
The Empty Locket

Catherine Rainwater



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by Catherine Rainwater

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THE EMPTY LOCKET

David and Renee

C.M. Rainwater

Dedicated in loving memories

Of my Grandmothers

Noreen Potts and Helen Connolly

And dedicated to my parents

John and Colleen Potts, and

My sister Jamie.

But most of all, dedicated to my Darling Husband,

David Rainwater.

THE EMPTY LOCKET

By Catherine M. Rainwater

Chapter I

Many small things in one's life can amount to a single large happening. Even though an event may seem like it is meaningless, it may hold the key to what you seek. I have been searching my entire life for such a key. The only things I have found seem to be mere shadows and possibilities. There's nothing that could fill a head with an entire past. Nothing spectacular has happened in my life that I can remember. Only by what I am told do I fit clues together to find that

the pieces fit, yet there seems to be a few upside-down or missing. I'll bring you up to speed to what has happened in my life from what I can recall. I'm 16 now but I remember it like it was yesterday. When I was five, the first dream came to me. I was fast asleep after a rough day (which I can't remember). All I knew was that my parents and sisters were dead. The doctors told me how there had been a car accident and I was lucky to have survived. I can't remember my parents or my sisters now, and in that, I find comfort. That night I had a horrible nightmare.

I was wandering endlessly through a forest, not sure of whom I was. The reflection of my face in the lake only mirrored my confusion. My heart raced as I slowly realized that I was

alone. I held my nightgown over my legs and took shelter behind a shrub. The wind blew viciously at me.

It snarled my pigtails and blinded me with flying dust.

The wind at last stopped, and left behind a strange calmness. While it had once been cold, tiny rays of sun pierced through the blocking clouds. Silence filled the woods. Not a thing could be heard. It was a silence that almost seemed to hurt my ears. I took a few steps into a clearing to get a better look around. The sound of a cracking branch caught my attention and sent me turning in its direction. I looked up into a tree. There sat a dark, almost shapeless figure. With blinding speed, it leapt down and landed in front of me. The fright sent me flying backwards into a tree. I awoke screaming.

Doctors rushed into my room while I lay shaking and crying in a cold sweat. It was the first of several nightmares that would haunt me for years to come. The faceless appearance of the creature in the dream scared me. And because of my misfortune, I was put into an orphanage for two years. No one knew anything about me except for my first name. Even in the orphanage these dreams pursued me.

The kids there would tease me when I'd have the nightmares and wake up telling them that the monster was going to come t get everyone. I really believed he would. It happened nearly every night for the time I was there.

Finally, when I was almost eight, a newlywed couple, named Melanie and Peter, adopted me. They have been my parents ever since. I thought that once I had left the orphanage, the dreams would stop, but they didn't. Along with my new parents, my dreams adopted me as well. The dreams may have been awful, but I always felt that they were somehow linked to my past. So I tried to learn as much as I could from them. They were so realistic. I even woke up a few times with bruises. One dream that I can recall quite clearly, I was face to face with this shadow. His eyes glowed and his form was transparent. I woke up with a skinned elbow and knee after fighting him off of me. He had attacked me and shouted words at me but they sounded like whispers.

I didn't dare to tell my new parents. I was afraid that they would think that I was crazy and want to give me up. For those four years I felt afraid to look at my own reflection from time to time. I kept seeing someone who wasn't me. Someone, perhaps, that I once knew. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I thought for a split second that I looked like my real mother. Then again, I really couldn't remember what she looked like. Had she died in a car accident or was it another way? I still could remember nothing.

I was in high school. Well, the junior section of it at least. Seventh grade. It wouldn't be too long until I was moved into the second story of the school. I just had to wait until the school year was over. They always had the eighth graders on the second floor with the freshmen. That was my dream. To be on the second floor. I wouldn't have to squeeze through the hallways full of

rushing seniors, who always picked on the students who were twelve and on the first floor because of their status, heading to the third floor, or be knocked down if I had to go up the stairs while being an office assistant. In that year, I didn't give much thought to who I was. It just mattered that I could make it up those stairs.

When I turned thirteen, a joyous event, I knew I'd be out of harm's way the next school year, a picture of a woman named Lynn and a man named Joe turned up. I looked nothing like them, though they were, supposedly, my real parents. My eyes were blue and my hair blond. Lynn had brown eyes and red hair. Joe had hazel eyes and sandy brown hair. Maybe it was just a genetic fluke. My friend Jenny has blond hair, and neither of her parents have blond hair.

It was the year I had waited for. I was on the second floor. No more getting picked on, no more crowded halls. . .so I thought. Nothing changed. It turned out that the bathrooms on the third floor were the worst. The juniors and seniors came down to use ours. . .the best. So, riddled with the new challenge to go to the restroom before the older students stunk it up with their cigarettes, it turned out that the worst three years were just beginning. My friends and I dodged even more students in the hall since there were three grades now instead of just two. The lockers were smaller, and there were two per locker. . .go figure. But I had status. I wasn't a first floor baby anymore. But I was still only in eighth grade and got picked on by the freshmen and sophomores. I thought to my self that next year would be better.

On my fourteenth birthday, Melanie told me that she had found a box of my things, some that were picked up at the scene of the accident, and that she had put it in my room. Eager

to see my forgotten past, I rushed up stairs. As I sat down in front of it, the doorbell rang. I went downstairs to see who it was. It was my friend Linzy. Melanie took the gift that Linzy had brought me and put it with the other gifts, which my cousins had brought. I was just about to tell Linzy about the box when we heard a large truck pull up outside.

We went outside to see who was moving in. A small red car followed behind it. I felt rather funny greeting the new neighbors in the party outfit that my grandmother had given to me. There I stood in a frilly blue blouse and pleated skirt with my hair back in a French braid. "I'll be right back." I told Linzy as I ran inside to change into a nice pair of blue jeans and my favorite T-shirt. I ran back down the stairs but by the time I got back from changing, they had already gone inside carrying boxes. Linzy tried to describe the oldest boy, David, but I was too preoccupied with something else.

A flash of light blinded me at my right. It came from a small stand of trees. I tried to show Linzy where I had seen it but she had no idea what I was talking about. I went over to see if I could find the shiny object, but found nothing. Finally Linzy called over to me to meet my new neighbor, David. I walked over to her though I felt like something was watching me from the woods. Linzy thought that I was just imagining things.

David came back out to get a box from the truck. I walked over to him and offered to help. Suddenly we were bombarded by blasts of water from the front door. David nearly dropped the box, then he yelled at his little brother, Michael. I helped carry in the box, although

it was partially soaked. I introduced myself and he did the same, then I invited him over for some cake, ice cream, and pizza. His mom walked by and told him to introduce his new friend, and she said it was all right for him to go to my party. She kept looking at me funny but I just guessed that it was because she saw that David was blushing. Michael came running around the corner begging. “Can I go? Can I go?” his mom said no and put him to work. As we walked out the door, Jenny came around the side of the building with Linzy. I introduced Jenny to him since Linzy had already met him. We went next-door to my townhouse. I introduced David to Melanie and Peter and then to my cousins. Most of my cousins were about nine or ten at the time, so they, of course, all began to tease me. “Renee has a boyfriend. . .” They kept chanting. I told David to ignore them.

As the party went on, my seven cousins, six aunts and five uncles all went home. Soon Linzy had to leave. She told me that she was meeting someone and wouldn’t say who. David also

had to go because he had to put his room in order. Soon Jenny was the only one there. Melanie and Peter had already gone to bed because they both had to work the next morning, so Jenny and I tried to stay up as late as we could by watching scary movies. I remembered the box.

Jenny and I crept silently up the stairs until we had made it into my room. We sat on the floor by the box and started to probe through its contents.

“Each article that we find in the box could point me in the correct direction of who I actually was.” I explained to her.

I pulled out one item at a time. In the middle of taking the things out, which were mostly all wrapped, I told her that I didn't know if I really should. The things that I would find were the things that might tell me my past, good or bad.

After all of the wrapped and unwrapped items had been taken out of the box, I took a breath and picked one up. I slowly tore off the tape and unrolled it. It was a teddy bear with a ribbon around its' neck. The ribbon read: "This bear belongs to Renee." I hugged the bear. I remembered it because it was given to me at the hospital by a nurse who told me that it had been found in the truck with me. I set it down and picked up the next item. It was an envelope. I opened it and took out the papers. They were the adoption forms from Melanie and Peter. I put the papers back into the envelope and set it aside. Then another envelope was folded. I opened it and took out its contents. It was a drawing of a forest with a moon shining above it. It appeared to have resembled the first dream that I'd had.

I reached in with my eyes closed like it was a drawing and drew out a small box. I opened it and held up the treasure that was inside. It was a silver locket with an amethyst in the center. I opened it to find, not a picture, but instead an inscription in another language. It read: "To my love Tranquility, from your love Neptune." I had no idea what it said. "It looks like Greek." Jenny commented. I stood up and placed it in my jewelry box. Then I sat down again. I picked up the teddy bear and examined it or a tag to see where it was made, but I couldn't find one. While I was

looking, I found a piece of folded up paper inside of a tear, which appeared to have been sewn up once before. The paper was in bad shape. The sides were torn and yellowed. I delicately unfolded the paper. It was my original birth certificate. Not the one that the orphanage had given to Melanie and Peter, but the real one. “This is it,” I told Jenny. The certificate read: “Renee Marie Cosmic; born to “Natalie” Anne Cosmic and “Troy” Joseph Cosmic. Birthdate: June 20; 8:30:26 P.M... .” The rest was missing. I wanted to know where I had been born, why that part was missing, and why my real parents’ names were quoted. “I guess I’m not really fourteen yet,” I told Jenny. By then she was starting to fall asleep. I only had three more packages to open but I knew what they were pretty much and so I decided to open them in the morning because it was getting late. I placed them back into the box with the two envelopes. Then I placed the birth certificate into my top drawer. Soon I was fast asleep.

That night I had expected to have another one of my evil dreams (that’s what I called them), but I didn’t. This was the dream that solved almost everything. For all of the years that I lived with Melanie and Peter, I always wondered why I looked so different from my parents and sisters in a photo taken on a farm. Why I had no memories of my past was a mystery to me. The doctors told me that I had hit my head very hard and must have lost my memory. I slept silently in the summer heat.

My dream began all too soon. I looked into a large mirror and saw myself as a five year-old again. My hair was done up in pigtails and I was wearing an old white nightgown. A curved stone window adorned a bare wall of my room. Without warning, a voice echoed down the hallway outside my door. A young boy came running in and grabbed my hand. “Come on

Renee!” He yelled. Frantically, he led me through twisting hallways until we came to a large hall. Two young women stood with open arms waiting for us. They both bore worried and frightened expressions upon their faces. I had no idea who the boy and the other woman were, even though they seemed to know me. All at once the ground began to shake ferociously. My father and her man, apparently the boy’s father, came running up and led us down winding stairs until we came to the outside. A strong smell of fire and smoke filled the air and stung my nose. I tried to keep pace at my mother’s side but I was knocked down by one of the several hundred people racing and fleeing for their lives. The boy’s father, Alan, picked me up as he jogged by and handed me to my father.

As I was carried, I began to feel dizzy. The last thing that I saw was very blurry. Shadowy figures carrying torches were burning the edge of the forest that we had just entered and were burning the small houses and huts set up amongst the trees. I fell drowsily to sleep. When I awoke, I was in the arms of my mother. My father and Alan were searching for the boy and his mother who had somehow gotten separated from us while I slept. Alan was obviously upset. “She’s been injured. . .we have to find them,” he kept repeating. My parents were upset too. My mother grew tired and set me on the ground barefoot. The search would go on for another hour.

As cold and wet as the ground was, we followed an unkempt path; I was still at my mother’s side. The path led deeper and deeper into the ever-darkening forest. We stopped in a very small clearing where a solitaire tree grew but without leaves. A large stone wall began to run along the path, for only a short distance though. Thorns placarded the wall and there were

hundreds of holes in it. Torches lit the top. My father signaled for us to go straight past the wall without making any noise. One of the torches disappeared. Suddenly, a loud, tolling bell went off and guards appeared at the bases of the torches. “Who goes there?” they demanded in a harsh tone while grasping their guns. Alan yelled out for us to run.

My mother scooped me up again and ran. The guard’s guns let off in harmony at the command of their leader. Alan collapsed. His cry was of pain and confusion. My father stopped but waved my mother and I along. She held me close in fear. That was when I heard my father yell out. He had been struck down just as Alan had been. My mother froze. She would have

collapsed if it weren’t for the fact that she heard the voices and whispers of the following guards behind us. The trees started to rush past us as we ran down the unused path. They continued their chase, following every twist, every turn. We couldn’t shake them. We slowed down and my mother looked behind toward the rushing troops. An old path with two stone gargoyles guarding the entrance was our only hope. We swept onto the path. The dead trees snagged at my hair and ripped out both of my ribbons. We stopped. She set me down and took my hand. The ground was drier and warmer but I could feel every broken branch under every footfall. We didn’t go at such a fast pace anymore. “Mother,” I questioned, “why we were going so slow?” We stopped and turned around to see that the guards had stopped at the entrance. They wouldn’t enter the path. She knelt down in front of me and said “It’s just us now. We must get out of this forest. There is only one place where we will be safe. It is a valley where the new city will be built. The guards aren’t permitted to pass by the gate-watchers. However, we still aren’t safe, and we won’t be until we find our way to the rest of the townspeople. There are too

many dangers in this forest to explain. We must be alert if we are to remain safe. It is all right to be frightened. Come on, it will soon be dawn.”

I gazed around into the darkness and the emptiness of the surrounding woods. I stayed very close to my mother, afraid that at any moment some evil creature would pop out at us. My mother stopped again and looked into my eyes. Then she began to tell me of the forest’s history. It had once been a peaceful wood until King Gelleon’s followers came. The thought of them frightened

me, and a shiver ran down my spine. The creatures were fearless and could take any form they wished, including human. They were difficult to spot because they appeared to be a shadow.

We walked slowly. My nightgown was torn and tattered at the bottom and my feet were cold and soiled. Several times I had thought that something was watching us and then I saw lighted eyes in the darkness. The darkness prevailed against any other entrance of light. Dead leaves were the only leaves that occupied the heartless branches of the trees. I held her hand very tightly. I noticed that the path began to climb and we were heading out of a valley and into a mountain range or a set of hills.

Off and on I dragged my feet, so my mother picked me up. I fell asleep in her arms and awoke next-to a fire in a cave. Shadows flickered on the wall and my mother sat against the opposite wall, asleep. The crackling of the burning wood and the dancing flames held my attention. I began to hear water. It lulled me back to sleep.

Hours passed without my realizing it. My mother woke me up in a hurry. She didn't explain why, instead she just lead me to the back of the cave and told me to stay there. A noise that I had never heard before came from outside the cave. It scared me and I began to cry. My mother comforted me and wrapped her shawl around me. She kissed my forehead and told me to keep out of sight. I watched her vanish into the front of the cave, which was consumed with darkness. I huddled against the wall and felt a breeze come from a crack in it. I began to look and was distracted by the new peculiar silence. It lured me toward the front of the cave. I peered around the corner and saw nothing. The sun was rising and it cast long shadows over everything. I called out for my mother and no one answered. Only the hiss and howling of the wind and the sound of a babbling brook broke through the silence.

I looked in the opposite direction and saw a dark, shadowy figure standing, injured against the side of the hill. I rushed back into the cave and hid. Then I heard a cry for help. It was a man. He sounded hurt. I came out of the cave to find a young man with his hand on his chest gasping for air. I cautiously stepped forward. He seemed nice. "Do you need any help?" I asked. He said yes and wanted to sit by the fire in the cave. I took his free hand and led him into the cave. I asked him if he had seen my mother, he nodded. I questioned him until he told me that she was dead.

"That's not true!" I cried. He stood up; a strange darkness filled his face.

"It is indeed true little brat. I killed her myself." He began to laugh an evil, boisterous laugh that echoed inside the cave, and he transformed into a shapeless shadow, cornering me.

Remembering the darkness of the back of the cave, I made a mad dash. Again I could feel the cool fresh breeze from the cracks of the cave wall. The breeze grew stronger as I went toward the right. I followed it and found a small hole. The stranger came at me and I squeezed through the opening.

He couldn't follow because he was too large.

I heard him calling for me to come out. I just ignored him. A river flowed from one end of the cave to the other with tremendous force. The stranger began to break through the wall. There wasn't anywhere to go except into the river. I plugged my nose and jumped in. Immediately, the currents swept me out into the open and it continued in a long stretch. The water was so cold that I could hardly move. I gasped for air several times as I watched the sun on the horizon and the surrounding trees disappear and reappear over and over again. My memories slowly faded and everything went dark.

When I awoke, I was caught in a fallen tree branch somewhere along the riverbank. The rapids that once crushed and chilled me now slowly floated and warmed me. The sun was very high and birds cheerfully sang to welcome the day. Regaining my strength, I pulled myself upon the bank and sprawled out on the soft grass. I was in a field filled with a sea of dandelions. Butterflies and bees briskly flew every which way. I had little memory and I didn't recognize my own reflection in the water. I felt hungry, and dizzy at the same time. My mouth was dry so I cupped my hands and drank from the river. It tasted clean and cool, but it didn't ease my hunger.

In the distance I could see a small rectangle on the horizon. I decided to see what it was...maybe if it was a house, they might have something to eat. I walked through the field of flowers; it seemed as though I walked forever. As I finally approached the cabin, I could see a wood swing and a clothesline with shirts and pants hanging on it. A strange noise came from my left. Dirt and dust formed a cloud that hung over the noise. The sound grew closer and closer until I could see what the object was. I had no idea what it was. I also had no idea where I was or who I was. The machine stopped in front of the cabin and two small children hopped out followed by a tall thin woman.

I walked over to get a better look when the other children came up to me. They questioned me in a language I didn't understand but we soon began to play on the swing. The woman came out and also spoke the same language as the two little girls. She came up to me and began to talk, but again I didn't understand. I tried to tell her that I didn't understand but then she didn't understand me. She took my hand and brought me inside. A new set of clothes was given to me and my nightgown was set aside. We ate and played all that day until the sun began to set again.

I grew frightened. Although I had no memory from before the woods, I still remembered the evil creatures, my mother, and jumping into the river. But I had no clue as to who I was. I thought that if the sun went down, the shadow stranger would come and get me as he did my mother. I spoke of the things that had happened although the family didn't know what I was saying. Then the mother began to point out objects and say what they were. I soon began to understand and I stayed with them for a while. I was able to talk to Lynn, the mother

of Carla and Mable. She “protected” me from the shadows and thought all the while that it was just a phase, like being afraid of the dark.

Three days after I arrived there, Joe (the father) came home. He held up a piece of paper and said, “Pack your bags! We’ve got a house in the city!”. Everyone was happy, and although I didn’t understand all of the words that he said, I still felt somewhat happy along with the rest of the kind family. After a few moments, Joe pulled Lynn to the side, and then she introduced me. I was welcomed into the family as another daughter, and another sister. Because the only possession that I had was a teddy bear, Lynn looked for a name or a reference to who I was. The name Renee was written on a tag, so they called me Renee.

As the days went by, the family packed their things and began to ship them to the house that they had purchased. Just a few days after that, we all crammed into the truck and headed for the city. I saw the river in which I had almost drowned and the mountains where it lead into. It was a long way and I figured that the currents must have carried me for about a million miles or so. After the mountains were out of sight, I saw on the distant horizon ahead of us, the city. It only looked like some small gray figures, but when we reached it, it was more than I could have ever imagined.

Cars were everywhere and people crowded along the sidewalks. I looked out the window and saw massive buildings that were so tall I couldn’t see the tops. Traffic was very slow and then we came to a light. We stopped at the red light and I watched the opposite cars turn and proceed past us. A huge truck, Joe called it a semi-truck, went by us as the light turned

green. The feeling of the truck going past me made me dizzy, and it felt as though we were going backwards. The sounds and sights were all new to me. They frightened me.

As we approached another light, the truck that had earlier sped by us made a left turn from the wrong lane. It tipped over and I watched three cars pile into it before we did. I blacked out and could only feel a little pain. My head swam and my heart raced until everything including my blackout went dark.

Chapter II

As I came to, I could hear strange voices all around me. When I opened my eyes, everything was blurred. Bits and pieces of my memory flooded me and then disappeared. I was frightened by the shadows and yet I had no idea why. They all spoke in tones of amazement and comforting. My arms hurt and my legs felt as though tiny needles had been implanted within them. I tried to sit up and talk but one of the figures assured me that everything would be okay. I closed my eyes and began to cry. I was scared. I opened them again and to my amazement, the shadows began to clear away.

I was in a small room with white curtains to either side of me, and the people who were huddled around me looked very friendly. One of them introduced herself as Nurse Camela. The other was Dr. Nadine Smithe. They asked me questions about my parents and my two sisters but I had no idea what they were talking about. They then diagnosed me as having total

amnesia. Later that day, I was able to eat ice cream and Jell-O, and a man came to visit me, his name was Mr. Mike. He ran the local orphanage and told me that my parents had died in the accident, along with my two sisters. Again I had no idea what he was talking about. I didn't know how to react because I didn't know them. Mr. Mike read me their names in hope that some memory was still there. He read, "Your mother Lynn Talby, your father Joe Talby, and your two sisters Carla and Mable Talby. Does this ring a bell?" It did a little and I suddenly felt helpless and sad. I did know these people.

When I was able to walk, I was transported to the orphanage with Mr. Mike. There, I met a lot of children my age that also had lost their parents. I met Linzy, my best friend, there. As I was looking into the mirror, I saw myself as a 14 year old all of a sudden. A buzzer rang and I woke up. My alarm clock was going off so I threw my pillow at it.

I sat up in amazement. Not only did I just dream all of this, but I could actually remember things that weren't in the dream. Part of my memory had come back. I knew now, who I was. . .sort of. I couldn't explain everything, not even to myself. I decided to keep it a secret for then. As I looked down on the floor, I saw Linzy. She was curled up on a spare mattress, still sleeping. I looked up again and saw that we were going to be late in meeting Melanie at the little restaurant near where she worked. She was treating me to a birthday lunch and in our case it was breakfast.

I forgot to re-set the alarm clock the night before.

I woke Linzy up and we rushed around getting dressed. As we flew out the front door, we saw David sitting on his porch. I invited him to come with us. We walked down the road and past Jenny's house. She was wide-awake, but she was busy cutting her lawn so she couldn't go with us.

As we walked toward the corner of the block downtown, I saw the intersection where I had been in the car accident. I looked at it as we went around the corner and entered the front entrance of the restaurant. Melanie stood up as we walked in so that we could see her. We all sat down in the booth and the waiter gave us our menus. "Did you two sleep well? I thought that you were going to be late." Melanie asked. We answered, "Yes." Linzy and I ordered and then began talking about, what seemed, absolutely nothing. We decided that when we were done, we would take David to the mall and show him the rest of the town. Melanie looked down at her watch and stood up. "I'm going to be late for a meeting. Sorry I have to go so soon." She paid for all of us and then we all followed her out. The streets were strangely empty, it was very unusual for that time of day. Melanie said goodbye and drove off.

We walked to the mall where we found Jenny being dragged around by her older sister, Megan. She looked miserable, so she was pretty happy to see us. We walked up to her and she asked if she could go with us. Megan didn't want her to leave because she knew that their mom had said not to let her wander off alone. But she let her go because she was with us. Like the street, the mall was also somewhat empty. We went up to the third floor to where everyone hung out. Our favorite place to go was a place called Arcade Mania. The usual bunches of people were all there but there was definitely a dent in the crowd. Linzy immediately went to

her favorite game. By the time David and I had played two rounds of basketball, she had won 150 tickets.

When Linzy went to exchange her tickets for prizes, the people at the counter even agreed that there weren't many people in the mall. Linzy exchanged her tickets for a bag of candy and two parachute people. After that we decided to head for the city park.

As we came into the park, we could see children flying kites and people throwing Frisbees. There were picnic tables set up all over and benches lined the edge of the lake.

We sat at the nearest table to the lake. The sun shone brightly; not a cloud in the sky. David, Linzy, and Jenny began to talk about a person dressed like a clown handing out balloons on the other side of the park. I just sat thinking about my real parents and the awful day that tore us all apart and killed them. I looked out over the lake and remembered the river that I had plunged into to elude the shadowy stranger in the cave. My life had fallen apart and was mended by a new one. I began to wonder where the boy and his mother went when we were separated in the forest. Jenny noticed my strange behavior and questioned it. I didn't know how I could answer. My real life was one with shadow men and strange forests. How could I explain any of it?

The sun was high and the summer temperatures grew fast so we decided to go back to my townhouse and sit a while in the air conditioning. We followed the bike path out of the park and cut through the town. The streets were still empty and we noticed why. A parade was

going down the road for the annual fair, but we continued through town anyway. It was always the same parade, held on the same day every year, and it was quite boring. The town seemed to like it

though. I stopped to tie my shoe. When I looked up, there was the shadow man. My face went pale and my heart raced. I yelled out, "I've got'ta get out of here!" They followed me as I ran, although they didn't know why I was running. I only stopped when I had reached my front door.

I shoved the key into the door and went bursting into the living room with Jenny, Linzy, and David. I slammed the door and locked both the dead bolt and the handle lock. They were all confused. I told them that I couldn't explain anything until I had sorted it out for myself. Why this was happening and why to me, I had no idea. I had always been a normal kid who minded her own business and never did anything wrong past the extent of small lies. I couldn't figure out why this shadowy man was after me or why he had killed my parents. I told them that I would tell them as soon as I knew what to say.

Linzy looked at her watch and announced that she had to meet someone soon. She told me that she could come back over later. She left and David and Jenny tried to get me to tell them what was going on but I told them that in all truth, I had no idea. I told them that something had happened and some of my memory had come back, and that my real parents had left me with a lot of problems when they died. We all decided to try to piece together some of the clues for the rest of that summer. We watched for that man and we searched the library in town for a book on Greek languages to try to "decode" the writing in my locket. Jenny even

had her father take a look at it, he knew Greek but couldn't make sense of the wording. We used up the rest of that summer searching and doing detective work. David and I became very close. We tried dating a few times at the end of July and continued in August, but mainly were as close as best friends could be.

When School started again in September, on the second floor (I was very proud to be on that floor), I introduced everyone to David and vice versa. I tried to forget about that day of the parade, but it kept coming to me in bizarre dreams where I would try to run but couldn't, or that when I did run, it took forever to get to my house. Homecoming was coming up fast. I had a dress all picked out and David had a suit. We even got to march in the homecoming parade. Unfortunately it ran on the same street where the figure was. David kept my attention from it so that I wasn't so fidgety. That day I was direly nervous.

There were other new people in school that year. Linzy's new boyfriend Richard, who was living with her and her foster parents, was new. Linzy was extremely unclear on how she met him but he seemed like a nice guy. He had red hair and green eyes. He seemed very bold and was a big show-off. He took Linzy to homecoming and I went with David. Jenny went with a guy named Daryl who she had just met over the summer as well. He was blond with brown eyes. He was so shy that I had to ask Jenny to go for him.

There were a lot of people there that night and we found a table and sat down at it immediately in order to keep it. Balloons bounced around the room and popped as people stepped on them when they hit the floor. As the night went on, the crowd disappeared

gradually. We danced with our dates for the last dance and went home. The high school was so close that we walked. The night was warm enough to not need a ride. As we walked down the road I watched our shadows grow and shrink when we passed through the streetlights. I wondered if I would ever see that shadowy man again. And if he was looking for me, I hoped that he wouldn't find me. After finding out what he had done to my parents, I wanted revenge for messing up my life but I also wanted to keep my distance.

Jenny departed from the group after Daryl had, and Linzy turned down her driveway with Richard and that left David and I to walk home alone. I grew worried as the time grew later. It became darker as we reached the townhouses and our shadows were left behind at the street where the lights stopped. Several lights had been turned off already as people ended their day. We said good-bye, David kissed my cheek, and then my hand and we went into our own homes. I blushed the rest of that night.

Over the next few months I gathered up an explanation as of why I ran that day, but regrettably I couldn't. In my mind there was no reason; it all seemed logical to me. I was the one who had gone through all of the horrid things and I had absolutely no way of telling my friends. I didn't want our friendship to end because of fear, and I didn't want my relationship to end with David because I had to go hide somewhere. I decided again to wait until I could come up with a good excuse to tell them.

As the school year ended, I was already preparing for my 15th birthday. I talked about it for several days before the last day of school. When the last day of school came, we rushed out

and walked home. The ice cream parlor was having a two for one sale, and the day was hot so we went into town to get some. We sat down on the stools at the counter and ordered. The shop was old fashioned with fountain soda spouts and a red and white awning. Its counter was marble and had bar stools that swirled. The waiter wore a paper hat that looked like something out of a movie. Supposedly, the parlor was going to be moving across the street. An old building on the corner of the intersection had a fire just a few days before. There were rumors that it was arson. No one knew what type of building it was because it never had a sign; the press just said that it was an office building. The county wanted to move the ice cream shop there because it had a cross walk that came off of the school path.

We sat on the stools eating our ice cream cones and speculating about the fire. There were six floors and all of them were assumed to be destroyed. Even the fire fighters who put the flames out wouldn't go back in. The building was supposedly empty when the fire began so they didn't have to risk their lives. A huge yellow sign was placed on the door reading: "No trespassing: CONDEMNED!" A police line encircled the building to keep people out.

After we were finished eating, we walked toward the city park. As we passed the charred building, I saw a glint of light and then a dark figure disappeared in through the door to the building. Right away I knew that it was the shadow man. I wanted revenge for ruining my life and

in an instant it all swelled up inside of me and came bursting out. I yelled "Stop!" over and over again, and yet the figure proceeded into the building. I told Jenny, Linzy, and David that if they

wanted to know what made me run on the day of the parade, to follow me.

We crossed the busy intersection and ran up to the police line. Linzy said that we shouldn't cross it because we could get hurt if we went in, but we went in regardless. The building smelled like smoke and burned wood. Paintings hung, slightly melted, on the walls. A rug that was laid out to welcome guests at one time was so singed that you couldn't make out the pattern. I took a deep breath and went further in. Glass was shattered all over the floor and the windows were boarded up from the outside. Several scraps of paper lay in ruins mixed within the glass. Dead plants littered the hall as we looked down it, and mostly just the stumps were left in a large pot. Numerous offices lined the hallway. There were desks and chairs in some, and a couch in others. I peered into each of the rooms, expecting to see the shadowy figure leap out at me to kill me like he did my parents. I didn't find him.

The last room that I opened led to the stairs for the next floor. We cautiously walked up until we came to the second floor. We pulled on the door but it was locked, so we continued up. At every floor, we tried to open the doors but they were all locked. When we reached the sixth floor, the door was missing so we went into the large room. The walls were all missing and there was no carpet or paint. It appeared to be unfinished.

I looked all around and caught something with my eye on the other side of the room. It was a dark spot and appeared like the light had purposely skipped that corner. I yelled.

“Here I am! Do you remember me? I was the little brat! I was the one whose parents you killed in the mountains! If you want me, come get me! I’m here!” My friends just looked in amazement at me. . .or it might have been a look saying that I was crazy.

The shadow stretched upward and became a solid shape. It began to speak, saying, “Yes, I remember you. You were supposed to have drowned in the river. I came to make sure that it was you. I was told that you were dead; I guess my spy was wrong. You, your family, and your friends were trespassing in my master’s woods. You had no right to be there.”

I called back, “Does that give you the right to burn my home? Does that give you the right to kill everyone that I knew? You started the war. My parents were caught in the middle. They wanted me to be safe so they left as our town burned. You caused the car accident that killed the Talby family. You killed them to get to me! Why can’t you just leave me alone?!?”.

My friends huddled around me, not sure of what to do. Tears streamed from my eyes. Then the figure began to speak again, “It is not just you, that I am after. I will leave you now, but I will return again. . .when you are alone!”.

I began to walk toward him. The floor, as I reached the center of the room, began to make a creaking noise. The figure disappeared. I froze. David, Linzy, and Jenny motioned for me to come back, so I slowly and softly walked over the floor. The sound grew louder and I stopped. I looked down. I took a step and the floor gave way. I screamed as I fell and I could see about three floors down. The broken glass and pieces of the floor flew all around me,

cutting me. I reached my hand up and grabbed the first thing that my hand felt. When I looked up, I realized that it was David's hand. I swung under the floor and then back out from under it. Tears blinded me. David was hanging onto a pole and Jenny and Linzy grabbed my other hand. Slowly I was pulled up. They all put their arms around me when I was up and I sat there shaking and crying.

We left the building; I was limping from the cuts on my legs. Blood ran down my arm where I had hit the floor as I fell, and glass was caught in my shirt. We walked to Linzy's house and I was stared at the whole way there. When we arrived, I cleaned out my cuts and tried to think up something to tell Melanie when she saw me like that. I called her to come pick me up. I told her that there had been a car accident in town (which there had been) and that we were standing on the corner when it happened. I also said that I was hit with the flying glass from their windshields. She came and got me right away. She also gave David a ride home too. She babied me for a while and then was glad I wasn't hurt too seriously. Little did she know that I actually was hurt worse than what she could possibly imagine.

When Melanie wasn't around, I talked to David. I told him that I was sorry for dragging him into that building and into that situation. He assured me that he was glad that he didn't stay behind, and then he kind of gave me that look like "You know what I'm talking about?" I assured him that I had a good reason, and that if I hadn't, I wouldn't have gone in. I knew that David was just dying to ask me why that creature was after me, but he didn't. I think that he told Jenny and Linzy not to bring it up with me so that I didn't get upset because when we got together the next day, they said nothing about it. They only asked me how my cuts and bruises

were doing.

They never mentioned anything, not even during the summer or on my 16th birthday, not even when school had come again. We kept it to ourselves and didn't discuss it with each other. It was like it had become a taboo. That school year dragged on. I kept expecting to see the shadowy figure again, but I didn't. As the days went on, my memory became clearer. The things that had me questioning my life were not all explained though. I got my life back to the way it had been before the building incident. The city even tore it down; they said that they were going to put in a strip mall instead of putting the parlor there. I took driver education and got my license when I turned 16. That was just two days ago. Today I expect to go for my first drive without an adult. David will be over soon. He went to the store with his mom.

Chapter III

The doorbell rings. Renee answers it and David is waiting for her. She turns around and picks up a set of two keys and her purse.

“Melanie! I’m gonna’ drive to the park,” She hollers to Melanie who is in the basement working on the computer. She comes up.

“Okay. . .but I want you to be very careful. Don’t speed and don’t hit anyone.”

“I won’t.”

She walks out the door with David and they get into a gray car. It is small with four doors. David gets in on the passenger side and they drive off.

“Where are we going first?” David asks.

“We’re gonna’ go get Linzy and Richard. Jenny can’t go with us because her aunt is in the hospital. She just had twins.”

She drives out of the complex driveway and turns onto the main road. The radio blasts with their favorite music. About three miles down the road she slows down and pulls into a long driveway that leads back to a large house on the lake. Woods surround the house. A tree hangs its branches over a large pond in the back yard and has a tree house in it. A bench sits on the shore overlooking the water.

As Renee pulls up, Linzy and Richard appear out the back door and run up to the car. Renee and David unlock the back doors to let them in the back. They close their doors and pull forward into the loop in the driveway and head back out.

Renee pulls back onto the main road and heads for the park. They go through the town and pass the ice cream shop and the restaurant, and then they pass the school. Luckily on Sundays, the park offers free parking and they find a spot. Renee goes to the trunk and pulls out a cooler full of food. Then she pulls out a Frisbee.

“We can play Frisbee later if we have time,” Renee says.

“What do you mean ‘if we have time’? Do you have a time to be home?” Linzy asks.

“No, look out over the lake. There’s a storm coming. The clouds are getting black and the wind is starting to pick up,” says Renee.

They walk to a picnic table and set their stuff up. Gusts of wind blow a few napkins around and send Linzy and Renee chasing them while David and Richard go back to the car to get the umbrellas in case it starts to rain. As the clouds pass over the sun, the warm air goes

from being warm and humid to being cool.

They finish eating and sit out on a large blanket after packing the picnic materials away. The captive sun breaks from the clouds and warms the air again. Children run toward the beach that is tucked away in the very corner of the park; their parents follow them, ready to sit out in the sun and tan.

“Does anybody want to go swimming?” Richard yells while taking his shirt off.

“I will,” says Linzy.

“I will,” repeats David and then he looks at Renee.

“That’s okay. I really don’t feel like swimming right now,” Renee says, answering David’s look.

David sits down next to her.

“Why?” He asks.

“I don’t know how to swim.” She replies.

“Then I won’t go swimming either.”

“Thanks.” says Renee.

Renee lays out in the sun with David in her bathing suit, which she had worn under her clothes. Slowly David drifts off to sleep but Renee stares up at the clouds and thinks back to her past. Swinging on the tire swing at her second family’s home, she would look up at the sky and watch it pass back and forth over her as she swayed.

Richard walks up to the beach and lies out on a towel that he brought and he too falls asleep. Linzy goes over to the swings and sits down thinking. Time goes by and Renee falls asleep in the warm sun. Linzy goes back in to swim.

A voice shatters the sleepiness of the three and Renee jumps. Linzy calls out for help. She has swum too close to the dock and has gotten her foot stuck in a hole formed by cement. The tide is coming in and it’s up to her chin. She paddles ferociously. Renee, forgetting that she had told David that she couldn’t swim, runs out to the end of the pier.

“Linzy! Hang on!” Renee calls.

She climbs up onto the railing and dives into the deep water. Linzy continues to struggle calling out, “Renee!”.

Renee doesn't surface. Suddenly the waves pick up because of the approaching storm. They begin to fold over Linzy's head. Richard swims out into the water with David following and looking underwater for Renee. Linzy springs up, only moments after Renee had dived in, and gasps for air. Renee follows her and leads her back to shore. Both collapse onto the beach with David and Richard holding them in fear. Linzy begins to cry holding her foot. She clings to Richard as if she might be swept back out. Renee holds onto David while shivering. The air has grown cold again. The beach is empty except for the four. Renee looks over to Linzy who is also shivering and coughing.

"I thought you said you couldn't swim Renee," David looks into her eyes.

"I had a bad experience when I was younger with the water. I never could understand why I was so afraid of water, but then some of my memories came back to me and I remembered why. Besides, I couldn't let her drown," She looks over at Linzy, "Are you okay?"

"Except for a sore foot and headache, I'm fine. When you dove in after me and didn't come back up, I was afraid that you had drowned. Then I felt you free my foot and was relieved. I thought that you said you couldn't swim."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know that there'd be any trouble."

Raindrops begin to fall lightly. Thunderclaps can be heard faintly over the lake. They steadily grow louder and the drops become heavier. Richard helps Linzy back to the car and

then comes back to help pack up their picnic lunch. Children run past them toward the exit of the park. It is now pouring rain. Renee and David get into the car, they are partially soaked from the lake already so the rain is just a nuisance.

On the way home no one talks. They pull into Linzy's driveway and drop her and Richard off and then drive back to the townhouses. The winds pick up quite a bit and there are flashes of lightning every few seconds. The rain turns into a curtain and hail pellets pound on the windshield.

The sky turns strange colors of green and blue and sirens blare on the air base, only a few miles away. They park in the designated spot and get out into the downpour, fleeing for the safety of the porch. Renee turns the door handle furiously but it won't open. She jams the key into the keyhole and shoves her way in and they collapse onto the floor.

The lights are shut off and the VCR clock is not working. Renee hurries to her feet and shuts the door. David picks the phone up.

"The phone is dead. I think we've lost electricity," David looks around.

Renee walks into the kitchen and removes a note from the fridge. It reads:

'Renee,

We went to the cabin to celebrate our anniversary. You and I talked about this last week and I only hoped that you wouldn't forget. The weather station claimed that we could get some storms. Call us. The number is 555-3061.

Love,

Melanie and Peter'

"Well I guess that we're alone. We were gonna' have dinner but. . ."

David kisses her before she can finish her sentence. They stand there in a tight embrace. Renee and David's eyes are shut. They stand by the window as the lightning silhouettes them. The old grandfather clock chimes eight and the embrace ends. They look into each other's eyes. A blank expression is on their faces. Their relationship was always like best friends and now it crossed the line. A feeling of rightness was in the kiss and they both felt it.

"I think the power is back," Renee says trying to break the some what awkwardness.

"Power? Oh, yeah, the clock is blinking." David looks at the clock.

He reaches for the switch behind him. Sure enough the power is back on. Renee gazes around her to make sure everything is in place. One corner remains dark. Renee's eyes skip that corner and come back to David's green-flecked blue eyes. David places his hands on Renee's waist and she places hers on his back. They begin to lean in when a snarled voice hisses. Renee jumps and David stands in front of her. She peers out and glares into the corner.

A shadow moves along the wall toward them. The door locks and the window blinds close.

Renee walks out in front of David and in a demanding voice, speaks.

“Who are you? I know you killed my parents, but why are you here now? What do you want?”

The creature takes the form of a guard with a long dark cape. He clears his throat.

“I’m sorry. I never introduced myself. . . Oh, that’s right! You took up ‘flying’ lessons in that abandoned building. Ha, you’re not a danger to me. What do you think you can do? Do you expect to stop me? I don’t care. Anyway, it’s not just you that I’m after. I’m Toregone. My master is his majesty Gelleon, the king of Dark Wood. You two wandered into the forest without permission when you were supposed to have been burned. Do you remember?”

Renee looks at the ground.

“Sort of. . .”

David looks at her with amazement.

“Why should that matter? Renee never did anything to you or your master. Neither have I.”

“I don’t think you understand. We started that fire. You and her were not to live. That was my order. You and your mother escaped somehow, but you Renee Cosmic, you jumped into the river. I had expected you to die but I was wrong. I guess you’re not as weak as I thought you were.”

“I’m confused. Just because I wandered into the woods. . .what right do you have to kill my parents? And what does David have to do with any of this?”

David looks with deep thought.

The guard moves closer to them. He begins to speak in a whisper.

“You weren’t ever told were you? Ha, ha, ha! This makes my job all the more easier. This time you two are trapped and there is nowhere for you to go. . .or jump,” He glares at Renee. His eyes begin to glow a bright red. He extends his arm out.

David looks uneasily at him and then pulls Renee to the side. Toregone grabs both of their wrists before they have a chance to think. They pull to get free but only David manages. Toregone grabs Renee’s other wrist and laughs furiously. She pulls and wriggles then David

leaps at him. Toregone falls backward and hits the wall. His grasp of Renee's wrists releases as he falls to the ground. David pulls her up. They run to the door and unlock it.

The door opens and they run out into the rain, grabbing the keys and racing toward her car. Puddles of water reflect the flashes of lightning and then ripples out as drops of rain hit them. She opens the car doors and they climb in. The car refuses to start. She restarts it over and over again until Toregone is outside. It finally starts with a sputter and a cloud of smoke billows out. They speed out of the parking lot, causing the puddles to splash up onto the windows.

"Where should we go, David?"

He looks at her and shakes his head, then looks out the window. The rain streaks down the glass.

"Let's go to Linzy's house. We'll be safe."

David's suggestion puts Renee into tears.

"All I ever wanted was to remember. I wanted my memory back so much. Now, ever since some of it has come back, all that I've wanted was for it to go away. There is some crazy shadow person after me and now we have to hide out. If I had known that this would happen, I

would have given myself up a long time ago.”

She wipes the tears from her eyes as she pulls into Linzy’s drive way.

“Renee, don’t talk like that. If you were meant to have given up, you would have. You’re stronger than that. Besides, I know what he was talking about. It just occurred to me. My mother told me when we had first moved in. She said ‘David, the girl next door may need your help in the future. She looks very familiar. I never told you this, but you and the little girl that we were with, you both have a large duty that only you and she can perform.’ Then she got off the subject. I only asked why were moving around so much. I know the little girl that she was talking about was you. I think that we were supposed to meet.”

The car comes to a stop.

“I hope Linzy doesn’t mind that we’re here,” says Renee.

They get out of the car with an umbrella and run up to her door. Linzy sees them coming and opens the door as they get there.

“What are you two doing here?”

She looks at Renee and sees that she has been crying.

“Come on in. What’s wrong?”

Renee collapses into Linzy and starts to cry. She mumbles incoherently something about a man named Toregone. Linzy looks up at David for an explanation.

“We can’t really talk about it here. Do you have somewhere where we can talk in privacy?”

“Sure, follow me.”

She leads them up a winding staircase and into her room. Her younger foster sister is sitting on her bed looking out the window at the backyard.

“Hey Emily? Can you go down stairs? We kind of have to talk alone.”

“Okay,” she says annoyed.

As Emily closes the door, Linzy sits on the bed with Renee still crying. David pulls a chair over from Linzy’s vanity and sits it in front of them. Renee takes a few breaths, wipes her

nose with a tissue, and clears her eyes of tears.

“I don’t know why this is happening to us Linzy.”

“What exactly is happening?”

“Renee and I are in a bit of trouble. A man. . .shadow. . .guard-thing is after us. It has to do with an event that happened just before you and Renee met. We lived in a valley. It’s been so long since I’ve thought about it. It was destroyed a long time ago. Look out the window. Do you see those mountains? That’s where it was located. . .as I said, in a valley. Both Renee’s family and mine were very high in society. You could say, the royalty, at least in that town. Her mother was a very powerful woman and her father was respected and listened to. My family lived on the other side of a large hill and were also well off. Renee and I were. . .are, betrothed. The evil lord from the woods burned the village down in order to kill us. He feared that when we met and combined our powers, we’d put an end to his. Our parents wouldn’t give him their lands so he sent his shadow guardians after us.”

Renee listens carefully to all that he says.

“My house was the first home to be set on fire. We escaped through the cellar to warn Renee’s family. I found Renee looking out her window with terror on her face. I brought her out into the hallway.”

“I remember that. Your father picked me up and we all escaped into the woods.”

“Yeah. Well my mother and I were separated from the others by the darkness and we found our way to a city. My mother was severely hurt and I didn’t think that she would live. We wandered the street up to a building with some stairs and sat down, she slumped over. I kept calling out for her to wake up but she wouldn’t. A cut scarred her back. Some people walked by and saw me crying. They helped us to a hospital. I had cuts and scrapes on my face, and I had been burned. I still have a slight scar. The rest of our lives we moved around until now. Now one of the evil lord’s guards is after us again.”

Renee clears her tear filled eyes again.

“This guy, Toregone, was the same guy that killed my parents. Then he chased me into a river. I lost all of my memories. . .twice. I didn’t even speak English.”

“Now that I think about it, neither did I,” David says. “It was a strange language, that’s all I remember about it. I think it was some form of Greek.”

“I think that it’s the same language carved into my locket.”

Renee opens it. The writing still can’t be translated. Linzy places her hand on her locket.

“It doesn’t matter what it says. . .you know that it was your mother’s and that’s all that counts. She wanted you to have it otherwise you wouldn’t. Maybe it’s a language that’ll help you stop all of this nonsense.”

“Linzy’s right Renee, but I’m not sure it would be safe to go back.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. If we go back to the mountains and find those woods, maybe we could stop Toregone, David. I mean, we can’t run forever, and. . .”

She is interrupted by a scream of a little girl.

“That’s Emily!” Linzy cries.

They get up and run down the stairs partially falling. Richard comes stumbling up from the basement and opens the door. They see Emily standing in a small rowboat in the middle of the pond.

The rain pounds down. Richard hands a raincoat to Linzy and they put their hoods up. Lightning forks across the sky and thunder crackles into a resounding crash. Mud flows into a ditch with the sickening smell of danger. The tree blows fiercely in the wind. Emily screams out for help.

“Sit down Emily! Sit down!” They all yell to her as they watch her wobble in the unsteady boat.

She sits down but continues to cry out for help. Renee and David run along the shore nearly slipping on the wet grass.

David stops when he is halfway around the large pond.

“There’s no way to get to her. We’ve got to swim out to her or something!”

His loud yells can barely be heard over Emily’s screams and the clashing thunder. Richard stares up at the sky over the lake in the distance.

Renee runs over to David with a long piece of rope that was attached to the tire swing. The night air sends chills through them all as the rain continues to come down in torrents.

“There isn’t anything to throw it with! It’s too light!” David exclaims.

Renee ties one end around her waist and hands the other end to David. Linzy and Richard come over watching Renee.

“Renee, I don’t think you should go! What if something happens?”

“I’m a good swimmer and I’m not afraid anymore.” She looks at Emily. “Hold on! I’m coming!”

She wades out into the water until she can’t touch the bottom anymore and she goes under. Moments later she reappears at the boat’s side. Emily reaches out to her, she is still screaming. Bubbles start to form around the boat. Emily stops to look at the water and then screams louder. Renee grabs her and pulls her over the side of the boat.

“Hold on to me Emily. Don’t be afraid and don’t look back!”

On shore, Linzy and Richard pull the rope with steady strokes. David swims out to help Renee. The water lights up a bright red and begins to bubble even more. Slowly they make their way to shore. The bubbles follow them and a low rumble begins. David can touch the bottom and runs up onto shore to help pull them in. Emily and Renee are dragged onto the muddy beach while Emily cries and wails and reaches for Linzy and Richard. They scoop her up and Linzy wraps her raincoat around her.

David helps Renee up and unties the rope from her waist. As they finish the last knot, an eruption of water and energy sends them all flying and hitting the side of Linzy’s house. Richard stands up and pulls up Linzy. She moans and then picks up Emily. Emily doesn’t move. She just hold on to Linzy with her legs draped over Linzy’s arm. Renee is curled up in a

tight ball with her hands on her head. David sits up and grasps his arm.

“Renee! Are you okay? What about you three?”

He looks up at Richard and Emily. Linzy takes her inside the house. David bends over Renee who is shaking. He sets his hand on her back and then pulls her up into a some-what sitting position. She throws her arms around him.

“I don’t care who I am! I’ll give up if that’s what he wants! I just want everything to be back the way it was!” She sobs.

A hissing sound alerts them. David helps Renee stand up. Her knee is cut and her shoulder is gashed from flying debris. Richard walks over to them and rips a strip from his shirt. David ties it onto Renee’s arm to stop the bleeding. They go back into the house. Linzy lays Emily on the couch.

“She’s out cold. I think she was hit in the head. It could be a time before she wakes up,” She turns to Renee.

“That was a very brave thing that you did. . .thank you.”

Linzy throws her arms around Renee. A tear rolls down her cheek.

“Emily is only eight. I never had a little sister before I was adopted, and I don’t know what I would do if I ever lost her.”

Richard walks into the house with a thin young girl following him. Linzy looks up.

“Everyone, this is Tessa. She lives where I’m from.” Richard looks at Linzy.

“I thought you might need some help,” she says.

Renee sits down with David next to her. She looks up at the pale face behind a dark hood.

Richard walks over to her and sets his hand on her shoulder. Tessa looks around the room and over to Emily. She looks back to Richard.

“This is my friend, Tessa. . . Tess for short.”

“Nice to meet you Tess,” David says.

She puts her hood down to reveal a long red ponytail with three gold bands wrapped around it in segments. A leather braid headband is under her brow length bangs.

“I’ve been appointed to the royal court as the queen’s personal guard.” She boasts.

“Congratulations Tessa. If I had been there for another year longer, that would have been my job.” Richard takes her cape.

They all sit down in the living room watching it rain outside and the news on the television talks about the unexpected storms recently. The clock chimes.

An hour passes. The rain is still coming down but not as hard. Emily groans and turns on the couch. Linzy sits next to her.

“She’s running a fever. It’s probably from being out too long in the rain. I wonder what she was doing out in the boat nevertheless.”

Tessa walks over to her and lays a hand on Emily’s forehead.

“Maybe she didn’t go out willingly. Look. There’s a bruise on her face. Renee, did she hit her face as you pulled her out of the boat?”

“No. . .you saw us?”

“That’s how I knew you needed help. There is a ‘window’ above Linzy’s pond. When people’s parents die, if they are children under a certain age and of a certain qualification, by their own will, they can come live in my dimension. Richard brought Linzy through it about a year ago.”

“Oh! I had forgotten. I knew you looked familiar. I must have met you when I visited.” explains Linzy.

“Actually, it has been over a year. Time is a little different there. It has been about two years.” Richard looks out the window and to the pond.

“Well, after your sister Samantha’s death, the queen ordered everyone to undergo training of fighting. Then, she picked out some of the best and recruited them. I became their leader and also learned the ways of telepathy. I came back through the ‘window’ when I sensed that you might need me. What happened and what was that explosion?”

“We’re not exactly sure. It has to do with our friends Renee and David.” Linzy looks back at Emily.

Emily’s eye’s partially open. Her head turns toward Linzy and she closes her eyes again.

“Linzy. . .” she asks in a whispering voice, “Linzy? What happened?”

“Shhhh. Be quiet Emily. You should sleep. I’ll tell you when you’re feeling better.”

The rain slows to a trickle. The thunder dies down, and the fresh night sky reveals an exquisite full moon. David and Renee are asleep on the couch. Renee’s head rests upon David’s chest and the clock in the main hall strikes eleven. Linzy sits, trying not to doze off while watching over Emily, and Richard rests his head in his folded arms on the kitchen table. The only one awake is Tessa. She stands at watch in the back door and shows no emotion. Suddenly the phone rings. Renee shoots up like an arrow with David doing the same. Linzy’s eyes bolt open and she reaches for the phone.

“Hello?”

“Linzy? Hi, it’s Mom and Dad, we’re just checking in. A storm knocked the phone lines out and we’ve been trying to call for hours. Is everything okay?”

“Well, Emily is running a fever, but I think everything else will be okay for tonight. Renee stopped over so I invited her to stay the night. . .is that okay?”

“Sure, just don’t stay up for too long. Are you sure everything is okay. . .I could come home if you like.”

“No, Mom, it’s fine here. . .real quiet.”

“Okay well I was just checking. Love ya, have a nice time with Renee! Bye.”

Linzy hangs up the phone. Everyone stares at her.

“It was just my, mom. She wanted to know how everything was. I guess the storm just missed them. Renee, we have to do something. That thing. . .Toregone?. . .has to be stopped. From the way it changes, and the way it moves, I’d say that it’s going to be a hard task. But we have to do something. Emily could have been killed!”

Renee’s eyes fill with tears and she sinks into David.

“I’m so sorry Linzy! I never knew any of this would happen!”

David comforts her and rocks her back and forth.

“I wasn’t yelling at you Renee, I was yelling at Toregone, and myself. I should be the one who’s sorry.”

Renee lifts her head again and gets up. She slowly moves toward Linzy and throws her arms around her.

“You’re my best friend! I’m just really scared.”

To change the subject, Linzy interrupts.

“Let’s go upstairs and you and I can change into something to sleep in, and then make this into a real sleep-over. . .just like I told my mom.”

Renee agrees and they go upstairs. Richard pulls his sweatshirt-jacket off and hangs it on the coat rack. He goes into the kitchen and gets out a bag of popcorn. David takes his shoes off and puts them by the door. Emily stirs as he walks by. Slowly he kneels down next to her and places his hand on her forehead checking for a fever. He gets up and goes into the kitchen area and sits down at the table. Richard presses the start button on the microwave and then sits down at the table, too.

“So, David, what’s with you and Renee? I thought you two were just friends.”

“I don’t know. We were at her house, her parents weren’t there, and mine were with hers. We were soaked to the bone. It just happened.” He shrugs.

“What just happened?”

“Well. . .I kissed her.”

“What’d she do?”

“She returned it. It felt right. . .ya know?”

“Yeah, that’s how it is with me and Linzy.”

Linzy and Renee come around the corner with their hair up in ponytails and with T-shirts and shorts on. Tessa joins them and they all sit at the table waiting for the popcorn to be finished. The smell of melted butter fills the room. Just then, Emily’s small face peers from around the corner.

“Can I have some popcorn?”

Her tired face turns into an energetic little girl’s again.

“Come on in and join us Emily. I was worried that you would get even sicker than you were. Mom and Dad called and wanted to know how you were. I told them that you had a small fever and that you were sleeping. Whatever it was that happened is over.”

Linzy gazes out the window. A strange sense of danger that she had felt earlier in the day, is now gone. A mist takes the place of the rain. The air becomes moist and warm as it was before the storm. Debris still clutters the yard from the explosion. The moon has a mysterious haze around it that sends chills up her spine. Richard reaches over and puts his hand on her back. She jumps a little, then smiles.

“Linzy, the popcorn’s done.”

Richard gets up and takes out a large glass bowl from beneath one of the counters. He opens the bag and dumps the steaming popcorn into the bowl until it forms a small popcorn mountain.

Renee and David curl up on the long couch, Emily sits with Tessa, who is only two years older than she is, and Richard and Linzy pack themselves into the love-seat. Linzy turns the television and VCR on and starts up a movie that they had rented the day before. Within an hour, the popcorn is gone, and everyone is asleep. The movie continuously plays though no one is watching until the screen turns dark and the picture turns to snow.

Chapter IV

“Toregone!” Gelleon’s thunderous voice booms throughout his palace and rattles the walls.

Toregone hurries down the hall toward the great doors leading to the throne rooms. He throws open the door and walks in, bowing to Gelleon.

“You’re majesty. . .”

“Toregone, what was that all about? You were supposed to kill the boy and bring the girl back alive! Stop fraternizing with the outsiders and get to work! I want her unharmed!”

“Yes sire. I was just trying to lure her into the water to open a portal to the river. An outside force acted upon my powers. I don’t know where it came from.”

“Well find out! And don’t mess up this time! I don’t want those two to come to the mountains together. I want them alone. . .and I don’t care what happens to the boy. Kill him for all I care. I want her locket. Her mother’s locket! It contains powers to focus energy! In my hands I will be able to destroy New Cosmia for good and all of the mountains will be mine!”

“I didn’t see a locket sire.”

“Impossible! She must have it! No matter. . .she contains the powers. The locket just focuses them. Bring me the girl. She will be Thomas’ queen.”

“Yes your majesty.” Toregone bows and turns to walk away.

“Oh and another thing! Bring Thomas with you on one of your rounds...I want him to be able to fight against those brats! I want to see if his skills are ready to be ruler.”

“Yes sir.” Toregone bows and walks out of the room.

He walks down the hallway toward the post command center near the entrance to the palace. Other shadowy figures stand around talking and discussing plans and options.

Toregone walks into a small building just on the outside of the building and the guards stop and salute him.

“Sir!” They all shout.

“At ease. Renee Cosmic is still alive, men. The king wants her brought to him alive. David Lenalde is alive too but the king doesn’t care what happens to him. Make sure that when you go into New Cosmia you search every inch of the homes. The king worries about the two making it all the way to the mountains. Beldren!”

One of the men walks up to Toregone and salute him.

“Sir!”

“I want you to go to Dead Water Valley. You know what to do. Make sure, if those royal brats do decide to venture our way, they don’t even make it past Shieldrasaz.”

“Sir yes sir!” Beldren salutes and walks out of the room.

While Toregone readies the guards for a visitation of Renee and David, Gelleon talks to his son in the throne room. The lanterns hanging on the wall flicker and burn with the smell of kerosene. Thomas sits on the throne next to his father smiling in anticipation.

“Thomas my son, the time has come for you to take your bride. Renee Cosmic. Her mother was very beautiful, I doubt Renee will lack in the qualities of beauty. However, there is a problem. We tried to drive the families apart during the war. We succeeded, yet somehow they managed to come back together. Neptune and Tranquility are dead. This means that their daughter is the ruler of New Cosmia.”

“What about Tunn. . .”

“Never mention him! He is nothing. A thorn in the side of all humanity and a waste of a guard. He will remain locked up and will never rule New Cosmia. As for this child, David, I want you to have your first kill, and I want him to be the target. He and his wretched mother somehow survived the fire and the other perils in the forest but shouldn’t be too much trouble for a warrior such as you. Destiny won’t be any problem at all but her son may put up a fight. Renee may try to stick up for her precious prince and use her powers against you. Don’t let her succeed! I want that locket! With her in the family, the locket will be mine and then we can extend our realm outside of this hideous mountain range. The outsiders won’t know what hit them!” Gelleon laughs.

“I’ll win Renee there’s no need to fret over that father. When do I get to claim my prize?”

“Toregone will be raiding the city from now on himself. He’ll bring his best men. If news reaches me that the two have somehow reached the city, you will go. But I doubt that they’ll make it without being caught first. We’ll have Renee in a cage before the week is through.”

“Then we will be married and you will gain her powers. We’ll rule every part of these lands.”

“And beyond!”

Both men laugh at their plans of domination. A clanging noise begins to come down the hallway. A man wrapped in chains and ropes clambers down the hallway, bashing into doors as he passes. The throne room door explodes inward in splinters and a man with long hair and pale skin stands staring at the two royalties. Gelleon and Thomas both stand up. The man enters the room with several guards chasing after him.

“You! I’ll kill you!” The man yells.

The guards seize him but as they do, a current flows through the man that sends the guards flying across the room. He falls to his knees, tripping over a rug.

“Guards! Seize this man! What do I have to do to keep order around here?”

The guards get back up and begin to pull the man out of the room.

“You’ll never turn me Gelleon! My spirit is too strong and so is my sister’s! My time may be up but my spirit lives on!”

“Get Tunnor out of here!” Gelleon booms.

The guards grab him with more ropes and chains and manage to drag him from the room, still yelling. Gelleon clenches his fist in anger and his eyes begin to light up red.

“Father, you don’t suppose that he’ll give us any trouble do you?”

“Thomas! I’ve come to far to let some mollicoddle pip-squeak like Tunnor ruin things now! I’ll just have his cell changed and his serum adjusted to be higher. He’ll squirm in agony if he dare refuse to be transformed!”

The guards finally manage to drag Tunnor from the room, holding him by the ends of his ropes and chains. He thrashes around like a mad man trying to get free again but Toregone walks up and stuns him with a blow to his neck.

“That should keep him quiet for now. Lock him up in the last cell in block ‘D’ where he’ll be alone. Be sure to cuff him this time and don’t listen to his lies. Now that you newbies can see that he is stronger than he seems we won’t have another incident, will we?”

The guards answer to Toregone that they won’t allow Tunnor to escape again. Toregone walks behind them watching Tunnor’s head move blankly from side to side in dizziness. They reach his new cell and cuff him to the wall Toregone pulls the chains and cuts the ropes from around him and kicks them aside. He reaches into his vest and pulls out two test tubes of a black liquid.

“Use both on him. He won’t be able to withstand two injections. He should turn by morning.”

He hands the tubes to one of the guards and walks out of the cell. Thomas walks out of the throne room and meets up with Toregone in the hall. Toregone salutes the prince and walks with him toward the outpost on the opposite side of the palace.

“Will everything be ready Toregone?”

“Yes my liege. She and the prince will both make it to New Cosmia alive. You’ll have your battle, your queen, and your father’s power all in one foul swoop.”

“Good. The old man is insane. Who cares about the outside world? I just want these mountains. No one will stop me from taking them by storm! Not even my own dear old dad. My mother always said that he was crazy. . .guess she was right. You’ll be promoted to advisor Toregone. We’ll start our own dual monarchy like the Cosmic family and Lenalde family. We’ll make history. It will be wonderful. . .but first, I want you to dispose of our dear friend Tunnor.”

“But my lord, your father would surely find out that I am going against him if he were to end up dead. We should wait. . .he could be useful in convincing the young princess into making the right decision.”

“Now you see? This is why I like you Toregone! Your brilliant mind lays dormant under my father’s rule. You’d be more useful as my advisor.”

Thomas slaps Toregone on the back and they walk together out into the courtyard. The worn out yard has no grass and the living trees stand bare and brittle. A large brick wall runs down its length and further. Only at the base does grass dare to grow. Missing bricks are used as spy holes, and torch holders line the top with large spikes as a gloomy decoration and defense mechanism. Three large cages are placed near the doorway. One on the left and two on the

right. Other cages are placed within rooms inside of a large corridor leading toward the interior of the palace underground.

In one of the cages three adults sit talking to their children placed in other cages. Several young children are crammed into one of the cages on the right. The last one in the courtyard stands empty and clean unlike the others. Toregone and Thomas walk out into this yard and two of the shadow guards stand and salute them.

“At ease men. Has the cage been readied?” Thomas asks.

“Yes sir. All preparations have been taken care of and we are ready to receive the lady.”

“Good. Very good. Well done. Things will be on their way then. I hope that they come soon. . .it would be in your best interest if they do Toregone.”

“I will insure that they reach the city. The way has been secured with some degree of difficulty to make it seem not too easy.”

“Excellent. Things seem to be looking up from here. I’ll go ready now. You should do the same Toregone.”

“Yes sir, I think I will.”

They both walk into the palace. Toregone goes to the barracks and Thomas to his room. The sun begins to shine red as it sets and the storm clouds begin to fade away. On the opposite side of the sky, the moon shines dimly and a single star shines brightly directly under it. The children in the locked cages whimper and moan and a guard changes forms into a black wolf and lays down under the ledge of the wall. The other guard throws scraps of bread into the cages and small paper bowls of water. The guard that had changed into a wolf stands up and howls at the moon and then lays back down yawning.

Chapter V

The clock in the hall chimes 8:00 A.M. and Linzy wakes up. The others are still asleep. She creeps into the kitchen and turns on the coffee machine. Then she goes back out, picks up Emily, and brings her up to her bed. Richard wakes up as Linzy steps on a creaking board while coming back down. Tessa continues to snore away while Richard lifts her and brings her down to his room setting her on his bed. Then he goes back upstairs. Linzy sits back down and turns the television off. Richard stretches and then sits next to her.

“So Richard,” she says whispering, “What’s between them? Did David say anything to you?” She looks at Renee and David sleeping. His arm is around her waist and she lays on his other free arm.

“Yeah. David says that they kissed.”

“I think they make a good couple. Her life was always missing something.”

The phone rings. Linzy gets up and answers it.

“Hello?”

“Hi Linzy it’s Dad! I didn’t wake you up did I?”

“No, I’ve been awake for about fifteen minutes now.”

“How is Emily? I heard that she had a fever.”

“It’s gone now. I think it was just one of those kid things.”

Renee turns over and faces David.

“Is Renee still there? I heard that she stayed the night.”

“Yeah, she’s still sleeping.”

“Hey, tell her that we saw her and David’s parents here. We joined all four last night for dinner but Melanie had an uneasy feeling. She kept thinking that something was wrong.

Nothing’s wrong. . .right?”

“No, everything is fine.”

“Well, okay. I was just checking in to see how everything was. We’ll be home around two or so. Well, have fun. See ya later!”

Linzy places the phone down. The call had reminded her of what had happened. She walks to the back door and stops short.

“Richard! Come here. Look!”

The yard is a disaster. Branches from the tree lay scattered around. The boat that Emily was in floats in several pieces. A large path of bare dirt in the grass distinguishes where the explosion traveled. Richard steps toward the door and gazes out the screen.

“Oh my gosh. I didn’t know that the storm had caused so much damage,” he says.

A tap on the shoulder sends Linzy spiraling around.

“Renee! You scared me. I thought you were something else.”

“What’s going on?” She asks.

Richard goes back to the seat and sits down. Linzy opens the door to show Renee all of the damage.

“I’m so sorry Linzy. . .we shouldn’t have come here. We should have gone to the police or something.”

“Hey, you keep apologizing but it isn’t your fault. Don’t worry. Richard, Emily, and I will clean up the mess before anyone comes home. We need to think up a strategy on how to get this guy.”

“We. . .?”

“Sure. Richard, Tessa, and I can help too. Tessa’s a royal guard. She’s been trained to fight, and Richard and I have fought before, we saved the other dimension. . .by the way, you don’t think we’re nuts for talking about another dimension, do you?”

“After everything that’s happened to me, I’d believe just about anything.”

Linzy shuts the door, David sits up on the couch. Renee looks over at him and blushes.

“I see that you’re awake David.”

“Yeah, I needed to sleep after a harsh day like that. Toregone hasn’t come back, has he?”

Renee walks over to him and sits next to him.

“No thank God, and I, for one, am glad. Linzy says we have to come up with a way to stop this thing. Besides, I think Linzy’s parents will be upset if he comes back here again. Emily wouldn’t be very happy either. Poor thing.”

“I have a question, how did Emily get out in the middle of the pond, without ores, all by her self?”

Linzy looks up the stairs and walks over to the couch. She looks again over at the stairs, then at Renee.

“I don’t think she did it on her own. I think Toregone hit her and pulled the boat out into the water as a trap. That’s why she has a bruise on her face and that’s why an explosion went

off under water. He was trying to kill us.”

“You mean me.”

Renee turns her head to look out the window. The sky is blue but there is still haze hovering over the lake and pond. Sea gulls swarm catching insects that fly to and fro. Large sun patches cross over the dark water as the sun hides behind and comes out from behind the clouds.

“He was trying to kill me. Not you guys. We should go.”

Renee looks back to David and then gets up. She steadily walks up the stairs and disappears into the library. The others sit and stare out the window. David hangs his head in his hands over his lap. Renee reappears dressed and again walks steadily down the stairs in order to keep from waking up Emily. Her keys lay on the door table where she had flung them the night before. David stands up, slips his shoes on, and they walk out the door. Richard comes running after them carrying two small packages. The first he hands to Renee. It is wrapped in a reddish-violet cloth and fastened with a brooch.

“This was Tessa’s when she was younger. She asked me to give it to you last night. I wanted to wait until I heard the entire story. It’s yours.”

Renee unwraps the object and pulls it out. The device is short but telescopes out to the length and width of a staff and is very sharp with a metal handle.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for protection. It can cut the toughest object straight through, but, it won’t cut its holder no matter how hard you press.”

The next package he hands to David. It too is wrapped in cloth. This cloth is a deep shade of midnight blue. He slowly unwraps it until a cape is totally unfolded. Then a dagger hangs from a belt in its sheath.

“This is for you. It was mine when I needed it. The blade won’t ever break and the cape will keep you warm.”

David slips the belt on and unsheathes the dagger. It fits perfectly in his hand. He re-sheathes it and lets it set at his side. Linzy appears in the doorway.

“Emily and Tessa are awake. We have to make them something to eat before my parents get home so that Tessa can get back.”

Richard bids them farewell and they get into the car. Tessa pushes her way out from behind Linzy and runs up to the car.

“Let me help! I can’t go back to my world until the next storm anyway and besides, I can fight.”

David and Renee look at Richard as if asking him.

“Hey, it’s not up to me. If you want that brat along, she can go.” He says mockingly.

David reaches his arm back and unlocks the back door. Tessa climbs in and fastens her seat belt.

“I haven’t been in a car for ages!” She says grinning.

She is clearly excited. David closes his door and Renee starts up the car. They slowly pull forward into the grass to turn around. The streets are littered with tree foliage and even a few dead downed wires with workers buzzing around them. Renee enters the driveway to the townhouses and drives to the back and parks parallel next to the sidewalk. She hops out of the car, runs up to the porch, and opens her door. She had forgotten to lock it as they rushed away the day before. First she peers inside to check and see if anyone is there, then she goes in all the way. From the desk near the door, she pulls out a pen and paper. She writes a note saying that she was fine throughout the storm and that she hoped they were having a nice time and how she

would see them when she got back from a picnic. She neglected, however, to say where she was having the picnic.

She runs into Melanie's office and makes a copy of it on the fax and takes it out to the car.

"Here David, this is so that your parents don't worry."

She hands the note to him and then hands Tessa a duffel bag. Renee opens her door and climbs into the driver's seat and pulls up to the sidewalk so that she is facing in the opposite direction that she had come. David gets out and closes the door behind him carrying his house key on a chain around his neck. When he gets in, they drive off. The roads are busy from closed lanes. They stop at a light and turn left. Renee begins to slow down. She pulls into a gas station and buys a map of the surrounding areas of the mountains.

"This will help us out because I really don't know how to get there."

"When we get there," David says, "You'll remember everything."

The car pulls away from the station and heads toward the mountains. David looks back at Tessa to see how she is and she is already asleep. A half hour has past. The noon sun is high.

“Okay, so we’re following this river here. . .” He points, “and we need to take a left at the next road, right?”

“Right or left?”

“Left.”

“I think we should almost be there. Wait, there, right there. There’s the road we’re looking for.”

Renee slows down and pulls over. David scrambles with the map and tries to fold it up. Tessa jerks awake.

“Are we there?” She asks as she yawns and stretches.

“No...but I know this place. Look!”

Renee steps out of the car. To the left side of the road is a giant field of dandelions. White fluff hangs above them in the air. In the distance, a small cabin can be seen on the horizon.

“That’s the river that I fell into. . .and this is the field I crossed. That house is where I learned to speak English.”

She points to the cabin and continues.

“We are here! Get back in the car, I know how to get to the cabin without taking the main road.”

She plops herself cheerfully down in the seat as her childhood lies before her instead of in her past. She pulls forward and turns left down the road, stops, and then backs up and faces the other way.

“There is a back entrance to the cabin along here somewhere. We used to race on it because it was so flat.”

She stops again and turns left into a field, onto a dirt and gravel drive. It stretches about a half-mile or so and then stops in the backyard. Another driveway, half paved, lays stretching toward the main road in the opposite direction. An old tree is leafless with age. Tent worms occupy the branches where the leaves once were. A long rope extends from the lowest branch and a tire lies on the ground off to the side. Renee steps out.

Chapter VI

Small birds hop on the ground and fly around the old home. David and Tessa step out of the car and walk over to Renee. David looks around.

“This is a familiar place to you?”

“After I jumped into the river to get away from Toregone, the rapids brought me to the edge of that field. I wandered up to this house where I met Carla and Mable and their parents. They took me in and taught me English. I wish Lynn were still here. She was their mother. I taught her my language, the language that I don’t know now.”

“I think that it would be best if we got to the mountains before dark. It doesn’t look like there’d be anyone here.”

Tessa steps around with a few strange plants in her hands. She tucks them away in her sack that is securely tied at her side.

“I agree. If these creatures can change into shadows, we’d never be able to see them at night.”

Renee glances over her shoulder one last time before climbing back into the car. Flashbacks of playing on the wooden swing with Carla and Mable hit her with tremendous force.

“Wait. . .that tire wasn’t there before. It wasn’t there when we left either! Some one is here! I can feel it.”

Renee closes the car door and walks up to the door. David reluctantly closes his door and follows her. She stops just a foot away from the door and knocks. No one answers. Renee begins to walk away but before she can get more than two steps, the door opens a crack. A teenaged girl peers out the door but doesn’t show all the way.

“Hello? Can I help you?”

“I’m Renee, and this is David. I used to live here with some friends. Unfortunately we were in a horrible car accident and I was the only survivor. I happened to be in the area and thought to stop by. I didn’t think anyone was here until I noticed that someone had removed a wooden swing and replaced it with a tire. Are you living here with someone that I could speak to? Maybe someone who bought the house knew the family?”

“Did you say that your name is Renee? You lived here with friends?”

“Yes. . .did you know them?”

The girl steps out all the way.

“My name is Carla. Do you remember me? My parents were killed and I thought that I was the only one who survived.”

Renee and Carla hug each other in reunion.

“I had amnesia. I just recently regained some of my memories. You don’t know how glad I am to see you. Are you living here alone?”

“No, please come in. I met them about two days after the accident. I was in the hospital and a younger boy than I was in the next bed over. His folks were broke. They adopted me after Nathan and I became friends. Come in and meet them.”

“I’m sorry, I wish that I could, but I’m sort of in a hurry. Maybe you can help me though. I spoke another language when I first came here. Do you remember any of it?”

“No, it’s been way too long. I wish you could stay. Will you come back?”

“Yeah. I think that can be arranged.”

David nudges Renee with his elbow. He looks over at her with a doubtful expression.

Renee turns back to Carla.

“Well actually, I don’t know. You see, I’m going up into the mountains and I really don’t know if I will come back.”

“I wouldn’t go up there Renee. I remember some of the stories you told my mom and I started to believe you. Nathan went mountain climbing up there. He almost got lost in the woods. He came back with stories of a hidden town and stone statues.”

David and Renee look at each other with a wide-eyed expression.

“When he told us, no one believed him. Then I told them about you and your language and your shadow men. His father went up with Nathan and a few of his friends but they couldn’t find the town or the statues. So naturally no one believed him...except me.”

David glances over his shoulder at Tessa and signals for her to come in. She walks through the door and stops next to him.

“This is Tessa. The three of us are going up to the mountains in search of that village. Could we talk to Nathan so we could find out where this place is?”

“Sure, I’ll get him.”

Carla disappears around the corner. She comes back a few seconds later with a tall young man. He has loose curly brown hair and deep blue eyes.

“Nathan, this is Renee. She is looking for the town in the mountains. . .you know, the one you saw? They want to know where you saw it.”

“Well,” says Nathan, “there was a waterfall with the river running under it. It’s the same river that runs through the field outside the house. Then I saw houses, like normal homes, except really old looking. There were lots of burnt boards lying around...not too much, it just looked like a mess. All of the shutters were closed on all of the houses and there weren’t any people around. I felt like I was walking through a ghost town.”

Renee turns to David and frowns. All hope that she may of had about meeting people is gone.

“The town is deserted. There was a fire. . .a long time ago. The burnt wood was from the homes that were destroyed. You basically were walking through a ghost town.”

“There were no new buildings. I’d guessed that an avalanche took it out or something. The homes that were still visible were ancient looking. The place looked like it had been totally bombed. There was a path though, into some dead trees. I think I saw another town about a mile from it, but it may have just been someone’s house.”

“Really? David, do you think someone lives in the town? Maybe someone who knew my parents? Or maybe someone who knows how to stop Toregone?”

Before David can answer any of the questions, Nathan cuts in.

“I don’t know. There was smoke coming from a chimney. I only guess that there was another town. Are you saying that you’re from that town?”

“Renee and I are both from the deserted one you saw. . .we think.” He turns to Renee.
“Renee, I can only hope someone is there if what Nathan says is true.”

Tessa steps in. She has her hands on her waist and is growing impatient.

“If what he says is true, don’t you think we should get going? It’s going to be dark soon and as I told you before, if you think it’s hard to keep track of Toregone now, you’ll have an extremely difficult time even sensing him in the dark.”

“David, Tessa’s right. Carla, it was nice to see you again. Nathan, it was nice to meet you. We do have to go though. I’ll see if I can come back.”

They file out the door and scramble back into the car. Carla stands in the doorway and waves goodbye. Renee’s eyes become clouded with tears and then uncloud.

“I never thought that anyone but I had survived. I thought she and Mable were my sisters for so long until my memories came back. They were family. If we follow the river, we will be led straight to the waterfall in the old town. Maybe there are people still living there. . .or at least some sign as to where to find them.”

“Renee, I’m sorry I was rushing you, but I’ve dealt with similar creatures and trust me, they’re tricky.”

David rolls his window down just a crack and turns the radio on. The sky is clear and the sweet smell of the air is very inviting. Renee shuts the radio off.

“Don’t worry about it Tessa. Hey, tell me about this knife. Richard said that it wouldn’t cut its holder’s hand?”

“The blade is enchanted. If you were to trip and fall, the worst that it would do is give you a bruise. If you are caught, it will cut through anything. It will even cut through metal and steel. It was a gift to me. I just recently got another similar to it. The blade is a bit longer and thicker though.”

“What about my dagger?” David asks.

“Your dagger was Richard’s. The only thing I know about it is that the blade is indestructible.” She stops and looks out the window. “Look!”

She points toward the horizon. A gray shadow, from the mountain range, is cast upon them. Renee slows the car down and stops. She puts it into park and turns the ignition off. The road is a dead end. The rest of the way is nothing but fields, woods, and rock.

“Now what?” Renee looks at the small path leading between two foothills.

“I guess,” suggests David, “we walk.”

They open their doors and step out into the summer heat and humidity. The smell of freshly cut grass and sweet scented flowers fills their noses. Tessa lifts the duffel bag and hands it to Renee who openly takes it and helps her out. Renee locks her door and puts her keys into her bag. David rolls the window up and then locks the door.

Massive white clouds roll over the sky and dissipate over the mountains. Renee bends down and feels the water of the river.

“This water is warm. Do you see that tree over there? That’s where I woke up. This is the river that carried me away from the cave. If we follow this small river, it will lead to a larger section, and then to the cave itself. From there are the woods. I remember them, but I was asleep most of the time. I’m sure that we’d be able to get to the town from there.”

The river runs through several foothills and then up to the mountains, which appear to be just about five miles away. The sides of the hills are covered by plush green grass and speckled with small flowers. Some are yellow and some are white. Their petals shimmer like satin. The first hill they come across is very small but very steep up the side. There is no way around the hills. To the West are acres of thorns and various trees. To the East, is the river.

Although the river is at it’s smallest width, it is about 100 feet wide. Renee picks up a large stick that is almost her height and uses it to ascend the slope. As they reach the top, they gaze around them and reality hits hard. The river runs along approximately ten miles of hills,

each one rising, as they become the mountains.

Renee turns around and looks back. She can see the cottage, the car, and even the townhouses. Everything moving looks like ants running around in a small anthill town. She looks to the thorn bush groves and sees a large brick wall following their path. The ground appears to be level there.

“David, look. Do you see that wall? What about you Tessa?”

“I see it,” David says.

“So do I,” says Tessa.

“Does it look like the land is flat over there? Because if it is, I think we should follow that wall. It would take much less time and we would not use all of our strength climbing these hills.”

David thinks for a moment. His hair softly blows in the wind as he looks at the wall. The sun casts shadows in the valleys below the hills.

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt. But to tell you the truth, I think we should stay close to the river. That wall may lead to nothing, or end all of a sudden. Then we would be stuck amongst

the thorn bushes. There is only one apparent path to the wall and that is only what we see. If the wall were to turn, we could end up getting lost. However, I do agree. If that is flat land, it would save time and strength.”

“I agree with David, Renee. I think it would be safer if we stayed on these hills. They would shelter us from harsh winds while in the valleys, and it will be warmer too. Besides, if Toregone shows up, we could always lose him in the hills. If we were near the wall, the only place we would have to hide, would be the picker bushes.”

“I never even thought about that. I’m just in such a hurry. I can feel that we will find something when we get there. Don’t you David?”

“Yeah. . .I feel like there’s something there too, and I think we should hurry, but I think it would be safer to stay in the hills. You never know what’s hiding in the thorns, and you never know who might be living in these valleys. We may need a place to stay for the night. Someone could have a small house somewhere.”

“Okay,” Renee agrees, “let’s stay on the hills. But let’s also keep an eye on the wall.”

They run down the gentle descending side of the hill and are in a valley. The entire bottom is covered by fog when looking down from the top, and two feet of water fills the bottom.

Thin layers of mist hover over the shallow lake. It looks beautiful, and peaceful, but it also looks dead. There are no trees in sight anywhere and the fog above them blocks out most of the sun. There is no noise, and no smell. The fog traps the sweet fragrance from the flowers above out.

They move slowly onward through the mud and water. It's not cold water, but it's in no way warm. Renee stops and unzips her bag. She pulls out a large purple sweater and puts it on. She buttons the front up and then zips her duffel bag back up. A cry breaks the silence.

Tessa struggles as she is caught in the mud and is sinking rapidly. She pulls at her leg and continues to cry out.

"I'm stuck! I'm stuck! Help, I'm sinking! I think something has my leg!"

David and Renee run to her side and reach into the mud to try to set her free. The mud slowly pulls her leg in. Her thigh is almost under. Finally, they pull her out of the mud and she collapses face first into the water. Mud covers her face. Renee and David stand up and laugh.

"It wasn't funny."

She begins to wipe the mud off of herself when she notices that her tall leather boot is ripped. Her leg underneath is cut and bleeding. Renee and David don't notice. She turns to them and they are still laughing at the mud on each other's faces.

“Renee, something grabbed me! I say we get out of this valley as soon as possible.”

“No way! You just sank in the mud. This valley is dead. There’s no life here.”

Tessa shows the still laughing Renee her gashed boot and bleeding leg. Renee and David both stop laughing. Renee reaches into her bag and pulls out a cloth for Tessa to clean her cut. She wipes it and stops the bleeding. Then she looks up at the fog.

“I can’t tell if it’s night or day up there. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Renee, Tessa’s right. For all we know, night may have already come. We need to get into another safer valley and find safety soon.”

“We haven’t been here long, so I don’t think that it could be past dinner-time. But I agree. This place is starting to freak me out.”

She picks up a wad of mud and flings it at David who does the same back to her. They continue to play around and walk toward the edge of the water. Small bubbles begin to surface where Tessa had sank in. They notice and begin to move quickly back to the side from which they came. They climb up and begin to follow it around the water instead of cutting straight through. The fog is thicker here than at the bottom, but they can see the way in which they are

heading.

Small shrubs begin to appear every once and a while. They decide to go straight up to see where they are. As their heads break through the fog, they can see all around them. The hills are large. They look back and can see the slope that they had gone down into the lake valley. The sun is still up and birds sing again. The smell of the flowers permeates everything. They continue to hike up the hill until they are at the top. Looking around them, they can see the thorn patches and the large wall and the river. It steadily picks up speed in this area and is much wider, too. The next hill lies ahead of them. This one looks much deeper and much rockier.

The pathway through the valley is easy and it only takes them thirty minutes to make their way across the sloping sides of the hill. They decide not to go into any more of the valleys to be careful. Tessa limps along on her wounded leg until the third hill.

They see a stream and decide to go into this valley. Slowly they scale down its steeply sloping sides. Renee and David go first to make sure that it is safe and Tessa follows close behind them. The wind is gentle but it picks up dust and blinds them. Trees begin to appear. Soon, all that is below is forest. They stop to catch their breath.

“I don’t think I can travel much farther on this leg. It feels like it may be infected. Our best bet would be to find shelter below. The trees would give us good hiding spots. Who

knows, maybe there will be someone living here,” Tessa explains.

“I think she’s right,” says Renee. “My shoulder hurts from when we were at Linzy’s.”

“Can you make the climb down Tess?” Asks David.

“Yeah. I just hope I don’t fall.”

“We’ll help you down so you don’t.” Renee shifts her bag from her hurt shoulder to the other.

They continue at a slower pace to ensure that no one falls. As they near the bottom, the rocks grow smaller and eventually turn to sand, then to rich soil. A lush forest of pine trees and other types of trees grow here. Small shrubs line a path. It’s covered over by moss and the rocks with lichens. In the woods, birds flap happily and other animals such as squirrels flourish. A small stream runs along the trail. Trout and other fish swim in its cool water.

“David, do we follow the path?” Renee looks uneasily at the path hidden below tiny green plants.

“I don’t think we have another option. What do you think Tessa?”

“This path was made by people. It’s been kept up for who knows how long. I’d say that there are people living here.”

“Yeah, but the question is are they are good or bad?” Renee adds.

“I say we follow it,” Tessa says.

They all agree to follow the path but they keep their eyes open for traps and ways to get back if something should go wrong. The forest darkens out the day. The air is very moist and it causes the moss on the path to become thick in areas. David slows ahead and then stops. Renee and Tessa catch up to him.

“Look. There is a town! I see people,” exclaims David.

“David! Shut up! I don’t think we should let them know we’re here yet!” Renee yells and softens out to a whisper.

They begin down the hill, although they are unsure of whom the people are. Suddenly David loses his footing on the damp moss and slides down the hill, gaining speed as he goes. Renee and Tessa chase after him nearly falling themselves. They near the bottom and trip over a stump. Renee grabs onto Tessa to keep her balance and causes her to fall too. David reaches the bottom and is sprawled out. He lies there and looks up at the sky, too sore to move. Renee

and Tessa roll right over him.

Chapter VII

People from the town gather around and stare at them. They lay there motionless, afraid to move and bring notice to themselves. It's too late. An old man runs up to Tessa, picks her up, and signals to a young lady who picks up Renee. David sits up and holds his hand to his

head.

“Where are you taking them? Put them down!” He tries to stand but fails and falls to his knees.

“They are in need of medical attention. Don’t worry, we won’t hurt them,” says the old man who identifies himself to be the doctor.

David attempts to stand again and a boy helps him up. The town’s people return to what they were doing. The town looks old with wood buildings and cobblestone walkways.

“My name is Stephan. Follow me, I will take you to where your friends are being treated.”

“What is this place? Where are we?”

“This is the city of New Cosmia. I have lived here for as long as I can remember. My father is the doctor. He can tell you more about this place; I am sort of failing History in school.”

“Do you go to school out of this valley or in it?”

“What valley?”

They walk away from the trees and a large city spreads out in all directions. People use horses on the dirt streets and stone building line them. On all sides of the city are forests. To the West and East are also two high mountains.

“I thought we were in a valley,” David says.

“The valley is where the path begins, but here you are in a city like the ones outside.”

“What outside? Do you mean the cities beyond the foothills?”

“We have had few visitors, and the ones who visited decided to stay. They helped us build these great buildings. There is my father’s clinic. Your friends are there inside. Now I gotta go. I’m supposed to be running errands for my aunt. Bye!”

Stephan disappears around the corner of a building and David enters the old wooden door to the doctor’s clinic. Renee is sitting in a wooden chair with a sling on her arm and her wound wrapped. Tessa is inside a small room with the doctor.

“They wrapped my arm out here. I don’t know what they are doing to her in there. Luckily for me, this is just a deep scratch and should be all right. I don’t know about Tessa

though. Her leg was in bad shape when she took off her boot.”

“How do you feel? Do you feel strong enough to keep going or do you want to stay over night?”

“I don’t even have the strength to run. Besides, my back hurts. I think I may have hurt it when we fell. Tessa’s in worse condition than me. We have no other choice but to stay.”

“Renee, when I gained my balance back, I began to walk around with Stephan, he’s the doctor’s son. He told me a little about this city. I wondered why it looked so familiar.”

“David, tell me.”

“Well the name of the city is New Cosmia. This is where our parents were originally trying to get to as the fires burned. The village in the woods was the original town, or at least similar to it. This city was built approximately ten years ago. We’re home! Our true relatives may be here. We have found what we’ve been looking for.”

“No. We haven’t. Remember Toregone? Remember the evil king in the woods. We have to destroy his reign. Besides, I want to go to the old site of the city to see things for myself. Gelleon is evil king. I heard a few of the people talking about him. He still exists, and the people still live in fear of him. He’s the one who sent the shadows to destroy Cosmia.”

“Have you told anyone who you are?”

“Not yet,” The door opens and Tessa hops out on one leg. “How will she be Doctor?”

“If she stays off her leg for a day or so, she’ll be fine. What happened? How did she get that cut?”

“We were lost and found our way into a valley full of mist and water. We think something grabbed her leg and began to pull her under into the mud.”

“That sounds like Dead Water Valley. No one knows what exactly is living there, and no one here dares to find out. You are lucky to have come out of there with just a cut. I have seen much worse.”

Tessa looks up at the doctor and sits in a chair next to Renee. She elevates her leg on a stool and removes her cape, folding it neatly. Her short sword hangs at her side and she removes its belt.

“You three look a bit young to be fighting, so why are you carrying around swords?”

David’s eyes glare at the old mans face with distrust.

“Who are you? I don’t mean to be so suspicious but I just feel a need for it,” David continues to look at the old doctor.

“I . . . I’m not sure I understand your suspicions, but I apologize for my rudeness. I should have minded my own business, but you all look so young. Especially you.”

He points to Tessa. She begins to take offense.

“I can defend myself better than anyone else! My eyes see what others don’t! I can run faster than any slimy serpent, and, I can fight longer and harder than anyone in my division! Too young? Ha! Where I come from, the oldest person is twenty! Too young!”

“Tessa? I hope you know that you just told a complete stranger your history,” David says.

Tessa sits back down into the chair folding her arms and the old doctor just holds a face of amazement.

“Has the world changed so much that a child must fight?” He shakes his head.

“Look, we did come here for a purpose. I am just trying to find out more information about New Cosmia. Your son told me a little, but I know there is more. Can you tell us

anything?”

David sits in the last vacant chair and sets his dagger on a small table. A change of atmosphere settles the argument.

“I can tell you about this town, but you must promise not to repeat any of it to anyone in the outer world. Do you promise?”

“We all do,” Renee says.

“Okay. . .this town is the second town of Cosmia. The city was destroyed by fire eleven years ago. Many people fled with their children and families. They came here. Some were misfortunate to have not gotten away. We had two royal families that governed hand in hand. It was said that they didn’t escape the flames. Some say that they tried to escape into the woods and were lost. The rest don’t believe that they ever existed. After the fire, we came together in a small valley and decided to build a small village amongst the tree so that no one would ever see us. Then some mountain climbers found us, almost the same way that you three did. They helped us build the city of New Cosmia.”

“Did you ever meet the royal families?” Renee asks.

“Meet them? Sure, twice. When their children were born, I was right there. I had just

finished learning medicine too. Why?”

“Well, I was wondering, if you had to guess yourself, what do you think happened to them?” Renee places her hand on her wounded shoulder.

“I think that the evil king living in the woods near the site of the old town lured them into the woods and then killed them all. It was a shame to because they were good people. You know what else? Their children were supposed to get married when they got older. What a shame.”

David and Renee look at each other.

“Could they have survived?” David asks.

“No. That evil king had a tremendous temper. He doesn’t forget anything. The Queen, Tranquility, had turned down Gelleon’s marriage proposal when she was younger. Gelleon is the king of Dark Wood. That’s where I think they disappeared. Gelleon hated Neptune. He wanted to take over Neptune’s land but Neptune kept telling him no. He would have done anything to destroy the entire bloodline and future bloodline. I think he sent Shadow Men to kill them, probably the same ones that torched the city.”

Renee stands up. A tear gently rolls down her cheek.

“Toregone! I knew it! He was sent for us. David we’re on the right trail.”

“Who are you? How do you know Toregone? He has been tormenting this city and village since the fire. . .answer me. How do you know Toregone?”

David stands up and helps Tessa to her feet. She unfolds her cape and puts it back on. Then she replaces her sword belt.

“Doctor, you have been very helpful. I was wondering where we could stay for a night.”

David picks up his dagger and places it back into his belt.

“I want to know who you three are and why you know Toregone.”

Renee pulls her locket out and shows it to the doctor. His face turns pale and he backs up against the wall.

“I had no idea of who you were! I am sorry. Please, stay at my house for the night. You can’t find anywhere else to stay that will be more comfortable. Besides, I can tell you all about your parents. Is this David Lenalde?”

“That’s me. How did you know my name?”

“I knew your parents well.”

“My mother is still alive. She never told me anything, but I could remember something about the town that I came from.”

“Your mother is safe! That is wonderful! Now, who is this? I don’t remember you.”

“This is a friend from out of town,” Renee says.

“Please, I was going to close early today. Nothing ever happens here until night. Come stay at my home.”

“We do need a place to stay until Tessa is feeling better, and we can find out more about what we’re up against,” Renee suggests.

“I think we should take the doctor up on his offer. Besides, if your leg gets any worse, we’ll have someone to take care of it. What do you think Tessa?”

Tessa looks up at David. Then she looks up at the doctor. She looks down at her leg and then back up.

“I guess.”

“Great! Oh, by the way, you can call me Elliot instead of ‘The doctor.’ My family will be thrilled that you two have returned! In fact, the entire town will be!”

“Wait! We never said we were staying forever! We just want to take care of Toregone! Then maybe I can have a normal life. . .just like the normal one I had before my memories came back. I can go home to Melanie and Peter, and David can go home to his mom and stepfather. Tessa can go home and fight for the ruler of her land. We were dragged away from the places that we call home so that we can rid you and ourselves of Gelleon! Not so that we may rule again. I grew up in a world much different than this one and I don’t remember much of my past! I’m not the same person. I’m sure David feels the same.”

“I feel the same. I have a new life. The life that I knew before wasn’t much fun. Fires and wars destroyed all that I loved. I don’t want to go back to that life. . .sorry.”

“I don’t understand! After that battle, we sent numerous search parties out looking for you. People said I was nuts. You can’t leave your people now!”

“For starters, these people aren’t our people. They’re not anyone’s people. You have lived here without a ruler for eleven years. I’m sure you can manage with out us. We’ll accept your offer if it still exists, then we will leave tomorrow. Please don’t tell anyone of us,” Renee says.

“The offer still exists. I guess that I just figured that if you came back that you would take rule again. I’m the only one who believed that there was a chance of your survival.”

A buzzer goes off. The lights in the clinic dim. Elliot gathers his things together and shows them the way out and onto the street. The people are mostly all in their homes and there are no buggies on the road.

“Like I said, nothing happen until dusk.”

“But Elliot, that isn’t for at least an hour,” David points out.

“I know. People are so afraid, that they get into their homes an hour early so they can lock up and hide in secret places so that the Shadow Men don’t find them. They hide things like food, favorite possessions, and their children. Gelleon sends his men out sometimes to kidnap our children. I have had four daughters and two sons. Now I have one son and one daughter. They also took my wife. I don’t know what they do with them. Rumor has it that they change them into the Shadow Men to add to the king’s army. I despise Gelleon. Everyone here does.”

“Can’t you leave this city and move into the upper world? They have police to stop people from committing crimes,” Renee says.

“Not even a police can capture these men. We know of your world. I frequently travel there to buy medical supplies. I make the money by selling my farm goods. Ah here we are.

It is a fine world, but not comparable to our own.”

They stop in front of a villa. A small raccoon runs out from under the porch. Elliot scoops up the creature and sets him on his shoulders. Stephan walks out of the door followed by his twin sister Sally.

“Daddy, I was looking for Coon but I couldn’t find him. He ate an entire pumpkin. It was the big one that you were going to take up tomorrow.”

“This is my daughter Sally. Over by the water trough is Stephan.”

“I’ve met Stephan,” David says.

“Come in. Sally, Stephan, you two should be inside. You know that. Follow me.”

Elliot leads them inside. He opens the closet door and presses on a stone. The back of the closet moves backward until a door leading to the left is uncovered. The twins go in followed by Tessa with both Renee and David supporting her. Elliot enters and closes the door by pressing the rock back into place. A torch is lit and they go down a narrow tunnel. Elliot stops and pushes another rock in. This time a door on the floor opens leading down into total darkness. Elliot leads in with the torch and the rest follow him. There are two cases of stairs to choose from leading in separate directions. Elliot chooses the one pointing in to the left. As they reach the bottom, he hands Sally the torch. Stephan lights another from the other. Elliot pulls on a chain and a low rumbling noise is heard from above. It is the door closing behind them.

“You certainly have a large house. Why so many turns and doors?” Renee asks.

“I’ve lost so much. I don’t want lose any more. The hall upstairs is a decoy. If they figure it out, then the other set of stairs is also a decoy. I just make sure to stay to the left. If you go to the right, you will fall into a crevice. The steps appear to go on, but they are worn down like glass. If someone walks on them, they’ll slip. We have a nice room set up down here. It’s through that door. We can rest, eat, and warm up.”

He opens the door. Sally hands him her torch and he lights a fire, then he lights several candles on the stone walls. The room glows brightly and shadows flicker against the walls. Air ducts lead to the surface on the walls. The room is beautiful and heats quickly. Cots are brought out of a closet and set up for the twins and Tessa, Renee, and David. The couch has a

drawer under it that pulls out with blankets and pillows. A cabinet and a pantry hold several food products. Elliot pulls a card table out of the closet and sets up wooden chairs like the ones he had in his clinic. Sally takes out food and plates. Stephan brings out of a small fridge, four bottles of water and then takes out of the cabinet six glasses. They quickly set the table while Elliot cooks three small chickens. It is a small feast with dried vegetables and fruit.

“I hope that we aren’t eating all of your food,” Tessa says.

“Nonsense! The food here in the valley is free. We grow it from seeds that are free. We have no need of money here. Besides, look at the company!”

Renee and David look at Elliot as if they are saying ‘Please, don’t say who we are.’ Tessa removes her cape and places it neatly on her cot. Then she removes her belt with her short sword and places it on top of her cape. She takes off her boots and places them under the cot and then removes her leather-braid headband and sets that on her belt. Renee walks over to her duffel bag and unzips it. She pulls out two pairs of socks and hands one to Tessa.

“Thanks. Normally I’m considered to be an adult, in my world that is, and now, I’m starting to feel my age. I’m getting scared. I haven’t felt this frightened since the Serpents in my world captured me. At that time, I didn’t know how to fight. I was so helpless. I was freed and trained, then I was left alone to defend the queen and king of my world. I relied on myself. Now, I’m relying on you and David. I feel so helpless.”

“You only feel helpless because you’re hurt. Since we became friends, I felt like I had a sister. I only had that opportunity for a short while before, like my real parents, the feeling was snuffed out. I don’t think I could have made it this far without you. Don’t feel helpless. Just feel like a couple of friends are there for you in case you are helpless. . .okay?” Renee sets her hand on Tessa’s shoulder.

“Sure. I know we’ll make it.”

“Dinner’s done,” Elliot calls out.

They all sit at the table and begin to eat. The food tastes fresh and nourishing to them after all of their traveling. After they finish, Sally and Stephan fall asleep at the table and Elliot puts them to bed. A soft buzzer goes off to signal dusk. Elliot stands up and opens another closet with a stone door and shoves Sally and Stephan into it, hiding it with a tapestry over it. Tessa pulls her sword and stands holding onto the chair for support. David and Renee stand up and walk over to Elliot. They take each other’s hands.

“Now what do we do?” Renee asks Elliot.

“Now. . .we wait.”

Chapter VIII

“We are ready for the invasion as usual sir. We can begin.” A guard walks up to Toregone.

Toregone stands with his back to a doorframe and watches the sun setting. He notices the guard’s words but pays little attention to them.

“Sir? Did you hear me? We’re ready.”

“I heard you. I’m waiting. Tonight’s going to be different. I want a full plan before we leave. Go tell the others that we attack in shadow formation tonight, and not in human form.”

“Yes sir.”

The guard walks out of the room and toward the barracks. Toregone buttons his blouse and puts his vest on. He straightens his black boots and tucks in his shirt. A gong goes off to alert the men of the setting of the sun and the coming of dusk. He leaves his room and slicks his hair back. In a window on the third floor, Thomas watches the activity. He catches Toregone’s eye and gives him a thumbs-up signal.

Toregone walks into the barracks and salutes his fleet of shadows. Already in line formation, they follow him out into the courtyard. The troop marches, like a single creature, along the wall for a mile until they come to a rather large, ogre-looking man who salutes to Toregone and opens a heavy wrought iron gate. In two straight lines the shadows walk out into the forest and pick up on a trail at a higher speed march. The branches swoop by them and crack at the crushing of their feet.

Wearing their armor, the guards begin their nightly descent upon New Cosmia. Burlap sacks are carried at their waists, tied to their belts. Their swords dangle aimlessly at their sides and shine in the light from the waning moon. Toregone leads the group throughout the woods until they begin to slow. One of the shadows gives a hand signal to Toregone from the back of

the lines and they stop. In front of them, a large ditch full of dead bodies, blocks their path. Some of the bodies are humans who had once been changed into the shadow men. The ditch is a trap that had been set years ago by the New Cosmian people to stop the raids. .it had worked only once. The same guard who gave the signal to stop, gives another signal, he flattens his hand. Toregone nods his head and shifts into a formless, dark and shadowy figure. The others do the same and they continue slowly toward the city. .now in their sights.

The city's streets are empty but that doesn't keep the king's guards from terrorizing the entire premises. Windows are smashed and doors are broken down. Chimneys are plugged to smoke the people out. The commotion begins to shake the ground and Toregone steals away into Eliot's home.

Fires destroy a few buildings and people run everywhere, climbing trees just to escape entrapment by the shadows. Children become shackled when they are caught. Their hands and feet bound in cold steel. Their parents are either killed or taken for transformation.

Fifty guards race through the homes, burglarizing and smashing everything in their paths. The burlap sacks become full and the guards are nearly ready to leave. The guard second in command finds Toregone.

“Sir, what should we do now? Are we ready to leave? We have 27 children and 12 adults.”

“I will stay behind. Take what you have and go back to the palace. I will be there shortly. . .I have a special item on my hit list.”

The guard salutes to Toregone and hurries out. The fleet begins a retreat toward the palace with their loot and hostages. Their trip home is swift and easy for they use the front entrance with no need of stealth. Thomas enters the courtyard and surveys the prizes that the troops have brought home.

“Good job! Excellent work. This is one of the better nights I see. Cage the children and the adults separately as usual. Bring anything of value to my father.”

“Yes, your highness.” The group answers back.

Thomas enters the palace and walks to the throne room where Gelleon sits. He enters and closes the new door behind him.

“They are back father.”

“Where is Toregone? I want a report.”

“He was not with the troops. He must still be in the city. Perhaps he has found something?”

“Good. . .good. Yes. Maybe he has. Think of it son. It’ll soon be over and this puny fortress and kingdom will expand!” Gelleon laughs. “Now, what have the troops brought back?”

“They brought slaves. Children mostly. Some adults. The children look strong and healthy.”

“Wonderful. Soon our army will be strong and the Shadow men will attack and seize control of New Cosmia! Go to the troops and tell them to alert me to Toregone’s arrival.”

“Yes father.”

Thomas leaves the room and closes the door behind him. He goes back down to the barracks and the outpost where nearly all of the captives have been caged.

“Rembrandt,” Thomas turns to one of the guards, “When Toregone returns, find me and tell me at once. My father wants me to talk to him about going out on one of the raids”

“Yes, your majesty. . .right away.” Rembrandt replies and salutes.

Toregone wanders through the doctor’s home. He pulls paintings from the wall and throws them to the floor in the hallway. He walks up the stairs, looking into each room.

“Ah, dear old friend. You haven’t even changed the layout since we came.”

He walks into one of the rooms and touches the mantle over the fireplace. The night fills the room and casts shades of dark over everything. Toregone knocks an unlit candle off and steps on it as he passes. The porcelain base shatters.

“Yes. . .I know you two are here. I can feel you. It’ll only be a matter of time before you are found.”

Elliot listens to the smashing sounds coming from above while Stephan and Sally run from the closet and cling to his sides. Renee takes David’s hands and watches the ceiling as pieces of clay and dirt fall to the floor.

“What’s going on up there? Do you think they will burn the house down like they did in Cosmia?” Renee asks trembling.

“They haven’t used fire since the old city. . .I don’t think they will set fire tonight. But I think it’s almost over. It usually doesn’t last this long.” Elliot remarks.

Tessa sits up on the cot. She begins to rub her knee and leg. The lanterns flicker and send shadows dancing and skipping about the room and into corners. She watches the flame in the fireplace and it consumes her attention. The hypnotizing flames put her into a trance.

“When do you think this’ll stop? I think they know we’re here.” David says.

“I don’t know. And I don’t think my house can take much more of this.”

The walls shake slightly. Gelleon punches his fist through it and crumbles the plaster. The wooden beams of the structure begin to creak and Toregone slips out of the room and continues his search. The shaking stops. He opens all of the doors on the top floor and goes into the last one. A brick fire place stands against a wall. He walks over to it and sifts through the ashes. They don’t seem to have been from any recent fires. A jewelry box catches his attention and he hurries to it with anticipation. He throws open the lid and pokes through the miscellaneous pieces of gold and silver. When he is done, he dumps it into a small burlap sack and draws it shut.

Toregone walks over to the fireplace and picks up one of the iron tools. He smashes the brick and again, the house begins to shake. Renee watches the fireplace in the basement fill with ash. Tessa blinks out of her trance and stands up.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“He’s destroying my house!”

Toregone walks back out to the lower floor and begins smashing wooden posts and columns. He tears at the walls and shatters the windows. The stairs he leaves in one piece and goes back up them. He walks into a room and transforms back into a shadow in the corner.

Chapter IX

A few minutes pass before a low rumbling noise is heard. The walls shake although they are far beneath the house. Renee clings to David who in turn clings to her.

“It’s all the same! It’s happening all over again! What do we do? How can we escape?”
Renee becomes hysterical remembering that night of the fire so many years ago.

“Calm down girl! You shouldn’t talk. We wait. If they find their way here, we fight and hope that they don’t find Sally or Stephan. Can you two fight as well as Tessa?”

“I can fight. So can Renee, she just hates tight spaces. In fact, Renee can do just about everything I can do, mostly better.”

Tessa hops over to David and Renee. Her leg is still very sore and is painful to move.

“I can fight, but I may injure my leg even more than already. I didn’t show anyone what happened, but this was stuck into my leg in the swamp.”

She pulls out a long claw with tiny barbs on the end. It is curved and black. She places it back into her hip-pack.

“You can use the weapons that I gave to you. They will prove to be very helpful in battle,” She adds.

“I don’t think any weapon that you own will be useful. These weapons were your birthrights,” Elliot says.

He pulls out the drawer under the couch. Then he removes all of the blankets. Two staff-swords are drawn out. Elliot stands with them and hands the sword with the pure silver blade to David. He takes it and the handle is a perfect fit to his hand. The second one is only half the size of the first. Elliot hands it to Renee. As she takes it, the sword begins to glow blue. It extends to the exact length of David’s. Its handle is also a perfect fit to her hand.

“These two swords were crafted the day after you were born. They were forged for your use against Gelleon. These are the only weapons in this land that will hurt the king and his men. I have something else for you.”

He goes back to the drawer and reaches into the far back. He brings out a pair of leather boots, leather patched pants, and a white shirt with a light coat of chain mail.

“These are your father’s fighting clothes. I found them before they burned as I went in to find you and your parents. The fire took everyone by surprise. It was the first attack. I guess that no one had time to ready themselves. Renee, I found a suit for you as well.”

Again he reaches into the drawer and pulls out a dress of fine material with a leather bodice and a headband similar to Tessa’s. There’s also pair of long leather boots match the bodice. Renee takes the purple dress from Elliot. She holds it up to her cheek and tear falls.

“My mother made this for me. I remember walking into her room as she was making it. She told me that it would be a gift in the future. She had a similar dress. She was wearing it when Toregone murdered her. Thank you for recovering this. I’d forgotten about it,” Renee holds it up to her.

It is a perfect fit. The boots also fit her. The outfit was like out of the old days of warriors. She spun to make the skirt of it twirl. Then she notices something on the back.

“I guess my mother never finished sewing it.”

“What do you mean? Let me see,” Elliot takes the dress and examines the back. A long slit runs down the back but doesn’t cut the dress all the way.

“She finished the dress. I guess you just aren’t ready to wear it yet,” He explains.

“What do you mean. . . ‘Not ready’?” She takes the dress back.

“It was a trait that skipped generations. Your mother told me once that your grandmother had wings. Your mother didn’t. Now you will. I guess you aren’t the right age.”

“Are you saying that I’ll have wings?!?”

“It must have been a genetic flaw that occurred several years ago. It was before your grandmother’s time even I’m sure.”

“I’m going to have wings. . .?” she says in disbelief. “My back hurts right now. It has all day, in fact. At first I thought that it was sore from the fall we took down the hill. I realized though that it has hurt since I woke up this morning. I wish that everything was as it was before Toregone showed up at my house.”

“So do I,” David smiles and raises his eyebrows.

Renee smiles and blushes remembering their kiss. The walls stop moving and the rumbling stops. The lanterns that hang on the wall rock back and forth and slowly stop. Elliot gets up from the chair that he sat in next to the fire and opens the closet door. Sally steps out followed by Stephan. They glance around.

“Father,” says Stephan, “they went early. Do you think that we are being set up for a trap?”

“Don’t be a dummy Stephan! Daddy wouldn’t have let us out if we were in any danger. Besides, didn’t you hear? They are the prince and princess. They are here to fight for us!” Sally hugs Renee.

“We have to leave tomorrow, but I promise we will be back and we will stop the night raids. As for the prince and princess thing, don’t go around repeating it okay? We haven’t gone by those titles for a long time and I doubt that I would even know how to act. But I do make one promise, we will stop the raids.”

“I promise that I. . .I mean we won’t tell anyone who you are. If we can do anything to help, just ask.” Elliot reassures.

“I don’t thing that will be necessary, but we’ll see. Maybe when we come back you can help us.”

“With what?” Stephan asks.

“I’m not sure yet. I know there will be something though,” Renee says.

“I feel weak. I think I’m gonna faint,” Tessa just barely makes out the words.

Elliot rushes over and picks her up. He lays her on one of the cots and looks at her leg. The wound is becoming red and swollen. It begins to bleed through the bandage. Elliot opens a black doctor’s bag and removes a gauze wrap, rubbing alcohol, and medical ointment. A cold sweat runs down Tessa’s cheek joining with a single tear. Elliot uses cotton to clean her wound and then wraps it.

“She has a fever. I think she may be having an allergic reaction to the creature that cut her. If she keeps it elevated and gets a lot of rest tonight, the pain will be less in the morning. As for the fever, Stephan, bring me the flask of leaves marked ‘Fever’ in the pantry. This should help her get to sleep and bring the temperature down by morning. Tessa, how does your leg feel now?”

“My head is spinning. I’ve never felt so strange in my life. My leg feels like there are thorns jabbed in it. Here, this was the object I pulled from it.”

She reaches into her sack and pulls the claw out. Elliot takes it and places it into a flask of Hydrogen Peroxide. The claw fizzes and the bubbles rise like a cloud. He wraps the wound with clean gauze and places a pillow under the hurt leg.

“Try to sleep. Your body will heal itself. Renee, David, do you think you could find your way up to the main floor?”

“I remember the way,” David says.

“Then go upstairs and see what’s happening. Bring your weapons in case it’s a trap. Stay on your guard, and be careful.” Elliot goes back to tending to Tessa’s leg and David and Renee go upstairs.

They follow the way that they had come in and find their way back to the closet on the main floor. They cautiously peer outside. The den is empty. Only a few items lay broken on the floor. Otherwise, everything looks to be normal. Renee and David think that it is best to split up and search the villa. Renee goes up a winding staircase and David goes into the back of the home.

Upstairs, Renee sees that there are normal rooms that are used as decoys. They are completely furnished. In the first room, a master bed and a crib are set up. It was the room first attacked. That was when Elliot lost his youngest daughter when she was just three. He also lost his wife here. The second room has a bunk bed set. It is the twin’s room. A blanket lies on the floor in the corner. Renee walks over to it and picks it up. Toregone jumps out grabbing her arm. Renee screams and thrashes out at him with her weapon. He leaps back and cries out.

David races up the stairs. Renee is rammed into the wall and falls holding her shoulder. David bursts into the room just in time to see Toregone change into a giant bird. He stands tall, nearly touching the ceiling. David runs over to Renee. Her shoulder has been hurt again. Toregone's talons latch onto the floor as he walks toward them. He bobs his head up and down. Suddenly, with the swiftness of sound, Toregone seizes Renee and lifts her into the air. Renee screams out in pain and fear. David cleaves viciously at the monstrous talons. Toregone thrusts his beak through the ceiling and creates a hole large enough to fly through. The ceiling falls in, nearly crushing David. Toregone takes flight and soars away with Renee still screaming.

David runs down the stairs falling and rolling. Elliot appears out of the closet with a frightened expression on his face. The house shakes with the sound of the ceiling collapsing. Elliot evacuates Sally and Stephan from the villa while David grips onto Renee's sword as it falls through the crumbling floor. He meets Elliot outside who is holding Tessa and guiding the twins. David runs back into the villa and grabs the two sets of clothes Elliot had given them. He brings them back out, removes his tennis shoes, and replaces them with the leather boots.

"My mom would kill me if I ruined my clothes."

He runs to a small supply shed and changes into his clothing. Stephan places the dress Renee's mother had made into her duffel.

Moments later a crowd has gathered around the doctor's villa. David comes back out. He is an exact image of his father.

“This doesn’t look too weird, does it?”

The people look at him in awe. Some cry out ‘The king!’ and others bow. David looks at the crowd with a confused look and then to the sky to find Toregone. He is only a small figure in the dark sky and can barely be seen.

“David, if you follow the river bank, you will see a large raft. It’s my raft and you’re free to use it. Take it down the river. It should lead you to the mountains that Toregone, the leader of the king’s Shadow Men, is taking Renee. Here is Renee’s bag. Good luck and stay to the left path. Don’t take the right fork or it will lead you straight for a waterfall,” Elliot says.

“Thank you for all of your help. We’ll both come back.” David runs toward the river.

As he boards the raft, he notices a reed pole leaning against the flag-post. He picks it up and begins to push himself in the direction of the flow of current. The river moves him faster and faster as he reaches the rapids. Toregone is still in sight and is easier to see. David remembers the fun he had with Renee before all of this happened. He remembers how he was so afraid to talk to her, and now all he wants to do is talk to her. He thinks to himself ‘Hang on Renee. I won’t let anything happen to you. . .I promise.’

Trees are now on either side of the river and it begins to flow more slowly. The water splashes at him as it hits the rocks. It is icy cold. David's arms hurt from pushing along with the pole. He feels strangely tired. A low humming noise fills his ears. Warily he presses on. The forest grows darker with every inch. The noise becomes louder. He can hardly stand up and feels himself supporting his body with the pole. Slowly he drifts along and soon falls asleep.

Chapter X

When he awakens, a young maiden stands over him with a pair of brightly colored wings. Her face is wise and understanding and yet David feels threatened. He reaches for the dagger that Tessa had given him and realizes that his hands are tied behind his back. His ankles are tied as well. A young boy walks over to the maiden and hands her Renee's bag, her sword, and David's sword. Another young boy walks up and hands her David's belt and dagger.

His head swims with dizziness. His eyes can hardly focus and his lips can barely move to speak. He rolls over onto his back and pulls his arms around his legs so that they are in front of him. He can hear the water steadily flowing behind him and plans to make an escape but the

woman begins to speak.

“Don’t think about escaping. I have no intention of harming you. I only wish to know what you are doing on this branch of the river and heading for Gelleon’s palace. Do you work for him?”

“No. . .never! Untie me! I have to continue down river. You are right though; I am heading for the palace. A friend of mine was kidnapped and I’ve got to find her. It was by one of Gelleon’s men. I suppose you work for him.”

“Don’t be silly! I work for no one. I am Angelica of Dark Wood. I live here, and serve no one. I am friend to no one and enemy to no one. Tell me, what is your name.”

“I am David, son of the king of Cosmia before Gelleon destroyed it. I suppose you weren’t a friend to the Cosmian people either.”

“Actually, no. But my mother was. I knew your father, and your mother. I heard they had been killed with you as well.”

“No. Just my father. Renee’s parents were killed. She is my friend. . .untie me.”

“You sure are pushy. Gazziell, cut him free.”

A small girl walks over to David and cuts the ropes. Then she throws the pieces into the river. As quickly as she came, Gazziell walks away. David stands up and brushes himself off. The river is directly behind him and Elliot’s raft is tied to a tree.

“Tell me Angelica, do you know the way through these woods?”

“I know my way better than anyone. I was born and raised here. I can help you through the woods. But you must promise to never show anyone the way here or from here. If they become lost, then they are lost. It is their problem.”

“What about Renee? Can I show her the way out?”

“There are other ways to get from the palace to New Cosmia. That is assuming that that’s where you are from.”

“Yes. How will I find my way from it though?”

“If you destroy the king, the power over the Shadow People will be released and they shall turn back into their human form again. Even my people who were captured will turn back.

I will show you the way, and my people will bring your raft to the mouth of the river. That is where you will find it and the way home. Follow me.”

She leads him into the darkest part of the heart of the forest. It is so dark that David can hardly see, and nearly trips a few times. They walk on a path of some sort. It feels very familiar to David as he passes stone figures guarding other passes. He remembers this path and his mind places it as the one that he and the others had used to escape. He and his mother had taken one of the guarded paths and found their way to the outside world.

“No one has used these paths in over one twenty years to my knowledge. Few dare to travel on it. It is the roadway between the three domains. Cosmia, Dark Edge Wood, and Dark Wood used to share these passes as friends. Much has changed over so many years.”

David listens to Angelica as he walks along the weed-grown paths. A ribbon becomes entangled on his boot. He picks it up and examines it. The purple ribbon is dirty and damp.

“This was Renee’s. She had it on one of her pigtails the night of the fire. Our families used these paths to escape. This must have fallen out of her hair that night.”

“You remember strange things, David. You know, you and Renee are something of a legend. There were stories of strange children wondering around at the time of the fire. My people say that these two children could escape from anything and have nerves of steel. I’m not

sure if these are exaggerations or what.”

“Renee is the brave one. She jumped into a river to escape from Toregone when she was just a little kid. She was terrified of water after that and yet she still managed to jump into a lake and rescue our friend from drowning. Then she swam out into the middle of a pond to rescue our friend’s little sister. I haven’t done much of anything.”

“You were brave enough to sail down the river and then you were brave enough to trust me. Now you are here in the middle of a dark forest with a stranger. I’d say that’s brave.”

“Or stupid. . .is that light up ahead?”

“We are almost clear of the forest now. It isn’t light from the sun. There is a small town up ahead. It is the mid-point. From there is a path. I can take you no further after that.”

They continue walking until they come to the town. It is dead silent. There are only guards out on the streets. The homes and buildings are boarded up and shut tight. The main guard stops them by lowering a gun and hanging a lantern in front of himself.

“Let us pass. This is an emergency. This is the prince of Cosmia. The princess of Cosmia has been kidnapped by one of Gelleon’s guards. I am Angelica of Dark Wood.”

The guard raises his gun to let them pass. They walk quickly to the other side of the town where a small path cuts through the thick woods. Tall grasses grow in some areas surrounding it.

“This is where you go alone. Remember, my people have no friends or enemies. One favor in return of another favor. Do not come back in through this town. The guards will not allow it. Goodbye.”

Angelica turns and vanishes into the darkness of the night. The long, narrow path reaches out in front of David. He takes a breath and begins his treacherous journey. Strange eyes watch him as he jogs down the path. Bats attack him out of fear. He pulls his cape closed. He feels safer and runs faster. The path begins to grow wider as he comes to a large brick wall.

He stops. The sun is beginning to rise over the mountains. He turns around and can see the path he had come down. On either side is a canyon over one hundred feet deep. David swallows hard and tries to figure a way to get onto the other side of the wall. He walks a mile before he recognizes the wall. Unlit torches line the top, and bricks are missing in various locations. He turns toward the surrounding forest. This was where he and his mother had separated from the group. He continues to walk along the wall. He sees something resting against a tree. He cautiously makes his way forward. As he reaches it, he sees that it is a skeleton. An arrow lays within the bones of the ribs, the tip rusted and nearly deteriorated. It is his father's remains though he does not know it. David steps back and looks around him one

more time.

A branch from the other side of the wall cracks. David runs up to the wall and peers in from one of the holes. A large dark shadow passes in front of the opening. David jumps back. The missing brick holes are numerous. He looks back in and begins to carefully slip his feet into the openings, climbing. As he reaches the top, he can see dead trees, skeletons, and other dead creatures besides humans on the dirt floor. The guard disappears around the corner of a large structure. It is Gelleon's courtyard. Quickly, David jumps over the wall and lands with a loud thud. The guard races back around the corner but misses him. A pile of branches, leaves, and dirt hides David from the guard's eyes.

He pokes his head up and hears laughter. A deep voice calls out catcalls to a large cage.

"Meow! Stop that crying, you aren't going to be his supper, your gonna' be his slave for the rest of your miserable life. That goes for you too, Missy. Now who wants to be first? Ha ha ha ha ha!" cries out the voice.

"You leave her alone!" David recognizes the voice of Renee. "She's only a child!"

"Shut up you!" the guard says.

He picks up a large stick and begins to poke at the caged people. Cries of agony and fear shriek out from little children followed by cries of mournfulness from their parents in separate cages.

David leaps out of the brush and charges at the guard sending him flying against the wall. Renee stands up and reaches out for David. He takes hold of her hand and gently kisses it.

“The key is on the guard’s belt. Please hurry. There are other cages to open,” Renee says.

She steps out of the cage. The cape that Richard had given her is draped around her. She flings her arms around David. The small children rush past them toward their parents who are still locked up. David lets go and opens the cages to reunite the parents with their lost children. A large gong sounds. Renee looks up at the top of the palace. Shadow Men line the top with guns and bows and arrows.

“This way. I watched the guards enter over here. It must lead somewhere,” Renee exclaims.

David hands the key to an older girl and follows Renee into a small doorway leading into total darkness. Renee cups her hand and blows dust from the floor into the air. The entire hallway glows green. Several doors lead off into absolute darkness or perhaps into nothingness.

They cautiously make their way down the hall until they come to another intersecting hall.

They glance straight, left, then right.

“Which way do we go?” Renee asks.

“I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure out how you made the hall glow. Try left. Back at Elliot’s, everything was left. Then at the river, I was told to go on the left fork.”

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

“I don’t know, but I think we should choose soon. I hear voices from behind us. Go left.”

Renee again lifts dust from the floor. This time she hands it to David. He takes it and looks blankly at her.

“Blow it into the air.”

David blows the dust into the emptiness. It brightly lights up a lime-green. Several more doors show down the corridor now lit. They begin to run through the catacombs. Whispers of forgotten souls echo through their minds. Renee collapses onto the ground holding

her head,

“Not again!”

“What’s happening?!?”

“They’re calling out to me! Can’t you hear them?!?”

“Come on. We have to continue. They’re catching up!”

Renee slowly rises to her feet still holding her head. They run until Renee begins to cry. David pulls her into one of the unlit rooms and shuts the door behind him. He rests her against the wall. She slides onto the floor with tears flowing down her cheeks and her red nose. David sits next to her and holds her until she can speak.

“What’s happening Renee? Are you all right?”

“I can hear the good sides to the Shadow Men. They were transformed into evil beings and it was like their good essence was cast off and trapped in here. When I was caged, they dragged me through these halls. I felt it then, too.”

“What can we do?”

“We have to end Gelleon’s hold over them. We have to stop him. You remember that night! You remember the screams of the people who were running helplessly through the streets being chased by the shadows. They hurt me and killed my parents. They killed your father. We have to stop the transformations today.”

“It’s morning. We have a long time before it is dark again. We can do this, I know it.”

“Not if he gets this locket. As soon as I was caged up, a charm appeared in it. It’s the source of my power. You have powers too. You just haven’t realized it yet. Try to think of something that you want to happen. Just act upon it and chances are that they will.”

David thinks for a moment and then sits up. He stands up and helps Renee to her feet. The voices already passed them. He opens the door and looks out. The hall is still lit and empty. He takes Renee’s hand and leads her out into the hallway.

“We’ve got to find a way out of here. If we can get to the site of the old city, we may find something that’s helpful. If we don’t, we may stay trapped in here. . . forever.”

Renee squeezes his hand. They slowly walk into the hall and go in the direction that they had come from. They follow the lit halls and find themselves back outside. The sun gleams down on them causing them to have to shield their eyes. The courtyard is empty. Only

the unconscious guard lay against the wall and a crying little girl huddles near a cage. She hears David and Renee and turns around nearly screaming. David rushes over to her and puts his hand over her mouth.

“We aren’t going to hurt you. Be quiet, we’ll help you escape,” David says.

The little girl stops crying and David removes his hand. Renee walks over to them and kneels down next to her.

“What’s your name? I’m Renee, and this is David. Where are your parents?”

“Mommy was taken into that door with my sisters and my brother and they didn’t come back.”

She bursts out into tears and wails. Renee holds her and tries to calm her down. She pauses only to take a breath. The guard begins to awaken.

“We’ve gotta’ go Renee.”

Renee lifts the child up and they run to the wall.

“I’ll climb up to the top, then you hand her to me, climb up yourself, and then climb down. I’ll pass her down to you and then I’ll climb down,” Renee explains.

They go into action following Renee's plan. As they reach the top, the guard wakes fully. He stands up and charges at the wall. As he runs, he transforms into a rhinoceros. The wall shakes on impact and collapses. David and the little girl are safe on the ground, but Renee is on top of the wall. She tumbles to the ground and the bricks pile around her. David rushes over to her. She lays on her stomach holding her locket. She turns over and opens her eyes. David lifts her out of the rubble just as the guard reassumes his shape and begins to charge at them. David sets Renee down and picks up the little girl. They run toward the river. The Shadow guard follows them closely. Renee stops.

"The cave!" She cries out.

David makes a turn back toward the woods. They race as fast as they can into the forest. Just as they reach the path, Toregone appears in front of them. Next to him is a tall, young man with a gold staff in his hand. The chasing guard stops and bows down to this man. David sets the young girl down and draws his sword. Renee looks up and then looks at the little girl. She removes her cape and picks her up. Two thin sets of wings spread out. Toregone and the young prince step back. She leaps up into the tree and sets the little girl down and then returns to the ground. David stands in amazement. Her shimmering wings are delicate and sheer. They show off her royal blood. The prince steps forward. David holds his sword up as he advances toward Renee. She pulls her sword out of the duffel bag and threatens him.

“Toregone, you had better tell you ruler that I will strike if he takes another step forward!”

“Back away from the path! Leave us alone! Your rule will end soon pretty-boy. Just keep coming forward.” David warns.

“Now now. . .we mustn’t have any of that. Toregone, retrieve that young girl from the tree. Bring her down here. We will show them what we do to people who dare betray my father.” The evil prince chuckles softly to himself.

“Touch that child and die Toregone!” Renee moves in toward Toregone and then toward the tree.

She leaps back up into the tree and brings the girl back down. Her face is still wet from tears and now her eyes are filled with fear. She clings to Renee as she floats back down. David takes her arm and pulls her behind him. Then out the corner of his mouth whispers to her.

“Fly her to the town. Elliot can take care of her.”

“I’m not leaving you here to fight by yourself!”

“Do it. If you stay here, they will get the kid. If you go, both you and the child will be safe. Take her to the town.”

“No!”

“Will you two just surrender and had that brat over? I’m getting tired of listening to your bickering!” The prince yells.

“Who do you think you are?!? You can’t just go around taking kids and transforming them into slaves like Toregone. Look at her. Can’t you see the fear in her eyes. Can’t you see that she is frightened? Your father took her family. Your father also took my family. Cosmia would still be around if your father wasn’t so jealous!” Renee begins to cry.

“Well well. It seems as if there is a princess in our midst. I knew you would come, I just didn’t think you’d be so. . .so common. Bow down Toregone, this may be your future queen. I am truly sorry Princess. I haven’t introduced myself. I am Thomas, son of Gelleon.”

“I know who you are and forget it! I would never be your queen! You stay away from me or I’ll kill you myself!”

Thomas’ face grows angry and he pulls out a long, curved sword. Toregone leaps at Renee and pins her down. The little girl crawls out from under Toregone and begins to pound on him. David runs at Thomas with his sword in hand. Thomas swings his sword at David and

misses but manages to knock his sword out of hand. David stops and goes after it. As he turns his back to retrieve it, Thomas grabs him by the shoulder and he turns around. David falls backwards as a blow to the face hits with extreme force. Thomas laughs and unnoticeably cradles his hand. David covers his face with his palm and stands back up, his sword in his other hand.

Renee screams and both Thomas and David stop and turn to see what is going on. Toregone slaps Renee across the face with the back of his hand. The little girl rolls off of him and begins to run toward the woods. Renee cries out. David breaks away from Thomas and runs at Toregone. From where Thomas stands, his body disappears and then reappears in David's path, blocking his way and view.

"Going somewhere? What's wrong? You don't want to walk away from a fight do you, David?"

"That's it!" David yells.

With a quick blow, Thomas falls to the ground holding his stomach. David drops his sword and backs away.

"I killed someone! Oh my god! I'm a murderer. . .he deserved it."

He looks over at Renee who is struggling under Toregone who continuously pins her to the ground. David lifts his sword again and walks over to him.

“Get off her. . .now! See what I have done? I killed a man. I will kill you if you don’t get off of her!”

Toregone stands up and seems to grow much taller than Renee or David. Renee sits up and then backs away, holding her cheek. The little girl helps Renee up while David holds his sword in a fighting position. Toregone stops growing and stares down at them. Then he transforms into a familiar shape. Renee stares.

“Mother?” Renee asks.

“Ha ha ha. That’s what you think!” He yells.

He reaches out and grabs her arm. With cunning speed she flies up into the air until she can go no further up. David can see her only as a speck. The little girl tugs on David’s chain mail.

“My name is Sarah. I know you think that she won’t be able to handle Toregone, but I know she can.”

“How do you know that?”

“As Toregone caged her, she lashed out at him and punched him. She sent him flying into another guard. He didn’t mess with her after that. She’s strong and smart. We were caged near each other and she told me all about the world you two come from. With the cars and the buildings, it must be a fun place.”

“You’re pretty smart. How old are you?”

“I’m five. Can we go home now? I miss my daddy. My sisters, brother, and my Mommy are still inside. They was turned into one of those shadow people.”

“We’re going to take care of you until we can figure a way to get you back to your parents. For now, though, you have to do everything we say. Now when Renee comes back down, we have to go somewhere very special. See that path?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, that’s the path that will take you home. You can’t go by yourself. It’s too dangerous.”

David freezes. Thomas begins to move. Vines begin to grow from beneath him and then begin to cover him. David jumps back with fear. Sarah just stands there.

“Yeah, he’s dead all right.”

“What’s happening to him?”

“That’s what happens when someone dies here. Everything will return to the Earth. Now it’s his turn.”

“Good riddens.” He looks up. “Renee!”

There is no reply. Suddenly, Renee appears from behind a cloud and appears to be falling. She is fighting with Toregone. Just as she reaches the tops of the trees, Toregone releases his hold and Renee falls to the ground. David fights his way into the woods through the thick trees and tall vine-grass. As they reach her she is holding her shoulder again. Her once regal wings now hang wrinkled and limp. She pulls herself up by a vine hanging from a tree.

The brush begins to move as David takes her hand and helps her over a rather large hole. Sarah begins to get fidgety and scared and then starts to whine.

“David, Renee, someone’s in the bushes. Look!”

The bush stops moving and Tessa springs out at them. Her leg is healed and she is ready to fight.

“Ah ha! I found you! Do you know how hard it is to find your way through these woods? Man, especially when some winged-lady refuses to help you. Geeze!”

“Tessa! You’re in a good mood.” Renee exclaims.

“My leg feels much better. You know, this looks just like my home! I feel right at home in these woods.”

“Not for long! Another friend to add to the list of slaves?” Torgone says as he plows through a small stand of trees.

They turn and begin to run into the silence and darkness of the forest. Renee’s wings catch on the thorny trees of the wilderness. She lags behind them still holding her wounded shoulder. David slows a bit to let her catch up and Tessa holds Sarah’s hand and advances far into the obscurity. Renee’s face begins to turn pale and white. She begins to slow down and wheezes. Her delicate wings begin to sag and she starts to trip on the roots sticking up from the ground. She removes her hand from her shoulder. It is covered with blood. Suddenly she falls

to the ground.

“He stuck me with something. That’s the third or fourth time this shoulder has been hurt. . .couldn’t they hurt the other one?” She weakly smiles. “I can’t walk. I can’t even feel my legs.” Tears begin to fall from her eyes. “Get Tessa and the kid back to the town.”

“I am not leaving you.”

He lifts her up and help her walk along the trail. Two gargoyles block the entrance to a path. It is the same path that Renee had taken as a child. Tessa and Sarah turn down this path. Toregone stops at the passage, he dares not advance. David sets Renee down.

“Her heart is barely beating Tessa! Her breath is so faint. She’s slipping in and out of consciousness. What do I do?!?”

“I don’t think there’s anything you can do David. We have to get her back to Elliot. He can help her. . .maybe.”

He picks her up again. Another tear falls from her cheek. It falls at the same time as David’s tear falls. He knows in his mind that she is in fact dying and that if he doesn’t get her back to the town that she will die in his arms. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the purple ribbon and places it in her hand. She slowly grips it.

“My. . .”

“Don’t say anything. Try to save your strength. We will get you back to normal soon. .
.I promise.”

A rushing water sound echoes against the canyon walls. David stops and looks around. The raft isn’t there. He pauses for a moment then moves on. Further down river they see a small girl sitting on a tree stump and playing a pipe. Tied to a large tree is the raft. Tessa and Sarah run up to it and board it. David slowly walks trying to make sure that no harm comes to Renee. The young girl stands up and stops playing.

“What do you think you are doing? Who are you?”

“This is my raft. Please, we’re trying to hurry. My friend is dying,” David explains.

“Let me see her,” she says.

David sets her down onto the soft, earthy ground. The girl leans over and examines Renee. Then stands shaking her head. Renee’s face is covered in a feverish sweat and is turning blue around the lips and sides of her cheeks.

“I don’t think she will be able to make the trip up river. The rapids can get pretty ferocious. You had better let me take her to the village, we have a doctor there.”

“But Angelica said that I shouldn’t go back there.”

“Angelica doesn’t live in my village. Come, we should hurry and go now.”

Tessa and Sarah climb off the raft and follow the little sprite and David. They reach a guarded gate but are let through without questions.

“By the way, my name is Mallory. The man in the hut over there is our town doctor. He can heal anything. Come on,” says the sprite.

The hut is a shaggy hay hut with no windows and only one door. A small pipe leads into the top and smoke gently puffs out in rhythmic fashion. Mallory stops at the door and rings a bell with a rope that is secured over a well. An old man appears in the doorway and greets them.

“Well, we don’t get too many outsiders here. Come in. I see your friend is sick.”

The doctor leads them inside and takes Renee from David. He sets her on a grass rug and sits over her.

“This isn’t good. What has happened?” The doctor asks.

Renee’s eyes remain shut but a small tear gently rolls down her cheek every few minutes. David takes her hand and gently kisses it. Then he begins to smooth out her wings.

“We were in a fight. She was injected with some kind of poison,” David explains.

“Shame on you. Two young people should try to get along,” the doctor gives David a look.

“Not us! One of Gelleon’s men. His lead guard Toregone did this. She fell and Toregone got away. She told me when she was stronger that she was losing the feeling in her legs. The wound on her shoulder is bleeding badly, too. You can help her. . .right? I promised her that she’d be all right. I can’t let her down. . .I love her.”

David looks down as a tear fall from his eyes. He removes his cape and places it over her to keep her warm. The doctor shakes his head in slight uneasiness.

“I’m sorry. I’m not really sure what I can do for her, but I’ll try. Please, wait outside

and don't come in until I tell you that it's okay. I have to have time."

David stands up and walks out of the hut. Tessa picks up Sarah, who is sleeping, and brings her outside too. Mallory waits to leave.

"Do you know who these people are Mallory?" asks the doctor.

"Yes. Angelica of Dark Wood told me to wait with their raft by the river. She really did not want them to go back through the forest. This is Renee Cosmic. She is the princess of the destroyed city of Cosmia. David is the prince. They came to destroy Gelleon."

"Well I never! I guess the tales are true. I'd better do everything I can to save her. Now you both have to wait outside."

Mallory walks out of the hut and sits next to Tessa. Tessa has fallen asleep in the warm silence. David gets up from leaning against a tree and brings Renee's bag to the hut. The doctor gives him permission to come in just for a moment.

"Give this to her when she wakes up. There's a dress in it that was made by her mother. I know she would want it."

“I will. . .don’t worry. Wait outside. I don’t know how long it will take me. I don’t even know the type of poison that was injected into her system.”

David reaches into the duffel bag and brings out a quill. He hands it to the doctor. Then he looks down at Renee. Her face is still very pale.

“This is what the poison was in. Toregone stuck it into her shoulder. Why is this happening?”

“I think I can find out a way to revive her. As to your question, I don’t know anything about what happened years ago. This is a fairly new town. I have only heard tales and legends. To meet you is, to me, an honor your majesty.”

“I’m no ruler. . .please. . .just bring her back.”

David turns and walks out of the hut. Tessa wakes up and stands. She stretches her arms out and yawns. The sun is directly above them and is very warm. Tessa walks over to him and joins him in the shade.

“Tessa, would you be able to find your way back to Elliot’s?”

“Sure. I passed straight through here this morning. There is a good path that leads directly to the city. It beats taking that raft upstream.”

“Take Sarah there. We’re only endangering her life while she’s with us. How long will it take to get there and back?”

“Only about twenty minutes there and if I run, about ten minutes back. But I can’t run with Sarah.”

“Okay, I think we’re safe here. Here, take your dagger with you just in case.”

“But I gave it to you.”

“Well, you will be coming back, so just give it to me when you get back. It will make me feel a lot better about not going. Besides, I have my sword.”

“Okay. I’ll wake up Sarah and we’ll go.”

She walks over to Sarah and gently wakes her up. She explains to her that they are going to go and they walk away onto the trail. The guard lets them pass.

“I’m going to be coming back,” she tells the guard.

Slowly she and Sarah disappear into the cool shade of the forest. David hangs his head, for now he is alone thinking about Renee. Mallory has already gone and David sits under the diminishing shade of a tree. Passers-by stop and look and call him a fallen knight. His blade sits in the sun and reflects the light in many directions.

Inside the doctor’s hut, the doctor works hard at finding a way to make Renee awaken. Time passes slowly and he tries many different things such as rubbing herbal leaves into her wound, dripping different medicines into her mouth, and acupuncture. Still she lays there in a strange sleep-like trans. Her skin growing ever more pale, a black fluid begins to seep from her wound. Her eyes are still closed. She turns her head with the pain from her shoulder. The doctor takes this as a good sign that she is still conscious. He opens a small trunk and takes out a leather pouch. Inside is three different types of leaves. There are red leaves, green leaves, and orange leaves. With only a few of each, the doctor takes only one of each and spreads them across her forehead. Renee’s eyes loosen up and her cheeks grow pale pink. The doctor stands up and walks outside. David stands up immediately.

“Well?

“She’ll wake up within the next ten minutes. As soon as I realized what type of poison it was, I knew there was only a few ways of curing it. It was the same poison that is being used by Gelleon to change you humans to his slaves. You can come in and see her if you want, she’ll be

fine. Where did your friends go?”

“They went to New Cosmia. Will she be okay?”

“For goodness sakes, come in and see her if you don’t believe me.”

David walks into the hut and kneels down next to Renee. Her eyes are still shut but her hands and cheeks are warm. David takes her hand and holds it talking quietly to her.

“Renee, wake up. I told you that I wouldn’t let you die. Tessa’s gone back to Elliot’s. She took Sarah. She’ll be back soon, and then we can go back there and rest until you are strong again. Wake up, it’s me. . .David.”

She turns her head toward David and a small smile stretches across her face.

“I know that it’s you. My eyes are so heavy.” She takes a breath. “My legs feel like they’re asleep. You know that tingling feeling you get when you sit funny for too long? My shoulder still feels numb.” She takes another breath. “Maybe next time they’ll hit the other one?” She smiles. “I’m glad you, Tessa, and Sarah are all right. I’m sorry for pulling such a stupid stunt.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you talk too much? I’m just glad that you’re okay. You really scared us. From now on, we fight as a team, not as individuals. It isn’t your fault that you got hurt. Toregone is the one to blame.”

“Still, I should have been more careful.”

She opens her eyes a little and grins.

“I was so busy in the catacombs that I hadn’t noticed that you were wearing your outfit. You look very handsome in it you know?”

David blushes. He turns around and reaches for her dress. Then he brings it back in front of him.

“I brought you yours. I thought that you could use it instead of your normal clothes. Your shirt is ripped in the back.”

“That’s why I was wearing the cape.”

The doctor comes back into the hut.

“Okay, let her rest now. She needs to sleep for a good hour or so for the medicine to take full effect. You can see her when she wakes up. In the meantime, my son is cooking dinner right now. We could bring her there and eat something while she sleeps in a soft bed.”

“We have to wait for Tessa to get back. She has only been gone for about fifteen minutes. I don’t want to get up and leave without her knowing where to find us.”

“Okay. We can wait a little while.”

“It should only be another fifteen minutes. . .I hope,” David looks out the door.

Chapter XI

Tessa and Sarah reach New Cosmia. Sally and Stephan are playing a game of catch when she walks into town carrying Sarah. She slowly wakes up as they round the corner. Sally runs to get the wayward thrown ball and nearly knocks Tessa down.

“Tessa! Your back! Where’s Renee and David? Are they all right? Did you help defeat Gelleon?”

“No. David and Renee are in another village right now. Renee was hurt but will be okay. David is fine. We haven’t defeated anyone. David did kill Gelleon’s son though. Renee hurt Toregone. Let’s go back to your house. I can only stay a moment, then I have to get back.”

They walk to the clinic and slowly open the door. Five children with their parents stand and sit in the waiting room. Tessa looks around for a good place to stand that isn’t in anyone’s way.

“Where did all these people come from Sally?”

“They came back from Gelleon’s hold. They all say the same story about a knight and a fairy that freed them. It must have been David but I don’t know about the fairy. Do you think they’re talking about Renee?”

“Hmmm, I suppose. Sally I really do have to go. Take Sarah to your father. I think she should have a check up.”

Sally takes Sarah’s hand as Tessa walks out the door. She begins to run down the path. Several blockades and barriers that had been broken down, lay in shambles. She runs past them in a great hurry. Trees seem to fly by as she concentrates on her footing. Carefully, but quickly, she makes her way up to the standing guard. He lets her pass without a second thought. David greets her outside the hut and they both go back inside to see how Renee is.

“David, Elliot is busy in the clinic. It was packed.”

“Those must have been the slaves that we released. I only wish that I could have done more.”

“How is she?”

“She woke up a while ago. The doctor says that she just needs rest now. She spoke to me a bit. I am so relieved that she’s okay.”

“Me too.”

“Now,” the doctor says, “let’s go to my house. My son will have dinner ready by now and Renee can sleep in a comfortable bed. You two can rest some, too.”

The doctor picks up Renee and carries her outside. Tessa and David follow. The sun begins to set as they walk down a small stone path. More straw huts are set up along the way. Torch poles stand ready to light along the path. Few houses are scattered amongst the farmland. Cows and donkeys eat grass in the pastures. They reach a white house with a wooden fence around it. Crops and fields stretch out behind it. A man walks out of the house and shakes the doctors hand.

“This is my son Aaron. Aaron this is David, Tessa, and Renee. They will be joining us tonight. The changing serum poisoned Renee. She is now asleep.”

“Nice to meet you. I made plenty to eat. Father, Janice needs to talk to you. She said something about false-labor or something. Janice is my wife.”

“Oh, I’ll go see her right away.” The doctor takes Renee inside.

Aaron shows David and Tessa into the house. A small fire kindles in the fireplace. A woman comes down the stairs with the doctor. She has long red hair, which is put back into a

corn-twist braid that lays over her shoulder.

“This is Janice,” Aaron says taking his wife’s hand.

“Hello. Your friend was asking for someone named David. Is that you?” she looks at David.

“Yeah. Can I go see her?” David looks at the doctor.

“Sure. By the way, my name is Derek. Take her bag up to her, she wanted that too.” Derek points the way up the stairs and to the room.

David walks up the stairs with the bag at his side. He peers into the room. Renee is sitting up against her pillows and looking out the window. She senses David standing in the door.

“David, I don’t think we’ll ever get there.” She turns to him. “Maybe we’re just not ready to go.”

“Sure we will. We’re ready. We just have to make sure we pay more attention to what we’re doing. We’ll get there. We’re closer that you think. Look what I found.”

He pulls out the other purple ribbon that he found on the trail and hands it to Renee.

“I found both in the woods. They were on a trail that apparently no one has gone down for several years. The trail was thought to have not been used in over twenty years but our parents used it to get us out of the burning town. I think that some of the people who live here are from Cosmia and they settled here after the town was destroyed. That’s why there are guards at the gates. Most memory of Cosmia was lost.”

“I had them in my hair. I remember the way on the path, all except for one area. I fell asleep. That’s when you and your mother disappeared. This all seems so much like a dream and a nightmare put together. Maybe you’re right. Did you bring my bag?”

“Yeah, right here.”

Renee takes the bag and pulls out a brush. Then she pulls out the outfit that her mother had made for her.

I’m going to change now. I can’t stand wearing the same thing for more than a day. Besides, My shirt and pants are full of holes and covered in mud.”

“Okay, I’ll be downstairs. The doctor’s name is Derek; if you need anything call someone up. I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

David kisses her hand and walks out of the room, closing the door behind him. Renee changes into the outfit her mother made her and removes the ponytail holder from her hair. She slowly un-braids her hair and brushes it out. It goes all the way down to her waist. She re-braids it and puts the ponytail holder back onto the end of the braid. She looks at herself in the mirror and remembers her mother very vividly. The smell of warm bread fills the air and then a knock on the door wakes her from her daydream.

“Come in.”

David walks in the door with a plate and glass. Turkey and warm buttered bread, and a glass of milk, balance in his hands.

“I wasn’t sure if you were hungry or not. . .” He stammers and looks at her in the dress. “So I thought I’d bring some dinner up to you.”

“Thank you. I am sort of hungry. You know, I think I may have hit my head or something because I’m beginning to lose the memories of Melanie and Peter. I can remember their names and what they looked like, but my memories of times that I spent with them are fading.”

“I can hardly remember my step-father. I still remember my mom and brother, but my step-dad is the one fading for me. You know what, I forgot about Michael. He was over at

Joey's house for the day and I was supposed to get him and bring him home. I don't think that any of this is amnesia. Instead it is like we are going back in time. Our minds recall living like this and not like normal people. Whether we like it or not, we belong in New Cosmia. They need us as much as we need them."

"I feel the need, too. When we were there, I felt. . .safe, or at home. I never felt like that when I lived in the townhouses. Or anywhere else for that matter. The image of my mom haunts me like reality instead of just a dream now. I can't explain it, but I don't know if I want to go back to Melanie and Peter. I mean, I love them and all. They were my parents for a long time and I will miss them, but I think we should stay in New Cosmia."

"We will have to go back and tell everyone, you know that right?"

"Yeah. I know. They must be so worried about us. They probably have our faces on the billboards and on milk cartons by now."

"They're probably searching the pond by Linzy's."

"We do have to go back, to make sure everything is cleared up. I don't want them to think we're floating around in that pond. Maybe though, they won't let us come back. They'll most likely tell us that at we can't go back to New Cosmia."

“My mom will let us. She’ll probably come back with us.”

“What about Michael and Your step-dad?”

“Michael will come with us, but I have no idea about George. I really don’t know about anything. I’m not sure what’ll happen.”

“There’s also another problem. What if someone finds out about everything and sends news people into the mountains?”

Renee brushes her bangs from her eyes.

“You’re right. We’ll just have to make sure that everyone swears not to tell anyone.”

David sits on the end of the bed while Renee eats.

“Do you think this’ll all work out? I mean, this all seems so impossible. It’s something you would read about in some book or watch on television. Either that or have as a dream after eating spicy food before bed. I mean, it’s the sort of story one dreams up while having a fever.”

“I know. People will think we’re lying about all of this. That’s exactly why we have to limit the number of people we tell.”

“This all seems crazy, but I know we’re supposed to do this. I just hope we’ll succeed.”

“Renee, me too.”

Tessa knocks on the door. She begins rubbing her eyes and yawning.

“Come on in Tess,” says Renee.

Tessa walks over to the bed and sits down on the end next to David. Her eyes are heavy and tired. Renee sets her emptied plate to the side and gets out her brush.

“Tessa, why don’t you redo your hair? Then you can go to sleep. You look so tired.”

“I’m beat. I know I’ll definitely sleep well tonight.” She smiles.

Renee brushes out Tessa’s hair and puts it into a ponytail. Then she gets another rubber band and braids her hair. Tessa reaches into her pouch and pulls out a cloth. She unfolds it and two pills roll out into her hand.

“What are those Tessa?” David asks.

“Just vitamins. The food where I’m from. . .it’s different, and has more vitamins in it. I feel weak when I don’t take these after a couple days. Richard is used to it by now.”

“Oh. Well, I guess there’s not much we can do tonight. I just hope Elliot’s okay. Gelleon’s going to be furious when he finds out that his son is dead,” Renee says.

“I totally forgot about that. Do you think they’ll be safe without a house to protect them?” asks David.

“They’re staying with a friend. That’s what Sally said to me when I took Sarah to New Cosmia.”

“Sarah’s safe? Good. I was a bit worried.” David says reassured.

They look at Renee who has just fallen asleep. Her pillows are only propping her up. Tessa lowers her and her pillows and pulls the sheet over her. David leads out of the room. Tessa shuts the door on the way out.

Downstairs, Derek is sitting next to his son reading a book. Aaron is writing in a journal and Janice is asleep in a rocking chair. David and Tessa walk into the living room and sit in two chairs.

“You two look wearied,” says Derek looking up from his book.

“You have no idea what we’ve been through for the last couple of days,” Tessa says as she removes her cape and folds it.

David begins to tell Derek and Aaron of their trip from the outer world into New Cosmia. They listen carefully like children sitting in front of a storyteller. Finally, David reaches the part about Renee’s injury and then ends it by telling about how Derek saved her life. Allan sits back in disbelief.

“I have heard stories about such people, but I never would have imagined any of it to be true. Two children lost in the woods finding their way to the outside world. . .the tales always said you’d return”

“Well, that’s not exactly how it happened. My mother and I got separated from Renee and her parents. My father was killed. Renee was the only one wandering around in the woods. Then again, she really didn’t wander around, she jumped into a river.”

“Still, the tales were all true. There was another story about your parents being from a different planet. Is that true?”

“Not to my knowledge.” David laughs and then yawns.

“There is a pull out bed under the one Renee is sleeping in, and there is another guest room next to that room. Tessa can sleep on the fold-out bed and David can sleep in the neighboring room,” says Derek.

They get up and go to the rooms. Tessa pulls out the bed very quietly as not to wake up Renee. Soon the silence of night comes and they fall asleep for the first true time in days. The moon rises up into the sky. Clouds pass over it and create strange shadows over a still pond. Tessa wakes up around midnight with a strange feeling. Although she doesn’t know what the feeling means, she acts upon it.

The air is dank and heavy. She stands up and walks to the window. A flock of geese has flown in and landed gracefully on the water. Their honks and cries are muffled a bit by the thickness of the air. As the clouds clear away, the moon’s reflection shines brilliantly in the water. Ripples distort it every now and then as a goose swims by, dunking his head for a fish. A glint of light catches her eye’s attention. A line of lanterns and torches are carried through the forest from the direction of Gelleon’s palace. She runs down out of the room and down the stairs. The den is empty. She races out the door and out to the pond. Loudly she whistles and thunder is heard.

Moments later a beautiful black horse stands proud with his wings spread. Tessa secures her cape and mounts the Pegasus. She points toward the direction of New Cosmia and shakes the reign. With tremendous speed and grace, the proud beast with Tessa on his back, leaps up

into the air and flies toward the town.

Renee turns over and wakes up. She puts her hand on her heart and gathers her voice.

“David,” she mumbles, “David!”

David rushes in the door and to her side.

“I know I feel it too. It’s happening again,” he pauses and looks out the window.

“Look. Gelleon’s going to burn New Cosmia to the ground. . .just like he did when we were kids and it’s all the same. We have to warn Elliot and the other people.”

“Where’s Tessa?!?”

“She must have gone already. Come on. Do you feel strong enough?”

“I feel fine. Whatever Derek did, the poison’s gone.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

They leave a note for the kind family and doctor. Everything is silent in the small town. They depart with great hurry, hoping that they make it there in time to both warn people and

evacuate the town, or to fight off the army. The light from the moon is the only light available. They stop at the river by the raft.

“We can’t go back by boat but we’ll never make it there fast enough on foot. Do you think Angelica will let us go through the woods?” Renee asks.

“I don’t know, it’s worth the chance though. Let’s go.”

As they run down the path, a light appears in front of them.

“Oh no! Are we too late?” Renee asks.

“One way to find out. Let’s keep going.”

They run faster and as they near it, they realize that it is just a bon fire. There is no one in sight. David stops and grabs Renee’s arm.

“Wait. This is a trap. Do you see that out line?” He points to a faint outline on the ground.

“Yeah.”

“Watch this.”

He picks up a rock and throws it into the middle of an area. The ground gives way and opens to a large pit. Renee looks up at the trees and then at David.

“I’ll fly us over this.”

Renee slowly lifts the both of them off the ground and quickly flies over the pit and the fire. As she lands, she and David examine the ground carefully and judge that it is safe to run now. The city comes into view. Masses of people stand in the crossroads. They hear a familiar voice.

“Renee! David! Hurry, we have to find a safe place for all of these people!” Tessa jumps down from the Pegasus and runs up to them.

“It’s happening all over again but this time. . .this time, it will end,” Renee says clenching her fist.

Elliot walks up to them with Sarah in his arms and Sally and Stephan at his side.

“Thank you for returning my lost daughter. I never thought I would see her again.”

Elliot exclaims.

“We had no idea that this was your daughter! She was alone in a cage when I was locked up. Her mother and sisters were taken before David rescued me and the others,” Renee says.

“Elliot, you have to get out of this place! Gelleon and his henchmen are coming, and they are coming with fire. My best guess is that they plan to burn the town down as they did once before. They will destroy this place. You have to leave,” pleads Tessa.

“But we don’t have any other place to go. This valley was our safety in case something happened, and then it did. We built here. No other valley to our knowledge has the space or is capable of living in. You saw the wound on Tessa’s leg. A creature living in one of the other valleys did that. We don’t know where to go,” Elliot says while looking at David and Renee.

“You three are our last hope.” Stephan steps forward. “Then when Tessa goes home you two are the only ones left. Please help us. There are lots of other kids here just like us,” Stephan adds.

The townspeople step forward. They glance at Tessa, David, and Renee. Two men and a woman shove their way up to the front.

“What is the child talking about? What can these three, children themselves, do?” the woman cries.

“Yeah, speak up Doc. Who are these kids?” One of the two men says in a grumbling voice.

Elliot fidgets for the right words. Renee clasps her cape shut as to hide her wings. She can see that they would have no choice but to tell the people, now, who they are.

Elliot looks at David in hopes of some help. Renee steps forward and takes a deep breath.

“I . . . I am Renee Cosmic. I was born in Cosmia before the fires. My family, and David’s family, escaped through old trails in the forest. I lost all of my memories but they have somehow, recently come back. Gelleon killed my parents and David’s father, three of your rulers. Then, in my world, Toregone paid a little visit to David and I. It nearly cost us our friends’ lives. We’ve come back here in hopes of stopping him.”

“I killed his son. The revenge is the cause of his anger. We’ll do as much as we can to stop the destruction of your city, but it would be much safer if you would all hide. Find places that won’t burn. We’ll hold them off as long as possible, but as you’ve pointed out, we’re not exactly the strongest people. . . we are just kids. In fact there is only one warrior-type person among us. Tessa is trained for fighting. Now, there isn’t much time, they’ll be here soon. You

all must hide or leave.”

The town’s people stare in awe. Elliot begins to gather Sally, Stephan, and Sarah together. A low rumbling noise echoes from the forest. The people begin to disperse into their homes and board up the windows. Elliot looks at his ruined home.

“Elliot, I think it might be best if you took your children to your clinic. It’s a solid enough building. Thank you for all of your help. I hope to see you, David, and Tessa soon.”

Elliot and his children quickly leave the village square and head for the clinic. David and Renee go to the edge of the path while Tessa flies on the Pegasus to keep watch. The flames grow nearer and nearer. A fight is more seemingly inevitable. Renee removes her cape and sets it aside. David draws his sword as Renee does. He holds a shield out in front of him and tightens the knot of his cape. Renee stares at the edge of the path awaiting the army. Still, in her mind, she knows that if they don’t get any help to ward off these Shadow Men, then they and the town’s people will certainly perish.

Chapter XII

“Are you Ready for this Renee? Because, if you aren’t, we can hide with Elliot, and wait until it’s over. . .then we could help rebuild the city.”

“I’m ready now. . .we shouldn’t hide. We are the Cosmians’ last hope. Even if we’re to die, we can’t give up. Though we may not think of it as being so, it’s our duty.”

David nods his head in agreement and turns facing behind them. The path from which they had first come to the city slowly begins to tremble. Teams of horses pounding harshly on the dirt path shake the sturdiest trees in the forest. Tessa raises one arm and points in the direction that Gelleon’s army is coming from. She calls out strange commands at the horse teams. They respond to her as they are being lead into battle. The first and largest horse steps out with a valiant rider who only appears to be about twelve years old. He raises his hand with a short sword in response to Tessa’s raised arm.

Renee and David act very confused for a moment until they realize that this is Tessa’s army from her dimension. They quickly join with the horse riders on two unoccupied horses and form a brigade near the mouth of the path. Forty or fifty children bear swords, daggers, or bows and ride to the aid of Renee and David.

The first hints of light from the sun begin to shine in the dawning sky. The torches of Gelleon’s army can now be seen in the woods. They stop advancing and a single torchbearer walks forward up to David and Renee and stops.

“I am second in command from Toregone. I have been sent with a message for Renee and David.”

“That’s us. What’s the message?” Exclaims Renee.

“The message comes from Gelleon himself. ‘If you and the prince go back to where you came from and don’t look back, your lives and the lives of the town’s people will be spared. If you decide to stay and fight, you and the people won’t be so lucky.’ What is your decision?”

Renee looks at David for help. David just gives the same look at Renee and she bites her lip. She sits up in the saddle and stares at her sword. She notices Tessa in the air signaling a trap in the making.

“We stay and fight. It is Gelleon who should go back to where he came from, not us. Tell him that we intend to stay. If that means our death. . .so be it,” Renee says to the commander.

The commander returns to his army and a hush falls over the entire city. The morning birds go mute along with the croaking frogs and buzzing bees. Even the horses stop creating noise. A drum begins to pound in the absence of noise and Gelleon’s troop hastens forward. The battle begins.

Swords clash in blinding fury and crashing-clinking sounds. The drum beats steadily on. Renee advances slowly and slashes at the shadowy figures but does not intend to hurt them. Instead she makes a plan. Cautiously she tells David her plan so that none of the foes hear them. David signals to Tessa who in turn flies down and hovers over Gelleon in the farthest back area of his troops. Renee and David rear their horses up and tell the fighting children not to kill anyone. Then they bound back to the ground.

They quietly slip out of the frenzied flock and make their way toward Gelleon. Four guards step foreword, including Toregone. He transforms into a snake and slithers under Renee's horse. It goes wild and rears back without warning, sending Renee sprawling to the ground. She spreads her wings and lands a counter attack with more cunning than Toregone. She leaps onto his snake tail and cuts it off. Toregone quickly transforms back into his human form. His clothes are torn on his back but no harm is done to him. She jabs again at him. This time she clasps her sword with both hands. The blade glows sapphire. She lashes at his side and just barely misses when he jumps out of the way.

The drums continue. David dismounts his horse and sends it away. He begins to fight off the other guards. One swings at him and misses. The next comes from behind and hits him on the arm with a dagger. He clasps his shoulder and turns quickly, striking the guard who hit him. The guard falls dead to the ground. His body vanishes into mist. Renee screams as Toregone transforms himself into a giant spider. David turns around just as she is about to run.

“Renee, it’s not really a spider. It’s the same guy who killed your parents. Now is the moment you have been waiting for!”

Renee trembles with fear but grips her sword, takes a deep breath, and moves to the right of Toregone. Tessa jumps off of the Pegasus onto the spider’s back.

“Now! Renee hit him now!” she cries out.

Renee lights the blade of her sword again and strikes for the last time. Toregone falls in his human form to the ground, clenching his heart. Renee steps forward and catches Tessa as she falls. The remaining two guards advance toward David, Renee, and Tessa. Tessa draws her short sword and dagger. She tosses the dagger to David. The drums beat on.

“I forgot to give this back. Remember? It’s yours.”

David catches the dagger.

“Oh yeah.” David remembers.

One by one they defeat the two guards until Gelleon is left wide open. Tessa blows a large whistle and the oldest rider comes forth with wounds, but still strong. They prepare to take on the evil king himself. The moment of life or death for the town’s people and the trio

draws near. The king draws a jagged sword and its blade glows silver as he handles it. He swishes it in the air and then holds it firmly.

“Well, I would not have thought that I would have the honors of killing Princess Renee and Prince David all at once. You would have made a wonderful queen for Thomas, my dear. Now I have two more victims. I do believe that you are Tessa Emblim. I took much joy in killing your parents. Back then, I didn’t care whether or not I had any servants. I wanted revenge. My sister lived in your dimension. That is until your friends Richard and Linzy killed her. Now it is my turn. Prepare yourselves, you will all die.”

Tessa begins to grow angry. Tears fill her eyes and she races toward Gelleon. Renee, David, and the rider also race forward. Clashing metal and flying blood signify that the end is drawing near. The sun begins to grow warm in the sky and yet the drums still beat away. The battle continues until a bolt of lightning crashes to the ground. The riders scatter as does the shadow servants. Renee, David, Tessa, and the rider stop. Gelleon seizes as well. This stops the drums and begins the rain. Without further interruption, the battles rages on again. The riders try not to hurt their foes, and try to just hold them off.

More and more shadow slaves come from the woods, ready to die for their master. The rider at Tessa’s side is thrashed down. His head bleeds and his body lay motionless. The trio becomes more aggressive and tries multiple attacks but nothing seems to work against the evil king. Renee notices that her locket is beginning to glow. She opens it.

Suddenly, a blast of light bursts out and strikes the king down. David and Tessa freeze. As the light continues to blast, it grows more intense and eventually sends Renee flying backwards into a tree. She hits hard and her legs give way, but the force holds her upright. Still she clasps the locket open and aims it at the king. David rushes to her and holds her up. More energy begins to emerge from the locket. It begins to draw from David and the tree. Anything Renee is touching, down to the blades of grass, begins to wither. David's lost powers join with Renee's. The force becomes so great that it drains them quickly, causing them both to collapse and Renee to close the locket.

The crowds stop fighting. Their king is dead. Tessa drops her sword. David, having very little energy left, lifts his head and turns Renee over, lifting her up. He staggers. The town's people come out of their homes and hiding places but do not dare to venture further than their front doors. The Shadow Men begin to fade and fall to the ground, their human forms revealed. A loud cry is heard from the other side of the woods. Renee wakes up and hugs David. They had accomplished everything that they had set out to do. Slowly they stand up. Tessa remounts her Pegasus and flies up into the air. The riders turn and ride in the direction from which they came. Few children lay injured or dead in the town's square.

The town's people run out to Renee and David and lift them up and carry them to the clinic. Elliot begins to help them at once. Cheers of excitement coarse throughout the city as the people's lost loved ones return from their caged lives in Gelleon's palace, and from the battlefield. A stranger walks with only one sack on his back into the clinic. He sets the bag

down at his side and removes his large brimmed hat. His eyes are icy-blue and his limbs are nothing more than skin on bones.

“Hello stranger. Are you one of the captives from Gelleon’s hold?” Tessa asks.

“Yes I am. I was there for many years. I am searching for some people. . .my relatives,” says the stranger.

“Well, what’s your name? Perhaps I can help you.” Renee steps out of the bustling crowd and pulls David out too.

“Yes. . .perhaps you can.”

He looks into Renee’s eyes and stares at her dirty face. He lifts up his bag and opens the buckle. He reaches inside and pulls out a half sheet of old paper and hands it to Renee. David glances at him. His lean body is that of an eighteen-year-old man. His clothes are covered by dust and his face is dark with soot. Renee looks up after reading the paper and shakes her head.

“I don’t remember you. Who are you? This is the other half of my birth certificate! Where did you get this? Who are you?”

“My name is Tunnor Cosmic. Are you Renee Marie Cosmic?”

The crowd stares at them and a hush falls. Tunnor sets his bag down. David looks at Renee who grows pale.

“I am Renee. Still, I don’t know you.”

“I was taken young by Gelleon. I wanted to fight like Father. Gelleon came to our home. You were only two and Mother was afraid so I grabbed my fake sword and ran at Gelleon. He caught me, brought me to his domain, and constantly injected me with the changing poison to turn me into one of his shadow men. I rebelled against his magic and so he half starved me. He locked me up, and chained me. I could do nothing. Renee, I am your brother.”

Renee hesitates to believe him. Tunnor rolls up his sleeve where his name has been branded into his skin by Gelleon as punishment. She breaks down into tears and runs to him with open arms, hugging him. They are interrupted by a strange sound from outside.

David walks outside with Tessa and look up to the sky. Heavy purple clouds form. A brisk wind picks up and the rain that had been falling, changes. It is oily and covers all of the buildings with a corrosive liquid. David shuts the door and windows. The people in the street run for shelter.

“What’s that David?” Renee says while wiping the tears from her eyes.

“I don’t know. It isn’t normal rain though,” says David.

The people in the clinic begin to panic. Tunnor runs to the door and opens it. He reaches his hand out into the rain. Steam rises from his hand as the solution hits it. He quickly pulls it back in.

“It’s acidic. We are stuck in here until it stops. . .that is unless someone is brave enough to venture out.”

He turns and looks at Tessa. She steps forward and he removes his chain mail and hands it to her. She places it over her leather shirt and under her cape, bringing her hood up.

“Tessa, go find Angelica. She and her species may be able to stop this rain. Renee, you can help too. Fly to the edge of the cloud and blast it with all of your energy, but be careful.” Tunnor finishes.

“I can’t do that! You saw what happened last time I used my powers! I’ll get killed!”

“Every time you use them, you’ll grow stronger and be able to withstand the blast. Our entire family had powers. . .I had no one to teach me. I had to learn this by trial and error.”

“How am I supposed to find the edge?”

“Follow the direction of the wind. That should bring you to its head.”

Tessa and Renee start to walk out the door. David stops Renee before she leaves.

“What should I do? If you go, and you get hurt, I can’t help you.”

“Be strong for me. Wait for me. I will come back. . .I promise. . .I hope.”

David pulls her to him and embraces her, gently kissing her lips. She wraps her arms around him. Renee pulls away and runs outside with tears welling up and her cape over her head. David stands watching until she disappears into a fog bank. Tunnor walks over to him and lays a hand on his back. He slowly shuts the door and turns around. Once again, the people in the temporary shelter grow silent.

“Don’t worry David. I can already tell that she behaves just like our mother. She is a great fighter, and very stubborn. Renee will be fine. Where are my parents anyway?”

“Your parents? Just like your mother? Didn’t you hear?” he grows angry. “Your parents were killed by Toregone! She and I have barely escaped his grasp over and over again! We endangered an innocent person back home, and we had only expected to be a day. . .two at the most. We have been gone four days from our homes. Our lives were normal!” He pauses for a moment.

He reopens the door and watches.

“We came to keep Toregone away and ended up fighting in some petty war! Renee was nearly killed by Toregone. . .several times! No one helped us. Now you show up and send her into death’s grip again!?! I’m out of here!”

Tunnor’s face grows pale, for he knows that David is right. Now he has just sent his last relation into the arms of the enemy. David takes out his thick cape and drapes it over him then puts on his leather tunic. Tunnor sits down and hangs his head in shame.

The people watch David suit up and glance at Tunnor in shock. He looks up in time to see David give him a cold stare and then walk out the door.

He runs out into the rain. The corrosives don’t damage his cape all that much. It just eats away at the rock buildings. He looks in the direction of the wind and notices that it is heading straight for the city in the above world. A horse stands left behind under the protection

of a grove of trees. David mounts it and races off into the direction that Renee went. As he goes over the hill, he finds Renee's cape soaked on the ground and full of holes. He continues onward with great determination.

The steam becomes thick and rolls across the ground at great speeds. He can see Renee's silhouette in the air just up ahead.

"Renee!"

The acidic fog muffles his voice, but it manages to reach Renee. She stops, lands, and runs toward David. He pulls her up onto the saddle and the horse runs full speed until they can see sun light up ahead. . .and the cottage.

"We won't make it! David we won't get there in time!"

David and Renee wipe their skin off continuously to relieve the pain of the burning. A large cloud passes over them. It doesn't look like the others. They look at the cloud and realize that it is Angelica's people. They stop at the edge and Renee watches them. She soars up off the saddle to join them and greets Angelica.

"I don't know what to do!"

Her locket glows red this time and opens by itself. A face appears in the head of the clouds.

“Thomas!” Renee yells.

A charm appears within the locket and then shatters into silver dust and blows into the clouds. Renee shields her eyes from the debris. The clouds don’t stop. Thomas laughs and begins to pour heavier rain. David’s horse rears up and down as the acid seeps through its hair and begins to burn its skin. The force of the burst pushes Renee back but this time the others help hold her in front. Tessa lands next to David on Lightning.

David turns to Tessa.

“You should probably use this as an opportunity to get home. We don’t want you to get hurt any more than you have been.”

“Your right. . .I mean, I should be getting home that is. . .my friends will be waiting.”

She whistles and the Pegasus spreads his wings. They fly up into the air and as a vortex opens, they stop.

“Renee! Good luck! Good bye!” She disappears into the dark opening.

Renee waves, then she spreads her wings and the same silver dust that had blown from the locket blasts from them. She places her hands out in front and a blue globe appears. It is so bright that Carla and Nathan run out of the cottage, covering their heads and ducking back under the eaves. The blue glowing sphere explodes outward at the clouds. Angelica’s followers do the same except their lights are yellow and orange.

The clouds begin to dissipate and clear out. Thomas’ face disappears. David rides toward Carla and Nathan who are standing with gaping jaws.

“What in the world is going on David?” Carla asks.

“You two should go back inside. Tell no one about any of this. Swear that this will remain a secret.”

“We promise. . .but what is going on!?!” says Carla.

“It turns out that there is a village in the mountains and they needed our help. But that’s all I can say. Go back inside and don’t breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Renee begins to weaken and her wings begin to droop. Suddenly she faints in mid-air and falls. Nathan runs and catches her as David dismounts. Angelica and the others continue to fight. Nathan sets her down as she wakes up.

“David? I’m really dizzy. Now I know what you felt like when you rolled down that hill. Promise me that you won’t ever let me do that again unless totally necessary.”

David laughs a bit and then agrees. She sits up and puts her hand on her head. Angelica lands and the rest follow.

“Renee, you are very strong for someone your age. Because this cloud was destroying our homes too, no favor will be asked of you. David, you helped stop this cloud by getting Renee here before it grew any stronger. Consider that the favor which you owed me. Now we are even.” She turns to her people. “Come, we shouldn’t be out of the forest.”

Angelica and her people fly away toward the trees. David hugs Renee and helps her to her feet. Her wings become invisible. She looks back at them.

“I can still feel them. . .but can’t see them. I guess I won’t have a problem hiding them in the city,” says Renee.

“I guess we’re lucky. Scientists would stand in line to get their hands on you,” David adds. “Renee, you’re bleeding. That rain soaked you. . .you should get rinsed off quickly.”

“I’m okay.”

A flashing light and blaring siren raced toward them on the small dirt road. A police car roars up and stops. The policemen get out of the car and look to the sky.

“Did any of you kids see that storm?” the first one says.

“Yeah, but it just. . .went away. I guess it was a funnel cloud system or something,” Renee says.

“Well, I guess there’s no danger now. . .say, you two are on the posters in the station! You’re David and Renee, right?”

“Yeah, I’m Renee and this is David. We went for a picnic in the mountains and got lost. We finally found our way out and now we’re heading home.”

“No. You two kids have to come with us. We were told that if we saw you to pick you up. Come on, get in the car,” the second cop says.

Renee and David enter the back of the car. The second police shuts the door. Carla and Nathan stand in amazement of what they have just seen and finally go back inside. The sun begins to peer down from the clouds and the birds sing once again. A small area of destruction to the paved main road is the only damage left behind. The police get in the car and they drive onto the main road.

They slow down as they approach Renee's car on the side of the road. The police look back at them. They sit silent.

"We saw this car on our way up. Is it anyone's that you know?" the first cop asks.

"It's mine. We left it there so we didn't have to drive up the mountains," says Renee.

"We'll send a tow truck out here to bring it to your house."

They pick up speed and drive off. They pass the gas station and finally can see the city in front of them. The car turns past the ice cream shop and then pulls into the police headquarters. They are let out of the car. Renee picks up her bag and notices their swords. She quickly zips the bag up and exits the car. David takes her hand and helps her out.

Chapter XIII

“This way,” says a policewoman who walks out with a smile on her face.

They are led into the building. The sergeant calls Melanie at work and gives the phone to Renee.

“Hello?”

“Renee! Are you okay? Where have you been? I was so worried about you. David’s mother was frantic and Linzy kept calling!”

Her voice sounds choppy and Renee can easily tell that she is crying and has been for a while.

“Melanie. I’m okay. We both are. We just got lost. . .that’s all. I had food and a first aid kit. We were fine.”

“I’m calling David’s parents. We will be there to pick you up in a few minutes. Stay there!”

“Okay, bye,” Renee finishes.

She hands the phone back to the sergeant and sits down next to David, then the sergeant walks over to them and pulls up a chair.

“Now, I have to ask a few questions. They are just some things that need to be used to close up the case. First, where were you?”

“We went for a picnic in the foothills before the mountains. Night came and we tried to follow the river back in the direction we had come from but we got lost and ended up going in further,” Renee says.

“Second, why are you dressed like that?”

“We were playing a role playing game at our friend’s before we went. We didn’t change,” says David.

“Okay, last question. Why did that storm eat the pavement on that road?”

“Well. . .umm. . .I don’t know. Maybe it was acid rain?” Renee suggests.

“Okay, that’s it. When your parents come to pick you up, they will just have to fill out a few papers and you will get to go home.”

They sit in the station chairs, listening to phones ring and the news being blasted over a television. Renee looks around at the ‘civilization’ that they have returned to. The door opens and David’s mom walks in first. David stands up as she comes in. She stops short and looks at

him. Then she hugs him tightly. She looks at Renee and takes her hand.

“I knew this day would come. From the moment we moved in next door to you, I knew it was you. I think it was your eyes. I’m just glad you and David came back all right.”

Renee smiles and then looks at the door again. Peter walks in first followed by Melanie who shoves her way in and embraces Renee. Linzy follows. She stops for a moment and looks at Renee’s strange clothes. Renee is crying and smiling.

Linzy hugs Renee and feels her wings but can’t see them.

“What happened? I was so worried,” Linzy says.

“I wish I could tell you. Don’t make a big deal about my back though. Linzy, thanks for everything. . .you’ve been a great friend.”

“You sound like you’re gonna’ die or something.”

“I’m going back. . .with David. We won’t be coming home.”

Linzy hugs Renee again and begins to quietly cry. Melanie grabs Renee and embraces her crying frantically. When all is said and done, papers filed and police thanked, they all leave

the station and go home. As they pull in the drive for the townhouses, Renee looks around and remembers wishing that she were back here. They pull up and David's family follows after. Michael runs out of the house yelling at his brother for not getting him from his friends.

“Melanie? Peter? We all have to talk. David's mom and step-dad, and both of you with David and I. It's very important. I know that David's mom will understand so she can help you.”

They walk up to the sidewalk and Renee looks at David who in turn looks at his mom and nods. She invites them to come in and sit and talk.

They go into David's townhouse and go down into the basement where a den has been set up. Renee sits next to David on a love seat. The parents sit on the two sofas.

“Melanie, I know that you have no idea of what is going on. George doesn't either. I have been expecting this for a long time now. I knew Renee's real family. Both of her parents and her brother.”

“We met him unfortunately,” David says.

“Anyway, Renee's past must become her future. There is nothing that can stop it. It will just happen. She and David must go back to the mountains.”

“But they got lost! I can’t just send Renee off into the mountains.”

“Melanie,” Renee interrupts, “you have no choice. We weren’t lost anyways. I have to go. If David and I don’t, we will let a lot of people down!”

“I still don’t understand. Peter, do you get any of this?”

He stares blankly.

“You’re a big help.” Melanie scolds.

“I can show you. . .I think. Mrs. Moore, how do I get my wings to reappear?”

“Wings!?!” Melanie says, as her face grows even more confused.

“Just fly. They should reappear.”

Renee removes her cape, muddy from falling off during the storm, and full of holes from the acid, and jumps into the air. Pair of sheer shimmering wings appear on her back and disappear when she lands with a thud.

“I’m still pretty weak, but you have to believe me now. We have to go back. These are the reasons why.”

She removes the other half of her birth certificate and takes the bear out of her bag. She pulls the other half out and holds them up to Melanie and Peter. Melanie takes them and examines them.

“Why are your parent’s names in quotation marks?” Peter asks.

“I never found that out. We set out to find that out but failed. We never made it to the old site of the city.”

David’s mother takes the certificate halves.

“On the birth certificates, the royal families had to use fake names. It was a precautionary measure used in case any attack on the families, in which the children could come to the upper world and be safe. Which in fact happened. Renee, I don’t know how you managed to escape those woods and make it here, but you certainly were brave,” David’s mother, Destiny says. “I go by the name of Didi here but my real name is Destiny. My first husband died the night we all escaped from the burning city. His real name was Jephaldaran Lenalde though we called him Alan. David and I didn’t know the way so I chose one of several paths to choose from. By chance, and luck, we ended up in a neighboring city. We moved quite a bit, but I still remember everything. David could remember some. Although he didn’t

recognize Renee when we first moved in, I saw in her eyes what she, herself, didn't know. I hoped that they could live a normal life, but life goes by a master plan, which we cannot alter. I would go back myself, but my reign is over. The Cosmian and Lenalde reign had to end with the destruction of our village. Now, Renee and David must go and start anew. They will be married."

David and Renee look at each other and blush. George stares at Destiny.

"Are you trying to tell me that you were a queen and that David is a prince? I've been married to you for eight years and not once did you say a thing," George says.

"I couldn't tell anyone. David couldn't either. Michael has royal blood in him too. One day, if anything should happen to David before he has children, he will go and live there. But I don't think that will happen because Gelleon is dead."

"Why do they have to go back? Why can't Renee stay here? This isn't fair. I don't even know if I believe any of this," says Melanie.

"You have no choice. We have to go back," David explains.

"I promise, nothing will happen to me. I'll visit when I can. You just can't tell anyone about any of this. Anyone here in this room that knows must forget," says Renee.

“Will we be able to visit you?” Melanie asks.

Renee looks at Destiny for an answer.

“No. No one is permitted to travel there. If they do, they will not return. It is law. No one has ever just ‘visited’. They would know the way there and back. Then if anything were to happen, someone would follow you and expose the sanctuary-life. It is not permitted,” Destiny tells her.

They all sit in the semi-darkness of the basement in loss of words. The day grows dark and they finally finish talking about the subject. David and Renee have fallen asleep and Melanie’s eyelids droop. She hears the finishing words and sits up.

“Okay. If it is to be so and not I or anyone, nor anything, can stop this, I guess she and David must go back. Peter and I have decided that it would be best anyways because if anyone should find out about her wings. . .I don’t want to imagine.”

“We promise, too, that we will never say a word of this to anyone. I think that it would be best if we didn’t discuss it in the open or casually with each other either. If anyone heard us. . .” George begins.

Renee turns over and David wakes up. He stands up and stretches, then looks around at everyone still discussing.

“I thought it had all been a dream. Well, is there a decision?”

“David, you and Renee are to leave in the morning at three o’clock. It will be dark then and no one will see you.”

“Three. . .as in A.M.?!?”

“Yes. Do you remember the way?”

“Yeah, but it isn’t going to be the same without Tessa.”

“Who’s Tessa?” asks his mother.

“She is Linzy’s boyfriend’s friend, and our friend. She helped us out quite a few times.”

“There won’t be any danger on your way there, if you stay close to the river. . .so you won’t need her. After you see a large field and a cottage, the river will take you most of the way and. . .”

“We know the way. The only worry we will have is in the first valley. The water monster nearly killed Tessa. If we walk around the valley, it will take an extra day.”

“That is why I suggest you stay as close to the river as possible. . .even cross it if you must,” she explains.

“Oh, don’t worry. We’ll stay plenty far from that valley. Well, what time is it?”

He looks around at the VCR and sees that it is 11:55 P.M. He stretches again and Melanie wakes up Renee. She sits up and looks blankly around. She stands up and picks up her cape from the floor.

“What’s the verdict?” She asks and then yawns.

“They’re letting us go back in the morning.”

“Good, I don’t want to be lab prey. . .and I’m beginning to miss Elliot. I wonder if his wife got back.”

“I think she did. Well, umm. . .I guess this is the last night we’ll see all of you for quite a while. And that marriage thing? Ya know, Mom, Renee and I kind of liked each other before

any of this happened and well. . .”

Destiny jerks her head.

“Go on.”

They go up stairs and sit out on the porch. The moon is waning and small and thin in the sky, but the stars shimmer and glitter. David holds Renee and just sits there. They are relieved just to be home for the time being and to be alive, even if it is their last night there. Renee looks up into David’s eyes. She can see the reflection of herself and the backdrop of stars. She gently presses her lip to his and in an instant her memories come back entirely. A voice seems to echo in both of their minds. They release and look toward the mountains. They aren’t a range. Instead, they appear as a massive cascade, a barrier to what lies within. The secrets that lay in the inner crevices and deepest valleys are kept.

Melanie walks out and David and Renee depart from one another for the last time. She looks over at him and mouths some words. He doesn’t catch the phrase at first, but later, just as his mind shuts off, he realizes that she had said ‘Thank you.’ Her past had been pieced back together and their life and future would lie ahead.

The journey shall continue. . .

The End...for now...

PREVIEW

The Gift

By

C.M. Rainwater

(Coming soon)

Sahirah hated her school...but that didn't keep her from being one of the most popular kids there. Captain of the Junior Varsity Cheerleading Squad, member of the Student Council, Honor Roll Society, and in the Choir...yep, that was her. And she hated it. She always told people "Don't get me wrong, I love the stuff I'm in, I just

hate this school." She had grown up in this district. She wasn't the typical rich blond cheerleader...what a stereotype. She lived in a trailer, had jet-black hair, and her single mother received WIC for her little brother Aaron. She'd fought her way to the top in her school, and once she got there, she realized that she really didn't want to be there. All the attention was on her all the time. She had so little privacy...and to make matters worse, she rarely got privacy at home. Her mom was always working. She worked retail and never had regular hours. That meant that her 4-year-old brother was either next-door at Tracey's, or Sahirah had him. Being 16 and having homework, and taking care of a 4 year old was not an easy thing, she lost her temper a lot with Aaron, though she didn't mean it.

Mark. Now there's someone Sahirah loved and depended on. No. He wasn't the captain of the football team...again, stereotypes. He was captain of the Debate Team though. And actually, that's all he was really known for in the school...and only by a select group of students. Of course Sahirah's friends all knew him, but they never hung out unless Sahirah was there. Mark was 16, tall and skinny, with little muscle. He had slightly shaggy-spiked blond hair and wore wire-rimmed glasses that were rectangular. His life was total opposite of Sahirah...that's what attracted her to him and him to her. When they hung out, it was like the rest of the world didn't matter and opinions didn't matter. So what, she was eating a Big Mac, Biggie Fries, and a Super-Sized non-diet Soda. He didn't care. So why should it bother her if the world saw her, a cheerleader, eating it. It was bliss. Conversations with Mark were endless. He wasn't on the debate team for nothing. His ideas on abortion and its role in society today...well let's just say that if you sat down with one view, after listening to him, you might doubt yourself, if not openly then inwardly. It was that

way with a lot of things. And while she knew a lot from studying so much, it always seemed that he knew so much more. He'd come from another school district and had been in a rehab center for 6 months. Fallen into the wrong group of kids. He was very opinionated now that drugs and alcohol were evil and that God should be the answer to someone who turns around with questions and problems...not a joint, or a hit, or a fifth. Sahirah loved him for that. She started dating him the summer after her freshman year. Her mom and her mom's live-in boyfriend were always fighting but he helped with money because Aaron was his son. Sahirah had brought Mark over for dinner one night and her mom's boyfriend came home drunk...really, really drunk. He had told Sahirah's mom to get undressed and get into the bedroom. When she had started to object, he came at her, but not before Mark's fist had caught his gut. Mark was not quite as tall as he was but he wasn't drunk and was thinking a lot more clearly than him. That's the night that Aaron's father walked out and the night Mark was welcomed from there on out as Sahirah's mother's "Other Son."

Sahirah also had a lot of views on things that some people looked at her strange about, and some looked admirably upon her for them. She believed, for instance, that sex was meant to be for the man you married no matter what. And she planned on sticking by that. However, that didn't keep everyone at school from talking about Sahirah and Mark. Everyone was sure they'd done more than they had admitted. It didn't matter to her though. She neither admitted nor denied which seemed to work best in everyone's interest. That is until this morning...

* * *

Chapter 1

As Sahirah turned her alarm clock off at 5:45 AM, she rolled over onto her side feeling rather ill. Mondays. Who likes Mondays? Why even have a Monday on the calendar? Because of course then everyone would hate Tuesdays. Today was the day she had to watch try-outs for the Cheerleading team and help Coach Dee decide which girls would make it and which would not. It had been a month of training for them and she'd seen some real improvement in a few girls who she had already decided were probably going to be chosen. But could she even get out of bed today? Her head swam and she felt like she would be sick. Just nerves, she figured and therefore ruled all else out.

After a nice hot shower and a small breakfast, she helped Aaron get dressed and poured his cereal for him, then poured her mother a cup of coffee with 2 teaspoons of sugar and some cream, made her some toast, and headed out the door to catch the bus. She didn't have a car. She'd never be able to afford one. The bus ride was a lot bumpier than she ever remembered. Frost coated the sliding windows and the smell of the plastic seats was almost nauseating her again. The bus had made its stops all along the long dirt road, and finally turned onto the thankfully smooth pavement of the main road. Diesel, plastic, the smell of the guy's aftershave lotion in front of her...he probably hadn't shaved, and had put on way too much lotion...it all gave her a headache. School at last was in view. Just in time. If she had to endure it any longer she thought she just might throw up the pop tarts she'd

eaten for breakfast. October air always felt refreshing. She had to wear her uniform today. The Homecoming game was also tonight. It'd be a busy day; she had to shake this sluggishness.

Mark met her at her locker as he did every morning, ready to walk with her to her Biology class. He had a sheet of paper in his hands and handed it to her.

"Dissection? They want us to dissect stuff this morning? Ugh...I don't think I'm up for it." Sahirah handed the paper back. "I'm coming down with the flu. Talk about bad timing. I have tryouts to sit through today, and a game tonight, plus my mom's working the late shift so she won't be home until 1:00 AM. Aaron's bus brings him home at 4:15 but the neighbor's watching him, then she's bringing him to the game. Amy's bringing us home after the game, but that won't be until nearly 11:00 PM. Aaron's going to be a mess."

"I can get him from the game and hang out for a while. I can bring him back to your place if you want."

"Really? He really wants to see the game but he's way too young to be out so late. I wish he had Preschool in the morning instead of the afternoon."

"Yeah. I'll take him back to your place and make sure he gets to sleep, and then I'll wait 'till you get home to go."

"Thanks." She flashed him a smile just before she skirted into the biology classroom and Mark headed off to Chemistry.

The teacher droned on about alleles and genetics. Sahirah's tiny tape recorder picked it all up. She needed one for this class. This teacher never looked as his class. He just kept

his back to it and continuously wrote on the board all the while speaking like that Ben Stein guy's character in "Ferris Beuller's Day Off." She'd review it all right before bed. That way she was sure to get a good night's sleep. Now that Aaron's situation was figured out, she could relax a little. She didn't know why, but she always got a little nervous right before she cheered in front of people. She'd been cheering for about 4 years now so she really couldn't figure out why she hadn't overcome this stage fright. Didn't matter though. She'd overcome it in the end.

Next it was on to Government. She'd been spared the dissection. They wouldn't do that until the end of next week. Oh yeah...another thing to look forward to. She dug into her purse to get out her small pencil sharpener after the tip of her Halloween pencil broke in the middle of taking notes. Hmm...she still had her tampon in the bottom of her purse. Another late period. Guess it'd be a trip to the doctor's this time. She thought back a moment and figured out that she was actually about 3 weeks late. The doctor had one time diagnosed her with Polycystic Ovaries...already she knew she was doomed to have kids naturally. Her case was so severe that she had at one time only had one period per year. From about 13 to 15 she actually had 3. At first she thought it was something wrong but the doctor said it was her period. It had only lasted for a day though. Not unusual for a young teen's first period. After that though she knew something was wrong, and for the last 7 months she'd been taking the pill to regulate it. It'd been working but it looked like it wasn't now.

Geometry was next, followed by lunch. She picked through her turkey salad, sipped at her chocolate milk, and hardly touched the brownie she'd been given by her friend Amy. Nerves. And now this. She hated going in to see the doctor about this. "Sahirah, are you feeling well? It's a walnut fudge brownie." Amy watched as Sahirah picked out the walnuts to eat.

"I'm nervous is all. Makes me sick to my stomach sometimes."

"Yeah but never enough for you to not eat. Usually you mow a half-carton of ice cream when you're nervous."

"So who're you going to homecoming with?" Sahirah shrugged off the conversation. Inside she was thinking that her disorder was causing her to be sick. Or maybe the pills she took. They had a habit of doing that at first.

"Martin Trezbiki. Are you going with Mark?"

"Yeah. Got a dress?"

"Two weeks ago. You?"

"No. I mean, nothing new anyway. I'll probably wear the same dress I wore last year."

"Oh! You should see the ones they've got at Havencrest! That's where I got mine. It's a little strappy but it holds up well enough."

"Nah. I don't have time to go looking for a new one anyway. Oh, by the way, we're all dissecting fetal pigs next Thursday in biology."

Amy stopped eating her pizza slice and made a face.

"Ewe...that's disgusting! He can't make me do that..."

"You have to or you fail. It's worth 50% of your grade."

"I'll just have my mom write in a note or something...I mean...that's just cruel! Poor little baby pigs..."

"I know. They weren't even born and we have to do that to them...hey Mark."

Mark walked up to them and set his tray down on the table beside Sahirah. He'd been near the end of the line and the bell would be ringing in 10 minutes, but he had just enough time to shove down the slice of pizza, packet of fries, and the 20

oz soda before they all went on to their next classes. The day went on pretty much the same. They had 3 classes left and then school finally let out.

Tryouts went well enough for Sahirah. The girls that the coach chose for the upcoming competition would be assets to the team for sure. And the game went smoothly. Her stage fright took back stage as the spotlight shone. This was her favorite time of year. The crisp air, the slight smell of burning leaves, Halloween bon fires, the Homecoming Dance...everything seemed so fast and exciting. She hurried around the next morning, getting everything together for the dance that night. Her hair, nails and makeup had to be perfect. Her dress was the same as last year but the style was still current enough and no one would dare insult her about it. She knew though that they'd be talking about it behind her back for quite a while. Didn't matter. Truth of the matter was that she couldn't afford a new one. She considered getting a job to help raise the money but that lasted all of 2 weeks, bagging groceries. She was just too busy and the money was needed for her yearly dues in the squad. She didn't want to ask her mother for the money so she went ahead and used it for that.

When her hair was done, she emptied nearly half of a hair spray can onto it to hold it in place for the 6 hours until Mark came to pick her up. Amy was over helping her get ready and they were doing each other's toenails for their strappy shoes.

"I have to go back in to the doctor's again. He's probably going to want to do surgery this time or something." Sahirah applied the glittery mauve to Amy's big toe.

"You missed another one?"

"Yep."

"I thought the pill was supposed to make you have them."

"It is. Or was anyway. I mean, it's not like I miss the cramps or bleeding, but it sucks to know what the future holds."

"You don't know for sure you won't have kids. I mean you could be pregnant right now and not know it right? You and Mark..."

"No." Sahirah interrupted. "We're waiting."

"Yeah..." Amy came back sarcastically. "Why don't you take a pregnancy test? We can do it at my house tomorrow. No one will be there."

"I'm not pregnant..."

To read more, be sure to purchase "The Gift" when it comes out soon!

"Well, you'll find out tomorrow right?"

"Amy, I haven't had sex."

