

Excerpted from
The Silver Seed

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PROLOGUE

The Four Winds

The hunter paused briefly to resettle the pack bumping against his back. The column of smoke which had drawn him down this narrow path seemed no nearer, though he had been traveling swiftly for more than an hour. The side trip was taking him far out of his way, and he almost wished he had never spotted the smoke. Still, it ran against his nature to ignore a potential sign of distress.

The world was harsh, and a Tuath learned young what it meant to need the help of another.

Few would have considered the hunter an attractive man. His features were large and squat, marked with scars from some childhood disease. His short, stocky build would have seemed clumsy in another setting. Here in the forest, though, he was more than graceful. His feet touched the ground with an instinctive sense of rhythm, keeping time with the beat of his heart. At times, he all but disappeared into the surroundings, his leaf-green cloak and brown tunic fading into the trees. Apart from a small breath of wind whisking the leaves along the trail, his passage was silent.

Another hour of travel slipped away before the hunter finally found the edge of a clearing containing a small cluster of huts. The shape of the structures, and their arrangement, were much the same as the one found in his own village, but the sense here was entirely different - *empty*.

Cold foreboding tickled his spine.

The hunter knew better than to ignore that chill, so he settled back on his haunches to wait for its cause to become clear. It took only a moment for him to realize that what bothered him was the lack of noise. By this time of the morning, most Tuathi settlements were bustling with activity - but he heard no hammering from the village blacksmith, no buzz of conversation from women visiting the well. In fact, the forest itself had gone quiet, as though even the animals were reluctant to disturb the stillness of this clearing.

The thin column of smoke rose from just beyond the huts to his left.

Steeling his nerves with a deep breath, the hunter slipped his arms out of his pack. He hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly did the same with his bow and quiver of arrows. He hated to part with those, but they would only be in the way here. He tucked the entire bundle behind a bush, then drew his long hunting knife and carefully stepped out of the forest.

The logical place to begin searching for clues to the whereabouts of the villagers was the column of smoke that had drawn him here in the first place. The hunter began to work his way around the outside of the village, clinging to the edge of the forest; he felt much safer with the promise of cover nearby.

Another lesson that a Tuath learned young was that predator could become prey in the blink of an eye.

Unfortunately most of the huts faced away from the forest, making it difficult for the hunter to see what lay inside them. Even worse, the little he could discern through the cloudy glass in the windows only added to his confusion. The insides of the dwellings showed no sign of extended disuse, as though their owners had left only recently. They had left unexpectedly, too, if the food which still sat on some of the tables was any indication.

As he drew nearer to the source of the smoke, a knot of certainty grew in his stomach, threatening to wring out its contents. He knew what he would find long before he rounded the corner of the last hut. The inhabitants of the village had not abandoned their homes at all. Most of them lay here, wearing large, ugly wounds.

Years of skinning animals had inured him to the sight of blood, and he had even weathered a few goblin fights, but nothing could have prepared him for what he found in the open space, the Bind, of that village. He drew out a kerchief to cover his mouth and nose, then slowly began to work his way through the bodies.

The column of smoke was rising from the charred remains of several huts at the edge of the village. Those must have been torched at some point during the fighting, and since the dwellings were small, the slaughter must have taken place only the evening before. It was fortunate that the huts were widely spaced and that rain had been plentiful in recent weeks. Otherwise the fire might have taken the entire village. His eyes turned upward involuntarily. The sky was empty now, but carrion birds would be here soon.

Taking a deep breath, the hunter bent down to study a particularly dense cluster of bodies. A glance was enough to show that not all of them were human. In fact, most of these bodies were goblins. He had some knowledge of the tactics used by those little monsters, so he could guess what had happened the previous evening.

Most likely this raiding party had stumbled across the village just as its inhabitants were settling down to their evening meals. Hoping to panic them, the goblins had set fire to a few huts. As those villagers fled the flames, the goblins had slaughtered them - and the neighbors hurrying to their aid.

He jerked his eyes away from the corpse of a woman with a gaping wound in her throat, swallowing rapidly to still the heaving of his stomach.

The way the bodies were distributed spoke well for the courage of the villagers. Those flushed from their huts at the edge of town must have sold

their lives dearly, purchasing time for their fellows to gather arms. Sure enough the hunter soon began to come across Tuathi corpses wearing bits of armor and holding makeshift weapons. Before long he came across a place where the corpses were piled more thickly, where the villagers had actually managed to establish a line.

Just then the hunter's eye fell upon a pile of white ash heaped over a jumble of fire-cleaned bone. *A troll*, he thought to himself. His respect for the villagers grew as he caught sight of another pile of ash farther along. Unlike goblins, who were small and scrawny in addition to being stupid, trolls were half again as large as a grown man, with thick hides and sharp claws. What was worse, trolls had the ability to heal even the most dire wounds at an alarming rate, making them extremely difficult to kill. Nevertheless, the villagers had managed to destroy two of the monsters.

Unfortunately that had been the high point of the battle. On the other side of those piles of ash the bodies began to fan out again. The villagers had been brave, but they had not had the numbers to overcome the invaders. Eventually they had been forced to turn and flee. Very few goblins had fallen beyond that point; most of the bodies were humans struck down from behind. There was little hope that anyone had survived.

The hunter was about to give one of the troll skulls a kick when a faint noise froze his heart. He stood stock still for a moment, the thudding of his pulse threatening to shake the trees. *Stupid!* he railed at himself. *The goblins must still be around. They would have set fire to the whole village before they left.*

He waited for an eternity, but the sound did not come again. Finally the hunter began to wonder if his imagination had been playing with him. That battle scene would have been enough to unnerve Dakon himself, so it would be no surprise if he had begun to hear things.

Perhaps the villagers killed so many of the goblins that there were not enough to fire the huts, he rationalized. Slowly his chest unclenched, letting a little bit of air back into his lungs. Hoping to confirm his conclusion, the hunter started toward the nearest unburnt hut, expecting to find that it had been ransacked by the goblins.

As his hand approached the doorknob, he froze again. This time there was no doubt that he had heard something. Carefully, heart in his throat, he moved to the side of the door and pressed his back to the wall. After heaping a litany of curses on the souls of all goblins, he thanked Anatema that he had heard the noise *before* opening the door. He edged around to the side of the hut, where he remembered a window. He did not dare open the shutters, but he did find a crack large enough for a peek inside.

The hut's interior was too dark for him to see much detail, but the place was clearly a shambles. A litter of small objects had been cast about the floor of the hut, punctuated by the jagged shapes of broken furniture. What seized the hunter's attention, though, were the dark mounds sprawled amidst the jumble. Those must be the cause of the noises he had heard. He breathed another prayer to Anatema, thanking her for the fact that the shutters were closed against the sun's brightness.

One of the shapes stirred, turning the hunter's blood to ice once again. Backing carefully away from the window, he ducked around the corner of a neighboring hut. Once he was safely out of sight of the one with the sleeping goblins, he broke into a run, anxious to get some distance between them and him. A part of him longed to exact a little revenge for the things he had seen, but he had counted at least eight mounds in that one hut. He did not like those odds, not even against goblins.

The hunter's stride wavered briefly as he considered the possibility that the goblins might try to follow him out of the village. It took a moment for reason to assert itself. The goblins were not likely to look for survivors, and here in the village his tracks would mingle with the trampling the villagers had made during the course of their daily activities. It would be a simple matter to cut through the village to get his equipment, and once he was in the forest the goblins would never find him.

He walked carefully at first, but after passing a few huts he decided that he was no longer in danger of being heard by the goblins and put a little speed into his stride. The run was short-lived, though, as another sight brought him up short. In front of him lay a goblin, killed from behind by a single sword stroke. Beyond it lay another goblin with a large knife protruding from its back, but the second had fallen across the legs of a woman who was pinned to the ground by a spear.

A small boy knelt beside the woman, clutching at her hand.

The hunter approached slowly, clearing his throat so that he would not startle the child. The boy jumped nevertheless, then scurried over to tug at the knife in the goblin's back.

"There now, m'boy. I think ye willna be needin' that," the hunter said gently. "I mean ye no harm. My name is Brion."

The knife came free with a jerk, and the boy spun around to point it in his direction. Another pang struck the hunter, tinged with regret; suspicion was another thing that Tuathi learned young. Raising his hands to show that they were empty, he moved over to crouch beside the woman. Her hand was still warm, but he could feel no pulse.

"What d'ye think we should do about ye're mother, here?" he asked,

glancing back up at the boy. His answer was a shrug. "Why don't ye go and fetch me a blanket while I get this stick out of her?"

There was one more moment of hesitation, but then the child turned to run toward one of the huts. The hunter's lip twitched, relieved that he had been able to win that much trust, at least. Things were complicated enough as it was.

With a swift kick of his foot, he broke the spear shaft, then cast a fearful glance over his shoulder, worried that the noise might have been heard. He raised her gently off of the stump and wrapped her carefully in the thin blanket the boy had brought. He glanced down at the bundle when he lifted it again, surprised at how light the woman had been.

"I'm a-guessin' that house is yours?" he asked, receiving a nod in response. With another worried glance over his shoulder the hunter carried the woman inside.

There were only two beds in its single room, so he lay the woman's body on the larger of them. Then he took hold of the boy's shoulder and looked directly into his eyes. He could almost feel the heat they radiated; pain, rage, vengeance burned brightly in those eyes.

"Listen to me now, lad. We've got to be gettin' away, because there's more of those brutes nearby. Can ye stay quiet and keep up with me?"

Once again his answer was a nod, and the hunter turned to lead his new charge back out into the morning. He hesitated in the doorway, casting a suspicious glance around the buildings, then stepped through it and hurried toward his small cache of equipment. It was not until he was rounding the corner of the building across the way that he realized no one was following.

A sad smile touched his lips when he turned and saw that the boy had stopped to gather a warm cloak and a sheath for his knife. If he was able to keep his head about him like that, the journey might not be so bad after all.

Perched on a stool in his little tent, Eustace gingerly turned the pages of the ancient tome he had unearthed earlier in the day. His features glowed with excitement as his eyes flickered across the pages. Suddenly he froze, for a moment forgetting even to breathe. Slowly he bent forward, as though getting closer to the words would somehow make them more real. Carefully laying the book back down on the table, he leaned over to pull a more youthful volume from the stack tottering near his stool. He thumbed hastily through it, doggedly refusing to stop at any of the entries

that clamored for his attention. At any other time he would have been content to lose himself in those passages, but right now he was chasing something more important.

Finally he found the entry he sought, a short paragraph in a chapter entitled *The Succession of Clan Kiltaran*. The book was as close as could be found to a history of the early Tuathi chieftains; a Tundine scholar at the Academy in Lauregal had compiled the data from the tales told by their bards. Of course, Eustace was not certain he could trust the man's scholarship, let alone that of the Tuathi oral tradition. Still, he had found their stories to be useful sources of information as long as they were treated with care.

. . . Telwyn had four sons. The oldest were twins, Manwyn and Mathwyn. Mathwyn was born minutes after Manwyn, but the older son vanished at the age of sixteen, in the year 786 Before the Exile. Thus Mathwyn was the one to succeed his father when Telwyn met an early demise at the Battle of Craggin Heath (783 BE). As the younger of the two, Mathwyn had received instruction in the druidic arts . . .

Eustace closed the book with a slam, clasping it tightly to himself. Struggling to control the pounding of his heart he sank back onto his stool. A self-satisfied smile crept over his face as he considered the impact this find would have upon the Academy. His colleagues had slighted him many times, but they would live to regret that. This expedition had already produced enough material to secure his place on the faculty and he had only begun to scratch the surface of what might lie within the towers.

He leaned forward once again. The book that he had found appeared to be the journal of the last captain of Arsheck-Kor.

Naveshk 23, 3562

Though I obey The Master's will in all things, I cannot bring myself to trust the new captain of Meveck-Kor. This Altark has not yet been washed clean of Manwyn the Tuath. His promise is great, but he must be watched closely. Perhaps that is why The Master has sent him here, where I can observe him. The Master knows there is no stain on my loyalty, and now is trusting me to guard against betrayal from the newest of Its underlings.

The daily tallies . . .

Unable to remain still any longer, Eustace rose from his chair and paced to the front of his tent. The mystery of Manwyn's disappearance had confounded Tundine historians for years, and Eustace was beside himself with excitement at the prospect of unraveling it. Even the self-serving tone of the diary's author was appropriate, lending credibility to any facts the writing might reveal.

More thrilling still was the fact that Manwyn's disappearance was only one of the mysteries shrouding a time known in the bards' tales as the Sundering of the Peoples. This book, or others he might find within the towers, could shed light on any number of other subjects that had confounded historians - the Tuathi bards as well as his own colleagues at the Academy. Indeed, it was possible that after this trip he would have enough material to write the definitive history of the Sundering. He would be famous!

Rubbing his chubby hands together, he thought about how it would be when he brought his finds back to Lauregal. There would be dinners and awards and speeches . . . At last all of his suffering would be vindicated.

Pushing his way through the tent flaps, Eustace stepped out into the night. Finding a place to set up camp had been difficult in these broken hills, but after a few days of searching he and his workers had come across a satisfactory spot just to the northwest of a ruin which he could now identify as *Arsheck-Kor*. In the language of the nation that had once occupied the northern barrens that meant 'Eastern Fang'. The name was even more apt now, with the tower's broken crown jutting out at the sky.

He shivered at the sight of the half-moon standing just above the ruin, as though the dead empire was seeking to pierce the gently glowing globe.

That sight unsettled him, so Eustace turned to look across the narrow valley, where another ruin stood. If he had interpreted the words correctly, that would be the remains of *Meveck-Kor*, where it seemed that one of the most mysterious figures in Tuathi history had once held a command. His heart resumed its fluttering.

Eustace turned his gaze toward the stars winking in their settings of black velvet. Triumph had touched his life so seldom that he was reluctant to let this moment go. Eventually, though, he had to surrender to his need for rest. He sighed as he pushed aside the flap of his tent; sleep would be a long time coming, but perhaps the morrow would bring another find like this one.

Just before he let the flap fall closed, however, his eye snagged on the sight of the moon impaled by the tower of *Arshek-Kor*. He was not superstitious by nature, but his heart skipped a few beats at that image. Glancing backward he saw that the ruin of *Meveck-Kor* was completely hidden in shadow; the sight added to the cold fingers dancing up and down his spine.

Night weighed on the rumbling mountain, made even heavier by the absence of stars. Those were hidden by clouds of black smoke rising lazily

from the peak, malevolence without direction. An approaching eruption would have been cause enough for fear, but this rumbling signified something more . . . much, much more . . .

The few creatures scratching out a living within the shadow of the mountain reacted to its awakening on an instinctive level. Some of them began to prepare for flight, while others began to drift toward the rumbling. Each moved according to its nature.

The Eye was opening.

The heart of any Tuathi village was its well, which generally was surrounded by a broad, open space lined by the shops of the village craftsmen. The goods they produced were important, of course, but what truly set the space apart was that it served as a natural place for the villagers to gather. In fact, the number of people who came solely to gossip often exceeded the number with legitimate business for the craftsmen. Idle though they might have seemed to an outsider, those exchanges were the stuff from which the fabric of the village was woven, and the Tuathi referred to their gathering place as the Bind.

Brion was welcomed by a chorus of shouts as he led Dael into the Bind of Glen Emmor. He answered each one with a nod and a smile, but did not allow them to slow his progress toward the village smithy. Had he given it any thought, Dael would have wondered at the impatience in his new companion, but at the moment his attention was fully occupied by the effort it took to match the taller man's pace.

They had nearly reached the forge when the smith glanced up from his work and caught sight of them. Any questions Dael might have had were answered by the grin that transformed the enormous man's features. Dropping his hammer, he wrapped Brion in a rib-cracking embrace, and the two men proceeded to pound each other's backs with great enthusiasm.

After a moment, Brion turned back to his small companion, introducing him to the smith without ceremony. "This great lump is Durgan, my brother. Durgan, the lad's name is Dael. He has lost his family, so I believe that he'll be a-stayin' with ours."

Durgan was taller than anyone Dael had known in his brief life, with heavily muscled arms that had been bronzed and hardened by his exposure to the forge. For all of his intimidating size, however, the big smith was surrounded by an aura of gentleness. Sinking into a crouch, Durgan moved his hands slowly through a series of gestures, then held one huge palm out to the boy.

“He is givin’ ye the welcome a brother would,” Brion interpreted. “Durgan doesn’t speak, y’see. His throat, well, ’twere damaged by a sickness back when we were lads.”

Dael studied the big man’s face for several moments, then solemnly took the hand that had been offered. Another grin flared across Durgan’s face, and he waved his hands at Brion once again.

“Ye’ve struck the mark there!” the hunter laughed. “Come along, then, Dael. Let’s wash up before Ma gets home.”

The travelers left Durgan to return to his work, angling their way through the small huts toward the home of Brion’s parents.

“What did he say?” Dael asked.

“He said ye’re name might better be Mouse, since ye speak not much more than himself,” Brion chuckled. The boy merely quirked a tiny smile that made Brion laugh even harder. “By Anatema, ye’ll not even rise to that! Mouse it is, then!”

More than an hour of daylight had remained when Brion and Dael took their leave of Durgan, which meant they had some breathing space before Brion’s mother and father returned from their work in the fields. They spent the time unloading Brion’s pack and washing away the dust of their travels, so that by the time they were done the sun was brushing against the treetops of the surrounding forest. Squinting against its glare, Dael was the first to catch sight of an elderly couple making its way toward the cottage.

Brion’s parents hurried forward as soon as they caught sight of him, welcoming him as enthusiastically as Durgan had. At first they did not even notice Dael, but in truth Dael was grateful to have a moment in which to observe these people who seemed destined to play a large role in his future.

Considering the harshness of Tuathi life, Brion’s parents had aged remarkably well. Time had wrought its changes, of course, but a careful observer would still have found traces of handsomeness in their features. Even though each had seen more than fifty summers, they were more than capable of caring for their portion of the village’s small plantation and of husbanding a few animals here at the cottage, as well.

Brion definitely favored his mother, Endir, both in build and in looks. In fact, from the manner in which the two greeted one another, the hunter had been stamped with her effusive personality as well. The old woman’s plump face, already flushed from the exertion of her walk home, positively beamed with pleasure as she wrapped her arms around her son’s neck.

Brion’s father, Bann, on the other hand, reacted to his return in a much

more subdued fashion. The quiet pride that glowed from his features made it apparent that he felt as much joy as his wife, but he stood off to one side while the others celebrated.

Using the wisdom that is granted to children, Dael paid little heed to the things that would have drawn the eye of an older observer - age, looks, clothing; those things meant nothing to him. Instead he focused his attention on the deep creases lining the cheeks of the elderly couple and on the network of lines that surrounded each eye. Together with the greeting they had given their son, those wrinkles spoke of a house filled with love and laughter.

“What is this?” Endir asked, catching sight of the boy at Brion’s heels. She rounded on her son with a teasing smile. “Is there a young lady that you’ve forgotten to mention to us, Brion?”

A hint of red crept into his cheeks. “No, Ma,” he said quickly. Then his expression grew serious again. “I happened across this young lad’s village on my way home. Dael here has been orphaned by goblins.”

The smile fled from Endir’s face, too. “Oh, you poor dear,” she said gently. Then, with surprising strength and agility, she caught hold of the boy and raised him to her hip. Dael would not ordinarily have submitted to this sort of indignity, but Endir had caught him by surprise, and now he was afraid that he would offend her if he pulled away. Instead he sat calmly and allowed himself to be coddled.

“Well, you’ll just have to stay with us, then, won’t you.” Endir’s voice carried no trace of question. “Brion won’t mind giving up his bed until we can find a more permanent arrangement. Oh, it will be such a joy to have a young person around the house again.” Endir’s face assumed a wistful expression as she spoke. “Brion and Durgan were such terrors at your age.”

Dael was not really listening to the words, so he did not notice the incongruity between what she said and the longing in her voice. His instincts were enough to let him know that it would take more than a pair of unruly children to ruffle this woman.

“Bann, dear, you’ll have to go to the smokehouse for a ham. A large one, I should think. I’ll see to the vegetables myself, and I’m sure Brion won’t mind setting the table. Six places, dear.”

“Six?” Brion asked.

“Nestor helped us with Ivy today, and we asked him to supper. He’ll be here some time before sundown.”

Both Bann and Brion leapt to obey, and they continued to respond to her gentlest suggestions as though their lives were at stake. Where an adult

might have found that odd, Dael found himself reassured. Devotion like that could not be won through by force of will. Only true, unquestioning love - coming from both sides - could build that sort of bond. Without ever having to give the matter a conscious thought, Dael reached the conclusion that he would be safe here.

Endir maintained a steady stream of chatter as she busied herself with dinner, mesmerizing the young newcomer with the sound of her voice. Eventually Bann and Brion came to his rescue, catching hold of his arms and sneaking him out of the kitchen. The twinkle in their eyes said that they had done this many times before and that Endir always pretended not to notice them leaving. Taking Dael around to the side of the cottage, the two men sank to the ground with their backs to the woodpile. Before long Durgan appeared on the path that led to the village and joined them there. Dael listened to their talk for as long as he could, but the warmth of the setting sun soon forced his eyelids closed, and he drifted off to sleep.

Although he would not appreciate the fact for many years, Dael's arrival here, after the shattering of his world, was nothing short of miraculous.

Eustace spilled another armload of books onto a table quite unlike the study desks to which he was accustomed. This table was made of stone - a cold stone table, in a cold stone vault, surrounded by cold stone shelves, filled with books which were even colder. He grabbed one of his finds before it had tumbled to a halt, scanning its pages frantically. He dropped that one almost immediately and snatched at another. Again he flipped through the pages too quickly for true comprehension. He had to move quickly, because The Master might summon him again at any moment. When that happened, Eustace was certain his secret thoughts would be discovered.

I wish my armor brought to me. With it I wish a large diamond of good quality, two rubies, a human prisoner and a troll. Go.

Eustace shuddered and closed his eyes against the memory that sprang unbidden into his mind. The Master's commands could not be disobeyed - or even ignored. They overwhelmed his will as though his thoughts and feelings were of no consequence, reducing him to little more than hands and feet waiting to perform The Master's bidding.

That particular memory was especially horrifying, however, because he could not possibly have known where to find The Master's armor. The

passages in this labyrinth had not been walked in hundreds of years, certainly never by him. Yet somehow, when the command had come, Eustace had known where to go. Not only had The Master stolen his will, but It seemed to have taken command of his memory as well.

And It was not gentle when It invaded his mind.

To Eustace's knowledge The Master had never actually spoken - in the conventional sense, at least. He was not even certain that It had a physical form - though he was not prepared to think about what the alternative implied. Still, The Master had no trouble communicating Its desires, and whenever he recalled one of their conversations he heard a cold, distant voice echoing from the depths of his memory. The sound was deep and alien, primal, as though it rose from the very bowels of the earth. It resonated through his mind, awakening echoes in every corner, carrying no trace of human compassion, or of any feeling at all.

Most dreadful were the demands for living creatures. Eustace did not know what use The Master made of them - and did not want to know - but he had never seen any of the creatures he brought leave the Chamber of The Master. At least, none that he recognized. Things left the Chamber, of course, but Eustace rarely knew what they were.

Eustace was fairly certain that many of the creatures he brought were used for food. Even worse, he suspected those were the lucky ones.

His gorge rising, Eustace wrenched his attention back to the books on the table. He could not afford to be distracted from his search. The key to controlling The Master must lie in this library. Eustace was neither noble nor selfless, but he knew that he was responsible for having unleashed The Master, and he was desperate to find a way to undo that act.

Gasping and choking on dust from the plateau he had traversed, he collapsed just inside a large gateway. For a long time he lay without moving, until even the most cautious of the mountain's scavengers began to develop an interest. Eventually, however, his exhaustion faded to an urgency less than that of his thirst, and the little man began to stir.

With agonizing slowness he pushed himself to his knees, twisting his neck so that he could look through the opening behind him. A small pool of water had collected in a hollow there, reflecting the silvery moon. He climbed to his feet and tottered unsteadily toward it. Kneeling at the edge, he plunged his face into the water and drank greedily. It was stale and gritty, but it was all he had had in several days.

Finally he sank back on his haunches, wrinkling his forehead at the effort it took to think clearly. "Gateway . . . mountainside . . ." he whispered to himself, trying to remember why those two objects should

be associated with each other in his mind. Slowly his eyes wandered up the side of the mountain to the sky. Stars winked down at him, filling the blackness above - except for one small patch over the mountain itself, where a great hand seemed to have blotted them out.

Suddenly his confusion receded. That hand had summoned him, and now he stood beneath it, on the verge of answering it. He wavered in front of the cave mouth for a moment, shaking his head in one last effort to regain control of his thoughts, then stepped between the door posts.

His forehead wrinkled again as darkness slid over him. Some runes had been inscribed on the lintel-piece, and others on the posts to either side. He was certain that he could puzzle out their meanings with enough time. His steps did not slow, however; he had a task to complete and no time to wait for the wool to leave his thoughts.

Without sparing a glance for the narrow passages sloping upward on either side, he made his way to the stone staircase in front of him. The steps twisted and turned as they descended into the mountain, plunging him into a blackness deeper than any he had ever known. Still, without light or guide, without even so much as a hand touching the wall, he hurried downward.

After a while stairs ceased to appear beneath his feet, and he found himself walking through a roughly cut passage. It twisted and turned, rose and fell, until he lost all sense of the direction in which he was traveling. The only thing he knew for certain was that he was moving deeper into the mountain, deeper into the darkness. Side passages appeared frequently; sometimes he walked past them, sometimes he turned down them, until a tiny portion of his mind began to wonder how he would ever find his way back out of this maze. That part quailed at the thought of wandering through the blackness forever, but it no longer held any influence over the movements of his body.

After walking in blackness for an age, he reached his destination. He knew that because his feet stopped moving. Spreading out around him was a large, circular space carved entirely out of black obsidian. Thick pillars surrounded the central portion of the room, isolating it from the even deeper shadows around its edge. Openings - the mouths of more passages - appeared at irregular intervals around that outer wall. Black as the room was, those openings were even blacker, as though they were creating the darkness that oozed through the room and out into the tunnels he had walked.

What would have surprised him, if his mind had been awake, was that he could distinguish between the levels of blackness. At the center of the room was an enormous diamond, nearly the size of his own head, which

was glowing with an eerie light that did more to enhance the shadows than it did to provide true illumination.

He could not see much detail from where he stood, but the stone appeared to be flawlessly clear and beautifully cut. It was resting on the seat of a large throne which had been carved whole from the living rock. The scene inspired an awe that was enough to penetrate even the fog surrounding his mind, and he took an involuntary step forward.

That first step led to another, then another, drawn by the siren call of that glowing diamond. His hands moved, obeying the commands of an invisible puppeteer, tracing strange sigils in the air. He watched with dismay from the back of his mind; he had once been rejected by the Ravensrill for having only the weakest of magical talents. His voice began to chant an incantation in a language he did not know.

The diamond shattered in a blinding flash of light.

Eustace froze, his thoughts returning to the present. He caught at the page, turning back to the one that had just flashed past. He forced himself to focus on the words, carefully reading the page in its entirety. With a shout he dropped the book and raced toward the racks of scrolls at the back of the library. He was close now; the scroll referenced in that book had to contain the information he needed, the secret that would give him a hold on The Master.

His heart threatened to burst from his chest as he raced through the library. Getting close would not matter if The Master summoned him now.

Eustace had needed hundreds of hours here to gain even a rudimentary understanding for how the information was organized, but the time seemed well-spent now. He did not even glance at the shelves of ancient books passing on either side, not slowing until the books gave way to racks of scrolls. He searched for points of reference, then turned down the aisle he wanted, eyes scanning the runes cut into the wooden knobs. Suddenly his blood froze.

A gap stood in the place the scroll should have occupied.

Mocking laughter rose around him, echoing from the depths of the mountain and directly into his mind. The Master had known what he was about from the beginning.

Nestor stood at the door of his cottage and looked out at the young boy who served as his apprentice. A smile creased his face as he saw what the ten-year-old was about. Dael usually managed to complete whatever

task he was assigned, but not always in a timely fashion. At the moment he was chasing a sparrow from tree to tree. The bird could have flown to a safe distance at any time, but for reasons understood only by bird-kind and young boys, it chose to remain just out of reach. Naturally that left Dael with no choice but to continue his pursuit. Nestor had long suspected that the creatures of the forest were conspiring with the boy to drive him mad, and considered this yet one more piece of evidence to that effect. He sighed with resignation and turned to remove the pot of stew from the fire. Dinner would have to wait until the boy had finished playing long enough to collect the tubers he had been sent to gather.

The moment he turned, however, Nestor heard a shout from the yard. "Master! Someone's coming!"

Dael was bounding across the open space between the cottage and the wood, the sparrow completely forgotten. Eyes wide with excitement, he skidded to a halt at the doorstep, then turned to point over his shoulder toward the figure approaching the front of the cottage. Nestor said nothing.

The boy looked at his hands, then cautiously up at his master, then back down at his hands. "I'll go collect some tubers for the stew, Master," he said in subdued tones.

"Indeed," Nestor answered gravely, somehow managing to suppress the smile that threatened to steal whatever shred of authority he still held. He could not bring himself to scold his apprentice, since he understood that young boys could not deny their natures. Still, he could not afford to let Dael think he approved of his irresponsibility or there would be no hope whatsoever of teaching him discipline.

Once Dael turned to bound off toward the woods again, however, he let his smile break loose. *Such a long time it took before he found that bounce again, he thought. The wounds were deep. He needs more time to frolic in the sunshine.* The world was not likely to grant his wishes, unfortunately. Nestor's smile disappeared as he turned to study the approaching visitor, whom he had been expecting for some time.

"This is my son," a man said proudly. "What is his Reading?"

"Through him may come a great Light into the world," came the answer, "but first he must leave himself behind. One will come to him for shelter, which he must not refuse. This will signify the Awakening of the Shadow which only the Light may dispel. He must nurture this One, who will carry a great Fire within. Before he is ready, though, he must cast that One to the Four Winds, where the One will gain in strength for the Time of Darkness."

With a shake of his head Nestor returned to the present. That Reading

had been given a lifetime ago, to a babe who had long since left this world. Still, the memory was so clear that sometimes he wondered if it was etched upon his soul. Surely that was impossible. Surely he was simply re-creating the scene from the many stories his parents had told. They had told the story often, since the Reading had caused quite a stir in Glen Emmor. Where most Readings were simple and direct - bland, even - that one had carried enough power and mystery to unsettle even the most skeptical of villagers.

The Reading had proven remarkably effective in isolating him from his peers, and children can be unspeakably cruel to someone who is set apart. His childhood had been difficult.

Making matters worse, he had also been singled out by the adults of the village. The power of that Reading had convinced them of his uniqueness, and when miracles failed to materialize they were quick to lay blame on his shoulders. Adults can be cruel in their own way, too - all the more so when they are made to feel childish.

Youth does not last forever, however, and as he had grown into young adulthood he had found ways to take advantage of his Reading. Though all but the most spiritually-minded of the villagers had soon come to doubt that it would be fulfilled, tradition compelled them to respect the Reading, just as they respected the druid who had delivered it. As a result the young man found that he could exempt himself from learning a trade or working the fields. Instead he devoted his time to the study of the druidic arts, claiming that would better prepare him for his destiny.

Of course his arrogance had alienated the villagers even further, so that by the time he reached the age of nineteen the rift between him and the rest of the village was beyond mending. That had not bothered him, though. The first line of his Reading stated that he was to leave himself behind, and his interpretation of the phrase was that it meant he should leave the village. The small forest settlement bore little to recommend it as a site of momentous events, after all.

Impatient to claim his rightful place in the cosmos, that young man had filled a pack with his few belongings and turned his back on Glen Emmor, eager never to see it again.

The world had proven to be a more dangerous place than he expected, and within a few days he was lost in the ruthless struggle between hunter and hunted. Though most Tuath framed their lives in terms of that conflict - referring to it as 'the Game' - he had not been prepared for it. He had never bothered to learn the rules of the Game, considering himself to be above such mundane concerns.

Consumed with his struggle for survival, the young man had little time to spare for thoughts of his former home. He was clever and powerful enough to escape each predicament that found him, but not wise enough to avoid the next. The ways of power had come to him swiftly, but humility was a much longer and more painful lesson. More than twenty years passed before it occurred to him that he could return to the village, and to safety, whenever he wished.

Reflecting on it now, Nestor considered the mere fact of his survival to be a minor miracle.

Having finally learned the most important lesson of all, the young man had turned his steps homeward. Afraid that danger might follow him, he had chosen to return quietly; he did not want the peaceful village to come to the notice of the enemies he had won. Even more importantly, he wanted the villagers to consider him a stranger. If his luck truly had turned, perhaps he would be allowed to remain the person he had become, rather than being forced to revert to the person he had been - to the life that had been devoured by that disastrous Reading.

Nestor was the name he had given to the soft-spoken self journeying back to Glen Emmor. Nestor, he had decided, was a gentle man with a knack for handling animals, a knowledge of herbs, and the ability, perhaps, to work a little minor magic. More than anything else, though, Nestor had nothing in common with the rash, arrogant young man who had turned his back on the village two decades before.

When Dael arrived at Glen Emmor, another ten years after Nestor's return, the two had become instant friends. Their ages might be different but they were not - not in interests and not in spirit. Before long Dael had begun to accompany Nestor whenever he called upon villagers in need.

Their friendship had formed so quickly that Nestor found himself unprepared by the emergency that arose less than a year after the boy's arrival in the village. Upon reaching their seventh summer, Tuathi children were expected to stand for the Choosing ceremony, so that the village craftsmen could select their apprentices. The boys who were not selected, by far the majority, would take their places in the fields to prepare for lives devoted to farm work. Dael was so bright and quick that Nestor could not believe he belonged in the fields, but there was little chance that any of the craftsmen would choose someone who was almost a stranger.

Nestor wrestled with the problem for several days before a solution finally dawned upon him; he would Choose the boy himself. After all, Dael already performed the sort of work that he would have expected of an apprentice, for no other reason than that he enjoyed it. Nestor was a

little worried that he had no proper trade to offer the boy, but he quickly dismissed the thought from his mind. His travels had taught him to trust his instincts, and having Dael with him simply felt right.

As Nestor had expected, Dael continued to be a quick and eager student after their relationship was formalized. Before long, the boy knew the common plants and animals of the forest as well as his master, and was nearly as adept at tending minor sicknesses. Nestor had not seen such aptitude for the work in many years - not since his own youth, in fact. He naturally avoided mentioning anything about that around Dael, for young boys have notoriously loose tongues, but when he had felt the time was right Nestor carefully introduced his apprentice to the secrets of druidic magic.

While he was enormously pleased with his new apprentice - and Dael seemed enormously pleased with his master - the years brought a feeling of disquiet to Nestor's mind. Something long buried was struggling to be remembered. Despite lengthy deliberations on the subject, however, he could not identify the source of his worries.

On a summer afternoon, less than a year after Dael's Choosing, Nestor had found himself gazing into a small, clear pool of water behind his small cottage. Suddenly, impulsively, he had begun an incantation. The spell was a simple one, and Nestor could remember wondering why he had not used it before. After carefully tracing glyphs above the water, he had gazed into the glowing traces they left behind. Before long they had begun to swirl, as though caught in a whirlpool, and an image had taken shape in the glow.

He felt himself rising into the air; glancing downward he saw his cottage falling away. Then he moved above the treetops, so that the grassy clearing was lost behind the green of the forest's canopy. To the north he could see the towering peaks that were the Dragonbones. Still he continued to rise, but now he felt a sense of motion, as though he were moving, ever so slowly, to the north and east, toward those looming mountains. He passed over a lighter section of forest, where the Duchy of Kildare was located, then the Barrow Plain where the Battle of Westgate had been fought an Age ago. As he crossed the plain, his path turned slightly, so that the spur known as the Mountains of Shadow stood before him. He had crossed those in his youth, his curiosity strong enough to drive him into risking encounters with worse than goblins in order to lay eyes on the Dark Land of Tuathi legend.

As the mountains approached he swooped upward, as though borne on the back of a long-dead roc. At that height, he should have been able to see

clearly into the plateau beyond, but what confronted him now was an inky blackness lapping at the range's peaks. The sea of darkness roiled uneasily, as though agitated by something at its center. Waves rolled towards him, thankfully shattering against the encircling mountains. With every surge, however, a few tiny dribblets leaked through the spiky fence.

Upon that terrifying backdrop another scene had been superimposed.

. . . will signify the Awakening of the Shadow . . .

Nestor shook himself back to the present just as the stranger reached the foot of the steps. His vision had ended there, but the meaning had been all too clear.

His Reading had not deserted him at all. It had chosen its own time and circumstance, but the task that had called him at the moment of his birth was calling again, demanding the life that he had thought already given.

Even before he looked he knew that the stranger wore a brooch inscribed with the symbol of the bards, the Four Winds.

PART I

Lightning Crashes

The storm swept over Craggin Heath with destruction on its mind. Telwyn watched it come, wondering whether Kerrakain was out for revenge or just seeking to assert his lordship. The chief could not think of anything he had done - or had failed to do - that should have drawn the Storm-bringer's special attention. But here it was.

Silver bolts lanced out of the night, scoring the rock around Telwyn and blasting the birth-hut behind him. Deafened by the crash he rushed back to the door, which swung free, now. He staggered into the room's wreckage, searching through the confusion for what he already knew to be there. He fell against the side of her bed, sobbing uncontrollably, but the only sound was the roll of thunder on the heels of the wind.

Tearing his eyes away he saw that the midwife had also fallen, but that the storm had missed its real target. The cradle was intact, there in the corner . . .

- The Birth of the Twins, Tuathi Legend

Chapter 1

The brisk November air turned Aileen's nose red the moment she stepped out from the warmth of the inner keep. The sun had barely cleared the battlements behind her, but the princess considered this the best time of the day to go riding - or at least that was how she felt at this particular moment. Had the sun been reaching its zenith she might have suggested that midday was the best time of day to go riding.

A light snow had fallen two nights earlier, the first snowfall of the year, and remnants of soft powder still littered the corners of the dirt courtyard Aileen was crossing. The wind was very still, and she filled her lungs with fresh air. Today would be a glorious day, and she could hardly keep from brimming over with excitement at being among the first to greet it.

"Mornin', Yer Highness!" called Brion as she approached the stables.

Aileen had long ago given up trying to discover when the man rose in the morning. On the first morning after his arrival at Caer Werrener, she had come down to saddle Snowfoot for their morning ride only to find him there before her. He had smiled at her look of surprise and told her that he liked the silence of the morning much better than the bustle of mid-day. She did not doubt the truth of that statement, all the more because the Tuathi huntmaster had to feel out of place here, in a castle full of Tundines. Of course, the man's race meant far less to Aileen than his love of horses, and they had quickly become fast friends.

Brion had needed only a few days to become familiar with her morning routine, and Snowfoot was waiting for her in the saddling area now. With a twinkle in his eye he handed her a brush.

"Ye've gone and done it now, Yer Highness. She's caught a whiff of that apple and she'll have to be havin' it."

Aileen chuckled. "Brion, you know fall is apple season. If I don't give her a few now they'll all go bad and she won't get any."

The man nodded sagely. "A tragedy indeed."

She laughed again, louder. Somehow Brion always knew when she had a treat for her favorite horse. Of course that was no great feat, since she *always* brought something for Snowfoot. The Huntmaster turned to retrieve her tack from the stable while Aileen ran the brush over the horse's

coat. She had to smother another giggle as she worked her way down the mare's side; Snowfoot's stomach *was* beginning to sag a little.

Aileen focused on the horse's back first, to make sure that there were no burrs under the saddle, then ran over the rest of Snowfoot's coat quickly. The mare would get a good rubdown after their ride, but for now it was enough just to warm her a little.

Ordinarily Brion turned to other tasks after fetching her saddle, but this time he quickly returned with another horse from the stable. The princess had never seen the dappled grey stallion before and guessed that this was one of the horses her father had purchased from the Duke of Northmoor in an effort to improve his breeding stock. Northmoor's horses were famous for their speed and power, and this one certainly seemed full of spirit. He was prancing about the saddling area so nervously that even Brion appeared to have his hands full.

"Are you going to ride with me this morning?" Aileen asked.

"If ye'd not be mindin' the intrusion, Yer Highness. I'd be wantin' a feel for this lot. Little doubt he'll be a handful," Brion gave her a wry look. "Why don't they breed horses fer brains?"

The horse had arrived the afternoon before, with another stallion, a pair of mares - and their previous owner. Since horse-trading hardly qualified as official business, they had all been surprised to discover that Hendrick Lokin, the duke himself, had traveled with the caravan. Nobles did not often leave their homes so close to Yule, particularly for a journey as long as the one from Castle Eisenrok to Caer Werrener. Lokin, furthermore, could hardly expect a warm reception in Desmond; he was her father's most vocal opponent in the Congress of Lords.

The fact that Northmoor was the oldest of the provinces of New Tundia lent an extra measure of influence to Lokin's voice. The tension had become so divisive in recent years that Aileen's father had even suggested that she marry the duke's son to ease it. As much as she wanted to help her father, though, Aileen could not bring herself to take that step. Along with its influence, Northmoor carried a reputation for being the bleakest of the noble sees. Aileen's first meeting with the duke had reinforced her feelings; Hendrick Lokin's demeanor had been as warm as sleet in February.

The princess shivered at the memory, reaching inside her coat to touch the gem hanging on her necklace. It had been a gift from her grandmother, and she found its touch soothing.

Brion and Aileen were about to ride through the castle's outer gate when the morning's stillness was rent by the blast of a horn. Both halted in surprise, turning back to face the inner keep, from whence the blast

had come. The courtyard fell silent as the echoes of the horn faded away, until the only sound was that of banners flapping in the wind - the griffon of New Tundia above her father's dragon on one staff, with Northmoor's colors beside them. Finally Brion dismounted, handed the reins of the grey to Aileen, and took a few purposeful steps in the direction of the inner gate. As he did, the sound of shouting began to grow out of the silence.

Brion had taken only a few steps when a young man wearing the king's livery burst from the castle gate. "Treachery! The king is betrayed! Fly!"

Two men wearing the colors of Northmoor's personal guard appeared on the battlements, and another followed the man out of the gate. Brion began to move forward to help, but the man waved him away.

"Save the princess! Fly!"

One of the men on the battlements loosed an arrow at the guardsman, missing narrowly. Unfortunately the shot startled him, and he lost his footing. The third of Northmoor's men was on him in an instant, forcing the guardsman to dodge sword strokes as he struggled to draw his weapon. Brion was not armed, but he could not bring himself to leave the young man. His feet shuffled forward.

"Go, you fool! I can't hold them for long!" the guardsman shouted. At that moment the archers caught sight of Brion and Aileen and raised their bows. That, along with the sight of more armed men approaching the inner gate, convinced Brion to follow the guardsman's advice. He threw himself into the grey's saddle, then smacked Snowfoot on the rump.

Hoping that the guardsman would be able to win free of his attacker, they turned to look back as soon as they were beyond the range of arrows. Suddenly the portcullis came crashing to the ground, sealing the outer gate, and they realized that escape had not been the man's purpose. Brion's face was grim as he turned his back on Castle Desmond and led Aileen toward the western forest.

Brion insisted that they take full advantage of whatever time the guardsman might have bought them. He drove the horses hard until the sun was nearly to the horizon. Even then he refused to let them stop, although he slowed their pace a little. They had come across a stream just as the last of the sun's rays were fading, and Brion led them through the middle of it for an hour before calling a halt for the night.

When he finally let her climb down from the saddle, Aileen was too tired to do anything other than flop on the ground beside the small fire

Brion was building. She had thought herself to be an experienced rider, but today's ordeal had left her wondering whether she would get into a saddle again. The only activity she had enough energy for was sleeping, and she was too sore for that. Brion conscientiously saw to the horses, removing their saddles and giving them long rubdowns. By the time he made it back to where Aileen lay, her pain had subsided to a dull ache that she could almost ignore. She could not stifle a cry when he took firm hold of her shoulders and began kneading the muscles in her back.

"I'm sorry, Yer Highness; I know I'm breakin' with custom - and me a Tuath! - but these need a-loosened or ye'll be stiff as a board tomorrow," he apologized. "I know it smarts, but ye'll thank me for it in the morn."

Aileen could not bring herself to believe him, but she said nothing as he finished with her shoulders and began to work his way down her back and legs.

She awoke with the smell of horse filling her nostrils and started to roll away in disgust - before her muscles turned to stone in protest. A soft chuckle answered the groan that was torn from her lips, and she opened her eyes to see Brion smiling in her direction.

"Come now, I thought ye fancied a good ride in the mornin'," he said. "Are ye tellin' me ye're not lookin' forward to another day in the saddle?"

Her look could have dropped an ox. She was tired and sore and hungry and smelled of the horse blanket she had slept under. It was not right that he should look refreshed and ready to go. Brion smoothed the blanket and lay a small pile of berries and some wild roots on it.

"Ye'll do best ta move around a bit and loosen up yer muscles. Then eat some o' this. 'Tisn't much, but it'll keep the life in ye."

Knowing that sleep would not return now, and resenting Brion for that as much as his cheerful demeanor, Aileen slowly dragged herself to her feet. Then the reasons for yesterday's flight came flooding back and she nearly sank back down to her knees.

"What are we to do?" she asked, trying to control the quavering in her voice. Brion stopped what he was doing and looked at her carefully.

"Well, I don't rightly know what ye mean," he answered. "I'll not be pretendin' to understand yer Tundine ways, so I don't know what *can* be done. First things first, though. I'm gettin' ye somewhere safe."

An ache swelled in her throat. She could see that he was trying to be confident and reassuring for her sake, and that touched her. But he could not undo what had been done. She forced a few more bites past the lump, then moved over to join him in working on the horses. All she could think to do was keep as busy as possible. Brion rested a hand on her shoulder

for a moment, then it was time to ride again.

They began their second day of riding at a much slower pace than they had their first. Yesterday Brion had wished to gain as much ground as possible, but now he considered it more important to pace the horses and hide their trail. They continued to splash through the stream for several more miles, then Brion dismounted and handed the reins of the grey over to Aileen.

"I'll need t'be walkin' if I'm t'cover our tracks," he explained.

For more than an hour he walked along behind the horses, brushing away the hoof marks with a leafy branch. As the sun was reaching the midway point of its climb, however, he tossed the branch aside and leapt back into the saddle. For the rest of the morning they traveled at a much brisker pace.

A quick stop to nibble at a meager collection of greens, foraged from the side of their path, was what passed for their noon meal, then the two riders resumed their flight. As the afternoon progressed Brion gradually turned them from a southwesterly direction to one that was nearly due west, aiming for the broad expanse of forest known to the Tuathi as the Tyrmagan. His home lay in the depths of that forest, and he was confident that he could lose their pursuit there.

As afternoon wore on into evening, however, Aileen noticed that the wrinkles lacing his forehead were growing deeper. She watched the Huntsmaster for a while, then realized that he was casting glances over his shoulder more and more often, and that he cursed his failing eyes each time he did.

"Brion, what is bothering you?" she finally asked. "I don't see anyone back there."

"As ye say, Highness, but back there they are. I'd'a thought our stroll down the stream might have slowed them a wee bit, but it seems 'tisn't so. Gaining they are, and faster than I like. 'Tis sure the grandfather of all bloodhounds is ridin' with them."

No matter how hard she looked, Aileen could see nothing behind them, but Brion's level of tension continued to rise as the sun sank toward the horizon. Desperately he cast about for other tricks he might use to shake their pursuers, while at the same time pushing the princess to a faster pace than they had used all day.

After a while Aileen began to believe that she, too, could see a dark speck in the distance. Until then she had tried to convince herself that Brion was being overcautious, but now her own stomach clenched with the fear - the certainty - that Northmoor's minions were behind them. Her

mouth went dry, and she felt a cold trickle of sweat run down her spine.

“We’ll be needin’ t’split up,” Brion said, as even the twilight began to fade. He reined in and handed a dagger to the princess. “Keep yer head in this direction until ye’re standin’ under the trees, then keep on fer at least an hour more before ye stop fer the night. I hope t’be catchin’ ye there. If’n I don’t, why then ye just keep on that same line and soon ye’ll chance upon the village o’Glen Emmor, where I was born. If ye should happen t’meet anyone, just say my name, Brion ap Bann, and show the mark on that hilt. They know me in these parts’n they’ll do right by ye. Have ye got all that?”

Aileen nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She had never ridden into the forest alone, and the thought of entering at night was terrifying. Thoughts of the man who had set the pursuit on her were worse, though, and she did her best to echo Brion’s brief smile of encouragement. Then he was gone, veering away to the north, and Aileen was turning Snowfoot’s head in the other direction, urging the mare forward with her heels.

From her point of view, the forest arrived at exactly the wrong time; the sun’s last sliver had just disappeared behind the horizon. Brion might think nothing of walking amongst those looming trees, but he was a Tuath and used to the forest. Tundines lived in more cultivated lands, where the forests were not so wild and unfriendly. The men and women of the village around Caer Werrener held that the forest was an evil place, filled with ghosts and bandits - and worse.

Aileen knew that their stories were groundless; Brion came from the forest, and he was neither haunt nor bandit. It was hard to remember that with the trees leaning over to menace her, though.

There was nothing to do but go on, however. Brion’s instructions had been very specific, and she would have been ashamed to have him know how frightened she was. It took her a minute’s worth of staring into the darkness, but finally she forced herself to plunge into the dense screen of brush before her.

The trees were closely spaced, and Aileen was obliged to wend back and forth to get around them. She was so intent on keeping Snowfoot moving forward that she paid no heed to the twisting and turning until she was several minutes into the forest. Suddenly she glanced up, realizing that she no longer knew which direction was which. She was not much good at navigating under the best of circumstances, let alone with the moon and stars hidden by the branches overhead.

Knowing that she was lost made the darkness even more ominous. The trees pressed in, branches reaching out to clutch at her robes. She flailed at

them in passing, trying to keep their sharp fingers from her face. Leaves flapped in her face, obscuring her vision. Every sound echoed from the trees, making it impossible for her to tell how loud it was, how far away it had been made.

There was something waiting for her here, hidden just behind the shadows.

After fighting through the brush for what seemed like an eternity, she caught sight of a faint glow coming through the trees to her right. She froze, suddenly unable to breathe. Whatever it was, it had found her.

The moments passed, and no disaster came. Gradually her thoughts began to flow again, and Aileen remembered that Brion had told her to seek help from anyone she encountered. Now that she was faced with the prospect of actually meeting someone, though, she could not believe he had meant that. How could Brion have known whether the person she met would be worthy of trust. She did not see any reason for an honest citizen to be sleeping here, in the middle of an open, dark, unfriendly forest.

She was about to turn away from the glow when she realized that she was about to do exactly that. The prospect of spending the night alone was enough to make up her mind.

Drawing closer confirmed that the light was coming from a bright, cheery campfire. A single figure was seated beside it - a man, with his back turned toward her. Now that she was here, however, all of her misgivings came flooding back. It was well enough for Brion to talk about asking for help from a stranger, but she was not a skilled hunter, bristling with weapons she knew how to use. She squeezed her grandmother's necklace until the stone began to dig into the palm of her hand.

"You can tether your mare next to the gelding, miss." Aileen jumped at the sudden sound of a young man's voice. "Make sure to loosen her girth and remove her bit so that she can rest comfortably."

Aileen didn't move, at a loss for a good response to that greeting. It was almost as if this man had been *expecting* her. She spent a long moment staring at the back of his head, since he still had not turned around, but she found no great flash of insight. Finally she did as he suggested, tethering Snowfoot and coming back to the fire.

"Have a seat," said her host, waving toward a fallen tree. She sat down warily, studying him as carefully as she could without being rude. His age looked to be about the same as Aileen's, but there was a seriousness about his expression that made him seem older. His clothes were simple, but they were clean and well-made. In fact, she felt a little envious of them, since

the thick wool was better suited to the season than her own silk dress. His tunic was the deep blue of a summer sky and his mantle the dark grey of a winter storm, and when he smiled at her she saw that both colors matched his eyes. Beside him rested a battered harp case and a pair of large saddle bags, from which he took a potato that quickly vanished into the pot of vegetables that was boiling over the fire.

The young man was obviously Tuath, though Aileen could not have said what made her so certain. She had known only one other Tuath, and he looked nothing at all like Brion. As she studied him, in fact, Aileen decided that there was something odd about the cast of his features. He was handsome enough, she supposed, but there was something unusual about him.

“You look pretty hungry,” he said with a smile, breaking the silence that had descended over their little camp. Evidently he thought that she was wondering about the potato that he had thrown into the pot.

She smiled uncertainly in response, too nervous to make conversation; she had no idea what to expect from this Tuath, after all. Brion had always been friendly and open, but she could hardly expect the Royal Huntmaster to be representative of his race. In fact, given the poor history of relations between their two peoples she suspected that most Tuath would have preferred to kill her on sight.

Oddly enough, the young man did not seem to notice Aileen’s discomfort. He settled down to his meal as though he was perfectly comfortable with silence, making no effort to engage her in conversation. She was caught by surprise, then, when she realized that her anxiety was gradually fading away. Somehow he managed to communicate a great deal without words, using only his friendly manner and easy smile. He even managed to provoke a laugh by arching his eyebrow when she reached for her third helping of stew.

“You were right, I am very hungry,” she said. “But how could you have known to make so much?”

“I always make enough for visitors,” he said with a wry smile.

“Do you get a lot of them?” she challenged.

“Well, no, not really,” he frowned in mock consternation. Then his face brightened. “Still, it came in handy tonight, now, didn’t it?”

Once again Aileen could not resist smiling at the mischief reflected even more in his eyes than in his voice. They shifted shade and mood as quickly as the flames of the fire, captivating her with their dance. Finally she shook herself, concerned that frivolous thoughts like those would dull her wits.

“Excuse me for asking,” he said, clearing his throat, “but it’s not often that I find young ladies traveling the forest alone. Would you be willing to tell me what brings you here?”

The question gave Aileen a moment of panicked confusion. She had known the question would come, but she had not yet been able to formulate a good answer for it. The young man seemed friendly, but she still did not know how he might react if he learned that he was in the presence of a Tundine noble. Her hand fumbled at the hilt of Brion’s knife.

“My name is . . . Aileen. I was traveling with an escort, but we were set upon . . . by wolves . . . and became separated. My escort told me to use his name, Brion ap Bann, to get help from the forest people.”

Silently she berated herself for failing to create a more plausible story. She should have invented something that included a family that would come to rescue her, so that he would think twice about using her for his own ends. She also wondered about using Brion’s name; he had told her to ask for help, but if this young man knew him there was no telling what he might be able to glean from her story. Looking at him only confirmed her suspicions. He was sitting as though frozen in place, staring fixedly at the dagger.

“Come, now,” he said quietly. “No pack of wolves could have driven Brion ap Bann from your side.”

Aileen could feel herself wilting under those unwavering grey eyes. She had not planned for this, and now she could not think quickly enough to answer his challenge.

“If you’re a runaway I’ll have to return you,” he continued. “Else I might be hanged for kidnapping.”

“No!” Aileen shouted desperately, her blood turning to ice. “You can’t take me back!”

“Not just a runaway, then,” the young man mused, apparently convinced by the very real note of terror in her voice. “Well if I’m to help you in the name of Brion ap Bann I’ll need to know a little more about what you’re running away from. And don’t tell me that it’s wolves.”

His sudden change of direction caught Aileen by surprise. He obviously knew that she was not telling him everything, but he no longer seemed concerned with her identity. He had not even asked her how she came to be in Brion’s company. The question he had asked was dangerous enough, though; she obviously needed to give him as much of the truth as she could, but she still dared not reveal her true identity. Finally she decided to cast herself as a chambermaid from a small castle not far from *Caer Werrener*, saying that her lord had been attacked by blood enemies. She could not

imagine why they would pursue a servant like her, but Brion seemed to think they meant to kill everyone who had witnessed their treachery.

The young man nodded thoughtfully as she finished her story, giving no sign that he doubted any of it. “Well, then. We have our work cut out for us. Brion is a great player of the Game, so your pursuers must be very determined. You’d best get some sleep.”

Aileen nodded, relieved that he had not probed for any more details. Just as she was settling into the blanket that he offered, however, she realized that there was something she had forgotten.

“You haven’t told me your name,” she said, almost reproachfully.

He grunted and favored her with half a smile. “Dael is my name, but most of my friends call me Mouse.”

Chapter 2

When Aileen awakened, she found that her new companion had already been busy for some time. Both horses were loaded and saddled, and a steaming pot hung over a small fire.

“There’s hot cereal over there. Eat up; we’re almost ready to go.”

Aileen spooned a bowl of gruel for herself, not expecting much from the bland-looking paste. It tasted surprisingly good, however, and she said so.

“I found a bit of honeycomb the other day, and some berries from that bush over there mixed in nicely. Quite a coincidence.”

Aileen smiled, infected again by the dry sense of humor that seemed to characterize the Tuath. This young man - Mouse - lacked Brion’s thick accent, but she could hear the older man saying those same words.

Mouse gave the dishes a quick dunking in the stream that flowed beside the camp, then slipped them into his saddlebags. He swung quickly into the saddle, making no attempt to disguise the remains of the camp.

“Aren’t you going to hide our fire?” she asked, hesitating as he rode off into the wood.

“It’s very hard to conceal a dead campfire, so I thought we wouldn’t try,” he answered. “Perhaps if we don’t act like we are trying to hide they’ll think we aren’t us. Or not you, anyway. They don’t know that we’ve come together, of course.”

“Of course,” Aileen echoed, faintly. She needed several more minutes to work out exactly what he had said.

The pair traveled through the woods for nearly an hour before arriving at another small stream, which Mouse identified as the same one that they had camped beside. Aileen asked why they hadn’t simply followed it, and Mouse explained that doing that might have made their pursuers suspicious, since the banks were steep and rocky and unpleasant to travel - unless you wanted to hide tracks or scent. On the other hand, if their pursuers had stuck with their trail this far it was time to try something else. Aileen nodded and resolved not to ask any more questions, since the answers made her feel foolish.

After they had splashed down the middle of the stream for another hour or so, Mouse raised his hand for a halt. "Continue along the stream until I catch up."

Mouse turned aside and took his horse up a rocky bank, plunging into the underbrush as Aileen stared at his back. Apart from answering her questions, that single sentence was as much as he had said to her all day. Aileen wanted to ask him to explain where he was going, but since he had already vanished, she had no choice but to do as he had said. It was nearly four hours later, just as she was deciding to turn back and try to find him, that she heard splashing behind her.

"Good," he said, "let's turn off here."

Once again Aileen was left with a question dying on her lips. Mouse had already forged ahead, leading the way up the steepest, stoniest part of the stream bank. In moments they had plunged into the depths of the forest once again, leaving Aileen with only the clapping of hooves to distract her from her thoughts. She was beginning to develop a strong dislike for the sound of silence.

Just as she was getting ready to vent her frustration, however, Mouse suggested that they stop for lunch. Aileen agreed readily, her stomach rumbling a reply of its own.

"Don't let your horse eat any grass or leaves," he said. "Feed her from this." He held out a small feedbag filled with oats. "And save all of your food scraps. We'll put them in another bag."

Aileen did as she was told, hoping that Mouse would be a little more sociable over lunch. Unfortunately the meal did not last very long. She had barely enough time to choke down a few bites before Mouse announced that it was time for her to return to her saddle.

"I'm going to cover our tracks for a while," Mouse said. "Take my horse with you and continue to head west. In about an hour you'll come across a trail that runs north and south. Follow it southward and keep going until dusk. When you stop for the night, feed the horses the same way we just did, and eat some dried fruit from my saddlebags. Don't build a fire. Oh, and make camp a good distance from the trail - thirty or forty paces, at least."

Aileen took the reins of Mouse's horse, suddenly reminded that Brion had said much the same thing when they parted. There was no way the huntmaster would be able to find her now. With a shake she looked up, only to find that Mouse had already disappeared into the underbrush. There was nothing for her to do but continue on. She was grateful that his instructions had been relatively simple, at least.

By the time dusk fell she was nearly asleep in her saddle, but she still felt reluctant to stop. Her tired mind struggled to understand that for a while, but finally she realized that she was driven by the worry that Mouse would think her weak. She scolded herself for placing so much weight on the opinion of a man she had just met, but that did not keep her from pressing on for nearly an hour after the sun had set. When she did stop, she had only enough energy to see to the horses and dig a leathery apple from the saddlebags. She rubbed that on her sleeve, then sank to the ground in exhaustion.

She awoke to a hand on her shoulder and the sound of her name in her ear. She couldn't remember finishing the apple, but the core lay near her hand. Muddled by sleep, she stared up into a face that seemed vaguely familiar. It whispered her name again.

"Come on, we've got to move," the face said. She started to respond, but gentle fingers stopped her lips. "No time. I'll explain later. It's dangerous to ride in the dark, so just lead the horses. Take them that way."

Aileen took the ropes that were pressed into her hand and shambled off in the direction indicated by the face. Most of the forest was hidden by darkness, and what moonlight filtered through the canopy of branches did little to illuminate her surroundings. Instead the silvery light added a dreamlike quality to everything that she saw. The feeling seemed appropriate somehow; to her sleepy mind it seemed more likely that she should pass through the misty trees than around them.

Occasionally that possibly familiar face would materialize out of the darkness to correct her course, but it always vanished before she had a chance to identify it. Then, after she had been walking for either a few minutes or an eternity, the face stopped her and removed the lead ropes from her hands. Her mind too fogged to understand what was happening, she simply stood where she was until the face reappeared once again, bidding her to lie down and rest.

The crashing of horses through the underbrush brought her bolt upright. Frantically she cast about for an avenue of escape, then caught sight of Mouse leading their mounts into the clearing.

"Eat up," he said, pointing to a pile of nuts and dried fruit sitting next to her. "I want to make one more trail before we go."

Aileen began eating in silence as he left again, forging his way into the underbrush with the horses trailing after him. She was folding up the blankets when he returned, sweeping behind him with a leafy branch.

"Are you ready?" he asked. "You made good time yesterday. I was

surprised at how far you managed to get.”

Aileen blushed and thanked him, feeling inordinately proud of herself. She could not understand why she should react this way. She had been honored at dozens of balls, had been flattered by the highest-ranking nobles in New Tundia. It made no sense that a simple statement from this commoner - a Tuathi commoner, no less - should turn her head that way.

“You were making false trails?” she asked as she slid into the saddle, seizing the opportunity to get a question answered.

“Yes, your pursuers were persistent enough to stick with Brion all the way to the forest, so it is possible that they will eventually work through the stream ploy. By then, though, the false trails that I laid this morning will be cold and this one all but undetectable. We should be free of them now.”

Unfortunately that was the extent of the conversation, as Mouse threw himself into the saddle and pressed on ahead of her. Wishing that she could think of something else to ask, she climbed aboard Snowfoot and trailed along behind him. Nothing came to mind, however - at least, nothing that seemed important enough to warrant a call for attention.

They traveled that way for about an hour before Mouse raised a hand to stop them again. He dismounted and bent to tear some leaves from a bush, then brought them back and began to rub them on the hooves of their horses.

“What are you doing?” the princess asked.

“That bush is called *aeriela*. Bruising its leaves produces a scent that will cover the smell of the horses. Canines also find the fumes mildly intoxicating, which should help to confuse our pursuit even further.”

Mouse spent most of the morning trailing behind the horses, working to disguise the marks made by their hooves. Eventually, however, he seemed satisfied that they had done enough to lose their pursuit. After that the journey was much more pleasant, since he no longer felt the need to drive the princess at top speed.

The slower pace gave Aileen the chance to rediscover how much she enjoyed riding. She would have expected the long days and short nights to have left her too tired to enjoy her surroundings, but that was not the case. In some ways, in fact, her exhaustion helped her to relax, which actually made it easier to focus on the sights appearing around her. The textures of the tree trunks, the green of the leaves, the smells of the forest - she had never felt so deeply in touch with the world. Even the aches in her muscles felt right, as though her body knew it was being used for honest labor.

The feeling could not last forever, of course. As the day progressed her eyes began to sag, and she found herself starting to doze in the saddle. Unfortunately the sun still needed a few hours to reach the treetops even on this short autumn day, and Mouse undoubtedly meant to keep them moving until well past nightfall. Aileen sighed softly, thinking that she might like to ask him to stop early this time.

Suddenly the forest ended, revealing a broad clearing carpeted with grass that remained surprisingly green despite the lateness of the season. An enormous garden filled the more distant half of the open space, and Aileen was amazed to see that blooms still topped many of the stems. Something had kept October's frosts away from this place.

She could see no pattern to the garden; the owner did not seem to have made any plan before sowing the seeds. Fruits and vegetables mixed with flowers in combinations that no rational gardener would have considered. It was random, illogical - and beautiful.

In the midst of that wonderful chaos stood a small cottage. It had been built of wood, but the walls had been daubed with mud and painted a clean white that set off the lightly-stained wood trim visible around the edges. A red-brick chimney peeked out from the top of its thatched roof. Flagstones marked a winding path from the edge of the forest to the door of the cottage, though many of the stones were nearly hidden by the thick, green grass. Mouse walked his horse to the beginning of the path, then slid from its back and turned to help Aileen down.

"Welcome home," said an old man, pushing open the door to the cottage. He stood there on the front step, his broad smile adding some real emotion to his quiet greeting. "I see that you've brought us a visitor."

"Yes, Master," answered Mouse, returning the grin. "This is Aileen, a friend of Brion's. She is in some trouble, so I thought it best to bring her here."

"That is frightful news," the old man frowned. He raised his eyes to glance over their heads, as though expecting to see something in the trees. He stayed that way for a few moments before shaking himself and stepping down to greet her.

"Allow me to make you welcome here, Your Highness," he said, bowing to kiss the back of her hand. "My name is Nestor, and I hope that you won't be too badly discomforted by our rough fare."

Aileen felt her heart stop. It would not have surprised her to have Mouse see through her flimsy story, but he had not made any effort to do so - at least, none that she had seen. Even if he had learned her true identity, there had been no time for him to communicate that to

this person. Nevertheless, Nestor had greeted her with all the courtesy he might have shown during a visit to her father's court, as though there were nothing at all surprising about the presence of Tundine royalty at his cottage in the woods.

Fortunately for the princess, someone else chose that moment to burst through the door. He was easily the largest man Aileen had ever seen, standing well over two paces tall and with shoulders that were broad even for that towering height. He was handsome, too, with straight, black hair running down to his shoulders and framing bright, intelligent eyes. He was halfway down the stairs before she had quite registered his presence. He seized Mouse around the waist and spun him around, thumping the young man on the back enthusiastically all the while.

"When Durgan has finished breaking Dael's ribs I will introduce him to you," Nestor said conversationally. Aileen turned back to face the older man, still at a loss for words. His eyes twinkled as he watched the others, his expression something like that of a proud father.

Aileen tried to take advantage of the moment to gather her scattered thoughts, but for some reason odd details kept getting in the way. She noticed, for example, that Nestor's robe was of the same simple cut as Mouse's, but that the older man had left his undyed. His hair and beard were even whiter than the robe, but there was a spryness in his step that belied his apparent age.

The thumping slowly subsided, and Aileen turned to see the younger men facing her with silly grins pasted on their faces.

"Your Highness, allow me to present Durgan, the blacksmith of Glen Emmor," said Nestor, waving his long-handled spoon like a staff of office. Despite the cold, Durgan was wearing only a loose shirt cut from the same kind of cloth as Nestor's robe, with woolen breeches that had been dyed a light brown. His feet were bare. Aileen felt her blood rush as he took her hand and pressed a kiss onto her knuckles.

"He does not speak, but I am sure that you've already noticed how much better his manners are than Dael's."

Mouse answered his master's jibe with a grin, then took the reins of the horses and headed for a building that was mostly hidden by the trees.

"Durgan, I am sure that our guests are looking forward to a hot bath. If you will draw some water, we can set it to heat over the fire. In the meantime - " Nestor thrust his spoon into the air "To dinner!"

He turned to march into the cottage, pulling Aileen after him. Inside she was greeted with the smell of a thick stew bubbling over the fire. Nestor sat her down in one of the chairs around the table placed against the rear

wall of the room, then turned his attention to the contents of the large pot.

The kitchen was simple but comfortable, with a washbasin set against the wall between the table and the cooking hearth. Surrounding the room was a haphazard assortment of shelves and cupboards, filled to brimming with all manner of things, from pots and pans to foodstuffs to books and scrolls.

Aileen gazed around the room in amazement, struggling to take it all in. Nestor smiled as he watched her, and after giving the stew a good stirring he went over to one of the shelves and took down a basket of fruit. Setting that on the table, he turned back to the hearth and opened a small door near its base. Aileen had thought the stew smelled good, but the fresh bread that Nestor drew out of that door drew a long rumble from her middle. Nestor quirked an eyebrow, and with a wry smile cut the heel from the loaf. He took a small crock of butter from a cupboard, and set both in front of her.

“Go ahead and nibble,” he winked at Aileen.

As she was taking the lid from the crock, Durgan burst in with two large buckets of water. He carried them through the kitchen, into another room, then marched back out the front of the cottage again, snagging a huge, iron cauldron as he went. Nestor did not even look up from his dinner preparations, pulling jars of jam and honey from cupboards and setting them on the table beside wooden plates and spoons. When the table was set, he used a long knife to cut thick slices of bread from the loaf and set them on a board in the middle of the table.

Presently the two younger men reappeared at the door. Durgan set the huge cauldron, now full of water, over the fire to warm, then took a chair next to Mouse at the table. Then, for several moments at least, the kitchen was even quieter than it had been before they entered, with only the clatter of spoons to break the silence.

Finally, when they had all taken the edge from their hunger, Nestor cleared his throat.

“Well, Your Highness, forgive me if I am prying, but you must realize that royal visitors are rare here in the Tyrmagan. Would you mind if I asked what has brought you to us?”

“How do you know who I am?” she blurted, unable to think past that one question. Immediately she wished she had reacted in some other way, since her answer had confirmed her identity. Clamping her lips shut, she looked around at their faces.

“I am sorry. I thought you knew,” Nestor said, surprised. He shot a

hard look at Mouse.

"I merely followed her lead," the younger man said with a shrug. "That was the way she introduced herself to me."

"Your Highness, Brion is brother to these two," Nestor explained, after another moment of glaring at Mouse. "He has told us quite a bit about you."

Aileen stared at Nestor, the meaning of his words taking some time to sink in. Then she turned her gaze on the young man who had traveled with her for the last few days; no wonder he had made no effort to work through the inconsistencies in her story. She could feel the blood rushing to her cheeks, but could not decide whether she was more angry at Mouse for deceiving her or at herself for being unable to keep a secret.

Warring with the anger and embarrassment was a strong feeling of relief. Apparently she need not have worried about the reception she would receive from the Tuath. Now that the truth was out in the open there was no need for her to worry whether her story was convincing or not. Instead she was free to relate the real story, starting from the moment the Duke of Northmoor had been invited into the castle. Aileen began her story in a rush, afraid of the emotions it was going to raise, and she was almost surprised when it came to an end with relatively little turmoil. She supposed she was just too tired to feel much of anything.

"Durgan, would you fill the tub for Her Highness?" Nestor asked, when she had finished. He turned to Aileen. "I assume that's all right with you?"

Aileen nodded silently. None of the men had shown any reaction to her story, and she wondered what they were thinking, whether they believed her at all. She studied them all carefully, her confidence starting to ebb a little bit. The events sounded outrageous, she realized, but surely they realized that she was telling the truth.

Her eyes followed Durgan as he strode over to the fire and lifted the enormous cauldron from its hook. He grunted with the strain but had no trouble getting it to the back room. Even through her exhaustion Aileen felt her eyes move to the muscles of his back and arms, which stood out as he raised the heavy pot.

"That will be too hot for you, I'm sure," said Nestor, indicating that she should follow Durgan. "There are some buckets of cold water on the floor by the tub so that you may cool it. Here is a towel, and I will dig out some of Dael's old clothes. They will not be what you are used to, but perhaps they will serve well enough for now."

Some part of Aileen continued to struggle with the idea that none of

them had commented on her story, but being left alone with a tub full of hot water was enough to drive those concerns from her mind. She pulled off her dirty, smelly clothes, then added cold water from the buckets until the bath was just cool enough to bear. She stepped in gingerly, slowly sinking down until the water covered her shoulders. She spent a few minutes scrubbing at the grime that seemed to have worked its way into her pores, but all she really wanted to do was lean back and allow her eyes to close.

She had not intended to fall asleep, but the combination of hot food and hot water proved too much for her. She awoke to the sound of a gentle knock at the door.

“Your Highness? I have some clothes here for you.” The voice belonged to Nestor.

“Just a minute,” Aileen answered. The water had cooled so that the bath was no longer comfortable anyway, so Aileen decided to get out. She toweled herself dry, then poked her head out the door to see Nestor holding a shirt and breeches that resembled Durgan’s. The thick wool felt rough against her skin, which was used to finer material, but the clothing was loose and surprisingly comfortable. After pulling it on she gathered up the dress she had been wearing and carried it out to the kitchen.

Nestor took one look at the travel-stained rag and shook his head. “I don’t think we will be able to save the dress, Your Highness. I’m afraid you’ll have to be a Tuath for a while longer.”

Aileen smiled ruefully, then took the dress over to the fire and threw it in. Durgan was building a pile of rushes there, near the fire, and gestured to it after spreading a blanket over the top. Aileen smiled at him, feeling the blood begin to rush to her face again.

“That will be your bed,” Nestor interpreted. “Now, Dael, let’s have a song to cheer us after our guest’s tale of woe.”

Aileen noticed that Mouse’s hair was damp as he took his harp down from a peg near the doorway, and she realized that he must have bathed in cold water. For a moment she felt guilty for taking so long in the bath, but he gave her a smile and a wink, and she felt a little better.

Chapter 3

A strange noise gradually intruded into the warm comfort of the void - clicking, like the jaws of some giant grasshopper. With a sleepy yawn Aileen raised a hand to rub her face, then opened her eyes to have a look around. For a moment she panicked, not recognizing her surroundings, but then she remembered arriving at Nestor's cottage the evening before and relaxed. From where she sat on her pallet she could see an empty bowl sitting on the table, next to a jug of milk and a small pot of honey. A kettle was hanging over the fire's embers, no doubt containing porridge for her breakfast. Before she sat down to eat, though, the princess decided to find out why that grasshopper was so persistent.

Pushing open the cottage door revealed a golden morning, and for a moment she simply let the sun bathe her face. When she looked down she saw a branch in the path of flagstones that she had not seen the evening before. A smaller set of stones broke away to her right, leading around the cottage and into the garden. She stepped down onto that path and within a few steps bumped into Nestor, who was trimming shrubs.

"Good morning, Your Highness," he said cheerfully, setting aside his shears. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, indeed . . .," the princess started enthusiastically, but her answer stopped abruptly. "What am I to call you?"

"Well, I should think that Nestor would do nicely."

"But I don't feel right calling you that," she answered. "It feels disrespectful."

"Well, why don't you try it for now, then if the feeling gets to be too much we can think of something else. Did you have breakfast?"

Aileen shook her head, but before she could open her mouth to offer an explanation, the old man shooed her back toward the kitchen.

"Well get some, then. Come right on out when you finish; don't worry about the dishes. I have some things that I want to discuss with you before the boys come back."

When she returned to the garden after eating her fill of porridge, Nestor seemed to be doing much as he had been before. In fact, Aileen could not see that his trimming had made any impact on the greenery at all, though

she tactfully decided not to say so. Once again Nestor set his shears aside as soon as he caught sight of her, waving her over to a nearby bench.

“First let me say that you have all of our sympathy, Your Highness,” he said when they were settled. “I know there is very little we can do to redress the harm that has been done you, but if you think of something you have only to ask it.”

The chaos of the past few days had driven the pain of her loss to a distant corner of her mind, but now Nestor’s gentle eyes brought it all flooding back. The princess felt tears well up, forcing her to bite back her answer for fear that her voice would betray her.

“This may not provide much comfort, but your father was regarded with respect here in the Tyrmagan,” he continued. “We considered him to be a kind and just man. Your news is especially disturbing for that reason; Hendrick has never been a friend to the Tuath.”

Aileen grunted. The constriction in her throat made it impossible to speak normally, but she tried anyway. “The Lokins are friends to no one; they hate everything that they do not control. They certainly have hated my family for generations.”

“Yes, they do seem to hold a particular animosity toward the Werreners,” Nestor nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “I must confess, though, that I have never understood the reason.”

Aileen shook her head, swallowing past the lump in her throat. “The story is too long to tell . . .”

“Please, Your Highness,” interrupted Nestor. “If we are going to be of any help to you, we are going to need to understand these things. I don’t think that any story is too long at this point.”

“Well,” Aileen said reluctantly, “basically the reason is that the Lokins believe they are the rightful rulers of New Tundia. They feel they were cheated of their birthright several generations ago, and consider my family usurpers. As I said, they hate anything they do not control; they hate us all the more because they believe that we took something they should have controlled.”

Nestor said nothing, merely waiting expectantly for her to continue. With a sigh Aileen gathered her thoughts. She had been drilled in the history of the royal succession for years, but it still confused her. When she was ready she launched into the story of how her father had come to be king.

“The dispute began during the reign of King Arthur the Second, when the line of succession for the Duchy of Northmoor failed. Duke Laras was desperate for some means of preserving his heritage, but his only child was

a daughter, and Tundine succession customs reserve the title of duke for men who have inherited it through a line of direct descent from the son of a king. By custom, his daughter's husband stood to inherit Northmoor as an earl, rather than a duke, and Duke Laras could not bear to see his daughter lose her status.

"Of course there is little practical difference between the titles. The only real difference lies in the order of succession, and since Northmoor is quite far down the line of succession, that should not have been a concern. By all accounts, however, Laras was a vain and arrogant man, and he demanded that the Congress of Lords consider alternatives for his daughter. He proposed that his daughter marry the son of another duke, arguing that even if it were a younger son the combined nobility of that man and his daughter would be enough to warrant the title of duke.

"Needless to say the question was completely unprecedented; no one had ever conceived of such a thing as 'combined nobility'. Still, Duke Laras somehow managed to bring the matter before Congress, and since it seemed to be of so little consequence the lords actually decided to approve his plan. In order to justify the change, the Congress stipulated that the boy would effectively be adopted by Duke Laras, with the consequence that he would relinquish any claim to his former inheritance in favor of the Duchy of Northmoor.

"The most natural match for Hendra of Northmoor was the second son of the Duke of Desmond, who was my great-grandfather, Thomas. Since he was out of the direct line of succession, the marriage actually offered Thomas a significant rise in status. Without it, the best he could hope for was the title of earl, and his holding was likely to be quite small. As Duke of Northmoor, on the other hand, Thomas would hold one of the oldest and most prestigious titles in the kingdom - in many ways more prestigious than the title of Desmond, despite the fact that Desmond stood higher in the succession.

"That possibility outraged Harold, Thomas's older brother. He could not stomach the idea of Thomas holding a title with more prestige than his. At that point the succession must have seemed irrelevant, since Conneill stood before Desmond in the succession, and since Arthur's young wife was with child at the time."

Aileen paused, suddenly realizing that Nestor was shaking his head, his face a mask of wrinkles. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," he answered quickly. "It is just that your Tundine politics give me a headache. Go on, finish your story."

"Well, the child borne by King Arthur's wife was a daughter, Karen.

She was betrothed to my great-grandfather, Thomas, solidifying the ties between those families. No one could have suspected that Arthur would not produce any more children - but that was what happened, and Arthur died soon after the marriage between Thomas and Karen was consummated. Meanwhile, Arthur's uncle, the Duke of Conneill, had died without issue, unexpectedly leaving Desmond next in the line of succession. Harold, who had since become Duke of Northmoor, immediately traveled to Lauregal, obviously hoping to reclaim the right of his birth and assume the throne.

"To his dismay, the Congress of Lords interpreted the succession differently. They held firm on the point that Harold's adoption into the Northmoor line had been complete, that in taking that step he had abdicated any claim to the birthrights of the Desmonds. They declared Thomas to be the rightful heir to Desmond and placed him next in line for the throne of New Tundia. The result must have been particularly galling to Harold, because the lords cited his own case as precedent for elevating Thomas and Karen, declaring that the 'sum of their nobility' was enough to decide the matter in their favor.

"Of course the Congress is practical more than anything, so it is likely that what really decided the matter in favor of the Desmonds was that they had already produced a male heir. Recognizing the importance of stability, the Congress declared that the successor to Arthur would be his grandson Richard. Thomas and Karen were appointed to serve as Regents until the child reached majority.

"None of that placated Northmoor, who reportedly stormed out of the meeting in anger. Indeed, I would not be surprised if many of the Lords were influenced by that outrage, since it confirmed the naked ambition he had shown in making the decision to join the Northmoor line in the first place. Soon after that Harold took the surname Lokin, which means 'betrayed'."

Nestor sighed, once again shaking his head. Aileen smiled sympathetically.

"I spent years memorizing the history of the royal succession. For some reason my tutors seemed to think it very important that I learn every detail of the kingdom's bloodlines."

Nestor chuckled softly. "Your teachers would be proud, Your Highness. Please, finish the story."

"There is not much left to tell," she answered. "Northmoor threatened war, and in truth wars have been fought over weaker claims than his. However, the members of the Congress were - are - proud men, and even those that might have voted for Harold's succession did not like his

challenge to their authority. In the end, he was forced to accept the will of the Congress, but his descendants have never forgotten how close they came to sitting on the throne.”

“Well, I suppose that explains some things. Hendrick Lokin views your family as usurpers, so in his mind he is a patriot, rather than a traitor. Would he stand next in the line of succession now, then?”

“That is difficult to say,” Aileen answered hesitantly, twisting her grandmother’s necklace in her fingers. Her face wrinkled with concentration, helping her to avoid considering Nestor’s use of the term *regicide*. “If the Congress holds to its original ruling that Harold and his heirs should occupy Northmoor’s place in the line of succession, then no, the crown should pass to the Duke of Tenshire. This is bound to throw the Congress into turmoil, though. Anything might happen.”

Nestor was silent for a few moments, but then he spoke once again. “I will assume that you are not close enough to Northmoor to say whether his behavior has changed over the last few years.”

Aileen shook her head, and Nestor rose to pace along the path. After a few seconds he spoke up again. “Your news would be troubling enough on its own, but it has come at a particularly ominous time.

“A few years ago I had a vision of the north, in a region that was once known to the Tuath as the Dark Land. In my vision there was an inky blackness hovering over the Dark Land, devouring every ray of light that touched it. I fear that darkness has seeped into Northmoor - which is why I asked whether the duke’s behavior changed recently.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it without saying anything. Nestor actually seemed to believe what he was saying about visions and dark powers. Surely that was impossible, but she did not want to risk hurting his feelings.

Fortunately the old man was so lost in his thoughts that he did not seem to notice her expression. After a few more paces he spoke again, once again turning the conversation in a direction she did not expect.

“Would you mind helping me with an experiment?”

She had no idea what the old man had in mind, but Aileen was certain he meant no harm. She rose and followed him deeper into the garden, to a shallow pool surrounded by tall hedges. The water in the pool was incredibly clear, so that the white stones lining its bottom seemed to leap out at her. Nothing was growing in the water, and its surface was as smooth as glass, ignoring even the light breeze that blew about the rest of the garden.

“Kneel before the pool, but be careful not to touch it,” instructed

Nestor. Standing at her left side he began to chant in a soft voice, drawing a startled glance from the princess. Taking no notice, he extended his staff over the water and gently touched its tip to the surface. Aileen's eyes widened when no ripples appeared; instead the water held its shape as though it were soft clay. Gradually he traced a pattern on the surface, the staff leaving a soft, golden glow in its wake. The shapes looked very much like letters, but the princess did not recognize them.

"Don't touch the water." Aileen felt his hand on her shoulder, and realized that she had started to lean forward. "Study the pattern."

The lines drew her eyes, making it easy for her to do as he had said. After a moment they began to shimmer, then to move. Her head swam, and she felt as though she were falling. Her hand twitched, but she had not leaned forward again. Her vision turned grey around the edges, the golden tracework growing until it filled her eyes with its spinning and swirling. A wave of dizziness rushed over her, followed by another one of fear. Her body was drifting away from her; she could not feel the earth beneath her. Then she became numb even to that sensation, leaving only an aura of peace.

The golden lines slowly congealed into a pool of light that held her eyes in place. Gradually the pool began to stretch and shift, flowing into the shape of a sword. That, too, receded until she was able to see its surroundings. The weapon was held by a tall, slender man who seemed almost familiar, though the alien cast to his features made her certain that she had never seen him before. His face was set and determined, and as she continued to back away from him she saw why. The man was standing at the point position of a circle of armed men. Around the circle churned a horde of nightmarish creatures, while inside it a man struggled to climb onto the back of the largest bird she had ever imagined. Suddenly the bird sprang into the air, and the circle of warriors began to shrink. From the corner of her eye she saw they were disappearing into a small tower. The image began to blur and fade, but just as everything lost its shape she saw the man with the sword stumble and clutch at his chest . . .

The sword remained in focus while the rest of the world faded to black. Gradually new shapes began to appear in the darkness. As the sword's holder came into focus, she realized that she recognized him - it was Mouse, wearing a hunted look in his eyes. The sword lay loosely across his lap as he bent low over the neck of a horse. From behind him came the baying of a hunting pack. There was an unnatural ring to the sound - the barks were deeper, more sinister, than what she would have expected from wolves . . .

A curtain of darkness once again swept over everything but the sword.

When it lifted she saw that it was still Mouse's hand on the hilt, but now he was crouching defensively in front of a suit of armor. Though it appeared to be empty, the suit raised its arm so that it could bring its own, menacing blade down on the one Mouse raised before him . . .

The clash sent sparks flooding over the scene. By the time they faded Mouse had been replaced by the shape of an armored man, kneeling on a steep mountain slope. Over his shoulder she could see a battle raging, but the fighting seemed to have moved away from this place. Near the man lay a skull that would have reached his shoulder if he had been standing. He bent forward, reaching down to feel around in the dirt, then straightened and raised a small object over his head. She could see that he was holding a gemstone - one that she knew intimately, since it was hanging at her throat right now. Something caused the man to glance over his shoulder, toward the peak of the mountain, which she saw dissolving in flame . . .

She pulled away from the fire instinctively, but it changed shape and color. Dark, blocky shapes came into focus in the distance, and after a moment she realized they were small huts. The inhabitants were rushing about in confusion, while shapes from other nightmares hacked at them mercilessly. The scene flickered, and though there was almost no discernable change she knew that another village was being put to the sword. Nausea threatened to overwhelm her, but the vision would not release her. Instead it dragged her closer, until she found herself before a small boy, who was weeping inconsolably . . .

Her rush forward continued, until the only thing she could see was a single tear trembling on the boy's cheek. Then she felt herself moving in the other direction, her vision expanding to reveal scales above a maw of sharp teeth. White wisps of smoke curled away from the dragon's nostrils. The sight was fearsome, but the only emotion that came through to her was admiration for the grace and beauty of the creature's bearing. Its eyes swiveled toward her, welling up with a terrible, tragic sorrow. She could sense that it wished to tell her something, and she felt herself edging forward to listen. Before the dragon could shape any words, however, she felt herself falling again. She rushed toward the darkness at the center of the dragon's eye, then into it . . .

She could not see whatever was hiding in the darkness there, but she felt a malevolent presence. A wave of hatred swept past, chasing away the calm that had surrounded her. She fought to turn away, but her limbs would not respond. The presence grew more real as she inched deeper into the darkness. She felt a breath of movement - some monstrous limb reaching to gather her in. She fought to flee, to wave a hand, to move anything at

all. Her struggles grew more desperate as the presence gained in substance. Something cold moved before her face, and she was certain her heart had become as frozen as the rest of her body. Finally she forced a scream . . .

She found herself wrapped in Nestor's arms, clutching at his robe to ward away that figure in the darkness. Then she realized that the sense of evil had vanished with the vision, and she sobbed with relief. After a few moments of gasping air she had thought never to taste again, she realized that she was still clinging to the old man, and pulled away in embarrassment.

"Your Highness, I am truly sorry," he said anxiously. "I had no idea that the vision would subject you to such terror or I would never have suggested it."

Aileen nodded, unable to bring herself to speak.

"Let us go inside and get something warm to drink. Perhaps that will help to settle your nerves."

Nestor led the princess back inside the cottage and sat her at the table while he stoked the embers of the morning fire into a cheery blaze. Turning to one of the shelves, he took down a small jar that held a pile of dried leaves. He measured out a handful of those and crumpled them into a pot of water, then hung the pot over the fire.

"We'll let that steep for awhile," he said, settling down in the seat opposite the princess. He leaned forward to catch her eye with his. "Why don't you tell me what you saw while it's fresh in your mind?"

For a moment Aileen hesitated, not certain she wanted to remember what she had seen. When she did begin to speak, the words came in a rush, and she found herself describing the sights with gestures as well as words. Many of the scenes left her shuddering again, but the experience was much less intense this time. She did not see how Nestor could follow her description, what with the scenes so jumbled in her mind, but he did not interrupt. By the time she came to the end, the kettle was whistling. Nestor took a deep breath, but he did not say anything before rising to fill a couple of large mugs with the steaming brew.

"Oh, there is one more thing," Aileen said as he set a mug in front of her. "The stone that man found on the mountainside looked like the one that is on the necklace that my grandmother gave me." She drew up the chain that hung around her neck. "It has been in my family since before the Exile, and everyone calls it the Dragonstone, but I don't know any more than that."

Nestor held the pendant in his hand so that he could have a good look at it. "No doubt it was the same stone. That part of your vision must

have lain in the past. The man you saw was an ancestor of yours, and you saw the moment at which he found the Dragonstone.

“Unfortunately that is all that seems clear about your visions,” he sighed with a look of mixed frustration and regret. “Probably it was foolish of me to subject you to this. I was hoping that a fresh pair of eyes would reveal new secrets, but all I managed to do is cause distress. I am sorry for that.”

“I know that,” she answered simply, surprised at how much she meant it. She had been in Nestor’s company for less than a day, but already she felt safer with him than she would have with anyone save her father.

Thankfully that thought flickered away without taking hold as she raised her cup to her lips. As good as the tea was, what was most important was that it was hot enough to chase away the chill left by the vision. The horror gradually faded, returning the princess back to normal. For a while she was content to let her feelings stabilize, but then she realized that the silence was beginning to drag. She glanced up to see that Nestor was frowning at his cup without drinking.

“Nestor?” she asked. Using his first name bothered her only slightly, now. “Are you all right?”

Nestor shook himself and favored her with a tight smile. “Yes, Your Highness, I’m fine. Just thinking is all.”

He took a belated sip of tea, then began to speak. “The spell I cast - yes, I know Tundines don’t believe in magic, but bear with me - the spell is very difficult to control. Indeed, the reason I asked you to try it is that it has stopped working for me altogether. Now it will only show me darkness - darkness that grows stronger every time I cast the spell.”

He paused to take another sip of tea. “And since the spell is so difficult to control, it usually raises many more questions than it answers,” he said ruefully, “as it seems to have done this time.

“I cannot say what most of your vision might mean - in fact I cannot even say for sure when your visions took place. The giant bird that you described was almost certainly a roc, and rocs have not been seen in the world for many, many years, so that part probably took place in the past. I would have said that your vision of the dragon was in the past, too, but you sensed that this one wished to speak with you. I do not know what to make of that.

“The ancient sword that you saw clearly is bound to Dael in some way, but I cannot guess how you or I might be connected to it or to him, if we are at all,” Nestor hesitated again. “Actually, I know very little about Dael,” he said softly. “Does that not seem odd?”

Aileen nodded, though he did not seem to require an answer. She was not even certain that he saw the gesture.

Nestor stood up and let the silence rise once again. For several long minutes he said nothing at all, and Aileen began to wonder what he was thinking. Her vision had been frightening, in places; had Nestor learned something he would rather not have known? After a moment she was certain that was it; her presence here must have triggered something in the visions, something that Nestor did not want to face.

A sick feeling grew in the pit of her stomach. The worst parts of her vision flashed before her again - the burning villages, the nightmarish creatures . . .

. . . that awful presence in the darkness.

She gripped her mug tighter, but the hot tea could offer no more comfort. It barely warmed her fingers, now. That monstrous blackness - that was what she had found in her vision that Nestor had not wanted her to find. He must know what it was, must dread the very thought of it. She felt the cold breath of air brush past her face again. The presence had found her in the vision. Surely it could find her now.

Quick footsteps approached from outside, and suddenly the door burst open. Sunshine flooded into the room, borne by the songs of the birds in the garden. Aileen looked up at Mouse, and felt the crushing weight of that shadow rising from her mind. His eyes blazed brightly, as though he had sensed the darkness invading the cottage and had come to answer its challenge.

"I have our dinner, Master," he said, his voice carrying no hint of anything out of the ordinary. Aileen felt the world lurch, then everything returned to normal. Mouse raised his hand to show three rabbits dangling from a string.

Nestor acknowledged the catch with a nod. "Very good. I will boil some vegetables," he finally managed. Then he changed the subject. "Your Highness, perhaps you would like to take a ride with Dael? Snowfoot will want a little exercise today, I'm sure."

The princess nodded, suddenly eager to be out of the confining cottage and into the wide open space of the forest. Mouse led her out the door and off to the northern side of the cottage, where a small stable was set a short distance into the trees. Within the half hour they had saddled their horses and set off on a short ride through the forest.

Aileen was surprised by the peacefulness of the forest. She had felt a hint of it the day before, when Mouse had slackened the pace of their flight, but the feeling had not really had time to take root. The forest was

not what she had expected at all. Tundines generally considered the place a frightening place, hiding all sorts of unsavory villains - and they thought the Tuath the worst of the lot. The reality was much gentler and more pleasant. The trees soothed the afternoon sunlight so that it fell gently over them, and the vegetation laid a hush over their surroundings.

The Tyrmagan, she said to herself. Mouse had told her that the name meant 'endless leaves' in the language of the Tuath, and she could not think of anything more fitting name. The forest seemed to stretch forever, and gazing up into the green canopy gave Aileen a feeling of timelessness, as well.

The princess rolled the forest's name around on her tongue for a while before she was struck by the way Mouse had referred to the 'language of the Tuath'. She had never considered that the Tuath might speak a different language from hers.

"But we are talking," she mumbled to herself.

"What was that?" asked Mouse, overhearing.

"Nothing," she answered. "I was just wondering how it is that you speak Tundine, if you have your own language."

"Well, that is a good question - especially for a Tundine. You almost sound ready to acknowledge that there is a world outside of your own."

Aileen did not know how to react to that comment. First she glared at him, then she frowned in thought, then she glared at him again. Mouse chuckled.

"The truth is that we are speaking a mixture of tongues. When your ancestors arrived from across the sea, their language mixed with ours to make a new one. There is too much Tundine in the result, if you ask me . . ." He cocked an eye, checking to see if he could get another rise out of her. "You would have trouble understanding most Tuath, I suspect, but you would be able to speak with them."

The princess nodded. "It took me a long time to get used to Brion's accent."

"Yes, and his has been smoothed by the time he spends with my master."

"But you and Nestor do not have accents," Aileen protested.

"That is a product of our training and our travels," answered Mouse. "We were taught both High Tuath and Ancient Tundine by the druidic elders, and we have traveled extensively in Tundine lands - tho' 'tis no more'n a moment away, don't ye know."

The sun had nearly set by the time they returned to the yard in front of the cottage. Durgan was there waiting for them, and offered a bow to

the princess before turning to lead her into the kitchen. Aileen could feel her heart beginning to beat a little faster as she trailed behind, hardly noticing that Mouse was leading the horses in the other direction.

The kitchen's atmosphere had returned to normal, no longer harboring the shadows that had lurked in the corners that afternoon. A warm fire blazed in the hearth, raising delicious smells from the rabbits above it. Nestor smiled a greeting, but continued to turn the spit. Mouse appeared a few minutes later, having settled the horses in the small stable, and they sat down to dinner.

As she watched her companions fill their plates, Aileen began to wonder what the evening held in store. She had done most of the talking the night before, but she did not have another story to tell tonight. She was not used to silence at the dinner table, but with Durgan unable to speak and Mouse unwilling, she thought she might be facing a quiet meal.

She had reckoned without Nestor. He began firing questions even before she was settled in her chair, apparently relishing the possibility that he might actually receive an answer. Aileen did not blame him; living with those two younger men must have left him starved for any sort of conversation. For a while, she considered each question as it came, trying to read the thought that motivated it, but the rain of questions came so quickly that she found it difficult to get two bites of food at a time.

By the time dinner was over, Aileen was grateful for the chance to duck into the other room and change into a loose-fitting robe - one of Nestor's old ones - for sleeping. When she returned, the three men were clustered around the washbasin, scrubbing at the dishes. She felt strange watching them work, though she had never paid any mind to how the dishes were done at home.

As they settled onto their blankets, Mouse took down his harp and tuned it carefully. Aileen had been too exhausted to listen to him play the night before, but as he ran his fingers over the strings, she realized that he was as good as any of the minstrels who visited her father's court. When his harp was ready, he paused for a moment, then launched into something gentle and relaxing. The melody sounded somehow familiar, though the princess did not believe that she knew any Tuathi music. It was not until she was nearly asleep that she realized he was playing variations on a lullaby her nurse had played for her.