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The Conduit

Rachelle Larsen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Chris Crowe, Chair
Debbie Dean
Mike Tunnell

Department of English
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

The Conduit

Rachelle Larsen
Department of English, BYU
Masters of Fine Arts

This is a high fantasy novel about Iníon Ríúil, a girl who discovers she has the ability to manipulate magic. Two weeks before Iní's seventeenth birthday, thieves attack their home and her grandmother is murdered. After her grandmother's death, Iní goes in search of the father she has never met and ends up joining the Magical Alliance, where she learns more about her unique skills. Iní is a full conduit, someone who possesses all four of the possible conduit abilities: shielding, absorption, transformation, and amplification. Because someone has been kidnapping other conduits, the Magical Alliance assigns guardians for her protection: a goblin, an elf, and another being whose exact race is unknown. Iní and her guardians are assigned to find out more about the bloodstone, an ancient relic made to function the same as conduits, something the Races thought long destroyed. They suspect the dragons to be looking for the bloodstone and worry its discovery could start a war. The culminating challenges in the novel involve Iní finding the bloodstone and learning the identity of her father.

Keywords: fantasy, young adult, conduits, magic

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

“Writing is not a gift from the gods. It does not spring fully formed from the author's brow. Writing is a craft, and, like any craft, you must practice, practice, practice to hone your skills.”

—Christopher Paolini

Forget all the romantic notions about the art of writing. For me, writing is like vomit. It feels terrible coming out, but once I get it on the page I feel a whole lot better. Maybe there really are muses or authors whose work flows effortlessly onto the page, but in my experience writing is work. It takes long hours, multiple drafts, and the ability to realize when something you wrote is just plain bad. But that's the point—if writing were effortless, if anyone could write award-winning novels or compose brilliant sonnets, the act of writing would cease to hold value in our society. It is the rarity of the prize and the sweat expended that makes it worth the pursuit.

To write a book is an accomplishment. It's something few people will do. No, not all books are groundbreaking works of literature, but they are *works* comprising weeks, months, even years, of effort. I undertook this adventure not because I believed I was the next J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis—I don't have any illusions this little book will receive great critical acclaim—but because I longed to create something, and writing has always been one area where I felt capable. After years of struggling to write nonfiction, I chose to write young adult (YA) fantasy because this is the genre I understand. I've spent my whole life reading YA fantasy. I'm familiar with the common themes, plot devices, and archetypal characters. I love Newbery Medalist Robin McKinley's advice on writing, “Write what *you* want to read. The person you know best in this world is *you*. Listen to yourself. If you are excited by what you are writing, you have a much better chance of putting that excitement over to a reader” (McKinley, “Advice”).

This is how I feel about YA fantasy. It's what I gravitate to as a reader, and writing it felt like the natural next step.

I believe fantasy has great value. It has the ability to reveal to readers, through imagined and foreign settings, something they are unable to recognize or deal with in real life. "An irony about fantasy is that despite the fanciful characters, strange imaginary world, and bizarre situations encountered, it has the power to help us better understand reality" (Kurkjian et al. 492). Putting issues like racism and prejudice through a lens of star-bellied Sneetches, for example, allows people of all ages to consider a concept in a new light, to step out of cultural mores and consider the logic and reasoning behind beliefs and customs they have never previously questioned. One author who exemplifies this practice is C.S. Lewis. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was one of the first fantasy novels I read. I was in grade school at the time and much of the complexity and symbolism was lost on me. However, this is a book I have been able to read and reread through the years and still find things to enjoy. C.S. Lewis is one of my favorite examples of a young adult author who writes stories that operate beyond the basic plot to communicate greater depth and meaning to the readers. I wouldn't dare to place my work in same arena as his, but I must cite him as one of the authors I aspire to be like.

Fantasy is an excellent venue in which to address ideas of culture and belonging. A story might have little green men and horses with magical horns, but that doesn't mean it can't also tackle serious questions and allow the reader to discover truths or ideas that translate directly to real life. Tolkien explained this concept in his landmark essay, "On Fairy Stories," by saying, "Actually fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting" (Tolkien 20). Just because the setting of a novel is an imagined land or the characters

have fantastic capabilities, does not mean that nothing in the story can be applicable or valuable to readers' lives. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is an excellent example. While the major dramatic question may involve the destruction of the magical ring, the books are filled with themes applicable to real life, such as friendship, the value of home, and persistence in the face of adversity.

A more current example of this, and a novel which greatly influenced my own writing, is Holly Black's *Valiant*. This novel has fairies and goblins, but the crux of the story is a reversal of traditional gender roles. The valiant hero is a young girl who saves others from harm. Not only does Black reverse gender roles, but she also portrays fantastical creatures in a new light. *Valiant* was the first novel I read where a goblin was a "good guy," and I loved this idea of twisting the stereotypical fantasy roles and the implications this has for the reader's real life. I believe that before people can take on their real-life prejudices, they must first be willing to entertain new ideas or definitions in a more simple and non-threatening venue.

Throughout my novel, I have tried to challenge readers' expectations. With the exception of *Valiant*, goblins are not usually protagonists. Nor are they portrayed as attractive or human-like characters. The relationship between Iní, a human, and Anwar, a goblin, is meant to be somewhat startling to the reader. Fantastical interracial relations are a way of opening readers' minds to the idea that the people you love don't have to look just like you. In the book, I refer to members of all races as "people" in an effort to remove the emphasis on race.

To build on this, in books like *Valiant* and in my own thesis, the story helps readers also see characters struggling to come to grips with a culture they don't understand or have prejudged. Anwar overcomes his dislike of an entire race through a positive relationship with Iní. She struggles to define herself without a relationship with her father and without affiliation with

any cultural group or race. Themes of identity and belonging are particularly important for young adults to examine because adolescence is the time when youth struggle to define themselves and discover their identity both within their family and society.

Identity is a common theme in fantasy. In *The Blue Sword*, by Robin McKinley, the protagonist Hari struggles with gender roles and her place as an outsider in the community. In Kristin Cashore's *Fire*, the main character is the last of her kind and struggles to maneuver through a world that sees her either as a potential enemy or an object to be used. In Christopher Paolini's novel, *Eragon*, a young boy loses his family and is forced to navigate a dangerous world alone, never knowing for sure whom he can trust.

In my novel, I have also tried to go against traditional visual cues like appearance and color-coding to signify the "bad" characters in my book. I owe this in great part to the excellent advice of Diana Wynne Jones in her invaluable text *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*. This mock travel guide reveals many of the clichés found in high fantasy, everything from the types of magic and fantastic races that typically populate fantasy novels to the common landscapes and color-coding used in such stories. As Jones explains, black is all too often associated with evil and white with goodness (38). A couple classic examples that follow this pattern of white or light for goodness and black or dark for evil are Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* and Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*. In my thesis, I attempt to invert the traditional use of color-coding with the character of Arach, who is both white and seen as a potential enemy. However, I tried to avoid placing Arach and the other dragons clearly on the side of good or evil. Even after Arach is revealed as Iní's father, he is not seen as completely trustworthy. This is because I want readers to understand that people have many motives and qualities that cannot be easily categorized.

I would like to say this book accomplishes all the lofty goals set out in my prospectus, but

that simply isn't the case. Fortunately, writing this book has taught me a great deal about fantasy and about my own writing process. Bestselling YA author Cassandra Clare describes her writing process when she said:

It's easy in the beginning. The book idea is fresh and new and the characters seem appealing and the story is one you want to tell. Then you dig in and round about chapter four or five you start realizing that nothing is happening, or that what your characters are doing doesn't make any sense, or that you're telling the whole story from the wrong point of view. (Clare)

When I first started writing, I thought I had to include every detail of how characters got from point A to point B. This bogged down my plot and resulted in multiple chapters where nothing actually happened. One of the hardest choices I made in this manuscript was to delete forty pages. There was a large section of time in the village of Antharra where Iní and the others essentially hung out and talked about doing things but never actually made any progress in the plot.

It was not easy to admit to myself that those chapters were ultimately useless. After I hit the delete button, I felt sick to my stomach. However, once I did this, I found there were other sections where I could jump to a new scene or cut out extraneous information. Even though I added in several pages' worth of new scenes, the total page count still shrank another sixteen pages. I tend to get a little tied up in page count and length, and I did worry that a shorter story would mean a weaker story. However, I can easily say this is a better manuscript due in great part to the deletion of those pages.

I want to emphasize the word "manuscript" because even though this is a defensible copy, I know the story is far from perfect. The more I learn about writing, the more weaknesses and

room for improvement I see in my own work. It has been a balancing act deciding which changes are necessary, which can wait, and which might not be done at all. I've learned that a manuscript isn't done until you get so sick of looking at it you lose all personal investment in a particular phrase or scene. This is an important step in my writing process because it allows me to truly open the text to the feedback of others. Yes, it can be discouraging to feel like no matter how many times I read over a section, I will still find awkward phrasing or unnecessary words. However, I'd like to think that with every pass my eye becomes sharper, my prose tighter, and my chances of repeating those same mistakes decrease dramatically.

I already have a list of things I will do differently on my next book. I made an outline for this story, but then promptly proceeded to ignore it. As a result, the first draft was a hodge-podge collection of random events I felt like writing. It wasn't until I pulled the outline back out and made a plot goal for every chapter that the story started to take shape. For my next book, I am going to spend a lot more time outlining and planning before I begin the first draft. I know some authors say they just feel the story as they go, but that simply doesn't work for me.

Another thing I want to work on for my next book is consistency. It wasn't until the second half of the first draft that I really got into a daily writing pattern. This made such a difference! The more frequently I wrote, the quicker I was able to jump back into the story, the more I wrote in each sitting, and the better my scenes became. Having a set daily schedule kept my writing muscles warm and limber. Yes, sometimes it felt like I was slogging through the story, just vomiting out the first description or sentence that came into my head. But the more I trudged through the white space, the more momentum I gained. I came up with solutions to plot problems through writing them out, not waiting for inspiration or just thinking about them a lot.

Does writing one book make me a writer? No, certainly not a good one. Now, I just know

it can be done. I can write a book. Then, I can rewrite it to make it better. I can keep writing and revising and writing and revising until I finally reach the point where my manuscripts stop gathering dust on the rejection pile. Janet Pocerobba, assistant coordinator of the Lesley University MFA in creative writing says: “What are we, as ‘masters’ of fine arts? Not Roth or Rushdie, to be sure. Not someone who knows everything inside and out. I’m coming to think that being a master is not about what you know but how you face what you don’t know” (15). I might not wake up every morning excited to write, and some days the act of writing may feel akin to bloodletting, but I’m going to keep at it.

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CHAPTER 1

It was exactly one week, three days, four hours, and twelve minutes until Iní's seventeenth birthday and the day she would learn her father's name. For years she had pestered Nana to tell her more about her parents—the mother who died in childbirth and the father she'd never met.

"No one must know you are his daughter, not even you, dear one," Nana had explained long ago to a frustrated, seven-year-old Iní.

"Why? And why can't we live in a village like everyone else? Why do we have to live out here?" Iní stomped her foot, angry at the traitorous tears that slid down her cheek. Ever since she could remember, she and Nana had lived alone in the Purple Hills. No friends, no neighbors, no visitors except for Master Shin who came once a week to teach her self-defense.

But in one week, three days, four hours and eleven minutes, Iní would leave the Purple Hills forever, find her father, and finally begin living the life she had longed for. If Nana wanted to see her, she would have to come to Iní. There was no way Iní was ever coming back.

"How's the weeding coming?" Nana interrupted Iní's thoughts of freedom and brought her crashing back to the garden patch with its large swath of creeping vines that were taking over the spinach patch. Iní groaned.

"Weeds don't magically pull themselves, dear." Nana's voice was overly cheerful and her warm brown eyes sparkled. She knew how much her granddaughter hated weeding.

"Couldn't we buy a charmed spade or hoe or something that would solve this problem?" She was all for using magic whenever possible. If only her grandmother felt the same way. It was an argument they'd had more than once. Iní saw magic as a modern convenience; Nana saw it as a crutch.

“A little sweat is good for the brow.” She adjusted her floppy, sun-bleached hat and squatted down in dirt next to Iní. Her age-spotted hands plucked the weeds, roots and all, at a steady pace. Iní clamped down on any more complaints and worked beside her.

Nana’s petite frame was a sharp contrast to Iní’s tall, more athletic build. Iní often cursed the fates that she hadn’t gotten more of Nana’s genes. Her thick mass of wild red curls was nothing like Nana’s flowing blonde hair. Where Nana had soft, delicate features, Iní’s were sharper and more pronounced.

“There.” Nana stood up and smiled, surveying the quick work they’d made of the weeds. “Just finish off the stragglers, then come join me for a cup of sweet tea.”

It took her ten minutes to finish the patch. A long ten minutes, knowing a cup of cool sweet tea waited for her on the porch. She stowed her spade in the tool shed and turned to the house when she heard a crash and Nana’s cry.

As Iní ran for the house, a sudden malevolence permeated the air, making her shiver. She rounded the corner of their small cottage to find two figures, covered from head to toe in black, bending over Nana. Masks hid their faces, but she could hear their deep, masculine voices. One of them rummaged through Nana’s pockets.

“You find anything in the house?” said the tall one, rifling through Nana’s clothes.

“Nah.”

Iní opened her mouth to scream when a rough hand reached from behind and grabbed her.

“Found another one,” said the robber, jerking her over to where his two companions stood. “Looks like we found something valuable after all.”

The men laughed.

Iní looked down at Nana's body and saw a trickle of blood running out the side of her mouth.

"We're done here, let's get moving." He poked Nana's body with his boot as he spoke. "That killing spell is bound to attract attention, even way out here."

The way the man prodded at Nana's body, like a piece of trash, turned Iní's shock into anger. She flung her head back against the man holding her. He cried out and let go of her, bringing his hands to his mouth. Iní ran.

"Immobilize her!"

"I'm trying!"

Iní felt something shoot by, seeking a target it couldn't find. She fled past the woodpile, wrenching the axe from the chopping block, then sprinted for the forest. She knew these hills better than anyone, so losing herself among them was her best chance at escape.

But Iní didn't make it to the forest. Before she reached the trees that same malevolence engulfed her, and she spun around to see a shaft of green light streaking toward her. The killing spell. She lowered her head, waiting for death.

Then one of the men screamed, "Conduit!" The frantic sounds of a hasty retreat reached her ears, and she looked up to catch the last dark figure disappearing into the woods beyond Nana's cottage.

Iní crept back to the house and found the tall robber lying dead, sprawled awkwardly at Nana's feet. She dropped the axe and looked down at her own body, feeling her arms. She was fine. What had happened? She looked around for the "conduit," but saw nothing. She took a few careful steps toward Nana and, when nothing happened, ran the rest of the way.

Gently, she lifted Nana's body into her lap. She sat there, silent, until dusk.

Iní didn't cry that night. None of it felt real. The next morning she lay in bed well past dawn, listening for Nana's voice in the kitchen, waiting for Nana to come in and scold her. Finally, she crept into the kitchen and saw the body still lying on the floor where she had left it the night before, and then she wept.

She cried until she had no more tears. Then, she rubbed swollen eyes and walked over to the old cedar chest. *When I die, you must promise to bury me in the blue dress in the cedar chest.* Nana's words came back to her as she opened the lid and drew out a simple muslin dress with a frill of white lace around the throat. The fabric smelled of cedar. She shook it out to release any wrinkles, and as she did so, a thin piece of parchment slipped from the dress and settled on the floor.

Iní picked it up. "Iní Rí," Nana's pet name for her, was written across the front in her grandmother's swirling, elegant script.

I am sorry, Iní Rí. If you are reading this I am dead, and I have left you all alone. Do you know who your father is? I will not risk revealing it in this letter. You must find Cerulean. He can help you.

I love you,

Nana

Sweat rolled down Iní's face. A fine layer of dust coated her skin and her fiery curls made a wild halo for her head. It took her most of the day to dig the grave. She didn't have a casket, so she wrapped Nana in the beautiful patchwork quilt Nana had stowed in the cedar chest. Nana always said it was for Iní's wedding bed, but none of that mattered anymore. It was the

loveliest thing they owned and Nana deserved a proper burial, at least as proper as Iní could make it under the circumstances. Silent tears slipped down her face as she rolled Nana's body carefully over the edge of the grave. The body fell to the bottom with a heavy thud. Iní stood looking down; a wisp of white-blond hair had escaped the blanket. How could she fling dirt on top of Nana's body? It seemed so callous. But growing up in the hills, she knew what happened to an exposed body. She'd left the thief's body lying outside overnight, taking pleasure in the sound of wolves snarling over the carcass. She didn't want Nana to end up like that, scattered in pieces around the forest. *Well, then, you know what you have to do*, she told herself, and dropped her first shovelful of dirt into the hole. When she finished, she covered the grave with stones and placed a large bouquet of wildflowers on top.

Tomorrow she would gather anything of value and begin the search for Cerulean and her father. Right now it was dusk, and for the first time that day Iní was hungry.

CHAPTER 2

The nearest trading post was only six miles away. Iní arrived just before lunch and made her way to the crowded Rocking Horse Tavern. The tavern was filled with traders and trappers. Iní had planned to ask if anyone there knew Cerulean, but now, she wasn't so sure if that was a good idea because it didn't exactly look like a helpful crowd. The trappers wore deep scowls and kept a hand on their knives as they drank. To the left, a rowdy group of traders dressed in bright traveling clothes bragged loudly about their latest conquests. Several of the men leered openly at her. The more respectable folk kept their eyes on their plates.

“Hey.” A strong scent of alcohol accompanied the hot breath on Iní's neck. She spun around to see a large trader, swaying as he stood. His greasy buckskin clothes stank of sweat.

“What's a pretty thing like you doing here all alone?” He leaned in when he spoke, his breath hot on her face. Iní tried to back away, but he clamped a hand on her arm. “Let's you and me get to know each other, shall we?”

Iní felt her throat close in fear. The man was easily twice her size. *Remember what Master Shin taught you.* She took a deep breath, scanning the room for the nearest exit—ten feet away to her right.

“I'm meeting someone.” Her voice sounded weak and small. The trader laughed and squeezed her arm so tight tears sprang to her eyes. She fought down the rising panic. What good was learning self defense if you couldn't remember any of it when you needed it? The man pulled her farther from the exit, toward the back rooms. The place was packed with guests, but everyone carefully avoided eye contact, shifting away from her as she was dragged by.

“Let the girl go.” A voice rang out over the tavern, silencing the crowd.

“What?” The trader spun around, keeping a tight grip on Iní's arm.

“You heard me.”

Iní had never seen a goblin before. He didn't look anything like the strange creatures described in children's tales. Rather, he looked a lot like her, only with green skin and eyes a startling shade of metallic amber. His strong, high cheekbones and lithe muscular frame made him look handsomely fierce.

“Listen here, Gob. I don't know what hole you crawled out of, but I suggest you crawl back in and leave the girl to me. You have no idea who you're dealing with.”

The goblin smiled, and removed his jacket to reveal a thick silver band across his left bicep. There was an audible gasp from surrounding customers, and Iní felt the grip on her arm slacken.

“Guardian,” whispered someone behind her.

When the goblin stepped forward the trader released her, shoving her forward.

“I have no quarrel with the Alliance.” The trader raised his hands and backed slowly away. Once he reached the back rooms, he turned and ran.

Iní rubbed her arm and looked cautiously at the goblin. She had no idea what “guardian” or “Alliance” meant, but the reaction from the trader meant it was certainly important. Maybe the goblin would help her find Cerulean.

“You should know better than to enter a tavern alone in these parts.”

Iní balked at his sharp tone. “I'm sorry, I ...”

He waved her explanation away. “Go back to you parents.”

Flushed with anger and embarrassment, Iní drew herself up straight and brushed past him with a simple thank you.

Once outside the tavern, she turned towards the inn and nearly plowed into an old man.

“Oh!” She tripped in her efforts to avoid a collision and landed hard on the ground.

“Are you all right?” The elderly man extended his hand to help Iní up.

“I’m fine.” Only her voice wobbled.

“Why don’t I buy you a cup of tea?” His kind blue eyes crinkled into a smile. “That always makes me feel better.”

Iní nodded gratefully.

They were crossing the street when the goblin appeared at their side.

“Anwar!” The old man exclaimed, smiling. “We were just on our way for a cup of tea. Join us.”

“We don’t have time for this, Cerulean. I’ve got a lead on the disturbance.”

Iní’s head snapped up. “Are you Cerulean?” She studied the old man, noting his deep blue robes and wispy white hair.

“I am.” His gaze narrowed slightly. “Who are you?”

Iní bowed. “I’m Iní Ríúil. My grandmother said to find you.”

Cerulean sighed. “I always liked your grandmother. I’m guessing your presence here means something happened to her.”

The goblin looked from Iní to Cerulean, confused. “Was she involved in the disturbance?”

“Iní Ríúil, let me introduce Anwar Lochem.” Cerulean gestured to the goblin, who nodded curtly. “Now, why don’t we go somewhere quiet, and you can tell me what happened.”

Once they reached Cerulean’s room at the inn, Anwar excused himself and left Cerulean and Iní alone to talk. They sat down at a small table by the window and Cerulean poured her a large mug of lavender tea. He was a good listener. He didn’t interrupt or push Iní to go on when

her story got hard to tell. When she finished, he placed a hand on her shoulder and they sat quietly for a while.

“A killing spell. That would explain the magical disturbance.” Cerulean turned her to face him. “Iní, there’s something you should know. Your grandmother moved out here to protect you, to keep you safe from the kind of men who attacked her.”

“But why?”

“When those men said they saw a conduit, they were talking about you. You reversed a killing spell and turned it on the caster without you even realizing it.”

Iní remembered back to that moment, the flash of green light traveling at her, the feeling of something cold and foreboding gathering in the air, the same feeling she got when Nana died. Only Iní hadn’t died. She’d bowed her head, and nothing happened. She twirled a strand of her long, red curls in her fingers, playing the moment over and over again in her mind. No, she hadn’t died. But she hadn’t done anything special either.

“There was someone else, there had to be. I didn’t do anything; I just stood there.”

Cerulean shook his head slowly. “I know it’s hard to believe. Most children grow up knowing about conduits. They are tested at a young age, pitting them against harmless spells to discover their talents.”

“If what you’re saying is true, why didn’t Nana have me tested?”

“She did, Iní. I tested you myself. Conduits are a rarity among humans, but every child is still tested as part of the treaty with the Magical Alliance. A conduit has one of four talents—a way in which they can manipulate magic. But you are a full conduit, meaning you have all four talents, something that has never been seen before. Not only can you shield and absorb magic, but you can also transform and amplify it.”

Cerulean's tone was reverent as he spoke of her talents, but Iní felt it must be some kind of mistake. Her, manipulate magic? Impossible.

"You do not believe me." He didn't sound surprised. "Shall we perform a test?" His eyes sparkled as he raised his hands in what Iní imagined was a classic spell-casting pose.

"What if I'm not a conduit? Won't it hurt?" She slid back her chair in response.

"Nonsense. I will not do anything dangerous, just a binding spell. Though I would appreciate it if you tried not hurt me."

"Hurt you?"

"Now, stand up and give the magic a little room to work. Not that it's necessary, mind you, it will just help you feel more prepared. Oh, and when you sense the magic, fill your mind with the image of your favorite flower."

Iní nodded and edged back a little farther from Cerulean. *Lilacs*, she whispered to herself, *lilacs*.

The air around her took on a heavy, pressing feel. It was a living thing, closing in around her, squeezing. *Lilacs!*

The pressure disappeared. All around her, lilac petals were floating to the ground. She put her fingers out and felt the soft blooms as they floated down.

Cerulean laughed.

"Lilacs, eh?"

Iní crouched down, wrapping her hands around her knees, and took a deep breath. The air was filled with the sweet, heady perfume of flowers. She could manipulate magic. She really was a conduit.

CHAPTER 3

“Is this why Nana never told me about my father, because I’m a conduit?”

Iní and Cerulean sat at the table eating large slabs of cornbread with sweetberry jam while Cerulean explained more to Iní about conduits and the Magical Alliance.

“Maybe. But you’re no regular conduit. And I’m sorry, but I don’t know any more about your father than you do.”

“What about the letter? Nana said you who could help me. How can you help if you don’t know who my father is?”

“I can help you look, but that’s not the only problem you have right now. By simple virtue of being a conduit, you are in grave danger.”

“But I have magic; can’t I just turn my enemies into a bunch of lilacs if I want to?” Iní focused on her plate and imagined it transforming into a bouquet of small purple flowers. Nothing happened.

“Conduits are not magicians. They can only channel magic someone else has called. In peacekeeping missions, the Magical Alliance often assigns conduits and magicians in pairs.”

“So, without someone around to call the magic, I’m pretty much helpless.”

“You are not helpless, Iní. Magic is not the only thing people have to defend themselves.”

Iní said nothing, staring unhappily at her plate.

Cerulean shook his head. “Being a conduit is a responsibility. Many have died so that you would not spend your life in slavery. Before the Conduit Wars and the formation of the Magical Alliance, your kind was treated like magical machines. Whichever ruler could collect the most conduits had the strongest army. Your sole function was war. Now, thanks to the Alliance, conduits are free and can use their abilities to maintain peace and prevent magical warfare.”

“So, now I’m free, but I’m still in grave danger. Perfect.” Iní kicked the table leg in frustration.

Cerulean reached across the table, putting his hand on Iní’s. She stared fixedly at the swirling wood grains in the table. How could life change so quickly? What was she supposed to do without Nana?

A knock at the door startled her.

“Ah, that will be Anwar.” Cerulean stood to open the door. “I am assigning him as your guardian.”

“My what?” Iní remembered the term from the tavern, but she still wasn’t sure what it meant.

“He’s a bodyguard, all conduits are assigned one. Even with the Alliance, there are still people who would enslave conduits for their own means, especially lately.”

Iní frowned.

“Anwar is one of the most elite guardians in the Alliance. He may be a little ... formal and focused on his job, but there is no one you could be safer with.” Cerulean waved the goblin in.

“I followed the tracks back to her house. I found no sign of the intruders or the body.” Anwar’s voice was crisp and businesslike.

Cerulean frowned. “Do you think it was the same group behind the other abductions?”

“Abductions?” Iní was confused. She thought the men were simple robbers.

Cerulean and Anwar shared a look, and Cerulean hesitated before he spoke. “Someone sent them here on purpose...to look for you.”

“For me?” Iní’s mind raced.

“Over the past few months conduits have been disappearing. That is why we have instituted guardians to protect the remaining conduits. I wanted to send someone to guard you, but your grandmother did not want to risk even one more person knowing about your abilities. As I have said, you are no regular conduit.”

Iní recalled the previous day’s events. The attackers had been looking for something “valuable.” Was she the prize? Had Nana died because of her?

“But those men used magic,” Iní said. “If they knew I was a conduit, they wouldn’t have done that.”

“We think the men were sent to draw you out,” said Anwar. “When you reversed that killing spell they knew you were the object of their search, and now whoever sent them also knows.”

“Don’t blame yourself,” Cerulean added. “There is nothing you could have done to prevent this. If you had not been a conduit, both you and your grandmother would be dead.”

“Has she packed yet?” Anwar asked.

Cerulean shot the goblin an irritated glance.

“We’re leaving?” Iní’s voice rose in panic. Everything was happening too fast. She hadn’t thought past finding Cerulean.

“Iní, you cannot stay here. Those men will be back. And if you want to find out more about your father ...” Cerulean let the words hang in the air unfinished.

Iní clenched her teeth. He was right. She couldn’t find her father without Cerulean’s help.

Anwar’s voice cut into her thoughts. “This isn’t just about you. Whoever is doing this is powerful, and the Alliance has other problems that need your help.”

Iní glared at him and then turned to Cerulean. “I don’t care how talented or elite he is. I don’t want him for my guardian.”

“Anwar, perhaps you should wait outside.” Cerulean gestured to the door. Anwar’s mouth formed a tight line, and he spun on his heel and walked out the door.

“We really do have to leave. There is a lot I have not yet told you. The Alliance is in trouble: not only are we losing guardians, but there is also the matter of the dragons.”

Dragons. The word sent a tingle down Iní’s spine. Even in the Purple Hills, people knew the danger of dragons. Not only were they physically imposing, reaching heights upward of twenty feet with scales as tough as metal and the ability to breathe fire, but they were also creatures of powerful natural magic. Where most Races’ magicians spent years learning to call and shape magic, dragons possessed innate power. As far as Iní knew, dragons hadn’t been seen in the Six Kingdoms for over a hundred years.

CHAPTER 4

“After decades of reclusive behavior, the dragons are now demanding access to the Summer Tree, an ancient dryad held sacred by the gnomes.” Cerulean extended his hand to help Iní board the small coach.

“But the real question is what do the dragons want with the dryad,” Anwar added, slipping in to sit next to Cerulean. “Some fear they seek the location of a lost bloodstone.”

“Bloodstone?” The name made Iní shudder.

“An ancient weapon made from the blood of conduits. A bloodstone holds all the abilities of the conduit who was killed to make it. It allows the possessor to manipulate magic.” Cerulean sighed and pressed his fingers to his temples. “We thought all the bloodstones were destroyed in the Conduit Wars, but there are rumors one was never recovered.”

“We need to speak to the dryad before the dragons do. The Summer Tree is a magical seer; if there is a surviving bloodstone she will know,” said Anwar.

“Well, what can I do?” Iní didn’t like the idea of going up against dragons.

“Dragon magic is particularly wily. I do not know if it is the combination of natural magic with wizardry, but it takes several conduits to channel the magic of one dragon. That is where you come in. We think a full conduit might be able to channel dragon magic alone. If we send a band of conduits to the Summer Tree, the dragons will know we are investigating. But if we send just one...”

“You can cut through any distraction spells and they’ll be none the wiser.” Anwar cast a brief glance in Iní’s direction, avoiding eye contact.

“You want me to trick the dragons?” Iní’s voice was tinged with panic.

“Yes,” said Anwar.

“Well, not exactly.” Cerulean held up a hand as if to stop Iní’s racing thoughts. “We just want you to use your talents to help Anwar and the others, tell them what magic you sense and channel it if necessary. You are the only one who can do this discreetly.”

Iní said nothing, mulling the idea over. She stared out the window and watched as the Purple Hills grew farther and farther away. “And how does this help me find my father?”

Anwar rolled his eyes. “Haven’t you been listening? We’re trying to prevent the dragons from gaining a weapon that would give them near limitless power, not to mention stopping a war.”

“And in case you haven’t been listening, I’ve been waiting my whole life to find out who my father is, and the one person who knew was murdered in front of me.”

“Enough bickering.” Cerulean interjected calmly. “I think you will find this plan solves both our problems. As Anwar mentioned earlier, the Summer Tree is a magical seer. If anyone knows where to find your father, she will.”

“So if I help, you’ll ask the dryad about my father?”

“If you go with Anwar, you can ask her yourself. Agreed?” Cerulean looked to Iní and Anwar for approval. They nodded.

CHAPTER 5

Anwar's fist clenched so tightly that Iní thought the blood vessels in his hand would burst. He hadn't said a word since they left Cerulean behind at the roadside inn. She huddled against her corner of the carriage and tried to not to stare at him. He sat straight and stiff, mouth tight and eyes staring straight ahead. His bright amber eyes reminded Iní of her Nana's favorite broach, the one she'd been wearing the day she died. Her chest tightened at the thought.

"So we're going to a gnome village?"

"Yes."

"What's the name again—Anthra?"

"Antharra."

"Have you been there before?"

"Yes."

Anwar wasn't in the mood to talk. Iní wasn't sure if he was angry at her, angry at the situation, or just angry in general. For lack of anything better to do, she closed her eyes and pretended to sleep.

"We're here."

Iní was pulled from a dream of jam-making with her grandmother. Anwar climbed out of the carriage, turned, and extended his hand to her. His eyes glowed in the dark, like a cat's. Cranky after the long, boring ride, Iní ignored the gesture and stumbled out of the carriage on her own. Standing next to him, Iní realized Anwar was tall; her head barely came to his shoulder.

“We’ll meet the others in the morning.” He shouldered his pack and was about to carry Iní’s as well, but she quickly took it. He was being strangely chivalrous tonight. Iní stared at his long black braid as he led the way into a small roadside inn. “We’ll stay here for the night.”

The inn was warm and cozy, with a roaring fire. Iní gravitated to the fire while Anwar found the innkeeper. They were in gnome territory and most of the customers were gnomes with tough, gnarled skin that reminded Iní of tree bark. Gnomes were a forest-dwelling race that specialized in woodcraft and brewing a rare liquor made from the sap of cedar trees. In many ways they resembled the forests they lived in, from their bark-like skin to the way their twisting, brown hair was streaked with flashes of green, gold, red, and orange.

Conversation lulled at Iní’s arrival and several of the gnomes stared openly at the human girl. Some were merely curious, since humans rarely traveled onto gnome lands, but the sight of her angered others. An elderly gnome, sitting several feet from where Iní stood, cursed loudly and spat in her direction.

“I have a room. You should order something to eat,” Anwar said. He was no longer carrying her bag, which he must have stowed in the room. His eyes didn’t meet hers but rather scanned the room as he spoke. He wasn’t exactly rude, but he wasn’t friendly either. He was professional. Everything about his actions said that she was a job, a task he was performing.

When Iní was young, she used to dream of having friends. Growing up without other children around, she often longed for someone her own age to talk to. Leaving home was supposed to be a bright, exciting time full of new friends and potential—and her father. But that was before Nana died, taking all of Iní’s dreams with her. Thinking of Nana made her feel hollow inside, like she would never be completely happy or whole again. She shivered despite

the warmth from the nearby fire and pulled her thoughts back to the present. Anwar was watching her, his face devoid of any emotion.

She looked around at the food other patrons were eating. Most of the fare consisted of various root vegetables, nuts, and a strange-smelling spice. The steam from a nearby soup made her stomach gurgle. She recognized a hint of basil and perhaps lemongrass. She would order that. Slipping into a corner table, with Anwar following silently behind, she waited for the serving girl to come take her order while two gnome girls about her age gawked at her. One had light, mottled skin like the bark of a willow, with green and yellow strands of hair. The smaller one reminded Iní of an evergreen, right down to the spiky styling of her dark green hair.

Iní smiled at them.

The two girls quickly turned back to their meals.

“Humans,” muttered a male voice from somewhere to her right.

Iní held the smile on her face but didn't attempt to talk to anyone else until the serving girl appeared.

“What'll it be?” the young gnome asked, shaking her head. Hair the color of autumn leaves swirled around her face. Her manner was more harried than unfriendly.

Iní looked away. The gnome's eyes, dark from rim to rim, unnerved her. “Could I have the soup?” she asked in an uncertain voice.

“Make that two bowls and a mug of cedar dew,” Anwar said.

The serving girl nodded and disappeared into the kitchen.

The soup was surprisingly good. It had a sweet, herbal tang that Iní found refreshing. She was just about to take a second taste when Anwar grabbed the spoon and cursed.

“Don't, it has henbane,” he said.

“Henbane?”

“It’s a hallucinogen, at least for humans. I didn’t smell it at first, the other herbs were masking it.”

“Is someone trying to poison me?” Iní looked furtively at the other customers.

“Not poison exactly, but I don’t know. Henbane isn’t common in gnomish food, though they do eat it on occasion.” He gave the serving girl a cold, appraising stare. “I’ve got some foodstuffs in our packs, we can go up to the room and eat those. I don’t think we should stay down here.”

The room was furnished with two twin beds covered with colorful wool blankets and a small table and chair. The table was shoved up next to the window, which looked out over the road. Anwar set Iní’s bag on the bed farthest from the door.

Being in a room alone with Anwar made Iní’s stomach do nervous flips. Her fingers found it hard to hold still and began twirling her hair and tugging at the frayed edge of her jacket. She couldn’t help staring at his lean, angular face, wondering how *he* felt about sharing a room with a strange human girl.

“What is it?” Anwar was bent over his pack looking for the food. Iní felt the color rush to cheeks. How did he know she was staring?

“Oh, nothing. I mean, it’s just strange.”

“Strange?” Anwar placed a small pile of jerky, cheese, and traveling biscuits on the table.

“Everything that’s happened—traveling here with you, staying in this room.”

Anwar stiffened slightly. He gave Iní a quick glance that did not quite meet her eyes, then gestured to the food on the table. “Here, eat.”

When Iní crossed over to the table, he stood and walked to his bed, as if to avoid her. Heavy silence filled the room.

“The far bed is yours.” He cleared his throat. “Once you finish eating, you should get some sleep. The rest of the group will be here before dawn.”

He walked to the bed and pulled off his heavy boots, buckskin jacket, and the small leather pouch he wore around his neck.

Iní finished eating in silence. When she sat down on her bed and pulled off her boots, small puffs of dust rose in the air. Tired and grimy, she wished she could clean up and change into fresh sleeping clothes. But what could she do, ask Anwar to leave the room? Far too embarrassing, plus he'd probably just say no and tell her to go to sleep.

Laying down and pulling the blanket up to her chin, Iní felt a fresh waive of grief wash over her. Every night before bed Nana used to make two cups of firelight tea, and they would sit on the porch watching the stars. They would invent stories about how the constellations came to be. Nana would tell Iní about her family and her mother who died giving birth.

Anwar's breathing was slow and even in the neighboring bed. Iní looked over to see if he was sleeping, but his eyes were wide open. His eyes were perhaps his least human feature, even more so than the green hue of his skin, but Iní thought they were beautiful. She felt color creep into her face at the thought of Anwar knowing she thought about his eyes. A soft sigh escaped her lips, and Anwar turned to catch her staring at him, again.

“Go to sleep,” he said softly, then rolled over so his back was facing her.

Iní closed her eyes and tried to imagine she was lying in her own bed, with the scent of lilacs and firelight tea wafting through the air.

In her dream a shining white cord wound away from her body, like a trail. The bright, glowing rope tugged at her occasionally, as if trying to pull her somewhere. When she touched it, she felt the tingle of magic. The world around her was covered in mist, and while she knew Anwar was near, she couldn't see him. Once, after a particularly strong pull at the cord, it occurred to Iní that someone must be at the other end. She reached down to try and untie the brilliant trail, only there was no knot. The line flowed from inside of her.

CHAPTER 6

A sharp stick prodded Iní awake.

“It’s time to wake up.”

She opened her eyes to find Anwar fully dressed and standing over her. Iní felt tired and cranky. Could he not bring himself to touch her? She wasn’t some strange circus animal.

Anwar shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “We need to be going.”

Iní sat up, scrubbed her eyes and then swung her feet over the bed. She fumbled with her shoes. Anwar already had her pack swung over his shoulder.

“I can carry my own pack.”

Anwar nodded and held the bag out to her. She set it next to the bed while she pulled on her sheepskin jacket. Then she shouldered the pack and followed Anwar out the door. They were both dressed in muted colors of brown and green, allowing them to better blend with the landscape and avoid attracting attention.

The halls were quiet. A small tabby cat cleaning its fur in a window was the only witness of their departure. Once they were on the street, Anwar quickly led them to the stables to gather their horses and meet up with the rest of the party. Iní hoped her other two companions would be a little more friendly.

The stable smelled of fresh hay, thanks to several bales that lay stacked inside the door for the day’s mucking. Several horses whinnied at their arrival, and Iní longed to walk among the stalls and say good morning them. Instead, she just waited silently by Anwar for their companions to arrive. Cerulean had not said if the others were goblins as well, just that they would be working together to uncover the dragons’ secret.

“It’s about time,” said a female voice from one of the stalls to their left. The door slid open and out walked a tiny figure, more beautiful than anyone Iní had ever seen. A small gasp escaped Iní’s lips as sunlight caught the girl’s skin—it gave off a gentle golden glow. Everything about the girl was golden—not just yellow, but actual gold. Her skin was softly iridescent, and her hair was like strands of spun gold tumbling down her back. She had eyes the color of dark honey and a sweet, heart-shaped face.

“Ahem.”

Iní had been staring. She turned her head away from the girl to be equally surprised by the tall purple man standing beside her. He was inhumanly tall, which made sense given that he wasn't human. The tall, purple giant was a strange mixture of oxen and man. Two large horns protruded from his wide forehead, and his face was flatter than that of a man’s. He had wild, purple hair that curled and ran from his head in a stripe down the length of his back. He wore nothing but a pair of simple brown pants.

“Let me guess,” said the purple giant, pointing to the golden girl. “You’ve never seen a sun elf.” His voice was light and friendly.

“No,” Iní replied, feeling the heat rise in her cheeks. She had heard rumors about sun elves. They were considered the most beautiful of the Elvin tribes.

“That’s quite all right,” the elf said casually, “I’ve never seen a full conduit before either.” She held out her hand. “I’m Lycene Perihelion, your magician for this trip, and this is Ari Loosestrife.” She gestured to the purple giant beside her.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Iní Ríúil.”

Iní turned to Anwar, expecting him to introduce himself.

“Oh, we know Anwar. What we don’t know is where our horses are stalled. Care to enlighten us?” Lycene tapped her foot impatiently.

Iní couldn’t help but wonder what horse would be strong enough to carry Ari. Maybe a draft horse, but even then she couldn’t see it being a long ride.

As it turned out, Ari didn’t ride a horse—he ran. His long legs were corded with thick muscle, and he easily kept up with the cantering horses. Anwar and Lycene both rode golden mares with strands of green braided into their manes. They were strong, tall horses bred for racing, each over sixteen hands.

“Goblins are known for their horses,” Lycene explained. “All the Alliance riders use goblin-bred mounts.”

Iní’s horse was a light, dappled-grey steed with deep blue threads woven through his mane and tail. The horse snorted and skittered when Iní tried to mount, making her even more nervous about riding—something she’d done only a handful of times.

“Karrack!” Anwar chided the horse, grabbing the reins and holding it still.

“I know I said I *could* ride, but I’m not very experienced.” Iní bit her lip, not bothering to hide her nervousness.

“Don’t worry.” Anwar stroked the horse’s nose. “That’s why you’re riding Karrack. He’ll follow the mares without much prompting from you. He’s a little tense this morning, but he’ll calm down once we get on the road.”

Only Karrack did not calm down. He skittered around on the trail, started at the smallest noise or flicker of shadow and almost unseated Iní twice in less than a hundred yards. When a field mouse ran onto the trail, Karrack bolted off to the right, leaving the rest of the group behind.

“Anwaaaaar!” Iní cried, clutching the pommel of the saddle. Karrack galloped in a crazy, s-shaped pattern through the brush, his ears laid back and nostrils flaring. Iní held on for her life.

Anwar rode up fast on the left. “Whoaaa!” He reached over and grabbed Iní’s reins just as Ari came on the other side and plucked her from saddle.

“I don’t know what’s got into him,” Anwar said. “He’s never been this skittish before.” He ran his hand down the horse’s neck, muttering something to the horse. Iní didn’t care what Anwar said—she did not want to get back on that horse. She had the odd feeling the horse didn’t like her. *Much like its owner*, Iní thought when she saw Anwar giving her a strange look.

Lycene trotted up to the rest of the group and looked suspiciously at the horse. “Well, I for one vote ‘no’ for her getting back on that animal. I don’t care how docile it’s been in the past.”

Ari nodded his head somberly. “I have to agree.”

Iní tried not to let the relief show on her face. Anwar said nothing. His grip on Karrack’s reins tightened, and his mouth pressed into a thin line.

Turning to Anwar, Lycene said, “Would you prefer we wasted more time and went back in to town, or should she ride with one of us?”

“We are not going back to town,” Anwar said firmly. “It’s almost daybreak. Your presence alone, Lycene, would draw plenty of attention.”

“He’s got a point,” Ari chimed in. “Iní will just have to ride with him until we can work something out.”

Anwar’s lips pursed at the mention of Iní riding with him, but he didn’t object.

“Very well,” said Lycene. “We can tether Karrack to my horse.”

“Are you all right with that, Iní?” asked Ari.

“Sure.” She smiled at Ari to thank him for caring what she thought.

“Here, hand me the reins, and I’ll get Karrack tethered while you two saddle up.” Lycene extended her hand to Anwar.

Without a word to Iní, he handed over the reins, walked over to his horse and began adjusting the stirrups. “You’ll ride in front, but I’ll handle the reins.”

He stood waiting at the side of the horse, not making eye contact. Iní walked over and slipped her foot into the left stirrup. Anwar’s horse was several hands taller, and it was hard for her to mount without assistance. The horse stepped back from her just as she tried to swing her right foot over. Iní faltered and landed back on the ground.

“Soleil!” Anwar grabbed the reins and held the horse’s head firmly. “Try again, I’ll hold her still.”

Iní, who had stepped back from the horse after the first failed attempt, walked forward slowly. Soleil pawed the ground with her left foot, but stayed still while Iní mounted.

“Ari, come hold the reins while I mount,” Anwar said. “I don’t know what’s gotten into these horses.”

Ari gave Soleil a rub behind the ears. “Easy girl,” he said. “It’s all right.”

Anwar leaped up behind Iní without the use of the stirrups. His arms reached around her for the reins. She sat up stiffly, feeling self-conscious about their proximity. Anwar had a sharp, earthen smell, like the forest after rain. Iní wondered briefly how she smelled, especially after the absence of a decent bath.

The rhythm of the horse was awkward for Iní at first. Gripping the pommel with both hands was also uncomfortable, but she didn’t know what else to do. She could feel the heat from Anwar’s body warming her back, and she was terribly conscious of the silence between them.

“You seem to know these horses,” Iní said, trying to break some of the tension. “Do you ride them often?”

“Yes.”

“How often?”

“Not sure, a lot.”

“Oh.” Iní sighed. This was going to be a long ride.

At first Iní dreamed she was in the ocean with the gentle rhythm of the waves swaying her back and forth.

“Why do you think the horses don't like her?” The feminine voice cut into her dream, confusing her.

“I don't know, but I've never seen Karrack refuse a passenger—he's carried members of every riding race without a problem.” Iní frowned. She knew that voice. She took a deep breath and her head filled with a sharp, spicy scent of the woods. She snuggled against the warm fabric, about to drift back to sleep

“You say Cerulean's going to help her find her father? Any chance he's not, you know, hu—”

And then it clicked, the gentle rhythm wasn't waves, it was horses! Iní shot straight up with a burst of recognition and felt the heat flood her cheeks. Why hadn't Anwar woken her up? He couldn't have liked her snuggling against him, not when he could barely stand to touch her. She rubbed her eyes and quickly took in her surroundings.

“Well, you got some sleep, didn’t you?” Lycene smiled at Iní. “Riding all day like that can be hard on new riders, but you’ll get use to it. Tell me if your legs start getting raw, and I’ll lend you some salve.”

“Thanks.” She could still feel the warmth of Anwar’s body on her cheek.

CHAPTER 7

“Anwar, what do you say we spar tonight?” said Ari. “That is if my size isn’t too intimidating.”

Lycene laughed, like sunshine bubbling into sound. “This I’ve got to see, though I’m not sure you won’t regret those words later, Ari.”

They were camped at a small clearing for the night. Ari made a big show of getting limber for the fight. Iní watched with eager curiosity. With the exception of her simple defense lessons, she’d never seen anyone fight. Anwar stood at the edge of the clearing, watching Ari stretch and lunge in preparation.

“Aren’t you going to warm up?” asked Iní, coming to stand next to him.

He shook his head.

“I don’t imagine Anwar will need to,” said Lycene, with a laugh. “This won’t last very long. Ari is an amazing fighter, but he’s no Anwar.”

Once Ari finished warming up, the two fighters faced each other in the center of the clearing. The fight began so quickly Iní had trouble following at first. Ari was fast, far faster than someone his size should be. But Anwar was faster. The first couple of minutes, Anwar didn’t even attempt to fight, just stood sidestepping blows, blocking kicks, and neutralizing Ari’s every advance. Next to Iní, Lycene released a slow breath.

“He’s toying with him.” Lycene gestured at Anwar’s easy deflections.

Watching Anwar, Iní had no doubt why Cerulean had chosen him. When it came to combat he had a magic all his own. Ari began to sweat and his movements were heavier. Still, Anwar did not attempt to engage him. He stood calmly, reacting to each advance as if it were in slow motion. Iní’s stomach growled loudly, but she was too engrossed in the fight to pay her hunger

any attention. She almost missed the flash of Anwar's leg as it swept Ari to the ground. Anwar was now on top of Ari, pinning him to the ground, his knife at Ari's neck.

"Enough of this," said Anwar. "Iní's hungry."

Lycene let out a bright laugh, and Iní felt herself flushing. Anwar stood back and offered his opponent a hand. Ari smiled and gripped his hand, leaping up from the ground.

"Fighting you is hard on one's ego," Ari said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Then again, no one who's seen you fight would ever expect to win." He gave a mischievous grin and sauntered to over to where the girls stood.

Soon they were all sitting around a warm fire, sipping a hot soup made from dried jerky, wild carrots, and herbs packed in the foodstuffs.

"We should reach Antharra tomorrow night," Anwar said. "As far as anyone outside this fire is concerned, Iní can only absorb magic. Which means, Iní, you must not do anything else, even if you think we're in danger. We want to appear like a group of low-level Magical Peacekeepers, in town to enjoy the Midsummer Festival."

Iní nodded.

"We'll draw enough attention as it is, what with a human conduit, no offense, Iní girl." Ari spoke through a mouthful of soup. "It's been over a hundred years since humans saw fit to involve themselves in the Magical Alliance."

"It's all right," said Iní. Cerulean had explained what it meant to be human in the Magical Alliance. She knew not to expect many warm welcomes.

"Are we going to try and approach the dryad during the festival?" Lycene asked.

"If the opportunity presents itself, yes. But the first step is to make sure the dragons don't use their magic to get there first," said Anwar.

“You don’t suppose the dryad actually knows the location of the bloodstone, do you?”

Ari’s mug of soup of froze halfway to his lips.

Anwar shook his head. “No, but she does know the way to the Pool of Memories.”

Lycene gave a small start and the mention of the pool. “Do you really think it will come to that?” She leaned forward, her soup spilling onto the ground.

Ari whistled. “You’d have to be a madman to go into the Blightwood.”

“What’s the Blightwood?” Iní hated feeling like everyone was talking over her.

Lycene opened her mouth to respond, but Anwar cut her off. “It’s not important. Your services won’t be needed beyond the tree.”

Iní glared at him. He seemed determined to keep her at arm’s length, even from the rest of the group.

Anwar took the first shift at watch. Iní tried to take a turn as well, but none of them would hear of it. “Fat lot of good we’ll do as protectors if you’re the only one awake,” Ari replied. “But you are kind to offer.”

In the darkness between midnight and dawn, a tingling feeling of magic jolted Iní awake. Lycene lighting a fire? No, this magical feeling pulsed longer and stronger than what she had felt last night. Fighting panic, she looked toward Anwar sleeping at her left and touched his shoulder. He woke instantly and stared at her.

“Magic,” she mouthed, unsure if speaking would trigger unwanted attention. Anwar nodded and turned to Ari’s bedroll: empty! Lycene’s too! Had they felt the magic? The thought made Gabby nauseous.

Anwar raised his head and scanned the surrounding area. The fire burned low in the pit, but neither Lycene nor Ari were anywhere to be seen. He slowly rose to his feet, pulled a large

knife from under his pillow and slipped behind a nearby tree. Iní knew he wasn't abandoning her. She told herself this over and over, but she couldn't help feeling vulnerable. Where were the others?

The magic drew nearer. Iní could feel its tendrils snaking their way around the camp. She felt its desire, the need to find something for its master. For several seconds she was frozen by the idea of someone hunting her. Then she remembered: she was a conduit! Defending against magic was the one thing she good at. A slow smile spread across Iní's face, now was her chance to try her newfound skills. She crept forward, following the magic's invisible trail.

In a small clearing a hundred paces from their camp, two men hunched over a small, round mirror, chanting a finding spell. Beside them lay a large bag, its contents spilling out onto the ground—gold. There were serving trays, coins, figurines, watches, jewelry, and inlaid boxes all giving off a golden shimmer.

“What do you see?” The man on the right was thin and balding, with a high-pitched whine in his voice.

“Shhh! There's a heavy purse nearby, but the magic can't find the exact location.” The strong, confident tone told Iní that he was the magician.

“Then how will we ever get it?”

“The mirror—once the magic finds the gold the mirror will show us the location.”

Iní smiled. Now it was her turn to work a little magic. *Gold is not what you seek*, she whispered to the spell. *If you really want to please your master, you will change his gold into fish. He loves fish.* The spell paused for minute, as if thinking, then took on a briny smell and returned to the campsite with a renewed sense of urgency.

“Do you smell that?” The thin man whined.

The magician started to silence him, then stopped and sniffed the air.

“Someone’s got a ripe bag of fish, they do.” The thin man scanned the area, trying to identify the offender. Iní crouched behind a nearby bush, shaking with silent laughter.

“In the name of all the Races!” The magician cursed and held the now-fishy bag up for the other to see.

“Our gold! You’ve ruined our gold.” He was on the verge of tears.

“Not me, you imbecile—a conduit. Grab your knife and spread out; we’ll get him.”

Iní hadn’t planned for this part. Escape wouldn’t be so easy now that the men weren’t huddled over their magic mirror. She ducked and attempted an awkward walk-crawl. She made it thirty feet before stepping on the nest of a wood mouse. The harried creature tried to run up Iní’s leg, and she cried out in surprise. They were on her in an instant.

“What do we have here?” The thin man shoved his face up close to Iní’s. A little trail of spit escaped the corner of his mouth. He pressed his knife hard against her neck.

“My, my, a human conduit.” The magician circled her slowly. “And with the ability to transform no less.”

Iní winced. Just hours ago, she’d promised Anwar she wouldn’t do anything other than absorb magic.

“I must confess, you’ve done us a favor. Compared to that bag of gold, you’ll fetch a much higher price. Certain ... *people* will pay a small fortune for your likes.”

Iní felt sick. Not even two days into her adventure and she would be sold into slavery.

CHAPTER 8

Iní lay bound and gagged on the cold ground as the two men debated what to do with her.

“There’s a slave trader not one day’s walk east of here. But without a horse you’d have to carry her.”

“Why me?”

“I need all my faculties to defend against any magical attacks.”

“But I thought you said we couldn’t use magic around her?”

The magician waved away his protest. “You will carry her.”

There was something crawling on Iní’s neck, she shook violently to get it off. Her movements interrupted the men’s planning.

“Stop that!” The thin man kicked her in the stomach.

Iní groaned and held still as little legs made their way up her neck and on to her face.

There was a whistling sound. The thin man cried out, a throwing star stuck in his leg.

“Kick her again and I’ll maim you.” Lycene’s small golden frame stepped out of the shadows, holding two throwing stars in each of her hands.

“I’d listen to the little lady if I were you, her bite is bigger than her bark.” Ari strode out from the other side, armed with a large battleaxe.

“Do something,” cried the wounded man to the magician.

“I can’t you fool, she’s a conduit.” He held up his hands and backed away from Iní.

Lycene and Ari stood guard over the prisoners while Anwar cut Iní loose.

“Didn’t I explicitly tell you not to use your magic?” Anwar asked.

“Yes, but...”

“But what? This is the very thing we wanted to avoid happening.” Anwar scowled at her.

“You could have been killed or worse.”

Iní tried to stand and winced at the pain in her stomach.

“Did they hurt you?” He reached out to steady her.

“Just some bruises, nothing more. The kick was the worst of it.”

“I’ll make a poultice for you back at camp. Can you walk?”

Iní nodded.

“Oy, what are we supposed to do with these two?” Ari angled his axe at the two thieves.

“Kill them?” Lycene winked at Iní as she spoke.

“Magic!” cried the magician. “You’re a sun elf, you could cast a simple spell and your conduit can transform it into amnesia.”

“That would work,” Lycene admitted, a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. “But I’m not sure it would be as much fun.”

“Please miss, I’ve a family.” The magician’s voice took on a wheedling tone.

“I don’t know ... what do you say, Iní?”

Iní paused, drawing out her captor’s fear. “I suppose we could use magic.”

“Wake up, Iní.” Lycene gently shook her shoulder.

Iní woke up to find her hand clutched just above her belly button, the source of the shining cord in her dream. She felt stiff and weary. Sitting up slowly, she noticed all the other bedrolls had been cleared away and the horses were standing saddled and ready not far from the fire. The sun was bright in the sky.

“Come and eat some breakfast,” Lycene said, motioning to a steaming cup sitting beside the fire. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes,” Iní said reflexively, any other answer would be impolite. They had let her sleep in, even after her antics the night before. “How about you? How much sleep did you get?”

“I slept well enough,” Lycene replied easily, lending Iní a hand up from the ground. “Ari made some oatseed porridge you can drink while I roll up your bedroll.”

Iní started to protest, but Lycene waved her away. “Ari and I made a deal, he cooks and I pack. It’s all part of the job.”

Iní couldn’t help but wonder what her part of “the job” was, other than putting herself and others in mortal danger. She walked over to the fire and sipped her cup of oatseed porridge, which had a surprisingly sweet, nutty taste. Ari had gone to the river to refill their canteens and wash the cooking pot. No one said where Anwar was.

“Good morning, Iní girl.” Ari smiled as he came up beside her at the fire. “Here’s your canteen freshly filled, and here’s a handful of berries I found growing by the stream.”

“Good morning, Ari,” Iní said, taking the bright pink berries from his large purple hand. “Thank you for breakfast.”

The berries had a tart, biting sweetness that helped shake off the last of her sleepiness.

“What do you call this?” she asked Ari, holding up a berry.

“Dawnberries,” he replied, popping several in his mouth. “They contain a natural stimulant that’s great for brightening up your mornings or keeping you alert at night. Lycene and I always keep a large sack of dried dawnberries to munch on when we’re traveling or on night duty.”

Ari lounged next to Iní. His friendly open manner put her instantly at ease.

“Is it hard, running all day?” Iní ventured. “I mean, don’t your feet hurt?” She couldn’t imagine trying to keep up with a horse for even ten yards, let alone for twelve hours. She’d never even heard of someone possessing such a skill, not in all the Races. In fact, come to think of it, she’d never heard anyone say precisely what Ari was. Elves and goblins were common enough, but Iní had never heard of anyone quite like Ari.

“Running is easy,” Ari said. “Growing up, Lycene and I used to pack a lunch and spend most of the day traipsing around the forests, she on her horse and me on foot.” He lifted his left sandal into the air.

“You grew up with Lycene?” Iní said surprised. The two were clearly close friends, but she hadn’t guessed their connection stretched back so far. Did that mean Ari was also a sun elf? Iní was too polite to ask.

“Lycene and I’ve known each other from birth; we’re like crib mates,” he replied, standing up and dusting off his pants. “But that’s a story for another time. Now that Anwar’s back, we best get going.” He winked at her and walked over to where the horses stood packed and ready.

Out of nowhere, Anwar materialized next to the horses. He nodded a brisk greeting to Ari, but avoided meeting Iní’s eyes or even acknowledging her. Rather, he stood ready by his horse, waiting for her to mount.

“I’ll ride with Lycene today.” Iní surprised even herself with the statement. “That way none of the horses will get too tired.” She walked up to Lycene’s horse, noticing how the horse sidled away from her. *That’s not normal.* Something she heard on the edge of sleep nagged at her. Was it something about her father?

“Lycene, if you’ll untie Karrack and bring me the reins,” Anwar said evenly. He didn’t spare a glance in Iní’s direction.

“Here.” Lycene offered Iní a hand up on the horse.

Anwar quickly tethered Karrack to Soleil, mounted, and took off down the trail without waiting for the others. Lycene quickly urged her horse into a canter and Ari ran alongside. His long, easy strides amazed Iní with their speed.

“We’ll be to Antharra well before dusk if we let Anwar set the pace,” Ari said.

Lycene nodded an agreement. “Maybe you better run up and catch him, convince him to slow down. The Sun knows these horses shouldn’t be overtaxed so early in our journey.”

Ari picked up his pace in response and soon the two of them were left trailing behind.

“He doesn’t hate you, you know,” Lycene said after they’d rode several minutes in silence.

“Really?”

“No.” Lycene sighed. “But he has a deep pain and seeing you reminds him of it.”

“Oh?”

“His home village was slaughtered by humans during the Conduit Wars.”

“Why did he choose to guard me?” Iní said, her voice thick.

Lycene reached back and patted Iní’s leg. “Because while part of you might represent everything he’s lost, the other part represents everything he fights for.”

Iní said nothing. After a while, Lycene urged the horse forward and they met up with Ari and Anwar. Iní found it hard to look at him.

CHAPTER 9

Just before they reached the village, Anwar signaled them to stop. “Now remember, if anyone asks why we’ve brought a human, we say she is a new conduit training in absorption.”

“Iní girl, maybe you better switch horses now before we get too close to the village. It might look a little strange to have the magician sharing a horse with a trainee,” said Ari.

Iní nodded and slipped down off the horse. Riding with Lycene had been easy and comfortable, but the idea of getting on Anwar’s horse made her instantly nervous. She walked over and stood waiting beside the horse, unsure how to mount without assistance. Anwar refused to look at her.

“Here, let me give you hand.” Ari put his hand down and, when she stepped into it, he lifted her easily onto the horse. He gave Anwar a sharp look before he walked away.

Riding behind Anwar, she had no choice but to touch him. At first she looked around for something on the saddle she might hold or some way she could squeeze her legs tight enough to stay seated without touching him, but no luck. She gingerly held on to the back of his jacket, only leaning closer when the horse sprang into a canter. The sharp, earthen scent of his skin reminded her bitterly of the wide gap between their races and the losses both of them had endured.

The gnome village of Antharra was famous for the tree houses located high in the air among the branches of giant redwoods. Iní was shocked at how high up the homes were, many at least a hundred feet above the ground. Swinging bridges connected all the homes and public buildings. A large pulley system transported people up and down from the town, like a rising ferry. From the outside, the homes looked a lot like tangled branches and giant knots of wood,

but there were circles of cloth hanging in gaps she quickly recognized as windows and also the occasional porch swing, flower pot, and other item that marked the structure as a dwelling.

“Where will the horses stay?” she asked, speaking to no one in particular. Surely they wouldn’t stand being stalled so high off the ground, let alone the ride up.

“There are stalls for them underground,” Anwar replied. “Down in the shelter of the roots.”

“Under the trees?” *That* had certainly never occurred to her, though looking at the trees, many of them spanning over thirty feet in diameter, Iní could imagine how large and complex the root system must be.

“Yes,” said Anwar. “The gnomes keep nothing at ground level. This was a tactic that saved them many times during the Conduit Wars. Well, that and the fact that all the trees are spelled to repel fire.”

The mention of the Conduit Wars made Iní uncomfortable. She now understood both Anwar’s dislike of humans and his commitment to keeping the Magical Alliance strong, even if it meant guarding her.

Iní noticed a tree ferry lowering from the nearest village outpost, there were five gnomes standing on the platform, four of them forming a circle around one richly dressed figure.

Anwar and Lycene slowed the horses down to a trot and Ari walked briskly beside them.

“Greetings, Anwar Lochem,” said a tall, willowy gnome, with white, papery skin and hair that reminded Iní of dead twigs. “It’s been a long time since we had the honor of your presence.”

“Greetings, Eleshta,” Anwar replied, bowing his head in respect before quickly dismounting and grasping the gnome’s hand. “The honor is mine.”

Eleshta turned to the rest of the group, all of whom were now standing before him, his eyes narrowing on Iní. “I admit, the Midsummer Festival draws people of all Races, but I don’t know the last time I saw a sun elf and a human in the same company. And you, my large friend, are entirely a mystery.”

The last part was directed at Ari, who bowed his head and smiled sheepishly. “I fear my kind is a mystery even to me, but my name I know well enough—Ari Loosestrife.” His purple hand swallowed Eleshta’s in greeting.

“On behalf of the Gnome Council, let me welcome you to Antharra.” Eleshta bowed. He turned to Lycene and gave an even deeper bow. “And this fair creature is?”

“I’m Lycene Perihelion.” She stepped forward and extended her golden hand. The gnome sighed as he took her hand and held it longer than he had the previous two.

“Lycene, you honor us with your presence. There has not been a sun elf in these parts since I was a little boy,” he smiled at her warmly and finally released her hand.

Iní prepared to speak and step forward, but before she could introduce herself Eleshta turned his back and began addressing his guards. After a moment of initial shock and embarrassment, Iní was careful to keep her face blank. She must come to expect such treatment or she would end up looking like a fool. As Eleshta made preparations for their rooms and horses, Lycene reached out and gave Iní’s hand a quick squeeze. It was good to know not everyone here disliked her.

“Eleshta,” Lycene called out sweetly. “You seem to have missed my conduit-in-training during our introductions.”

The gnome turned, a look of shock on his face, which he quickly covered. “My apologies, I was so eager to attend to your comfort,” he replied smoothly, gesturing to the guards.

“An easy mistake. Now, let me introduce Iní Ríúil.” Lycene lifted Iní’s hand in her own for Eleshta to shake. After a slight hesitation the gnome took Iní’s hand briefly.

“Excellent, now that we’re all introduced, I think we would all welcome the arrangement of a hot bath,” said Lycene.

Lycene and Eleshta were all smiles and polite words throughout the introduction, but the message was clear—Iní was to be treated with respect and Lycene was not one to be trifled with.

The bathhouses were underground hot springs. The water pooled in natural stone formations, and the scent of crushed herbs and essential oils filled the air. An old gnome woman with skin like a gnarled oak gave them each a towel, a robe, and a pair of slippers, then led them to their private pools. Iní sank into the water with relief. Soreness and two days’ dust from riding all washed away in the quiet pool. She found herself thinking about Anwar and the death of his family. The only family Iní had ever known was her grandma, and losing this one person had been hard enough. She understood the desire to hate the people who killed his family. She hoped he would realize she wasn’t one of them.

Once she was all clean and wrapped comfortably in the soft white robe, Iní ventured out of her bathing room. She only got a few steps before she saw the pile of neatly folded clothes set just outside her door. Picking up the clothes and heading back in to change, Iní was surprised to find the gnomes had even provided shoes that looked to be her size. There was pair of wheat-colored leggings and a long, deep green tunic with intricate beadwork along the sleeves and hem of the garment. The beads were opalescent and covered a wide spectrum of green shades with

matching wheat accents. The soft fabric was much nicer than anything Iní had ever worn before.

Among the clothes, Iní also found a comb and jade hairpin, which she quickly used to untangle her long, fiery curls and pin them up in a thick twist. Several tendrils escaped the pin and framed her face with wispy rings. She would never be crushingly beautiful like Lycene, but staring at her reflection she felt ... nice, hopeful even. Then she walked out of the bathhouse and saw Lycene.

Freshly scrubbed, her gold hair cascading down her back, Lycene actually glowed a little brighter. She wore a simple dress of pale pink silk with no adornments. Her natural beauty was the focus, and the pale pink hue of the flowing fabric brought out a natural blush in her cheeks. Gnomes walking by stopped and stared at her for several seconds before continuing on. It was impossible not to. The only person not affected was Anwar. He met Iní in the hallway and escorted her out, still in full protector mode. Upon exiting the bathhouse, he quickly scanned the open clearing, sparing Lycene the same quick glance he gave everyone else.

When Eleshta returned and led them to two private rooms for Lycene and Iní, Anwar quickly stepped in.

“Private rooms are not necessary, Lycene and Iní can share one room, Ari and I will take the other,” he said with a note of finality.

“Very well,” said Eleshta, eyeing them carefully for a moment. “I will arrange to have extra beds brought in. In the mean time, why don’t you join me at my home for a meal.”

He led them through the swinging catwalks to a large, wooden, red door. Stepping inside, Iní’s eyes were quickly drawn to the intricate carvings on the living walls of the large room. Etchings of Eleshta’s ancestors filled the left wall.

Noticing her interest, Eleshta said. “These are carvings of everyone who has lived in this

home. This is one of the oldest homes in Antharra. My great-grandfather, four times removed, built this home.”

“It’s lovely,” Iní said, taking in the plush rugs and vibrant wall hangings. The center of the room had a low table laden with steaming dishes and surrounded by pillows.

“Please, sit.” Eleshta indicated the floor around the table and sat down himself. He poured them each a mug of cedar dew from a large silver decanter.

“Eleshta, your hospitality honors both us and your people,” Lycene said formally, sitting down.

Iní wanted to say something, but she felt unsure of what would best suit the occasion. Up until last week she had never gone anywhere, let alone represented a magical organization.

“Please, help yourselves,” said Eleshta, pulling Iní away from thoughts of her past. “I have already dined.”

The table was laden with rich dishes--fried mushrooms, spicy meats, pickled vegetables, and savory crepes filled with herbs and a sharp cheese that left a tang in Iní’s mouth. The woody, sweet taste of the cedar dew was a perfect pairing and brought out the layers of flavor in the dishes.

“Have any of you attended the festival before?” Eleshta looked at Lycene when he spoke, but it was Ari who responded.

“Aye, but it’s been a while. I still remember the last time Lycene and I were in gnome country for the festival. I must have drunk three barrels of cedar dew.” Ari leaned back sighing contentedly at the memory.

“This is my first time, but I hear it’s lovely,” said Iní.

“I’ve given Iní a brief history of the festival,” said Lycene, “but I’m sure I did not do it justice. Perhaps you could tell the story?”

Eleshta eagerly accepted Lycene’s offer, diving into a detailed account of the history of the Summer Tree, the lighting ceremony, and festivals of the past. Anwar remained quiet, only half listening to the conversation, his mind somewhere else. Iní’s eyes drifted over to him once or twice. He was dressed in a black silk tunic and pants that matched the black sheen of his hair. Everything about him was foreign, closed off to her. Once he looked up and met her gaze for a piercing second before looking away.

“We should retire soon,” he said, standing up from the low table and bowing to their host. “Thank you for an excellent meal.”

“The honor is mine,” Eleshta replied, standing also and bowing to his guests.

When they reached the sleeping quarters, Anwar stopped them. He insisted on doing a quick sweep of Iní’s room before she entered. When everything was clear, he waved them in. “I think tonight we can sleep without a watch; however, we mustn’t get careless.”

CHAPTER 10

The next morning, Iní awoke to find Anwar sitting in the room watching her.

“Oh!” She pulled her bed sheets up to her chin, then immediately felt embarrassed at the reaction. She was fully clothed, and besides, she had slept in the same room with him before.

He arched an eyebrow. “Lycene woke up several hours ago. I thought maybe you could use the extra rest, but you can’t be left unguarded.”

“Thanks,” she said lamely.

“There’s some breakfast here on the table,” he said, gesturing to a plate of fruit and a sweet roll next to him.

Iní swung out of bed and came to sit beside him. Her stomach growled, and she placed her hand over it in failed attempt to quiet it down.

“Ouch,” she said, finding the skin on her navel sore.

Anwar’s eyes narrowed immediately, “Have you been hurt?”

“No, at least not that I remember.” Then, Iní remembered her dream of the previous night. It was the shining, white cord again, only this time the strain on the rope was stronger. It felt almost as if someone was pulling her towards them. Once again, she had scabbled around trying to find the end of line, only to discover it emanated from her navel like an umbilical cord. She tried to wrench it from her stomach, only she couldn’t. The weight of magic increased and whatever was on the other end drew closer.

Anwar listened closely as Iní told him about the dreams, his eyes narrowing when she got to the part about her stomach. He sat silently for several seconds after she finished, tapping his finger on the table. “And it comes every night?”

“Yes.”

His finger stopped tapping. “We should discuss this with Lycene and Ari after the festival. These are no ordinary dreams.”

Iní nodded, feeling foolish she’d waited so long to tell someone. She picked at her breakfast, distracted by thoughts of what her dreams could possibly mean. Anwar sat in silence next to her, wrapped in his own thoughts. When she finished her roll, he stood up briskly.

“I’ll give you a moment to dress, then we should be on our way.”

Today was the Midsummer Festival and they would spend the whole day watching parades, wandering among the booths in the street bazaar, eating large meals, and then attending the lighting of the Summer Tree at dusk. Everyone wore their best clothes. Iní got a new dress for the occasion. It was a beautiful amber color that reminded her of Anwar’s eyes and complemented her deep red tresses. As a general rule, Iní did not like dresses, but in this case she would most certainly make an exception. Standing in front of the mirror, she couldn’t help but smile at her reflection.

When she opened the door, she found both Anwar and Lycene waiting outside.

“That dress is the perfect match for Anwar’s eyes,” said Lycene, looking as beautiful as ever in a simple, white sheath.

Anwar looked over, his eyes covering the length of Iní’s dress. She felt the color rise to her cheeks. It mortified her to think Anwar might guess that was the reason she’d chosen the dress. Fortunately, Anwar was too tense and distracted by the day’s events to pay her outfit much attention.

“I still say she shouldn’t attend the lighting. It is far too dangerous.” He stood poised on the balls of his feet, like he expected an attacker to jump out of the shadows at any moment.

“And where is Ari? I told him we would meet in an hour.”

He paced the room, his hands clenching and unclenching.

“He’ll be here, he’s probably just running late because of the crowds.” Lycene leaned out the window and scanned the gathering throng.

“We are not just four friends enjoying the festival. This is a job. She is our job,” Anwar continued, pointing at Iní. “And everyone would do well to remember it.”

Iní felt as if she’d been slapped. She kept her gaze trained carefully on the floor. Did he really expect Ari and Lycene to treat her as he did, keeping her at arm’s length? No, she couldn’t bear it. She raised her head and met Anwar’s gaze. “It’s true, I am a *job*. However, I hear some people actually enjoy their jobs, and those who don’t would be better suited finding new ones.”

Anwar opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it, turned, and walked out the door.

Lycene cleared her throat delicately. “I find parties are always more enjoyable when contrasted by the unpleasantness of daily life.”

Iní tried to laugh, but it ended up a choked sob.

“I don’t think he means to be quite so terrible. It just sort of comes out sounding the worse possible way. Why don’t I suggest that Anwar and I act as back up for Ari today? Give the two of you a little space.”

Iní nodded a wordless agreement, and Lycene slipped out the door to discuss it with Anwar. Not much later Ari arrived and, after complimenting both the girls on their “stunning good looks,” accompanied Iní to the festival. Iní made it a point not to look in Anwar’s direction when she passed him the hall.

Growing up with just Nana, Iní had never been to a party, let alone a citywide celebration. She found the crowds of people both exhilarating and overwhelming, with the press of the bodies, the variety of colors and dress, and the mingled smells. All along the road people

set up shops to sell various items: wood carvings, artisan breads and cheeses, sticks of roasted meats, glasses of chilled cherry wine, and charm jewelry with beads spelled to bring love, fortune, and other magical items. There was even a glass blower creating beautiful vases and ornaments at people's request. The festivities brought in people from all over the area, not just gnomes but also goblins, elves and other races she'd never seen before. She noticed with hint of disappointment that she was the only human, and though she did get some icy stares from passersby, people were generally friendly.

Ari wore deep purple silk pants that billowed around his legs and tapered to ornate cuffs at the ankle. He wore matching cuffs on his arms, but no shirt. Iní thought the clothes made him look even more exotic, and he got an equal amount of stares from people walking by.

"Iní girl, we seem to be drawing quite the crowd," Ari whispered, as they stood watching a glass blower create a multi-colored vase for a young gnome woman.

Iní turned around to see that only half the people were watching the creation of the vase, the rest of the group stole curious glances their way. She tugged nervously at her dress, worried that something in her appearance gave reason to stare.

"Relax, it's just our stunning good looks," said Ari, wagging his eyebrows at her.

Once the vase was done, Ari led her over to an herbalist's booth where they bought a variety of healing tinctures and poultices. The herbalist was an ancient elf, whose stooped back made it seem he was always bending over.

"Don't get many humans around here," came a strange voice.

Iní turned to find a tall goblin staring at her, a smile playing on his lips. He had the same lithe, muscular frame as Anwar, but his black hair was cut short and spiky and his eyes were a

deep brown. The booth was crowded with people, and Ari was busy sorting through jars of spices.

CHAPTER 11

“I heard a rumor there was a human conduit in the Alliance. I must confess I expected you to be short and ugly with strange facial hair, though your face seems relatively smooth.” His eyes danced with amusement.

“Yes, well in my experience most goblins are rude and taciturn, though you seem to offer your opinion quite readily,” Iní retorted.

The goblin let out a surprised laugh and then extended his hand toward Iní. “Well met,” he said. “I’m Kolar.”

“Iní,” she replied, extending her hand stiffly. She still wasn’t sure whether she liked his particular brand of humor.

“Nice to meet you Iní, and might I say you actually are quite pretty, even if you are a human.”

“Thank you,” Iní said, the sarcasm dripping from her words.

Kolar was now standing directly next to her. He put his arm around her shoulder and leaned in to whisper in her ear. “You know, I think you’d find this party much more entertaining if you didn’t have Anwar and his goons trailing you everywhere.”

Iní felt the shock of his remark register on her face. He knew Anwar. And he knew people were following. The next question was if he suspected why. Kolar’s grip on her shoulder tightened, and her breath caught in her throat. Ari was busy arguing with the herbalist over the price of spices, his back to her. Anwar and Lycene were somewhere behind them, but Iní hadn’t actually seen them all morning. Kolar face wore a friendly smile, but his grip on her arm made Iní wonder if he felt otherwise—especially when he slowly began pulling her to the side of the booth.

“The sea elves make the most amazing fish jerky, you simply must taste it.” He drew her away as he spoke.

Iní wondered if she should call out for Ari. But what if she was overreacting? She could just imagine how Anwar would react if she wrongly accused a goblin, perhaps even one of his friends. Their progress from the booth was slow, but in a crowd this big it was easy to lose someone. A little gnome girl carrying a bag of candied nuts was crying for her mother. Iní pushed back against Kolar’s grip and opened her mouth to call out for Ari while she could still glimpse his tall purple frame.

“Anwar,” said Kolar, his voice overly bright.

Iní stopped short and turned to see Anwar standing inches away from Kolar’s face. Anwar was the taller of the two, though they were both muscularly built. Mouth set in a tight line, Anwar’s eyes never left the other goblin’s as he reached over and yanked his arm from Iní’s shoulder.

“We were just on our way to investigate the charm bracelets. Care to join us? Or would you prefer to skulk around in the shadows following our every move?” Kolar voice grew sharp at the end, but the hint of malice quickly disappeared when Anwar’s hand gripped a large hunting knife strapped to his side. Kolar stepped back and raised his hands in surrender. “Easy cousin, you know I’m just joking. I understand worrying about a human conduit out in this crowd, particularly one as lovely as Iní here, but don’t you think three guards is overdoing it a bit?”

Iní tensed at the implication she was somehow different. The last thing she needed was people thinking she was special in some way.

“Three guards is definitely overkill,” said Lycene, sweeping into view. Her skin sparkled in the noon sun, and her hair fell in long curls down her back. The crowd parted to make room for her and Iní heard several gasps. Even Kolar’s focus wavered at the sight of a sun elf.

“But then again, *I’m* not a guard,” she continued, walking up to stand next to Anwar. She smiled sweetly at Kolar, bowed, and extended her hand.

“Lycene Perihelion,” she said. “Iní is my conduit-in-training.”

Kolar gave a sweeping bow before taking Lycene’s hand and kissing it gently. “Kolar Melech at your service,” he said.

“Melech you say? Are you any relation to King Melech?”

A slow smile spread across Kolar’s features. “I am, in fact.”

“He’s the crown prince,” said Anwar, his voice hard.

“And this dear man’s cousin.” In an act of exaggerated fondness, Kolar put an arm around Anwar, who quickly shrugged it off.

“Well in that case, you must join us for dinner,” said Lycene.

“I would love to.” Kolar threw a look of triumph in his cousin’s direction.

Anwar started to protest, but Lycene cut him off. “Now, did you say you were looking at charmed bracelets?” She turned to him conspiratorially. “I think our friend Anwar here is desperately in need of one that lessens stress.”

She held out her hand to Kolar, who laughed freely and escorted Lycene to the booth. Iní was left standing alone with Anwar. He stood stiffly, not quite meeting her eyes.

“I ...” Anwar began, clearing his throat awkwardly. “Well, this morning, what I meant to say was...” He shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. “Your safety is important, you are important.”

He seemed strangely exposed standing there fidgeting nervously, his eyes never leaving the ground. Iní felt a strong urge to reach out and take his hand, but remained standing where she was.

“Thank you,” she said softly, then added, “I am lucky to have you.”

CHAPTER 12

When Ari made it across the crowd to them, Anwar gave him a long, cold stare.

Ari grimaced. "I know, I'll hear about it later." He turned to Iní. "But I am sorry and I won't lose you again."

Anwar let out a grunt of disgust.

"Who was that fellow?" Ari gestured in the direction Kolar and Lycene.

"Kolar." Anwar's tone was sour.

"His cousin, the goblin crown prince," Iní added.

Ari's eyes widened at this and he craned his neck to catch a glimpse of Kolar in crowd. "I take it you two aren't exactly friendly?"

"No."

"I see," said Ari. "Well, anyone ready for lunch?" He patted his belly and winked at Iní.

"I'm starving," Iní said. All the excitement left her hungry and tired. She looked carefully at Anwar for confirmation.

Anwar's expression altered when he met Iní's eyes, and he nodded. She was the one person he wasn't mad at in all of this.

"If you two want to find a table over in the commons area, I'll get the food" Ari said.

"Anyone have requests?"

Anwar shook his head.

"Surprise me," Iní said.

Being with Anwar was suddenly less awkward, but still it wasn't comfortable. He was so quiet and often looked angry or annoyed. Iní started to wonder if that was just his regular expression. They sat silent in the shade watching the crowds of people pass by. Iní didn't mind

silence, growing up with Nana had been a quiet life. But this silence lacked understanding and weighed heavily on her.

“So the lighting of the Summer Tree is at sunset, right?”

“Yes.” There was long pause, but then he added, “Haven’t seen a lighting since was I eight.”

“Oh?” Iní was surprised. Anwar never spoke about his personal life. “What is it like?”

“The whole tree is engulfed in flames, only nothing burns. It’s beautiful.” His voice had grown soft, but quickly hardened again. “The perfect opportunity for kidnapping a conduit, however—what with everyone’s attention elsewhere.”

“Right, I’ll stay close to you.”

“Good.”

Ari came back with food enough for seven people. There were sticks of grilled meat, rolls filled with spicy bean curd and thick slabs of sharp cheese, pickled vegetables, candied fruits, and two flasks of cedar dew and cherry wine. After trying some of each dish, Iní was stuffed, but Ari and Anwar managed to polish off the rest.

“Lycene’ll have to fend for herself,” Ari said, as he bit into the last the stuffed roll.

After lunch, Anwar and Ari took her to see the charmed jewelry. There were rings spelled to keep you safe from lightning, bracelets that made you lucky at cards, and necklaces that prevented the common cold. Iní noticed one ring in particular: a delicate silver filigree set with lapis lazuli.

“What is this one?” she said.

“Excellent choice.” Ari picked up the ring. “The wearer of this ring will always be able to find the way home.”

“Oh.” Iní couldn’t help the note of sadness in her voice. Such a ring wouldn’t work on her; she didn’t have a home—at least not anymore.

Ari saw the change in her face and quickly set the ring down. “But they’re just silly trinkets really.”

To Iní’s surprise Anwar picked the ring back up and placed it in her hand. “This is a good ring to have,” he said and turned to pay the seller. “Especially for those who feel lost.”

Iní quietly slipped the ring on her index finger, a warm feeling blooming in her chest.

CHAPTER 13

The time was quickly approaching for the ceremony at the Summer Tree, and everyone made their way to the Flowering Orchards, the sacred home of the dryad. The orchard was two miles away, and ceremony dictated that everyone go by foot. Iní was constantly jostled by passing strangers. Once her hand brushed Anwar's and she felt an electric spark shoot through her arm. Anwar said nothing, but his hand clenched into a fist.

Lycene and Kolar caught up with them on the road, much to Anwar's dismay. Kolar jibed his cousin at every opportunity, but Anwar remained silent, his face impassive. Lycene occasionally intervened, but for the most part she left them to each other. She and Ari walked side-by-side, sharing the events of their day and a bag of candied nuts. Ari had discovered some exquisite throwing knives he was anxious to show Lycene, and she had seen a booth selling cooking pots charmed against burning food.

"You're certainly quiet," said Kolar, sidling up to Iní. "I thought humans were loud and brash."

"I wouldn't know, I haven't met many humans."

"Really? How'd you manage that?"

Iní realized too late her past was something best kept secret. It wasn't normal for little girls to grow up shut away from all human contact. Iní scrambled for a reply. "Well ..."

"Her grandmother was an outcast, banished for practicing magic," said Anwar, coming to her rescue.

"Ah," said Kolar in a knowing tone. "Humans are strange lot. If I remember correctly, you said you'd never guard a human conduit." He gave Anwar a challenging stare.

"I did," replied Anwar. "Lycene is my charge."

“Oh, right,” said Kolar sarcastically as he glanced over at Ari and Lycene deep in conversation.

Iní found Kolar uncomfortably perceptive and wished he would turn his attention elsewhere. “What brings you to Antharra?” she asked, trying to distract him.

Kolar flashed a dazzling smile in her direction. “You, actually. I don’t think you realize how much of a rarity a human is in these parts, especially traveling with my cousin.”

Anwar snorted in disgust. “Don’t believe my *cousin*. He’s here as a trade ambassador. King Melech is a connoisseur of cedar dew, and Antharra is home to the best brewers.”

“It’s true,” Kolar said in mock sadness. “But I would have come for you.” He gave Iní a wink, and she felt the color rise to her cheeks. She was not used to this kind of attention. Thankfully, Kolar’s attention was drawn away when Eleshta came upon the group. As a council member, Eleshta had great sway in any trade agreements, and Kolar used the opportunity to flatter and ply the gnome for allegiance. Iní went back to walking quietly beside Anwar, painfully aware of his proximity.

As they neared the orchard the air began to hum with the presence of a strange magic. *You cannot pass*, whispered the spell. At first Iní assumed it was related to the Summer Tree, some sort of shield to protect it. Then she registered the angry shouts coming from up ahead. Anwar clutched her arm so tightly it hurt, and Ari and Lycene were suddenly right next to her.

People were growing anxious, shoving and jostling each other in an effort to get closer to the commotion. Somewhere in the crowd a mother was calling her child’s name. Iní was almost knocked to the ground when a burly gnome came barreling through.

“Lycene, send out a calming spell. If we aren’t careful people will stampede,” Ari said, suddenly serious.

“What’s going on?” Iní couldn’t understand the sudden change.

“Something’s happening at the tree, something bad,” said Anwar.

Armed gnome guards shoved past them, hurrying towards the tree. Ari made a path through the crowd for Lycene as she put all of her focus into casting a calming spell over the entire crowd.

“I could help,” Iní offered, seeing the toll the spell was taking. She could easily amplify a small spell to cover everyone.

“No!” Anwar, jerked her in front of him to meet his eyes. “Under no circumstances are you to do anything. Do you hear me?” His voice was harsh and urgent, his eyes burning. Iní nodded wordlessly, and Anwar loosened his grip on her. “I knew this was too dangerous. I would take you back, but that might draw too much attention. For all we know, this could be another attempt to draw you out.”

The movement of the crowd pressed everyone forward, but Lycene managed to keep them from sheer panic. A line of archers was forming up in the trees surrounding the clearing. As they neared the center of the orchard Iní was struck by the slightness of the Summer Tree. She expected a great towering trunk, but instead found a slender cherry tree dripping with blossoms. Then she saw the dragon.

Standing at least twenty feet tall, the great red creature dwarfed the tree. It licked its left foreleg, like a cat cleaning its fur, and acted completely ignorant of the commotion it was causing. Gold lines shimmered along its wing tips, tail, and forelegs. There was a shimmering curtain that hung around both the dragon and the Summer Tree, which Iní recognized as a sort of magical shield. She watched as several spears and other objects struck the barrier and fell harmlessly to the ground.

The dragon paused in its cleaning and surveyed the crowd. “Has all the council arrived?” The voice was unmistakably female, which surprised Iní. For some reason she had assumed the dragon was male. Large, golden eyes surveyed the crowd, and then the dragon nodded in confirmation. “Several weeks ago your council members received a generous offer in regards to a parley with the dryad. However, it seems they couldn’t be bothered with a response. Perhaps they think they are the only Race worthy to receive the dryad’s help? I am here to remind them, and all of you, that the dryad’s power belongs to no Race. We are not to be ignored.” The dragon’s voice grew hard.

The power emanating from the dragon silenced the crowd to grumbled whispers. Iní wished she knew more about the dryad’s history, but she could see the dragon’s words made the gnomes around her livid.

“How dare you interrupt the festival!” Eleshta pushed his way to the front of the crowd, his face bright red. “Stand down at once.”

The dragon laughed, a plume of smoke rising from her snout. “And if I don’t?”

Eleshta raised his arm in the air, and the archers in the trees behind them drew back their bowstrings. Iní felt the air around her hum with a new gathering of magic.

“You are not the only one here with power,” Eleshta said softly.

The dragon’s eyes narrowed to golden slits. “Never threaten a dragon, gnome. You won’t live to regret it. Or perhaps it is the dryad who won’t live.” The dragon’s mouth curved upward, baring her teeth in an eerie smile. She took a deep breath and turned towards the tree.

Iní acted fast. She could not let the dragon destroy her one chance at learning more about her father. Using the first image that popped into her mind, she quickly transformed the magical

shield surrounding the dragon. *Rose petals? I guess it will have to work.* Iní was not experienced at on-the-spot transformation.

At that same moment one of the archer's sent an arrow flying over the crowd. It tore through the falling petals and pierced the dragon's thin skin just above her right eye.

The proud crimson dragon gave a roar and burned the petals to ash with one blast of fiery breath. "How dare a conduit intervene! I will hold you personally responsible for my injury."

Anwar grabbed Iní's arm. "Get ready to run."

"I see you, little human." The dragon leapt into the air and flew straight for Iní. Gnomes screamed, trampling one another to get out of the way.

"Find cover!" Anwar flung her behind him, drew his sword, and turned to face the dragon.

"You mean to fight me with that?" The dragon laughed, drew a great breath and released a wall of fire.

Iní watched in horror as the fire barreled down on Anwar, incinerating everything in its path. Anwar leapt out of the way, almost clearing the flame, but a corner of it caught his left leg.

"Anwar!" Iní ran forward to help him, but the dragon swooped down and plucked her off the ground in one swift movement.

Anwar tried to stand, failed, and launched his sword at the dragon in a last-ditch attempt. It clattered uselessly to the ground.

"Rizen!" Lycene's skin glowed with power. Ari stood flanking her left side, his battleaxe raised.

"You know my name?" The dragon paused in mid-flight, peering down at the sun elf.

Lycene gave a deep elegant bow to the dragon. “My name is Lycene Perihelion. Many years ago you were a guest in my family’s home.”

The dragon snorted, but made no move to attack.

“On behalf of the Magical Alliance, let me apologize. The human is only a conduit-in-training.”

The air was charged with power and the scent of charred earth. Everyone held perfectly still, waiting for the dragon to respond.

“You know the rules, sun elf. The penalty is death for any conduit who uses her abilities to aid an attack.” Rizen tightened her grip on Iní as she spoke, squeezing so hard Iní could only take small, shallow breaths.

“You are correct,” Lycene said, holding her hand up for silence when Anwar started to protest. “However, the fault is mine. It is my failure as a teacher that caused this breach of the treaty. Please, release the human and take me.”

The dragon shook Iní’s body over them like a rag doll. Anwar flinched and reached for his sword, only to find an empty scabbard.

“Interesting.” Rizen smiled, watching Anwar’s reaction. “But I think I’ll hold on to this one.” Then she soared into the air, Lycene and the others quickly becoming small dots as she carried Iní away.

The ground moved like a blur below them. Iní quickly lost sight of Antharra or any other landmark that could help track their flight. She scrabbled to reach the small dagger in her boot, but Rizen squeezed until she blacked out.

CHAPTER 14

Iní awoke to find herself bound and gagged in small stone room.

“She awakes at last.” A pale woman, her scarlet hair streaked with snatches of gold, loomed over her body.

At first, Iní thought the woman was an elf; her striking beauty and glowing skin marked her as a being of natural magic. But this woman gave off a cool, white light, and something about her appearance felt unnatural or forced.

“Now let’s get some answers, shall we?” The woman smiled and removed the gag. “Why don’t we start with what makes you so special?”

Several things clicked into place at once, and Iní recognized the woman’s scarlet hair streaked with snatches of gold—this was the dragon Rizen in her human form. She’d heard stories of dragons changing shape, but Iní thought it was a myth.

“Well?” Rizen prompted again, giving Iní’s shoulders a rough shake.

What could Iní say? From Rizen’s conversation with Lycene, Iní gathered that her actions at the tree were considered a violation of the Magical Alliance and warranted her death. She didn’t think telling Rizen who she really was would help matters. She pressed her lips tightly together and tried to avoid eye contact. When it became obvious Iní wasn’t going to answer, Rizen grew angry.

“You think if you don’t answer I’ll just stop? That’s not how it works, little human.”

She laughed and then struck Iní hard across the cheek. Tears sprang to her eyes, but Iní gritted her teeth and refused to cry out. When Iní didn’t talk, Rizen hit her again. She might be in human form, but Rizen was unnaturally strong.

After several vicious blows, Iní felt her resolve crumbling. She grasped for some lie the

dragon might believe. A particularly strong backhand sent her flying across the room. Something warm trickled down her face as everything went dark.

“Hello Iní Rí.” The golden figure brushed a hand tenderly across her cheek. The touch was warm and tingling, but not quite substantial, like the fluttering of moth wings.

Iní shifted in her sleep, the hard, stone floor of her cell causing pressure points. “Iní Rí” was Nana’s pet name for her.

“Those were not my orders!” said an angry male voice.

Iní’s head throbbed. Her right eye was swollen shut and caked with blood. Outside her door, Rizen and the strange male were arguing.

“She attacked me. The treaty says...” Rizen began.

“The gnomes say she simply disarmed your shield.” The other voice cut in.

Rizen hesitated. “There is a fine line between disarming and attacking. I acted within my rights.”

“You will take her back.” The voice sounded tired.

“But...”

“You will take her back!”

“Yes, your majesty.”

“Now open the door and let me see her.”

The door opened to reveal a tall man whose hair and skin were completely devoid of color. She knew instantly he was not only a dragon, but the most powerful magical being she had

ever met. He seemed to sweat magic, like there was so much bottled up inside little drops couldn't help seeping out his pores. Iní felt her own body tingle in response, just standing near him.

“Something tells me she didn't get these bruises from disabling your shield.” He bent over Iní and touched her swollen left cheek.

“She resisted questioning,” said Rizen, but her voice lacked its earlier confidence.

“My name is Arach.” He squatted down next to her extending his hand. “On behalf of the dragon clans, let me apologize for your mistreatment—it won't happen again.” He glanced back at Rizen, who nodded.

“I'm Iní Ríúil,” she said, surprising even herself with the calm tone of her voice.

“Rizen, have the healers see to her face before we leave. And, she'll need a clean change of clothes.”

Rizen's eyes widened. She opened her mouth, but then clamped it shut without saying a word.

CHAPTER 15

A whole retinue of dragons accompanied Iní home. In addition to Arach and Rizen, there was Viot, a lavender dragon; the emerald Twins, with black swirls running the length of their wings; and finally Gris, possibly the most startling of all the dragons, because he was neither sleek nor beautiful. His scales were a dull, grey color, and his body oddly disproportionate--his great wings dwarfing a small frame.

Arach, his glittering white form emanating power, carried Iní himself. As they drew close to Antharra, Iní could see a small group gathered by the landing clearing. Anwar, Lycene, and Ari were standing with Eleshta and several other gnomes from the Council. Iní felt her mouth go dry; she was not looking forward to this part. As they landed she could see Anwar's tense frame, his fists clenching and unclenching, as if he were restraining himself from hitting someone.

Hopefully not me, thought Iní.

As soon as Arach released her, Anwar limped forward. Iní felt a sharp pang of guilt; his leg still wasn't healed from the fight with Rizen.

"Who did this?" He quickly took in the bruises on her face, then turned to face Arach. Most people would be intimidated by the presence of the dragon king, but Anwar was ready to pick a fight with the great beast.

"An unfortunate mistake," Arach said. "It won't happen again."

"Rizen?" Anwar turned to the scarlet dragon, his hand grasping his sword.

Lycene quickly intervened, approaching the dragons and bowing deeply. "Thank you for agreeing to this peace summit." She shot Anwar a warning look.

"Iní girl, I bet you're exhausted. Let me take you back to your room," said Ari, putting a friendly arm over her shoulders.

“Don’t, I’ll do it.” Anwar sighed and let go of his sword.

“Are you all right?” Iní asked once they were clear of the dragons.

“I’m fine.” Anwar said brusquely. “But I’ll need to examine your face for any hairline fractures and get a poultice on that eye.”

Back in the rooms he remained silent as he worked, his deft fingers covering every inch of Iní’s face.

“I’m sorry,” Iní said softly.

Anwar didn’t respond, just handed her a poultice. “Lie down and place that on your eye.”

“I was trying to help,” Iní grabbed his sleeve when he tried to turn away. “I was afraid Eleshta would make things worse.”

Anwar twisted out of her grasp, and walked to the door. “I’ll be just outside the door if you need me.” He paused at the handle. “Three gnomes died in the stampede that night, one of them a seven-year-old girl.”

Iní felt the bile rise in her throat. Did that mean she killed them? The gnomes must be furious. Anwar couldn’t even meet her eyes. He stepped out the door without saying another word.

Iní was running away. She’d thought about it all day, and it was the only solution. Lycene and the others could handle the dragons; they didn’t need her here to cause more problems or put anyone else in danger. As soon as Lycene reached a deep sleep Iní would sneak out and go to the

Summer Tree alone. She would leave word for Cerulean once she knew more about the bloodstone, then she would continue the search for her father.

Getting out was surprisingly easy. Iní's soft leather boots made no sound as she crept across the floor and slipped out the door. She was surprised Anwar hadn't insisted on posting a guard outside her door. Then again, she figured he would be glad to see her go. She quietly made her way across the deserted catwalks. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She turned around several times, sure someone was following her but saw nothing. *Just nerves*, she reasoned.

The path to the Summer Tree was deserted, but Iní still avoided the main road and took a more circuitous route. She figured the gnomes would be on high alert, especially with the dragons in town. As it was, Iní found herself taking cover at the slightest sound, sure a gnome guard was just around the corner.

All too soon Iní found herself looking at the delicate Summer Tree. Eight gnome soldiers monitored the perimeter, making a wide circle around the Tree. Iní crouched in the bushes, trying to memorize their pattern and divine a plan.

"We could just make a run for it," came a voice just a behind her.

Iní jumped in surprise and whipped around to see Anwar, a smile playing on his lips. "You didn't think you had actually escaped, did you?"

"Wouldn't it be better if I did?" Iní felt a mixture of relief and sorrow at seeing his face. "At least then I couldn't hurt anyone else."

Anwar sat silent, plucking at the wild grass growing around them. Finally he spoke, "It's true, if you hadn't dissolved the shield those gnomes might still be alive. But," he took Iní's hand in his own, "the fault is not all yours. I knew taking you to the Festival was a bad idea. As your

guardian I too bear responsibility for what happened that night, as does Rizen who—no matter what she says—initiated the conflict.”

Iní liked the warm comforting feeling of his hand. She didn't think Anwar was at all to blame, but she felt some of the weight lift off her shoulders.

“Wait here.” Anwar let go of her hand and slipped into the bushes. There was a loud crash off to her far left and several guards quickly ran to investigate.

“What is it, Merk?” cried the captain, trying to see into the thick cover of the bush.

“Merk?”

The captain gripped his sword, then motioned to two of his men to follow him. They drew their weapons and went to investigate. Once out of sight, they too seemed to disappear.

“I don't like this,” said one of the three remaining guards. “Treb, you better alert the watchtower.”

Treb nodded and ran for the main road. He made it ten feet before a small dart flew through the air and stuck in his neck. The gnome fell to the ground unconscious. The remaining two guards drew their swords, but looked hesitantly at the bushes, unsure whether to attack or make a run for it. One gnome opened his mouth to cry out, when a dart zipped through the air and cut him off. The other guard then made a run for it, weaving zigzag across the clearing, but a dart pierced his right arm and he dropped.

Anwar stepped out of the clearing, a small dart shooter in his hand. “We have to move quickly. Those sleeping darts won't last long.”

CHAPTER 16

“What do I do?”

“I’m not sure. Try touching it or reach out with your magic or something.”

That’s helpful. Iní shrugged and took a few tentative steps toward the tree. She did not sense any magic. If she hadn’t known better she would say it was like every other tree. Only Iní knew it wasn’t. She placed a tentative hand on the rough bark—nothing.

“Hello?” She felt incredibly stupid talking out loud. She glanced back at Anwar. “Could you go somewhere else? I don’t think I can do this with an audience.”

Anwar started to protest, then stopped. “I’ll go down the road a little and watch for anyone trying to approach.”

Iní stood quietly, her hand on the Summer Tree. She sent out tiny tendrils of thought, trying to sense with her mind the magic buried deep in the tree.

Hello? I’m sorry to intrude, but we need your help—all of us. Someone is looking for the bloodstones, and if they find them the entire magical balance could be destroyed. She thought rather than spoke the words.

For the briefest moment, Iní she felt a warming of the bark under her palm. She strained all her faculties, trying to “hear” whatever message the dryad might be sending. No luck. She wished everything wasn’t so rushed. Cerulean, or perhaps even Lycene, would know the proper etiquette when speaking to the dryad. She hated to think she might fail or even offend the ancient being with her approach.

I don’t know the proper way to ask you for help. I need to know about the bloodstones. Do any of them still exist?

There was no breeze in the orchard, the air was heavy and warm and perfectly still. When

the leaves rustled slightly of their own accord, Iní knew it was dryad speaking to her -- or at least acknowledging the conduit's presence. She waited for something more, some answer or response she could understand.

You hear me, right? What did that mean? Is there still a bloodstone?

A twig snapped. Iní turned to see Anwar walking up the path.

“We need to go. More guards are coming.”

Iní nodded, but turned quickly back to tree.

Do you know who my father is? Please, I need to find him.

Petals tumbled from the tree, swirling and dancing in the air. Iní strained to listen for something, anything that could lead her to her father. The bark beneath her skin grew hot. Iní snatched her hand back to prevent it from being burned. The dryad heard her. But what did it all mean?

Not even Cerulean knew what to make of the dryad's response, and Iní worried she had offended the tree somehow. She lay in bed, reviewing the encounter over and over again until she drifted off to sleep.

Hello? I'm sorry to intrude, but we need your help—all of us. We think the dragons are looking for the bloodstones, and if they find them the entire magical balance could be destroyed.

In her dream, the bark beneath Iní's hand turned to blazing embers. Iní cried out and pulled her hand back to find the word “proceed” seared into her palm.

I don't know the proper way to ask you for help. But I need to know about the bloodstones.

Do any of them still exist?

The rustle of the leaves grew to a loud hiss, “Yessss, yesssss.”

You hear me, right? What did that mean? Is there still a bloodstone?

A loud twig snapped. Only this time it wasn't a snap so much as a splash, like the sound of wood hitting the water. The air filled with the smell of water, clear and crisp and cool. Only it wasn't just a smell, it was also a word—in a way Iní couldn't explain, the scent formed a message in her mind: “The Pool of Memories.” A flash of images then filled her mind: a tree with a limb grown in a circle, a rock sliced off like a slab of bread, a cave surrounded by dense shrubbery, and a great mountain cat walking before her.

Do you know who my father is? Please, I need to find him.

Petals tumbled from the tree, shifting in the air and forming a message as they fell: *he found you.*

Iní shot out of bed.

“Lycene, she answered me!” Iní flew across the room and perched on the edge of the sun elf's bed.

“What?” Lycene groaned softly and rubbed her eyes.

“The dryad, she answered me. Just now in my dreams.”

Lycene sat up, stretched, and took a drink from the canteen she kept propped next to her bed. “Start from the beginning.”

CHAPTER 17

“What do you think it meant, ‘he found you?’” Lycene was now wide awake and puzzling over the dryad’s message.

“I don’t know. Do you think it means it’s someone I’ve already met?” Iní scoured her mind for the faces of the few humans she’d met over the years.

“Have you ever considered ...” Lycene left the question unfinished.

“What?” Iní leaned forward, eager for any ideas.

“Well, you are a full conduit. So I can’t help but wonder...” Again the elf’s words trailed off. She shook her head. “I don’t know what it means.”

Iní sighed.

“We should wake the others and contact Cerulean.” Lycene stood up and walked to the door.

Soon they were all gathered around a small table in the girls’ sleeping room. Anwar loosened the strings on a small pouch, then opened and spread the leather until it was a flat square with a pile of silver dust at its center. The silver dust began moving and spreading until it reached the edges of the leather. By now the dust had become a thick silver liquid that mirrored its surroundings.

“What is that?” Iní asked.

“A mirrock,” replied Lycene. “It’s a specialty of the sun elves and very rare. Mirrocks allow us to communicate over great distances. But they only work in pairs, so this mirrock will only contact the owner of its other half, which in our case is Cerulean.”

Iní peered at the silvery mirrock in fascination.

“Well, shall we begin?” said Ari, coming to stand next to Iní.

Anwar nodded and placed his hand over the mirrock. The liquid surface shimmered and darkened. The mirrock began to clear, no longer reflecting its surroundings but showing a completely different room.

“Just a minute,” called a voice from the mirrock, the speaker’s face out of view. “You have a habit of always calling when I’m in bed.”

“Perhaps you’re sleeping too much,” Anwar said sarcastically.

There was a grumbling response from the mirrock and then Cerulean shuffled into view, his hair disheveled.

“Well, what is it that couldn’t wait until tomorrow?” he asked, patting down his hair.

“The Pool of Memories.” Cerulean whispered after the tale was done. Iní felt a flash of annoyance that he focused only on the bloodstone, ignoring the dryad’s cryptic remark about her father.

“Do you think the pool could tell me more about my father?”

“The pool is dangerous, Iní. The things you see might be truths, but they are usually painful to bear,” said Anwar.

“But is there really another option?” Lycene laid a supportive hand on Iní’s shoulder.

“She’s right, I’m afraid. We must follow the dryad’s advice.” Cerulean looked at Anwar as he spoke.

“Fine, but Iní’s not going. Lycene can come instead. It’s too dangerous...and she’d only get in the way.” He added the last part without conviction.

“It won’t work,” said Cerulean, his tone final. “Iní, not Lycene, is the one to whom the dryad spoke. If we want the pool to help us, Iní must go.”

And I'm not giving up a chance to learn more about my father, Iní added silently.

“What about the dragons?” Ari asked. “Won’t they notice if we all suddenly disappear?”

Lycene nodded. “I promised Eleshta I would personally oversee the peace talks between the two Races.”

“We had best leave you here then,” said Cerulean. “If you could wait a little while, I might be able to slip away and take Iní myself.”

“No.” Anwar’s voice was tired. “The longer we wait, the closer the dragons get. I will take her.”

“But how are we going to find the way?” Iní remembered the images from the dryad, but didn’t three memories would serve as adequate landmarks for their journey.

“That’s easy Iní girl—the werecat will guide you.” Ari smiled and gave her a playful shove.

Iní looked blankly at the large purple man. Werecat?

CHAPTER 18

Leaving was a quiet affair. They said their goodbyes to Eleshta and the other gnomes the night before, under the guise of returning to Alliance headquarters. Only Ari and Lycene woke to see them off, though Iní did see a flash of a white among the trees that she almost mistook for a watching figure.

“I’m sorry Ari and I won’t be coming with you,” Lycene said, hugging Iní fiercely.

“Me too, Iní girl.” Ari lifted her off the ground in a bear hug. “But you’ll be happy to know your guide arrived right on time this morning.”

“My guide?”

A large, golden-furred head appeared at Ari’s side. It was the same great mountain cat Iní saw in her vision. It was the height of a young calf, and its glossy golden fur was mottled with spots of brown and green.

“This is Mauladad, a werecat.”

“Oh.” Iní looked at the long, four-inch sabers that jutted from both sides of his jaw. “You want us to take him with us to the Pool of Memories?”

“He will be taking you. He’s familiar with Blightwood and all of its ... inhabitants.”

“Is he tame?” Iní looked at the werecat uncertainly. She wasn’t sure she wanted to be left her alone with such a powerful creature. Mauladad gave a low growl and lifted his lips to reveal two rows of razor sharp teeth.

Ari rolled his eyes. “He’s not a pet, Iní. He’s here to guide you at the request of the dryad.”

Mauladad sat back on his haunches and peered at Iní.

“Oh. Well, thank you.” This time Iní addressed Mauladad directly. “Do you, er, talk?”

Mauladad blinked.

“All animals talk, just not like you or me,” Ari said. “Mauladad can understand you, and he has a way of making his opinion known.”

The last part sounded slightly ominous in Iní’s estimation.

“Just listen to Anwar and Mauladad and you’ll be fine,” said Ari. “And don’t go trying to slip off your own.” He gave her a wink at the mention of her previous escapades.

Iní felt her face go hot and she nodded quickly. “I won’t.”

Lycene came up and slipped her arm around Iní’s waist.

“Remember what Cerulean told you about the pool. Just ask the questions you need answered, and don’t stay any longer than you must. It might speak the truth, but it is a twisted, varied version that often hurts more than it helps.”

“Right.” Iní nodded again, stamping her feet to keep the blood flowing in the cold morning air. She was eager to be off.

“We’re ready,” said Anwar, bringing the horses around. “Hello.” He bowed in greeting to the large werecat. “Thank you for accompanying us on this trip. We’ll need your presence in the Blightwood.”

Mauladad bowed his head slightly in response.

Karrack skittered around at first, but Lycene held him still while Iní mounted. The tether line kept him from going off course, and Soleil made it clear she would not put up with any misbehavior. Iní waved a final farewell and then they were off. Anwar set a brisk pace through the chill morning air.

CHAPTER 19

“In three days we’ll reach fury country.” Anwar stirred the coals in the small campfire as he spoke. “I won’t be any good to you then.”

“What do you mean?”

“The last time I traveled in Blightwood, I was bitten.”

Iní gasped. There weren’t many stories of people escaping a fury attack, and none of them included someone surviving a bite “What about the venom, is the binding spell gone now?”

“I don’t know. But Mauladad and other animals are immune to their call. You might be too, being a full conduit and all.” Anwar gave the werecat a playful cuff on the head. Mauladad gave a small growl and batted at his hand. Only Anwar would dare play with Mauladad that way.

Iní leaned in closer to the fire, warming her hands.

“How are you legs? Do you need any salve? It’s best to treat any irritation early, not wait until it gets too hard to ride.”

“I’m fine.” Iní leaned back and drew her legs to her chest.

The two stared silently at the fire for some time before Anwar spoke again.

“I’m not going in to the Pool of Memories.”

Iní looked up in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I have enough memories I’d like to forget, and every story I’ve ever heard about the pool says it twists as much truth as it reveals.”

Iní knew Anwar’s words should make her wary, but she couldn’t help being excited. She needed the pool to find out more about her father, and they all needed to learn more about the bloodstone. If it fell into the wrong hands there would be disastrous results—war, the end of the Alliance, and even more danger to Iní and other conduits like her.

“It’s late. You should go to bed. Here—“ Anwar rolled a medium-sized rock out of the fire’s embers. He produced a thick piece of leather and wrapped the rock before handing it to Iní. “Place it in your bedroll to keep you warm.”

“Thanks.”

Anwar nodded and returned to prodding the fire.

They stopped just outside the entrance to a thick grove of trees.

“Here, use this to tie yourself to the horse.” Anwar handed Iní an odd sort of shackle that fastened around the left ankle on one end and onto the stirrup on the other end. Unlocking the shackle required a key, which Anwar did not provide. Rather he hung a little bag containing the key around Maul’s neck.

“Make sure your restraints are fastened tight to both you and the saddle,” he cautioned. “Once we enter these trees we’re in fury country. The horses know to follow Mauladad. If anything happens to me, don’t stop. Follow Maul. That’s the only way you’ll get out of this alive.”

Iní nodded, her mouth suddenly dry.

Mauladad positioned himself in front of the horses, walking slowly into the grove of trees. Though it was midday, it was dark under the canopy of old, gnarled trunks. Moss and dead leaves carpeted the forest floor. The air was heavy with the scent of moldering plant life.

Iní sat tense and alert in the saddle, waiting for something to jump out at any moment. Anwar had said the furies were small, about the size of a child, but hunted in packs. One or two decoys would lead the prey deep into the forest, then the group would attack. She glanced

nervously up at Anwar, trying to discern if he was still alert and himself. Would she be able to feel the enchantment? Would she know when or if it took hold of him?

A fly kept buzzing around her ear. She could feel little rivulets of sweat running down her back. The air hung moist and warm, like a wet blanket. Iní took a long swig of her canteen.

“Why is it so hot in here? Shouldn’t the shade from the trees make it cooler?”

Anwar didn’t answer her. He rode ahead of her, not turning when Iní spoke.

“I think there’s a stream not too far away. We can stop for water,” he said after a minute.

Iní shook her canteen. Only a third of the water remained.

“Is it a good idea to stop here?”

“Better now than deeper into the forest.” Anwar spoke, barely raising his voice to be heard over the footsteps of the horses.

Iní didn’t like the idea of stopping anywhere in the Blightwood, but it would take them two days to get out of fury territory, and they would have to stop sometime. She cast her senses out, feeling for the familiar tingle of magic in the air. Nothing. Mauladad was still moving steadily deeper into the forest, his gaze focused straight ahead. *Trust Maul*, Iní repeated to herself. *If he thinks it’s all right, we’ll stop for water.*

Iní’s eyelids sagged. She found herself drifting to sleep, then jolting awake when the horses hit a rough patch of ground. She pinched her arms and patted her face, trying to stay awake. Nothing helped. Was it the magic? The thought floated around in the back of her mind. She saw a tree with its lowest limb grown into a circle, the same as her vision. She opened her mouth to tell Anwar, but a hiss from Mauladad cut her off.

The horses veered sharply to the left, away from Maul’s raised hackles.

“We have to save her,” Anwar said, his voice distraught.

Iní blinked, looking around the forest. She didn't see anything. Even the circular branch had disappeared. Her eyelids started to droop again, but she gave her face a hard slap. She couldn't fall asleep!

Maul was next to Soleil snarling, trying to force the horse back the other direction. Soleil snorted and tried to turn with the cat, but Anwar pulled hard on the reins.

“Those children need my help. I have to save them!”

Iní caught the flash of a small face peeking through the brush off to their left. It looked like the face of young child, round and cherubic with a soft glow. Anwar was struggling to get off his horse. Soleil took halting steps forward to prevent Anwar from dismounting, but Anwar pulled up hard on the reins. He swung his right foot over fast, in an attempt to land while the horse was stopped. He forgot about the restraint, which held his left foot in the stirrup, making him fall back and slamming his head into the ground.

“Anwar!” Iní started, trying to dismount and almost repeating Anwar's mistake.

The horses stopped, and Soleil tried to turn and examine her rider. Anwar wasn't moving. Mauladad stalked over to the body, sniffing Anwar's face. Anwar's hand shot up, grabbing for the key around Maul's neck, but Maul jumped back. The cat snarled.

“Give me the key!” Anwar tried to lunge at the cat, but Maul was out of reach.

“Anwar, don't—you're confused,” said Iní, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

They couldn't drag Anwar through the forest, and he would not remount on his own. Maybe if Iní could get Maul to give her the key, maybe then she could get Anwar back on his horse.

Iní caught a flash of movement to her right and turned to see another cherubic face smiling at her from its perch on a tree branch, the same circular branch she had seen earlier. This time she could see the fury's naked body and rows of razor sharp teeth.

"Come over here, I will help you." The fury spoke in a sweet, lilting voice. It raised a small hand and extended it to Iní.

"Go away!" Iní tried to sound brave.

Anwar was reaching for the saddle, trying to loosen the girth.

"Maul! We can't let him get that saddle off. I need the key!"

Maul stood watching quietly several feet away. He cocked his head as she spoke.

"Bring your horse this way, pretty girl," cooed the fury. "My friend and I can help you."

Iní glanced back at the tree branch to see not one, but two furies now watching her.

"Maul, please. I won't listen to them. I just need get to Anwar back on his horse. I'll give the key back to you as soon as I unfasten myself." Iní kept her voice calm, trying to show the great cat that she wasn't enchanted.

Maul took a couple steps toward her and then stopped. Iní held perfectly still. He took another few steps. Each time he would stop and assess her, making sure she remained calm. He walked right up next to the horse. But when Iní reached down for the key he stepped back again.

"I'm fine Maul, really, I am." Iní could hear the furies laughing at her from their branch. She sat back up in the saddle and glared at them. Anwar was still scrabbling for the girth. Iní felt tears in her eyes. None of this would be worth it if they didn't get out alive.

"Please Maul, we can't stay here, and we can't leave until Anwar is back in his saddle." Her voice trembled. She caught and held Maul's stare, ignoring the calls from the furies.

Finally Mauladad stepped over to the horse and sat still as Iní reached down and slipped the key chain off his neck.

CHAPTER 20

Iní knew better than to try and approach Anwar unarmed. She hunted around on the forest floor for a large stick, something she could use to try and knock him out from a distance.

“Iní, help me get this saddle off! My sister! She’s over there!” Anwar flailed a hand in the direction of the furies.

Once Mauladad regained the key he skipped away from the horses, watching Iní and Anwar from a safe distance.

“Anwar, listen to me. We need to get you back on your horse.” Iní spoke in a soothing tone.

“No, I have to save my sister. I wasn’t there last time. I didn’t help them, but I can now. I can help.”

The pain in Anwar’s voice tore at Iní’s heart. Anwar was only a boy when his family was slaughtered, but he carried the guilt even now.

“Listen Anwar, we’ll help your sister. But first we need to get you back on the horse. All right?”

Iní laid the stick just out of reach and then put a soft hand on Anwar’s forehead. His skin was burning up.

“You promise, you promise you’ll help me?” His voice sounded weak and lost.

“I promise,” Iní said, running a hand through his hair. “Now, let’s just get you up.”

Mounting a full-grown goblin on a sixteen-hand horse was no easy feat. It took several tries before Iní and Anwar’s collective strength could get him high enough to grasp the pommel and pull himself over. Then came the hard part.

“Is your foot in the stirrup? Oh, just a minute, Soleil looks like she limping a bit. Let me check her right foreleg.” Iní walked calmly around the back of the horse, slipping her own restraints out of her pocket and keeping them hidden from Anwar’s view. As she passed the stirrup, she made a show of tugging on the girth and slipped one end of the restraint on to the right stirrup. Then she bent down and examined Soleil’s foreleg, which was fine.

“Everything looks good,” she said, straightening slowly. “Now, where was it you wanted to go?”

Anwar turned his attention towards the furies, who again had begun crying and whimpering loudly. In a flash, Iní fastened the other restraint around his right ankle, then grabbed the reins and pulled them over Soleil’s head.

Anwar cried out, catching a corner of the forgotten reins with his hand, but Iní yanked it away.

“I trusted you,” he said, his voice raw. He struggled to lift his foot out of the stirrup, only to discover she had tied him in.

Iní led the horses on foot. Karrack was too jumpy to let her ride him, and being closer to Anwar made her feel better somehow. Maul guided them through the brush at a quick pace. The furies followed, staying a safe distance away. They had given up trying to trick Iní and now mostly focused on taunting Anwar, making the trip as miserable as possible.

Anwar struggled occasionally to get out of the saddle. Not long after she tricked him, Anwar tried again to get at the girth. Iní used the thick stick to stun him and then bound his hands.

It was getting dark, but the heat in the forest didn't relent. Iní's clothes were wet with sweat and clung to her body.

"Maul, can we stop? You might be able to see in the dark, but I can't." Iní brushed the dirt and leaves off her pants. She'd caught her foot in an old tree root and fallen.

Maul paced back to where Iní stood. He rubbed up against her legs and purred, then he circled the horses and came back to sit at Iní's feet.

"Guess that means we're stopping." Iní dropped to the ground in exhaustion. She pulled off her boots and laid back.

"I'll just rest for a minute, then I'll get the bedroll..."

Iní woke up to the feeling of wet sand paper on her face. Maul stood over her, his yellow eyes glowing in the predawn light. Anwar was slumped over on the horse, asleep. Iní's whole body was stiff, her clothes were covered in grime, and her throat was on fire. She stumbled over to Karrack and drank the last of her water from the canteen. When she turned back to her bedroll she found she had slept nestled against a giant slice of rock—its flat, smooth surface another image from the dryad. Iní took it as a sign they were on the right track.

With Anwar still tied to the horse, the few furies they saw quickly grew frustrated. Iní ignored the small demons entirely, more concerned about Anwar's rapidly deteriorating state. He had refused to eat or drink anything since she tied him to the horse. True, he wasn't in his right mind, but that was what worried Iní. At first she just assumed it was the furies, but now he was so delirious he didn't even seem to notice them. Growing up in the secluded hills, Nana had

taught Iní how to treat most common ailments. Anwar's behavior reminded her of the heat sickness she had as a little girl. She'd gone hiking without her canteen on a particularly hot day and ended up lost and seeing strange visions. Nana said people died of heat sickness if they didn't get water in time, and Iní didn't have any water.

"Maul, we've got to get more water. Do you hear me? Anwar's getting worse."

Maul padded silently ahead of her and the horses, not stopping or turning when Iní spoke.

Iní sighed. She had no idea how close they were to the pool. She could only follow Maul. The sun was beginning to dip from the sky. Would they make it to the pool tonight with their current pace? Whenever the terrain would allow it, Iní led the horses at a brisk walk, but there were many fallen branches and tangled roots that slowed their progress.

Anwar sat completely silent. He slumped over on the horse, not responding when Iní spoke or touched him. It was an hour past sunset, but still no Pool of Memories. Iní's own throat burned with thirst. The horses were beginning to lag, and Iní assumed they too felt the effects of so long a trip without water.

Maul, on the other hand, was fine. He had even picked up the pace. Several times Iní completely lost sight of him and yelled for him to come back.

"Stupid cat, slow down!" She threw a rock, which fell pitifully far from her target.

Maul stopped and looked back at her. He made a strange panting sound Iní was quite certain equaled laughter. She picked up another rock to throw, then realized Maul had stopped. He was sitting back on his haunches, staring off to the right.

Iní stumbled forward, pulling on Soleil's reins.

“Are we there?” She looked from the cat to a cave opening just twenty feet off to their right and surrounded in shrubbery: the last remaining image from her vision.

“I have to make a torch.” They were losing light quickly, and Iní gathered as much wood and tinder as she could for a fire. The cave opening was large enough for everyone, and the air was noticeably cooler inside, something the hot travelers welcomed. No longer worried that Anwar would run away, Iní undid his restraints. He toppled over, and Iní barely managed to catch him and keep herself standing upright.

“We’ll have to take him with us,” she said to Maul as she fashioned a makeshift travois out of a couple branches and the heavy skins from her bedroll.

Maul stalked over to the sick goblin, who lay unconscious on the rocky ground. He ran his rough tongue over Anwar’s forehead. Anwar didn’t stir.

“I’m making a harness for you to pull him.”

Maul growled his disapproval when Iní slipped the harness on, but he held still for her to do it.

Iní unsaddled both horses and gave them a quick a rub down.

“Be safe,” she whispered in Soleil’s ear. “I’ll bring back water for everyone.” She patted the two large waterskins slung over her shoulder.

The cave floor was relatively smooth. Light from her torch reflected off the iridescent rock in the walls. She took a step forward and the ground fell from beneath her.

CHAPTER 21

It took a moment for Iní to realize she was sliding and not falling. Her torch was out and the pitch black was disorienting. She fell forever. Finally a hazy light appeared below. The speed of her descent began to slow, and she came to gentle stop at the edge of a glowing pool of water.

Maul and Anwar clattered out of the tunnel not long after Iní. Maul's ears were pressed flat against his skull, and he turned and hissed at the opening. Anwar stirred slightly but remained unconscious. Iní checked him for any cuts or other injuries but he appeared unhurt. Then she took a deep breath and stepped toward the pool.

"Um, hello," Iní said, feeling as foolish as when she'd spoken to the Summer Tree. "I was told by a dryad that you might be able to help."

Iní stared at her reflection, waiting for something to happen. Maul walked over and rubbed his head against her arm.

"Not now Maul." Iní pushed the big cat away, but he nudged her again, harder.

"Maul!" Iní turned impatiently to find Maul holding a small silver goblet in his teeth.

The goblet was cool to Iní's touch. She turned it gingerly in her hands, looking at strange carvings she assumed were some ancient language. Was she supposed to drink some of the water? She dipped the cup into the water and brought it to her lips. She looked to Maul for reassurance, but the werecat was busy cleaning his paws.

"Here goes." Iní took a drink of the water.

It was like swallowing light. She could feel it travelling down her throat and spreading through her whole body. Her skin took on the same gentle glow as the Pool of Memories. Iní dropped the goblet in surprise.

The water in the pool began to hiss and swirl.

What question brings you here? The voice came from everywhere and nowhere at once. Iní looked down at the water to see her reflection had vanished.

“I’ve come to learn the whereabouts of the bloodstone.”

Which bloodstone?

Iní’s mind raced. Did the bloodstones have names? She didn’t know anything about that. She remembered Lycene saying the pool could be deceiving. She would have to go about this another way.

“Is there a bloodstone that hasn’t been destroyed?”

The water shimmered. Suddenly Iní was looking at a great white dragon—Arach. His scales caught the sun and cast a blinding light into Iní’s eyes. She brought a hand to her face, shielding the glare. It took her moment to see the small round stone clutched in Arach’s right foreclaw. A bloodstone. The picture zoomed out. People from all of the different magical races surrounded him. A tall sun elf, wearing a deep purple robe embroidered with a sun and stars, raised a long golden staff and everyone turned to watch.

“As leader of the Council of Magic, I declare this bloodstone property of the dragons -- to use for the equality and protection of all magical kind,” the sun elf said.

The vision in the pool blurred.

“Wait, does that mean the dragons still have the bloodstone?” Iní tried to keep the frustration out of her voice.

The surface of the pool grew dark. A gentle, pulsing, red glow came from the center. Iní squinted, trying to understand what it was she saw. It was the bloodstone, but Iní had no idea where it was. Then the vision panned out. Iní saw the stone sitting in a small stone box, the front of which had a peculiar golden marking.

“So, if the dragons don’t have it, then where is it?”

The water swirled together, replacing the previous scene with one of a giant granite pillar. A figure in dull, slate-grey robes stood in front of the pillar, the hood hiding the face. The only identifying mark was that same strange, golden marking on the robe’s breast. The vision held for several seconds, then vanished.

Anwar was right. The pool had a strange way of showing truth. It had confirmed their suspicions about a remaining bloodstone, but hadn’t really given them any new information.

“Who is the person in front of the pillar?”

Iní leaned forward in anticipation, but the water remained still.

“How can I find the pillar?”

Nothing.

Iní let out a long sigh.

You know everything you need regarding the bloodstone.

“But I don't *know* anything!”

Is this the only truth you seek?

Iní didn’t answer right away. Anwar had warned her not to ask the pool about anything other than the bloodstone, but if Iní didn’t ask about her father she knew she would regret it.

“Who is my father?”

Iní didn’t breath as she watched the water ripple with new colors. The vision that came made no sense.

“What does this mean?” Iní’s voice rose in anger. She held back the urge to slap her hand down on the water and destroy the scene before her. It was nothing but her own face surrounded

by a strange white glow. She cursed herself inwardly for thinking the pool would somehow be helpful for her.

“Fine.” Iní wanted to leave right then, but a quick glance at Anwar reminded her there was one last question she needed to ask.

“I’m leaving, but before I go I have one last request. Please, tell me how to help my friend.” Iní gestured helplessly to Anwar as she spoke.

For a moment nothing happened. Iní didn’t expect much, given the previous visions. But she greatly feared that without the pool’s help Anwar would not make it out of the Blightwood alive. Then, the water below her began to shimmer once again. Iní saw herself dipping the goblet into the pool and holding the cup to Anwar’s lips. The vision was brief, and when it was over the pool went dark. Whatever power it was that spoke through the water now slept, and Iní saw only a simple reflection.

CHAPTER 22

The trip back was quick. The water from the pool cured Anwar of his fury bite and even made him resistant to their calls. Several times Iní tried to tell Anwar what happened at the pool, but he insisted she wait for Lycene and Ari and a listening spell.

“Thank you, by the way.” Anwar kept his eyes fixed on Iní’s boots as he spoke.

“Oh, well, my pleasure.” Iní could feel the blush building in her cheeks as she spoke.

“We’ll be in Antharra by sun down. Lycene will prepare a safe room for us to talk.”

“And food?” Iní realized her voice sounded a little over eager.

“Yes, and food.” Anwar chuckled.

“Hail the conquering hero!” Ari slapped Iní on the back and helped her down from her horse.

Lycene embraced her, looking into her eyes for several seconds, silently asking if Iní was all right. Iní nodded and the worry in Lycene’s eyes cleared.

“I’ve set listening spells around the door and windows, no one will be able to hear.” She motioned for them to follow her into the sleeping quarters.

“I’ll get Cerulean.” Anwar produced the bag containing his mirrock and laid it in the center between them.

The silver surface of the mirrock shimmered in to focus. Cerulean was sitting at a desk stacked high with books and rolls of parchment.

“Well, for once you decide to call at an appropriate hour,” he said, taking off a pair of reading spectacles. “And it looks like everyone returned in one piece. Good.”

“Thanks to Iní,” said Anwar, putting arm around her.

Iní blushed. “Maul helped.”

The cat purred loudly from where he sat in the corner licking his paws.

“You saved my life,” said Anwar frankly, his arm pulling Iní just a little closer to him.

“And your own,” added Ari, his eyes twinkling.

Lycene shot him a look that said to keep quiet.

“Sorry,” he mouthed, holding up his hands.

“Go on,” said Lycene, rolling her eyes and giving Ari a harmless swat.

Iní continued her story without interruption, until she came to the tall granite tower.

“A granite tower?” Cerulean said, recognition flashing in his eyes.

“Yes.”

“And the mark, did it look something like this?” Cerulean grabbed a quill from the nearby table and drew an exact replica of the strange, golden mark.

“Yes! Do you know what it is?” Iní leaned forward expectantly, careful not to shrug off Anwar’s arm, which was still wrapped around her shoulders.

“Druids,” said Cerulean. He stood and began shuffling through the papers on his desk.

“They oversaw the creation of the bloodstones, you know.”

“But they’ve been dead for over a hundred years.” Lycene’s voice mirrored the frustration Iní felt.

“Yes, they’re dead, but it’s said they left behind an extensive wealth of magical knowledge in their secret library.” Cerulean kept searching through his desk as he spoke.

“So what does it mean? Why did the Pool of Memories show me that?”

Anwar held up his hands, motioning for silence. Iní tried not to show her disappointment at the loss of his touch.

“Cerulean.” The tone in Anwar’s voice pulled the old wizard away from his papers and back to the faces in the mirrock. “Where is the druid library?”

“I’m getting to that, just give me a moment to activate a few more listening spells.” Cerulean stepped out of view. “Even within the Alliance this information is not made readily known.”

“There.” He returned to the desk and sat down. “I wish you could wait for me. This isn’t a mission you should embark on alone.”

“But there is not time for that. The longer we wait the closer the dragons will get,” Iní protested. Since leaving the pool, she had experienced a gathering sense of dread.

“And indeed, they are close, because the lost library is not far from Antharra.” Cerulean said, selecting an old, vellum scroll.

“Where is it?” said Iní.

“Lycene, can you spell the mirrock so that only Iní or Anwar can open it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I want you to close the mirrock and do that now. While you’re doing that, I have some protective spells to perform on my end. Let’s meet again in two hours.”

The mirrock shimmered and the connection closed.

“Why does he want you to spell it?” asked Iní.

“For safety. That way no one else can get the information he is going to show you.”

“This is dangerous stuff, Iní girl. Cerulean won’t even risk saying the location out loud. My guess is he’ll project an image through the mirrock that’s protected on both ends.”

CHAPTER 23

Iní could not shake the feeling of dread that pressed thick in the cool morning air. Time was running out. She popped another dawnberry in her mouth and leaned forward in the saddle, urging Karrack to hurry up the pace. They wanted to reach the cave before dark, which meant a hard ride using the old hunting paths and little known back roads. Lycene would spread the story that Cerulean had called them back to headquarters for an emergency council. Two more conduits had gone missing from rural outposts in the last month, and it was a growing concern for the Alliance.

“We’ll stop here for lunch.” Anwar pulled up on Soleil and brought himself even with Iní and Karrack. They had been riding for over six hours, and the horses had a fine sheen of sweat on their coats.

They tethered the horses by a little copse of birch trees, unsaddling and giving them a quick rub down before leaving them to munch on the grass. Iní saw a flash of something dark back on the path, but it was gone when she blinked. Her nerves were definitely getting to her. She had been tense and jumpy all morning.

“Water?” Anwar held a canteen out to her, pulling her out of her thoughts.

“Thanks.”

“At this rate, we should be to the cave well before sundown.”

“Good.” Iní started to say something more, then froze. There was a whisper of magic in the air.

“What is it?” Anwar’s voice was tense. He quickly scanned the area around them.

“Magic, but it’s too faint to tell what kind.”

“Can you redirect it?”

“I can try. It’s hard to do anything more than absorb or shield it since I don’t know what it is.”

“Will they know if you do that?”

“I don’t think so, unless it’s dragons...” Iní’s voice trailed off.

“We need to keep moving.” Anwar’s voice was calm, but his hands gripped the reins and Iní could see the veins in his arms.

He led them off the path through a dense, brush-filled section of forest. Several times he veered off in one direction only to double back. Iní suspected he was trying to make them harder to track. When they reached a small stream, Anwar led the horses right down the middle of it.

“Shouldn’t we be going more south?” Iní asked after they’d been traveling westward in the water for over an hour.

“We will. Just a little longer in the water. Is the magic any closer?”

“No.” She could still feel a light touch of something moving in the air, but it hadn’t grown stronger.

“Good.”

When Anwar finally led them out of the water, he took them down a rocky slope with loose shale that broke off and slipped under the horses’ hooves. Karrack grunted in protest and kept his ears flat against his skull.

“We’re almost there,” said Anwar, glancing at back Iní and her slow progress down the hill.

At the bottom, Anwar stopped to check the mirrock. “The entrance should be thirty paces east of here, but it’s sealed.”

“With magic?”

“No, magic can be sensed and spells can be broken. The druids were not just skilled magicians, but also brilliant thinkers.”

“How will we get in?”

“We hope Cerulean was right when he said he’d found the entrance code. This way.”

Anwar took one last look at the map and closed the mirror.

They took the horses down to a heavily wooded area where they could be tethered out of sight.

“Don’t drive the stakes too deep, if something happens to us the horses need to be able to pull free.” Anwar unsaddled Soleil and gave her a good rub down with a handful of dry grass.

“Right.” Something told Iní there was a strong chance they wouldn’t be back.

CHAPTER 24

“Are you sure this is it?” Iní looked skeptically at a large tree stump that was half as wide as she was tall.

Anwar studied the mirrock, then felt around on the stump. “It’s a sort of puzzle lock. We have to press the right levers in the exact order.”

Iní didn’t see any levers. All she saw was a tree stump. Anwar pushed at the stump in several places, but nothing happened.

“Feel around on that side.”

“Feel for what?”

“I don’t know, something that sticks out or sinks in.”

The bark was surprisingly smooth under Iní’s fingers. It took her a moment to realize the stump was petrified. She was so fascinated with its cool stone texture she almost missed the soft click a ridge of bark made under her touch. “I think I found one.”

There was no indent or protrusion to hint of the lever’s presence, but when Anwar ran his fingers over the spot they heard the same click. He took out a piece of chalk and marked it.

“There should be eleven more, once we’ve found them all we can figure out the combination.”

It took a long time. After about an hour they had found ten levers, but they couldn’t find any more.

“Maybe Cerulean was wrong and there are only ten,” said Iní. It was going to be dark shortly. A fire would draw too much attention. If they didn’t find the last levers soon they would have to wait until morning.

“No, twelve is a significant number in druid culture.”

“We covered the entire stump at least three times now.” Iní was hot and tired. The tedium of the search drained all her excitement.

Anwar didn't respond, just kept searching.

Iní stood up and stretched. She took a drink from her canteen and sighed. She kicked a small grey stone not far from the tree.

“Ouch!”

“What?” Anwar looked up.

“That rock.” Iní pointed. “I kicked it, but it didn't move.”

Anwar stood up and walked over to peer at the stone. He ran his hand over the rock, trying to press it one way and then another. It didn't budge. He tried pressing down on it. Iní came closer to watch.

“Try pulling up on it,” she suggested.

He gave the rock a small tug, and it popped up to resemble a small stone lever.

“Well, I'll be,” said Anwar, smiling. “That makes eleven, and I'm guessing the twelfth is nearby.”

It was, though by the time they found it the light was all but gone.

“Should we light a torch?” Iní could just see the faint lines of chalk on the stump.

“Not yet. A torch could attract unwanted attention.” Anwar studied the mirrock as he spoke, muttering the order to himself as he pointed to different points on the stump.

It was a 24-point sequence that involved touching each of the levers in a precise order. Twice Anwar got out of sequence and had to start back at the beginning. Iní stood back to give him room. She could no longer see the marks in the dark.

“I think...that's...it.” Anwar touched the last spot and then stepped back.

There was deep groan and the stump slowly began to revolve in the ground. Anwar quickly grabbed his canteen and washed away the chalk as the stump sank into the ground to reveal the entrance.

“Now you can light that torch, just wait until we’re down in the cave.” He hopped down and caught the bags Iní threw to him.

“How are we going to get back out?” Iní wondered aloud as she stood looking up from the hole.

“Let’s worry about that later. Hand me a torch.” Anwar struck a flint against the side of the cave wall until the torch was fully ablaze.

The cave had smooth, stone walls. Iní tried to step into the tunnel, but Anwar put out a hand to stop her.

“Wait. We made it inside but that doesn’t mean we’re safe.”

CHAPTER 25

Darkness pressed in on them like a physical force. The damp air smelled stale and musty. Anwar produced a handful of small stones and stood rolling them in his hands.

“Here, take some of these. Before we go down a corridor or into a room, we’ll roll one across the floor. Take a piece of chalk, too. We’re going to mark the side of every tunnel we take. Cerulean said the map isn’t complete, and I don’t want us taking a wrong turn and getting lost.”

Iní’s palms started to sweat. She gripped the chalk tightly. “Anwar?”

“Yes?” He was busy studying the mirrock and didn’t look up when she spoke.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Iní’s voice came out softer than she intended.

Anwar cleared his throat and looked over at Iní, meeting her eyes. He held her gaze for a few moments, then nodded briskly and returned to the map.

“If I’m reading this correctly there are a few small sleeping quarters down this hall, then an old dining area and a corridor on the left that leads to the study rooms. Let’s start with those and see how far we can get.” Without waiting for a reply, he leaned over and rolled a pebble down the hall. It only travelled a few feet before a set of long spikes sprang from the ceiling.

Iní gasped.

“There’s enough space to slide under.” Anwar lay flat on his belly, slowly inching forward. A spike caught the edge of his jacket, its sharp edge slicing the thick wool.

Every twenty yards a new set of spikes would drop from the ceiling, forcing them to squirm carefully underneath. When they reached the sleeping rooms, Iní rolled a small pebble through the doorway, expecting another set of spikes. Nothing happened.

“Well, that’s refreshing.” Iní smiled and stepped into the doorway just as a jet of flame shot from the floor. Anwar jerked her back, the force of his movements carrying them both to the ground. Anwar ended up on top of Iní, their faces just inches apart.

“Are you all right?” He asked, not moving right away.

Their eyes locked and Iní found she had trouble forming a reply. She felt his warm breath on her face. “Umm...”

He shifted to the side and sat up. “New rule—we count to five before entering any doorway.”

Iní sat up slowly, feeling the charred leather of her heavy travel boots.

“Are you sure you’re not injured? Let me see your feet.” He reached over and removed her boots, carefully examining her feet and legs for any sign of injury.

“I’m fine; my boots are ruined though.” Her right boot was still smoking slightly.

Once they figured out the fire jets, it didn’t take long to search the sleeping rooms, with their musty cots and sparse furniture. *If I had the bloodstone, where would I hide it?* Iní mused on the question as she went from room to room, looking in dark corners and under beds.

The kitchen and dining area were a new dilemma. The pebble check revealed a hidden chasm six feet beyond the doorway. Anwar was able to clear it with a running leap, but insisted Iní tie a rope around her waist before attempting the jump.

There were shelves and shelves filled with various jars and containers. There were dried herbs, strange powders, and even bottles of dead bugs.

“I hope this wasn’t all to eat.” Iní held up a dusty jar filled with yellow liquid and what looked like brains.

“No, the druids were experts of potions and tinctures.” He turned and produced a jar of eyeballs.

Iní shuddered. “I don’t even want to know what that was used for.”

By the time they finished searching the eating areas, Iní’s stomach was starting to growl.

“Can we...”

“Eat soon?” Anwar said, finishing her question. “Of course.” He went over to the low stone table where they had stowed their packs.

Iní followed him and sat down on the nearby bench, watching him quietly.

“The dark makes it hard to tell time, but I figure we’ve been at this at least ten hours.”

Anwar handed her some jerky and corn bread.

“Doesn’t it feel, I don’t know, like it’s not completely real—being here in the dark with no one else around?” Iní gestured around the room as she spoke, watching the light from their torches throw eerie shadows on the walls.

Anwar paused in his chewing and followed the motion of her hands. He was quiet for a moment and then answered softly, “I used to love exploring caves when I was little. The day our village was attacked I was out exploring the woods. I found a small cave and spent the day pretending it was my fort.”

Iní held very still as Anwar spoke. He rarely talked about his past, and he had certainly never mentioned that day before. She was unsure what to do or say in response. She wracked her brain for a proper response and came up blank. But Anwar wasn’t looking at her; he was focusing on a little chip in the table’s corner.

“Haven’t been in caves much since then,” he said, his voice sounding carefully nonchalant. He flashed Iní a brief smile that didn’t reach his eyes, then stood and walked restlessly around the room as he finished eating his food.

CHAPTER 26

“What is that?” Iní watched as the pebble dissolved in the dark pool that spanned over ten feet of the library floor. “I don’t sense any magic.”

“Acid.” Anwar said. “And it’s too big for us to jump.”

He waved his torch into the room, revealing shelves upon shelves of books and scroll casings, various shaped boxes and containers extending in every direction as far as the light would reach.

“Even if we could make it over the acid, it would take us weeks to search this properly.” The words tasted bitter in Iní’s mouth. It struck her just how little they actually knew about where the bloodstone was. Up until then she’d focused on the cave, assuming things would fall into place once they arrived. But the endless stacks in the library made her heart sink.

Anwar didn’t say anything, just opened up the mirrock and studied it quietly. Iní paced back in forth along the main corridor, trying to be patient. After several minutes she gave up.

“Anwar, what are we going to do?”

Anwar held his hand up for quiet, still studying the map in the mirrock. Iní threw up her hands in frustration and slumped against the side of the cave. They were going to fail. Arach was going to get the bloodstone, war would break out, the Alliance would crumble, and Iní would never know who her father was.

“I think I have an idea.” Anwar sat down next to her, spreading the mirrock out on the ground before them. “Cerulean said this wasn’t a complete map of the cave, just the rooms they knew about.” He gestured to the labels on the map. “Most of these are common use areas, like the library and the dining halls. But I don’t think that’s where we need to look. If I had the bloodstone, I would keep it someplace out of sight—some place not a lot people had access to.”

“So what you’re saying is it’s not in any of the marked rooms? How does that help us?”

“It means we can cross these rooms off our list, at least for now, and look for a room that isn’t on the map. Some place deeper into the cave and out of the way, probably some place protected—by both magic and logic.”

It made sense. But it wasn’t without risk. No map meant they would be going blind. Their water would run out in two days, and there was no guarantee they would be any closer to finding the bloodstone.

“How many dawnberries did you bring?”

“Huh?” Anwar was thrown off by the change of subject.

“If we do this, I don’t want to sleep; I want to spend the whole time looking.”

Anwar nodded. “I brought enough.”

They were careful to mark each split in the tunnel with two separate marks, an “O” for the path they took and an “X” for the ones they didn’t.

“If we can’t find one mark, we can always look for the other one,” Anwar explained.

The pebble checks continued to reveal traps in virtually every corridor, but it was always something they could slip under, jump over, or avoid in some way. Every room they came to they checked the door, took a quick look in, and then moved on. As the hours grew longer the rooms became farther apart. Anwar and Iní each had a large pocketful of dawnberries they ate as they walked.

Time lagged. Iní’s legs felt heavy and her pack seemed to grow in size. The latest tunnel had been relatively bare, only one or two doors. One had been a weapons room, and the other was filled with strange contraptions Iní didn’t recognize.

“I’m guessing it’s morning now. The lack of rooms is a good sign; it means we’re getting deep underground.” Anwar’s voice sounded loud in the silence. “Do you sense anything, any magic?”

“No, nothing.”

“Let’s push on to the next split and then take a short break.”

Iní nodded, adjusting her pack as she walked.

“I don’t know how much farther we can go. We’re almost out of water, and we still need to get back to meet up with Cerulean.”

Iní knew what Anwar was saying made sense, but she didn’t like it. Ever since they’d left the pool, a growing sense of uneasiness pressed down on her. Time was running out. She needed to find the bloodstone before someone else did.

“What if…”

“What?”

“Nothing, never mind.” *What if you go back to meet them alone?* She wanted to ask. But Anwar would never agree to it. There was no point in asking, because whether Anwar agreed or not, Iní already knew she wasn’t turning back.

The air coming out of the left tunnel took on a strange, almost sour smell. But it was this that drew Iní down the tunnel. Something about it felt uninviting, and therefore promising.

Anwar hesitated at the crossroads, his face wrinkled in worry. “Wait. I don’t like the looks of it.” But a pebble check revealed nothing out of the ordinary.

“This may be it! Someplace out of reach, hard to get to.” Iní was eager to be on her way. Time was running out and she hadn’t yet come up with a way to trick Anwar into leaving without her. And with no magical catalyst, her abilities as a conduit were useless, and she was no match for him physically.

“Let me go first, check it out,” said Anwar. “I’ll come back and get you if I think it’s safe.” He took slow, measured steps forward.

Iní watched his light slowly disappear down the tunnel. She stamped her feet impatiently, longing to follow. Then it hit her—she was alone! If she wanted a chance to lose Anwar, this was it. She peered into the heavy blackness of a tunnel running in the opposite direction. It wasn’t the way she wanted to go, but it was the only path open. How long did she have before Anwar returned?

Iní scribbled a note on the cave wall using her chalk: *Sensed magic behind us, went to check*. Then she took off at a guilty trot down the tunnel on the right, expecting Anwar’s hand to clamp down on her shoulder any second.

CHAPTER 27

There were a couple doors along her path, but Iní did not stop to check them. She needed to put some space between her and Anwar. She didn't stop running until she reached the next branch in the tunnel. She stopped then only to make a quick mark and check for traps. If Anwar came this way it wouldn't take him long to find her signs. The only thing she could think to do was switch the "X" and "O." He would figure it out once he found the next split with no markings, but it would slow him down.

Iní ran for what felt like hours. Her lungs burned and her legs throbbed, but she only stopped when she had to slither under spikes, check for flaming jets, or mark her chosen corridor. The adrenaline from her flight gone, Iní now felt the deep weariness of having gone more than 30 hours without sleep. She chewed her dawnberries sparingly, trying to make the small handful last as long as possible.

Then she saw it. The faint outline of a door tucked back in recess of the tunnel. She ran past it at first, her brain taking a moment to register that the shape of the tunnel had changed. When she backed up and thrust her light into the corner, she saw the lines in the stone. The door looked almost identical to the cave wall. Iní ran her hand along its surface and realized it was actually made of stone. No wonder she had almost missed it. She searched around for a handle, but couldn't find one. She tried pushing on the door, gently at first and then hard, but it didn't budge. *This is the room*, she thought, suddenly certain.

Iní tried prying the door with the edge of her knife. She searched the wall for a hidden lever. She ran her fingers along the ground and over the surface of the door itself. She even, in a moment of desperation, tried knocking. Nothing worked. Here she was, likely at the very spot they'd been searching for, only to find herself locked out. All the weariness of the past few days

settled over her. She was exhausted and out of time. When Anwar found her he would be furious. She slumped to the ground and took a deep drink from her canteen, noting the water would not last her much longer.

She hadn't meant to fall asleep; somehow it just happened. When she awoke with a start, she had no idea if it had been three minutes or three hours. Her first panicking thought was that Anwar had found her, but a quick glance down the corridor confirmed that her small pool of torchlight was the only one present. Iní scrubbed a hand over her face, willing her mind to clear. What was she going to do?

Her torch, set into the wall sconce above her, made eerie flickering shadows on the wall. She stood looking bleakly at the door, scouring her mind for new ideas. Reaching up to grab her light, Iní's hand bumped against the bottom the sconce and, to her surprise, the metal casing moved. Quickly Iní grabbed the torch and pushed again on the sconce. It slid upward to reveal a hidden recess, inside of which was a small lever. Iní's heart raced as she pressed the lever and heard a slow grinding sound as the door opened inward.

Iní rolled a stone into the room before her and waited. Nothing happened, which was somehow more ominous than a set of spikes or a jet of flames. The light from her torch did not reach to the back of the room, but from what Iní saw it looked like a small study of some sort. The left wall was lined with books, and there were several strange metal instruments. One was a long tube Anwar said they used to look at the stars. To the right was a great a desk piled haphazardly with scrolls and old leather-bound books that gave the impression the owner had simply stepped out for a moment. Iní leafed through the papers, looked through the long metal tube (which made everything seem much closer and larger than it was really was), and opened various cupboards. The box wasn't sitting in plain sight, but Iní knew it was somewhere in that

room. She knelt down and was pulling all the books from the bottom shelf when a hand clamped down on her shoulder.

CHAPTER 28

“Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?”

Iní looked at the ground while Anwar talked. He paced around the small room, punctuating his lecture with the occasional slamming of his fist against various surfaces.

“What if you had gotten lost? Or injured? What if you had run into something or someone down in these tunnels? There are strange things living this far underground and none of them are friendly.”

“Sorry,” Iní said, trying to make her voice sound penitent.

Anwar slapped his hand against the side of the great bookcase. There was a soft clicking sound and then the bookcase began to move. Anwar stopped yelling and stood watching in stunned silence. The bookcase swung out to reveal a second set of shelves, all of which were empty—except for a small box, with the gold insignia, sitting alone on the middle shelf.

“The bloodstone.” Iní crossed the room in several quick steps.

“All right, let’s just think this through,” Anwar began. “This is too simple. You said no traps protected the doorway, unlike every other room we’ve come across. We should leave the box alone and wait for Cerulean.”

It was a typical Anwar response: stop, think, and wait. But Iní had other plans. Waiting would expose them and the box to anyone else that came looking, and she wouldn’t risk it. She nodded her head slowly, as if agreeing with Anwar, and watched as his body relaxed. Then she lunged forward and grabbed the box. Anwar wrenched Iní back, but he was too late. Her hands closed on the stone cube, and the box came back with her.

A loud cracking sound rent the air as the box left the shelves. Iní looked up in surprise, and Anwar cursed. He hauled Iní up and forward as the walls around them began to crumble and

break. Stones fell from the ceiling. The short five feet to the door now felt distant as they dodged falling debris. Iní could see the doorway begin to crack and buckle. She opened her mouth to scream, but all the air was knocked out of her by a firm shove from behind. Anwar propelled Iní forward and out the door, then dove out himself. The door came down in a great shower of rocks and dust.

Coughing, Iní crawled back to the main hallway. Anwar had left a torch burning in the wall sconce and once the dust cleared Iní looked around for him.

“Anwar?” Had he gone down the tunnel? She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. He had been right behind her, she would have seen him.

A soft moaning interrupted her thoughts.

“Anwar?” Iní stood up and tried to follow the sound, which seemed to come from a pile of rocks now blocking the hidden room. “Anwar!” Iní scrambled over to the rubble and began frantically digging.

Why hadn't she listened to Anwar just this once? Tears streamed down her face, as she worked frantically, hoping she wasn't already too late.

“Anwar? Can you hear me? I'm going to get you out. Just hang on.”

She had to stifle a cry when she wrenched away a large rock and saw him.

“Anwar!” His eyes were closed, and he wasn't moving. Iní reached in and grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling with all her might. He groaned in pain. Iní was just glad to know he was still alive. Several larger rocks had formed a tunnel of sorts around the goblin, and she was able to inch him out of it.

“It’s all right, you are almost out.” Sweat ran down Iní’s face, her muscles burned with the effort of moving his large frame even this small distance. The rocks above him groaned and trembled, threatening to cover him again.

“We can do this, we can do this,” Iní repeated the phrase over and over, putting all her strength into each tug. His head and most of his torso were almost out when the rocks above gave way.

Anwar cried out as the rocks crushed his legs. Iní bit down on her lip to keep herself from crying, too.

CHAPTER 29

Iní held the canteen to Anwar's lips as he drank. Fortunately, they had left their packs in the main tunnel, allowing Iní to give Anwar a few small comforts. She cleaned his cuts and applied salve and bandages, but the real problem was the pain. His right leg was surely broken, and he passed in and out of consciousness. She found some birch bark in the medical kit and tried to get him to chew it.

"I'm so sorry," Iní whispered over and over, praying her foolishness wouldn't cost Anwar his life. She cradled his head in her lap, trying not to let her tears fall on his dust-covered face.

"Iní?" Anwar's voice was weak, but Iní jumped at the sound.

"Anwar, you're awake! How are you feeling? Did the birch bark help?" Iní slurred her words together in excitement. She had drifted off to sleep and was surprised to wake and see Anwar looking at her.

"Yes, the bark helped. I'll be all right."

Iní wanted desperately to believe him, but there was the small matter of his legs stuck underneath all the rock. How typical of Anwar to be comforting her in this situation.

"Iní, listen to me." He placed his hand on her arm. "I need you to—"

"Anything! Food? I can get food. Or more birch bark?"

"No Iní, listen. This is important." Anwar squeezed her arm as he spoke. "Cerulean will have reached the cave by now. You need to go back—" he held up his hand to silence her

protest. “You need to go back and give him the stone. Do you hear me? It must be put safely into Cerulean’s hands.”

Iní shook her head. “I am not leaving you, Anwar. This is all my fault, and I’m not leaving you here to die.”

“Die?” Anwar forced a weak laugh. “Who said anything about dying? You’re going to go deliver the stone and get help. Think about it, if you don’t go back no one will find us in time.”

The last two words, “in time,” hung heavy in the air. Anwar was in serious trouble, no matter what he tried to pretend. Iní then remembered how she had switched the symbols at the tunnel branches and cursed her own stupidity one more time. He was right; the false mark would lead Cerulean’s party on a wild goose chase. They might never find Iní and Anwar without help, not to mention the risk they ran of getting lost themselves.

“What if I leave and you need something? Or if there’s another cave in?”

Anwar relaxed slightly at her words, knowing they meant Iní was actually considering his request. He patted her arm softly and shook his head.

“I’ll be fine. The tunnel has been stable for hours. You can leave the pack right next to me so I can reach anything I need.”

Iní looked from him to the packs and the wall of rocks covering his legs. The bloodstone was sitting next to them, tucked safely in its box. Iní ran her index finger along the edge of the box. She hadn’t even opened it to look inside. After the cave-in, she was too focused on Anwar. She lifted the lid slowly, unsure of what to expect—another trick, a spell? The bloodstone sat nestled inside the soft velvet lining. Its deep red color gave off a soft glow that cast a red haze on everything near it. The stone was small, about the size of a robin’s egg, but Iní knew it was powerful. When she reached out and touched it, a painful jolt of energy caused her to recoil. But

the pain faded the moment she lost contact with its surface, so she tore a piece of fabric from her jacket, wrapped up the bloodstone, and dropped it into her pocket.

“Are you sure you’re going to be all right?”

“I’m fine. Just go. The sooner you leave, the sooner you can bring help.”

Iní placed the packs next to Anwar, then took her jacket and rolled it under his head as a makeshift pillow. She stood up to leave, but hesitated.

Anwar lay with his eyes closed and his mouth pressed into a thin line. *He’s still in pain*, Iní realized. And then, before she could think too much about it, she knelt and gave him a swift kiss on the forehead. Anwar’s eyes popped open in surprise, but Iní ran off down the tunnel before he could say anything.

The way back felt twice as long. Iní got confused trying to remember where exactly it was she reversed the symbols and had to do a little backtracking of her own. Luckily, she found that Anwar had marked the last reversal with a large “R” so Iní at least knew she was on the right track. At first she ran, ignoring the painful stitch in her side, as she tried to make faster time. As the hours dragged, exhaustion began to overtake her. She half-ran, half-walked along the tunnels, hoping that each new turn would be the place where she found help.

Iní quickly regretted not taking any food or water for herself. They had spent more than two days traveling deep into the cave, and it would take Iní at least a day to get out. After stumbling twice, scraping her hands, and almost snuffing out her torch, Iní finally sat down to rest. She told herself it would only be for a minute, just a minute. She was so tired she didn’t realize she had her eyes closed.

There was something rough scratching Iní's face. She turned her head, her dream interrupted—and she was having such a nice dream. She and Anwar were...

“Anwar!” Iní bolted up with a jolt of adrenaline. Something heavy brushed against her legs and she looked down to find Mauladad staring up at her.

“Maul, oh Maul, I'm so glad to see you!” Iní hugged the cat fiercely. Maul stiffened slightly but didn't protest.

“Where are the others, are they close?” Iní looked around for signs of torches. She grabbed her torch from a nearby sconce and began loping down the tunnel, the prospect of meeting Cerulean giving her new energy.

She noticed the change in the darkness before she saw their actual lights.

“Cerulean?” Iní called out as soon as she saw the torches.

“Iní?” The lights moved forward quickly in response to her voice and soon Cerulean was within view. He brought with him two sun elves, whom he quickly introduced as cousins of Lycene.

“This is Khama, and this is Shemesh.” He gestured to the men. Their skin gave off a soft golden glow, and they were as strikingly handsome as their fair cousin. The men nodded briskly but didn't speak.

“Where is Anwar?”

“He's injured. There was a cave-in, and he pushed me out of the way.” Iní tried to keep her voice calm. “He told me to wait for you and the others, but I wouldn't listen. Now his legs are probably broken, and it's all my fault.”

Cerulean nodded. “Don't worry, we'll get him out. Khama and Shemesh will run ahead with Maul. Why don't you sit down for a minute; you don't look so good yourself.”

“No, I’m fine, just tired. I came back to give you something.” Iní reached into her pocket and took out the small piece of cloth, in which she had wrapped the bloodstone.

Cerulean looked at the bundle, confused at first. His eyes widened. “Is this...?” Even though the others had run ahead, he avoided saying the word out loud.

Iní nodded solemnly.

“Don’t tell anyone else about this. Understand? I trust Khama and Shemesh, but the fewer people who know the better.” Cerulean pulled a small pouch from under his shirt, and dropped the stone inside. Iní felt a flare of magic, cold and jealous, and knew Cerulean had placed a protection spell on the pouch.

“Now, no one other than you and me will be able to see this pouch.” He tucked it under his shirt as he spoke.

“Good, let’s go get Anwar.” Iní turned to go back down the tunnel, but her vision blurred and she put out a hand to steady herself.

Cerulean was quickly at her side.

“Iní, you need to rest. When was the last time you slept, or even ate anything, for that matter?”

“I’m fine. I slept some before Maul found me.”

“I’m serious. You need to sit down. If you like, I’ll wait here with you.”

Iní shook her head. “We can’t. We need to catch up with Khama and Shemesh. I forgot to tell them about the sign reversal. It’s kind of a long story, but I tried to trick Anwar by switching the signs I used when the tunnel split.”

“You tried to trick Anwar?” Cerulean’s voice was heavy with disapproval. “We’ll talk more about that later. You don’t need to worry about the signs. Maul is with them, and he will track by smell.”

“Oh.” Iní could feel her resolve weakening. She was on the verge of collapse.

“Let’s just sit down here and let you rest for a while. You won’t be any help to Anwar in this condition. I’ll wait right here with you.” Cerulean gave her a fatherly pat on the back as he eased her down to the floor.

Iní sighed. “Fine, I’ll rest a little bit. But you should go on. Help Anwar. Even with three people, it will be hard to get him out.”

Cerulean started to protest, but Iní firmly declared that he could either leave her there or take her with him. She wasn’t going keep anyone else behind. He left, grumbling at her stubbornness, looking back several times to make sure she wasn’t trying to follow him.

CHAPTER 30

Iní was sick of waiting. She'd taken a short nap and eaten some food. Now she didn't care what Cerulean said. She was going to go find out about Anwar. She walked at a brisk pace down the tunnel, listening for the sounds of someone returning with news or—even better—with Anwar himself. She had traveled only a short distance when she noticed a faint light down the corridor to her right and suddenly remembered Cerulean. She had forgotten to tell him about the “R.” *It's good thing I decided to follow him*, she thought, shaking her head.

“Cerulean!” She called, trying to get the old man's attention. She couldn't see him yet, but she could tell he stopped moving because the light started to get brighter.

“I forgot to tell you...” Iní said, rounding the corner.

“Iní?”

“Kolar?” Iní stopped mid-step.

“Iní, fancy meeting you here.” Kolar smiled. “I confess, I seem to be totally turned around in here.”

Iní smiled faintly, as she wondered why Kolar was there. Cerulean had said nothing about him.

As if reading her thoughts, Kolar laughed lightly and said, “Cerulean didn't tell you I came along, did he?”

“No.” Iní hadn't known Kolar and Cerulean were friends.

Kolar lounged against the wall, studying his fingernails as he spoke. “Where's Anwar? I was under the impression you couldn't even breathe without him around.”

“He's hurt, Kolar.” Her voice was reprimanding. “That's where the others are, trying to dig him out. Come on, I'll show you the way.”

Iní turned and started to walk back down the tunnel. She only took a few steps before there was flashing pain at the back of her head, then darkness.

CHAPTER 31

When Iní came to, she was blindfolded and strapped to the back of a horse. She could feel the horse moving fast underneath her. Her head bounced roughly against the right stirrup. The last thing she remembered was turning her back on Kolar. Had he done this? She knew the two goblins didn't get along, but she'd never thought Kolar was a real threat. Perhaps they had both been attacked, and Kolar was captive, too.

When they stopped, a rough hand grabbed Iní's head and put a canteen to her lips.

"Drink."

Iní started to resist, but the man forced the liquid into her mouth, and she eventually gagged some of it down.

"Where's my ..." Iní began, but the effects of the drug-laced water were instantaneous, and she fell into an unconscious stupor.

"I think the girl's awake." This was a new voice, gruffer than the first. Something about it nagged at Iní's memory, but she didn't know why. She realized she was no longer slung over the back of a horse. Someone had propped her against a wall, leaving her blindfold and bindings in place. Her head throbbed with pain, and her throat was so dry it took her several tries to get out a simple, "Water."

"Yep, she's awake. Grab her some water, Scruff." It was the first man's voice.

Iní heard movement and then felt the canteen being pressed to her lips. She gulped down the water as fast as she could.

"That's enough," said the gruff voice, pulling it away.

“Where’s Kolar?”

The voices laughed.

Fear and worry flared in Iní’s mind.

“What have you done to him? Why did you take us?”

“Sit there and stay quiet, or I’ll gag you.”

Iní heard footsteps and knew the man had left. Her throat still burned with thirst but she stayed quiet. Her mind raced with questions. How long had she slept? Where was Kolar? Did the men know who she was? A loud growl from Iní’s stomach interrupted her thoughts. She guessed it was at least two days since her last meal, but she had no idea where two days travelling could put her.

“Did you feed the others?” The first voice again.

Scruff grunted a reply.

“Feed the new girl, too, but put her in a cell first.”

Others? Iní’s heart sank. Her abduction was more than chance. These men were prepared and experienced.

“What do you want?” Iní blurted out, ignoring Scruff’s earlier warning of a gag.

“You’ll know soon enough,” said Scruff, undoing the rope around her feet and leading her forward.

Iní heard the scrape of an iron door opening, and she was thrust forward. There was a sharp clang.

“Wait! My hands, the blindfold ...”

Scruff laughed. Iní could tell from the way the sound trailed off that he was walking away.

“Don’t worry,” said a soft female voice. “I’ll get these off.”

It took a moment for Iní’s eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. They were in a dungeon or underground chamber of some sort. A shaft of sunlight streamed through a small slit high up in the stone ceiling.

“I’m Arbor,” said the tall, slender forest elf.

“Iní.”

“What’s your skill?”

“Skill?” Iní stalled, unsure how to answer.

“You are a conduit right? The Prince will be angry if they went to all this work for a regular human girl.”

The missing conduits, Iní thought with a flash of fear. “I ... absorb,” she lied.

“I shield,” said Arbor.

Just then a slide at the bottom of the door opened and a steaming bowl was thrust into the room. Iní rushed forward, her mouth watering. She had the bowl to her lips before she stopped, and remembered Arbor.

“Oh, sorry. Do you want to share it?”

Arbor laughed. “No, I’ve eaten. And trust me, after a few days in here that soup will lose its appeal.”

She was probably right, but just then Iní was so hungry she couldn’t get enough of the thin, watery broth. There were a few slices of what Iní guessed was a sort of turnip, and a small chunk of meat that Iní saved until the last.

“You absorb? That’s odd, I thought the last one they brought in could absorb.”

Iní stopped mid slurp. “The last one?”

“They brought in another conduit earlier this week. I thought the guards said ‘absorb,’ but I must’ve been wrong.”

“How many of us are there?” Iní had only heard about one or two conduits going missing, though it was possible a third kidnapping occurred while she was travelling.

“Six that I know of.” Arbor leaned in and lowered her voice before continuing. “But I’m not sure they’re all still alive. The guards keep talking about ‘stones’ and ‘failed experiments.’”

“Stones?” Iní left the soup unfinished.

CHAPTER 32

A loud bang on the door made Iní jump.

“The Prince wants to see you.” It was Scruff. Iní could hear his keys unlocking the door.

“What should I do?” She kept her voice low, looking to Arbor for advice. But Arbor just shrugged.

“No one’s ever met the Prince, at least as far as I know.” Arbor studied Iní, suddenly wary.

The door swung open to reveal a scarred, and heavily muscled man dressed head to foot in black.

“Hands!” Scruff wound a thick rope tightly around Iní’s wrists.

The hallway was dimly lit, with only a few torches. Iní counted ten doors in the corridor after her own. She couldn’t see how many there were before that. This was too large and well made to be a small hideout somewhere. Wherever they were, the Prince had money and power. When they reached the stairs, Scruff blindfolded her again.

“The less you know, the harder it is to escape.” He chuckled at his own wit.

Iní couldn’t see, but she could count the flights of stairs—four, with a right turn, a left turn, and then two more rights in between each one. She repeated the pattern over and over in her brain, trying to fix it to memory.

At the end of the fourth flight, the air took on a different quality. The dungeon air was stale, with the scent of wet stone. Here the air was fresh and full of all kinds of smells—oiled leather, fresh linens, even baking bread. Iní heard voices, people laughing, and occasionally there were voices in the hallway, but they always veered away from Iní, often changing direction. She

thought about calling out for help, but she could tell by the way the people stopped talking and avoided passing her that no one would come to her aid.

They finally stopped. Scruff took off her blindfold to reveal a large set of ornate wooden doors.

“No point in blindfoldin’ you for this part.” He banged on the door twice, and then stood waiting.

At first, when the door opened, nothing made sense. The room was full of goblins. Some were dressed in military attire, the insignia of King Melech emblazoned on their chests. Others wore fine silk, embroidered robes, and rich attire that set them apart as noblemen. Why would goblins kidnap her? Cerulean said the goblins were one of the conduits oldest allies.

Then she saw him. Kolar sat at the head of a long stone table. He was smiling and talking to two older goblins who bowed slightly in deference when he spoke.

The Prince is Kolar, Iní suddenly realized, feeling sick to her stomach.

When they reached the table, Kolar stopped talking and smiled.

“This is my latest acquisition.” He waved a hand in Iní’s direction. “I’ve been watching her for some time, but the opportunity didn’t present itself until last week.”

Last week? Had Iní really been gone that long? She tried not to let the panic show on her face.

“I found her while searching the Druid caves, apparently we aren’t the only ones trying to find the secret of the bloodstone. Are we Iní?” He smiled at her, but there was no kindness in the action.

Iní didn’t respond.

“Yes, I suppose it is a shock. I believe I had you quite fooled, didn’t I? It is rather lucky we didn’t get you that first time, with your grandmother. I had no idea what you actually were then.”

Iní’s vision reddened with anger. She lunged at Kolar, trying to use her bound hands as a club. The older goblins cried out in alarm, but Scruff grabbed her by the collar and jerked her back before she could reach Kolar. One of the soldiers ran over and threw her to the floor. He pinned her there, his knee grinding in to her back.

Kolar laughed. “Don’t worry, Iní. I won’t hurt you. I need you to make a bloodstone.” He waved a hand in dismissal and turned his attention back to the two older gentlemen.

The soldier yanked Iní upright. Scruff put the blindfold back on, but it was the soldier who kept her painfully restrained all the way back to the dungeon. They didn’t remove the blindfold or the ropes until they were back at the cell. It took Iní a minute to adjust to the darkness before she realized Arbor was gone, the lonely cell further punishment for Iní’s misbehavior. But she didn’t care, only wishing she’d actually been able to strike Kolar’s smug face.

Iní slumped down in the corner on her thin pile of straw, reviewing what she knew. It had been over a week since her kidnapping. Kolar was trying to make a bloodstone, but he didn’t know how ... yet. Iní shuddered at the thought. She hoped Cerulean found a way to destroy the remaining bloodstone; that much power wasn’t safe anywhere. She tried to work out some sort of plan. He was probably keeping her on goblin lands, somewhere well guarded with soldiers and noblemen loyal only to him. Any possible escape would depend on magic. Without her abilities as a conduit, Iní was helpless.

She sat brooding, frustrated by her limitations. She was going to die without ever meeting her father. Anwar would look for her—Lycene and Ari, too—but Iní doubted they would ever find her. Kolar was the goblin crown prince. Even if Anwar did suspect him, he couldn't just barge in or make accusations without proof.

That night Iní dreamed about the shining cord. Glittering shapes drew ever closer, reeling her in. She noticed a ring of light wrapped around her right index finger. Even asleep, Iní remembered her predicament and wished the dream could bring help. She woke to a loud bang on her door and a bowl of soup sliding through the small slot at the bottom. She sipped her soup, mulling over the dream. What was that new ring of light? Iní looked down at her right index finger. Her bowl clattered to the floor. The ring Anwar bought her from the Midsummer Festival—it was charmed! If Iní could find a way to access the magic of the charm...she could escape.

CHAPTER 33

Iní stared at the ring, her vision blurring. There had to be a way to reach the magic. She had been trying for hours to sense the power of the charm, but nothing worked. *I'm going to die without ever meeting my father*, Iní thought in frustration. Longing for her father welled up inside her. She tried to imagine what he looked like, what he'd say when he saw her, the home they would live in together.

At first the feeling was so faint, Iní thought it was just part of her daydream. But when she glanced down at the ring, the weak pulse of magic was unmistakable. Iní acted quickly, amplifying the power of the charm until the air around her shimmered with magic. *Help me get free, convince anyone who comes near me to fight for my freedom*. She transformed the magic and sent it speeding through the dungeon.

It didn't take long. Scruff and several of the goblin guards were playing cards just around the corner from her cell. They rose in unison, cards spilling to the floor, and marched in step to her door.

"You two, scout ahead for any resistance." Scruff gestured toward the hall as he unlocked Iní's cell. He opened the door and bowed to Iní, the two remaining soldiers doing the same.

"How can we help, miss?"

Iní stared at her rescuers, amazed at the sudden transformation.

"We need to hurry, miss. The guard will change soon and we don't want to get sandwiched between soldiers coming and going." The goblin on the left glanced down the hall as he spoke.

"What do you suggest, soldier?" Iní tried to sound commanding.

Scruff cut in. "We stage a riot," he said, a sly smile on his face.

The warning bell boomed through the walls, resulting in a flurry of activity on the floor above her—footsteps running, doors slamming, panicked cries.

Scruff and the other guards had opened every cell in the dungeon, creating a scene of total chaos. The conduits quickly joined in the revolt for freedom.

A knot of soldiers burst through the doors, only to turn and begin fighting those behind them. As soon as any goblin got within ten yards of Iní, they would change sides and begin working to free Iní.

“What’s happening? Is this a mutiny?” called one of the goblins in the watchtower, his voice cracking with panic.

Iní’s ever growing army pressed out of the dungeon and into the courtyard of a great granite castle.

“Lower the drawbridge!” Scruff and three other soldiers quickly scaled the guardhouse walls to ensure the order was obeyed.

The bridge began to inch down, showering bits of dirt and stone. Outside, Iní could hear men barking orders and the sound of wood creaking under a heavy load. There was a heavy chop and the sound of something flying through the air. Catapults. The castle was under attack from without!

A fiery missile cleared the outer wall and came blazing straight at Iní and the escaping conduits. Soldiers cried out in pain. The air grew strangely warm and dry, carrying with it the smell of smoke. What was going on? Could it be Anwar or the Alliance?

“Iní!” Arbor slowly made her way through the commotion, her progress hindered by the weight of a semi-conscious gnome who leaned heavily on her for balance. Iní fought her way toward the forest elf and shouldered the other side of the gnome. Four other conduits emerged from the fight. One elf was using the stool from his cell to clear a pathway to the drawbridge.

“How do we get out of here?” someone cried from behind them.

“Just keep moving straight ahead,” called the elf, as he brought his tool crashing down on a goblin’s head.

There was a roar outside and once again the air around them grew warm.

“Dragons, dragons—run!” screamed the half-coherent gnome at her side.

Dragons? Iní wasn’t sure if that meant friend or foe.

The guards were all gathered at the edge of the bridge, grouped three-deep, with swords and short-knives drawn. Iní slowed to a halt, unsure how to proceed. As if sensing her predicament, a tall white figure appeared on the bridge. Arach! The dragon king was in human form and with a quick flick of his wrist he released a stunning spell that toppled the goblin guards.

“Quickly, before they get reinforcements.” Arach rushed forward as he spoke, taking the injured gnome from Iní and Arbor. “My people can fly you out of here, but you need to run.”

In the past, Iní might have hesitated to trust a dragon but not now. She sprinted across the bridge, Arbor and Arach (who managed to run at full speed while carrying the gnome) not far behind. Any resistance they met was quickly removed with magic. Rizen and a dark blue dragon stood waiting for them, their wings spread for flight.

“Get on,” said Rizen, lowering her neck to ground level.

Iní took a deep breath, and climbed on the red-gold dragon. Not far behind her, Arbor too climbed on the blue dragon. Arach quickly transformed into his dragon form, picking up the hurt gnome in his great claws. The dragons leaped into the air, their wings propelling them upward.

CHAPTER 34

The ground moved swiftly below them, much faster than a galloping horse. Iní leaned close to Rizen's body, her arms wrapped around the dragon's neck. She alternated between closing her eyes in terror and staring wide-eyed at the ground below. The earth looked like a child's toy, with miniature houses, speckled fields and little lakes and hills. *How long would it take me to hit the ground if I fell off?* Iní clutched tighter at Rizen's neck.

They landed at dusk in a small clearing, Arach and other dragons touching down beside them.

"We'll stay here for the night," said Arach. He stalked off behind a copse of trees and Iní saw a bright flash. He returned in human form. Rizen and the other dragon also went somewhere secluded to transform. It seemed this wasn't something dragons did in public.

Arach retrieved several packs that had been hung high on the branches of nearest tree. He laid out six bedrolls, and then rummaged around in the packs for their cooking supplies. Rizen helped the injured gnome lie down comfortably on a blanket.

"I've never known dragons to be involved in conduit affairs," said Arbor. "Still, I thank you for rescuing us." Her words were warm, but she angled herself in such a manner that she could always see all three dragons at once.

"You're welcome. Though, I confess your rescue was more of coincidence than any planned effort on our part." Arach glanced at Iní as he spoke.

"What were you there for?" Iní asked.

Arach stared at her for a time before simply saying, "You'll know soon enough."

The next morning Iní's legs were surprisingly stiff. She hadn't thought much of it at the time, but riding a dragon was different from riding a horse. Not only did the scales chafe considerably, but you were also required to straddle a much wider area. She groaned, pausing midway between sitting and standing, and using her hands to help straighten her legs.

"You'll be riding with Arach today." Rizen smirked slightly as she watched Iní struggle to her feet. "Arbor, you'll be with me."

Arbor nodded. Iní took comfort in the fact that even the forest elf moved a bit slower that morning.

Breakfast was a brief affair consisting of a couple handfuls of jerky and a few dawnberries, after which Arach stowed the packs out of sight on another tree branch. Iní got the feeling this was something of a regular resting spot for the dragons.

"How long will it take us to reach Antharra?" Iní wasn't sure her legs could take many more days of this riding.

"We'll be there by nightfall." Arach called over his shoulder as he walked into the copse of trees. Iní saw the familiar flash of light and then Arach's glittering white scales.

"Is there a rope or something I can use for a hold?" The idea of riding a whole day unsecured on Arach's back made Iní more than a little nervous.

Arach made a strange snorting sound. "Don't worry little human, if you fall I'll just snatch you up in my claws." He grabbed at the air with his right foreclaw, making a loud snap.

He's enjoying this, thought Iní with a trace of irritation. She made an effort to stay calm as she climbed on his back. Arach was much taller than Rizen, and Arbor had to help boost her

up. The poor gnome remained only semi-conscious, and Volar, the quiet blue dragon, would carry him in his claws.

“He was one of their first captures,” Arbor said, nodding to the gnome. “The week before you came they tried an ‘experiment.’ He’s been like that ever since.”

Iní shuddered. She hated to think of what experiments Kolar’s quest for a bloodstone might involve.

After a while, flying took on a sort of monotony. You could only see so many tiny roads and houses before it all started to look the same. Even Iní’s fears of falling diminished as she became accustomed to the bobbing rhythm of Arach’s wing strokes. They only stopped briefly for the dragons to drink at a passing lake. Iní took this opportunity to get down, stretch her legs, and eat the jerky Rizen gave her for lunch. She might be getting used to flying, but she didn’t want to combine eating with hurtling through the sky. She could only imagine how Arach would react if she got sick while she was on him.

It was just before dusk when Iní first saw Antharra. The large tree houses the city was famous for made the trees look strangely misshapen. Not for the first time, Iní wondered about Anwar. Was he all right? Would she see him tonight? She could only imagine how angry he was going to be with her for going off on her own. At least he wouldn’t get in trouble, Cerulean’s presence alone could clear up any qualms the Alliance might have about his choices as a guardian.

Arach didn’t fly right up to the city. Instead, he landed in the orchards about a mile off. Iní was glad. Now that they were close, she felt herself growing shy. She didn’t want to make a

big scene, but rather slip in quietly and find the others. She slipped down from Arach's back and had to steady herself a moment.

"Are you all right?" Arach turned his great white head to look at Iní.

"I'm fine. Just tired and sore." Then, remembering her manners, she added, "Thank you, again, for saving us."

Arach was silent for a moment, just staring at her. He pawed at the dirt with his right foreclaw. Thinking the conversation was over, Iní turned to look for Arbor who had landed a little ways off in another clearing.

"You look a lot like your mother, you know."

Iní froze. "What do you mean?"

Arach blew a slow puff of smoke from his nostrils. "Her hair had a little more fire in it, but your eyes are exactly the same."

Odd, Iní thought, that's exactly the way Nana used to put it. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. Her mother had known a dragon? Surely Nana would have mentioned something like that.

Arach brought his head down close to Iní's body, so close she could feel his breath on her skin. She flinched slightly when one of the last rays of sun caught his scales and flashed in her eyes.

"Do I scare you?" His voice was strangely sad. He backed away from her a little, and glanced over in the direction where Rizen and the other dragon had landed. "Perhaps now is not the best time. We'll talk about this later, Iní Rí."

Nana's nickname for her. Iní drew a sharp breath. She'd never told it to anyone—not Cerulean or Anwar or even Lycene—yet Arach knew.

“Where did you hear that?” Iní’s voice was strained.

“Hear what?”

“My nickname. Only Nana ever called me that.”

Arach tilted his head to the side. “Really?”

The sound of branches breaking interrupted her thoughts, and Iní turned to see Arbor and Rizen emerge in the clearing.

“Volar has taken the gnome straight to the village.” Rizen was in her human form, the bright red streaks in her golden hair accented by her scarlet dress. She looked slowly from Arach to Iní before adding, “Should we wait for you or head on by ourselves?”

“No, I’ll change. Give me a moment.” Arach looked at Iní once more, then walked away into the trees.

When they reached the village, a large crowd had gathered outside. The landing of a dragon just outside the town was no normal occurrence, and the injured conduit only added to the draw.

Someone recognized Iní and cried out, pointing. “It’s the human conduit!”

Everyone turned and stared at the approaching party. Iní could feel her skin flush with embarrassment. She searched the crowd for Anwar and the others, but couldn’t see them.

“Where is Cerulean?” Arach’s voice carried over the crowd.

“He is out with a search party.” Eleshta pushed through the crowd to greet them and bowed deeply. “So are the others.”

He looked at Iní when he spoke, and she nodded, understanding.

“May I ask...”? He began, but Arach cut him off.

“They are hungry and tired after a long journey. The questions can wait.”

“Of course, my apologies. This way.”

It felt like years since Iní had slept in a bed. She snuggled down in the covers, breathing in the smell of the fresh linens. Eleshta made sure they were all well taken care of. Iní enjoyed a hot meal and long bath, before retiring to her old sleeping quarters. When she first walked in she half expected Lycene to be there. Messengers were sent to find them not long after Iní arrived, but Eleshta didn't expect them back until the morning. No one asked anything more about their journey that night, an unspoken agreement between Arach and the gnomes that questions would wait until Cerulean returned.

As she lay on the edge of sleep, Iní couldn't help replaying Arach's words in the orchard. *You look just like your mother, you know.* She felt as though she was on the edge of understanding something, but it slipped away from her as she drifted off to sleep. That night Iní didn't dream so much as remember. It was the summer of her fifth birthday, and Iní was helping Nana make jam in the kitchen.

“You look just like your mother in that dress.”

“What about my father, do I look like him?”

“Your father...” Nana began and then sighed.

“He isn't dead, is he?” It wasn't so much a question as a statement.

Nana shook her head.

“But he doesn't want me, because I killed Mother.”

Nana knelt down and put her arms around Iní. “Oh Iní, what happened to your mother wasn’t anyone’s fault.”

“Then why doesn’t he want me?”

“It’s not that he doesn’t want you, dear. It’s just that he doesn’t know anything about raising a human baby.”

Iní woke up with a start. The words “human baby” echoed in her mind.

CHAPTER 35

When Iní stepped outside for breakfast she found Arach and Cerulean waiting for her.

“Cerulean, you’re back.” Iní smiled and bowed in greeting.

“Iní, it’s good to see you safe and sound. I wonder, do you have a minute to talk with us before breakfast?”

“Sure.” Iní opened the door and waved them into her room. “Are Anwar and the others back yet?”

“Not yet. I expect Lycene and Ari by the end of the day, but I’m not sure when Anwar will be here.”

“He’s all right then, after the...accident?” Iní wasn’t sure how much she should say in front of Arach.

“Yes. He broke a leg, but that didn’t stop him from going out with a tracking party, regardless of what the healer said.”

Typical Anwar, Iní thought.

Arach cleared his throat and looked over at Cerulean, waiting. The old man nodded, but didn’t speak right away. “Iní...well, first I want to apologize for leaving you alone in the cave.”

“Don’t. If Kolar hadn’t kidnapped me we might never have known the truth.”

“Perhaps. But after speaking with Arach today, I fear my shortsightedness has caused everyone a great deal of trouble. You see, I didn’t think to consider your parents.”

“Pardon?” Iní’s mind flashed back to her dream from the night before.

“There’s never been a full conduit before, so I should’ve suspected.” Cerulean drew himself up to his full height.

“Suspected what?” Iní was starting to feel nervous.

“You’re father wasn’t human, Iní. He was—”

“Me,” said Arach. “I’m your father.”

Iní grabbed a nearby chair for support. Arach took a step forward, reaching out his arm as if to steady her, but stopped short.

“Nana and I agreed not to tell you until your seventeenth birthday. Only she died, and you left the home, and I had to use our connection to find you.”

“The shining cord.” Iní’s hand went instinctively to her stomach.

Arach nodded. “Dragons have a magical tie to their children. It lets us know when you are in danger. I’d never felt any pull from you until the day Nana died.”

“That’s how he helped save you from Kolar.” Cerulean added. He had been watching Iní nervously after Arach’s confession.

Everything they were saying made sense, at least to a degree. But Iní still had one problem. “Why did you leave me?”

“Your mother was a conduit, did you know that? She had the ability to transform. When she found out she was pregnant, I wanted her to take the tansy herb before it was too late. But she said no, she could feel your magic inside her, and she used her talents to keep you in human form.”

Cerulean, sensing Iní’s confusion, explained further. “There has never been a successful human-dragon birth. Usually both mother and baby are killed because the growing baby’s magic causes it to change.”

“Can I still change?” Iní had a wild vision of herself suddenly morphing into a twelve-foot tall dragon.

“No. Your mother changed you into something new, something neither human nor dragon.”

“A full conduit,” said Cerulean.

“And it killed her,” said Iní, sitting down hard on the chair.

This time Arach didn't hesitate. He quickly walked over to Iní, bent down, and softly put a hand on her face.

“Your mother loved you. She knew the risks, but she chose you. We both did. After you were born, Nana took you to the Purple Hills to keep you safe. My position is not without enemies, and we had no idea how either race would react to you or your possible abilities.”

CHAPTER 36

The table was overflowing with smoked mutton, curried fruit, pickled vegetables, and smooth and creamy cheese puddings. Everyone was gathered in the meeting hall to celebrate the return of Iní and the other conduits, as well as hear them report. The injured gnome was still recovering, but Arbor and Iní both told of Kolar's trickery and his quest to build a bloodstone.

"Pardon my asking, but how did you know?" Eleshta turned to Arach, the skepticism plain on his face.

"I didn't."

"Well, why did you attack the goblins?" asked another gnome.

"Kolar made the mistake of taking something very valuable from me. I simply went to reclaim it." Arach looked at Iní as he spoke.

"And what was..." began the same gnome, but one look from Arach silenced him.

"The important thing is that Kolar has been captured. And, after seeing all the evidence against his son, the goblin king has agreed to overlook the dragons' actions and let this matter be handled by the Alliance," said Cerulean with a tone of finality.

"A bloodstone. Just imagine if he had been successful!" said Eleshta, with a look of horror.

"Thankfully, the bloodstones were all destroyed centuries ago," said Arach, but he gave Cerulean a strange look as he spoke.

Iní wondered how much her father knew or at least suspected, but any further conversation was cut short when the doors to the meeting hall were flung open. Lycene and Ari came rushing in.

“Iní girl, we thought we’d lost you.” Ari’s eyes were wet as he scooped her up in a great hug.

Lycene laughed at Iní’s surprise and hugged her as well.

“Is Anwar here yet?” Ari scanned the room as he spoke. “You should’ve seen him trying to mount a horse one-legged. I would’ve laughed if I hadn’t thought he’d kill me on the spot.”

“He’s not here yet,” Iní said, trying to hide the disappointment in her voice.

“I’m sure he’ll be here soon,” said Lycene, laying a consoling hand on Iní’s shoulder.

Ari grabbed two chairs and shouldered his way next to Iní at the table. Ever gracious, Lycene introduced herself to Arbor, who turned out to be an acquaintance of her father. Ari nodded a brief acknowledgement but focused on piling his plate high.

“So Iní,” he said, after creating a small mountain of food, “tell us all about it.”

“The others have already heard. I don’t want to bore them.”

“Nonsense.” Ari took a bite into a large leg of mutton. “Kidnapping, traitors, and surprise rescues by dragons—what’s boring about that? Besides, I always say a story gets better with each retelling.” He winked at Iní.

Iní smiled, how could she argue with that?

By evening, Iní had retold her story at least a dozen times. She found herself avoiding the more popular areas of town in fear she would be asked to share her tale again. Still, she kept hanging around the main road, watching every rider that came into town, and waiting for news of Anwar.

“Ah, Iní, I thought I might find you here.” Cerulean walked up and stood beside her. “No news yet?”

“No.” Iní sighed.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be here as soon as he can. In the meantime, there is another matter we should discuss.”

The bloodstone. Iní wondered what Cerulean had done with it. Everyone else was so focused on Iní’s recovery, the trip to the caves was completely forgotten. What had Cerulean told them she and Anwar were doing there?

Once they were in a small room out of the way, and after Cerulean had set enchantments against eavesdropping, Iní asked him as much.

“As far as the Alliance knows, you were following the clues given to you in the Pool of Memories.”

“Which is true,” added Iní.

“I don’t mean to sound callous, but your kidnapping was actually rather fortunate. In light of Kolar’s presence in the cave and his own pursuits to create a bloodstone, people simply assumed you were sent there to find the culprit.”

“So no one knows about the existence of the bloodstone?”

Cerulean shook his head. “And I think it’s better to leave it that way. There might come a time when the bloodstone is needed, but for now I think it’s better left a secret.”

“What will you do with it?”

“Let’s just say I’ve put it somewhere only you or I could ever find it.”

Iní remembered the enchantment on the bag and wondered if Cerulean hadn’t hidden it somewhere in plain sight. She was happy to let Cerulean take care of the details.

“Did you ever find out what the dragons wanted with the dryad?”

“No, but the gnomes let Arach speak with her after your rescue.”

“Can I trust him?” Iní was afraid to hear to the answer.

“I don’t think he would ever do anything to harm you.”

“But...”

Cerulean sighed, “I’m not sure he wouldn’t use you to get what he wants.”

Iní nodded. She hated to admit it, but she suspected as much.

It was well after dark when Iní finally retreated to her sleeping room. Ari and Lycene brought her dinner and waited by the road for a little while. Even Arach came and sat silently next to her for a time. Iní still wasn’t sure how she felt about her newfound father or the idea that she wasn’t completely human. But now that things were beginning to calm down, she supposed she would have time to figure it out. When she did finally go back to her rooms, she found herself starting at every strange sound. How on earth would she sleep through the night?

Iní was just on the edge of sleep when the door to her room flew open. She shot upright, instantly awake, and saw Anwar, his mouth stern and lines of exhaustion plain on his face. Seeing him, Iní was torn between fear and relief. She watched nervously as he hobbled across the room toward her. Lycene, who had been sleeping in the bed next to her, also sat up and watched silently.

Anwar reached her bed and tossed his crutches on the floor.

“Anwar, I can explain. In the cave everything that happened was my fault, I know that.”

Anwar leaned forward and Iní steeled herself for the lecture that was about to come. Only he didn't say anything, instead he placed his hands lightly on both sides of her face and just stared. Iní could feel the heat rising to her skin and worried he could feel it too.

“You're not hurt?” He said after a long pause.

Iní found it hard to speak with him so close.

“No,” she whispered, avoiding his eyes.

Ever so gently Anwar tilted her face until their eyes met. Then he leaned forward, and did something Iní had wanted for a long time—he kissed her.