

Love Eternal

The Eternal Saga

J. Allen Wentworth

Fourth Edition

Meow/Squish Publications

<http://meowsquish.webs.com>

Georgia

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LOVE ETERNAL 4th Edition

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A Meow/Squish Book
Printed via Lulu.com.

First Edition: May 2006
Fourth Edition: February 2007

Printed in the United States of America

<http://meowsquish.webs.com>

www.lulu.com/content/626476

To Mom, Dad, Josh, Jenn, Audrey and Jesus.
Your love and support made the difference.

The Eternal Saga

Available
Love Eternal

Planned
Faith Eternal
Zeal Eternal
Hope Eternal
Joy Eternal
Truth Eternal
Peace Eternal

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Love Divided

It was evening: the last normal day of her life. The chill night air felt wonderful against her skin as Jewel gazed up at the flashing sky. The stars themselves were beautiful, but the fireworks exploding and glittering around them made the vision breathtaking. The smoke from the fire a few yards away sometimes drifted over, and she would wrinkle her nose. It wasn't unpleasant enough, however, to make her want to move from the comfort of the blanket. Over the constant chirping of crickets she could hear the hearty laughter from the party inside. It had been a wonderful ceremony. Her sister, Aura, was perfectly radiant in the long, flowing, white gown and veil. Rupert, her new brother-in-law, had also managed to look handsome. He was a squat, round man who had to look up to see into his new bride's eyes, but Jewel supposed that her sister saw something in him that she did not. A voice interrupted her thoughts, and Jewel felt her heart skip a beat.

“Are you comfortable? Do you need anything?”

Jewel looked up into the eyes of her beloved on the blanket beside her. He was on his side propped up on one elbow looking down at her. His long, light-brown hair was pulled back in a loose pony-tail. She had always known he was handsome, but in his suit he was positively dashing. He looked at her with a striking smile, and she found herself unable to speak. If only he would... An explosion cracked above them, and Jewel's eyes were drawn back to the sky. Thousands of tiny

green and blue lights fell down and disappeared. Since she was no longer looking at him she managed to find her voice.

“No, thank you, Dylan. I’m fine,” she said, trying to find her favorite constellation: Orion, in the sky. She desperately wanted to say something that he would find interesting. When she thought of something she looked back at him, but her stomach twisted itself up into a tight knot, and she lost her nerve. She looked longingly into his eyes and then down at his lips. If only he would kiss her. She tried to will him to do it, hoping that some how her thoughts would make it those few feet. Did he even want to? She thought that he did. She hoped that he did. Her sister had told her just a few hours before that he did, but now Jewel was uncertain. They had been friends so long. What if that was all she was to him? What if he liked someone else? Her insides bunched together at the thought.

“What is it?” his voice rang out, seeming loud only because they were so close, “What’s wrong?”

She had no idea how long she had been staring at him. She must have looked awfully stupid just looking at him without saying anything. Quickly she tried to think of something that would explain her sudden emotion. She looked up at the fireworks and sky again. The knot in her belly loosened barely enough for her to talk.

“It’s... It’s my sister. She looked so beautiful and happy. I...this... this is just how girls get at weddings, I suppose.” She finished by quoting what her mother had said during the ceremony. They had all been crying then, but tears of joy.

“Oh,” Dylan said. Jewel saw his hand move, and her heart almost burst.

His hand touched her face and carefully wiped away a tear from her cheek. He was so gentle. Do it now, she thought. It would be so wonderful! Even as she thought it though, she wasn’t sure. At fifteen she had never kissed a boy, and her sisters often teased her that she was long overdue. What if she wasn’t good at it? She was sure that he must have done it before. She could tell he would be good at it. He was always tender and gentle. In the years that she had known him he had never said an unkind word. His hand went back to his side, and Jewel felt a rush of both disappointment and relief. Her sisters had said that he liked her. They had said that they could tell. Why didn’t he kiss her then? She wondered what he could be thinking, and was about to muster up the courage to ask when she felt something touch her ankle. She jumped to her feet and let out a sharp cry.

“What is it?” Dylan asked, looking down towards the end of the blanket.

Jewel pointed. There on the edge of the blanket was a large furry spider almost as large as one of her hands. She gathered up the folds of her dress to hold the hem off the dirt and searched the ground nervously. Another explosion from the fireworks above her made her jump in fright.

The spider began to crawl toward them, and Jewel very nearly screamed. Dylan jumped to his feet as well. “Make it go away,” she urged him.

Dylan stood frozen. Beads of sweat trickled down his face as he faced the fearsome creature. Jewel had no idea of the turmoil that raged within Dylan. She didn't notice the fear and panic in his eyes. In her mind he was a brave and wonderful man who could do anything. Dylan tried to force himself to move, but his limbs just wouldn't obey.

“Make it go away,” Jewel pleaded, looking at Dylan. She considered running inside, but the thought of leaving him was so painful that she simply stood frozen waiting for him to do something. She felt safe around him and she was certain that at any minute he would come to her rescue. After a few moments she saw him reach slowly to take off his shoe.

“Don't kill it!” she pleaded, barely able to believe what she was saying. She hadn't realized until just that moment that she didn't want him to harm it, but now that she had said it she discovered that she would be devastated if he killed it.

“It's just an innocent spider, don't squish it. Just,” she started looking around, “just make it go back into the woods, away from here.”

Dylan let out a quiet sigh. He had barely managed to muster up the courage to even decide to kill it, and now he didn't feel he had any hope of making this spider go anywhere it didn't want to go. Jewel saw him look back at her and give her a weak smile. To her he looked brave and in control. She waited; comforted by the knowledge that he was taking care of things.

Jewel watched raptly as Dylan approached the spider and bent down. He flipped a corner of the blanket over it and proceeded to wrap the entire blanket into a bundle. In several huge, quick steps he made his way across the clearing to the edge of the forest. She

watched him shake out the blanket and check both sides. When he returned she didn't notice the beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead.

"Oh that was wonderful! Thank you," she cried running to him and flinging her arms around his neck to hug him. His arms came up reflexively to her sides and the blanket dropped to the ground. Somewhere above them there was a shrill whine and a loud crack. The clearing was bathed in a green glow.

"Oh, it was nothing, gemstone." he said with a smile, using the nickname he had given her years ago.

Jewel drew back and gazed into her hero's eyes. The close firelight that reflected off of them also cast a warm orange glow on one side of his face and left the other in a dim shadow. Her heart ached, and her lips trembled. Now! She thought as hard as she could. Do it now!

He leaned towards her slightly, and with wild abandon she told herself that it was close enough. Pressing her lips eagerly to his she kissed him, and her previous worries concerning her skill vanished. It was as natural and as easy as singing or walking, and she realized with giddy elation that he was kissing her back. Victory! Sweet Victory! For Jewel nothing existed except them and this one moment. His strong arms held her tenderly, and his warm lips touched hers sweetly and delicately. She was his and—

"What are you doing?" the loud voice boomed over the sounds of the party and the explosions of the fireworks, and Jewel's newfound world came crashing down around her. She quickly separated from Dylan and spun around to see her father charging across the clearing from the reception hall. Her mother was saying something to him, and it sounded like "Don't make a scene, George," but Jewel couldn't be sure.

Jewel knew better than to say anything. Her father's face was scarlet and twisted in a grimace of rage so fierce that his bushy orange mustache was shaking. Her mother was holding his large arm tightly with one hand and holding Jewel's little sister, Eve, with the other. Jewel's father was built much like Jewel's new brother-in-law. Both men were of below average height and above-average girth. Jewel's mother, on the other hand, was a petite woman who was quite thin for a middle-age mother of three.

"What were you doing with her?" her father bellowed at Dylan, and before Jewel could think she flung herself at her father.

"It was me," she cried, desperate to prevent him from harming her newfound love, "I did it. He didn't even want to. I'm sorry daddy. Don't hurt him."

Her father was furious, but he looked down at Jewel and her mother who were each clinging to a different arm. He looked back over his shoulder and saw that a crowd of people had evidently heard his yelling and were coming outside to investigate. Soon the sound of festivities was replaced by soft murmuring. He shot a look at Dylan.

"You stay away from my daughters," he barked and then added, "Come on, we're going home." He turned and hauled Jewel towards the path that led back to the town. She managed to look behind a few times and saw Dylan still standing in the same spot. Her blanket was still in a heap at his feet. She wanted to run to him, to let him know she loved him and never wanted to leave him, but her father's grip on her arm was firm. When they rounded the bend out of the clearing, and she could no longer see Dylan, she started crying.

"What do you think you were doing!" her father bellowed at her as he slammed the door to their small, two-bedroom house. He didn't wait for her to answer.

"I don't want you around that boy! He's trouble, mark my words. What were you doing alone with him in the first place? I thought you were safely inside dancing. I told you to stay with Eve! You know we don't want her wandering around by herself! Well? Aren't you going to answer me? What were you doing outside?" her father paused and took a few deep breaths. His face was still as red as the hair on the sides of his balding head. His cheeks were puffed out, and he was clenching and unclenching his fists. Jewel's mother tried to look busy in the small kitchen area that opened into the living room.

"I was watching the fireworks, daddy. You said I could, and Eve was with me at first, I didn't notice that she had gone back in I guess," she said, mad at herself for not seeing where her little sister had gone.

This seemed to make her father even angrier, if that was possible. He yelled again, "It's just lucky your sister went back inside! What if she had wandered into the forest and gotten lost? She's only eleven! She could have gotten hurt!"

"It's okay, daddy," Eve began, tugging at his sleeve, "I know not to go into the forest."

Jewel's father turned to his youngest daughter, and his anger subsided only a small amount as he looked at her adorable green eyes.

“You,” he said, forcing his voice to be low and calm, “are grounded for a week for wandering away from your sister when we told you to stay with her.”

“Daddy!” Eve pleaded, “but—”

“Don’t make it a month!” he interrupted, not quite yelling, “Go to your room.”

Eve looked down at her feet, said, “Yes sir,” and left into the room that she and Jewel shared.

“As for you, young lady,” he said, turning back to Jewel, “You are grounded for a month for failing to watch after your sister like we asked, and furthermore,” here he shot Jewel a fierce look when she opened her mouth to protest, “and furthermore, you are not to associate yourself with that Dylan Farseer boy or any of his family. They are bad news, do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” Jewel said, dejectedly. She knew she was lying. Nothing in heaven or earth could keep her from him, but she knew that her father would never understand.

“Good girl,” her father said, finally managing to calm himself, “Now go to your room.”

Jewel said, “Yes sir,” and entered her room. Their bedroom was small and contained a bunk bed, Eve’s toy chest, a combination dresser and wardrobe, and a full-length mirror, each on a different wall. Eve was on the bottom bunk of their bunk bed petting her small calico kitten named Fur Oshus in an effort to comfort him. Fur Oshus never liked their father’s yelling.

“I’m sorry,” Eve offered as Jewel stood in front of the mirror unlacing her gown.

“It’s not your fault,” Jewel sighed, “It was cold outside, and you don’t like fireworks as much as I do. I should have gone inside when you did. Here, let me help you get that dress off, and we can get into our pajamas.”

Eve bounced off the bed and stood in front of the mirror while Fur Oshus batted around a piece of yarn. Jewel stepped out of her gown and hung it on a hook on the wall, and then she stood behind Eve and began to unlace her sister’s dress. It was a very pretty light-blue linen dress that had previously belonged to Jewel. She looked over to her own dress hanging on the wall. It, too, was a hand-me-down from her elder sister: Aura. She yearned to one day own a brand new dress of her own. She saw it in her mind. It would be green: her favorite color,

and made of silk. She imagined Dylan seeing it and telling her that she was beautiful.

“Did you kiss him?” Eve interrupted her thoughts looking at Jewel in the mirror. They had barely made eye contact when Eve's mouth formed into an 'o' and her eyes opened wide.

“You did!” Eve giggled, suppressing a giggle. Jewel couldn't help the grin and glassy-eyed look that was now on her face. Eve continued, “What was it like? Was it wet? Did he use his tongue?” She asked the last question in a whisper as if it was a dirty thought.

“No,” Jewel replied, starry-eyed. Thinking about the kiss seemed to wipe away all the events that had happened since then. “It wasn't wet. Our mouths were closed. It was just... nice.” She said this last word because her mind had failed to come up with a description that was more wonderful than heavenly.

“Julie's got a boyfriend, Julie's got a boyfriend,” Eve began to singsong after she stepped out of her dress. Jewel ignored her and hung the gown on a hook next to hers. She pulled open one of the drawers of the dresser and pulled out a dark green nightgown. She pulled it over her head and was straightening it just as something flew across the room and fell into the corner. She looked down and saw Eve's underwear. She looked disapprovingly at the bottom bunk. There was an Eve-sized lump under the blanket.

“I think you're missing something,” Jewel suggested to the lump.

Eve's muffled voice complained from underneath the pillow, “It gets hot, and this is more comfortable.”

Jewel knelt down so she could see Eve's head with the pillow resting on top of it. She saw nothing but a wad of bright red hair. Jewel said, “Mom wouldn't approve.”

Eve turned over, and Jewel now saw her bright green eyes behind a mess of red tangles. “She's the one who says we can't open the window. If she's going to make it so hot in here I'm not going to get all sweaty.”

“Fine,” Jewel sighed and stood back up. She crossed the room and picked up a twenty-eight day calendar that had her name written at the top. She took her quill from the bottle of ink and marked out the day's date. She considered the second identical calendar that said 'Eve' but was otherwise unmarked. She looked down at Eve's underwear and then to the sheets on Eve's mattress. She briefly imagined the annoyance and subsequent conversation with her mother that could

happen any day now and sighed. There was nothing she could do about it. She and her mother had explained everything to Eve, but they couldn't force her to wear clothes if she didn't want to, and as Eve had pointed out many times it was 'just a little mess' and nothing to fuss about. Jewel blew out the oil lamp and began to climb into bed, and it was only then that she noticed that she didn't have a blanket. Aghast, she remembered the blanket sitting almost a mile away at the top of the hill outside the clearing of the town meeting hall.

Tap, tap, tap, came a sound on her window, she spun around. Like something out of a dream she saw him just outside her window. Elation filled her, and she wanted to dance for joy. She dashed across the room and hastily unlatched the window and flung it open.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed with a combination of joy and fear, "If daddy finds you..."

She stopped talking because Dylan wasn't looking at her face, and his mouth was moving soundlessly. For a moment she thought that he must be sick until she looked down at herself. Quickly she jumped away from the window.

"Turn around," she hissed and was grateful when he did. She opened her wardrobe and grabbed her bathrobe and hastily pulled it on and tied it around her. She didn't know if she should be appalled or excited at how much he had seen. She went back to the window. Dylan was still staring into the woods behind her house.

"It's ok, you can turn around," she said, "What are you doing here?"

He turned and lifted something in front of him. There in the moonlight was her blanket.

"Oh thank you!" she whispered, delighted. Dylan seemed relieved about something. Jewel gathered the blanket up into her arms while Dylan tried to keep any of it from touching the ground.

"No spiders, I checked," he said with a small laugh. Jewel looked up, and his face was so close to hers that their noses almost touched. She tilted her head a bit to one side, and he leaned in. He kissed her, and it was wonderful. His hand came up to cup her cheek, and she reached an arm around his neck to pull him closer. Her knees felt weak, and her legs went limp, and she had to brace herself against the windowsill.

"Jewel, is the window open?" Jewel panicked and spun around as she heard the door open and her father's voice behind her, "Your mother said she felt a draft—"

Jewel stood next to the window clutching her blanket as her father stared into the moonlight outside.

“You!” he bellowed through the window and turned, charging towards the front door. Fur Oshus darted under the bed.

“Run Dylan!” Jewel managed to scream out the window and watched, holding a hand over her mouth as he dashed into the darkness of the woods. Her father's large frame came lumbering around the corner moments later.

“You stay away from my daughters!” he roared into the woods shaking his fist in the air. He spun around and looked at Jewel who was still standing at the window.

“You close this window and get to bed,” he commanded, “and we'll talk about this in the morning.” He turned and marched back around the house.

Jewel quickly shut the window and locked it then spun around and shut the door to her room. “Eve lay back down,” she whispered to her sister and leapt up onto her bunk. They both pulled their blankets over their heads and tried very hard to be asleep. Moments later their father entered their room carrying a lantern and a hammer. He sat the lantern on their dresser and with several loud bangs drove two nails into the edges of the window, locking it in place. He scooped up the lantern and stomped out the door. Jewel heard her parent's door slam followed by their muffled voices. She couldn't tell what they were saying, but she had a very good idea what they were talking about. Carefully she slid out of bed and tip-toed across the room. She placed her ear against the wall that separated their room from their parent's room. She felt Eve brush against her as she did the same.

“...and we should have expected this sooner or later, George,” her mother's voice was saying.

“She has no business kissing boys, much less him,” her father's voice hissed. She could tell that he was making an effort not to yell.

“I know dear, but maybe if we just told them why.”

“Why?” he barked but then caught himself and lowered his voice, “It should be reason enough that I forbid it. Besides, they aren't old enough to understand.”

“George, calm down. Jewel is growing into a beautiful woman, and Eve isn't far behind her. Soon they will be out on their own just like Aura. We can't try to shelter them forever. I think that if we just sit down with them and tell them...”

"I know what I'll tell them," her father said harshly. "I'll let them know exactly how much trouble they'll be in if they don't follow my rules. This is still my house. I didn't give my country ten years of faithful service just so I could retire to take orders from my daughters. I expect the same respect and obedience from them as I did from my recruits. They are my daughters, and I won't let them come to harm just because I was too soft-hearted to protect them."

"Let's get some sleep," her mother said, "we can handle it in the morning."

They both returned to their beds, and Jewel took a deep breath. She didn't care how long she was grounded or what her father had to say. Dylan had come back. She smiled so hard she almost giggled. He had come back and he had kissed her. The first time, she admitted to herself, she had kissed him, but this time...

"It did look like a very nice kiss," Eve's voice whispered from the bunk below. Eve giggled, and then Jewel giggled. After a few moments they were both giggling so hard that Jewel was afraid they might wake their father again. Finally their laughter subsided, and Jewel stretched out to go to sleep.

He had come back, despite everything her father had said, he had come back, and that meant he must love her too. The soothing song of crickets chirping outside quickly lulled her to sleep, and she spent the entire night dreaming; kissing him.

The next morning was a disaster. Jewel woke up to Eve's frowning face looking terribly upset, and Jewel knew at once what it was. She hurried Eve into the bathroom and started the shower running while all the time saying things like, "It's ok," and "Mom and I do it too," and "Remember, we told you it would happen eventually, we just didn't know when."

Jewel had told their mom as soon as she got up, and now her mom was in the bathroom with Eve. Jewel had changed into her school clothes and was fixing breakfast. She waited for the sound of the heavy footsteps that would tell her that her father was awake. She didn't have to wait long.

"Eve started," she told him mischievously when he sat down at the table.

"Eh?" he said quizzically as Jewel poured him a cup of coffee. Jewel nodded her head towards the bathroom door and she saw her father's expression change as he realized her meaning. She found it very strange that something so normal had such a profound effect on

him. She hid her grin by pretending to wipe her face with one of the dish towels.

“Wha?” he stuttered and stood up. He took a few quick paces towards the bathroom but Jewel saw her mother shake her head at him. He paced across the small living room a couple quick times, and Jewel placed a plate of food on the table where he had been sitting. His fat hands tugged at the last remaining tufts of orange hair on the sides of his head, and he muttered under his breath. He glanced over to the table.

“Pancakes and sausage,” he said, and his voice was almost gleeful. It was as if he were looking for anything else to focus his thoughts on. Jewel knew that they were his favorite. Mom always made him pancakes and sausage whenever she wanted to go out and buy herself something. Jewel smiled, hoping her plan would keep him from remembering to ground her more than a month.

Jewel returned to the kitchen and continued cooking, putting the finished pancakes on three more plates and breaking some eggs into the pan. She watched her father nervously. He unfolded the morning paper and sat it on the table next to him. He would sip his coffee thoughtfully, setting it down only to turn the pages. She was wondering when the axe would drop, but finally she had to give up. She had already cooked more breakfast than her family could eat. Maybe her ploy had made him forget about Dylan. Maybe she would be able to finish breakfast and leave for school before he remembered. She sat her mother's and sister's plates on a rack above the fire to keep them warm and sat down across from her father. She ate carefully, still waiting for the tirade that might be coming. Her father wasn't evil, she knew that, but he had a bit of a temper. He had always been strict, but she knew he loved her. Jewel's mother always told her that he was strict because it was his job to protect his daughters. Still, her father simply drank his coffee, ate his breakfast, and studied the paper. Jewel was halfway through her breakfast when Eve sat down in the chair beside her. Eve, like Jewel, was wearing her school uniform: a white blouse under a black vest and a black skirt. They both hated having to wear it, since it looked awful next to their pale skin and freckles.

Across the room Fur Oshus pounced on a piece of fluff he had evidently been stalking for some time, and then hastily retreated to a safe distance.

"I'm a woman, daddy!" Eve announced proudly across the table, smiling broadly. Jewel thought she saw a few of his hairs turn grey, but it might have been a trick of the light.

Her dad looked up at Eve and forced a smile, "Is that so? Well, I'm very proud of you. I'm very proud to have two beautiful daughters." He looked across the table at Jewel. Here it comes, she told herself.

Jewel's mother pushed Eve's plate across the table and sat down with her own.

"Jewel this looks wonderful, thank you so much for cooking," she said. "George, are you feeling well this morning? You look pale."

Jewel smiled weakly; still afraid of when her father was going to start yelling but satisfied that her ploy had affected him so well.

"I'm fine dear." He said curtly and looked across the table to Jewel. "Jewel, your mother and I had a brief discussion about your recent," her father paused as if selecting the right word, "activities with that Farseer boy and we would once again like to make it clear that we do not wish either of you to have any association with him or his parents. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, but—", Jewel started to continue but her father held up a hand. "Your mother has told me that I should treat you like adults and tell you our reason for this. I do not believe this is necessary, since this is my house, and my rules should be law whether or not you agree with them. Your persistence last night, however, is evidence that you seem set against me on this, so I will therefore explain myself to a degree. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, father," Jewel and Eve both said, looking at their pancakes.

"Good. Your mother and I have tolerated your friendship with Dylan Farseer for quite some time. For that I can only blame myself. Now, however, it has gone quite far enough. Nothing good can come of your association with him or his family. Dylan Farseer is the grandson of Emanuel Kane. Isaac Kane is his uncle on his mother's side."

There was a small clank of steel as Jewel dropped her fork. It couldn't be true. I just couldn't.

"No," she protested, "he would have told me. I don't believe it."

Eve looked at Jewel and asked, "Who's Isaac Kane?"

Jewel's hands were trembling as she answered in a whisper, "Emanuel Kane was a powerful wizard who tried to overthrow Georgia. They—"

“No,” her father yelled, interrupting her. He turned to Eve, “You’re too young to understand, Eve. I’ll tell you about them when you are older.”

Jewel started to protest, but before she could speak Eve gave their father a sharp look and said, “I’m a woman, daddy, just like mommy and Aura and Jewel. I’m not a baby.”

Jewel was impressed. Eve had never stood up to their father before. Their father looked down at Eve and seemed as if he would explode, but their mother rested a hand on his arm in a silent plea to calm him. He swallowed hard and sighed.

“I know that you aren’t a baby, Eve, and I am very proud of you, but please trust me. This is for your own good. In a few years you will learn all about them in school.”

Eve scowled.

“George,” Jewel mother said in the voice she always used when she wanted something from him. “She’s just going to find out on her own. There are so many versions of the story. Wouldn’t it be better if she learned the truth from us, instead?”

Jewel’s father looked over the faces of his wife and two daughters, and Jewel could tell he knew this was a battle he couldn’t win.

“Very well,” he said. “Eve, you’ve learned all about the Great Change in school already, right?”

Eve nodded and said, “A long time ago magic didn’t work, but then it started working, and no one knows why. My teacher said it caused a lot of problems. People started wars.”

“That’s right,” he replied, “but it wasn’t that long ago. I was a young boy when it happened. You have seen the relics of those days: the clusters of giant steel and glass buildings and concrete streets that used to be cities, the enormous flat roadways littered with all those cars that used to be the primary mode of travel, and even the giant flying machines like the one that lies crashed outside this very town. I lived in one of those cities as a child, high up in one of those steel buildings in something that was called an apartment.

“I don’t remember what it was like, but my father, your grandfather, used to tell me stories about it before he passed away. In those days they were called scientists, and they studied very complicated ways to perform great tasks using nothing more than simple forces of nature apart from magic. In the confusion and panic

that followed the Great Change there arose several families who mastered the ways of magic more quickly than others. It was a very frightening time during the years that passed. These families used their powers to become evil rulers. It was anarchy, and many were killed. Here in Georgia we were fortunate. As you know our nation was once part of a much larger nation that stretched all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Back then much of the world cherished democracy just like we do. Georgia was a state back then, one of fifty united together for the cause of freedom. We here in Georgia were able to come together with very little bloodshed, and in fact, our response to the Great Change served as an example for many others. I believe we saved many lives because of that. These evil wizards, however, were too powerful. You might have heard about the wars that are still going on in the west and northeast. Today Georgia is the only democracy left.”

Eve asked, “But you said that Dylan’s family tried to take over Georgia. What happened?”

He replied, “I won’t tell you everything now, because you are too young. You’ll learn all about it in time. The important thing is that the Kane family tricked Georgia into thinking that they weren’t evil like the others. They claimed that they were running away from another family of wizards, and we made the mistake of letting them stay here under our protection. It was almost our downfall. We only barely managed to defeat them. Still, we made another mistake. After Veronica and Emanuel Kane’s deaths we let their daughter, Miranda Kane stay. The courts said that she was too young to be held accountable. It’s only a matter of time before she and her family attempt to continue their war.”

Jewel stood up knocking her chair backwards and yelled, “That’s not true. Miranda was only three years old. I learned that in school. She never did anything, and Dylan’s never done anything either! You can’t judge them just because—”

“Enough!” her father yelled, “It’s bad blood, the whole lot of them, and I’ll not have my daughters associated with them. End of discussion.” Eve’s kitten sprinted across the kitchen and into their bedroom then peered cautiously out the doorway.

“But, daddy”—Jewel pleaded.

“I said end of discussion! Now, get going or you’ll be late for school. I won’t be talking about this again, and remember that you’re both still grounded.”

Jewel stoop up and grabbed her backpack off the hook next to the front door. She ran outside before he could remember to ground her extra for the previous night. Eve followed after her. Neither of them spoke until their house was out of sight. Jewel was so mad she was crying.

"I can't believe it," she said, "I can't believe daddy would be so mean to judge Dylan just because he's related to them."

"Well, those were bad people," Eve said quietly, seeming afraid of even talking about them.

Jewel whirled and screamed at her, "Dylan's not bad! I don't care who he's related to! Dylan is one of the greatest men ever, and his mother is a good person too! I've met her, and there isn't a single evil bone in her body!"

Eve started shaking and then began to cry. Jewel knew she shouldn't have yelled and kneeled down.

"Oh, I'm sorry Eve," she said and reached out towards her, but Eve pushed past her and started running. Jewel walked the rest of the way to school feeling terrible.

Jewel's high school was a squat, blocky building on the edge of town and was one of the only remaining structures that had been built before the Great Change. Many modifications had been made since then, including a cooling spell that replaced the defunct ancient 'air-conditioners' that didn't do anything at all. Almost all of the asphalt in the parking lot had been torn up to make way for grassy fields for the horses, unicorns, and pegs to graze in. Like all students, Jewel was envious; all of them belonged to teachers. She passed through the fields and approached a large, light blue pegasus. His long feathery wings were folded along his back and shimmered with silver speckles in the sunlight.

"Morning Sky," she cooed at him, stroking his shoulder. Sky let out a quiet neigh and nuzzled her side.

"No, I don't have any pears today," she answered, "I forgot to stop by the tree. I'll bring extra tomorrow, okay?"

Sky snorted and shook his mane as he lowered his head and bit off another mouthful of grass.

"Don't be mad," she scratched his shoulder with one hand and rubbed his neck with the other, "You have plenty of grass. Is that mean old gryphon still picking on you?"

Sky's ears flattened on the top of his head, and he twitched his tail.

“He's just a little bully,” she assured him, “I have to go or I'll be late for class, but I'll see you again tomorrow.”

Sky snorted again.

“Okay, I won't forget the pears.”

She patted him again and then sprinted across the field and through the large double doors at the front of the school.

She arrived to her first class late and sat down in her usual seat. Despite her conversation with Sky she was still furious at her father. In the desk beside hers sat her best friend and cousin: Audrey, a petite girl with sandy blond hair, blue eyes, and a perfect complexion. Jewel, who hated her own freckles, had always envied Audrey's beauty but she never let it get in the way of their friendship. Audrey smiled at her, but the smile left her face when she saw Jewel's frown.

“Jewel, what's wrong?” she said.

A voice called out over the classroom, “Miss Price, today's assignment does not require talking. Ah, Miss Summers, so nice of you to join us. If you'll come up to my desk you can pick up a worksheet and your tardy slip,” Mr. Davis gestured to two pieces of paper in front of him. Some of the students sniggered.

Jewel walked to the front of the class and retrieved the paper trying to ignore the people staring at her. When she got back to her seat she looked at Audrey and mouthed the words 'I kissed him.' Audrey's eyes got wide and she had to clap her hands over her mouth. Jewel sat down in her seat and looked at the worksheet. It was titled, “Modern Mechanical Machines.”

The first question was, “The movable type printing press and its cousin inventions such as typewriters continue to function while simple items such as ballpoint pens do not. Why?”

Jewel had no idea. She rummaged through her book bag until she found her Modern Science book and flipped to the chapter they were on. Halfway down the page she saw a sentence that read, “The movable type printing press and its cousin inventions such as typewriters continue to function because...” and Jewel rolled her eyes and pushed the worksheet away to the side of her desk. Audrey's hand dropped a small piece of paper onto Jewel's desk. In hastily scrawled letters it read, “Tell me everything!” Jewel took a piece of paper out of her notebook and spent half of the class writing a note to Audrey. Then while Audrey read it Jewel worked on the assignment. She still wasn't finished when the bell rang.

“Anything you haven't finished is homework,” Mr. Davis said as they left, as if they didn't know that already, “It will be due at the beginning of class tomorrow.”

“Twice!?” Audrey exclaimed as they left the classroom.

They were still talking when they arrived in their next class: English with Mrs. Smith.

“I still can't believe you kissed him... twice.” Audrey hissed as they sat down.

Jewel looked starry-eyed for a moment before she managed to compose herself, “Stop it Audrey, someone will hear, anyway, didn't you read anything else? My father says I can't see him just because he is related to the Kane family.”

“That doesn't mean you're not going to see him,” she pointed out. “Do you think it's true? Is he really related to Isaac Kane?”

Jewel didn't want to consider that before she had a chance to talk to Dylan himself. “I don't know, and anyway, that's not the point. I'm already grounded for a month. What if they won't let me come over for your birthday?”

Jewel could tell by Audrey's expression that she hadn't thought of that, but just then the bell rang.

“Take your seats!” Mrs. Smith called.

Mrs. Smith's classes were always nothing but lectures, and that allowed for plenty of time to pass notes back and forth. By the end of the period they had learned nothing about predicate nominatives, but they had finished designing a wedding dress, decided that 'Jewel Farseer' sounded lovely, and discussed kissing technique in depth. Since Audrey had Band third period she was required to leave a minute before the bell in order to make the long trip across campus. Jewel had Drama instead, so they wouldn't be able to talk again until lunch.

In Drama Jewel looked out over the empty auditorium and read her lines, but her heart wasn't in it.

“Mr. Montaby, my voice is a bit hoarse. Is it okay if Shelly practices today?” Jewel asked. Shelly was playing the same part in the class's Drama competition, since it was impossible for any single student to make it to all their meets.

“Very well, Ms. Summers.” Mr. Montaby said warmly, “Ms. Long, please take your position and start from the top of the scene.” Mr. Montaby was Jewel's favorite teacher, and Drama, despite not

having it with Audrey, was usually her favorite class. Jewel took a seat and pretended to be memorizing her lines, but instead spent the time daydreaming about Dylan.

When at last the bell rang Jewel ran to the cafeteria. Tenth- and eleventh-graders had lunch together, so it was one of the only times that she was sure to see Dylan. Taking her home-made lunch out of her back pack Jewel surveyed the room trying to find him. He usually brought his own lunch. She didn't know how she was going to ask him. What if it was true? Did it matter? At last her heart leapt for joy; he was walking towards his usual table which was occupied by a couple of boys that she assumed were his friends. She nearly bounced as she walked towards him, and they arrived at the table at the same time.

"Hi, Dylan," she chimed, and he jumped and turned around. She thought he looked handsome in his school uniform and tried to work up the courage to tell him so.

"Oh, ah... hi Jewel," he said, rubbing his hands together.

"Mind if I ask you something?" She asked tentatively. She wondered for a moment if there might be a way to get him alone. She didn't want to ask him in front of his friends.

"Well, Jewel, actually... I..." he said, with a pained expression on his face.

"What is it?" Jewel said, becoming instantly worried.

"I can't see you anymore," he finished lamely.

At first she thought that she had heard him wrong, but the expression on his face told her that she had not. At once it was as if her world had ended. Nothing mattered. She didn't notice the looks that people gave her as she pushed past them and ran crying down the halls. She didn't care. He didn't love her, and she was nothing without him. She darted into the girl's bathroom: the only place she could think of to hide and sat on the floor crying. She didn't know how long she had been there before Audrey knelt down beside her.

"It's okay," Audrey said, putting an arm around her, "I heard what happened. That was a terrible thing for him to do—"

"He's not terrible," Jewel wailed, angry at Audrey, angry at her father, angry at herself, "You take that back. He's wonderful, and I'm... Oh, this is all my fault!" She burst into tears again.

Audrey sat Jewel's book bag and lunch on the floor next to her. "I brought this," she offered, "In case you get hungry later today." Jewel didn't hear her.

Eve finished copying down the notes Mr. Jones had written on the blackboard and looked up. He looked out over the classroom.

He said, "So far we have studied rod-assisted magical incantations which include staff and wand magic. Who can tell me another one of the four forms of magic?"

One of Eve's classmates raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Simms?"

"My brother told me that there are more than just four forms of magic."

"Ah, yes. Let me clarify. There are four forms of magic that are legal for use by a civilian. You will learn about the other forbidden or military forms of magic in high school. Right now you only need to know about these four. Do you know of one besides rod-assisted?"

"Music-assisted."

Mr. Jones nodded, "That's right. We can use musical instruments for conjuring items for indefinite storage. More advanced forms include spells in the form of song, poetry, or even dance. These are most commonly used in medical practice for healing and therapy. Even the common fire-starter spell is a musical incantation. When you snap your fingers the sound combines with your spoken command to produce fire. Who knows of another?"

Eve raised her hand.

"Yes Ms. Summers?"

"Psionic," Eve said. Her elder sister, Aura had once mentioned this form of magic.

"You are correct. Women who are capable of telepathy and other mental powers can sometimes train to use Psionic magic. Again this form of magic is often used in hospitals to help people who have mental illnesses. It is also sometimes used in legal trials to determine if someone is telling the truth. Who knows the fourth form of magic?"

When no one raised a hand Mr. Jones continued, "The fourth form of magic is what we will be studying next. That is Icon-assisted magic. Who knows what that means?"

One of the students called out, "Amulets and statues and stuff."

"That's correct. We use Iconical magic to store spells into carvings, necklaces, stones, or even common household items."

He walked over to his desk and picked up a pen.

“This is a great example. This pen has been enchanted to mark any surface with ink. Icon-assisted magic is the most common form of magic and has very few legal restrictions. That is why it is my favorite form to teach. I know that all of you have been disappointed that you are not allowed to try magic for yourselves. While we study Iconical magic you will not only have the opportunity to use many different magic items, but you will be making your very own magic item.”

Every student in the class sat up a bit taller, and some gasped in surprise.

“Really?” a few of them asked.

“That’s right. When we finish with this chapter each of you will have an item of your own choosing that will perform your spell. You’ll be able to keep it and use it whenever you like. Of course, there will be rules about the type of spells we can make, but there are many to choose from, and I think we’ll all have a great deal of fun.”

The bell signaling the end of class rang. As the students gathered up their things all of them were whispering excitedly about what they planned to make. Eve was excited too, but she had other things on her mind.

Eve watched as the last of her classmates filed out of the classroom. Mr. Jones was sorting some papers on his desk and didn’t seem to see her. She cleared her throat slightly.

He looked up and said, “Oh, hello Mr. Summers. I’ve been meaning to talk to you. Mrs. Macarthy spoke to me yesterday. Your grades in her class aren’t exactly what they need to be. You get the highest grades in my class, and I’ve spoken to your other teachers, it seems that you are an A student in all of their classes. What do you think we need to do for your work to be as outstanding in History of Magic and Science?”

Eve felt a pang of guilt. She never liked History of Magic and Science. She said, “I’ll work harder, I promise. Right now I need to ask you a question.”

“Is it about our study of Iconical magic? I wish you would be as excited about History of Magic and Science. Developing an interest in the subject is the first step to improving your performance.”

Eve shook her head, “No, but it is about history. My dad told me about wizards after the Great Change who did bad things. He said that some of them tried to take over Georgia. He wouldn’t tell me everything.”

Mr. Jones gave her a serious look. Eve knew what it meant. He thought she was too young. She hated being treated like a child. He said, "Well, if your father won't tell you, it isn't exactly my place to do so. You'll learn all about that stuff when you take Misuse of Magic in a couple years."

"But it's important," Eve pleaded. "My sister is friends with a boy and my father said..." Eve didn't know how to continue.

"Ah," Mr. Jones said, "Yes, I think I see the problem now. You are talking about our nefarious celebrity, Dylan Farseer, correct?"

Eve nodded.

Mr. Jones said, "I have had the pleasure of teaching him when he was your age. Don't worry. He's not a bad person. Whatever you may have heard about his family history isn't important. There is no reason to fear him or his parents. They are upstanding members of the community. I wish more students were smart enough to come ask me when they hear things about him. Rumors can be a dangerous thing. I'm proud of you, Eve. Now hurry along. You don't want to be late for your next class."

Eve wanted to ask more, but could tell that Mr. Jones considered the subject closed. She said, "Thanks," and hurried out of the classroom.

For the rest of the day her mind was full of questions. How could her father be so wrong about this? She had always looked up to him. She had thought he knew everything. She couldn't wait to tell Jewel what Mr. Jones had said. Eve knew her sister would be glad to know that not everyone thought Dylan was evil.

For Jewel the rest of the day after lunch passed in a daze. Jewel ignored the looks. She didn't care. Let them make fun of her for crying if they wanted to. Audrey walked with her between classes, offering a few words of consolation each time, but it didn't help. Jewel felt she had lost the only thing that had any meaning to her and she hated everything.

Eve fell into step beside her as they started the walk home at the end of the day. It was a long time before anyone said anything.

"I heard what happened today," Eve said.

"You think I deserve it, don't you? For yelling at you this morning?" Jewel snapped.

Eve scowled and broke into a run, but Jewel wasn't sorry this time.

When she got home the disaster continued.

"What did I tell you?" her father bellowed, "Eve gets home, and the first thing she tells me is that you were talking to that Farseer boy again at lunch!" Eve shot a dark look at her from the doorway of their room. "I thought that I had made this clear, but apparently I was wrong. You are grounded indefinitely! Until you show me that you can be responsible enough to obey the rules that your mother and I set for your own good you are grounded and no dessert at meals and... and—Trisha what else can we do?"

Her father stomped around the living room furiously.

"I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU DO!" Jewel's scream caught him off guard. "I don't care about anything anymore. I don't care about any of you. I don't care. I don't care! I don't care! I – DON'T – CARE!"

She stormed past her father and into her room.

"GET OUT YOU LITTLE TRAITOR!" She roared at Eve who immediately ran out the door holding a frightened Fur Oshus against her chest. Jewel slammed the door as hard as she could and locked it then flung herself up onto her bed and began to cry.

It was evening when she woke up. There was a light tapping on the door.

"Jewel, honey," it was her mother's voice, "Eve just needs to get her pajamas so she can take a shower. Is that okay?"

Jewel got up, unlocked the door, and opened it. Her mother entered and crossed the room.

"She just needs a few things," she said, searching through the dresser, "Ah yes, here it is. Okay. Eve said that she wouldn't mind sleeping in our room tonight, if you need some time to yourself, and if you need anything at all just tell me okay?"

Jewel just scowled at her. She didn't want anything from any of them.

"Well okay, we're here if you need us," her mother said and then left, carefully closing the door behind her.

Jewel stripped off her school uniform and threw it across the room. She pulled on a pair of green jeans and her favorite shirt: a long-sleeve green turtleneck. Jewel grabbed her backpack and emptied it onto the floor. She didn't know when she had made the decision, but she had made it. Quickly she picked out clothes and began stuffing them into the bag.

Her mind raced through a checklist. Warm clothes? Yes. Raincoat? No need, she knew an umbrella spell. Money? Yes. She emptied the contents of her purse onto the dresser stuffed a ten dollar bill into her pocket, then she found her magic safe and said the password: Dylan. She had to stop to cry for a few minutes before she could resume packing. Total she had just over forty dollars now. Georgia money wouldn't get her far, but she was sure that she could manage.

Food? She found her conjuring kazoo and blew a flat note. A few of her old toys emptied out of it. She looked at the door and tried to compose herself. She took a few deep breaths, opened the door and walked out of her room into the kitchen. She did her best to ignore the rest of her family, who were eating dinner at the table. Jewel grabbed her plate, which was already prepared, off the rack above the fire, and also took a couple plastic containers which she hoped would not be noticed. Swiftly she made her way back into her room. Fur Oshus mewed at her, but the rest of the family was silent.

She let out a long breath after she was safely back in her room. Carefully she emptied the contents of the plate: roast beef, potatoes, and corn bread into the containers and sealed them tightly. She was glad that the meal was one that still tasted fine mixed together. Carefully, and as quietly as possible, she played a few notes on the kazoo. With a flash the two containers disappeared, and the kazoo became much heavier. Realizing that she was hungry now, she blew a note, and the containers returned, but the kazoo only became slightly lighter. Jewel emptied the food back onto her plate and ate it. After finishing, she noticed the uneaten school lunch and thermos on the floor. Scowling, she conjured them both into the kazoo as well. The kazoo was now almost as heavy as her entire backpack full of books had been, and as it was much smaller, the weight seemed greater. She tucked into the front pocket of her jeans where it seemed the most comfortable to carry and looked around the room. As a last thought she picked up several hair scrunchies that had fallen out of her purse and put them in the side pouch of her backpack. Satisfied that everything else was packed, Jewel turned to look at the wardrobe.

Was she really going to do this? Yes, she answered herself. She opened the wardrobe and lifted a large silver case. She placed the case on the floor and concentrated on the password. It would only work if she really meant it. She sang in a whisper.

“If the need is great,
If the options few,
Ask and I will open,
To you and only you.”

This was it, if the case didn't open, then she didn't really mean it and she would have to think of something else. She reached for the latch and took a deep breath. She turned it and heard a click. The case sprang open. Inside were three beautiful sections of cherry wood. Two were about two and a half feet long and tapered with gold fittings at each end where they could be screwed into one another. The third piece was only a foot long, but was topped with an amber globe held by a silver dragon's claw. In the center of the amber globe was a large rough emerald. Jewel took out the two longer sections and screwed them together carefully, and then she twisted the headpiece onto the top. She closed the case, locked it, and set it back in the wardrobe. This was only the second time she had seen the staff. This was the first time she had ever held it.

Jewel slung her pack full of clothes over one arm and tried to think if she had forgotten anything. Her gaze fell on the blanket, and her eyes started to water. She leaned the staff against the wall and reached down into the silver case. From a small indentation underneath where the headpiece had been she pulled a leather-bound spell book.

It was nothing like any of her class textbooks on magic. It was a military issue staff and wand spell book. After flipping through the index she found what she wanted. She picked up the staff again and pointed it at the blanket.

“Minatura,” she whispered. There was a slight ripple in the air that radiated outwards from the head of the staff, and in place of the blanket was a small handkerchief with the same pattern. The ripple surprised Jewel. Nothing like that had ever happened in class with the school staffs. She tied the miniature blanket around her neck like a scarf and looked in the spell book one more time. Eventually she found the spell she was seeking and pointed the staff at the window.

“Portabranis Paraban,” she whispered, and the window slid open despite the latch and nails. This time there was no ripple, so Jewel decided that she must have imagined it. Silently, she put the book into her pack, slung it over her shoulder, and slipped out of the window. The window shut itself behind her, and Jewel Summers began walking straight into the woods away from the village of New Atlanta.

“Solarum,” she whispered, and her staff began to glow with a bright white light that lit her path.

It was nearly an hour before the impact of what she had done rushed over her. Her parents would be furious, of course, but that was nothing compared to the number of laws she must have broken. She tried to count them off on her fingers. Conjuring food was one, but that was safe so long as you didn't try to live off of it for any long period of time. Unlicensed beginner magic outside of a school was another, but kids broke that one all the time. The first one that really worried her was her unlicensed use of staff-assisted incantations. That one was strictly enforced. The law she feared the most, however, was the one that she was breaking continually: possession of an unregistered staff. None of these infractions, however, would be readily apparent to any law enforcement individuals that she might encounter, so she really didn't have any reason to worry so long as no one asked her those dreaded words: “License and Registration, please.”

When sunrise finally came Jewel decided that she should find a place to hide. Her family would certainly notice that she was missing before long and they were sure to send out search parties. She only hoped that no one opened the silver case, or if they did, that they would not realize what it had contained. She sat down in a small clearing and dug out the spell book. She now wished that she had brought one of her notebooks to write down the more useful spells. She opened to the beginning of the section on staff spells and flipped to the index. After a moment Jewel found a spell that seemed suitable.

“Nondiscuvrum,” she commanded. She was startled and surprised to see that she was now surrounded by a thick hedge of brambles with a clear spot in the center just big enough to be comfortable. This was not the typical result of a camouflage spell. She had had the opportunity to cast such a spell in her beginner magic class. She was one of the only students who had been able to use a staff successfully. Most of the other students could only use the less powerful wands.

With a “Deminitura” she enlarged her blanket and then conjured out some food from her kazoo. The food was brittle, as if overly stale, but the taste was the same. Jewel knew that conjured food was fine if you only ate it for a few days, because she and Audrey had taken to sneaking cakes and pies into school with the kazoo last year. The two of them had been fine until about a month when they finally both

became horribly sick. Mom had been furious. Jewel smiled as she thought about it, but then started thinking about Dylan, and tears welled up in her eyes. Why didn't he love her? What was wrong with her? What had she done?

"Jewel?" a familiar voice called, and she sat up quickly. She waited a moment to see if she had imagined it.

"Jewel, are you in there," came the whisper, "are you okay?"

Jewel's stomach did cartwheels. "Dylan? What are you doing out here?"

"I..." he paused, "well, I followed you," he finished sounding ashamed.

Jewel grabbed her staff and pointed it at the brambles and said, "Portabranis Paraban." A small tunnel opened up, and Jewel saw Dylan's shoes.

"Down here," she said and soon she was greeted by his charming smile as he crawled through the tunnel. He was still wearing his school uniform.

Jewel's heart was racing a mile a minute as she watched Dylan emerge from the tunnel, and then something inside her cracked. Instantly she flung her arms around him buried her face into his shoulder and began sobbing.

"Oh Dylan, I've... I've don't something... something terrible," she wailed between sobs. She felt his strong arms around her at once.

"What is—Is that my mother's staff?" he asked accusingly. Jewel nodded into his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry Dylan. I didn't know what to do!" Jewel moaned. "You said... when you said... Oh I couldn't bear it. I hated everything at home. My sister told... she told that I had talked with you, and my dad... He never understands. And I yelled at Eve, and then... I don't know why I did it. I just wanted to leave, and this was the only way I could think of... but... but you're here now. Everything's right again."

"I don't know about that. Why did you bring the staff? I told you to hide it, not to use it." Dylan's words cut through her.

"I know," she wailed, "I betrayed you, Dylan. I'm so sorry. P-please f-forgive me!" Recklessly she buried her face into his shoulder, ashamed and afraid that he would leave her again.

"I... you didn't betray me," his voice was shaky; "I forgive you. It's okay Jewel. It's all going to be okay. Does anyone know you have the staff? Did anyone see you with it?"

She shook her head, but said, “E-Eve saw the case once, b-but I don't think she knows w-what's in-inside it.”

“Okay, that's fine, little gemstone,” Dylan held her close and whispered into her ear, “Just be calm. Did you do anything noticeable with it? Any spells that would leave a trace?”

Feeling his breath on her ear calmed her in some ways but excited her in others. She tried to stop crying. She felt that Dylan must think she was an awful mess.

“No,” she answered, “only basic stuff. The same stuff we've seen Mr. Eleazar do in Modern Magic class.”

“Ok, everything will be fine then.” Dylan said, breathing heavily, “All we need to do is take you home, put the staff up before anyone sees it, and tell them you were just out for a short walk because you needed time to think. The important thing is to keep you safe and out of prison.”

Jewel burst into tears again, pained that she had caused him so much worry, “I'm so sorry Dylan. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay, Jewel. This is my fault. I shouldn't have said what I said. My parents told me that your father had talked with them and that I couldn't see you anymore. I didn't want to disobey them.”

“I hate him,” Jewel said, angry, “why doesn't he want me to be happy? He's mean and... and...”

Dylan's arms squeezed her to him, “Calm down Jewel. Everything will be fine. We just need to get you home before they start searching for us.”

Jewel couldn't stand it any longer. She had to ask him. She was sure she knew the answer already, but she refused to believe it until she heard it from him.

“Is it true?” she asked in a whisper, staring at the ground.

“Is what true?” he asked.

She stammered, fumbling over the words. “My dad... he told me... your mother... are you...” She couldn't bring herself to finish.

“Oh Jewel,” Dylan said, “I should have told you. I didn't mean to hide it from you. It's just... Some people don't understand.”

Jewel pushed away from him slightly and looked up into his eyes. She said, “So it is true?” Her voice sounded more accusing that she had intended.

Dylan nodded, "Isaac Kane is my uncle. Emanuel Kane was my grandfather. I'm sorry. I understand if you don't want to have anything to do with me."

Jewel couldn't think of anything worse than never seeing Dylan again. She realized that had been right before. It didn't matter. Dylan was a good person. She couldn't blame him for something someone else had done.

"No Dylan. I want to stay with you forever. I don't want to go back home ever again. If I go back there then daddy will yell, and you'll go away again," she drew back from him and looked into his eyes. Her whole body shook with the need to hear him say it.

"I—I'll never leave you, Jewel," he said, "I love you."

She burst into tears again but this time they were tears of joy. She flung herself upon him and he fell backwards onto the blanket. For the third time in less than two days they kissed, but this time she knew they would not be interrupted. When at last the kiss ended she whispered to him, "I love you too, Dylan Farseer."

After what seemed like several minutes Jewel noticed that she had been playing with a loop of his light brown hair and doing nothing else. He lay silent, but smiling, staring at the roof of the bramble tent. She wondered how best to get his attention and finally settled on kissing him just below his ear.

"Do you know how long I've loved you?" he asked after she kissed him.

She was so overjoyed that he asked the question that she never thought to answer it. She did, however, kiss his ear again after he had been silent for a short time.

"I've loved you," he continued, "for seven years."

Jewel was startled, so she kissed his ear to tell him so.

"The first day I saw you, Jewel. December 25th, 2055. It was the town Christmas party. You wore the same dress that Eve was wearing the other night. I'll never forget it."

Jewel felt slightly self-conscious that her and her sister's bridesmaid dresses had been hand-me-downs, but Dylan's next statement made her forget about it instantly.

"You were beautiful."

At this, Jewel couldn't contain herself. She rolled over and locked her mouth to his. This time she would have to tell Eve that yes, it was wet and yes, he did use his tongue.

At length they disengaged, but Jewel found it odd that Dylan still lay on his back staring at the ceiling. As she looked at him it occurred to her that he seemed to have his mind focused on something very important.

"What is it?" she asked, sitting on top of him with her knees on either side of his hips.

"I," he said sounding strained, "I am being honorable, and you are not. Don't sit like that. Just—just lay down next to me instead."

Jewel had no idea what he was talking about, but she was glad to do anything he asked of her. "Okay," she said, swinging her leg over, "my jeans were getting dirty anyway." She brushed off the dirt and stretched herself out against him.

"You look lovely in green," he told her.

She beamed, "Thank you. Your uniform looks nice on you."

He smiled and asked, "How long do you plan for us to stay here?"

Jewel had thought that the answer would be obvious. "Forever," she said, matter-of-factly.

Dylan seemed to think about this. "Ah, as much as I would like that, my love," Jewel's spine tingled so much at the words that she missed most of what he said next. "...since you don't want to go to prison," was all she heard at the end. She assumed that he had said that she should go back home.

Jewel sighed and thought about the way it sounded when he said 'my love.' Those simple words made everything bearable. She said, "Okay, let's go back home as soon as we wake up. I had a long walk." She rested her head on his shoulder and listened to the sound of his heartbeat. She had counted three before she drifted off to sleep.

Jewel's dreams were oddly exciting, and some of them confused her. As she woke, however, she forgot all of them. She woke Dylan with a kiss, and after they finished she grabbed the staff and stood up.

"Discuvrum," she commanded, and the brambles disappeared.

"Discuvrum?" Dylan asked, raising an eyebrow, "That didn't look like a normal nondiscuvrum enchantment."

Jewel looked sheepish, "I know. I think it's because of the staff. Don't worry. I won't do any more. We can just take this back to my house, put it back in the case, and..." She was immediately anxious.

She felt Dylan squeeze her hand, and it instilled her with a great amount of courage. She was sure that she could face anything. Together they started walking back towards the village. As they

walked Jewel was delighted to be able to spend so much time with Dylan. His voice was wonderful to hear, and everything he said was always so interesting. She was sure that he was the smartest man she ever met. He rarely spoke unless she asked him questions, so she often forced herself to ask him things simply so she could hear the sound of his voice.

“Why did you follow me?” she asked.

A moment passed before he answered her, “I wanted to talk to you about what I said at lunch. I am sorry about that, by the way. When I got to your house I saw you walking into the woods. I was...worried about you, so I followed you. I didn't want you to get into any trouble for using a staff. I didn't see that it was my grandmother's. If I had known I might have stopped you then.”

Jewel's eyes started to water, “I feel just awful about that, Dylan. I shouldn't have stolen it. I was just so...”

“You didn't steal it,” he assured her, “I gave it to you.”

“But you told me to keep it safe. You were hiding it so your mother wouldn't get into any trouble for it. I had no right to take it.”

“Don't be so hard on yourself, Jewel. I told you the password for a reason, remember. It only opens if you really need it to. Since it opened for you that means that you needed it.”

“I guess so,” Jewel agreed, but she wasn't sure. She felt as if she had betrayed his trust, “Should we find someone else to keep it for a while? In case anyone notices the magic I did with it and comes looking for it?”

“No!” Dylan shouted and spun around.

Jewel saw the expression on his face and knew that she had said something terribly wrong. She tried to apologize but couldn't bring herself to speak.

Dylan instantly returned to his tender and gentle demeanor, “I'm sorry, Jewel. I didn't mean to yell. It was an accident. I... I just don't think it's a good idea to tell anyone else about the staff. My family has a bad history. Some people wouldn't understand.”

“Like my father,” Jewel acceded.

“Yes, like your father, but Jewel, remember, your father isn't a bad man. He's just trying to protect you.”

“I don't need protection from you,” she pointed out, “You wouldn't do anything to hurt me.”

"That's right, but I have to live with what my uncle and grandparents have done. My mother has struggled with the same thing her entire life, and she had told me many times that I should expect it."

"But you shouldn't be judged for something someone else did! I don't care how closely they're related to you."

"That's right, but my mother tells me that the world doesn't work that way. One day, maybe, people will learn, but you can't hate your father for this. He's just doing the best he can."

"I don't hate him," she agreed, feeling guilty.

They continued the walk in silence until they came to a small dirt road. Jewel recognized it as a path behind the school used as a nature trail.

"We must have gotten off course a bit," Dylan suggested, and they headed into town.

As they approached the village Jewel knew at once that something was wrong. There was no single thing that stood out as improper, but the village did not seem normal.

"Where is everyone?" Jewel asked.

"Maybe it's just because everyone is looking for us," Dylan offered, but she detected more than a hint of doubt in his voice.

Jewel peered through the trees as they approached the edge of the forest. Vague figures hovered and drifted in the streets. Jewel squinted to see what they were. Dylan grabbed her and brought them both to the ground.

"Nondiscuvrum," he hissed into her ear, and she instantly repeated it. Brambles circled around them, obscuring their view. Jewel looked at him for an explanation but he put his finger to his mouth. He opened her backpack and took out the spell book. Quickly he flipped through the pages but Jewel noticed that he was careful to make no noise. After a moments searching he stuck the book in front of her and jabbed his finger at a spell. Jewel read it and knew he wanted her to cast the spell.

"Privos Abodum," Jewel whispered but noticed no change.

"How do I know if it worked?" she whispered, desperately, but Dylan was busy riffling through pages. Jewel noticed that the pages now made no sound no matter how quickly he flipped him.

"Uh, Dylan, can you hear me?" She asked, and wondered when he would tell her what was going on.

He nodded and looked up at her. She saw his mouth move but heard no sound.

“I can't hear you,” she whispered.

He nodded and then mouthed, “I know,” and then he lifted his hand and snapped his fingers but there was no noise. Jewel nodded in recognition, but he was already looking through the book again. Now she sorely wished that she had brought a notepad and quill with her. After a few moments that seemed like hours Dylan held the book open in front of her. He was pointing to a section in the appendix. It read:

Supportive Magic (p.234) Example 1: Circle of Protection

Type: Pentagram Assisted Bicantational Persistent Circle

Class: Multi-dimensional and Multi-elemental

Instructions: Having drawn the pentagram the two magicians must...

Jewel looked aghast. This was a persistent spell, so any magician who found it would know instantly who cast it. It was also a pentagram assisted spell, which was forbidden and required a special license, and it was bicantational which required a special permit. People went to prison for very long periods of time for doing things like this.

Dylan mouthed something that looked very much like, “We'll die if we don't.”

Fear hit the pit of her stomach, but her faith in him let her know that everything would be fine if she followed his directions. She trusted him. Jewel stood up and cleared out a small patch of grass and traced the pentagram in the dirt with the end of the staff. As she finished the last line five small blue puffs of flame rose from the points. Dylan stood next to her and held the book open for her as she read the instructions. It was a very complicated spell, and she had never attempted anything like it, but magic was not hard at all to use. The ease with which anyone could perform magic was the primary reason that the United World Order of Magic had agreed upon so many laws. The threat of punishment was almost the only thing preventing abuse. Jewel noticed, however, that her magic was now much more successful since she had been carrying the staff. She chanted the words carefully and then waited while Dylan mouthed his part. When she saw Dylan's mouth stop moving she followed the rest of the directions: Weaving a circle around herself three times with one finger, she closed her eyes, and chanted,

“Novus protectum. Protectum totalus. Novus defendum. Defendum totalus. Invoke.”

As she said the last word something happened that she could only describe as an explosion except the results were very much different. Her 'nondiscuvrum' charm had disappeared, and the entire landscape turned into contoured night sky. It was as if the entire world had been carefully wrapped in black paper containing tiny dots except this paper had all the depth of infinite space. At Jewel's feet there was a small circle of land that remained unchanged on which she and Dylan stood, but none of these things held her attention. What held her attention was the creature which floated directly outside that circle. It was horrible. Jewel's first thought was that it was a ghost. It's grey, translucent body fluttered like a sheet in the wind. It had no arms or legs, and its deathly face was only a shadow with two glowing eyes and a gaping black mouth. As Jewel looked into the sinister eyes she felt as if she were falling into them. Her body felt like ice and she couldn't move.

Jewel screamed and passed out.

When she came to she could hear Dylan's voice saying “Jewel, it's okay. My darling, it's okay.” She felt a hand covering her eyes.

She tried to sit up, but Dylan held her tight.

“Are you awake?” he asked, but his voice sounded different, as if he had a cold.

“Yes,” she said, “what happened?”

“Don't open your eyes. Whatever you do, don't open your eyes until I tell you,” his voice was hoarse.

“They're closed, I won't open them. What's going on? What was that thing?”

“Just don't open your eyes. I've got to get the book. I'm taking my hand away. Just don't open your eyes and don't move, Jewel,” she could barely hear him now. He moved away from her, and she felt a surge of panic without his touch.

She kept her eyes shut tight, but Dylan was gone for so long that she was about to shout for him when she felt him sit back down next to her.

“Open your eyes, but look only at the book, my love,” she barely heard him whisper even though his mouth was right next to her ear.

When she opened her eyes she saw the heading on the page immediately. It read "Mass-transportation spell" and beneath it, written in jagged letters of fresh blood, was the word "Far."

Jewel gripped the cool wood of the staff in one hand and Dylan's arm in the other. His skin felt strangely cold but there was no time to worry about that now. Focusing her mind on Aura's house in the northwest mountains of Georgia, she envisioned Dylan and herself standing in the guest room. After she was sure that she remembered as many details as possible, she read the words from the book. Although she expected her voice to shake with fear, it was calm and even.

"Momentum Transportum Totalus Invoke."

Jewel felt the ground beneath her change to hard wood floor.

"Thank you," she barely heard Dylan's voice rasp and she felt his arm go limp. The book fell onto her chest, and she lay staring at the ceiling of the guest room in her sister's house.

Panic and worry swept over her, and she sat up to see what was wrong with Dylan. She screamed. His hair was no longer brown, but a bright solid white. His skin was pale and shrunken tight against his bones. His eyes were white and colorless except for the now cat-like vertical slit pupils. Though his eyes were open, he didn't move. He looked dead.

"Dylan, oh, Dylan what happened to you? Wake up! Don't die! I can't lose you!" She pleaded with him.

At that moment the door was flung open. The heavy form of Rupert Brown rushed into the room followed closely by Jewel's elder sister: Aura. Rupert took one look at Dylan and cried, "Feeders? Here?" A wand appeared in his hand he spun around looking very frightened.

"Jewel?" Aura said, sounding confused, "What are you doing here? And who is this boy? And what are you doing with a staff?"

"We transported here," Jewel sobbed, "We had to get away. It was awful. Don't—don't let him die!" Her last sentence was screamed with such a wail of agony that Aura instantly fell to Jewel's side and cradled her head to her chest like a baby.

"Rupert, call the hospital. This boy needs help. Then, call the Magus and tell them feeders are in my hometown!" Aura yelled at her husband and Jewel could hear the worry in her voice.

"Right away," he said, rushing out the door as quickly as his large frame would manage.

Jewel cried in her sisters arms and chanted, "Don't let him die," over and over until she eventually passed out.

When she woke up the walls around her looked like hospital walls, except they couldn't be because hospital walls weren't supposed to be blurry.

A voice from somewhere said, "...her in with... seem the youngest ever... love bond... surely wouldn't have... without her..."

Jewel wondered why the person talking was skipping words, and then she wondered who was dimming the lights. She tried to ask them to cut it out, but she had already fallen back asleep.

Jewel woke the next time to the sound of her name.

"Jewel, are you feeling better?" Aura asked.

Seeing her sister now gave her a terrible thought. "Eve, where is Eve? Is she all right?" As Jewel spoke she noticed that her own voice was now as raspy as Dylan's had been.

Aura gave her a pained look, "Eve and Audrey are here. After you disappeared Mom sent them to visit me. Everyone else though..."

Jewel began to choke, "Mother? Father?"

Aura reached down and took Jewel's hand. She whispered, "Yes. New Atlanta was consumed by them. It's a miracle you and this boy survived."

Jewel remembered the last thing she had told her parents. She hadn't meant it. She wanted to go back, to tell them she loved them and was sorry. Anguish swept over her.

Jewel hoped that it was possible to die from too much crying as tears began to run down her cheeks. She screamed. She ranted and vented with all the rage and anger she could muster. She cried and she screamed, heedless of anything else. The echoes of her single message of protest reverberated off the walls. Long after her throat had become so dry and hoarse that it cracked and bled Jewel still mouthed over and over, "I'm sorry."

Jewel had no memory of falling asleep, but shortly after the next time she woke she discovered that Dylan was unconscious in the bed next to hers. Despite being unable to talk she was still able to raise enough protest for an orderly to pull back the curtain. His features had not changed from the last time she had seen him. He was paler than she had ever thought possible and showed no signs of improvement in spite of the doctor's allegations that his 'progress' was coming along

'nicely.' For weeks after that Jewel accepted no visitors. Instead she was content to gaze over at Dylan longingly and mouth "I love you" over and over. Jewel saw no evidence of anyone working any spells to cure him, and as far as she could tell the orderlies only came into the room to change the sheets and bedpan. She once heard someone outside the room say something about the 'Dual Deaths' and wondered if they had been talking about her and her love.

During those weeks Jewel became increasingly ill. Even when her voice returned she had to make a great effort to speak in the quietest whisper. Her once pale and freckle-covered skin turned ashen, and her bright red hair changed to pink and then eventually white. She notice that even though none of the lights in the room were on, she could see quite clearly even at night, and the sunlight that leaked through the blinds hurt her eyes so badly that an orderly eventually had to cover the window with a blanket to keep her from screaming. Jewel continued to refuse to see any visitors and began to go to sleep early and wake much later each day. Her entire body felt so exhausted that it seemed as if there was no reason at all for her to live.

It was night, and the hospital room was quiet. Jewel wondered what day it was and how long she had been asleep. She also wondered what had woken her.

She heard the sound of someone coughing from the bed next to her and looked over. Jewel was delighted at what she saw.

Dylan was awake and sitting up. Now she was sure that everything would be all right.

"Good morning, love," she tried to whisper to him, but her voice wouldn't come. Having expended all her energy for the night, she drifted back to sleep, smiling.

The next time Jewel awoke an orderly was sitting next to Dylan's bed feeding him something from a small jar.

When the orderly finished he noticed that Jewel was awake. As she caught his eye she forced out a whisper, "Visitors, I want visitors," she pleaded, and lay back down to rest.

When Aura and Eve arrived they ran to her bedside at once, "Oh it was terrible, Julie," Eve said, tears streaming down her face, "You got worse and worse but the doctors said that there was nothing they could do but make you comfortable and that you should get better on your own but you never did and I was so scared that I was going to lose you too and I didn't want to lose you because we already lost mommy and

daddy and I don't know what to do and... and..." Eve's rapid speech ended with her burying her face in Jewel's side.

Jewel smiled and the words came slowly and almost inaudibly, "How's Dylan?"

Aura smiled back down at her, "He's doing much better. The doctors tell us that you and he should now have the same symptoms and get better at the same rate. He's asleep now, but he was very talkative earlier. He said three words."

Jewel nodded and whispered, "Why?"

"Well, Jewel, I don't know how much you know about what happened to him. The creatures that attacked him are called feeders. They—they are supposed to be instantly fatal, but if... Look, I don't know what magic was performed and I don't want either of you to get into trouble if I can help it. The Magus said they found a spell circle that was made with... well; they were asking questions that I couldn't answer... I guess we'll have to talk about those things when you're better able to give me answers. I have some surprising news for you though, sis," Aura seemed to force a smile.

Jewel smiled back and nodded, waiting for her to continue. Eve had finished crying and was looking up with a grin on her face.

Aura said, "Well, the only way to survive from the type of attack that Dylan suffered was for most of the damage to be transferred to another person. There are a few different ways of doing this, but the doctors found that you and he shared the beginnings of a Love Bond. That's why you're here and that's why you got sick like him. But, you know the law..."

"You're married," Eve chirped joyfully.

Jewel felt wonderful and terrible at the same time. She was married, but she had missed her own wedding. The shock was too much to take, and she let eyes close and slept.

In the days that passed Jewel never found herself to be awake at the same time as her newfound husband. This was to be expected since neither of them remained conscious for more than a few minutes each day. The orderlies had, however, increased the amount of food and water that was to be transported into their stomachs, and Jewel found herself to be more energetic and able to speak in a whisper without more effort than shouting. Her sisters were beside her every time she woke, so she assumed that they never left. Audrey visited her

once as well and told her about the new school she was attending. Her voice had choked, and she had decided to excuse herself.

"We're the only family she has anymore," Aura had said sadly after she left.

It was a particularly bright morning when Jewel awoke to the sound of his voice. "Please," he was rasping, "My eyes, the light hurts my eyes."

Jewel saw Aura and an orderly hanging another thick blanket over the window and saw Dylan sitting up with his hands over his face. Even though she knew the room must be almost pitch black, she could see as if all the lights were on. She gazed at her husband.

"Dylan, my love," she whispered.

He turned to look at her and seemed startled, "Oh Jewel, You are beautiful."

"Don't speak," she admonished, "save your strength. Only tell me, are you happy that I am your wife?"

It pained her to ask, fearing any response other than the one she knew he must give.

She saw the smile on his face and knew the answer before she heard it.

"Yes," he whispered and slept. Jewel lay back and joined him, glad and happy.

Over the next month Jewel steadily recovered and she was relieved to witness that Dylan's recovery matched her own. Everything, however, was not well. The Magus had opened an investigation into the matter, and Aura was increasingly afraid that they would find the staff that still lay on the floor in her guest room.

"Jewel, they'll find it, I can't move it," she came to Jewel, frustrated, "I had to rearrange the room so that the bed was positioned over it."

"Of course you can't move it," Jewel said, "It's mine. Only I can move it."

They had already spoken about the staff a few times before, and Aura had been instantly worried when she found out where Jewel had acquired it.

"Don't say that, Jewel. I mean, I know you used it a little, but it was, you know, hers. It needs to be back in its case. It needs to be hidden," she admonished.

Jewel nodded, "I'll come get it as soon as I can."

"So you can hide it, right?"

“Of course,” Jewel lied. The staff belonged to her now, and she intended to use it.

On the night that she and Dylan were to be released from the hospital Jewel was crestfallen to see that her appearance had not only failed to improve, but seemed to have gotten worse. She had only once looked into a mirror and was horrified at her now ghost-like appearance. Despite Dylan's previous assertion that she was still beautiful she knew she looked awful. She suspected that was the reason Audrey had never returned to visit. Aura handed her and Dylan each a pair of sunglasses.

“These should help. I have a carriage waiting to take us to my house. You and Dylan can stay with us for now, at least until the ceremony,” Aura said.

“Ceremony?” Jewel asked in her fully restored voice. “You mean...”

“That's right little sis. We're going to make it all proper,” Aura said, and hugged her other tightly. This news briefly took her mind off of her appearance until she realized how terrible she would look in a white dress.

Jewel spent the entire carriage ride cuddled against Dylan. It still felt strange to think that they were technically married. He had never asked her, so something about it seemed unreal. Maybe he would ask her now—

“Jewelwillyoumarryme?” Dylan blurted out, and a surprised look came over his face.

Jewel had heard the question, but now she was stricken with fear. What had she done? She had thought about him asking her in almost the same way that she had tried to urge him to kiss her—

Dylan bent towards her and kissed her tenderly, but in the back of her mind she worried. After they finished the kiss Dylan looked into her eyes.

“My love, Will you marry me?” he whispered. Jewel felt warm all over.

“Yes, Dylan. A million times yes,” she breathed letting the joy of the moment wash away all her fears. Now she felt engaged and after the ceremony she would really feel married. She kissed him again, and they didn't stop until the carriage came to a halt.

“There's been another feeder attack!” Rupert told them as they entered the cottage, “Augusta. No survivors. Everyone's saying it was Isaac Kane.”

Jewel saw Eve and Audrey crying on the sofa in the living room. All of them had had friends in Augusta. Despite this news, Jewel couldn't help herself; she raced up the stairs to the second floor, thinking about only one thing. The staff was exactly where she had left it, and she retrieved it from under the bed. The cherry felt warm in her hands and though she had not noticed before, she now realized that she had suffered great sorrow while being apart from the staff. She went back down the stairs to rejoin her family. Jewel was so intent on the staff and on finding some way to punish Isaac Kane along with anyone else responsible for her parents' deaths that she did not notice the Magus Soldier until she was already at the bottom of the stairs.

“You there,” he barked, turning his attention from Aura to Jewel, “License and Staff Registration.”

Jewel froze, “I don't... have...”

“What?” the soldier yelled, “If you're unlicensed or if that staff is unregistered then you'd better hand that over to me.”

Jewel at least knew a firm answer to this. “No.”

“Jewel,” Dylan's voice cut across the room, and Jewel thought to herself, don't ask me to give up the staff, anything but that. His voice seemed to change, “I won't ask you to give... up... the staff, but...” Dylan trailed off, unsure of what he was going to say next.

“Look here, ma'am,” the soldier said, wagging a finger in front of her, “It's not a question of if, it's a question of how. You can give up your unregistered staff, or I can take it from you.”

Jewel was about to tell him exactly which one it would have to be when Dylan stepped in front of her.

“You will not touch my wife,” he said coldly. Jewel felt a warm sensation go over her. Aura, Eve, and Audrey all watched in silence. Rupert put a hand on Dylan's shoulder.

“I'm sure that we can be civil about this,” Rupert said to the Magus soldier, “We don't want any trouble. Jewel will give up the staff. I'm sure we'll all be glad to have this sorry mess behind us...”

“Jewel is keeping the staff,” Dylan said calmly.

The wand appeared in the Magus Soldier's hand, and he had muttered “Non—” when it happened. Jewel had no idea where Dylan had learned component assisted magic, since it was strictly forbidden due to the dangers associated with it. Dylan threw small pinch of

powder in the air and muttered something Jewel was unable to hear. The room dimmed slightly, and for a moment she was confused until she realized that the room must be in total darkness. Only her unnatural eyesight allowed her to see.

Dylan spun away from Rupert and grabbed Jewel's arm, pulling her well away from the soldier who was flailing around and yelling.

"Freeze! You're all under arrest! How dare you blind a Magus officer!"

"We have to get out of here," he hissed, "where is your spell book?"

"Upstairs, but I don't want to leave them," Jewel's voice was shaky as she looked through the dim light at the remainder of her family.

"I think the best thing we can do for them right now is stay away from them. I can protect you, but I'd die if I thought I caused you any more pain. Come on." He held her arm and ran upstairs. The light brightened as they stepped onto the second floor.

"The book is in here," Jewel said, opening the door to her guest room. They found it on the desk at the back of the room, and Dylan threw it open. Quickly he found the mass transportation spell. "Where do I go?" she pleaded.

"I've got the image of the place in my mind. Look at it there and concentrate."

"Your mind," Jewel objected, "but I—"

"I know you're a psion, Jewel. I've felt your touch, now get us out of here."

The Magus Soldier burst through the door with his wand held high. As the soldier rushed towards them, Dylan kissed her, and his mind was open to her. She saw a dark cavern littered with huge pillars. She tried to keep the picture in her mind as he turned from her and threw another handful of powder in the air. This time she heard him mutter, "Mortirum." She was appalled. Had he really thrown the death curse? But just as she was thinking it the room exploded in a rush of wind that could only have been, "Vortexum." Looking back at the book she read the incantation. It seemed as if the last time she had been reading it was only moments before instead of several months ago.

"Momentum Transportum Totalus Invoke," she cried over the howl of wind.

Everything was calm. It was dark, and Jewel didn't fully realize the meaning of this at first.

“I'd forgotten what it was like,” Dylan breathed, “It's beautiful...”

“What's beautiful?” she asked.

“The darkness.”

Love United

Bill was a scrawny goat farmer in northeast Georgia who studiously ignored his failing eyesight and worsening arthritis. If he failed to hear a few words of a sentence then he would holler about people needing to speak louder, and he had spent his recent 88th birthday tending to two newborn kids that he had found in the south end of the pasture because their mama hadn't had the sense to stay in the barn. Bill ignored magic the same way he had ignored science. He ignored the Great Change because he hadn't changed at all. It had managed to split the states, and as he would tell anyone who cared to listen, he had figured that's what they had needed all along.

"Them danged scientist are at it again, Jess!" Bill yelled to his wife, who had been dead for over eleven years now. He forgot himself sometimes and thought she was there, so a few years ago when his old dog, Skeeter had died he had bought a basset hound and named her after his wife. He looked down at the dog, lying motionless on the floor wheezing softly through her fatty jowls. "Yep," he continued, "they done got themselves a ruddy mess I reckon over in Augusta jes like New Atlanta. Y'ask me they never shoulda named it that in the first place. Bad luck, y'see. Shoulda stayed burnt when Sherman marched through, but don't nobody learn. I coulda told em... Seems the whole town got it from some 'fangled hockney."

He slapped the newspaper in front of him with the back of his hand then sat it down on table. He flipped the page and turned to the editorials.

“Hogwash! Bea Wheston ain't got no kina sense. She's done gone rantin' 'bout one them 'jishins. Don't take no rocket scientist t'know its dem good fer nuthin Tennessee commies. Ne'er thought I'd see the day that reds were in my own back yard. Ain't right. I hope Carolina blows 'em right out there pants. Now they got it right, I tell ya. One man ta rule that whole lot and make sure he's good 'n Christian. Jawja could larn sumtin' from that, I tell ya. I ain't knockin' democracy tho, 'sbeen good to us. Well ain't this a shame,” he continued, “Looks like ol' Herb Mitchel dun kicked off. I guess Petunia'll be on tha prayer list Sunday. She'll prolly run on after 'im I reckon. She ne'er did let 'im go nowhere 'ithout 'er. The hereafter's bound to be the same. Prolly ginna tell 'em off fer startin' without 'er right in fronta all them angels when she gets there, too.”

Bill didn't recognize any more names in the obituaries so he turned to the weekly weather forecast. He'd never admit it, but he did like how accurate all the weather predictions were now. Living in Georgia meant that bad weather was rare, but it was nice to know exactly when the frost would hit so he could plant his crops accordingly. In the first half of his life the weatherman had never been right, now they were never wrong. The newspaper proclaimed sunny days all week in his area.

Jewel looked around the cave. Even in the shadows of the catacomb there was no need to use a Solarum spell. After a few minutes their enchanted eyes managed to adjust. They could not see more than a few feet, but since both of them had been experiencing splitting migraines from even the dimmest starlight they were comfortable with this change.

“I don't think they'll be able to find us here,” Dylan said, looking around the cavern.

“Where is here?” Jewel asked him.

“This is a cave outside Macon, I used to come here when I was little,” Dylan explained, “before I moved to New Atlanta. It's the only place I could think of in the time we had.”

Jewel wanted him to know she would enjoy any place, so long as she was with him, “Oh Dylan, I think it's wonderful. I don't know what I would have done without you.”

“Something impressive, I'd bet. Did you know you were a psion?”

“Not until you told me,” Jewel admitted sheepishly. “I didn't realize, I'm so sorry.”

“Just try not to use it on me unless I say you can. It... it feels weird, being made to do things.”

Jewel wrapped her arms around him, “Yes sir. May I add that you don't have to be a psion to make me do anything you please?”

He smiled and kissed her, “Very interesting, but most unhelpful at the moment. What is that in your hand?”

She had been hoping that he wouldn't notice. Timidly she held up a handful of paper pages: the only part of the spell book that had come with them.

Dylan laughed, and at first Jewel feared that he was laughing at her. After a moment, however, he said, “At least we still have the transportation spell. Did anything useful come with it?”

She looked over the pages, “Swimming, Transubstantiation, and Underwater breathing,” she offered.

“Is it alphabetized?” Dylan asked, looking surprised, “Wow, is my face red. That would have been good to know...”

“Your face is white darling,” Jewel corrected him but as soon as she had said it she remembered her own appearance and drew a sharp breath.

“Oh I look horrible!” She wailed, sitting down and burying her face in her hands, “Our wedding pictures will be awful. I'm so sorry Dylan. I want to be pretty for you. I never meant for any of this to happen. I”—

“Jewel!” Dylan yelled at her so sharply that she instantly went silent, afraid that she had angered him.

She looked up and saw a fiery look in his eyes, and for a brief moment Jewel was sure he was going to start yelling at her. She was surprised when instead he sat down and drew her into his lap. When he spoke his voice was soft and soothing.

“Jewel, you are just as beautiful now as you have always been, and nothing can ever change that.”

“But...” she began to object, knowing what her classmates at school would say. A pang of guilt shot through her as she remembered that all of her classmates had been killed by the feeders.

“Look at me,” Dylan directed her, and she twisted around and put her arms around his neck, “Do you think that I am ugly?”

“Of course not!” She protested, “You’re handsome and wonderful and... and perfect,” she added truthfully.

“Well, then so are you, my gorgeous little ghost. Now let me think a moment about what our plans are going to be...”

Jewel still worried that everyone else wouldn’t share his opinion, but he seemed to think that the matter was settled, so she had to relent. After a few minutes of silence she decided to change the subject to get her mind off of her appearance.

“Where did you learn component assisted spells?” she asked.

“I only know just the one,” he answered.

“But, you did two of them back at the house,” she pointed out.

“No, my gem, the only component spell I know is ‘Randomortirum.’ The problem with it is that I never have any idea of what it will do when I use it, so I try not to.”

“Oh,” she said, her face dawning with comprehension, “That’s why it sounded like you were using the death curse. I was so afraid when I thought I heard you say it.”

“Jewel,” Dylan assured her, “I remember the spider. So long as I live I will never kill. I love you, and though I may die to save you, you will never witness me take a life.”

Jewel could not have found something she wanted him to say more if she had formed the words herself. She could think of no suitable response, so their mouths came together passionately and lovingly.

As they kissed she decided to try something.

Have you decided on a plan? She thought at him.

Not so loud, my little psion. Yes, and your knee is pinching me. His reply was clear, and a rush of excitement flew through her.

It worked! Is this better? She move to sit on top of him.

Yes and no, are you determined to be—

Ha! I can’t be dishonorable. She interrupted him. *We’re married, or did you forget?*

I suppose I did. We should have a ceremony as soon as possible.

We could have our own ceremony here...

Do you even know what it is that you are suggesting?

I will as soon as I find it in here. She looked into his mind for any information about things that were supposed to come after kissing.

Gemstone, are you probing my innermost thoughts for naughty things.

Of course, now be still and—Eeeew! She was appalled.

Oh dear. Don't get upset.

Icky, Icky, Icky! That can't be it. You must have gotten it wrong some how.

Calm down, Jewel.

How can I be calm when you're moments away from tearing off my clothes and doing THAT to me?

Perhaps we should talk instead, so you won't be subjected to my thoughts.

Jewel pulled away from him. "How can you want to do that to me!?" she demanded.

"Jewel, the thoughts that you saw are... are part of an unconscious instinct, not my true desire. You saw it as it is with animals, haven't you seen the rams and ewes or the stallion and mares on the farms?"

"Yes," Jewel said, but she was sure she knew better, "but those were animals. Animals are always doing gross things." Still, something her mother had mentioned a long time ago seemed to scratch at the back of her mind.

"I understand that it seems gross, but I've been told that it can be very tender thing between a man and his wife," Dylan offered.

"Been told?" Jewel accused, "So you've never done it either?"

"No, but"—

"So someone could have told you wrong or you could have misunderstood then, right?" She had him now.

"Yes, but—"

"Well, then I'm not doing it, and you can stop trying to get it," she finished triumphantly.

"Jewel, you were the one that thought you wanted to, I've been working as hard as I can to make sure that it doesn't happen," Dylan said.

"Like it would be a hard job to keep me from doing that," Jewel pointed out, "Now, I think I'm tired and I'm going to go to sleep." After looking at the hard rocks and mud she curled up next to him and used his shoulder as a pillow. She heard him let out a deep sigh, but she never saw the tears that dripped down his cheeks.

Jewel was jarred awake by a cacophony of noise and panicked when she noticed her head was resting on a small wad of cloth. Dylan

was no where to be found. Where was he? What happened? Was he hurt? She must save him! She looked around to try to find what was making all the noise, but could see nothing but a few stalagmites on the floor around her. Then, as quickly as it began the noise was gone, and everything was silent. What was she going to do?

"Dylan?" she cried, hoping against hope that he would answer. Her frightened voice echoed through the caverns back at her.

"Don't worry Jewel!" his voice had never sounded more wonderful to her. She heard footsteps squish quickly through the mud floor of the cavern, and at the end of a moment that seemed painfully long he was at her side.

"I'm so sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to scare you. Everything's fine."

She ogled at him. He wasn't wearing a shirt anymore, and a strange feeling welled up inside her. All at once she felt a rush of emotions and for lack of a better response she started crying. He knelt down and held her close, and his arms around her made all the difference.

"I woke up, and there was that noise, and you weren't anywhere, and I thought you were dead! Don't leave me again," she whimpered, "Don't leave me again."

"Everything is all right. It was my fault. I was trying to do something. I didn't mean to scare you."

Once she had composed herself enough to care about anything beyond having his arms around her she asked, "What *was* that?"

"I was... I was trying to use my component spell," he explained, "I was hoping that it might do something random that would be useful. I didn't think it would... it was a bad idea."

Nothing seemed more abhorrent to her right now than the thought that any of his ideas could ever be bad. "Oh! No, it wasn't," she protested, "You were trying to help us. I shouldn't have been frightened. I was being silly."

"No," he said, his voice sharp and cold, Jewel had only heard him speak like this a few times before, "Jewel, you have to understand that I'm not always right."

"But," she protested but he interrupted her with a kiss. His thought was so vivid that she suspected that she might not have needed to be a psion to receive it.

You are not my slave or my servant. We are equal. We are in this together. I'll need you to carry me sometimes, just as I carry you.

But—

You are a beautiful, intelligent, and powerful woman, Jewel.

The ferocity of the thought forced her to believe that it was true. She drew back from him and looked at him in a new light. She saw the tears on his face and the pain and sadness in his eyes. With immense sorrow she began to realize that he was uncertain and unsure. She looked into his mind and saw that he had nothing, nothing but hope. She saw his confidence that was fueled only by a desperate drive to protect her and care for her, but she saw also his fear. He was afraid for her, afraid that he would fail her. She saw the burdens that he carried for her that caused no resentment. At last, overshadowing all these things, she saw the unquenchable love he had for her that matched the love she had for him. She was all at once terrified and delighted as her love for the man she thought him to be was replaced by the love for the man he truly was.

“I love you,” she said, and as she said it she opened her mind to him as he had opened his to her. The experience was more potent and fulfilling than any kiss or caress could ever have been or ever would be. As they shared each others thoughts completely, for one single rapturous moment their souls became one, and they were complete, finished, and pure.

While their minds danced together Jewel found herself looking at a frighteningly pale girl, and it took her a moment to realize that she was looking at a memory of herself through Dylan's eyes. Love welled up within her, but she recognized that it was not her own, but instead it was his feeling for her. She looked deeper into him, and abruptly she was gazing at her ghostly figure on a hospital bed. She pushed past the memories of those months and then she nearly screamed. She was surrounded by those terrible creatures that she had only briefly glimpsed. She felt their touch as they struggled to break through the protective circle, and, fearful that she would not be able to speak further, she watched herself cut her hand and etch the word “Far” on the page of a book. She turned and saw a feeder, awful and terrifying, hovering inside the circle. It must have just broken through. Beyond that she saw herself lying on the ground. The touch of a feeder was death. She felt the terror and pain as she walked forward and passed slowly beside the thing's ashen ethereal form. The circle must still be preventing it from moving. As she squeezed carefully between the edge of the circle and the ghostly creature she felt herself

fight against the pain and agony. She threw herself to the ground and struggled to lift the book and press her face close and speak. She screamed the words, but they echoed only as a whisper, and then abruptly she was walking through the woods and felt relief that she had passed that memory. She drifted farther and relived their time in the forest. She felt his pain and anguish as he stood in the cafeteria and watched her run away crying. She passed her own blanket through her window and experienced their second kiss through his eyes and then their first. After this, she felt the fear and horror that she had never known during his ordeal with the spider. Beyond this she watched herself longingly from across the cafeteria during school days. She handed herself a bright silver case, asking herself to keep it safe. Finally she found herself at a Christmas party. At first Jewel thought it was Eve, but then it dawned on her that it was her younger self. She lost herself in that one beautiful moment as she felt the wonderful beginning of his love. She drank in the experience hungrily until she felt she could take in no more. At last she was content. With sweet sorrow she began to withdraw again back into her own mind and felt him doing the same.

After it was done she tried to open her eyes but then realized that they were already open.

“Dylan, I can't see,” she shouted in alarm. Had she gone blind?

“Neither can I. Try Solarum.”

She reached out and put her hand around the staff, “Solarum.”

Startled she screamed and then started laughing. Dylan laughed too. His hair was light brown, and the bronze tint had returned to his skin. His eyes were their normal dark brown, and his pupils were round again.

“You have beautiful red hair and adorable freckles,” he said, smiling. Jewel's mouth formed a joyful 'o' of comprehension, and she kissed him.

I told you we had a better way than the animals. She pointed out.

You were right, my darling psion. You were right.

They spent a wonderfully joyful time exploring the ecstasy of each others thoughts during their makeshift honeymoon, but Jewel never ventured as far into his memories as she had the first time. She was, however, delighted to find that the corner of Dylan's mind that had previously contained the urges that she found so distasteful now held only the wild desire to continue their newfound pastime. Eventually Jewel found that she was hungry and was delighted to

realize that she still had the conjuring kazoo. After blowing a note on it she looked at the lunch that Audrey had given her so long ago.

"We have three month stale lemonade," she said, opening the thermos and holding it upside down. Nothing came out.

"Gross, I can wash it out and get us some water," Dylan offered.

"Really?" she hugged him, "That would be great. I didn't know there was water down here."

He pointed into the darkness. "There is a pool right behind a pile of boulders over there. Come see, it's beautiful."

Jewel picked up her staff, and Dylan carried the bag lunch and thermos. He led her across the cave until they came to a section that had obviously caved in at some point in the past. Jewel began to feel anxious about being underground.

"Don't worry," Dylan said, "These fell a very long time ago. This cave is perfectly safe."

She nodded, but still gave a wary look towards the ceiling. Dylan climbed up onto one of the large slabs of rock and extended a hand down to her.

"Come on, we have to climb over these to get to the pool."

Jewel had never done anything like it before. Many of the rocks were sticking at weird angles and were slick with mud or water. She had to stay on her hands and knees, unable to stand the way Dylan did. She tried to use the staff to steady herself but it had a tendency to slide over the surface of the rocks. He stayed lovingly by her side, showing her where to put her hands and feet, and many times helping by bracing himself so that she could use his arm as a hand hold. After they dropped off the last rock on the other side Jewel was thoroughly exhausted but found that it had been fun in a weird sort of way.

"Do you see it?"

Jewel gasped. At the edge of the staff's light was a pool of water clearer than any water she had ever seen. She peered down into the depths of it and marveled that it dropped down endlessly until there in the distance, so deep that she never imagined her eyes could see that far, she saw the rocky bottom.

"Watch," Dylan whispered, and she saw him throw a small pebble.

Jewel let out a small cry of surprise when she saw a splash and ripples several feet above where she thought the surface of the water had been.

"It's so clear," Dylan explained, "that you can't see it. Invisible water, almost."

"I've never seen anything like it," Jewel breathed, kneeling down and touching the invisible surface of the water. It was icy cold.

Meanwhile Dylan scooped some water into the thermos to rinse it out and emptied it behind some rocks. Jewel sat on the cave floor and opened the bag lunch.

"It looks like we have stale pudding, stale sandwich, and stale apple," she said, making a face. She had forgotten what happened to food if it was left in the kazoo.

Dylan sat down against a boulder, and Jewel sat between his legs and leaned against him. He took a drink of water and handed the thermos to her.

"So, what's the plan then?" Jewel asked, breaking off a stale chunk of conjured pudding and popping a piece into his mouth. They were covered in mud, and Jewel was sure that her clothes were ruined, but she knew he didn't mind.

Dylan raised an eyebrow, "You don't already know?" he asked after swallowing the pudding.

She blushed, "There's a lot of stuff in there, and I was... distracted by the parts about me. I especially liked the ones about the first day you saw me. I didn't have time to play around with any of the serious stuff."

"My thoughts about you are always serious."

"You know what I mean... or at least, you should. Anyway you seemed quite interested in my thoughts towards my little sister."

"You would make a good mother," Dylan said. As soon as he had said it Jewel knew it was true, and that she would like nothing more than to one day raise a family with him. This thought frightened her just as much as it excited her. Despite their very intimate mental contact she was at a loss for words.

"All in good time, my love," he assured her, "The plan is very simple. First, we come up with a plan, and then we see what happens." He smiled.

"You don't have a plan?" she asked accusingly, breaking off a piece of sandwich brittle and scowling at it.

"Recently my thoughts have been interrupted by a most pleasant visitor, but I have an idea. Is that close to a plan?"

“Well,” she asked, “is it a good idea?” She decided to reserve her judgment about the sandwich and put it back in the bag. She took out the apple.

“It's a big idea. Is that good?” Dylan asked.

“Stop being surreptitious.”

“Hey, that's my word. You got that out of one of my thoughts.”

“I can use it if I want to. Everything in there is mine anyway.”

He smiled. Jewel loved his smiles even more now. They always came with warm comforting emotions that washed over her. The apple was as hard as a rock, and she looked around wondering how they would be able to eat it.

“My idea is that we need to save the world,” he said at last.

“I didn't know that was one of the serious ones!” Jewel exclaimed, “I think it's a wonderful idea. From what does the world need saving? Can you smash this on something for me?”

“Isaac Kane, I think.” He took the apple from her and slammed it against a nearby boulder. The apple was undamaged.

Jewel nodded her head, “He would be the one. Do you think he's behind the feeder attacks?”

“I do.” He slammed the apple one the boulder again, this time with more force. A chip of the boulder flew off and landed in the mud.

“So we need to go to Augusta?” Jewel felt a surge of fear at the thought of facing the Feeders again. Now that she had seen the entire terrible experience again through his eyes she was very grateful that he had not let her open her eyes.

Dylan shook his head, and his thought came to her immediately.

“Macon?” Jewel said, quizzically.

“It was his home town,” Dylan explained, “We should find some clues about him there. This apple isn't cooperating.”

“What about Egypt? Everybody always said he hid there after his parents died.”

“Do you speak Egyptian?”

“Did you see any Egyptian lessons when you were dancing around in my head?” Jewel teased, “Don't be silly. We can use a language charm.”

“Of course, I forget that my better half is a sorceress,” Dylan glanced at the muddy staff that leaned against the cavern wall providing their light, and his thought was clear.

"You think it's dangerous, don't you?" she said timidly.

"I do, but I think you just need to be careful. There might be only a thin line separating using the staff and being used by it."

"I know," Jewel admitted, "It made me do some things before. It felt—it felt like I wanted to do them, but then afterwards I knew it wasn't me."

"Your mind is clearer now, though," Dylan assured her, "As a psion you should be very resistant to all forms of control or suggestion."

"How do you know so much about—?" her question was cut off by his feeling of pain.

"Oh," she cried, "Your mother was one. I'm so sorry. I forgot that she died when my parents did."

"That's okay. She was afraid of her powers, you know, because of our family history. That's why she gave the staff to my father and told him to hide it. He gave it to me with the same instructions, and made me use a spell to make him forget. It was a component spell but I think I used it on myself so I would forget it."

"That seems, funny," she said with a slight giggle, "Why did you give me the staff?"

"I thought that would be obvious, your father wouldn't have ever let my mother near his house. I couldn't think of any safer place. After all, I couldn't just bury it out in the woods somewhere for anyone with a shovel to find."

Jewel felt his thoughts about the staff and could tell that there was something that he wasn't telling her. A small section of his mind was dark, closed off to her. She wanted to ask about it, but couldn't think of a way to do so without sounding as if she didn't trust him. Dylan dropped the apple back into the lunch bag, conceding defeat.

"I see," she said, "When are we leaving?"

Dylan looked hopefully at her and said, "You don't want to—" *do it again?*

Jewel had thrust her lips into his and joined him in an explosion of thoughts and emotions. *Of course I do!* She sang and lost herself in his memories ignoring the section of his mind that remained closed to her.

After they finished they gathered up their few belongings, and Jewel studied the page containing the transportation spell. She was almost certain that she had it memorized, but she didn't want to make any clumsy mistakes.

"Momentum Transportum Totalus Invoke."

At once they stood, still covered head to toe in thick mud, in Aura's guest room. Jewel saw a bright orange ball of fur dart under the bed.

"Aura, I'm home!" Jewel yelled, but when the door opened it was not Aura, but Eve and Audrey who greeted them both with such vigorous hugs that by the time Aura entered the room all four of them were stuck together.

"Oh my goodness," Aura exclaimed when she saw them, "Where have you been and what have you been doing?"

"On our honeymoon and consummating our marriage," Jewel announced mischievously. Consummating was another word that she had borrowed from Dylan.

Before Aura could reprimand her Eve had already asked, "Really? How do you do it? What's it like?"

With a grin Jewel said, "Like this!" and Dylan kissed her. Everyone laughed except for Eve, who didn't think it was funny at all, and Fur Oshus, who was pawing at a piece of mud that had fallen onto the floor.

"Let's get the four of you out of those filthy clothes and into the shower," Aura ordered, shuffling them all out the door. "After you're all cleaned up we can talk about that staff of yours and the trouble it's caused me with United World Order of Magic.

"Are they still looking for us?" Jewel asked, as they all emptied their pockets and pulled off their clothes. The cat darted around the many pairs of feet, narrowly avoiding being stepped on several times.

"You were last spotted flying unregistered dragons over Egypt," Eve sang, giggling, "Did you really?"

Aura frowned, "Eve, behave. Someone saw something in the sky over Egypt, and the Order seems to be making a lot of arrests over there, but the paper hasn't said any more than that. I can see from all this mud that the two of you must have done very little flying. I've only seen mud like this once before. Do you like caves, Dylan?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, into the showers with all of you. I'll take those Audrey," she held out a large plastic trash bag and let Audrey throw the bundle of clothes into it.

"I'll just leave this here, Aura." Jewel said, leaning the staff against the wall in the hallway.

“I can take it down to the—” Audrey stopped speaking when her hand passed through it, “Hey, I can't feel it.” She waved her hands through it.

“Leave it there,” Aura sounded exasperated. “Shoo, into the showers. Stop dripping all over the place. Eve, this cat is a menace!”

Fur Oshus had taken a running leap and sank his claws into the plastic bag and torn it completely open, burying himself in wet muddy clothes. Eve stifled a giggle and they all entered the bathroom.

Jewel assumed that Aura must have placed several quick doubling enchantments on the bathroom because it could not have possibly fit within the walls of the actual house. She wasted no time in turning the hot water on full blast. It felt delightful, and although she was happy to wash off many hours worth of dirt and sweat, she knew she would always have special place in her heart for being covered in mud.

Jewel was the last one to finish with her shower. On the counter she found a fresh pair of jeans, underwear, and a blouse that she recognized as Audrey's. Her conjuring Kazoo and stack of money was also next to it. She blew a flat note on the kazoo, and it spilled its contents onto the counter. She dropped the old containers of food into the trash can and left into the hallway. Dylan was waiting for her outside the bathroom, and it lifted her spirits to know he would never be far away. When they entered the downstairs sitting room they were greeted by their family's warm and loving faces.

“Now that we are all here we should get down to business, but first I think Dylan said that you would have something special to tell us, Jewel,” Aura prompted her.

Jewel looked at Dylan.

Which one? She asked him.

This one. Wait, how many 'ones' are there?

Well, I'm a psion, we're going to save the world, we're going to have kids some day...

Ok, ok, he interrupted her thought, just start with the psion part, and we'll leave the others for later.

The exchange had taken less than a second.

“I'm a psion,” Jewel announced.

Everyone, even Rupert and Aura, had looks of great surprise on her face.

“Really?” squealed Eve, “What am I thinking right now?”

“Well,” Jewel replied with a smile, “Your trying to think about a green hippopotamus, but in the back of your mind you're wondering if

I'm going to rat you out for eating Aura's box of chocolates, and then you're also wondering if you're a psion too, and you are, but the ability is buried in the rest of the jumble of stuff, and it would take a lot of hard work before you'll be able to use it. Now you're happy but disappointed—”

“Stop it!” Eve cried and ran out of the room and up the stairs.

“...and afraid and angry,” Jewel finished feeling abruptly sad, “Oops. I didn't mean to do that.”

“She'll be fine,” Dylan said sounding thoughtful.

Aura looked at Jewel, “That was amazing. I've seen psions work for years to develop that ability. How long have you been training?”

Jewel looked sheepish, “Dylan told me I was one after we left, I really don't know how long it's been because we were in the cave so we lost track of the time.”

Rupert stood up, “Two days? My dear girl you mastered it in only two days? How?”

“Dylan helped teach me, we”—

“My mother was a psion,” he interrupted her, “and I think Jewel has been training herself without knowing for some time now. She's very smart.”

I don't know how much we should reveal about our consummation. I don't know if anyone has ever done it before, he warned her.

Jewel didn't like keeping anything from her family, but she could never go against his wishes.

Aura opened her mouth to speak and then seemed to think better of it. Jewel caught the question and couldn't help herself. Aura's memories about psions were very vivid. She had hoped that she was one for many years and attempted training several times before giving up. Jewel felt bad. She checked everyone in the room. She and Eve were the only ones. She was amazed at how easy it was to pick up their thoughts when she tried.

Fur Oshus walked into the room casually and leapt onto the back of the couch.

“Well,” Rupert was saying, “We're all very proud of you Jewel, but we have some pressing matters to attend to. First we need to contact the Order so that you can give them that staff. They agreed that if you do then they won't be pressing any charges, seeing as you haven't caused any harm.”

Jewel's voice was cold and even, "No, I'm not giving it to them. The staff is mine, and we need it."

Rupert seemed taken aback, "Now see here. I went through a lot to keep you from getting into trouble. The soldier was furious about Dylan's use of component magic. By the way, Dylan, I'll thank you not to use such dangerous charms in my house again. You'll be giving them that staff, Jewel. I don't think your parents would want me to let you be arrested."

"Darling," Aura interrupted him, "please. We can't treat her like a child, not after everything she's been through."

"She is a child!" he roared, and Jewel thought for a moment that he seemed very much like her father. "Aura, I'm going to protect my Lieutenant's family exactly as he would have wanted me to and I'll use everything he taught me in the Academy to do so. That staff is dangerous and needs to be studied by the proper magicians. Family is important, but I also have to consider my duty as a Magus."

"You're retired, dear," Aura reminded him.

"For less than a year, and if these feeder attacks keep up I might have to re-enlist. The only reason I haven't already is because I'm taking care of you girls. After what happened..." he trailed off with a pained expression on his face.

"What happened?" Jewel asked.

"There was another feeder attack after the one on Augusta," Aura informed her, and Jewel's heart plunged into her stomach.

Aura continued, but Jewel already knew what she was going to say, "They attacked the Georgia 1st Magus. Many of them were killed. Others are in hospitals Bonded to loved ones. The president called a State of Emergency, and Georgia is now under the direct protection of the United World Order of Magic. Some of the survivors... they... they saw Isaac Kane."

Jewel sat down. At least it wasn't another town, she told herself. At least it had been soldiers who had had a fighting chance...

Rupert found his voice again. "And this is exactly why we don't need to cause trouble. The Magus are willing to forgive and forget if you give up the staff, because my name still carries weight with them, but I can't do anything if Uwom gets involved. You have to give up that staff before it causes any more trouble."

"Jewel can't give it up. We need it. We're going to stop him," Dylan's voice was like a warm blanket to Jewel, but he was addressing

the others, "Jewel and I are going to save the world. We decided that while we were away."

"Stop Isaac Kane?" Rupert walked across the room and patted Dylan on the back, "That's a very noble gesture son, but leave this to the professionals. It will take more than a couple well armed magicians to kill Isaac Kane."

"We're not going to kill him," Dylan said flatly.

"What's that?" Rupert asked, surprised.

"Isaac Kane killed my mother, his own sister. He killed Jewel's parents—all our parents. He has killed our friends, families, neighbors, and the soldiers that swore to protect us. I believe he has done enough killing for all of us."

Jewel loved him. Everything about Dylan Farseer was honorable and good. She stood up next to him as he spoke. She felt someone push past her, and saw Eve sit down on the couch. She flashed Jewel a weak smile. Jewel smiled back.

I am sorry, Dylan's thought interrupted her, but I have hidden one last piece of information even from you until this time. Forgive me, my love.

Jewel listened intently.

"As terrible and evil as he is, Isaac Kane is my uncle, and I will not allow any more of my family to die. I will protect his life just as I would protect any of yours. Jewel is the psion sorceress who wields his family staff as his mother, yes Veronica Kane did. As my wife she is the rightful heiress to the staff, and that is why no other can touch it. So has it been since I presented it to her over a year ago according to the geis of our family. My mother begged my father to destroy the staff, but he could not. He presented it to me, hoping that I would be able to find someone able to stop my uncle and purge my family from the evil that plagues it. I hope that I have chosen wisely, but I have no way of knowing what the outcome will be."

Here Dylan turned to Jewel and knelt before her, "Your father was right to warn you against my family, Jewel. The curse upon that staff is a great and terrible one, and its legend begins in the same year and even in the same month of the Great Change. Please, sit down, all of you, while I now tell the story to you."

Everyone in the room, even Jewel, took a seat and listened raptly. Dylan stood before them, and his voice and words held their entire attention, as if this were the most important information that they

could ever receive. To Jewel, this was a sharp contrast to his normal, soft-spoken demeanor.

“As you know there were many families who seemed to master the ways of magic with uncanny speed and facility in the years directly after the Great Change. I tell you now that these families did not gain this power more quickly, but instead had mastered their craft long before the Great Change ever occurred. Before the change, there was magic, and not only in small amounts. Just as our society now enjoys the benefits of the science that continues to function, so did a select few families enjoy the benefits of magical powers. My tale concerns two families who lived then in the great city of New York. Of all the places in the world, perhaps only one other enjoyed more the benefits of science. The two families of magicians that dwelt there enjoyed so much power that each was rivaled only by the other. The first family delighted itself with excess and all the benefits that their power allowed them. They were known, among any who knew of magic, as a cruel and ambitious family that delighted in the suffering of any who knew nothing of magic, whom they despised. This family was ruled by their patriarch: Don Marcus Zitan. The Zitan family's ambition would have gained them absolute power over what was then known as the United States and perhaps even the entire world if it had not been for the other family. This other family's surname was Kane, and in those days they were loved and revered by all that knew them. It was their tireless efforts that kept the Zitan family in check. The Kane family's most powerful members were its sorceresses, and my great-grandmother was their leader. She was the one who created the Kane family staff that has now been passed down to Jewel.

During the Great Change, however, there was a terrible war between the two families during which Don Marcus Zitan placed a curse upon the Kane staff. So great was the curse that my great-grandmother took her own life, and the staff was given to the man you so despised, her son: Emanuel Kane. The Kane staff cannot be used by any man, for such is its great power that only the resolve and complexity of the female mind can bear it, and even then the woman must be a powerful psion. My grandfather therefore sought out a woman who was pure of heart and mind, and well disciplined. He met my grandmother, a psion named Veronica Eton, and a kinder and gentler woman he could not have found. It was his hope that she would not fall to the staff's power. In desperation they fled New York

into the peaceful, newly-founded nation of Georgia, which was at the time an eye in the great hurricane of the world.

“To his great dismay, however, the staff overcame his wife, and then in turn it consumed him as well, and finally their teenage son.

“The stories of their cruelty and unforgivable crimes are well known to all of you. After their end, Miranda Kane, my mother arrived at an orphanage with only a single possession, a silver case that seemed to be locked forever. On the day she became a woman, however, the case opened, and inside was the staff in three segments along with a letter from Emanuel Kane himself explaining this very story. With his last desperate act of free will, he had hidden the staff away in the case and ensured that his wife would never find it. I will not tell you the lengths to which my mother went to rid herself of the staff. I will only say that my father passed it on to me, and like my grandfather I have attempted to choose a worthy psion who may be able to overcome the curse.”

Dylan turned once again to Jewel who was now crying and knelt in front of her again, “Your family may fear that I have used you, but you know my mind. You have seen my love. My uncle is not an evil man, but he is in the grasp of a most evil enchantment. I beg and implore you. Help me right the wrong that has been placed upon my family.”

Jewel, her eyes and face wet with tears leaned forward to kiss him. As she did she brought his mind together with hers as they had so many times before and poured her answer into him.

I love you! I will not fail you! I am honored that you have chosen me.

As their thoughts mingled again she wondered if he was hiding anything else from her and she knew that he felt her thought. But even as she thought this she realized that she did not care what he hid. She had his love, and that was enough. His thoughts were his own unless he chose to bless her with them.

I trust you, she told him forcefully.

And I have faith in you, came his response, and it was the perfect thing to say.

Their joining of minds had lasted only a few moments, and to the others in the room it seemed as if they had only kissed.

Jewel said, for the benefit of her family, “I love you and I trust you, Dylan. I will not fail you.”

He wiped a tear from her cheek as he had done many nights ago under the stars, "I have faith in you."

Jewel looked at the rest of her family who all seemed to be at a loss for words.

She smiled weakly. "See, we have to save the world."

A brief silence was followed by a barrage of questions asked by her family and directed at Dylan.

"Now see here! What makes you think..." Rupert was saying.

"I think it's a good idea, Dylan, but..." Aura offered.

"Will the curse hurt Jewel?" Eve asked.

Jewel felt that she wasn't qualified to answer, and even if she was she wasn't in the mood. She was sure Dylan would take care of everything.

"I'm going to go lay down for a bit," she said to anyone who would listen, which seemed only to be Dylan.

Rest, I'll be here.

As she passed the staff on the second floor landing she felt a chill run down her spine.

It will only hurt you if you let it. He assured her.

She left the staff, entered the guest room, and threw herself onto the bed. After several minutes she found herself feeling very guilty about something.

She sent a thought to Dylan. *I opened it too soon, didn't I?*

Yes, but the need was there, and your will is strong enough, otherwise the case would not have opened, he assured her. *Eve is coming upstairs.*

Jewel heard the door open and looked up to see her sister holding her little orange and black kitten.

"Can you teach me?" Eve's voice was a whisper as she crossed the room to the bed, "Can you teach me to be a psion?"

Jewel wanted to tell her that she was too young, but she knew it would be a lie. They were both women now, and the events of the recent past had forced them to age in ways that the body doesn't show.

Jewel sat up in the bed. "I will teach you, if it is a burden you wish to bear. Do you understand what you are asking?"

Jewel searched Eve's mind for the answer, and Eve seemed to know that they would no longer need to talk. When Jewel had pushed past all the emotions and fears that cluttered her little sister's mind, she found the truth: she understood, she was ready, and she was able.

Without a Love Bond like the one she and Dylan shared, Jewel was forced to join minds with Eve via their Family Bond. This caused their thoughts to be muddled and cloudy.

How is Fur Oshus doing? Jewel sent, finding it easiest to focus on thoughts about her sister's pet.

Eve's response was completely drowned out by her fear, and Jewel quickly took some of it onto herself. She became anxious but knew it was her sister's emotion and not her own.

Calm down, don't be afraid. She told her sister, but calmed herself at the same time. *There is nothing to fear. Come here.*

Eve climbed onto the bed and sat in Jewel's lap. Jewel wrapped her arms around her sister lovingly. Eve, in turn, stroked Fur Oshus who then started cleaning himself.

Just relax. This isn't a test. I won't be mad at you or disappointed with you no matter what happens.

What if I can't do it?

Surprise was the strongest of the myriad of emotions that assaulted Jewel from her sister's mind. Jewel took some of the surprise and waited for her to relax again.

Does that answer your question? Now just relax. Your mind is full of a lot of thoughts and it's very cluttered. Like your toy box. We can do this now because we are sisters, and you are calm and serene, and we are so close. As you learn how to do it you will get better. It will be a gradual process and it may take many years. Understand?

Yes.

Jewel didn't know exactly how she knew that these things were true, except that when she contacted her sister's mind she saw all of the obstacles that she needed to overcome.

How did you learn so fast? JEALOUSY. ANGER. RESENTMENT.

Jewel struggled to take as much of the emotions onto herself as possible without succumbing to them.

Calm. Don't let your emotions get the best of you, sis. We are equals. She remembered Dylan telling her the same thing. *I'm not better than you. We are sisters. We've gotten mad at each other in the past, but nothing can pull us apart.* Jewel found that she was reassuring herself as well as Eve.

I'm sorry, SHAME, EMBARRASSMENT

Once again Jewel had to take some of her sister feelings. She berated herself for not being good enough until she realized that this wasn't really how she felt. She took a deep breath.

Everything is fine, your doing great, and you've done nothing wrong.

This is really weird.

I know, but you seem to be getting the hang of it.

I'm hungry.

Jewel looked up and noticed that it was dark outside. Her conversation with Eve had seemed to take only a few minutes, but hours had passed.

"I think that's enough for today," Jewel said.

"Awe, but I was getting really good at— What happened? Where's Fur Oshus? How long have we been up here?"

"No more than a few hours. You did great, but as you can see, we have a lot of work to do. Fur Oshus is over there." Jewel pointed to an orange and black tail sticking out from behind the dresser.

"Oh, can I practice on other people?" Eve asked.

Jewel smiled, "You can, but don't expect much right now. The important thing is to try and keep your mind clear and to stay calm no matter what. We did a lot to organize your thoughts today, but since you have new thoughts all the time we will have to do the same thing every day. With practice you'll eventually be able to do it automatically."

"Okay, but you never answered my question," Eve accused, "How did you learn to do it so quickly?"

Jewel gave the matter some thought, at length she answered, "When I was in the hospital I was very close to death, and my mind cleared away almost everything in it until only one thing remained. With my mind clear I was able to develop much more rapidly that I would have otherwise. After that, Dylan helped me in much the same way that I am helping you."

"Oh, I guess I don't want to almost die just to learn faster then, do I?" Eve asked shyly.

Jewel felt Eve's impatience and wanted to help temper her feelings. "It is not wrong to desire power, Eve, but it is your responsibility to choose your own actions. It is natural that you are eager, but try to enjoy what you have now," Jewel realized that she sounded very much like her mother.

"You've changed, sis."

“People change. It is something we cannot stop and rarely understand. You will change, even if you don't want to. With this in mind, you should wish those changes to be good.”

“I do,” Eve said.

“Then you have no reason to fear change,” Jewel picked her up, and they got off the bed, “Now let's go see what's for dinner.” Fur Oshus must have heard her because at that moment he dashed out from behind the dresser and disappeared down the stairs.

As Jewel entered the dining room the smells of fresh home-cooked food swam through her nostrils. One thing she could say about conjured food was that it never satisfied the same way real food did. She had been living on very little recently and she could tell, without using her abilities, that Dylan was just as ravenous. He was already finished with his first serving when she sat down next to him.

“Voila!” Aura sang as she put a steaming plate down in front of Jewel, “Venison steaks, mashed potatoes, and green peas, a Georgia specialty. Sweet tea anyone?”

Jewel savored every bite as quickly as she could while Aura topped off everyone's drinks.

“Seconds please,” she said with a grin before Aura finished filling the other's glasses.

“Goodness, sis, don't tell me you're eating for two!” she mocked, taking the plate and replacing it with another.

“Not yet,” Jewel replied between bites, “I have to save the world first.”

“Of course, wouldn't want a little pot belly to get in the way of an epic adventure. Oh no, I forgot to put out the rolls! Everyone grab one while they're hot.” Jewel noticed Rupert give Aura a disapproving look. He didn't like her talking about such things in so cavalier a manner.

The rolls quickly disappeared onto plates, and Aura hurried into the kitchen to bake some more.

When Aura sat back down at the table Audrey asked the question that Jewel had known was on her mind but was hoping she wouldn't ask.

“How did you change back to normal?”

Rupert looked up, “I'd like to hear that story as well, Jewel. I've never known of anyone whose body has recovered from feeder sickness so quickly. I've heard that it can take years.”

Jewel stuck a piece of steak into her mouth and chewed it so she would have an excuse to think. *What do I say?* She asked Dylan.

"What?" Eve said. Jewel looked up. Had her sister heard her thought?

Just tell them you don't know. Dylan replied.

Eve's eyes grew wide, and she looked back and forth at both of them.

Jewel swallowed her steak and said, "I don't know how it happened. We were in the cave, and it was so dark we could barely see, even with our eyes like that, and then we slept and when we woke up we just couldn't see anymore. We used solarium to light up the cave and saw that we were back to normal."

Everyone at the table was listening to her except Eve. Eve had both her hands clapped over her mouth and seemed to be in the middle of an intense giggling fit.

"Eve," Aura scolded, "what has gotten into you?"

"It's psion stuff. You wouldn't understand," Eve replied, having no idea how painfully the words cut through her eldest sister.

Aura shot a hurt look at Jewel and stood up from the table. Her voice was shaky, "Rupert dear, I believe I need to go take a nap. Please excuse me." She left hastily and ran upstairs.

"Oh no," Rupert stood up and followed her.

Audrey started to speak but stopped when Jewel held up her hand.

"Eve," she said firmly, "I need to make you understand how what you just said made Aura feel. It won't be pleasant, and you will be angry with me. I cannot prepare you for what must be done."

"What?" Eve asked, still confused, oblivious what had happened.

Jewel knew that the best thing to do was to get it over with as quickly as possible. She opened Eve's mind and poured in Aura's lifelong desire to be a psion along with her constant failure and subsequent battle with depression. The pain and sorrow washed over Eve, and Jewel felt miserable as she watched her little sister's expression change. At first Eve mistook the sadness and pain for her own emotions, but as she realized what Jewel had done they were overshadowed by intense anger.

"I HATE YOU!" Eve screamed, then leapt from her chair and ran upstairs.

Audrey stared at Jewel with a very confuse look on her face.

"Jewel, what just happened?" Audrey asked timidly.

Jewel tried her best to explain it. She said, "Aura wants to be a psion very badly, so what Eve said hurt her very deeply because she is jealous of her. Eve asked me to train her as a psion, and that was part of her training. She... she didn't mean to hurt Aura, so she didn't deserve it, but I had to do it. I hated having to do it."

She felt Dylan's hand massage her shoulder. She knew his thoughts weren't getting through because of the guilt and sorrow she was feeling.

"I think I need to go to my room too," she whispered to him. He nodded and they went upstairs.

Audrey sat staring at five empty chairs feeling forgotten and alone.

Jewel cried on Dylan's shoulder, and it occurred to her that she had been doing a lot of this recently.

"I didn't want to do it, Dylan." Jewel said between sobs, "I didn't. She's so young, and I knew she wouldn't understand, but I had to. If you had seen her mind you would know. She wanted me to help her be a psion, but I didn't know I would ever have to do anything like that. If I had known this would happen I never would have agreed to teach her. Why does this happen to me? Why is everything so terrible Dylan? Is it the curse? Is the staff doing all this?"

"No, Jewel," he assured her, "the staff is much more terrible than a few family misunderstandings. This is life, and it happens to all of us. Everything will be okay. Aura knows that Eve didn't mean to hurt her feelings. Rupert is probably talking to her right now."

"I know," Jewel said, rubbing her face on his shoulder to wipe away her tears. As he talked she tried to clear her mind and control her emotions.

Dylan continued, "Eve will come to forgive you in time. You knew that when you did it. It was the only way she could grow. In fact," he said thoughtfully, "the only one I think we should worry about right now is Audrey."

Jewel looked at him, momentarily confused until she saw his concern. Immediately she leapt from the bed and sprinted downstairs taking the steps three at a time.

"Audrey!" she yelled as she ran into the dining room, "I'm sorry!"

Audrey was still sitting at the table. She hadn't moved.

"I don't need you to be sorry for me," Audrey's voice was flat, "and I'd go running to my room, but I haven't got one since this isn't my house."

"You can have my room," Jewel offered instantly but knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as she said it.

"I don't need your charity," Audrey snapped back at her.

"Audrey, please, we're all family. We all love you. With everything that has happened recently, we've all had to cope with loss"—

Audrey stood up and interrupted her, yelling, "At least you still have someone! At least you didn't lose everyone! You still have Aura! You still have Eve! You still have HIM!" As she finished she glared at Dylan, and Jewel was overwhelmed by the resentment and jealousy that washed over her. Audrey ran upstairs and there was a crash of her knocking over something and then the sound of a door slamming.

"Oh Dylan," Jewel whispered, "If only I'd known, If only I'd checked her mind. I... She was right... I forgot about her. She's... We've always been friends, ever since I can remember. She's always been there. I took her for granted. I was so worried about my own problems..." She sat down, gripping Dylan's hand tightly.

"Jewel," Dylan's voice still never failed to bring her joy, "I had to tell you once that I am not perfect, do you remember?"

Jewel nodded, wishing she could feel his thoughts and mad at herself for letting her mind be obscured by her emotions.

He knelt down next to her and kissed her tenderly, her mind cleared at once as she momentarily forgot all of her worries and cares.

You are not perfect, and no amount of power or training will ever give you the ability to solve every problem. That is why I am here to help you. I will carry you when you fall, you will carry me when I fall, and if we both fall then we will comfort each other in knowing that even in failure we remain together.

Jewel nodded and stood up.

"I need to go upstairs and get my notebook and quill," she said, "I think I need to write a very long note to Audrey."

"I think that would be a great idea," Dylan agreed

As they stepped onto the landing Jewel automatically bent down to pick up her staff before Dylan's thought filled her with dread.

Who moved it? He asked.

As her fingers closed around the warm cherry wood she remembered the crashing sound before Audrey had slammed the door to the guest room.

Oh no! The curse? But... She had assumed that the curse would affect her first, and she would simply have to do her best to resist it, but now she realized that the staff may decide to assault her family members as well.

"We'll know soon enough," Dylan said, since her mind had clouded again, "bring the staff in here."

He opened the door. Audrey was laying face down on the bed, "Go away," she yelled into the pillow.

"Jewel just needs to get her things out of your room, Audrey." Dylan explained gently while Jewel silently crossed the room and grabbed her backpack.

"Good, maybe she can stop keeping her stuff where people can trip over it too," Audrey shot back at him.

As Jewel returned with her backpack Dylan gave her a look that she interpreted to mean, "Yeah, we were right."

After they had closed the door Jewel whispered, "What are we going to do? Could I help her fight it? I don't even know what I'm fighting."

Dylan shook his head, "She's not a psion. If it were attacking Eve, then maybe, but I don't know. We just have to go far away from your family—our family and not come back until we've found a way to break the curse."

Jewel bit her bottom lip, "It will come after one of us when we do?"

He nodded.

"Do we have time to say goodbye?"

"Yes, but we should leave for Macon tomorrow."

"I'll get started writing then," Jewel said starting down the stairs, "since I'll be writing three letters now."

"That's a good idea," he said, following her, "Do you want anything to drink?"

"Some hot cocoa would be nice, if we have any."

Jewel sat on the couch in the living room and wrote three farewell letters to her sisters and cousin. Dylan silently kept her company, leaving her side only to refill her mug whenever she asked. As she tearfully transferred her feelings into clumsy words that might be the

last messages of love her sisters received from her if she failed, Jewel lamented that there were some problems that no amount of mental skill or powerful magic could ever overcome.

Love Assaulted

“Are you sure you won't stay?” Rupert asked them.

Jewel had given Aura all three letters since Eve and Audrey both refused to come out of their rooms. She and Aura had exchanged a tearful goodbye, and now Rupert was standing with them outside to see them off. Dylan was wearing her old backpack loaded with supplies, and the staff was strapped to Jewel's back.

“We can't,” Jewel said regretfully, “we think the curse is already starting to affect Audrey. We have to find a way to stop it as soon as we can. Where is he?”

Jewel pondered her last question as she peered into the distant horizon. Dylan was also looking around.

“Well,” Rupert was saying, “The only reason that I haven't reported you is because Aura begged me not to. I also don't agree with how Uwom would handle it. Aura and I know that we can't ever replace your parents, but we feel obligated to look after you. We love you. I think you're both doing something very dangerous, but it doesn't seem like I can stop you. I won't report you, but don't expect me to be able to help if Uwom finds you with that staff. It won't be long before they start looking for you. The feeder attack on the Magus makes it certain that there won't be any tolerance. If you get caught with that staff, they won't go easy on you.”

“We'll be careful,” Jewel scowled at her brother-in-law.

“There he is!” Dylan exclaimed.

Jewel spun around and was overjoyed to see the light blue pegasus gliding over the crest of one of the mountains. Sky's hooves threw up clumps of dirt as he landed in front of them. Jewel ran over and threw her arms around his neck and pushed her face into his mane.

"I'm so glad to see you Sky! I was so happy when Aura told me that you were okay!"

Sky neighed and ruffled his wings.

"I know. I'm sorry about your family. I know they were good too you. We all lost family and friends that day. Are Aura and Rupert treating you well?"

He snorted and stamped a hoof, swishing his tail.

"I don't think there are any pear trees around here, Sky."

He blew a quick blast of air out his nostrils and laid his ears back.

Jewel scratched the front of his head. "Okay, okay, we can stop and find a pear tree on the way to Macon. Will that make you happy?"

Sky nuzzled her side.

"I love you too Sky. Dylan, can you help me up?"

Dylan held her foot in his hands while she climbed onto Sky's back and then he climbed up and sat behind her.

"You take care of her, Dylan. I hope you know what you are doing." Rupert said.

"Jewel don't go!" Eve's voice called out to them as she ran across the yard, "I didn't mean it. I don't hate you. I'm sorry! Just don't go!"

Jewel hopped off Sky's back and knelt to hug her little sister. Behind her she heard Dylan and Rupert having a whispered conversation.

"I have to go," she said, "but I'll come back soon. I have to fix it so that nothing bad will happen to you or any of us."

"But you said you would train me as a psion!" Eve protested.

"I know, but you did very well in our first lesson," Jewel assured her, "so you know how to practice. Just try to keep yourself calm and don't let your thoughts get all cluttered."

Jewel could tell that Eve still had not recovered from the shock the day before.

"Can I come with you?" Eve asked?

"Of course not!" Rupert's voice barked and it was clear that he was angry. Jewel was annoyed because she wouldn't have let Eve come anyway. He didn't have to yell at her.

"I'm sorry Eve, but the reason I have to go is so the curse will come after me. I can't fight it if it attacks someone else. Anyway, you have another job."

"What?" Eve asked, perplexed.

"You'll be the only psion here," Jewel told her, "You will have to watch everyone in case the curse still tries to make them do things. It will be hard, because you are learning, but you're the only one who can do it. Aura may not be a psion, but she knows almost everything there is to know about it. She should be able to help you, just remember not to make her feel bad that she isn't one."

This responsibility seemed to make Eve feel important and useful. "Okay," she said, "I'll make sure nothing happens to anyone here. When will you be back?"

"I don't know, Eve. I don't know."

Jewel disengaged from her sister after giving her one last hug, and Rupert helped her climb up in front of Dylan. At the door of the house Audrey was scowling at her but she dashed back into the house as soon as Jewel saw her. Jewel felt a momentary pang of guilt.

"Let's go Sky," she told the horse and then yelled, "Bye Eve, bye everybody. We'll be fine, don't worry."

"Remember what I said!" Rupert shouted, pointing at Dylan.

Sky broke into a run and then launched himself into the air with a mighty leap. Jewel felt a rush of exhilaration as his silver speckled wings spread out to either side and caught the air. With several stomach-churning lurches he pumped his wings and soared into the air. He held his wings steady for a moment and glided forward, then turned and pumped his wings again sending them higher. He circled, gliding straight and then climbing on the turns until the landscape below them looked like tiny models on green carpet. Dylan's arms were locked tight around Jewel, and she was clinging onto Sky's mane with both hands.

"Wow," she whispered, "Okay Sky. Let's go south to Macon."

"I'd appreciate it Sky," Dylan suggested from behind her, "If you try to keep the rest of the trip from being so bumpy."

Sky snorted at them and banked a gradual turn until they were pointed due south.

"Much better," Dylan's voice breathed next to Jewel's ear. She couldn't blame him for being anxious. The ascent had been intense.

Jewel gazed out over the landscape below them and marveled at how beautiful it all was. Dark-green pine trees covered the mountains but the hills were the lighter green of oak and maple. The forests blurred into one another, separated occasionally by low grooves where streams and creeks wound their way towards lakes or rivers. Square and rectangular fields of corn or other green crops were interspersed with golden wheat and hay fields. Brown farmhouses and red-roofed barns jutted out of the quilted countryside, and narrow pot-hole filled streets crisscrossed among them. Jewel saw the vast grid of ugly trees that could only be a pear orchard and nudged Sky with her knee. Responding to the pressure Sky glided into a downward spiral, and they landed in the yard in front of a farm house that must have been over a hundred years old. At the side of the house a man in overalls wearing a straw hat was loading baskets of pears onto a wagon cart. When the man saw them he sat the last basket in the cart and walked towards them.

“Thar's a beau'ful peg ya ga' thar,” he drawled, “Wud't be lookin' ta sellim, wudya?”

“No sir,” Jewel replied, “But he would like some pears. They're his favorite. May we buy some?”

“Gud 'evens, naw,” he shook his head, “Ahd et me 'at 'afor ah charge uh purdy thang lahk you rahdin' sucha nahs peg. Y'kin pick as many as ya lahk, no charge.”

His accent was so heavy that Jewel might not have understood him without being able to read his mind.

“Well thank you very much, kind sir. Is there any way we can repay you?” Dylan asked.

“Ain't no need, sonny, jes be sure ta take ged cahr uh tha' thar purdy las an' peg, y'hear?” the man directed.

“Yes sir. Thank you, sir.” Dylan agreed, and Jewel directed Sky towards the orchard. The man turned around and headed back towards his house.

While Sky ate entire pears in one bite straight from the trees, Jewel and Dylan picked a couple pears for themselves. Pears had never been Jewel's favorite fruit, but she had acquired a taste for them during her association with Sky.

“That was very nice of him, not to charge us for the pears,” Jewel commented.

“Well,” Dylan pointed out, “He did tell me that I’d have to take care of you and Sky, and considering the circumstances, that might be a pretty steep price for a couple of pears.”

“Yes, but you were going to look after us anyway.”

“True, but now I’m under so much pressure. If anything goes wrong, not only is the world doomed, but I have to come back here and refund this man his pears,” Dylan joked.

Jewel threw the remains of her pear on the ground and picked another. “I can see how that would make all the difference. Do you have the kazoo?”

He patted his jeans pockets, “I thought you had it.”

Jewel had to lean back and stick out her leg to get her hand into her tight front jeans pocket, her fingers touched the kazoo.

“You’re right,” she said, “Skooch back so I can get it out.”

“Okay,” Dylan said moving farther back between Sky’s wings, trying not to ruffle the feathers, “what are we conjuring?”

“I want to save some pear for Sky.”

Dylan flexed his hand remembering his last encounter with conjured fruit. “Um, are you sure he’ll want rock hard pear?”

“That was months old,” Jewel explained, “and besides, I’m going to cut it into bite-size pieces this time. It ends up being like rock candy.”

“I see. Do you need a knife then?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied, finally managing to extract the kazoo.

Dylan unfolded a small utility knife and passed it to her handle first. Jewel used it to cut out a small chunk of pear which she then carved into a ball about the size of a marble. She offered the rest of the fruit to Sky, and it quickly disappeared. Jewel pointed the kazoo at the piece of pear and blew a couple notes. The fruit disappeared, and the kazoo became heavy.

“There,” Jewel said, triumphantly, “Now we’ll have plenty of pear candy just in case.” She closed the knife and handed it back to Dylan.

Sky snorted and ruffled his feathers.

“No, Sky. The kazoo won’t hold the entire orchard. You will just have to make it last, okay?”

He blew through his nose and swished his tail.

“It’s time to go anyway. Dylan, scoot back up here.”

Dylan pocketed the knife and moved back to his original position. Jewel urged Sky forward, and he launched himself forcefully into the air and circled upwards. This time they were both prepared so the takeoff was not as unsettling as before. Once again they flew southwards over the foothills of Georgia.

When she first saw it on the horizon, Jewel thought that they were flying towards a giant black mountain taller than any she had ever seen. As they drew closer, however, she realized that it was a towering pillar of smoke many miles wide. When she realized what she was seeing her jaw hung open in an expression of disbelief.

“Oh my,” Dylan breathed next to her ear.

Jewel had learned about Atlanta in history class and in her misuse of magic class, but nothing prepared her for the sight of an entire metropolis set ablaze. Sitting there on top of Sky, flying through the air, she was a tiny butterfly gliding next to a roaring bonfire. Jewel nudged with her knees, but Sky needed no urging. The pegasus banked east, aiming to circle around the cursed city at a great distance.

“What kind of spell could do something like that?” Jewel asked nervously.

“Component magic,” Dylan replied.

Sky snorted and pumped his wings to pick up speed. He was flying almost directly east, and an hour passed before Jewel could coax him to turn back south. In the distance on their right the clouds of smoke billowed up in the distance, and Jewel was uneasy until at last it disappeared over the horizon behind them.

Macon was a dismal little village at the beginning of the Georgia flood plane where the rolling green hills were replaced by flat cattle pastures and soggy marshes. The older portions of the town contained abandoned crumbling ruins that hinted at what the city had been before the Great Change. A populated village had sprung up farther east but the condition of the buildings indicated that Macon had never recovered after the battle that had claimed the lives of Emanuel and Veronica Kane along with countless civilians and Magus Soldiers.

“Where is it?” Jewel asked over her shoulder to Dylan.

“Over there,” Dylan pointed, “On the edge of town, on the left side of the cemetery.”

They glided over the soon-to-be ghost town, and Sky's hoofs sank into the mud as he landed in front of a large abandoned mansion. The house easily stood out among the others in the area. It was three stories tall and had full circle porches for the first and second floors.

Most of the glass in the windows was cracked, shattered, or even missing completely. The windows on the first floor were barred, and a heavy chain and padlock held the front door closed.

"You used to live her?" Jewel asked as she climbed off onto the ground. The mud squished unpleasantly under her shoe.

"A long time ago," Dylan answered, hopping down and sending a splatter of mud in all directions. "It was much nicer then."

"Why did you move?" Jewel had never thought to ask Dylan about his past and had largely ignored his memories if they weren't about her.

"My father's family lived in New Atlanta, so when my grandfather, I mean, not Emanuel Kane, but my dad's father became sick we moved there so that we could be closer to them. My mother tried to sell this place, but no one ever wanted to buy it," Dylan lamented, walking towards the front door of the house.

Jewel understood why people wouldn't want to live in a house that had once been owned by some of the world's most nefarious wizards, but she didn't say so to Dylan. Instead she changed the subject to their mission.

"What are we looking for?" she asked, removing the staff from her back.

"I don't know. Anything that might give us an idea about where my uncle is. My grandfather, Emanuel Kane that is, must have researched the curse before he fell to it. There might be something that can help point us in the right direction." Dylan took a key from his pocket and pushed it into the lock and twisted. He pulled the heavy chain away from the door and set it on the floor.

Jewel asked, "Where did you get that key? Do you always carry it with you?"

Dylan shook his head and said, "No, Aura gave it to me. My parents left it to me in their will."

"Oh," Jewel said, not wanting to force him to talk about his parents. She knew how he must feel.

Carefully he pulled the door open, and its hinges creaked loudly in protest. A startled squirrel darted out a window as they entered the front hall. The place was a wreck.

The once elegant curved wooden handrails that should have lined the massive double staircases lay broken and covered in dust and mold on the hardwood floor. From the various bird nests and mouse

droppings Jewel could tell that the house now served as a home for a great many members of the local wildlife. Vines of ivy crept up through the floorboards and spread upwards around the pillars extending all the way to the ceiling. One especially adventurous piece of ivy even continued down around the heavy chain that held an immense tarnished silver chandelier. Empty bookshelves and trophy cases lined the walls, but their treasures must have been removed long ago. Ornate oak doors hung loosely on broken and rusted hinges. The grimy carpet that lined the stairs was moth eaten and torn. The entire decrepit vision left only a lingering suggestion of grandeur that filled Jewel with sorrow and awe.

“It must have been beautiful...” she choked on the words.

Dylan nodded his head, and she heard the sadness in his voice, “It was.”

The memories in Dylan's mind were so vivid that Jewel could not help seeing them. He was a child of four running through the hallways and down the stairs playing with a stick he had carved to resemble a wand. He was pointing it at various parts of the room and shouting 'kerpowum' to vanquish imaginary ghouls. She saw the young Dylan run past a door on the third floor and look at it with intense youthful curiosity.

“Stay away from there, sweetheart,” Miranda Kane's voice had commanded from behind him, and he had run away from it waving his wand and singing made-up incantations.

“Your grandfather's study?” Jewel asked, already knowing the answer.

Dylan nodded. “I've never been in it, but I saw my father come out of it once. It was the first time I ever saw the case that held the staff. If we're going to find anything helpful, it will be in there.”

The stairs creaked and groaned as they climbed them, and Jewel felt particularly wary as they climbed the smaller staircase from the second floor to the third. Since it also had no hand rails she stayed next to the wall and held onto Dylan's arm tightly. When they crested the last stair onto the third floor landing she was relieved to see it had retained its handrail, but she would never have trusted her weight to it. Here, closest to the roof, there was even more evidence of the mansion's decay. The walls were discolored with mold that grew along trails of water. The wind assaulted the third floor of the house unobstructed by other buildings. Each gust was coupled with a moaning howl as the air penetrated windows on one side of the house

only to break free from those on the opposite side. Leaves whirled and danced and then threw themselves off the landing to flutter down to the floors below. As she clung to Dylan's arm Jewel glanced in each of the rooms as they passed. All of the doors swung open on their hinges, their locks broken and busted. The rooms were all the same. No furniture or fixtures save the myriad of empty bookshelves that coated every available surface. At last Dylan stopped, and Jewel turned her attention ahead of them. She recognized the door immediately as the one from his memories, but she would have known that this room was important even without that information. It was not only the last door at the end of the landing, but it was also the only door that was closed. Around the door frame and on the door were huge gashes that might have been made by repeated swings with a heavy axe or pick. The lock and handle were not much more than a twisted mass of iron from what must have been a valiant but futile attempt to force the door open.

"Only you can open it," Dylan told her, nodding at the staff in her hand.

"Portabranis Paraban," she commanded and the door swung open soundlessly. Jewel thought of the marks on the door and realized that she had so simply achieved what others had repeatedly failed. She was sure that the door would not have opened to any other opening spell cast with any other staff.

Even before they entered the room Jewel saw that it was not like the house. There was no mold or dirt, only enough clutter to suggest that the proprietor had simply stepped out for a moment and fully intended to return at any moment. Like the rest of the house, shelves covered every wall, but unlike the previous rooms these were packed with titled edges squeezed so tightly between each other that it seemed the books might soon explode outward onto the floor. The room was fully furnished with a great desk at the far end flanked by two stained-glass windows that lit the room with an array of colors. Two comfortable-looking leather couches and three similar chairs were positioned around a modest fireplace on the right wall. Jewel was startled to see orange glowing embers buried half-hidden in the ash of the fireplace.

"Has someone been here?" she breathed sharply, breaking the silence that had fallen as they looked in awe around the room.

“No,” Dylan answered, walking across the room towards the desk, “no one could have opened the door. I suspect that the room is exactly as my grandfather left it before he died.”

“Oh,” Jewel whispered. Something about the room made her feel that anything louder would disturb whatever powers it concealed.

She began to follow the shelves reading some of the titles of the books therein. She saw titles such as *Magic Removed: A guide to Counter-Spells*, *A History of Hexes*, *Overcoming Omens*, and *A Complete Guide to Staff Assisted Incantations*. She slid this last title off the shelf as soon as she read the title and held it carefully. It was a small, pocket-sized, leather bound book, and the pages were in excellent condition except for a few dog-eared corners. She flipped it open to one of the dog-eared pages. It was titled 'Psiocerebral Assistance' and Jewel understood only half of the terms used. The text mentioned psions several times, including the term 'psicantational' which seemed to indicate that the words were not spoken but thought. As she muddled through the language Jewel got the impression that the spell was intended to ward off mental attacks. It was no wonder this page was marked. As she inspected the other marked pages she quickly saw that each was a type of counter curse, protective enchantment, or other method intended to bypass or inhibit the effects of a geis. Tucking the book in her back pocket she continued to look through the shelves. No matter where her eyes fell on a shelf the title of the book always implied the same subject. The books, and there must have been thousands of them, were dedicated to defeating the curse. Some sections contained similar titles in multiple versions each next to the other while other sections contained handwritten notebooks with their titles scrawled on the edges each in a unique script.

“Jewel,” Dylan's voice interrupted her study of the shelves, “come look at this.”

He was standing behind the desk looking down at a large leather-bound book. As Jewel approached she saw the title inked in stunning calligraphy: “A Diary of Emanuel Kane.” Dylan carefully unclasped and opened the cover, but Jewel was immediately disappointed. The coarse paper extended only a fraction of an inch from the spine of the book, the pages having been forcibly torn away. Jewel glanced over towards the fireplace and ventured a guess at what the pile of ashes might once have been.

“That was what we were looking for, wasn't it?” Jewel asked timidly.

Dylan nodded and looked desperately around the room. He ran from shelf to shelf, and Jewel knew he was looking for something he would not find. Emanuel Kane had dedicated his life to collecting information that might save his family, but had still fallen in the end. Jewel sank into the chair behind the desk and felt a wave of despair run through her. As Dylan tore around the room in circles, wresting books from their places and flipping through them quickly before dropping one to the floor and selecting another, Jewel stared forlornly at the empty binding in front of her.

“It has to be in one of these books! It has to!” Dylan was ranting, “He must have not had time to find it. If we just read through them we’re bound to find it...” His voice did not seem sure, and Jewel knew that the thousands of books contained more spells and information that they could read in the precious little time they had. The horrible truth was that if Emanuel Kane had not been able to find salvation among these tomes then they stood very little chance in succeeding where he had failed. It was perhaps then with sheer desperation that Jewel continued to stare at the diary, hoping that it would somehow restore its lost pages and reveal to them the information that had been so dangerous that Emanuel Kane, presumably under influence of the curse, had burned forever. It was perhaps this same desperation that clouded her vision so much that, at first, she did not notice what was directly in front of her eyes. Slouched in the chair and gazing across the desk, Jewel’s line of sight was almost at the same level as the now destroyed diary, and it was from this angle that she saw clearly the fold of paper stuffed inside the spine of the book.

“Dylan...” her voice, sharp but quiet interrupted his frantic searching.

“What is it, love?” he asked as he approached, sounding concerned.

She reached a finger into the spin of the diary and poked the folded piece of paper through. Dylan’s face was a combination of surprise, relief, and fear as he withdrew the paper and unfolded it. Jewel circled around the desk and stood next to him holding her breath. Neither of them could be sure that this single page would answer even one of the countless questions that whispered in the back of their minds. The page could be blank: an innocent bookmark long forgotten or it could be Emanuel Kane’s final but too-late triumph. When at last Dylan finished unfolding it they saw that it was not blank.

It was not, however, as they had both childishly hoped, a last and final spell that would defeat the curse and allow them to live the rest of their lives happily ever after. It was a letter. They both read it together.

To Mr. Emanuel Kane, Adversary of my most Esteemed Father:

In response to your letter it is with great pleasure that I find I might be able in some degree to put right the wrongs that my father was predisposed to commit. I can not, however, answer your query by post for fear that the information I have to give you may fall into hands that would use it once again for a most heinous purpose. I would be most appreciative, therefore, if you would visit me in person. You will find me still in residence at my father's estate at 110 15th Avenue in the city of New York. I believe that the current establishment has seen fit to rename the city once again, but I do not know that this administration will last any longer than the others. I will be awaiting your reply anxiously.

Your regretful and humble servant,
Hannibal Marcus Zitan

Jewel heard Dylan let out a long breath after he finished reading, and realizing that she was holding her breath as well she did the same. Dylan folded the letter and put it back in his pocket.

“What does it mean? Isn't the Zitan family the people who you said put the curse on the staff in the first place? Why would they want to help?” Jewel asked, puzzled.

“I don't know. Marcus Zitan is the one who cast the curse. Hannibal Zitan is his son. Perhaps he is not as evil as his family before him,” Dylan suggested.

“But if he told your grandfather how to escape the curse then why did he still fall to it?” she asked, “Maybe it was a trap. Maybe Hannibal lured him there with this letter and then broke in here and burned the diary.”

Dylan nodded, “That may be what happened, but unless you want to start reading these,” he waved his hand in a wide gesture around the room, “then the only thing we can do is go to New York and talk with Hannibal Zitan.”

Jewel's voice was now very uneasy, “But that means we'll have to leave Georgia. We'll have to go through all those countries that everyone says are so terrible. And New York... that entire area has been a constant war ever since the Great Change. No one has been

able to make the trip from there since your grandparents, and no one who has ever left Georgia to go north has ever come back. We could be killed.”

Dylan stepped into her and wrapped his arms around her. She instantly buried her face in his shoulder and wept.

“I’ll protect you,” he assured her but his words, though comforting and wonderful, still did not manage to remove all of her anxiety.

“What have you got here?” Dylan’s breath tickled her neck as he spoke. She felt him lift the small spell book from her pocket. Jewel thought to be worried that he might reprimand her for taking it, but even as the thought came she knew that he was not mad, only curious.

“I saw it on the shelf,” she explained, pointing with one hand and wiping her tears with the other. “I thought we might need it, since I tore up my other one.”

“I suspect that my ‘Randomortirum’ was largely to blame for that incident, dear.” Dylan flipped through the pages of the book. “It seems this one might prove much more useful than your last one. There is one problem, though.”

Jewel looked from him to the book anxiously, “What’s that? Is the book dangerous?”

Dylan shook his head, “No, but I don’t see any method of organization. There is no index or table of contents, and the spells do not seem to be alphabetized. They may be sorted by some method that I have missed.”

“Oh,” Jewel was relieved. Compared to the vast array of other seemingly impossible problems this one was laughable. “I suppose I will have to look through it and find the most useful ones. I can get a notebook and write them all down.”

“That is a wonderful idea, but I feel much more comfortable if you also memorize as many of them as possible. We may soon find ourselves in situations where there is no time to look in a book, or the book may be out of reach.” Dylan commented, and Jewel knew he was thinking of his ordeal with the feeders.

“Of course,” Jewel agreed. Dylan handed the spell book back to her and she returned it to her pocket.

The light through the stained glass windows had grown increasingly dim during their inspection of the room, and the chill in the air told them that night was approaching. Dylan walked over to the door.

"Is it okay with you if we stay here for the night?" he asked, closing the door, "The couch looks more comfortable than the mud floor of a cave."

"Anywhere is comfortable when I'm with you," she assured him.

A rack next to the fireplace held a few dry logs which they found suitable enough for a small fire. After Dylan ignited it with the unassisted 'infernus' charm that was so commonplace that neither of them considered it magic, they settled onto the plush cushions of the sofa. The warm glow of the flames and the soft popping of the fire filled the room with a serene mood. Fatigued from a day of flying they joined their minds only enough to share each others dreams and slept.

Eve sat bolt upright in her bed, beads of sweat creeping down her forehead. Fur Oshus looked up from his place at the foot of her bed and greeted her with a plaintive mew. The dream had been vivid, but even now her mind lost the memory. There had been a girl. She had been Eve's age. Something had been wrong, but the rest of the vision had gone. Eve was not prone to nightmares, and this one seemed to fill her with a great sense of dread. She lifted Fur Oshus into her lap and stroked his soft fur.

"I'm sorry, Oshy. I didn't mean to wake you up. I just had a bad dream is all."

The cat, unconcerned so long as he was petted, curled into a ball and purred. Eve lay back onto her pillow and tried to clear her mind. She was still suffering from the sorrow, pain, and anger that assaulted her from the events two days ago. Never in her life had she felt as despondent as when she had been forced to experience Aura's depression. Eve now found it increasingly difficult to talk with her sister. Acutely aware that she represented something that reminded Aura of what she saw as her own failure, Eve now worried that any comment, no matter how innocent, would result in disaster. Aura had, of course, forgiven her, and they had made up as sisters, but their relationship would never again return to the one they had shared in a more carefree past. Eve's thoughts turned to her sister: Jewel. Her anger still loomed heavily on her mind despite her knowledge that Jewel had done what she felt was best at the time. Eve still felt that there may have been an easier way for her to have learned this painful lesson, and this feeling caused a resentment that in turn left her feeling guilty. She tried to oust the feelings from her mind altogether and after failing to do so she found herself wishing that Jewel was there to

help her as she had done before. It was confusing, feeling at the same time angry with her sister while missing her deeply, and Eve rolled over, forcing Fur Oshus to relocate to the foot of the bed, and cried herself to sleep.

When Jewel woke she was cold. Multi-colored light from the windows bathed the room indicating that it was morning. Outside she could hear birds chirping and the rustle of leaves on the trees blowing in the wind. The fire had long since died out during the night, but she noticed that the fireplace contained the same amount of ashes that it had when they had first arrived, and there was still a single glowing ember peering out from beneath them. The books that Dylan had thrown to the floor in his frantic search had mysteriously returned to their shelves. She checked her pocket. The spell book was still there. She stretched out against Dylan and snuggled closer to warm herself. His deep, regular breathing told her that he was still asleep. Jewel closed her eyes and let herself drift back to sleep, cherishing as much of this peaceful moment as she could, wishing that it would never end.

When she woke again it was because Dylan had rolled over and sat up. She squeezed her eyelids tight and let out a pitiful moan that should have been sufficient to let him know that she had no intention of getting up ever again, but he insisted on being difficult.

"Wake up, little gemstone," he persuaded, kissing her. For a moment she wrestled with the decision to either feign sleep or kiss him back, but in the end her true desire won out. She kissed him passionately and decided that she had been wrong. This was the moment that she never wanted to end.

Good morning.

Good morning, she replied, *can't we just stay here forever? I promise I won't become evil.*

How I wish it was that easy, he sent back, *but we have a long trip ahead of us.*

Meany, she teased.

At length they separated, and Jewel sat up and wiped the sleep out of her eyes.

"Is there a shower here that works?" she asked.

Dylan shook his head, "No, but you can have one when we get back to Aura's house."

“We're going back? But, what about the curse?” Jewel asked, at once delighted and concerned.

“I'm not going to spend all day riding a pegasus if I don't have to,” he explained, rubbing his thighs, “Our next destination is New York, and Aura's house is close to the north border. Won't it be much better for you to transport us there for a short visit? We won't be staying long, so I doubt it will do any harm.”

Jewel clapped her hands together and took her new spell book from her pocket, “Let's go now!” she squealed enthusiastically. She had not expected to see her family again for a long time, so the idea of seeing them again so soon lifted her spirits immediately.

“Hold your horses,” Dylan chided, “We have to go outside and get Sky. We don't want to leave him behind.”

Jewel felt silly, “Oh, of course not. Hurry up then, I have everything. Let's go.” She lifted her staff from where it had been leaning against the couch and started towards the door. After braving the dilapidated staircases, which Jewel found to be much less intimidating on the way down, they exited the house and greeted Sky who was grazing in the pasture next to the mansion.

His snort of greeting caused them to alter their travel plans slightly. Jewel found the mass transport spell in her book after only a short search and transported the three of them to the pear orchard they had stopped at the day before. After Sky had his fill She envisioned Aura's front yard, spoke the magic words, and ran as fast as her feet could take her to the front door. Dylan followed behind her, and Sky, who seemed to have a low opinion of magical travel, trotted around the yard and flexed his wings.

“Jewel!” Aura exclaimed as she opened the door, “I thought you didn't plan on coming back for quite some time! Did you break the curse already?” Her last question was intensely hopeful.

“No,” Jewel said, hating to have to spoil her sister's hopes, “We're only stopping by.”

“Oh,” Aura's disappointment was only momentary, “Well, come on in and tell us about your trip to Macon then. Did you find out anything useful?”

“Yes, we”—

Dylan interrupted her, “Actually we were hoping to take showers first. We can talk about everything during breakfast so everyone can hear.”

“Yes, of course, of course. You're right. Rush upstairs now. The girls are still in bed, I'll get them up and in the showers too, and we can all enjoy a nice breakfast together.” Aura agreed and then yelled up the stairs, “Audrey! Eve! Come downstairs! Jewel and Dylan are back for breakfast this morning!” She rushed up the stairs, and they followed her.

As they stepped onto the second floor landing Aura turned, as if remembering something and yelled back down the stairs, “Rupert, honey, be a dear and mind the pancakes so they don't burn.” She turned and left towards Eve's room with out waiting for her husband's reply.

Jewel relished in the cascade of steaming water that almost, but not quite, let her forget all of her worries as if they were carried away down the drain. She delighted in the fragrant aroma of the soap and tried to block out everything else. She washed her hair and found it invigorating to remove the tangles that had been caused by the wind during their long flight.

“Jewel,” Dylan's voice from outside the bathroom door brought her out of her reverie, “Everyone is downstairs and breakfast is ready. We're waiting for you.”

She hadn't even notice when the others had entered or left the bathroom. Hastily she turned off the water, dried, and dressed in the fresh clothes that Aura had left out for her. She put her money, kazoo, and new spell book into her pockets, grabbed her staff and joined Dylan in the hallway. Together they went downstairs and entered the kitchen.

“Welcome back!” Eve threw herself into Jewel and hugged her. Jewel still received a sense of anger in her thoughts, but to Jewel's relief she saw that Eve was trying very hard to control and order her emotions. Audrey, however, sat at the table ignoring them, and her mind was a whirlwind of resentment, anger, jealousy, and fear. To Jewel, Audrey's thoughts seemed unnaturally amplified and at once she felt a pang of guilt. The staff was attacking her best friend and Jewel blamed herself for bringing it close to her. Despite her desperate wish to stay home as long as possible, she resolved to leave as soon as they could.

“It's good to be home again,” Jewel said, hugging Eve back, “but I can't stay long. We have to leave after breakfast.”

“Aww...” Eve complained at the same time that Rupert asked, “So soon? Where to? No chance of convincing you to give up that staff and let Uwom handle it? They haven't come poking around here yet, but I'm sure they will.” Jewel wished that he would give it a rest.

“We're hungry right now,” Dylan said before Jewel could answer. “We can talk about our trip after we have a plate of food in our stomachs.” This was the second time he had prevented her from telling them about their trip.

What's up? She asked him.

We're going to be going on a very dangerous trip. Let them eat and enjoy our company for now. There's no need to worry them too soon.

Oh, yeah, of course. Dylan's quick and thoughtful mind never ceased to amaze her.

Jewel ate her pancakes hungrily because she had eaten only a pear since breakfast the day before. She resolved that she would have to remember to eat more often if she was going to be wandering all over the world with Dylan.

Dylan was the first to break the silence after he had finished his first helping and was casually eating his second.

“We don't actually have to leave on our journey right after breakfast. We'll be going into town to buy a few things first. If some of you want to join us while we are shopping then you can see us off from there,” he said.

Jewel had no idea what he planned to buy, but didn't even bother looking into his mind or asking him about it. She was sure that he had everything under control. She ate her breakfast in silence and let him answer questions.

“What did you find in Macon?” Rupert asked carefully. Jewel ignored him and focused on her food. She didn't want to give him any more excuses to continue trying to stop them.

Dylan told everyone about the letter, and the room was silent, even Audrey had stopped eating and was looking at him aghast.

“New York?” Aura's voice trembled as she said it, “But no one ever goes there. The mail doesn't even get through anymore. You... you can't be serious.”

“I am,” Dylan assured her, “this man, Hannibal Zitan told my grandfather that he had information about the curse. We have to go talk with him and find out what that information was.”

"But, that letter was written almost fifty years ago," Rupert pointed out, "You don't even know if this Zitan fellow is still there or even still alive. Do you really intend to throw your life away on something that might just be a wild goose chase?"

"Even if he's still alive," Dylan said flatly, "It could be a trap, since the Zitan family was, if you remember, the family that put the curse of the staff to begin with."

"Exactly!" Rupert agreed, put off that Dylan had not offered a counter argument, "All the more reason not to go getting yourself killed by walking straight into a war-zone. I can't let you take Jewel there! I forbid it! This has gone too far!"

Dylan nodded, "You are right, but there are more important things at stake here. If we stay then the curse will consume not only Jewel, her family as well: all of us. We can't, as you suggest, give up the staff. Jewel is the only one who can touch it. And hiding it doesn't help. That is what my mother tried to do, and if she had not died then she would have soon fallen to the curse anyway. If we die then my uncle will be the last living member of the Kane family and the staff will pass to him. If that is the case then it is my hope that you all will not be closely enough related to him to be affected by the curse."

Aura turned to Jewel, "Jewel. Are you... do you... did you agree to this? Are you really expecting to die rather than risk staying here?"

Jewel swallowed the bit of pancake she had been chewing and replied, "I will go wherever Dylan goes. I don't care if it's New York, Atlanta, or through the gates of Hell itself."

Dylan smiled weakly at her, and she didn't care that his confidence was not absolute. Gone were the days that she could feel safe and secure, even in his arms. Now she only knew that in life or death, success or failure, they would be together, and that was all that mattered.

Audrey finished eating and left the table without a word. Jewel looked back towards her as she ran up the stairs. Jewel tried to tell herself that it would do no good to worry, but it didn't help. Eve was looking at her and spoke when she caught her eye.

"Jewel, can you help me a little more before you go? I'm trying really hard. Really I am, but it was so much easier when you helped," she asked.

Jewel nodded, excused herself from the table and led Eve into the living room. As she left she could hear Rupert talking with Dylan.

“This is insane! Is nothing going to change your mind, boy?”

Dylan shook his head.

“Well, I hope you know what you're doing then. These girls are only related to me through marriage, but that doesn't mean I don't love them. I know you're doing what you think is best to protect us, and Jewel loves you, there's no denying that. But I'm trying to protect her. I'm trying to protect you. All you know is this wild story. You don't even know how much of it is reliable. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we would gladly risk any curse just to have you two here with us.”

“Thank you, sir,” Dylan replied, “That means a lot to me. If it makes you feel better I'll tell you as much as I can about the route I plan to take on my way north...”

Jewel had to tune out the rest of the conversation while she connected with Eve. Jewel sat on the couch and cradled Eve in her lap.

Are you still upset with me?

Yes. No. Eve responded truthfully and then tried to lie.

That's okay, you don't have to hide anything from me. Just relax, and we can calm your mind. What's this dream about?

I don't know, Eve answered, *I had it last night. I think it was just a nightmare.*

Jewel was frightened to see that the dream was not created by Eve's mind, but instead forced into it in much the same way Jewel had forced in Aura's thoughts.

I don't think it was just a nightmare, Jewel told her, *It looks like another psion put the dream in here on purpose.*

What? Terror welled up in Eve, and it took a moment for them both to settle their thoughts.

Don't worry. It doesn't look like they meant to do you any harm. It looks like they were trying to talk with you.

Is it the curse?

I don't know, but I don't think so. Dylan thinks that the curse only affects what you do, not what you think.

Oh, then who is it?

I don't know, but if it is another psion then she must be trying to talk to you for a reason. The only advice that I can give you is to clear your mind and be ready for her to try again. Once you learn more about her you'll have a better idea of what to do.

What if she is bad? You won't be here to help me.

The dream looks like she was asking for help. She wouldn't ask for help if she were bad, would she?

I guess not.

Jewel kissed her sister on the forehead, "I think that's enough for now."

Eve looked disappointed but jumped off her lap, "Thanks, sis. I'll keep working at it, just like you taught me."

Jewel smiled, "You'll do great. You're a natural." Eve beamed.

The breakfast table was cleared, and Jewel guessed that about an hour had passed. Dylan was sitting on a chair across the room.

"Aura is going to come with us into town to do some shopping. She said you can come too if you want, Eve. Rupert is going to stay here with Audrey," Dylan informed them. "Apparently Aura had a bit of a talk with him. He still wants us to stay, but he said if we were going to go then we might as well be prepared."

Eve squealed, "I'm going with you!"

"Okay," he told her, "You and Jewel can ride Sky, but we won't be flying because Aura and I will be riding horses."

Eve seemed beside herself at the thought of riding the pegasus. Her elation wasn't diminished at all by the fact that she wouldn't be flying.

Later that day the four of them made their way down the winding mountain road at a brisk trot towards the small town of La Fayette. The road was hard pressed clay in most spots but a few vast stretches of asphalt served to remind them of how the world had once been. The cool spring breeze wafted through the trees carrying the scent of flowers, and birds chirped merrily as they darted around tree branches playfully. The rhythmic clop-clop of the horse's hooves completed the melody, and no one wanted to disturb the atmosphere by talking. Jewel and Eve therefore decided to let Sky follow the other horses while they talked silently.

What's wrong with Audrey? Eve asked, and Jewel felt her worry.

I don't know. Dylan thinks the curse is trying to make her do things or to use her to make us do something, but we don't know enough about the curse to even be sure. Her thoughts are different, unlike anyone else's.

Can you help her? Make her thoughts okay again? Eve asked.

No, I'm afraid I can't. If I tried to change anything in her mind she would sense the intrusion and become angry with me, just like you did.

Oh. When you and Dylan go away again, will she get better?

We hope so, but we still don't know, Jewel answered, but since she sensed that Eve was becoming frustrated she added: *Did she seem to get better when we were in Macon?*

Eve thought about it for a moment, I think so. At first she refused to read the letter you left, but when I walked by her room before bed I saw her reading it.

Well see, she got a little better when we were away for just a day. I'm sure she'll be fine soon after we leave.

I'd rather you stay, even if it means Audrey wouldn't get better.

Don't say that, Eve. She's your cousin, and we're the only family she has.

I know, but I don't like it when you aren't around. Is the curse really so bad?

You learned about the Kane family in school, Jewel reminded her, *they were good people just like us, and you know what terrible things they did.*

Oh, yeah. I forgot. So, this man in New York will be able to break the curse?

Jewel shrugged, I think he'll give us information that will help us break the curse, but his letter wasn't very clear. We'll just have to talk to him and find out.

"Here we are everybody," Aura's voice shook them out of their conversation, *"La Fayette flea market."*

It wasn't a market. It was a city. They stood on the outside edge of an enormous field littered with tents and booths of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Aura paid the fee to leave their mounts to graze, and they entered into the chaos. Drove of people shuffled in a mighty ballet among the vendors who tried to grab the attention of all who wandered by. In the scant few seconds that a potential customer passed their wares the salesmen would launch into an offer or demonstration. They promised the most fantastic of results no matter how insignificant or unnecessary their goods actually were, and satisfaction was always guaranteed. Livestock in cages let out varied but always plaintive cries, and their stench mingled with the odor of the throng so that the bazaar, packed with life, was scented like death. Jewel wrinkled her nose and tried to hold her breath. Anywhere she looked her eyes fell

on gifts and baubles, cakes and soups, even socks and underwear. Everything was for sale: the items, the tables, the tents. One woman even offered to sell the very dress she was wearing and assured them that the price was unbeatable. Since Jewel did not wish to shout over the din of the crowd she progressed in silence. She stayed closed to Dylan and held Eve's hand firmly as the tide of shoppers washed around them. They followed closely behind Aura as she led the way past the carts and stalls to a somewhat better organized section of the market.

Here what had before been a small narrow path was a wide clay street. Instead of small tents and stalls placed at random there were now wooden buildings packed tightly together on each side of the road. The center of the street was less crowded. The roar of the crowds was less pervasive, and the stench now retreated enough for Jewel to breathe normally. Window shoppers crowded around the fronts of the stores peering in at the items displayed. Jewel read the names of the shops as they passed. "Modern Living: Magical appliances for today's families." "Magician's Textbook Exchange" "Mystic Equines: Unicorn shoes %50 off." "Oddities of the Past" and Jewel noticed a sign in the front of the last one that proclaimed, "We buy all ancient electronics and other defunct science relics." Jewel noticed that the store was packed full of teenage boys who were gazing at strange metal boxes and gadgets with looks of delight and wonder plastered on their faces. She couldn't imagine what anyone would want with such junk.

"Wow," she heard Dylan's voice next to her and looked to see what he was looking at. She couldn't believe it. He was staring raptly at a small one-person horseless buggy with large rubber wheels. He was reading a small sign in front of it.

"The 20th century invention," he read, "called the four-wheeler, used a gasoline powered engine to spin the back tires with enough force to propel the vehicle to speeds exceeding sixty mile's per hour across even rocky or rough terrain. This and other inventions had replaced horses until the internal combustion engine ceased to function after the Great Change."

Jewel rolled her eyes. "What is the point of having this stuff if none of it works?"

Dylan shrugged. "It's interesting," he said, "We can't use most magic because it's against the law or requires a special license. But,

these didn't use magic. If science worked we could do anything we wanted without getting into trouble.”

Jewel felt there was something wrong with his logic, but she couldn't figure out exactly what it was. “Come on, we don't want to lose Aura and Eve,” she pointed out, and they rushed to catch up.

“So where are we going?” Jewel asked when she fell into step next to her sisters.

“Dylan gave me a list of the things he thinks you two will need on your trip,” Aura answered. “I think that All-Mart will have most of it.”

“But, they don't sell anything magical,” Jewel objected and turned to Dylan. “What kind of stuff are we getting?” she asked.

“Just a few supplies,” he answered. “And All-Mart does sell a few magical things. We're going to get you a new pen and a notebook so you can write down important spells. There are a few other things that I think we'll need as well.”

“Magi-pens don't count as magic,” Jewel pointed out, “They look just like those old ball-point pens. The only difference is that they actually work.”

“Wouldn't that be a big difference?” Dylan asked with a smirk. Jewel stuck her tongue out at him but he disarmed her with a sudden kiss.

“Eww!” Eve giggled, “Aura did you see that? She put her tongue in his mouth!”

“Behave Eve,” Aura chided, but she was obviously trying to contain a grin.

“What else are we getting?” Jewel asked him after the kiss.

“Camping supplies mostly. It will be a long trip to New York, even riding Sky. We'll have to make several stops in countries that are at war. I want to have enough food, since we can't expect to find many fruit trees outside of Georgia. Sky should be able to forage, but I'm going to get some for him as well just in case. After that, I need to get myself a wand.”

Jewel shot him a surprised look, “We don't have enough money to buy a wand! And besides, you're under age. You can't get a wand.”

“No,” Dylan agreed, “but Aura can, and she has offered to loan us the money out of her savings. She thinks it's important for me to be armed.”

Jewel looked at her elder sister, “I don't want us to burden you like this, Sis. You could get in big trouble if the Order finds out.”

"I'll already be in trouble with them once they find out I helped you two," she replied, "And you aren't a burden. This is important, and Dylan needs to be able to protect you if anything happens. Well, here we are!"

The building was a hundred times as big as any of the other shops had been. Large red letters on the front of the building proudly proclaimed, "All-Mart," and could have been seen from a mile away. Double doors opened magically as they approached, and Aura, Eve, Jewel and Dylan stepped inside.

"Welcome to All-Mart!" a cheerful old man wearing the store uniform greeted them. They thanked him and passed into the main portion of the store.

Aura said, "You three start finding everything you need. I have to go to the wand section now since it takes a while for them to clear the paperwork. Meet me over there when you are finished, okay?"

"Okay," Jewel said in a daze. She had never been here before, and it was like nothing she had ever seen. The building must have been built well before the Great Change, but it had been very well maintained. The ceiling was thirty feet above them, and the whole place was one room that could have contained her entire home town. "It's so... big..." she marveled. Eve seemed to be equally impressed.

"First time here?" Dylan asked, "Yeah, it's impressive. Come on, the writing supplies are over here. Then we can go to the camping section in the back and circle through the grocery on the way to meet Aura."

Jewel nodded wordlessly and let him lead her by the hand as she continued to take everything in. She held Eve's hand who trailed after her similarly. Jewel decided that the name "All-Mart" was suitable, because it seemed like everything that could be sold was sold here. At the center of the massive room was a forest of clothing racks, and the rest of the store was a never-ending maze of metal shelves. One section of shelves was filled with books, another with pots, pans, and silver ware. One end of the store was the grocery that Dylan had mentioned, containing shelves packed full of every food imaginable. Nothing, however, was explicitly magical. With a few exceptions of science-driven items that were enchanted to work via magic, the entire store was filled with simple everyday items. The carpets and brooms were labeled non-flying. The lamps were listed as genie-free. The

mirrors showed only a reflection. Even the section of the store that sold musical instruments boasted a sign that said, "Non-conjuring."

"Okay," Dylan interrupted her thoughts, stopping in front of a shelf full of pens, pencils, markers, crayons, quills, and chalk. "Find a pen you like and then grab a notebook from that shelf over there."

Jewel stood breathlessly as she looked over the vast selection of pens. This was nothing like that small store her parents had taken her to when they shopped for school supplies. With joyful horror she realized that she could never be able to choose just one. She wanted them all! There were some that wrote in different colors, some that had special rubber grips, and even some that could be bent into shapes. The choices between these were further complicated by the many different designs and patterns.

"I want a pen too..." Even breathed, and her words seemed to bring Jewel out of the initial shock. At once the both of them began grabbing pens off the shelves and showing them to each other. Their words mingled together as each failed to hear the other, instead talking only because the excitement required it. Pens were taken from the shelves, examined, evaluated, put to a vote by committee, rejected for some imagined flaw, and were finally placed back onto the shelves in favor of some other pen that one of them had only just seen. At last, when the entire shelf of writing utensils was a disaster area, Jewel turned back to Dylan holding three pens, two highlighters, a pack of markers, and a box of crayons. Eve had a similar armload of merchandise.

"Jewel," Dylan sounded exasperated, "We are on a limited budget, and Eve, I don't know if Aura will buy you all those..."

"Oh these aren't all mine," Jewel explained, "This pen is for Audrey because I just know that she'll love it and so are the markers and crayons. This highlighter and this pen are both for you. Do you like them? So all I'm getting is just these two," Jewel explained.

Eve, also, had an explanation, "And I got this pen for Aura because Jewel was already getting stuff for Audrey and I really need these markers because I'm going to be starting school again soon and this quill is for Rupert because it would be rude to get everyone else something without getting him something."

Jewel smiled weakly as Dylan sighed and said, "Well, okay. Find a notebook and then we can go look at the camping supplies."

Once again they squealed with joy at the vast array of journals, notebooks, and diaries that littered the shelves. Dylan found himself

holding an armload of pens and markers while they turned this second shelf into a disaster area. Jewel fell instantly in love with a small notebook that had a picture of a unicorn standing in front of a corn field. It had the words "Georgia 'Corn" in beautiful script at the top. Many minutes later, they turned to him each again holding an armful of items. Dylan sighed, and Jewel rushed into her explanation right away.

"I only got one for me, I swear. This one is for Aura, since I already got Audrey something, and this is for Rupert, and..."

Eve continued, "And I got Audrey this, since I didn't get her a pen, and Jewel and I both thought you would like this one."

They both had such looks of joy plastered onto their faces that Dylan couldn't bring himself to argue. He found a stray cart and deposited their newfound treasure in it.

"Okay, I guess we can borrow some money from Aura if we don't have enough. Let's go look at the camping stuff," he said. Jewel almost felt a little guilty, but she was sure that Aura would agree that they had only picked items that they could not live without.

The camping supplies were not as interesting as the pens and notebooks, but Jewel did not have to wait there long. Dylan stepped quickly from shelf to shelf grabbing only the items on his list and soon he was done and they were walking towards the grocery section. Jewel couldn't understand how anyone could shop that way. She glanced at the tent, lantern, miniature grill, and sleeping bag. None of the colors even matched! Boys, she thought and shook her head.

In the grocery Jewel and Eve helped Dylan pick out foods that were light-weight and didn't spoil easily. They chose dried fruit, beef jerky, crackers, ginger bread, and chocolate. The best thing was that none of the food would be affected very much if they conjured it into the kazoo.

"That's everything," Dylan announced, "Time to go get Aura."

Aura was still filling out paper work when they found her sitting in the Wandry.

"Look what we got you Aura!" Eve tittered as they approached. She looked up, and Eve thrust a pen at her.

"How nice," Aura said, shooting a look at Jewel who smiled meekly, "It's lovely. Oh and a notebook too? I suppose there was nothing you could do to stop this belated Christmas celebration?" Her last question was directed at Dylan.

He spread his hands, "I was hoping that you could help out with the cost, if it's not too much trouble."

"I'd be delighted to, dear. It will be better if Rupert is mad at me for spending too much anyway. That should make him more manageable. Bless his heart. There's never a bad time to buy people gifts, and it is never a waste of money. Thank you very much, girls. Now give me a moment while I finish these insurance forms. They're making my wand now, so we won't be much longer."

Eve busied herself by opening her new journal and starting her first entry, which Jewel noticed was almost nothing but multicolored hearts, stars, and intricate looping lines around the edges of the page. Jewel picked up the little black diary and smooth, shiny, black pen that they had gotten for Dylan. She offered them to him.

"Do you like them?" she asked, afraid that he might be angry with her for spending the extra money and making him have to ask Aura for help.

"Oh Jewel, I'm sorry. My mind has been on other things. I love them. I will need one, and these are just perfect. Thank you so much," he finished by taking them both and using the pen to write his name on the cover of the diary. Jewel felt wonderful and kissed him.

"Ms. Summers," a voice called and Jewel thought about her mother before she realized that the person had been addressing Aura.

Aura stood up and replied, "Mrs. Brown, actually. Yes?"

"Your wand is ready. If you'll just sign this and hand me your insurance form you can take this slip to the front counter. They'll have your wand there and you can pick it up when you finish shopping."

"Oh, thank you," Aura said, handing the clerk the form. She signed and took the proffered slip. "Come on you three," she directed back to them and headed towards the front of the store.

Dylan followed wordlessly, but Jewel and Eve were barely able to contain themselves.

"Aw," Eve complained, "I want to shop all day. We could buy my new school clothes and maybe some cat toys for Fur Oshus and then we could look at the jewelry but not buy any, just look and maybe they have some books that would be nice to read and I saw an entire section of the store that had bathroom stuff and your bathroom is a little bare since you made it bigger and there's also a bakery where we could get a cake because I think that would be just the thing to cheer up Audrey and"—

“Evel!” Aura scolded, “I know that you are excited, but honeychild, please. Jewel and Dylan have a long journey ahead of them. You and I can come here again soon and we’ll bring Audrey with us. Don’t you think that would cheer her up even more?”

“Aw... okay, I guess...” Eve sounded disappointed at first, but then she began talking about what she was going to show Audrey first. When she realized that she and Audrey would get to try on clothes she started rambling so fast that no one could follow what she was saying, which was just as well because she wasn’t really talking to anyone in particular.

Jewel kept silent because she agreed with both of them, and was at war with herself about whose side to take. Dylan seemed ready to go, however, so she decided that it probably was best to leave. When they arrived at the front counter Aura traded in her slip for her wand and also received a small book entitled, “Basic Wand Magic.” She paid for the wand as well as everything in the cart and Jewel’s mind reeled when she saw the sum total. She felt terrible thinking that she was being a burden on her sister, but Aura didn’t seem to mind, so maybe it would be okay.

“I like All-Mart much better,” Eve pouted as they exited the building and stepped back into the street lined with smaller shops.

“Well,” Aura explained, “These shops sell more magical items. All-Mart limits itself exclusively to more mundane items.” She covertly handed the wand and its spell book to Dylan, and he shoved them into a pocket.

“It was so big, I could have spent all day in there and not finished shopping,” Jewel whispered, “How did they make a building so large without magic?”

“I don’t know,” Aura admitted, “but this is the largest market in Georgia. Did you know that people from outside Georgia travel for miles just to come here. I suppose its location so close to the border has helped it grow.”

When they came to the end of the road Eve complained, “I defiantly like All-Mart much better than this.”

The four of them braved the tent-filled bazaar once again in silence and were relieved when at last they exited the gateway and stepped back onto the grassy pasture where hundreds of horses, pegasi, and unicorns were grazing. Aura gave her parking tickets to the attendant, and he left to fetch their mounts.

“Oh no,” Aura said, looking at Dylan who was carrying all their bags of merchandise, “We don't have any travel sacks. I'm afraid each of us will have to hold a bag on the way back home. Here, Eve you take the two small ones. Dylan hand that one to Jewel, and I'll take these. Is that better? I didn't even notice you where carrying all of that. Dear me, I'm so sorry.”

“No trouble at all,” Dylan replied. Jewel was sure he wouldn't have complained even if they had bought the entire store's inventory.

Eve rode with Jewel again on the way back home and they used the time to practice thought-speak some more.

Do you think Audrey will like her presents. Eve asked, and Jewel felt her concern and worry.

I'm sure she will, and I'm sure that she'll feel much better after Aura brings you two here again to go shopping together. Don't let her forget. She promised.

I won't. I'm going to write in my new journal every day. Did Dylan like his diary I picked out?

Very much, thank you. Be sure to write any more dreams you have about that girl in your journal. It may help you find out what she's trying to tell you.

Okay. Did you see that pretty dress, the green one?

Jewel knew exactly what dress her sister was talking about because her heart had been filled with a burning desire to have it from the first moment she had laid her eyes on it as they were leaving. It had been everything she could do not to beg Aura to go back and buy it for her.

Yes, it was very nice.

Don't try to hide it. I can tell you want it bad. I'm a psion, remember. Eve teased.

You're right. Someday, Eve, you and I are going to come back here and buy proper dresses, not hand-me-downs. We'll look beautiful.

Eve's response was just a strong feeling of joy. They spent the rest of the trip home sending images of dresses back and forth to each other in a shared daydream.

When they arrived home Jewel felt a mix of sorrow and relief. Her arms were tired from carrying the shopping bag the whole way, but now she knew that she and Dylan would soon have to leave again. They distributed their gifts to Rupert and Audrey who were both sullen but for different reasons. Rupert broke in his new pen by balancing his

checkbook. Audrey seemed to genuinely like her gifts, but her mind was still clouded with resentment. Even though she had refused to accompany them to the market, she felt as if she had been excluded. Jewel hated that there was nothing she could do for her cousin and felt slightly better about leaving. I was for the best, after all. Aura dug out a travel pack and tied it around Sky. The pegasus didn't like it, but he seemed willing to put up with it begrudgingly. At last they were packed and ready to go. Jewel retrieved the staff from inside the house where she had left it during the trip so as not to be seen with it. Eve and Aura said tearful goodbyes to Jewel, and Rupert fiercely told Dylan to "take care of that girl, we love her." Audrey was inside sulking. Jewel realized that she had been dreading this moment ever since reading Hannibal's letter. It had been nice to spend this last half a day with her family, but now it was ending. Dylan urged Sky forward and the pegasus launched into the air. After the thrilling ascent they headed north, away from home, into uncertainty.

Their trip north was uneventful, and Jewel found this surprising until she considered it. She had half expected them to be attacked from all sides as soon as they crossed the border out of Georgia, but now she realized that Dylan had urged Sky to fly so dizzyingly high that they were unlikely to be spotted. She saw the landscape far below them become more mountainous, but the landscape was only vague tiny hills with occasional blotches of blue water among the green forests. There was no evidence of the civil wars that she assumed raged below them, and Jewel tried to remember back to her history and geography classes. Failing to remember much, she decided to ask Dylan.

"Where are we?"

"Over the People's Republic of Tennessee," he answered and gathering her concern from her mind continued, "It's a peaceful country for the most part. They have been at war with the New United Kingdom of Carolina for several years, but all the fighting is much farther to the east, where they share a border. It is a narrow country though, and we are close to the north border I think. You shouldn't be worried until we get to New England. There has been so much turmoil there since the Great Change that it hasn't had the same government for more than a year at a time. At least, that was the case until a few years ago. There hasn't been any news about it for some time."

“What happened?”

“No one really knows.”

“When will we get there?”

“In a couple days. We'll stop tonight in a sovereign city in the mountains called Kentucky. There isn't any fighting going on there because the surrounding nations have already annexed most of the land that it used to cover. It used to be a country, but now it's not much bigger than the La Fayette market. The language they speak is English, but from what I've heard the dialect has changed so much that it's almost impossible to understand. We should be able to find a spot in the mountains and camp without being bothered though.”

“Oh,” Jewel had a thought, “Dylan. Thank you so much for doing all this. I had no idea the amount of work that you went through for me. Where did you learn all of this?”

Dylan paused before answering, “I... well I suspected that I might have to go to New York some day. The curse started there, and it was my father's opinion that the answer to removing it would be found there. We weren't sure, of course, because my mother refused to use the staff so we could never enter my grandfather's study again after she closed it.”

“Oh. Why wasn't your mother affected by the curse? Is it because she never used it? Couldn't I just put the staff away like she did?” Jewel suggested.

“No, even if it did work like that, I couldn't bear to abandon my uncle to the curse,” at this Jewel felt guilty for suggesting it, but Dylan continued, “but it doesn't work that way. My mother was affected by the curse. My father, many times, would find her doing strange things, and she would never have a reason for them. He was the one who enchanted the case to open only for the woman I presented it to. Still, he would find my mother tearing apart the house looking for the staff sometimes.” Dylan's voice had grown sorrowful, “She was wonderful most of the time, and I think my father kept me from seeing the worst of it.”

“I know it's painful to think about,” Jewel offered, “I'm sorry I asked.”

“Don't be. My mother is at peace now, and my father is with her. They are beyond the reach of the curse, and I am thankful for that, even if I miss them. Your parents are with them as well, and I'm sure that they have become the best of friends.”

Jewel was at once saddened and uplifted by his statement. The thought of her father befriending the people he had been so afraid of was comical, but she knew that it must be true because Dylan said it.

"There's Kentucky," Dylan pointed through the dimming sky towards a collection of lights in a small valley wedged between three large mountains. He steered Sky down out of the thin clouds towards the city. Jewel glanced west and saw the sun was beginning to set behind the distant hills.

"Oh look," she pointed it out to Dylan, "Isn't it beautiful."

He agreed that it was as they descended into a small clearing on a flat portion of the mountain south of the city. In the cover of the trees there was almost no light.

"Solarum," Jewel incanted, and the clearing lit up.

Dylan removed the travel pack from Sky and let the peg graze with a warning not to wander too far. He sat the pack on the ground and looked at the rolled up tent.

"We can probably just use the 'Nondiscuvrum' enchantment for tonight. The supplies are mainly incase we need to keep from doing magic for any reason"—

"Andsindair!" a voice called from behind them. They both spun around and saw a grizzled, leathery old man pointing a crossbow at them. Jewel saw Dylan put his hands up in front of himself in a passive gesture.

"We don't want any trouble," Dylan said. Jewel was frozen, wondering what to do and hoping Dylan would tell her.

Stay calm, she felt his thought.

"Wusydontukee? Yafranoth? Spinus?" the man barked, still pointing his weapon at Dylan. Jewel didn't understand anything the man was saying and his mind was organized strangely. She couldn't make heads or tails of any of his thoughts.

"We're just passing through, sir." Dylan explained, "We are from Georgia. We aren't spies."

Jewel realized that Dylan seemed to understand the man, so she tried to catch the meaning from his mind when the man spoke again.

"Hadanoeyaint? Proovt!" the man barked again, but this time Jewel heard him the way Dylan did. He had asked, "How do I know you aren't? Prove it." Her mind boggled. Dylan had been serious about how they had made English into a new language.

Dylan took a piece of paper out of his pocket, and Jewel recognized it as Hannibal's letter. He showed it to the man. "See this," Dylan explained, "the address says Georgia..." but the man interrupted him.

"Ahknaredaba! Yankskuree. Yeleklekayan yataklakeyan. Proovynt," and Jewel would have surely been lost without Dylan's mind to tell her that the man had told him he couldn't read and requested he prove he wasn't from the north by some other means. The entire meaning was lost even to Dylan. Dylan looked around, desperate for some proof that they were from Georgia.

"Wait," Jewel shouted, "I can prove it." She withdrew her small notebook with the unicorn on the front. She hesitantly approached the man with it.

"Nuthabuk? Etodya nokaintree," the man protested.

"No words," Jewel explained, hoping she had guess his meaning correctly since Dylan hadn't heard it clearly, "Just a picture. See." She pointed to the unicorn on the cover and the corn field behind it, which she was sure was unmistakably a Georgia landscape. She also pointed to the large words at the top, hoping that the man would at least be familiar with that word. The man took the notebook from her and studied it, still holding the crossbow pointed at them with his other hand.

"Pudypekokrn yegamis. Denoganutnlatisnoat. Yetopudy tabebadnewa. Jespasntruden?" the man spat out the words and handed Jewel her notebook. She had been too worried about whether or not he accepted the picture as proof to remember to follow Dylan's mind for the translation.

Dylan spoke up sounding relieved, "Yes sir, just passing through. We'll leave in the morning," and Jewel was delighted to realize that the man believed them.

The old man lowered his crossbow and said, "Itdenjeseado. Ahmaksunonbatsuh. Gna" and Jewel followed it as "Ok, you do that. I'll leave you alone. Good night." or at least that was as much as Dylan could make out.

"Thank you sir," Dylan replied as the man turned and left back into the forest.

When he had left Jewel let out a long breath that she hadn't realized she had been holding. She looked at Dylan and instantly threw herself on him, "Oh darling! You were wonderful! I was so

scared and didn't understand anything he said, but you were wonderful.”

He held her tenderly, “I was scared too, and his speech was harder than I thought it would be. I only understood a little.”

“I know, I was reading your mind to try to translate. I couldn't read his mind at all. He *thinks* in that crazy language. All I could see was his distrust of strangers and a general fear.”

Dylan nodded, “They have reason. The surrounding countries haven't been kind to them. I've had a full day though, love. It seems like ages since we woke up on my grandfather's couch in Macon, but it was just this morning. Let's get some rest.”

He took the sleeping bag and Jewel's blanket out of their travel pack and spread them out on the ground. Jewel whispered 'nondiscuvrum' and they were surrounded by the thick protective brambles once again. This time, however, she made it larger so that they would have more room to move around. Dylan lay down, but Jewel then remembered something.

“I have to write down at least a few spells, Dylan. I don't want to get caught in a situation where I have to flip through this spell book quickly,” she said.

He groaned and sat up, “Why do you have to remind me? You're right. I have to do the same thing with my wand spells. Okay, one hour, but after that we're going to sleep.”

Jewel found she was disappointed, “But, before we sleep don't you want to?”—

“Yes! Heavens, yes! So much to do, so little time. Okay, but after that then we're going to sleep, okay darling?”

“Yes, dear.” Jewel smiled.

Their evening progressed as planned. At last they both slept, embraced in each others arms and each others dreams.

Eve finished writing and tossed her journal and pen onto the nightstand beside the bed. She tried to clear her mind like Jewel had taught her. She had enjoyed all the shopping, despite the fact that she didn't like the bazaar at all. Audrey had seemed to like her gifts. Eve could only hope that her cousin would begin to get better now that Jewel and Dylan had left. Her eyes watered as she thought about them. She was so worried that she might never see her sister again.

She took a deep breath and left the thought in a part of her mind reserved for things she could do nothing about. Fur Oshus leapt up onto the bed and rubbed against her. Eve closed her eyes as she scratched behind his ears. Focus, she told herself, be calm. She first relaxed her body, starting at her feet and hands, stretching and flexing first, then letting them rest. She tensed every muscle in her body, feeling only that muscle then left it relaxed. Her heartbeat slowed. Her breathing became even. Slowly her thoughts drifted away. She stopped thinking about her parents' deaths. She stopped worrying about her family. She squelched her excitement at being a psion. She ignored her anxiety about starting a new school as an outsider. She struggled with her desire to know who the strange girl in her dreams was and loosed the resulting apprehension. Everything that was strange and unknown, everything that was exhausting, everything that was wonderful, everything drifted, not out of her mind, but into the back, controlled, conquered. At last all that remained was Eve, alone, but not lonely, relaxed, but not uncontrolled, tense but without tension.

When she opened her eyes she had not expected the vision, but was unsurprised by it. She knew at once that she was dreaming, but not a dream. The girl was petite, young, pale, and very frightened. Eve recognized her from her previous dream. She could have been Eve's age, and though Eve did not yet know it, she was both much younger and much older. The girl was naked, but innocently so. Eve looked down at herself and saw that she was as well. The rules of the dream told Eve that the nakedness was nothing that should bring either of them shame. Nothing else existed. The girl seemed expectant.

"Who are you?" Eve asked but the girl did not answer.

Eve rejected the anger she began to feel and let herself be distant and cold.

"You want my help?" she prompted, and the girl nodded and then looked around fearfully as if the act of answering would bring upon her some great peril.

"How can I help you if you don't tell me?" Eve asked, but again there was no answer. "Are you close? Can I come to you?"

The girl shook her head.

"What are you afraid of? Where are we?"

The girl's voice was an unnatural whisper like the howl of wind at night during a storm, "What are you afraid of?" she repeated Eve's question back to her.

Eve tried to contain her frustration. “Stop it. Answer me. What do you want?”

Again the strange voice, “Freedom.”

“What does that mean? Are you locked up? Who locked you up?”

“Father.”

“Your father is keeping you locked up somewhere? Like in your room?”

She shook her head again.

“Well where are you then? How long have you been there?”

“Forever,” the girls strange voice carried the chilling answer and filled Eve with such uncontrollable horror that she screamed.

At once she was back in her room, and she knew that she had never even left the bed. Oshus was cowering on the other side of the room. Eve heard footsteps outside, and soon Aura flung open the door.

“What is it Eve?” she asked, looking concerned and rushing to the side of the bed.

“Nothing,” Eve replied, trying to control her shaking, “I just had a bad dream. That's all.”

“Oh sis, you're sweating terrible, and trembling. Are you sure you're okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. I'm sorry I yelled.”

“Don't worry about it dear,” Aura offered, “I've been having nightmares ever since mom and dad died too. Why don't you come down and we'll have some hot cocoa together.”

Eve was perfectly content to let her sister attribute the episode to their parents' deaths. She looked at her journal on the nightstand. Jewel had told her to write down all of her dreams, but right now she just wanted to forget it. “That sounds nice.”

She hopped out of bed and followed Aura downstairs. She and her sister talked about nothing in particular. Both of them were careful to avoid any subjects that reminded Aura of Eve's abilities. Eve knew already that she was forgetting the dream, and that she should feel bad for not writing it down. After the cocoa was gone they sat and watched the fire crackle and burn in the fireplace while they grew tired. Eve didn't remember drifting off to sleep, but she had a vague memory of being carried up the stairs and tucked into her bed.

Jewel woke to the sound of rain. Her clothes were damp with dew as well as the blanket and sleeping bag. She sat up and frowned. The morning sun was so dim it seemed like moonlight. Tiny droplets of water were forming at the roof of the tangle of brambles around them. One drop fell and splashed on her arm. She shook Dylan gently to wake him.

“Dylan, it's raining. I don't want to spend the day soaked.”

He rolled over and mumbled something. She shook him less gently. “Dylan, wake up.”

He bated her hand away, still asleep. Jewel had a mischievous idea. She huddled down close to him and focused on his thoughts.

Wakey wakey! She thought and at the same time she transferred as many of her own joyful memories and thoughts into his mind. She felt his rush of exhilaration as his mind took in the feelings. He sat up immediately.

“Jewel!” he shouted, then as it subsided he added quietly, “What... what did you just do?” He was breathing heavily.

Jewel giggled, “You didn't want to wake up, so I woke you. We're going to get wet if you don't do something.”

Drips and trickles of water were now streaming down the vines around them and drops of water fell at regular intervals onto their blanket.

“Oh, of course. Well, get up and let me pack up our things. We might as well head out, since it is morning.”

“In this?” Jewel protested, “We haven't eaten breakfast! We'll be starving and soaked all day!”

“First, my little sorceress,” Dylan teased at her, “You should cast an umbrella charm on us before we drown. Then we'll eat breakfast before we leave. I'm not going to let you starve.”

Jewel felt a little silly for not thinking of the umbrella charm herself. She reached over and lazily brushed a hand against her staff, “Umbrellum.” The rain now bounced off an invisible shield above them and slid down around them. Dylan rolled up the blanket and put it in their travel pack.

“Off,” he commanded, pointing at the sleeping bag she was still laying on.

She stood up, frowning. “Now we won't have anywhere to sit for breakfast.”

“We can eat standing up, silly. We are roughing it, after all. Conjure us out some food while I clean this off.” He draped the

sleeping bag over one arm and pulled out his new wand. He took his spell book out of their pack and flipped through it. Jewel realized that, except in classes, she had only seen him do his component spell. She didn't want to miss his first wand spell.

"Yevaris Totalus!" his voice rang out as he flicked the wand through the air and touched the tip to the fabric. There was a flash and a pop, and the mud and dirt slid off the sleeping bag and splattered onto the ground. Jewel couldn't help herself. She clapped vigorously.

"Wonderful!" she cheered, "My very own magician!" She blew a note on the kazoo and took a bite out of a chunk of chocolate.

Dylan grinned at her, "Thanks. Could you?"

"Of course... Minatura... Now what do you want for breakfast?" she asked?

Dylan put the shrunken sleeping bag in the pack. "You are having chocolate?"

"Ids ah pudfutly dawishus bwefush," she pointed out chewing a particularly large chunk all at once.

"In that case, I think I'd like some as well."

Jewel handed him the last half of hers and conjured out a fresh piece for herself.

Dylan studied the teeth marks on his breakfast dubiously.

"Ah don av coodies," Jewel teased, already biting a chunk off her new piece. Dylan shrugged and ate a bite.

"You can dispel the brambles," he suggested.

"Vescromn," Jewel tried, but couldn't make the words with a mouthful of chocolate. She swallowed and got it right the second time. Rain battered the clearing except where they were standing. It was difficult to see very far through the sheets of water. Sky had been sleeping directly outside, his head tucked back under one of his majestic wings to keep out the rain.

"Isn't it awful!" Jewel complained, "We can't fly in this weather at all."

"We'll just have to make do on land until it clears up," Dylan sighed, "It will take longer, but I don't want to wait. We don't know how long the storm will last."

"At least it's a nice warm summer rain," Jewel said, trying to think positively.

Sky seemed to be as upset as Jewel about the miserable weather and snorted indignantly when Dylan secured the travel pack to him.

"Don't look at me," Jewel answered the peg, "I didn't make it rain and I certainly didn't want to make you carry us around in this weather, but Dylan is in charge."

Sky snorted again and stomped a hoof in the mud.

"Don't be rude," Jewel reprimanded, "It's just a little rain, and besides, the sooner you let us get on you the sooner you'll be less wet."

Jewel further pacified Sky by giving him some of the pear pieces she had stored in the kazoo. He didn't like it as much as fresh pears, but he seemed to cheer up. His hide was slippery with rain, and Jewel wrapped her arms around Dylan tightly. She was glad that they weren't planning to fly in this weather. Falling was dangerous enough when they were on the ground, she didn't want to have to worry about falling while flying. Jewel made a quick mental note to find a slow-fall spell and memorize it as soon as possible. Dylan flipped through his book of spells.

"What are you looking for?"

"A direction spell, I want to make sure we are going northeast. I was expecting to be able to see the sun."

"Of course."

It took several minutes before he found it, but at last he turned Sky around and urged him forward into the forest. Jewel didn't like the uneven feeling of Sky walking on the rough terrain. She constantly had to flex and shift her weight. It was many times more uncomfortable than flying, and it occurred to her that this might turn out to be a very long day.

"How far is it to New York?" she asked hoping the answer was much shorter than she feared.

"About eight hundred miles from your sister's house," Dylan replied, and her heart sank, "but we covered a lot yesterday. Like I said, I had expected us to fly most of the way. We'll take off as soon as the weather clears up enough. I really just want to get away from Kentucky before morning. They're nice enough, but they don't like strangers to stay around very long."

"How far did we go yesterday?"

"I think about a third of the way, if I remember correctly. I had planned on flying all the way through Virginia today and then from there to New York tomorrow."

"Oh, Dylan..."

"Yes, little gemstone?"

"I'm sorry I haven't been a better wife," she had been feeling guilty about something recently and felt this might be a good time to apologize.

"What? Don't say that! You've been a wonderful wife! I should be the one that's sorry. I drug your whole family into this curse. Why do you think you've been a bad wife?"

"Well, it's just that I haven't done any of the things Aura does. She cooks and cleans and sets out people clothes for them and all that kind of stuff. I can't even conjure you some chocolate for breakfast without messing it up," she was starting to cry.

"Jewel," Dylan turned halfway around to look at her, "I don't mind. The chocolate was wonderful. You are wonderful. With everything that has been happening we can't expect to have a normal life right now. We are both so preoccupied with trying to defeat this stupid curse that we can't really focus on anything else. After all, how do you think I feel? I brought you into this when I knew what it would mean. I didn't tell you the truth until it was too late for you to change your mind. We were both unconscious in a hospital when we got married and we haven't had the time to have a proper ceremony. I feel terrible when I think about what I have put you through, and yet you've stayed with me every step of the way without question. That is your most important job as my wife, and it is my most important job as your husband. We stay together no matter what because we love each other, and nothing can ever change that."

Jewel nodded, "I know, but it just doesn't feel like we are married. If I did more then..."

"Darling, some day we will have that ceremony in front of all your friends and family. Maybe my uncle will even be there. But even that won't change everything overnight. How we feel right now is how we will feel after that. Everything that we have gone through has overshadowed our relationship, and that makes it hard to know how to act. Don't try to make yourself into something you aren't just because you think that's what a wife is supposed to be. I don't want a wife. I want you. Glorious, beautiful, red-headed, freckled, laughing, you. I wouldn't change anything about you, but I am filled with joy when I think that you will change over the years because that is what makes people interesting and worth loving."

The last few lingering fears that Jewel had been harboring about her marriage melted away. If she could be herself and still be a good

wife, then she would be the happiest woman in the world. She kissed him passionately.

Oh thank you! I needed to hear that so much, and I didn't even know.

You are most defiantly welcome, my love.

As the morning sun rose the day grew warmer, but the rain still did not relent. Their progress was slow because Sky had to follow old roads around the mountains instead of going in a straight line over them. After a few hours Jewel became so uncomfortable that she started looking through her spell book for something that would keep her butt from hurting. She sat the book open on Sky's back between her legs right behind Dylan and pressed her journal against his back. Whenever she saw a spell that she thought might be useful she carefully recorded it in bumpy handwriting.

The sun was beginning to set, and they had covered very little ground when at last the rain diminished to a slight drizzle. Jewel was exhausted from riding all day, but Dylan wanted them to take flight and continue traveling during the night.

"But I ache all over!" Jewel complained.

"I know, so do I, but we don't know when the storm might start up again."

Ominous black clouds covered the sky, blocking out the moon and stars completely. The only light came from her staff.

"But it's so dark. Won't it be dangerous to fly when we can't see where we are going? And I'm sure Sky is just as tired as we are."

"Sky can see much better than we can in the dark, and he's used to getting a lot of exercise. Flying is easier for him anyway, and it will be easier on us. We won't have to put up with all this bumping around."

Jewel knew he was right, "Okay, but when are we going to sleep, I'm tired."

"We won't fly all night. We should be able to cover a lot of ground in only a few hours if I let Sky go as fast as he can. It will be uncomfortable, but better than this riding. We can switch places, and I'll hold you while we fly. You might be able to catch a little sleep that way."

"I guess so, if you really think we have to keep going," Jewel relented.

"I do. Come on, cheer up. We're having an adventure. What happened to the young girl who once told me she wanted to fly a pegasus all over the world?"

"That was before I found out how much work it is," Jewel joked.

Dylan smiled at her, "Life can be like that. Our dreams are never quite what we expected them to be once we achieve them. Come on, climb over here and sit in front of me. You can lean back on me, I'll hold you, and before you know it we'll be cuddled together in our tent, okay?"

"Okay."

Once they were settled Dylan urged Sky forward. Because of the trees Sky couldn't take off the way they were used to. Instead he had carried them up to the top of a cliff where they could look out over a large valley. Jewel had to close her eyes as the peg charged over the edge. She felt the rush of wind around them as they dropped, and there were no words to describe her relief when she felt the powerful jerks as Sky's wings carried them up into air. The trip was not comfortable. After Dylan checked their heading with his wand he let Sky fly at full speed. The wind pressed against them, and they both had to lean forward to keep from being blown off. Jewel wrapped her arms around the horse's strong neck and kept her eyes shut tight. Dylan's loving arms around her helped some, but between the biting cold and wind even Jewel's absolute exhaustion wasn't enough to let her sleep. She hadn't been able to find any spells that made the ride more comfortable and she wished now more than ever that she had. In a way this was worse than riding, but at least the ache in her legs and thighs wasn't getting any worse. She bore the misery in silence and each moment seemed to drag by.

When at last they landed Jewel didn't even bother to look around and see where they were. Dylan dismounted first and then lifted her off Sky. He only kept her awake long enough to ask her to enlarge the sleeping bag and her blanket. He left her laying on them, and she drifted instantly to sleep. Jewel's last memory was of Dylan beginning to set up the tent around her.

Eve hadn't expected the dream to come as soon as she fell asleep. She had been neglecting her mental exercises that would have allowed her to clear her mind very quickly at night. She was worried about her sister and the rest of her family, so she found it difficult to remove

herself from those emotions. Still, the young girl was before her once again. She tried to remember her last dream and regretted that she hadn't written it down.

"Help me..." the girl pleaded airily.

"I don't know how," Eve answered, "Tell me how to help you. Who are you?"

The girl had a pained expression on her face and seemed very frightened by Eve's questions.

"I can't help you if you don't tell me. Please, tell me."

"I... I can't tell you."

Eve had a sudden inspiration. Focusing her thoughts she tried to open her mind to the girl in the same way that she had opened her mind to Jewel. "Show me," she commanded in a voice that was so authoritative that she barely recognized it as her own. With this command she sent a thought of urgency at the girl with as much force as she could manage. Eve saw her vision change for a moment and had the impression that she had seen the inside of a large room, but the scene vanished as soon as it had come.

The girl screamed in that unnatural voice, "No! He'll know! I can't."

The scream woke Eve with a start, and again she found herself back in her room. This time, however, she had not screamed. She reached for the journal on the nightstand to record the dream. Eve knew of only one man evil enough to have locked a girl away forever. Isaac Kane would surely have instilled fear in anyone. Eve had never heard of him having any children, but suspected that he could have kidnapped her or just kept the information secret if he was terrorizing her in this manner. Trembling despite her effort to control her own fears Eve lay back down to sleep, this time letting her emotions cloud her mind. She did not wish to talk with the girl twice in one night. That would be more than Eve could bear.

"Rise and shine, darling!" Dylan's voice brought Jewel out of a nice dream she was having about buying wedding dresses at All-Mart. Eve had been wearing a pretty lavender gown and dancing around singing nursery rhymes. The lingering vision cheered Jewel almost as much as the kiss Dylan gave her as she woke. The morning sun lit up the interior of the tent, and already the air felt much warmer than it had the night before. She could hear birds chirping merrily outside.

"The rain has stopped," Dylan told her, "I think that today will be a rather beautiful one. We should be able to fly much more comfortably."

Jewel wiped the sleep out of her eyes, "That's nice."

She walked around the clearing while Dylan dismantled the tent. Her muscles ached all over from the exertion of the past few days so much that she leaned on the staff for support. She was relieved to have time to stretch and move around. The smell of the pine trees around them reminded her of home, but she let the memories comfort her instead of bringing sorrow. Sky trotted over to her and nuzzled her side.

"Okay okay," she laughed, "Give me a moment." She brought the kazoo from her pocket and conjured out a handful of hard pieces of pear. He ate them greedily and licked her hand when they were gone. He snorted again.

"I'm not going to let you eat them all at once," Jewel reprimanded. "You might get too fat to fly." She rubbed his nose and scratched between his ears, and this seemed to placate him. Dylan approached and threw the travel pack across the peg's back. Jewel noticed that he was walking stiffly.

"Are you all right," she asked, worriedly.

Dylan nodded, "Just a little sore. I don't think there is any part of me that doesn't ache." He smiled.

"Me too," Jewel replied. She felt comforted to know that he was sore as well. She had been worried that she wasn't cut out for adventuring, but if he was sore then it must be normal.

"We aren't going to leave just yet," Dylan offered, walking around Sky and offering Jewel her spell book and diary. "I want us to be fully prepared before we arrive in New York. What spells have you memorized?"

Jewel felt guilty and gave him a sheepish grin, "Only the ones that I have used a lot: Transportation, nondiscuvrum, and of course the easy ones like solarum."

"That's okay, have you found any useful ones to record in your diary for quick reference?"

Jewel had found several, "Oh, yes. There is a freezing spell that makes people unable to move, a shield spell that is not as complex as a circle of protection, a levitation spell, and an invisibility spell. What wand spells have you found?"

“Wand's are harder than staffs, you know,” Dylan reminded her, “I have to memorize the movement as well as the words. I can do the light spell; I practiced it a little last night while you were asleep. Other than that, all I really know is the direction spell and the cleaning spell. I found one that is supposed to make objects lighter, but I haven't been able to do it right yet. I was trying on some of the rocks here.”

Dylan pointed to a pile of stones that were odd colors, had burn marks on them, and a few were cracked in places.

“Oh,” she said, trying to hide her surprise and disappointment that there was anything that he could not do perfectly, “I guess that's why you're supposed to have a license to use a wand.”

“Staffs are similar,” Dylan remarked, “but you don't have a normal staff. I doubt you'll ever have any trouble casting any spell, no matter how difficult it is.”

Jewel remembered how easy the circle of protection enchantment had been to perform despite the complexity of the spell and how rushed she had been. She remembered the curse, and her grip on the cherry wood loosened.

“Oh, right,” she said, looking at the ground and biting her lip slightly.

“Don't worry,” Dylan said quickly, “That's not part of the curse. It is just a very powerful staff. Don't be afraid of that, just respect it and don't rely on it too much.”

Jewel nodded her head, and Dylan sat down on the forest floor. He took out his spell book and diary. Jewel followed his example and sat next to him. They spent more than an hour trying to memorize their spells. Jewel found that, once she tried, it was very easy to remember all of them. She felt guilty when she watched Dylan struggling with his and wished there was some way she could make his magic work as well as hers.

By the time Dylan was able to make a rock as light as a feather by waving his wand and saying, “*Ligeris Cosis*,” Jewel had memorized all the spells she had written down and was flipping through her spell book to find more useful ones. She didn't find any, though, before Dylan stood up and announced that it was time to go. They mounted Sky and he took them again to an overlook. Jewel considered keeping her eyes open this time, but closed them reflexively at the last moment. At last they were in the air, flying north once again.

Her sore muscles ached during the flight, but it was bearable compared to the riding and flying of the previous day. And even

though the summer sun was unable to warm the crisp northern air, it was much better than the biting cold of a storm. Jewel noticed that the air had taken on an unpleasant smell and the distant horizon was hazy and obscure.

"I think it's pollution from before the Great Change," Dylan explained, catching her thought, "The machines that worked then burned fuel for energy and spat out smoke into the air. Some places still haven't fully recovered."

"At least it's better than Atlanta," she mused, glancing back over her shoulder as if expecting to see the black pillar in the distance. But they were much too far away.

"Yeah," Dylan agreed.

FUGITIVES AT LARGE

The United World Order of Magic declared yesterday that Dylan Farseer, grandson of the notorious Emanuell Kane, is wanted for hiding 'dangerous magical artifacts' and is allegedly assisting his uncle, the nefarious Isaac Kane in his war against the nation of Georgia. Farseer is traveling with his wife and accomplice: Jewel Summers-Farseer. The two were last seen illegally transporting themselves in a daring escape from a Magus official to an unknown destination. These fugitives are considered armed and dangerous and should not be underestimated because of their young age. If you think you may have information that will lead to their arrest please contact...

Aura's expression was one of dread as she read the front page article. She had tried to explain things to the official who had arrived at her door the day after Jewel and Dylan had left, but they had refused to listen. At least, Aura thought, they did not yet know that Jewel and Dylan had returned and gone shopping, but she knew it was only a matter of time before someone who had seen them at the market came forward. Rupert's dislike of the Order caused him to be less than cooperative, and he volunteered no information. He tried to remind her that they had done nothing technically wrong, because official charges had not been brought against Dylan until afterwards. Aura, however, thought of the wand and the trouble she would be in if the Order started asking questions about why she no longer had it.

As she heard Eve's soft footsteps on the stairs her worry multiplied. She knew that it would be best to tell Eve as soon as

possible, and get it out of the way. There wasn't any chance of hiding it from her anyway. Eve now had a frightening talent of figuring out what was on Aura's mind, and Aura had to staunch her resentment at her sister's abilities. She knew that her sister was still a child and needed her love and support.

"What's happened?" Eve said in that knowing voice she was so often using now. Aura slid the newspaper over where Eve could read it. She tried to fight back the tears as Eve's eyes moved back and forth across the text.

"They... they can't!" Eve shouted angrily, "Jewel is trying to stop Isaac! This isn't fair! It's just not fair!"

Aura embraced her sister and they both began to cry. Rupert looked at them as if to say 'I told you so,' but Aura's sharp look silenced him before he could speak.

Jewel and Dylan, oblivious to their newfound criminal status, glided down out of the clouds and landed in an abandoned asphalt parking lot on the outskirts of a massive, crumbling city. Time had not been favorable to New York. The dim light of sunset cast a foreboding shadow over the decrepit towing monoliths that had once been majestic skyscrapers. Overturned cars and debris littered the cracked and broken streets. The putrid smog had grown steadily worse as they had approached and now was nearly unbearable. Jewel wished that she had thought to find a spell that might have let her breathe more easily. Sky was extremely restless, stomping and snorting in protest. After they climbed off his back, Dylan removed the travel pack.

"Okay," he said to Sky, "go home, we can walk from here."

The pegasus broke into a run and took off immediately, flying south at an astounding speed. Jewel looked at Dylan, aghast.

"We'll transport ourselves home when it's time to leave," he explained, but it was little comfort. Jewel had felt safer with Sky around, and his departure had been unexpected.

Dylan explained, "He didn't want to stay. He didn't like this place."

"I don't like this place," Jewel pouted.

"I know. I don't either, but it will be easier for us to travel unnoticed. He'll be fine on the trip home. He can take care of himself."

Jewel nodded and looked disapprovingly at the lifeless cement landscape around them. She rubbed her eyes and yawned. The stale

air was making her light-headed, which did nothing to improve her already dismal mood.

"Where are we going to sleep?" she asked him tiredly.

"In one of these old buildings," he answered, "but first, you said you were learning an invisibility spell. How long does it last?"

"Until I dispel it, are you worried about being seen? Are we in danger?" Jewel was worried.

"I just want to play it safe. Make us both invisible," Dylan told her, hefting the travel pack over one shoulder.

"Invisum," Jewel said, and for the first time she noticed that her speech was more exact. At the same time her hand gripped the staff more firmly and moved it in a small circle. Her mind seemed to obey subtle commands from the staff when she was performing magic, making the spell perfect in ways that she knew she could not have on her own. The realization frightened her almost as much as what happened next. For a moment, Dylan disappeared. She was so focused on the staff that she forgot that this was the desired affect of the spell.

"Dylan?" she shouted in alarm, but even as she said it he reappeared, but not completely. He was only a faint blue outline, ghostlike, still where he had been before the spell. She saw him bring his hand up to his face as if to look at it.

"I'm here," he said, "this is weird, not being able to see myself."

"You can't see yourself at all?" she asked, surprised.

"Not at all," he confirmed, "Why? Do you see me?"

"A little," she admitted, "I guess it's because I cast the spell. Let me do myself. Invisum."

Dylan jumped just as she had. "Are you still there, Jewel?" he asked, with a worried tone in his voice.

"Yes, I'm right here. Can't you see a faint outline of me?"

"No, nothing at all. Here, hold my hand. I don't want to lose you."

Jewel grabbed his ghostly hand with her own which was similarly translucent and she felt his relief as they touched.

We should talk here, he thought to her, so that we can't be heard as well.

A wonderful idea, Jewel agreed, where are we going now?

Let's try this building here. We can find a safe place to sleep and then find Hannible Zitan's house in the morning.

None of the buildings had normal doors, but instead only large glass windows. The windows were so caked with filth that Jewel could not see through them. At first she thought that they would have to circle the structure to find a door until Jewel noticed that one of the full length windows had been slid open, allowing a gap. It took both of them a moment to realize that these were the actual doors, and they wondered how people had found the entrances to these buildings when they were in use. It also amazed them that none of the glass was broken until they saw the thickness of the door as they passed through. It was wider than two inches and something about it gave Jewel the feeling that it was intended to be indestructible. Inside the building Jewel wrinkled her nose. The air was the same as outside, but the interior of the building reeked of mold and mildew. Jewel had to stop herself from gagging and held her breath.

We can not stay here, she said.

You are right, Dylan answered as they both rushed out of the building.

So much for that idea. They are probably all like that. Eww.

How about in that? Dylan pointed to a large abandoned yellow rusting bus.

We can try it. I hope it's better than the building.

The bus was not better than the building. It was much worse. The stench hit them as soon as they opened the door accompanied by a swarm of flies and gnats. Something, or worse, someone, must have died in it. They staggered away from the vehicle as quickly as possible.

Dylan, I don't like this. Jewel thought, taking in her surroundings again, but in a new light. If she had to pick one word to describe it, it would have been 'battlefield.'

As they passed most of the overturned or crushed vehicles they didn't even have to open them to see that these contained bodies. Decayed and putrid corpses lay where they had died as if casualties of some terrible battle. Jewel could not fathom what had killed them. Many of the cars were wrecked, but most were parked, with eerie flesh covered skeletons frozen on their knees crawling out of open doors. What had at first seemed like an abandoned wrecked parking lot was now revealed to be a gruesome apocalyptic graveyard.

I want to leave now, Jewel thought, tugging on Dylan's arm, and they both broke into a run. Jewel wanted to keep her eyes off the ground, but she had to watch where she was going to keep from

tripping. They sped past endless grim scenes of death, hurdling and sometimes stumbling over rocks and debris. Jewel didn't care where she went, so long as she was moving and kept some hope that this nightmare would end soon. Dylan sometimes pulled her in one direction or another, keeping them pointed steadily east, which was easy because the street seemed to run that way. They crested a hill, and Jewel stopped so quickly that Dylan almost pulled her off her feet when he kept going. He helped her catch her balance.

What's wrong? He asked.

Jewel pointed down the paved road in terror. Through the murky fog as far as the eye could see was the same scene. Cars and trucks littered everywhere with tiny figures collapsed just a few feet away from each. She couldn't stand it. She began to scream, and the sound of her own wailing echoed off the high walls of the buildings around them. So terrified of the unearthly echo that resulted combined with the vision of the dead city Jewel passed out.

Eve cried into her pillow and tried to clear her thoughts again, but she knew at once that it was a futile attempt. She was overwrought that the Order wanted to arrest Jewel. She couldn't stop worrying that they might try to arrest Aura as well for buying Dylan the wand. Today had been Eve's first day at her new school, but she had gone through it in a haze. She had not thought of anything but the newspaper article about Dylan. Audrey was getting worse, staying locked in her room except to go to school or to retrieve her meals and leave again. Eve felt miserable, and the last thing she wanted to do was to dream about some stupid little girl that didn't even have the sense to tell her what was wrong. She slammed her fist into her pillow so hard that Fur Oshus leapt off the bed in alarm.

"Mew?" he asked.

"I'm not mad at you, Oshy," Eve said in a voice that seemed very much as if she was mad at him. Eve got up and headed downstairs. Maybe some hot cocoa would help. The kitchen was dark, and Eve picked up a small brass stand that held a half-melted stump of a candle.

"Infernum," Eve whispered, and a wisp of fire lit the room. She sat the candle on the counter and retrieved a large pot from the cupboard. She had to climb up and stand on the counter to do this. While she was there she also retrieved the cocoa from another

cupboard. She sat them both by her feet and hopped off the counter with a light thump. She took a jar of milk out of the refrigerator and poured it into the pan along with some cocoa. She sat the pan on the stove and lit the fire with the same charm that she had used to light the candle. For a moment she wondered what she could do to pass the time while the cocoa heated, but soon her eyes fell on a large bookcase at the other end of the living room. Checking to make sure that nothing would catch fire for a moment, she left the kitchen and looked over the shelves. Her intention was to find something enjoyable to read for the night, but soon her eyes fell on an entire section of books with similar titles. "Freeing the Psion Within," "A guide to Telepathy," "Mental Exercises," "Psion Study Guide," and many others. Aura must have purchased them all when she was hoping to be a psion. The books were high up the shelf, and Eve had to move one of the chairs over and stand on it in order to reach them. She picked the fattest one, planning to come back for the others after she finished it. As she brought the book down she noticed something else. Still high out of her reach, on the top of the bookcase, a piece of leather binding stuck out. What book would be hidden away at the top of a shelf? She looked around for something that might allow her to reach it but saw nothing. Carefully she placed a foot onto one of the shelves and began to climb. She was light. She should be able to reach it. All she had to do was climb up one more shelf. Her hand reached out towards the leather as her other hand held onto a shelf. The psion book was still tucked under her arm, and it occurred to her that she should have sat it down. Her outstretched fingers brushed against the binding of the mysterious book and—

Tssssssssss. The sound of steam came from the kitchen as the cocoa boiled over into the fire. Eve turned reflexively and "Freeing the Psion Within" slipped from under her arm. At once she was falling, and then her head hit the floor with a loud crack. The world spun around her for what seemed like several minutes, and then she saw Aura's face. She heard a voice, but couldn't make out what it was saying. She felt her eyelids grow heavy, and something cold slapped her cheek, stinging. Her vision dimmed but she still felt as if she were spinning and falling. Strange, dream-like, thoughts bounced around her head, and then finally she was standing nowhere at all. The girl stood before her naked exactly as she had before.

"Help me," she pleaded.

Eve, furious and afraid, tried to leave, to cloud her mind and wake up, but nothing happened. She screamed and spun around, looking anywhere for an escape, but there was nothing but the girl.

"Don't scream," the girl begged, "Father might hear you."

When Jewel came to she saw the lining of the tent above her. She could not judge the time except that it was still dark. The air was still stale, but it had lost that pungent scent that she only now realized had been the smell of death around them. Dylan's translucent form was snoring softly beside her. Confidant that he had found some safe place for them to stay she pulled the covers closer to her and snuggle against his side. Still exhausted, sore, and wanting nothing more than to sleep rather than face the terrors of the city she knew was outside, she dozed off.

She woke again to the sound of her kazoo. When she sat up she heard the sound of Dylan chewing. She waited for him to greet her, but he was strangely silent.

"What's wrong?" she asked, and he jumped.

"Oh," he said, coughing, "I didn't know you were awake." He coughed again, and Jewel could tell he must have inhaled some of his food by accident. She felt guilty for startling him.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I forgot that you couldn't see me. What are you eating?"

"Some jerky," he answered in between coughs, "but more like breathing it. Want some?"

"No thank you, I'd like some chocolate. Where is the kazoo?"

"Here," he put his hand out and Jewel saw the faint shimmer in the dim morning light. She took the kazoo and conjured out a piece of chocolate and two pieces of gingerbread. She put them together in a makeshift sandwich and ate.

"Where are we?" Jewel asked, between bites.

"In a park, I think. I carried you past all the..." he trailed off.

"You carried me? And all of our things? I'm so sorry, you must be exhausted! How far did you have to go?" She asked, remembering that she had seen no end to the carnage.

"I carried you pretty far, but it was nothing, really. I used my spell to make you and the pack lighter. I was really glad that I had learned that," he explained.

"Oh, but wasn't it a long way?"

“Several miles, I think,” he confirmed, “but halfway through I got smart and made myself lighter as well. After that it was like I wasn't carrying any extra weight.”

“Oh you're so smart and brave. I feel awful. I shouldn't have freaked out like that.”

“Don't feel bad. I was scared too and I'm glad that you didn't have to see what I did. It got worse after a while. It seems that we landed on the outskirts of the city, where there were less people. We're farther in now, and this park seems to be the only place where there is less...”

“Shouldn't we go back to Aura's house?” Jewel asked, “I mean, surely if everyone is... surely Hannibal Zitan is... wouldn't be here even if...”

Dylan's luminous form shook his head, “No, I checked the street names and found an old map in one of the cars. Zitan's house is all the way on the eastern edge of the city, by the coast. We came in on the southwestern edge of the city. We don't know that the entire city is like this. We have to find his house, and even if he isn't there, there may be some clue to where he is or what he was going to tell my grandfather.”

Jewel nodded her head, knowing he was right, “Okay. I'll... I'll try not to freak out again. I wish we could fly Sky there.”

“Even if we had kept him here, there is no way he could fly. The mist is much worse here. It is difficult to see more than a few feet ahead and the wreckage is so bad that he would have had a hard time walking even if he was willing to go past all those... Anyway, it was a good thing we sent him home. We will just have to go on as best we can.”

“I'll try. What happened to this place?”

“I don't know. I doesn't make sense. It looks like they all died recently, but they are all in those machines that haven't worked since the great change. Either the cars were enchanted to work more recently, or...”

“Or what?” Jewel prompted when he seemed as if he wouldn't continue.

“I don't know. If they really are people from a time before the great change then there might be something very wrong with this city. I looked for some spells that might help,” Dylan offered, “while you were asleep. I didn't find anything in my wand book. All those are just the basic stuff. Not really intended for braving New York, it

seems. But I found something in your spell book. It will help us cross this city quickly and safely. Look at this.” Dylan handed her open spell book to her.

“Why isn't it invisible?” she asked, confused.

“Same reason the tent isn't. It was in the pack, see,” he answered, opening the pack. Jewel could see the interior lining and all of the contents inside the ghostly outline of the pack.

“Weird,” she said and looked down at the open page in front of her.

“Discorporatum Totalis?” she read the words on the page, “You want me to turn us into ghosts?”

“It says you'll be able to turn us back. The counter spell is on the next page. I read all about it, and it seems safe enough so long as you don't mess up the spell. Like I said before, you can't mess up the spell if you are using that staff.”

Jewel was doubtful as she read the list of possible side affects of failed spells. One listed was 'Death' and the others were less pleasant. “How sure are you that this staff lets me cast any spell without failing?” she asked, warily.

“Completely sure,” he assured her, “That's the way the staff was made. That is one of the reasons why it has to be used by a psion. It has to have a receptive mind so that it can guide you in casting the spell. That's the whole reason why the Kane family was so powerful. My mom studied the staff extensively trying to find a way to rid herself of it. My father told me everything she learned.”

“But the other day,” Jewel protested, “I tried the discuvrum enchantment and it didn't work the first time.”

“You had a mouth full of chocolate,” Dylan pointed out.

“Yeah,” Jewel retorted, “but that means that there is a limit to what the staff can do. It might be possible to mess it up. I don't want to...” she paused to read off the paper, “transport my soul into another dimension accidentally!”

“Jewel,” Dylan said in his calmest voice, “You had the staff for what, three days, when you cast the circle of protection to save us from the feeders? You were panicked, unsure, and that was a much more complex spell. You did that perfectly. There is no reason for you to think that this spell would be any different.”

Jewel became furious. “That's easy for you to say! You don't have to be the one responsible for all... all... all this! You want me to

act like some powerful sorceress and I don't even know what I'm doing! I'm constantly worried that things that I want to do are because of the curse. I'm supposed to be a psion but I couldn't even tell what that man in Kentucky was saying! Here I am in some tent in New York surrounded by horrible disgusting corpses and this terrible fog! We have to go around invisible because for all we know something or someone could be lurking here waiting to kill us both! I passed out just because I saw a bunch of dead people that couldn't hurt us! How am I supposed to fight when I'm nothing but a stupid little girl who can't bear the sight of a few harmless bodies? Of course now you tell me that it might be some terrible enchantment on the city. So maybe they aren't harmless. I don't want to do any of this anymore! I want to go home! I hate you for giving me this awful stuff! My parents are dead and... and..." Jewel threw herself back down onto the blanket crying.

Dylan's voice was still calm, and Jewel hated him for it, "Jewel. I can't ever say that I understand what you are going through. I wish I understood, but you're right. I don't know what it's like."

"Don't talk to me!" she screamed. She felt his hand touch her shoulder and she jerked away from him. "I'm sure this is all just the curse so don't feel like you have to be mad at me or anything. I can't help it."

"Jewel, this isn't the curse," his calm voice continued to infuriate her. Why didn't he ever yell or anything? Why did he have to be so damn perfect?

"That's even worse!" she snapped, "because if it isn't the curse then I really do hate you... and... and..." The impact of what she had said hit her like she had been punched. She couldn't bear to hate him, but now that she had said it she couldn't imagine being able to take it back. Would he leave her now? Would he tell her he didn't love her, that he hated her too? She burst into tears again and buried her face in the blanket, ashamed.

His calm voice came again, but this time she wasn't angry. She was so worried that he was going to yell at her and tell her to go away, that his response was completely unexpected.

"My love, please transport us to our cave."

For a moment part of her was furious that he had found the right thing to say, but the rest of her was so relieved that he had called her 'My love' that she allowed herself to do as he asked.

“Momentum Transportum Totalus Invoke” she said, and as the words came out she noticed that despite her anger and sobbing the incantation was flawless. At once there was darkness around her.

“Solaris Lumis” she heard Dylan's voice echo through the cavern and there was a flash of light from his wand. She was still on the blanket, and the travel pack was next to her. It seemed that the only thing that had not been transported was the tent. She wondered if the staff had done it that perfectly and decided that it must have.

“Would you mind,” Dylan still spoke in a soft controlled voice, “making us visible while we are here. I find it a bit unnerving to have an argument with someone I can't see.”

Jewel winced as he said the word 'argument' and then whispered, “Noninvisum” focusing on everything at once. Immediately she could see his handsome face set in an expression of deep concern and hurt.

“I...” she couldn't find the words. She felt that there was no way to apologize for the things that she had said. She spun back around and buried her face in the blanket again. She hated herself for being so terrible.

“I forgive you,” Dylan whispered, touching her shoulder. Why did he have to say the right thing every time? Why couldn't he just yell at her? She knew how to handle yelling. She had fought with her sisters thousands of times.

“You think it's so easy!” she snapped, fighting because it was more comfortable, “You think you can just say that you forgive me and everything will be okay! You always have the right answer, the right thing to say. You're always so perfect and so you expect me to be perfect like you! Well I'm not perfect. I'm scared and angry and sad and tired and... and...and we never had a wedding ceremony and I don't have a new dress and I didn't want you to send Sky away and it's your stupid uncle that got us into all this in the first place and... and... you... you... YOU WAITED TO LATE TO KISS ME!”

Dylan had been kneeling next to her as she ranted into the blanket but he jumped back as she spun on him yelling the last part at the top of her lungs.

“What?” he asked.

She continued screaming, glad that he finally wasn't calm because it made her feel in control, “You waited too late to kiss me so it's your fault that daddy saw us and interrupted what could have been a perfect moment! If you had done it while we were on the blanket after you

brushed the tear off my cheek then daddy wouldn't have seen and it would have been perfect! Or maybe you could have kissed me any time before that! Why did you have to wait until I was fifteen? All the other girls in school had kissed a boy long before that, but I didn't want to kiss anyone but you! But you didn't seem interested in me at all so I had to endure their jokes! If you loved me so much since that Christmas party then why didn't you kiss me? Maybe you were too busy kissing some other girl! This is all your fault!" She flung herself back onto the pillow crying again.

It was several minutes before Dylan spoke again.

"I... I... I'm so sorry, Jewel," she could hear from his voice that he was crying and she had never heard him cry before. It was as if a great weight lifted from her. She had wanted to hurt him and now that she had, she was no longer angry. Feeling very guilty and very ashamed she sat up and moved to wrap her arms around him. Still she had no idea of what to say or even if she should say anything at all. She wished desperately that she would look over and see another Dylan, calm and strong, whom she could ask what the right thing to say was. Instead she simply held him, his head pressed against her chest as he cried, her eyes still wet with tears.

It seemed that neither of them knew what they should say, because even long after they had both stopped crying, they lay embraced on the blanket in silence.

Too ashamed to look in his eyes Jewel stared into the darkness of the cave, worrying that at any moment he would tell her that he no longer loved her. Still exhausted from the past few days despite having slept recently, Jewel eventually fell asleep even though she hadn't meant to.

When Jewel woke Dylan wasn't next to her, she looked up and saw him sitting on a small boulder with the travel pack slung over his shoulder and holding his wand which was still lighting the cave.

"We'd better get going," he said evenly without looking at her.

Jewel couldn't tell if he was mad at her. His expression and voice were both as calm as normal. She still had no idea of how to begin apologizing for her behavior. She stood, shrunk the blanket, and stuck it into her pocket without a word.

"Momentum Transportum Totalus Invoke," she said, transporting them back to the tent: the only place in New York she could picture clearly in her mind. It was still there, exactly as they had left it. She wrinkled her nose. Dylan exited the tent, and she followed.

While the word 'park' was a possible way to describe where they were, Jewel wouldn't have chosen it. 'Chilling Death Forest' would have been more appropriate. While the trees and grass around them was certainly not dead, the air in the city must not have been very healthy for them. Leaves hung limp and pale on the tree limbs, and the grass was brownish and wilted. The fog obscured everything for more than a few yards in every direction. It was night now, and the only light came from Dylan's wand. He packed up the tent and stuffed it into the pack.

"This way," he said and began walking. Jewel followed behind him using the staff as a walking stick and feeling completely miserable.

The scenery that they passed was bearable only because Jewel saw just a small section of it at a time. Dylan seemed to be taking them around the city in a wide arc instead of going through it. Occasionally Jewel saw him consult the map that he had picked up the day before and cast his direction spell. Each time he would change their course. Jewel followed him in silence, staring at his back whenever they passed too close to wreckage so that she was sure not to look at any of the corpses that she knew must surround her. Dylan helped her scramble over debris or step over jagged trenches that must have been made by some sort of earthquake, but through this he said very little. His words were always commands of where to climb or to tell her to stop and then to follow. He had always been somewhat silent, so Jewel was unable to tell if he was angry with her or not. As far as she knew the only difference was that she was no longer asking him questions. Still, she couldn't bring herself to say anything. How could she explain? Here words had been unforgivable. If she tried, she might even make it worse. Afraid to do any more harm she plodded on.

Despite what Dylan had said previously the city did not seem to be getting any better as they traveled east. Jewel couldn't be sure, because of the limited vision, but it seemed that they were crawling over just as many derelict cars. The smell had certainly not improved, and Jewel only endured it because it was better than the odor that came whenever they passed too close to a building, and she feared Dylan might yell at her if she mentioned it. She didn't know exactly why she was afraid that he might yell at her, except that she knew she certainly deserved to be yelled at.

“Wait,” Dylan said, startling her. She stopped. Had he decided to yell at her now? Had she been too loud? He walked over to the edge of the street to a sidewalk and held his lit wand up to a small green sign. He looked at his map. “This way,” he said, turning down the side street.

Jewel followed, but didn't know if she felt relieved or worried that he hadn't shown any anger. What was he waiting for? Did he enjoy seeing her so upset? Was this his way of punishing her? Still he said nothing as they walked down the street. This road seemed to be fairly clear of debris, and they walked straight down it without having to go around or over any vehicles. Jewel stumbled and tried to catch herself. She looked down and saw that her shoelace was caught on a jagged piece of metal poking out from the concrete. She managed to untangle it and as she turned to continue forward she saw Dylan smiling.

“You would think that's funny, wouldn't you!” she screamed, tired of waiting for the axe to fall, “You've been letting me be miserable all day! Enjoying it! We'll I'm tired of it! Either yell at me or don't. I know I deserve it and I know you hate me! But don't stand there laughing at me just because I almost tripped! So I'm not the great perfect Dylan. I can't walk through this godforsaken hellhole without catching my shoelace! So what? That doesn't make you so great! That doesn't give you the right to point and laugh at me! What?”

Dylan's expression had changed immediately when she started yelling but she hadn't registered it until now. His smile had disappeared, and his mouth was hanging open in a look of such complete and total surprise that Jewel couldn't help but think that her outburst might not have been warranted.

“I wasn't... I didn't... I don't... You...”

“What?!” she screamed, frustrated, “Go ahead! Yell at me! Tell me how much you hate me!” Even as she said this she suspected that those things weren't on his mind at all.

“We're... we're here,” Dylan finally said lamely as he sat down on the sidewalk, “This is Hannibal Zitan's address.”

Jewel stared at him in disbelief, “You...”

“Look,” he interrupted her, “I know you're mad at me, and I know you don't want to do this. I brought you into this without even telling you what you were getting into. I... I tricked you into taking the staff. You never even had a choice of whether or not to marry me. I'll go inside and see if I can find anything helpful, and I'd like for you to stay, I mean, at least so that you can transport me back with you, since

I can't. After that... you don't have to come with me if you don't want to. I... I can try to find out how to lift the curse myself if I have to, I guess. We can put the staff back in the case, and... and maybe it won't be so bad. Maybe you'll be able to have a normal life. Maybe I can at least find a way to make sure the curse just comes after me..." he trailed off and stared at the pavement.

Jewel was furious. He had missed the point completely. She stomped over towards the door of the house.

"This is his house?" she asked, bluntly.

Dylan stood up and nodded, "I guess we should knock and see if anyone is home."

Of course no one is home, Jewel thought angrily. This entire city is dead. She slammed her fist against the wooden door.

"Anybody home?" she yelled, sarcastically then turned around at once, "Well, no one's home. I guess I'll be going then. Momentum Transportum Totalus Invoke!"

As she finished the last word she heard Dylan scream, "No!" but it was too late. She was already standing in Aura's front yard. She wasn't really going to leave him there. But she thought it might be good for him to worry for a few minutes to see how it felt to be helpless for a change.

"Imobilis!" she heard a loud voice behind her and then she couldn't move. The staff fell from her hands and landed with a dull thump on the soft grass.

"Jewel Summers-Farseer, you are hereby under arrest for the following charges: Unlicensed possession of a staff, possession of an unregistered staff, unlicensed possession of an unregistered staff, underage unlicensed possession of an unregistered staff, eluding officers of the United World Order of Magic, and two counts of aiding and abiding criminals, namely Dylan Farseer and Isaac Kane. As a minor you have the right to have your legal guardian present..."

Aura was running across the lawn towards her. Jewel was still frozen in place, unable even to blink.

"Don't hurt her!" Aura pleaded in tears, "Please. Oh I'm so sorry Jewel. They came right after you left and have been waiting for you ever since. I tried to tell them that you weren't trying to help Isaac, but they're impossible! Rupert and I will figure out something. But... where... where's Dylan?" Aura looked around.

Jewel focused a thought past all of her emotions and into her sister's head.

I left him! He's in New York, alone. I didn't mean to... I didn't...

Aura flung her arms around Jewel's frozen form and cried, "He'll be okay, sis! He's a smart boy. He'll be okay. Don't you worry about Dylan. Everything will be fine. I promise."

Jewel saw no way that everything could be fine when she had just abandoned her husband in a city filled with poison gas and rotting corpses and was now being arrested by the United World Order of Magic.

"...having been read and found to understand these rights. Mrs. Jewel Summers-Farseer will be accompanied by her guardian Aura Summers-Brown to the Georgia National Juvenile Women's Penitentiary to await trial. Having been informed that the suspect is indeed a practicing psion I will now render the suspect unconscious for the duration of her transportation. Nonsevanis!"

Jewel passed out.

Dylan stared at the door in horror. She wouldn't leave him here. Would she? He knew she was mad. He knew she blamed him for bringing her into this mess, but he never thought she would just abandon him in this terrible city. Maybe it was a trick. Maybe she had gone invisible and not really disappeared.

"Jewel?" he asked, tentatively, "It's not funny. Where are you? Jewel?"

"One moment please. Stanley, why didn't you answer the door? Put a kettle on, we might have company." the voice was not Jewel's. A small window slid open in the door, and two beady eyes peered out. "Who is calling?" the man asked.

It took Dylan a moment to remember his mission. "I'm looking for Hannibal Zitan..." he said softly, not really meaning the words. His eyes were still staring at the spot Jewel had been, hoping she would reappear at any moment.

"And who is calling?" the man asked politely, unaware of Dylan's preoccupation.

Dylan seemed to find his voice, "My name is Dylan Farseer—"

"I don't know anyone by that surname. Good day." the window slid shut.

"But sir," Dylan yelled running up to the door, "You wrote my grandfather a letter!"

The window slid open again. "That was a noble attempt. But I have never known or written to anyone of that name."

"No, sir, you wrote a letter to my grandfather, Emanuel Kane," Dylan explained, holding up the letter.

"I had thought you said that your name was Farseer. Was I mistaken?"

"It is, sir. My mother married, but her maiden name was Kane. She was Emanuel Kane's daughter."

"Another lie?" the man said dubiously, "The Kane family never had a daughter. Only their unfortunate son, Isaac! Please don't presume to insult my intellect." The window closed again.

"Sir! My mother was Miranda Kane, she was born in Georgia, after my grandparents moved there, so you wouldn't know her. Just, just look at this letter. You wrote it. I found it in my grandfather's study. You have to help me. My wife has the staff."

The window opened a crack. "Wife? What business does a man so young have with a wife?"

"We just recently got married, so that the doctors in the hospital could save us from a feeder attack."

"I see. A Love Bond then?" the single eye darted back and forth looking behind Dylan, "And where would she be? Ma'am, show yourself!"

"She's not here..." Dylan mumbled, frustrated.

"Again more deception? Do you expect me to believe that your wife has the Kane staff, and you have a love bond, but you still leave her at home to bake pies and attend to the housekeeping? You will have to be more clever than that to fool Hannibal Zitan. Now please vacate my doorstep." The window shut again.

"Mr. Zitan!" Dylan yelled pounding on the door, "I'm not lying. I don't know where my wife is because she disappeared just before you opened the door! She was the one that knocked and asked if anyone was home! I swear that I'm telling the truth!"

The window slid open. "Disappeared? Why's that?"

"I don't know," Dylan lied desperately, "maybe it was the curse. Maybe the staff made her do it."

Dylan heard the man chuckle, and the window slid shut again. Dylan started to pound on the door but then he heard a lock click. The door swung open.

"Come inside, boy."

Love Restricted

Bill folded the newspaper in half and threw it into the trash bin next to the kitchen counter. He pushed himself away from the table, sliding his chair along the floor with a scraping sound and stood up.

“Funny business, placin' all dis blame ona couple kids,” he mused to the dog sleeping on the floor. “But paper sez they got themselves some staff lets um do 'tever dey please. Ifn I had myself sumtin' lak that I'd not 'ave ta milk all dem goats in tha mornin'. I shore wouldn't be tryin' ta take over tha world or nothin' crazy like that. Tell you what Jess, I reckon it might be a trick by them Order folks ta get us ta 'and tha country over to 'em good 'n proper like. Well I ain't gone stand for it ifn they try. Jawja's a free nation, and we intend to stay that way. Ifn I wuz younger I'd sign up for them thar militia they got formin', but I think I've earned the right to keep my nose outa things.”

In truth Bill had already volunteered for the Free Georgia Militia that had recently reformed after the Magus had been killed and the United World Order of Magic had taken control of the nation's defense. The F.G.M. recruiter, however, had turned him away, citing that he was unfit to perform military duty. He had stayed angry at the whole ordeal for several days before forgetting the matter and finally convincing himself that he had simply decided not to join.

“I'm shore them militia folks'll givem 'ell ifn them feds don't skedaddle after they capture them kids an' that Kane fella. Thar's talk

'bout joinin' up wid Carolina an' movin' tha border north too. Them reds don't 'ave a proper claim to that land nohow. It'd be nice ta split Tennessee down tha middle after we run tha commies out. Right nice..."

Bill headed outside to do the morning's chores.

Jewel woke and sat up quickly. She was lying on a small cot in a square, concrete-walled room with bars and a sturdy steel door at the far end. She tried to grasp what had happened. Only moments before she had been with him, but now, now everything had gone wrong. She was sure that he hated her now. She had abandoned him, left him to die in that awful city. She would never get to say goodbye. She would never see him again. Somehow, she couldn't find within herself the ability to cry. She had cried too much recently with him. She couldn't bear to do it without him. She lay back on the cot and stared up at the ceiling. Nothing mattered anymore. Nothing. The word seemed to echo in her mind. She tried to clear her mind, to focus her thoughts but found that she could not.

There was a constant buzzing sound in her head that she could not silence. Her hand came up to the cold chain of metal lying loosely around her neck. She felt a tiny medallion, smooth and cold, attached to it. She tried to remove it, but even as she did so she knew it would never come off, and the buzzing would never stop as long as she wore it. Her muddy, travel-worn clothes had been replaced by a clean, grey, loose-fitting, single-piece uniform. She closed her eyes and did the only thing that she could think to do. She focused on the buzzing and began to work. Her purpose was singular. If Dylan was dead, as she feared he would be, then she had no other mission. She would escape. She would find Dylan. If he was dead, then... then she would... she would be done. After making her decision the buzzing grew louder, and she let it.

Eve thrashed about on the bed violently, restrained by Rupert's large arms. Her screams pierced through the small house.

"Let me out! Let me out of here! I don't care if you need help! I need to get out of here!" she wailed in her sleep.

Rupert was so busy trying to control Eve that he never noticed Audrey descend the stairs and exit the house. Audrey's blond hair was dirty and tangled from neglect. Her clothes were wrinkled. The normal bounce in her step was gone. She stepped off the porch and

walked towards the staff. A tall, slender man was standing next to where it lay on the ground. His silken purple robes fluttered around him in the light breeze.

“What are you doing, girl?” he asked in a sharp, authoritative voice, but Audrey ignored him, still heading purposefully towards the staff.

“Get away from here. This is a crime scene. This staff has to be properly studied. Go back inside. Your family wouldn't want you near it,” the man's orders fell on deaf ears. Audrey knelt down, and the man reached out to grab her. He was too late. Her fingers closed around the cool cherry wood.

“Mortirum,” Audrey whispered coolly. The man fell to the ground, dead. She placed her free hand on his leg.

“Momentum Transportum Totalus Invoke.”

The yard was empty. There was no trace of Audrey, the man, or the staff.

Aura roared at the squat, mousey official who sat behind the large featureless desk, “I want to see my sister and I want to see her NOW! You can't keep me away from her! I'm her guardian!”

“Mrs... ah Brown, there will be a slight delay while the proper paperwork is filed. If you would kindly take a seat—”

“No, I will certainly not take a seat! You can't keep me here! Where is she!”

A large, dark-skinned man approached her from where he had been standing by a locked door on the other side of the room.

“Ma'am,” he snarled, “If you do not calm down, I shall have to arrest you.”

“On what charge?” Aura demanded.

“Failure to report a lost wand,” he snapped.

Aura stood, aghast, unsure what to say. The man, however, had already spun on his heel and returned to his post.

“I...” stammered Aura to the mousey official, “I think I need to report a lost wand. Do you have the forms for that?”

“Certainly. If you will have a seat I will bring them to you.”

“Yes,” Aura said, anxiously, “I will sit down. Th-thank you.”

Dylan followed Hannibal Zitan into the gloomy interior of the house. The air in here was equally stale as outside, but the odor that

accompanied it was different. Not better, or worse, but different. Dylan's first impression of Hannibal was of a large toad that had been squeezed into the shape of a man. He had a large, pronounced hump on his back, and his body bulged awkwardly, and he limped down the hallway, leaning on a cane. It didn't seem as if he had bathed or changed clothes in quite some time, and Dylan assumed the odor of the house was due to this failure in hygiene. He wore a brown robe and fuzzy brown slippers.

"I suppose I have been expecting you, Emanuel. You received my letter then?"

"My name is Dylan, sir. Dylan Farseer. Yes, I found the letter in my grandfather's study." Dylan answered.

"The item in question is through here. I am sorry that I have been unable to deliver it to you in person, but I have commitments here in town. I see you had no trouble on your trip then. Perhaps the rumors of unrest here in New York are exaggerated. I always suspected as much."

They entered into a large foyer not unlike the one in the mansion in Macon, except this one had books and tomes piled on shelves and strewn around the floor. Flickering candle light from a candelabrum on the table cast eerie, waving shadows on the walls and floor. Hannibal picked up the candelabrum. The floorboards creaked and groaned as the man shuffled across the room and opened a simple wooden door. The door seemed out of place in the ornate gothic architecture of the rest of the house.

"Sir," Dylan asked as he crossed the room behind Hannibal, "About New York. What happened to this city? We... we thought you would be dead, like everyone else."

"What's that?" Hannibal replied, "I suspect many have died in the aftermath of the Great Change, but as you saw our city still flourishes. Have you had a chance to visit any of our wonderful restaurants or museums? Follow me." He motioned for Dylan to go into the dark room ahead of him.

Dylan wondered at his words as he walked into the room. Did this man not know that the city he lived in was deserted and dead? Dylan had to squint to make out anything in the darkness until he stepped to one side to let Hannibal pass. The flickering light illuminated what could only be described as a storage room. Hundreds of items littered the room as if they had been thrown in and then blown around by a tornado. A table missing a leg leaned against one wall

next to a dresser that was on its side. Numerous goblets and silver bowls were heaped in a pile in the corner. Chairs and stools, most of them broken, occupied another corner. In the middle of all the clutter was a four-foot concrete pillar, and it seemed that the clutter had been pushed back from it for about a foot in all directions. On top of the pillar on a small stand was an open book. The candle-light flickered across the pages.

“There it is.” Hannibal said proudly, “The Zitan family spell book. It has not been touched since my father's final atrocity. It is still open to that page.” He sat down on a small recliner by the door and placed the candelabra on a night-stand next to it.

Dylan walked over to the book and looked down at the page, but he couldn't make out any of the text in the dim light.

“I hereby bequeath it to you, Emanuel. You may bring it over here into the light. I really must talk with Maria about the state of her housekeeping. I daresay you will have many questions for me after you read it.”

Dylan reached out a hand and gingerly lifted the book off the stand. He expected something terrible to happen, but nothing did. He turned and crossed the room and sat on a chair on the other side of the night-stand from Hannibal. The flames from the candles danced between them. The orange light fell over the pages of the book. Hieroglyphics covered one page, and the next page contained handwritten scrawls that seemed to be a translation.

Greater Curse of Eternal Obligation.

Type: Sacrifice Assisted Ethereal Persistent Geis

Class: Iconic and Psionic

Dylan skimmed through the technical instructions and was aghast at the casualness with which it described the method of sacrificing someone in detail. At last he came to the description of the spell's effects.

“This spell will ensure that all those that claim ownership of the cursed item will be compelled to perform the command given during the course of the casting. The length of the command will affect the strength of the geis as much as the value of the sacrifice. Shorter commands are ideal.”

Dylan looked up past the candle light to ask Hannibal a question, but the man began speaking first.

"I was eleven when my father stood in this very room and cast that curse. How he managed to get that piece of your mother's staff I shall never know. I watched him kill her. I watched him kill her and did nothing to stop him. It is my constant shame. But, alas I can do no more now than to make certain that my father never returns."

"What do you mean?" Dylan whispered, "What was the command he gave? What does the curse make my family do?"

"Two words, Emanuel, two words," Hannibal said, shaking his head, "That is, of course why the curse was so powerful. My dear sister was only eleven, and my father commanded only two words: Ressurect me. He, of course, feared death above all else."

In all his years of planning to fight the curse Dylan had imagined what the curse's purpose was many times. He had never expected this.

"But," he argued, "No one has ever been able to raise the dead. It's not supposed to be possible, even with magic."

"Very true, but you well know the power of your family staff, Emanuel. You know that if there is any way for it to be done, then that staff knows. That staff can perform whatever spell the holder wants, regardless of skill. Since you are here, then I suspect that your wife Veronica is trying very hard to do something. Now you know what. I will never forgive my father for killing my sister. I loved her. I do recommend the restaurant across the street if you enjoy fine dining. There is also a very reasonably priced hotel next door. If you prefer, you may stay here tonight. I'll have my maid show you to one of the extra rooms." Hannibal stood up, picked up the candelabra, and opened the door. Dylan left in a daze, still holding the spell book open in front of him.

"You can, of course, keep the book. I have no use for it. And you will also want this, of course." He drew something out of one of his pockets and offered it to Dylan. It was a small gold tube, about the same size as a straw. "It's been miniturized. That is the sheaf of the staff. That is the piece that my father used to place the curse."

Dylan took it and watched Hannibal leave. After a moment he pocketed the gold tube and stepped into the large hall, stepping over piles of books.

Hannibal shouted into the empty mansion, "Maria, we have guests. I will expect you to clean more thoroughly in the future. Stanley, could you kindly show our guest into one of the spare bedrooms!"

There was no answer, but after a moment Hannibal turned to Dylan. "This is my butler, Stanley. He will show you to your room. If you need anything at all just ask him, and he will be happy to oblige. Thank you for gracing my home with your presence, Emanuell. I am so sorry that I could not offer you tea, but my cook has been most dissatisfactory of late." Hannibal gestured next to him, but no one was there. Dylan nodded weakly at Hannibal, wondering why the man seemed to have an imaginary household staff. Dylan looked down at himself, wondering if his appearance had changed, but as far as he could tell, he looked nothing like the pictures he had seen of his grandfather. Hannibal, apparently confident that the nonexistent butler would take care of Dylan, turned and headed upstairs.

Without the candelabra it was too dark to see much of anything. Dylan peeked into one of the side rooms. A bare mattress occupied a space on the floor among the clutter. He lay down on it and set the book next to him. He heard Hannibal shuffle up the stairs, and eventually there was the sound of a door closing.

Hannibal Zitan's apparent delusion was of little concern to Dylan. There were much more important questions racing through his mind. Why had his grandparents started a war with the George 1st Magus? Why was Isaac Kane attacking towns with feeders? If the staff only caused people to try to raise Marcus Zitan from the dead then why did they always do so many terrible things? Had the spell messed up? Why had Jewel abandoned him? She hadn't seemed very much effected by the curse before. Was her leaving even part of the curse? Had she stopped loving him? Had she really decided that he had asked too much? He knew that he had been terrible to bring her into this without her knowing, but he had thought that she had forgiven him. They had been so close, even joining minds. How could he have missed it? Having no answers for any of the questions that assaulted his mind he tried to sleep, but found that he could not. This was the first night he had been apart from Jewel, and he felt as if a vital part of him had been torn off. He rolled over and buried his face in his arms. He wept for hours until he eventually fell asleep from exhaustion.

Jewel did not eat or sleep. Eyes closed she focused only on the buzzing of the amulet, seeking a way to overcome it, remove it, or defeat it. She did not hear the guards talking to her and she was oblivious when they slid a tray of lunch under the door and later

removed it, uneaten. Her body responded and walked when the guard pulled her to her feet and led her by the arm, but her mind knew only the sound of the amulet.

"I'm telling you," Aura yelled across the courtroom at the judge, "something is wrong with her! Look at her!"

The judge peered down from his raised dais at Jewel who was sitting, eyes closed calm and serene. "The defendant stands mute, then?" he said.

"She's not standing mute! Something is wrong with her! I'm telling you she's affected by a curse!"

"Yes," said the judge in the voice of someone who is annoyed from hearing the same thing over and over, "this family 'curse'. There is no such spell that will cause people to behave the way the Kane family members have. This type of geis would be severely limited since it would only force the family to obey one command. That can hardly explain the attack on the Georgia government by Emanuel and Veronica as well as their countless other misdeeds. Not to mention that their son, Isaac Kane chose not to help them but instead to bring havoc to the world in much different ways. Even then it would not explain the behavior exhibited by your sister and her accomplice. I also happen to know that the late Mrs. Miranda Kane-Farseer was an upstanding member of her community with a clean criminal record. This curse seems to 'skip a generation' then. No, ma'am, what we have here is a family excuse to perform whatever mayhem seems convenient at the time, and I will not allow such behavior in my country. Your sister's theatrics in refusing to speak will be recorded for what they are."

"But Audrey has got the staff! It's controlling her now! You have to find her! You have to help her!" Aura cried.

"Mrs. Brown, you will lower your voice in my courtroom. Runaways are not the problem of the court. If you wish to file a missing persons report you may do so with the clerk outside. As for the location of the staff: when we find out where your husband hid it then he will also be arrested. Oh yes, Mrs. Brown, make no mistake, you are not fooling anyone. As soon as we have sufficient evidence that you gave your 'stolen' wand to Mr. Farseer we will be arresting you as well. It would be better for all of you to stop this nonsense and come clean now. At any rate, this session is to determine if Mrs. Summers-Farseer is to be tried as an adult. She is fifteen, but she is

married and was competent enough to elude officials once. I see no reason to doubt her competence now. The defendant will be tried as an adult. Court adjourned.”

The judge slammed his gavel down on the desk, and people started filing out of the courtroom. An officer began to lead Jewel out through a side door.

“You can't do this!” Aura pleaded.

“I may not yet be able to have you arrested, Mrs. Brown, but I can hold you for contempt of court. See that you hold your tongue.”

Aura remained silent as she watched Jewel walk robotically beside the officer and out the door.

Eve stood in the blank nothingness and stared at the frightened and distraught girl. Eve had given up hope on freeing herself from the dream and assumed that she had knocked herself out when she hit her head. She had decided that if she was going to be here, she might as well try to find out who the girl was and what she wanted. Talking had lent no results, as the girl had continued to moan about her father and beg for help. Eve, therefore cleared and focused her mind and probed outwards towards the girl.

Show me! Eve commanded, pushing as hard as she could.

Like before the girl screamed in her ghostly voice, “No! He'll know! I can't!”

Eve ignored it, trying to tune out the sound and hear only the girl's mind. The room she had glimpsed before returned, but as a blur, out of focus and dark.

Show me! Eve sent a wave of anger at the girl, hoping she would focus it on Isaac Kane and conquer her fear of him. The room came slowly into focus. It looked like a study, and Eve now noticed that it was small, but mirrors on every wall gave it the illusion of size.

“Stop it! Stop making me see it again! I don't want to die again!” the girl wailed.

Eve jumped startled, the vision left her. She looked at the girl. “Die?” she asked.

“No! Please! Don't make me do it again! I can't! Please!” the girl begged.

“Tell me what happened,” Eve was surprised at the threatening tone in her own voice, “and I won't have to find out that way.”

“I...I can't,” the girl said painfully.

“Where did you live?” Eve asked, hoping to start with something easy.

“I... I don't remember...”

“What do you remember?” Eve prompted.

“Can... can we have a tea party instead?”

Eve found this statement odd, because there was nothing around them.

“What?” she asked.

“A tea party. I haven't had a tea party in...in weeks. Oh, it will be so much fun!” The girl giggled happily. Her entire demeanor had changed.

“But,” Eve protested, “We don't have any tea...”

“Oh, I can make some. It isn't hard. See?” the girl said, and at once the scene change. Now they sat in a room full of toys and dolls. It was unmistakably the room of a young girl. In the center of the room there was a pretty pink tea set sitting on a small table surrounded by four chairs. A teddy bear and a doll occupied two of the chairs. The other two were empty.

“How did you do that?” Eve asked in amazement.

“I just imagine them,” the girl said, as if it were nothing special and then sat down in her chair. “I do it all the time. Don't you?”

Eve sat across from her as the girl began to pour very real steaming tea out of the teapot into the four cups. “Yeah,” she said, remembering that this was very much like the tea parties she and Jewel used to have with their own dolls.

“Oh,” cried the girl after she had finished pouring the tea, “we must have introductions. My name is Elizabeth, but you can call me Lizzy. This is Poofy Bear and Karabell. They love my teaparties. What is your name?”

“I am Eve. Nice to meet you, Elizabeth,” Eve answered, well aware of how tea parties should be conducted. She then greeted both Poofy and Karabell.

“They are shy. They don't talk much,” Lizzy commented when her toys did not respond. She passed a cup of tea across the table to Eve. Eve took it and sipped carefully. The tea was delicious.

Eve tried to sound conversational, “So Lizzy, who is your father?”

Lizzy scowled, “We don't talk about him. I hate him!”

“Oh, that's fine. I was just wondering what his name was. That's all.”

"I... he was... papa. I don't remember what mother called him."

Eve had to stifle her frustration. She sipped her tea again. Afterwards she decided to try a different subject. "How did you die?"

The girl looked frightened, "We don't talk about that much either. I hated it. Papa said it wouldn't hurt, but it did. It was awful."

Surely her father hadn't... "Your father... your father killed you?" Eve asked, trying to keep her voice calm, so as not to upset the girl.

She shook her head, "No, he said he had to... to read... while... I didn't want to. He said I had to. He said it wouldn't hurt if I did it fast, but it did hurt. The knife was cold, then my hands got all sticky, and... and it was hard to breath."

Eve was at a loss for words. This girl's father had made her... Eve wanted to throw up. Eve wanted to be anywhere else. She looked away from the girl. Who could do such a thing? Had Isaac Kane had a daughter? At length Eve found her voice. "Was... was Isaac Kane your father?"

"Oh, no," the girl's strange voice was again conversational, "Isaac is my friend. He's helping me."

Eve didn't know what to make of this. How could someone, even a dead someone, speak so naturally about being friends with someone who's name was synonymous with evil?

"Helping you do what?"

"Help papa, but I hate him!" here she looked mad again, "I hate him! I hate him! I hate him! I—"

The scene around them flickered back into nothingness for a moment except for the chairs and table. Lizzy's screaming was so loud that Eve clapped her hands to her ears but found that she was unable to muffle the sound. *Quiet! Stop it! Shut up!* Eve projected once her thoughts were clear enough, and eventually her shouts died out. After a moment the scene returned. They passed a few silent moments sipping tea.

"Why are you helping your father?" Eve asked once she was prepared for another outburst.

"He told me to," Lizzy replied, as if that explained everything.

"How are you helping your father?"

"I don't know. I think Isaac knows that part," Lizzy offered. She seemed to be able to speak more easily now.

"How... how do you know Isaac? Does he come speak with you like I do?"

Lizzy shook her head and said, "I just know what Isaac has been doing. I watch him, I think. I don't remember."

Eve wondered how she had come to be able to talk with a ghost that was haunting Isaac Kane. She took a few deep breaths and tried to think of another question that might shed some light on this girl's identity. She had already asked every question she could think of about Lizzy's father. Who, other than Isaac Kane, was evil enough to have his own daughter disembowel herself with a knife?

Eve asked, "Was Emanuel Kane your father?"

"No, no. I used to watch him too, but not anymore."

She used to watch him? So this girl was older than— The realization hit Eve with a jolt. "Who... who else do you watch?"

"Oh, there's this one girl named Audrey. She's so pretty."

Eve had no more doubts. "Did your mother call your father, Marcus?"

Lizzy thought about it for a moment and then said, "Yeah, I think that was it. Did you know mama?"

Eve shook her head, unable to form the words to answer. Fear had hit the pit of Eve's stomach, and she set the cup of tea down. Eve knew she was in the staff where the girl was trapped when the curse had been placed upon it. Eve fancied herself waking up triumphantly with this last piece of the puzzle, but was not so lucky. She stared at Lizzy feeling sick to her stomach. Eve had no idea what she was supposed to do now.

"Do you want to play dress up?" Lizzy asked, and stood up. She crossed the room and opened a door. Inside Eve saw a gigantic walk-in closet filled with the most beautiful sight she could imagine. There were hundreds of fabulous dresses, some glittering with sparkles and sequins and other flowing with lace and ribbons. Eve smiled, delighted.

Dylan stood outside Hannibal Zitan's front door with his wand clutched tightly and his travel pack slung over one shoulder. "Ligeris Cosis," he incanted, tapping first the pack and then himself as well. He felt himself become light as if lifted by some unseen force. He was torn between staying to wait for Jewel to return and leaving to try and find her. He had no idea if she would even come back, but he also had no idea where she had gone. He settled on retracing their steps back as far as he could while staying in the same places they had stayed during the nights. There was always a chance that Jewel would decide to

transport herself to one of those, and Dylan had told Hannibal to let her know that, in case she showed up asking where he had gone. Hannibal had given a kind of snorting laugh but had agreed. With a heavy heart Dylan set off into the foul smelling fog through the streets of the dead city. It was terribly silent. Before there had at least been the sound of Jewel following behind him, now there was nothing but the noise of his own footsteps echoing around him.

Jewel lay on the cot in her cell, but could have been anywhere. Her mind was withdrawn so deeply that she recognized none of her senses. She had slowed the roaring buzz gradually and now recognized it as an incantation that repeated itself over and over.

“Obscure from all without
And guarded from within
Trap the psion's power again.
Bind her mind against the world
To bind her powers of mind
And leave the thought behind.
Keep the psion under gies.
Let her give no commands
Lest we fall into her hands.
Restum obscurm totalis
Invoke Selosum Mentalum
Capturum psionum, Invoke.”

Carefully Jewel memorized each line perfectly and began to push and guide the words. It was very much like trying to climb up a large mound of fine sand. She would often lose her hold and slide back down, having to start over again. It was only with immense concentration that she contained the words, and the task was more difficult as she struggled to hold the lines she had already contained while continuing to the next. Whenever she held them too tightly the words shot out from her like a stretched rubber band, but when she held them too loosely they fluttered away like butterflies. Still she persisted, capturing more and more of the words with each attempt.

“Obscure from all without.” These were easy, as she already took no notice of the world around her. “And guarded from within.” She let down her guard, holding the words gently. “Trap the psion's power again.” This was the first part that began to give her trouble, but she had learned to let go of her power let the words drift until they settled

with the others. "Bind her mind against the world to bind her powers of mind." Here she had to drown out the words by surrounding them with intense rage, without allowing the emotion to disturb any other part of her mind. It was difficult and felt strangely unnatural to feel such an intense emotion partially. It was as if she had to be two people at once.

"And leave the thought behind." This thought was more nebulous and fragile than any of the others. She had to coax it gently, as if blowing a snowflake back up into the air to keep it from falling. Again this seemed to split her awareness further.

"Keep the psion under gies." These words had caused her much more trouble than any of the others before them. She recited in synch with them each time they repeated, "Shaig rud nuh nois eth peek." Still she seemed to be four people. One holding the first verse, one furiously angry at the first two lines of the second, one blowing gently upwards, and one repeating the reversed phrase each time the spell repeated.

"Let her give no commands lest we fall into her hands." Jewel found that she had to move her awareness constantly away from these words, as if playing an underwater game of tag. This was the farthest she had managed to come so far. Carefully one Jewel listened to the next line while five others danced with the rest.

"Restum obscurm totalis." Pain shot through her, and Jewel awoke, staring at the ceiling of her prison cell. The amulet burned like fire against her chest, and she sat up to let it dangle away from her skin. The chain around her neck was warm as well. The buzzing had resumed, the words were lost to her. She bitterly refused to accept defeat and closed her eyes again. The buzzing began to grow louder as she refocused.

Rupert mopped the sweat off Eve's forehead and gently stroked Fur Oshus as he sat beside the bed. He had been relieved when she had calmed, but the words she had screamed and mumbled in her sleep continued to worry him. She had been asking questions, as if having a conversation with someone he could not hear. Now she was silent, and he continually hoped that she would wake. He and Aura had been so worried when they had found her lying unconscious on the living room floor. Parts of the kitchen were still black and charred from the fire that had been noticed nearly too late. His thoughts turned to his wife who was still in Athens, where the new capitol had been moved

after Augusta had been destroyed. She had sent him a letter telling him the judge's threats and about Jewel's peculiar behavior. His marriage so far had been upset by the chaos that had ensued directly afterwards. His family had died in the attack on New Atlanta as well, and now he found himself a father to three orphans, one in a coma, one in prison, and one missing. Between the hospital bills and living expenses his inheritance was dwindling, and he feared that he might have to ask Aura about selling either their place in La Fayette or her parent's home in New Atlanta if he could not find a job soon. Most of Georgia was in a panic about the feeder attacks, and the economy was falling. Work was nearly impossible to find, and there was talk in the senate about taking the next step to dissolve the nation and become part of the United World Order of Magic completely. To make matters worse Order officials stopped by nearly every day to question him, and he had caught them rummaging through his garbage on more than one occasion. The newspaper was depressing. It painted a picture of his family that made them out to be sympathizers with Isaac Kane and all but blamed them for the attack on New Atlanta. Their account of Dylan's spells against the Magus officer was grossly exaggerated, making it seem as if he had blinded the man and then tried to kill him.

Eve stirred, and mumbled, "I wanna go home. I miss my sisters. I miss Oshy." Rupert squeezed her hand reassuringly and hoped that it might help. The orange kitten hopped from Rupert's lap onto the bed. The cat nuzzled Eve's cheek with his forehead and licked her before curling up against her and dozing off.

Gar was angry but excited. He flexed his ashen leathery wings and peered down through the fog. He had recognized the smell at once. One of the things was trespassing again. Gar didn't remember how long it had been since he had seen one. He remembered how it had tasted. How it had screamed when he killed it. It had been a long time, Gar knew, since he had enjoyed a proper meal, though. He dug his talons into the concrete and leaned forward. It wasn't very big, but it would be a much welcomed change to the rats he had been compelled to hunt. He drooled. Perhaps he would play with this one before killing it. That would provide some well-needed amusement to his dreary existence for a while. Yes, Gar decided, he would play with it until he grew tired of the noises it made. Silently he spread his

wings and glided through the fog towards another building closer to his prey. Chips of masonry fell onto the street below as he landed on a shallow ledge. His claws cut into the brick easily as he walked along, following the figure on the ground. His eyes cut through the fog easily, giving him a clear view. He could do it now, he knew, but Gar wanted this to be fun. He waited, savoring the beginning of what was sure to be an enjoyable evening hunt.

Dylan looped the last cord of the tent around the peg and jammed it into the soft earth with his foot. The night was cold, and he had been shivering since sundown. He had not walked as fast as when Jewel was with him, but since he had wanted to camp in the same spot as before he had forced himself to keep going despite the ache in his legs and feet. The only light came from his wand. Opening the satchel he removed the kazoo and conjured out a few pieces of dried fruit. He ate them and took a drink from his canteen. His eyes were heavy, and it had been a chore to stay awake even while erecting the tent. He looked at the miniature sleeping bag and blanket with a scowl. He had no way of enlarging them, so he would have to sleep on the bare tent lining. It would be a long and cold night. Somewhere behind him he heard a noise as if something fluttering in the breeze, but there was no wind. It was the only sound he had heard in this lifeless city. Warily he turned around, keeping his back to the tent for whatever shelter it could provide. He saw nothing around him except the shadowy fog, but the mist swirled, as if recently disturbed, the same way it did when he breathed. His body tensed. He was not alone. He gripped his wand tightly but the only spell that came to mind was the one for making objects lighter. He cursed himself for not memorizing a defensive spell of some kind, but in the aftermath of Jewel's departure, his mind had been distracted. Slowly he knelt down and lowered his free hand to the soft ground. His fingers closed around a clump of wet soil as he peered into the fog ahead. He waited, his body tense and ready to act, the words on the tip of his tongue in preparation. But nothing happened. Had he imagined it? He was sure that he had not. Could it be something harmless? A bird, perhaps? His knees started to cramp, and he lifted the travel pack and stood up. Slowly he backed into the tent and zipped the front flap shut. He dropped the pack to the floor and retrieved his wand spell book from it. Flipping to a page at random he hoped to find something useful as soon as possible. He had

no idea what might lurk in the depths of that fog, but he did not intend to remain defenseless. He looked down at the page.

One page was labeled: Fireproofing Wand Charm – “Infernus Negatis” and the other listed “Floranis Enductis” as a wood-shaping spell. Neither of them looked useful, but Dylan noticed that the Fireproofing charm had a very simple wand motion similar to his cleaning spell.

He was listening for the sound, but it was so loud when it came that he could not have missed it. The sound was almost that of Sky's wings, but with a different quality. In an instant the sound rushed upon him, and then with a terrifying ripping sound the tent canvas was torn and lifted into the air. The remains of the tent fell to the ground around him, but Dylan was looking up, where the rest of it had disappeared into the darkness. He had caught a vision of two enormous wings nearly the same shade as the mist. Dylan swallowed hard, trying to control his fear. One hand gripped the wand so tightly that his knuckles were white, while the other still held a compacted handful of dirt. The noise of the wings was beside him, and he spun to face it, but saw only fog, then it was behind him, and he spun again. Either the thing was very fast, or there was more than one. Dylan did not like either possibility.

“Infernus Negatis,” Dylan breathed, sweeping his wand through the air then touching it to his chest. He didn't know if the thing he had seen was some sort of dragon or not, and even if it was he doubted that a simple wand spell would be able to protect him from the powerful magical fire they breathed. He was not, however, going to take any chances. He was still relieved to feel the warm sensation flow through him that let him know the spell had worked.

Whoosh. The wings were behind him, and again he spun, but still he saw nothing except the swirling wisps of disturbed mist. “Momentum Transportum Totalis Invoke,” he attempted, picturing the inside of the cave, but even as he said it he knew the spell would not work. It was a staff spell and much too powerful for a novice to perform. Again there was the sound, but this time above him. He ducked reflexively and looked up. He saw a large, sinister ashen claw disappear into the swirling gray mist above. Dylan wondered if he should run and try to find cover. The thing, or things were obviously playing with him. Would he be able to hide in one of the cars on the road? The thought of spending the night next to one of those horrible

skeletons did not appeal to him, but he preferred it to the thought of becoming a skeleton himself. Wary that an attack might come at any moment he took a step toward the road. When nothing happened he shot a quick glance down at the travel pack. He couldn't afford to leave it, but he couldn't imagine himself carrying it to the road without leaving himself open to attack. Desperately he scanned the clearing unsure of what he even hoped to see. He realized that it was very likely that he might die, and he could see nothing that he could do about it. He made a decision. With a silent prayer to whatever god might be listening he threw a bit of dirt into the air in front of him.

"Randomortirum!" he yelled, and without waiting to see the effect he scooped up the travel pack. When he looked up he almost dropped the pack in alarm. All around him stood a crowd of people holding glowing wands. A short moment passed before he realized that they all looked like him. Lifting the pack he stood up, turned and then had to throw himself to the ground. Two of those sinister talons had just grabbed at one of the other Dylans and passed directly through it and almost collided with him. Struggling to his feet again he took off running, and the crowd of his copies ran in a group around him. None of them left footprints or made any sounds at all. Thankful that his component spell had been useful he dashed through the park. Though the lightening spell had worn off some the pack was not as heavy as it normally would have been. He heard the wings behind him and felt the air buffet him as the claws missed him, grabbing again for one of the doubles. He knew it was only a matter of time before the thing picked the right one. His heart pounded as his aching legs drove him forward at a sprint. Please, he begged, let me get to the road, anywhere were I can hide. His feet hit the concrete sidewalk before his eyes had time to register that he had left the park. His wand illuminated only a small area around him as the light reflected off the fog, and shelter could be just beyond the edge of the light on either side, and he would not know. He ran forward, hoping fervently that he would come to a building before—

He felt something hard slam into him and drive him to the pavement. Claws dug into his back, and he screamed.

"Randomortirum!" the pinch of soil left his hand, and he fell on his face on the pavement. He had expected to be scraped against the hard asphalt, but instead he slid in thick slippery black liquid. He tried to roll as he slid, to dislodge his attacker, but the talons dug deeper into his flesh, and pain shot threw him. He cried out in agony. His wand

was no longer in his hand, and he had no idea when he had dropped it. His other hand was also empty, and he knew he was finished. As he slid to a stop, covered in the go the creature's claws released their grip on him. Dylan rolled over, wondering if it had left, but instead saw that it was standing unsteadily over him and had sunk its claws into the asphalt to anchor itself. For the first time he saw what it was. A hideous ashen gargoyle ran its forked tongue over its jagged teeth and fangs and looked at him with a hungry and jubilant smirk as if it were enjoying itself immensely. Dylan tried to back away, but the wounds in his back flared up in pain again, and he slipped in the muck. He lamented that his component spell had not been successful on the second try. It seemed that it was hindering him more than the gargoyle, which seemed unaffected by the oil. Dylan tried to prepare himself for the killing blow while at the same time his mind raced wildly still looking for a way out, refusing to accept defeat. He had no wand and no dirt. He could do no magic except...

"Infernum!" Dylan yelled, snapping his fingers as he had done so many times since childhood to light the lanterns, candles, fireplaces, and stoves. At once the dark scene burst into a conflagration of fire. The gargoyle, which was also covered in oil, howled in pain as the flames blazed. Dylan felt a surge of panic as he was enveloped in fire as well, but he didn't even feel warm. He thanked the fireproofing spell heartily and struggled to back away from the flailing and burning creature. Already the smell of burning flesh was unbearable. As he reached the edge of the fire and crawled out, still alight with flames, Dylan heard the gargoyle's wails cease as it died, and soon all that could be heard was the crackling of the fire. He decided to get up and search for the travel pack and his wand, but then he passed out from exhaustion face down on the cold hard roadway.

The buzzing slowed, and once again Jewel heard the now familiar words echoing.

"Obscure from all without and guarded from within, trap the psion's power again." Jewel ignored the world around her, let down her guard, and released control of her mental powers.

"Bind her mind against the world to bind her powers of mind," Jewel raged against the words, drowning them out with anger and fury, so that she no longer heard them. Her mind separated, creating a separate section dedicated to this task.

“And leave the thought behind,” Jewel coaxed the words carefully away from her, keeping them just beyond reach. Again she dedicated another portion of her mind for this purpose.

“Keep the psion under gies,” Jewel repeated the phrase backwards. She had grown so accustomed to doing this that it was now involuntary each time she heard it.

“Let her give no commands lest we fall into her hands,” Jewel danced her consciousness around in her mind, retreating from the words so that they were nothing but a distance whisper. Once more she split and set part of her mind to continue this retreat.

“Restum obscurm totalis,” This was the part that had taken many failures before she discovered the secret. As the pain shot through her she accepted it and embraced it, telling her body that the pain was good, a thing to be enjoyed. Once her body accepted this, her mind was unaffected.

“Invoke Selosum Mentalum,” she braced herself, ready for the wave of anguish, sorrow, terror, and despair. She felt as if life was no longer worth living. She longed to die, for the suffering and torment to end. But she had found a way to overcome even this. She let go of her will to live, to survive. She gave up, and her consciousness left, as if to depart her body and die, but it stayed fixed to her, by the few small portions that she had separated out. Those parts of her mind still allowed her to cling to life. It was a dreadful experience, and she had considered giving up after the first time she had experienced it, for fear of losing herself completely and dying. But she was determined. Even the fear of death would not stop her.

“Capturum psionum, Invoke.” These were the words that she had failed to overcome dozens of times before. She had arrived at them, but had been unable to defeat them. She felt them take hold of her last bit of remaining free will. Her inner self began to be replaced by something else. It was this feeling, that of losing her identity and ceasing to exist, that had caused her to be unable to overcome this barrier. Carefully, minding all the many workings of her mind that had brought her this far, she created an empty room in her mind. Fearfully, knowing that she may never return, she entered the room and closed it. There was nothing. Not darkness, not sleep, but simply nothing to the extent that Jewel was not aware of even the nothing. She ceased to be aware, to think, to exist.

Bill walked into his small farmhouse with the day's paper in one hand and a bucket of goat's milk dangling from a handle in the other.

"Finally got 'er, Jess!" he bellowed to the basset hound snoozing on the hard wood floor in front of the fireplace in the living room. "That tart that's been causin' all the commotion an' whatnot. I still say the little vixen was workin' for the reds, but don't nobody listen ta Bill. No siree. Them Order folks ain't got brain one among 'em. Whole nasty business, us jest handin' ar whole dangnab Jowja to 'em like we's got a nutha'n jes lain 'round. I sware 'slike we're back under them north'n federal sumguns 'gin. 'Taint good yet neva' come from no 'world' or 'united' nuthin nohow. But sumhow thay's git ther heads out ther bungholes 'nuffta ketch wun lil' 'itch. Ses she's from them thar Kanes family. Right lot a basterds from the north, which jes goes ta show ye not ta trust nobody come from up north."

Bill had passed through the living room as he talked and entered the kitchen. He plopped the bucket down on the table, spilling only a little in the process. He pulled the entertainment section out of the paper and began wiping down the table with it. When the table was dry he crumpled up his makeshift rag and tossed it into bin next to the counter. He laid the rest of the paper on the table and turned the pages.

"Ses war's goin' bad fer them commie Tens. Carolina's been whopin' em six way frem Sunday. No surprise that. Don't take no huju te know tain't no commie worth a lick in a fight. 'Lina took two cities an' claimed 'em fer tha holy land. Renamed 'em after saints 'n e'er thang. Sumtin here about 'Tlanta burning bigga. I say let it burn. I'd go throw some gas on it meself ifn' it'd do a lick a good."

Bill looked over at his stove and scowled at the firestarter wand sitting next to it.

"Unnatural business, Jess..." he mused, shaking his head. "Tommy lakta blowd 'imself slap up 'tother day. Don't make no sense fer things not ta be burning right. No kinda sense at all..."

He opened a cabinet and took out a large empty glass jar with a cork stopper in the top. He yanked the cork out with his teeth and then lifted the pail of milk and poured out its contents into the jar.

"At least that Kane yank ain't gonna be causin' no more trouble. Ses she's locked up goodn' tight. If'n Jawja wutn ovarun wi' feds I mighta bin sleepin' good tonight."

“...and then the boy she was with, Dylan Farseer, attacked me with a component spell, and they both disappeared,” the Magus soldier finished from the witness stand next to the Judge's dais. He was dressed in the same uniform that he wore when he had been in Aura's house. Aura had tried to correct him the many times he had exaggerated or simply lied outright, but the judge refused to let her speak.

“And what spell did he use?” asked a slender, elegant woman with wire-rim glasses wearing a black formal dress and holding a clipboard.

“Randomortirum. I mean, anything could have happened. We all could have been killed! We were lucky it just caused the small tornado. I can't imagine what someone would have to be thinking ever to use that spell! And twice! Because he used it to blind me before they ran upstairs. Component magic is unpredictable enough. Why someone would...” the soldier trailed off.

“And the defendant, Jewel Summers-Farseer. What did she do after Dylan attacked you?” the woman asked, gesturing back towards a table where Aura sat with a pained look on her face next to her unresponsive sister.

“She used a transportation spell, and a powerful one. I... well, with all my training at the academy I suppose I might be able to do it, but it requires an acutely focused mind and exact pronunciation. She didn't have to try it twice, though. She said the words, read them from a book actually, which is another reason why I'm amazed that it worked, and they disappeared without so much as a pop or a cloud of smoke. Only a very powerful sorceress could have done that.”

“Thank you very much—”

The woman was cut off by Aura's very loud scream of surprise. Aura stared to her left at Jewel, who had stood up and opened her eyes. After the initial shock, Aura's expression changed to one of relief and joy.

“Oh sis! You're better! You're back!” Aura threw her arms around Jewel and hugged her. The judge slammed his gavel on his desk several times.

“Order!” he bellowed, “Mrs. Brown, I will not tolerate outbursts in my courtroom. Contain yourself. I can see that the accused has finally decided to quit her childish charade and act like a normal person. Mrs. Farseer if you have something to say then you will have to be called as a witness and be sworn in. Otherwise, please sit down and let us continue your trial.”

Jewel did not sit. She had conquered the amulet, and now wanted these people to know that she was the one in charge. She touched the minds of everyone in the room and caused them to want to listen to what she had to say. After her ordeal, this was a simple thing. When she spoke, her voice was even and measured but not unnaturally so.

"Your honor," she said, "I am going to leave now, because my husband may be in grave danger. I should warn you that this amulet is no longer protecting you from me." She paused and gave the amulet a quick jerk with one hand, snapping the chain. She threw it on the floor. "The only thing keeping me from harming you now is that I do not wish to do so. I am not waging a war upon your nation. I confess, plainly, to any and all charges concerning my use of the staff, but extenuating circumstances forced me to act. I am, therefore, not deserving of punishment, which is fortunate for you, because you lack the means to enforce any form of punishment you would seek to exert upon me. You are not to bother my family while I am away. If I find that you have done so, then you will have your war. Goodbye. Aura, let's go." As Jewel finished she withdrew her influence from their minds, and the crowd began murmuring. Aura stood up and followed Jewel towards the door. Jewel saw the worried look on her face, but was unsure of how to comfort her. Neither of them was in any danger, but Jewel could tell that Aura was afraid they might both be arrested. *You don't have to be afraid, sis.* Jewel told her, *I'm here now.* Jewel felt Aura's fear diminish but at once it was replaced by apprehension.

"You have not been granted permission to leave my courtroom," the Judge bellowed over the murmuring of the crowd as they approached the door, "Bailiff, arrest those two women. They are being held in contempt of court."

As the heavyset bailiff approached them Jewel spun around. She could have done this as easily while facing away but she wanted her point to be clear. As she turned, the bailiff turned in the same manner. He looked across the room at the judge and spoke. The voice was his, but the words were Jewel's.

"I will not allow you to imprison me or any member of my family. As you can see, I am quite capable of defending myself should you continue in your unwarranted harassment. I do not wish to harm anyone, but I will if you make it necessary. Leave us alone!" the man seemed very confused after Jewel had finished and released him. The

courtroom erupted in a roar as Jewel turned and walked with Aura out the door.

“That was... that was...” Aura muttered, trying to find her voice.

“Fun,” Jewel finished for her, stifling a giggle. Jewel had enjoyed herself immensely. Several days of nothing but meditation and mental combat against that horrible amulet had made her angry, and it had been satisfying to take it out on someone. Aura followed Jewel through the halls of the large courthouse.

“Jewel, they will... we can't just leave. Your trial...” Aura urged.

“Oh, it's a stupid trial. I only heard a little of it and I didn't like it at all. Anyway, we have to get home to Eve”—Jewel had caught her elder sister's thought, “Oh, no. Poor Eve! She's been in a coma all this time? We have to get home to her right away. Did you fly here on Sky? Did he come back yet?”

Aura shook her head, struggling between being intimidated by her sister and a strong motherly urge to look after her. Jewel felt pained to know that her sister was intimidated by her and resolved to try to be less daunting.

“The Order flew me here on a magic carpet,” Aura explained.

“Oh, darn,” Jewel complained, opening the courthouse door and stepping out into the warm afternoon sun. “I was hoping to see Sky again. I guess we'll just have to steal a carpet. Too bad I don't have my staff.” It felt good to be outside again.

“About your staff...” Aura began.

“Yes I know, I heard. Well, part of me heard anyway. I was very busy, but I got the general idea. Audrey must have taken the staff and gone somewhere. I think the curse has her.” Even as she spoke Jewel noticed that Aura was unsettled by her natural tone. She tried to sound worried. “I hope that Dylan and I can help her after I find him. I hope he's alright.” This last sentence, at least, did sound genuinely worrisome, and Aura seemed to feel better about Jewel's demeanor.

“What do you mean 'steal a carpet'?” Aura asked.

“We have to get you home so you, Rupert, and Eve can pack up a few things. Because you'll be going into hiding, of course. I have to go find Dylan, so I won't be here to protect you, and I don't trust the Order one bit. I don't want to come back only to find all of you in prison or worse.” Jewel noticed that her cavalier attitude was still putting Aura off. “Um, that is, if that's okay with you. You know, if you think it's a good idea for all of you to go into hiding at least for a little bit.”

Aura nodded, and Jewel was relieved. Jewel spotted the carpet check-in booth and approached it. "Hello," Jewel addressed the clerk while gazing up at the sky, "beautiful weather. It must be nice to have a job out here in the sun on a nice day like this. I'd like to pick up my carpet."

"May I see your ticket?" the clerk asked, raising an eyebrow in a manner that suggested she doubted that Jewel and Aura actually had a ticket or owned a carpet.

"We don't"— Aura began but Jewel cut her off.

"I forgot it, just give me that one," Jewel suggested, pointing to a large four-person carpet on the top of a pile behind the clerk.

The clerk seemed as if she was going to speak, but Jewel nudged her mind slightly. "Here you go," the clerk said, rolling up the carpet and passing it through the window to them.

"Thanks so much!" Jewel said and rolled the carpet out about three feet off the ground next to them. It lay flat, supported by nothing, as if on an invisible table.

Jewel gestured to Aura, "Come on, let's go."

She was in a bit of a hurry because she continually had to encourage nearby Order soldiers to look somewhere else for the escaped psion and her sister accomplice. Aura looked skeptical.

"It's just a carpet, sis." Jewel urged, "We'll leave it in your house where they can find it. Whoever owns it won't miss it too bad for just today."

This seemed to convince Aura, who climbed on to the carpet and sat down. Jewel hopped up behind her. "You can fly one of these, right." Jewel asked hopefully, because she had never learned. Aura nodded. "Well," Jewel prompted, "Take us home then."

"Volas!" Aura commanded, and the carpet began to climb steadily into the air. Jewel busied herself by touching the mind of the clerk and removing her memory of ever seeing them or giving them the carpet. Jewel also altered the memory of anyone who happened to see them leave. With any luck their getaway would buy them at least enough time to pack up their most important belongings quickly when they arrived home.

Jewel had never ridden on a magic carpet before, and the experience was exhilarating. Much of the ride was similar to riding Sky, the way the wind whipped her hair back and caused her clothes to flutter. Jewel looked down at her ugly jumpsuit and frowned. She

was going to get a proper dress as soon as she got home. The oddest thing about the carpet was the invisible barrier that surrounded it. Jewel could not put her hand even an inch past the edge and was sure that she could throw herself towards the edge and not fall off. Though, she was not inclined to test her theory. The carpet itself was moderately soft but rigid exactly as if it were lying on a hardwood floor. It was large enough for both of them to stretch out and lay down, and since the wind became annoying after the first few minutes they did so. Jewel realized that she was very tired from not having slept in several days, and nodded off shortly after laying down.

Eve twirled around in front of the full length mirror and delighted in the vision of herself in the white wedding dress. She and Lizzy had spent many long hours taking turns trying on dresses, and still the charm had not worn out. The supply of dresses was endless, because whenever they had tried the closet's entire inventory, Lizzy would close the door and open it again, revealing a new collection. It seemed that they were only limited by their imagination. Eve had also tried to invent things in the dream and found that it was exactly as easy as Lizzy claimed. She had only to imagine something and will it to appear, and whatever she imagined appeared. She had tried to create Fur Oshus, but while his sleeping form would appear curled in a ball, it was not the same. It was only an image. After a few sad moments of imagining her family and seeing them standing lifeless around her she had given up the pursuit in favor of playing dress up.

While Lizzy was trying on the wedding dress she looked startled and said, "I have to go. I have to go help father."

Eve was surprised. She had never seen her like this. "What?"

"I don't want to, but I have to go help father. He needs me."

"But... but we're having so much fun. Don't worry about him. He was mean to you, remember. Stay here with me. You look beautiful in that dress."

"But if I don't go he'll be mad, I just know it."

"Lizzy, your father can't get you here. It's just you and me. We can stay here trying on dresses and playing. Isn't that more fun?"

"Yeah, but what if he does come? I don't want to be punished."

Eve started to respond but she felt an odd sensation come over her. She tried to ignore it, but soon it would not be ignored. Something was pushing against her from all directions and though it was only slight at first, it soon became uncomfortable. She had been

enjoying being in this dream world, but as the pressure became painful she changed her mind. She closed her eyes and clapped her hands over her ears but it didn't help. The force squeezed her tighter and it felt as if she couldn't breathe.

"Eve, what's wrong?" Lizzy asked in an alarmed voice.

Eve tried to scream, but could not find the breath to do so. Soon she couldn't move. There was nothing but the terrible unending pressure that covered her. She felt it inside herself as well, first under her skin, and then as it increased it permeated her body. Eve knew nothing but torment as the unseen force squeezed her like a winepress and it seemed that she might soon die. *Eve, don't be afraid. Wake up.* The voice was Jewel's but something about it sounded different. Eve opened her eyes.

The pressure was gone, the pain was gone. Her eyes scanned the ceiling of her room and she was relieved by the feel of the mattress beneath her. Sunlight streamed through the window and fell onto the floor in four neat rectangles. After being away from it for so long, the real world felt better than ever. Fur Oshus raised his head slightly when he noticed his mistress was awake, but decided that no action was required on his part and settled back down at her feet. Eve heard voices downstairs.

"No one is here except me and my sister-in-law, sir." Rupert was saying, "As far as I know my wife and her sister are at court, unless something has happened."

Eve couldn't hear the reply, and assumed he was talking to someone standing outside the door. Had he really said that Jewel was at court? What had happened? If Jewel wasn't here then had she really heard her just a moment ago? Panic overtook her disappointment at being separated from her new friend.

"Get out of my house!" Rupert bellowed, and Eve heard footsteps run up the stairs. Her door flung open and a man in a United World Order of Magic uniform stepped inside followed closely by Rupert. "No one is here except..." Rupert lost his voice when he saw that Eve was awake.

"Where's Jewel? Where's Aura? What happened?" Eve asked.

"I ask you the same question!" the soldier demanded, towering over the side of her bed. Rupert shoved him roughly to the side.

"Oh, shut up. This girl just woke up. She's been in a coma for several days, and I'm not going to let you disturb her. No one is here

except us, so you can get out of my house before I force you out.” Rupert snapped at the soldier and turned to Eve, taking her hand in his.

Eve asked, “What happened? I heard you say Jewel was in court.”

Rupert nodded his head, “But don't worry about any of that right now. You have been asleep ever since you hit your head three days ago. You gave us such a scare, Eve. How are you feeling?”

“Okay, but I really want to know what happened to Jewel. Where's Dylan?”

“Aha!” the Uwom soldier yelled triumphantly, “You do know where Dylan Farseer is! Tell me this information at once or I will place you under arrest!”

Rupert spun and his wand appeared in his hand from some hidden pocket. “I have no idea where Dylan is and if you don't get out of my house I am going to have to force you to leave. This is Georgia and I am a Magus soldier. I will not stand by while the Order oversteps its bounds.” It was an odd scene, seeing Rupert's squat, round form looking up at the soldier threateningly. The Uwom soldier drew a wand and began to point it at Rupert.

No! Eve cried, afraid for him and hoping she could help. For a moment the soldier's eyes went blank and his wand hand dropped slightly. That moment was all Rupert needed.

“Imobilis!” he shouted, and the soldier fell to the floor paralyzed.

“Dear me, I really shouldn't have done that, Eve. Sir,” he addressed the soldier, “I apologize, but you are in my house without a warrant or cause and you drew your weapon against me. I was forced to defend myself. You can see that I have not harmed you.” He bent down and hefted the man up, half-dragging and half-carrying him out the door. “I'll be right back Eve.”

Eve, feeling exhausted from her time spent without sleep in the dream, grabbed the notebook from the nightstand next to the bed. She turned to a clear page and scrawled.

“Zitan killed daughter and trapped her soul in the staff. I talked with her. Tired, need real sleep. Don't worry. Thank Jewel for waking me up.”

She set the notebook open where Rupert would find it and then let her head fall back onto her pillow. She drifted off to sleep almost immediately, but this time there were no dreams.

Rupert hefted the soldier unsteadily out of the front door and let him fall to the porch with a dull thud. He looked around to see if there

were any more, but this one seemed to be the only one. He was about to turn to go back inside to check on Eve when something caught his eye in the horizon. A flying carpet! Only the Order used carpets. If there were more soldiers coming then he would be in serious trouble. They would want an explanation as to why he had enchanted one of their men. Rupert wrung his hands together, hoping that the carpet wasn't coming this way, but knowing that it certainly was. As it drew closer the two figures seemed familiar, and by the time it had landed in the yard he was sprinting towards them.

"Aura! Jewel! I'm so happy to see you! Were you released? Eve is awake," he hugged them both and then led them into the house.

"Jewel decided to escape. Who is this?" Aura asked as she stepped over the immobile body on the porch.

"He was upsetting Eve and making all sorts of threats, so I had to incapacitate him for a bit. Escape you say? What are you trying to do to me? I suppose there is nothing I can do about this?" Rupert shot a look at Jewel. He was still flabbergasted from having to assault a member of the Order.

"Nothing at all," she confirmed as the three of them walked up the stairs, "but don't worry. You, Aura, and Eve can go into hiding, everything will be fine."

"And where are you going?" Aura asked, while Rupert peeked into Eve's room.

"I have to go find Dylan, if he's still alive," the thought that he could be dead pained Jewel every time she spoke about him. It would be her fault if he was. She had left him, abandoned him in that miserable city to die.

"Eve is sleeping again now, but she left a note. I think it's just regular sleep this time. Here, you and Dylan will probably want to know this." He tore out the page of the notebook and handed it to Jewel. As her eyes scanned over the short message she let out a long breath.

"He killed his own daughter to cast the curse... What a horrible man..." Jewel breathed. As she read the rest of the note she did a double-take. "What's this about thanking me for waking her?"

"Jewel," Aura interrupted, "Shouldn't we be packing? I don't want to go to jail."

"Of course, of course," Jewel folded the note and stuffed it in her pocket. Eve must have woken herself up and assumed Jewel had

helped when she heard her in the house. "Quickly, let's get everything we need and any money we have. I'll pack Eve's things. Load everything onto the carpet outside. It should be big enough for you three and your things."

"Wait a moment here. I don't like this. What about you? I'm fine with going into hiding, since the Order will want to arrest me for attacking one of their men, but you should come with us." Rupert asked as Aura rushed into her room to pack her things.

"I have to find Dylan. Don't worry about me. I don't have my staff, but I'll be fine. I hope Sky returns soon, or I'll be forced to find another way north. I should have taken another carpet, but I don't know how to fly them anyway. I'll figure out something. Now let's pack, I don't know how much time we have before the Order decides to check here. I gave everyone at the courthouse the idea that we were hiding somewhere in the building by giving some people false memories, but that won't stall them for long."

He started to protest but Jewel carefully touched his mind only slightly. He decided not to bother arguing and then rushed downstairs. Jewel retrieved a functional but pretty black dress from Aura's closet and headed into the bathroom. She was going to shower and change out of her terrible prison clothes before doing anything else. They all worked quickly, grabbing whatever things they needed.

Thirty minutes later Jewel stood next to the carpet outside. Eve was lying asleep next to the pile of bags. Aura sat on the carpet next to her stroking her hair gently.

"Go south, to Macon," Jewel suggested in a whisper, and scribbled down Dylan's old address on a scrap of paper, "The mansion is abandoned and they probably won't look for you there. If you have to leave for any reason leave me a note under the door of the locked third floor study."

"Are you sure you won't come with us?" Rupert asked, hopefully. He seemed somewhat dazed, as if something in his mind wasn't quite right. Jewel hoped he would forgive her when he figured out what she had done.

Jewel shook her head, "You know I can't. Don't worry about me. Take care of my sisters. I love you."

Rupert hugged her and then Jewel hugged Aura who was in tears.

"Be careful, sis. We love you too," Aura said.

Rupert climbed onto the carpet and commanded it with a word. Jewel watched them sail into the distance. Tears welled up in her eyes

but she forced them back. She was not nearly as confident as she had led her family to believe. Her main short-term goal had been to make sure her family was out of harm's way. Now that she had done that she was at somewhat of a loss to know how to proceed. She had hoped that Sky would have returned by now, but he was nowhere in sight. Without any plan other than to somehow make her way back to New York, Jewel began walking at a quick pace down the winding mountain road towards town.

When he woke up Dylan at first did not remember where he was or how he had gotten there. As he tried to roll over the pain in his back reminded him sharply of the events of the previous night. He was soaked with burnt oil and blood and could barely move his left arm. He could wiggle the fingers on his hand but not much else. Painfully he struggled to his feet and peered through the mist. Where was his wand and pack? How far had he run from the tent site and in which direction? Cradling his injured arm in the other to keep it from swinging at his side he limped in what he thought to be the direction that would lead him back towards where he had dropped his pack. When he stepped off of the street and onto the sidewalk he changed direction, knowing that the gargoyle had attacked him on the road. After only a few yards he found his travel pack lying half off the road, its contents scattered along the asphalt. His wand was nowhere in sight and he tried to remember when he had dropped it, but could not. The ordeal with the beast was a jumble of running and panic in his mind. With one hand he slowly threw the books and supplies back into the pack, and when it was full he tied it shut and hefted it up on his shoulder. The spell to make it lighter would help right now, but without his wand he could do nothing except his component magic, and he didn't want to risk *Randomortirum* unless it was absolutely necessary. The spell wasn't actually completely random. With practice and instruction from his father he had learned how to direct the basic intent of the spell to a small degree. He could focus on an idea like 'distraction' or 'defense' and guide the spell away from anything very harmful, but even so, it could be dangerous. His father had been a master of component magic despite the fact that the Order of Magic had outlawed it as being too unstable. His father had suspected that the Order simply didn't like it because they could not control and regulate bits of dirt, lint, sand and other components in the

same way that they regulated staffs and wands. As Dylan limped down the road he kept an eye on the ground for his wand, but had no luck in finding it. Resigned to the reality of the situation and having no way to tell direction without his wand or the sun he plodded down the road, pain shooting through him with every step from the deep gashes on his back. He hoped that this road was the same one that he and Jewel had followed before, or even if it wasn't he hoped that it would eventually lead him out of the city.

Eve screamed across the squalid empty bedroom of the mansion, "You didn't wake me up! Jewel was here and I didn't get to see her! What if she never comes back? What if I missed my last chance to see my sister?" She was in tears. She had woken up in a large, dilapidated mansion that she recognized from Jewel's description as Dylan's grandparent's old house in Macon. The first thing she had done when she saw Aura enter the room was to ask about Jewel and now Aura was trying to comfort her.

"Eve, dear. We are all in danger. The Order is looking for us all and we couldn't stay at my house for very long. We had to leave as soon as we could and Jewel wouldn't come with us. She is going to look for Dylan. She thinks he might be in trouble," Aura explained.

"So why didn't we all go with her?" Eve shouted, "Why do we have to stay in this creepy place when they need our help?"

"We asked," Rupert interjected, "but she wouldn't have it. You didn't see her Eve. She's changed. The way she carried herself, the way she talked. We couldn't contradict her or persuade her to change her mind. She even..." Here he looked angry. After a moment he continued, "All we can do is pray that she finds Dylan safe and they meet us here as soon as possible."

"Well I want to go look for her!"

"We can't, she knows we are here and expects us to be here when she returns. We don't know where she is now, except that she's heading north back to New York to look for Dylan. If we leave she might come back only to find us gone. That wouldn't be good."

Eve frowned and stroked Fur Oshus, who had had a frightful trip huddled among the luggage on the carpet. He mewed at her plaintively and rubbed against her hand.

Aura sat down next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Eve, I know it's hard. This is hard on all of us, but we have to stick together and trust that it will somehow work out for the best. I gave Jewel your

note and she told me to tell you that you should do everything you can to learn more information about the girl in your dreams.”

Eve twisted her face in anger, “Fine. I’ll do that. It’s better than being here where I am treated like a stupid child. Why’d she even bother to wake me up if she was just going to send me back there?”

“Sis, when you hit your head you stayed unconscious for so long. I’m afraid that you might have trouble coming out of it again. I think you should wait a while before trying again.”

At first Eve was so angry that she didn’t care one way or the other, but then a thought struck her. She had thought the voice in her mind had been Jewel’s but it hadn’t felt quite right. It might have been someone else. Someone who had the staff and didn’t want her messing with the girl trapped inside it. Jewel had said that Audrey wasn’t a psion, but then how could she be using the staff? As far as everyone knew, Audrey had simply disappeared, and the staff and a Magus soldier had gone missing in the same night. Eve was sure that this wasn’t simply a coincidence, and since Audrey had been attacked by the staff constantly whenever it was near, Eve doubted that Audrey had been kidnapped. The only explanation was that the staff now had a new mistress.

When Eve didn’t respond to her, Aura continued, “Look, Eve. I understand that you are mad, and that is fine. We are all having trouble dealing with this. If you think it is okay to visit the girl in your dreams then that is fine. But I think you should wait until you are sure that you are ready. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I am ready,” Eve snapped, “I’m a psion.”

The comment hit Aura like a slap in the face and Eve was glad for a moment. Eve looked around the room. “Can’t we do something about this place though? It’s dreadful!”

Rupert replied from across the room where he was sweeping the floor clean with a makeshift broom. “Already working on it, but we’re only going to clean up this room and the one across the hall. It’ll be best if people still think this place is abandoned. We don’t have much money, since we can’t go to the bank now that we are fugitives. We’ll have to eat from the horn of plenty. At least I was able to fix the plumbing enchantments on this place, so we’ll have running water.”

Eve twisted her face in a look of disgust and said, “Uhg.” Food from a horn of plenty was just as nutritious as normal food, but it didn’t have any taste at all. It was like taking a bite out of solid air. “I’d

rather eat year-old conjured brusselsprouts than phantom food. Then at least I'd know I was eating something."

"Sis, please. It could be worse. We have to be thankful for what we have." Aura chided her, and then drew a book out of one of their bags and tossed it to her. "Here, if you aren't going to be in school you might as well learn something while we are here."

Eve looked at the book and saw that it was the copy of "Freeing the Psion Within" that she had been holding when she had fallen and hit her head.

Aura smiled at her warmly and said, "The others are in here too along with Rupert's spell books. I figured that we might need to be prepared for anything."

Eve felt instantly bad for her earlier comment and hugged her sister, but wasn't willing to apologize. Something far more important was clouding her mind. Aura seemed to have made peace with her lacking and was now eager to help Eve learn as much as she could, but Eve still disliked being treated like a child. She picked up one of the books and noticed that Rupert scowled. She barely had to try looking into his mind before she understood the thought. He did not approve of allowing Eve to read these books. Eve immediately shifted all of her anger and resentment onto him. She resolved to prove him wrong. She wasn't helpless. She didn't care if he was a Magus. He wasn't her father. Emotions ricocheted around in her head like a barrage of hail. She couldn't quite focus.

It was night when Jewel finally rounded the last curve of the winding mountain road and caught sight of the large city of tents and buildings that was the La Fayette market. A few lights still blinked out at her from among the buildings, and the only evidence of the swarms of people that had teemed through searching for bargains or selling their wares was the trash and clutter being picked up by enchanted brooms that swept it all into bins. The large grassy field in outside the market gates was nearly empty except for a few stray mounts that no doubt belonged to the last few shoppers and vendors. Jewel staggered through the gates tiredly, her feet aching from the long hike. She approached the first lit tent and addressed a short, mousey looking man wearing dark blue robes that seemed almost black in the dim light.

"Pardon me, but I'm looking for a riding broom," she said as he saw her approach.

He squinted through the dimness at her, "You don't look old enough to have a broom license, missy."

She smiled charmingly, "Youth elixir does wonderful things, sir. It's not polite to inquire too much about a lady's age."

"I suppose you are right. Not my place anyway. Most of the shops are closed, though. I don't think Guthrich has left for the night, though. His tent is just over that hill to the left, behind that big cabin there," the man pointed, "His brooms are expensive, but I hear they are the best. If you can afford youth elixir then I don't think that will be a problem. If you wait a few minutes I can walk you over there."

"No thank you," she answered looking through the tents to where he had pointed, "I'm sure I'll be able to find it. You have a nice evening."

She turned and headed down the dusty path. She took a deep breath. She didn't like having to steal anything, but she had no money and this was important. Despite how she had rationalized to Aura that they would return the carpet, she knew that it was unlikely that it or the broom she now intended to take would ever be returned, and even if it was, that was no excuse. When she passed the cabin and turned left she saw a light flicker off inside the tent directly ahead of her and a large, heavysset man emerged from it carrying an armful of papers and notebooks. He reminded her of her father.

"Excuse me," she called as he turned away from her, "Are you Guthrich?"

The man turned around, "Yes, who's that? Jenny, is that you?"

"No sir, you don't know me, but I'm looking for a broom."

"Ah. Well, I just closed for the night. I don't suppose it could wait? My wife's probably furious and I'm sure my dinner is cold by now." He struggled to keep the papers from falling as he hobbled towards her.

"I'm sorry sir, no, it can't wait," she answered as the man drew a wand out of his pocket with a free hand and cast a spell that lit up the clearing.

He peered at her, "You don't look old enough to ride a broom, miss. May I see your license?"

"Actually sir, I don't have a license and I don't have any money either," Jewel answered noticing his expression change as she spoke, "but you are going to give me a broom anyway. I'm sorry about this."

"Now that's not very funny, girl. Don't go playing games. I don't appreciate it one bit. If it's all the same to you I'm going home now. I've no time to fool around with childish pranks. I suggest you go home too. Your mom's probably worried sick."

The man turned, but Jewel said, "My mom is dead. My name is Jewel Summers-Farseer."

He stopped, startled and turned back pointing his wand at her. "You... you stay away from me," he stammered, "I don't want any trouble. I... I'll call the Magus." He was stumbling backwards and some of his papers had become dislodged and were fluttering to the ground.

"Please sir," Jewel pleaded, "I don't want to have to force you, but I will. I'm sorry, but this is important. Please give me a broom. It doesn't have to be a nice one. Anything that flies will do."

His face had grown pale when she had threatened to force him and he opened his mouth to scream. Jewel sensed in his mind that he intended to raise an alarm. Quickly she touched his mind and made him unable to speak. His mouth clapped shut and a look of panic washed over him. He dropped his papers and held his wand in front of him with both hands, pointing it directly at her chest.

"I won't hurt you, sir. I just need a broom. Please put your wand away. I just need to take a broom and then I'll leave and you can just go about your business."

The man began to back away, and again Jewel touched his mind and he stood motionless. She walked over to his tent and guided him to follow.

"I'm not a bad person, Mr. Guthrich. I just need a broom desperately. I'm not going to hurt you or anything. I'll just take the broom and leave. Open it."

The fear on the man's eyes was certain evidence that he wished to do no such thing, but even so his hands dropped the wand to the ground and one dipped into a pocket and withdrew a key. He was trembling all over, except his feet which refused to move, his mouth which was clapped shut, and his hand which smoothly inserted the key into the lock and turned it.

"Bring me an inexpensive broom that is in good condition and suitable for long journeys," she commanded him, and he entered the tent and returned almost at once holding a long slender broomstick with a light yellow finish.

“Can you afford to go without this broomstick then? It won't hurt you or your family to lose it? Nod or shake your head. Can you spare it?” She prompted and he nodded his head.

“Wonderful,” she said, taking it from his hands, “I can't promise that I will return it, but I will try to. If I can I will also try to repay this favor that I have forced upon you, but I am not sure that I will ever be able to. Please don't think ill of me, but I must erase your memory of this. Good evening, Mr. Guthrich.”

As she mounted the broom sitting sideways, not straddling it, she washed away his memory and made him face away. He should simply think that he had fallen as he left his tent and accidentally dropped his papers and wand. Jewel kicked off against the ground hard and zoomed into the air. She had only flown a broom once before. It had belonged to one of the teachers and she had gotten into a mess of trouble afterwards. After zooming up into the clouds so as not to be noticed from below she pointed the broom northeast and settled down to sleep. The broom was enchanted similarly to the carpet and there was no way that she could fall off. The rush of air in her hair and whipping through the fabric of the dress felt soothing now, since she had spent so much time flying recently. Even though it was somewhat uncomfortable with her head lying on her arms crossed over the broom she still felt better than she had when they had been riding sky in the storm. She had started the day in prison, subjected to that dreadful amulet, and now she was riding her own broom back north. Even though she had no idea of where Dylan was or how she was going to find him, she still managed to let herself feel hopeful and somewhat content. As she drifted off to sleep she wondered where Sky was and why he had never returned home.

Bill wasn't surprised by the newspaper headline at all. “Dang fools can't even keep a hold of one little girl,” he mumbled across the kitchen. “Makes me wish ol' betsy still packed a punch,” he glanced over at the antique shotgun that hadn't been fired since the great change. It wasn't for a lack of trying. On occasion he would take it down, disassemble it, clean it, load it with the same old buckshot cartridges, and try to fire it at hay bails behind his house. “Makes no sense that a man can't have a proper weapon fer defendin' his own.” He tightened the string of a small handheld crossbow on the table in front of him with a twist of an Alan wrench and loaded a bolt into it.

He pulled back on the loader and heard a click as the string fell into place.

The previous day a man had come by claiming to be from the United World Order of Magic, and ever since then Bill had been carrying the crossbow with him everywhere. He didn't like anyone poking their nose into his business, even if it was just to warn him about some strange ghosts or whatever. Bill had no idea what a feeder was. Probably just something thought up by the government to frighten people into giving up their rights, he figured. As far as he was concerned the only dangerous thing was a man who said, "I'm from the government. I'm here to help you." Bill flipped through the paper to the editorials.

"These folks ain't got not kinda sense," he shouted angrily after reading a letter that advocated Georgia's dissolution in favor of joining the Order completely. "We won't have no kinda freedom if we just let them take over. And here's a bloke who actually thinks we should side with Tennessee just because Carolina attacked them first. Of course Carolina attacked them first. No thinkin' man is gonna wait for them reds ta strike first. Hit 'em when their not ready. Saves lives, y'know." He stood up from the table and grabbed his crossbow. "Well, goats ain't gonna milk themselves, I guess."

Dylan stopped and held his breath. He wasn't sure what he had heard. Had he imagined it? He was about to give up and continue walking when he heard it again. Somewhere to his left came the distinct snort that sounded very much like the pegusus: Sky. Dylan tried to peer through the mist, but saw nothing. He was just about to call out when he heard a voice.

"Come on you stubborn beast," it sounded low and raspy, "Get his other wing. Tie it good this time." It was coming from off the road.

Dylan stepped carefully towards it, making as little sound as he could, both so that he would not be heard and so that he could hear.

"It's not my fault. These ropes aren't worth a nick," a second voice complained. This one also sounded horse, as if the speaker had a sore throat. It was followed by an irritated neigh and the sound of hooves stamping.

"Hold him, stupid. If I get kicked I'll gut you," the first voice snapped. "There, that should do it."

Dylan bent down and set the travel pack on the ground as quietly as he could. With his good hand he scooped up a fistful of dirt. He

inched forward towards the voices. After a few yards he saw the outline of a pegasus through the mist. Two figures, each only about three feet tall, stood to one side tugging on a rope tied around the peg's head.

“Come on you. Pull harder. He's a stubborn blighter.”

Dylan looked at the wing that was closest to him and saw the pale blue feathers with silver specks. It was Sky. Fiery anger welled up within Dylan at the thought of someone abusing the pegasus that had become his friend.

As he drew closer he recognized the two goblins from pictures that he had seen in school. Their skin was a deep greenish brown with grotesque red splotches. Brown hair jutted out from various lumps on their head and torso. The only clothing they wore was animal-skin wrappings around their waists and each one had a quiver of arrows and a bow strapped to his back. Their heads seemed too large for their body and Dylan noticed that their feet and hands were similarly enlarged. As they tugged on the rope, fighting to pull Sky forward, Dylan tried to think of how he could free the peg and escape. Any offensive spell would hurt Sky as much as the two goblins. He was in no condition to fight them, so he would be forced to rely on his component spell, unless... A thought occurred to him and he reversed, backing away from the goblins and retreating to the travel pack. Dropping the handful of dirt he opened it carefully and withdrew the Zitan spell book. Flipping through the pages as quietly he could he searched as quickly as he could. Staff spells, wand spells, pentagram spells, song spells, sacrifice spells, and finally, near the back of the tome, was a listing of component spells. He hurried past the first few pages which listed nothing but mass destruction spells that covered insanely large areas. This was why component magic was outlawed. Any wizard who wished to use it almost always needed to first protect himself with powerful enchantments. For a moment Dylan thought he saw a spell that would work. Mass Hypnosis. But he was disappointed when he saw the required component was sea water. There wasn't an ocean for miles. He flipped a few more pages. He was delighted to find another one that might work. The requirement was moss, and there was plenty of that on the ground. He read the details and they were simple enough. The spell was easy to pronounce and he was sure that he could remember it. Pinching off a piece of

moss from the ground he turned and advanced towards the goblins and their captive.

He was so close to Sky that he could have reached out and touched his wing when he threw the moss into the air in front of him and yelled, “Luna Nocturnum!”

He saw the goblins stagger on their feet and then fall to the ground with two satisfying thuds. It was followed, however, by the thump of Sky's form slumping onto the ground. One of the goblins started snoring.

Dylan acted quickly, not knowing how long they would be asleep. With only one arm it was difficult to untie Sky's bonds, especially since he was lying on one of the knots. Once the pegasus was free, Dylan used the ropes to tie the two goblins together. He took their bows and quivers of arrows and stashed them in his travel pack. When he returned he saw that Sky was stirring and standing up.

“Untie us, fithly human!” one of the goblins yelled, thrashing and tugging at his bonds.

Dylan ignored him, hoping the ropes would hold long enough. He slung the pack over Sky's back and secured it. With a painful burst of energy he hoisted himself up on the peg's back and settled between his massive wings.

“Let's get out of here,” Dylan urged him, and Sky turned and broke into a quick trot. Dylan hoped that Sky knew where he was going, because Dylan had no idea. It quickly turned out that Sky knew exactly where he was going. In a manner of minutes the fog lifted and reduced to only a hazy mist. Evidently this was good enough for Sky, because he took three powerful steps and then launched himself into the air with several quick beats of his wings. As he soared higher even the mist left them and they broke out into the late afternoon sun. Even though his back and arm ached constantly and flying was making it worse, Dylan still felt a great sense of relief. The long day of walking through the city had tired him, and since he was now used to flying, he hugged Sky's neck, braced himself against the pack, and let himself drift off to sleep.

He had no idea how long he slept, but it was night when he awoke to the sound of a familiar voice.

“Dylan! Dylan! Sky! Over here!”

Dylan looked up and peered to the left. There, obscured repeatedly by Sky's wing as it pumped up and down, was the

unmistakable silhouette of Jewel riding a broomstick. Dylan waved with his good arm and smiled.

“Good to see you, little gemstone,” he said weekly as she pulled up along side them, but she had not heard. An expression of horror was on her face as she stared at him.

“Dylan, you’re hurt!”

Love Enchanted

Jewel couldn't believe her luck in finding Sky and Dylan both flying over the mountains of Kentucky. She had feared that she would have to brave that terrible city, but seeing her husband battered and bloody was still a terrible shock.

“Oh my... Darling. You poor thing. Your back... it's... oh this is all my fault. I never should have left. I meant to come back, but... oh I'll tell you all about it later. Let's land somewhere and I'll see what I can do about those cuts.” Sky was already descending and she followed close behind. They landed in a clearing, and leaving her broom hovering a few feet off the ground Jewel rushed over as Dylan slid off Sky. She was in his arms instantly, but it was not to embrace him, but to support him. After a brief kiss she gently helped him lay down on the ground and urged him to roll over on his stomach.

“Let's get your shirt off, oh my. I'm so sorry Dylan. I never should have left. This is all my fault. I—”

A gruff and unintelligible voice interrupted her and she looked up to see an old man in overalls pointing a crossbow at her. Though this was not the man that they had met before, he was unmistakably from Kentucky.

Oh, no! Jewel sent a thought to Dylan, and she felt his fatigue and pain as she opened her mind to him.

Just be calm. Dylan replied. *Kentucky doesn't have a reputation for cruelty. If they see we aren't a threat to them they should let us go*

home. Let's go with him. Maybe they have a doctor who can help my back.

Yes, I guess that's best.

Jewel's elation at finding her husband had quickly been overshadowed by his injuries and then their capture. She had been unable to gain any access at all into the Kentuckian's mind and it seemed that he could not understand them any more than they could understand him. His accent was too thick for Dylan to discern, and so they were forced to walk through the woods, directed by the man's grunts as he gestured with his crossbow. Sky followed them at a distance, but the Kentuckian seemed content to ignore the pegasus.

What if they don't let us go? I can't get into their minds, and I don't have my staff.

We'll be okay, Dylan replied and Jewel saw him stumble and fall against a tree.

Be careful! Oh I'm so sorry about all this. What happened to your back?

Gargoyle. Don't worry about it. I'll be fine. What happened to the staff?

Audrey has it. She disappeared. I don't know where she is.

I lost my wand. Aren't we a pair? I talked with Hannibal.

He was alive?

Yes, Dylan related to her his conversation and subsequent realization of what the curse actually did.

What? So everything your grandparents and uncle did, all those horrible things, was somehow part of an attempt to resurrect Marcus Zitan?

I think so.

Jewel told him about Eve's discovery that the girl in her dreams had been sacrificed to cast the curse.

It makes sense, he agreed. *She was a psion very close to the same age Eve is now. They would be very receptive to each other. I don't know how we can break this curse though. Sacrifice assisted magic is very powerful. Supposedly the only way to counter it is with a more valuable sacrifice.*

Dylan! We can't do that!

I know, I know, he said trying to calm her, since she had stopped walking and the old man had barked at them. *Don't worry. I'll find another way. I'll go to Atlanta and find my Uncle. Audrey is probably there. I'll just have to figure out some way to destroy the staff on the*

way there. Since I have my grandfather's spell book and the Zitan spell book I should be able to find something.

Jewel sensed something wrong about his statement, but before she could discern what it was they crested a hill and looked down on a valley. Kentucky was a strange city. Almost all of the buildings had wheels, much like the ancient antique cars, but many of these buildings had harnesses strapped to them, as if they had once been hitched to horses. Among these wheeled homes there were tents of various sizes and a few log cabins. It seemed as if almost the entire village could be picked up and moved in a fairly short period of time.

They're nomadic, Dylan explained and Jewel now knew why she hadn't realized where they were. Kentucky had moved since the last time they had been near it.

As they were marched through the town faces peeked out of windows and doorways, only to retreat back whenever Jewel made eye contact. She felt an overwhelming sense of fear coming from all of the inhabitants, but other than that their minds were closed to her completely. Without her magic or mental power to protect her Jewel felt apprehensive and vulnerable. Dylan continued to urge her not to worry, but she feared that his optimism might be misplaced. What were they going to do if these people refused to let them go? She glanced back towards Sky and saw that he had stopped just outside the town at the tree line and it seemed the Kentuckians were content to ignore him. She also noticed something else in the woods behind him but couldn't make out exactly what it was. Their captor directed them towards the largest log cabin that was near the center of the village. Dylan walked confidently up the steps and opened the door. Jewel followed him.

The interior of the building was cluttered with a vast array of antique tools and equipment that all seemed to predate the Great Change. They were simple items that needed neither science nor magic to function. Most seemed to be wood shaping tools such as saws, drills, and knives, but there were also many others, including a large loom holding a half-finished brown tapestry made from coarse animal-hair string. The culture seemed to be separated completely from any technology or magic other than the most basic necessary for survival. In the center of the single room of the cabin there was a circle of wooden benches and chairs around a low circular table. Sitting on a chair at the opposite side of the circle was a tall, moderately handsome

middle-aged man. He wore no crown and his chair was no different than the others, but something about him seemed to suggest an air of authority. He gestured to a bench across from him and Dylan sat down. Jewel joined him, hoping that he knew what he was doing. She tried to ask him mentally what was going on, but he only assured her that there should be nothing to worry about. Jewel heard footsteps behind her and turned. She was shocked but also a little relieved when she saw a familiar face. The man that they had talked with before on their way to New York took a seat on a bench at the far right of the circle.

“Thisarchif, Josmit. Ewanano wiyakembak? Jesedja jespastru,” he shot at them accusingly.

“My apologies, John Smith,” Dylan said, directing his words to the man across from them and bowing slightly. “We are passing back through. Our business in New York is finished. We are on our way home.”

The interpreter turned towards the chief and blurted out a string of syllables so quickly that Jewel would hardly have believed it was even a language. The sounds ran together in one breath and seemed more like a moan than words. The Chief, whom Dylan had called John Smith, retorted with a blast of syllables of his own and the interpreter turned back to them.

“Nonkincumakfranyork. Edonelevya. Etinkurspinus.” Jewel caught most of the meaning as Dylan heard the words. They didn’t think people ever came back from New York and again they thought Jewel and Dylan were spies.

Dylan shook his head, still addressing the chief, “We are not spies. As you can see, I have suffered many injuries in New York. We aren’t a threat to you or your people, sir. We are only trying to go home. We had to land because we needed to rest and tend to my injuries.”

Again his message was translated and the chief replied.

“Tilbefigerdwidaringadrus. Ringadrusisol,” the interpreter explained while the Chief called out an incomprehensible command. He seemed to be addressing someone outside.

“Ring of Drus?” Dylan asked, confused. Jewel looked around as a dozen men and woman filed into the room and sat down on the benches and chairs. They all spoke in low whispers to each other, filling the room with an incomprehensible murmur. Soon all the seats were filled.

“Drus. Yewdrusus, wedrusou,” the interpreter clarified while the people filed in.

“Oh, trust... Ring of Trust,” Dylan said, turning to Jewel, *It looks like we have to participate in some ceremony so they know they can trust us. I have no idea what it is.*

Jewel looked around meekly at the people filling the chairs. *I guess we'll find out.*

After everyone was seated the chief raised a hand and the room fell quiet. From behind his chair he pulled a small animal-skin pouch, a shallow wooden bowl, and a large silver pitcher. He dipped his hand into the pouch and pulled out a small handful of what Jewel thought was sand. He dropped it onto the wooden bowl and then passed the bowl to the woman sitting on his right.

“Daspir,” he said and she repeated it, “Daspir.” She took a pinch of the powder held it in front of her nose and inhaled, smelling it, then she placed it on her tongue and swallowed it while passing the bowl to the man on her right. Jewel noticed that the seating was designed so that they alternated between men and woman and even she and Dylan conformed to this arrangement. The man said “Daspir.” Then he took a pinch of the powder and smelled and tasted it the same way that the woman had then passed the bowl to the woman on his right. As the ritual progressed Jewel noticed the Chief pour the entire contents of the small pouch into the silver pitcher and then he began swirling it in a small circle. She heard the sound of liquid lapping against the sides and assumed that the pitcher was filled with water. A hand nudged her shoulder and Jewel looked over to see the man next to her holding out the bowl of powder. She hesitated.

Take it, do what they do. If it doesn't hurt them then it won't hurt us. Dylan instructed her.

Jewel took the bowl carefully and said, “Daspir,” even though she had no idea what it meant. She brought a pinch of powder to her nose. As soon as she inhaled she almost sneezed. It was pepper, or at least, that was what it seemed to be. She put it on her tongue and ate it and noticed that her mouth tingled almost immediately. She passed the bowl to Dylan and he did the same. She rubbed her jaw and licked her lips. Her mouth was going numb and her tongue seemed lethargic. She looked over to the people to her left who had already tasted it, but it seemed that they were used to the feeling. Some were watching the bowl as it passed around the circle while others watched the Chief

swirling the silver pitcher. When the bowl finally reached the Chief he sat the pitcher down on the table in the center of the circle and smelled and ate the last bit of powder. At once the others clapped their hands together once hard and loud. Jewel and Dylan jumped, not expecting the sudden noise, since it had been so quiet before. The Chief placed the bowl on the table and lifted the pitcher over his head and everyone clapped once more. He lowered the pitcher and tipped it over pouring a thick white liquid out into the bowl. At first Jewel thought that it was milk, but then she wrinkled her nose as the scent of pepper filled the room. It was a drink made from the powder. When the bowl was full the Chief sat the pitcher down and there was a loud rap as everyone clapped again. He lifted the bowl in both hands and leaned forward offering it to Dylan. Dylan reached out and took it, raising it to his lips.

Wait! Jewel sent to him, almost forgetting herself enough to speak instead, *what if it's poison?*

It isn't. Don't worry. Dylan replied, but Jewel wondered how he could be so sure. Before she could voice any further objections, however, Dylan tilted the bowl up and drank a few gulps. He started to give the bowl back to the Chief, but the man shook his head and pantomimed tilting the bowl all the way up. Dylan shrugged and then drained the entire bowlful. As soon as he finished everyone clapped again and the Chief reached out to take the bowl. Dylan handed it to him and he refilled it. Again the crowd clapped and Jewel noticed that Dylan clapped as well.

I think I'm getting the hang of this. He told her. *Interesting drink. I feel all loose and tingly.*

Jewel had no idea what to make of this, still afraid that they were being poisoned. She was very relieved when the Chief took the second bowlful for himself and drained it, resulting in another loud clap. Again he refilled the bowl and Jewel was confident enough to bring her hands together as he finished, though it was so timid that she failed to make any noise. As she had feared, he offered the bowl across to her next and her hands were shaking as she took it. She smiled weakly as she raised the bowl to her lips. The taste was similar to the powder, but not nearly as strong. She took a few timid sips and felt her mouth and throat tingle and become numb. Encouraged by the gestures of the crowd around them she tilted the bowl farther back and gulped. It quickly became easier to drink as the liquid numbed her throat and stomach and at last she finished and there was the

resounding crack as everyone, even Dylan clapped. She giggled, feeling giddy and lightheaded, and passed the bowl back to the chief. The rest of the night was something of a haze for Jewel. She watched as the chief filled bowl after bowl and passed it to each of the men and women in the circle. For short moments after each resounding clap Jewel would be clear and alert, but then the feeling left her and she sank back into a half-daze. Dylan's arm was around her, but he was talking with the interpreter, having a conversation that Jewel was unable to follow. Several times after drinking she had tried to talk to him mentally, but found herself unable to focus properly. She had been about to consider talking to him verbally when a hand touched her left shoulder and she heard a voice next to her. She turned to the Kentuckian woman who was now sitting next to her and wondered when she had moved. If Jewel remembered correctly, this was the woman who had been sitting next to the Chief.

“What was that? I didn't understand,” Jewel said, groggily.

The woman smiled and let loose with a quick burst of syllables then hugged Jewel. Jewel was surprised to find herself hugging the woman back though she did not remember deciding to do so. Again several members of the group clapped, but it was softer this time, and they followed it almost immediately with another clap and then another. It took a few moments for Jewel to realize that they were keeping a steady rhythm. A soft low whine echoed through the room and Jewel looked over to see one of the men drawing a bow along the strings of a fiddle. Another man plucked rapidly on the strings of a guitar. The melody pulsed through the room and Jewel found herself clapping along merrily. Various other instruments began to appear around the circle as they all joined in. It seemed that only the men played instruments, because the women were only clapping and smiling. The sound was beautiful. The harmony and melody danced along with the rhythm, changing but always keeping the same basic beat in sync with the clapping. Jewel had closed her eyes and started swaying back and forth when she was brought out of her revelry forcefully but wonderfully. The six women had all begun to sing, and Jewel would never have believed that their strange language could sound so graceful without hearing it firsthand. The women slowly began to diverge the timing of the song so that they sang different portions, overlapping each other in glorious harmony. As Jewel closed her eyes and let herself take in the beauty of the song, she was

astounded as the words began to take shape in her mind. If she listened to any single woman's voice she was unable to discern the meaning of the words, but as she heard the song as a whole the words fused together as if two women were singing the beginning of each word, two the middle, and two the ending.

“Amazing Grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
I was blind but now I see.
It was grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.
When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun!”

As they finished everyone clapped loudly three times, and it seemed that this signaled the end of the Ring of Trust. People began chatting as they packed up their instruments. Jewel noticed that many of the women were now embracing and kissing the men that they had been seated with and she watched as they all retreated in pairs to corners of the cabin. Jewel noticed that there were large hammocks stretched out along the walls that were quickly being filled.

“Jerpartothachuch,” she heard the voice of the interpreter say. She turned and saw the Chief hugging Dylan and the interpreter smiling at her. It seemed that they had been welcomed as friends. The woman that had hugged her earlier approached and smiled at Jewel as she embraced the Chief. Jewel assumed that she was his wife as the Chief excused himself and they retreated to a hammock.

“Yikinsleepinere. Dinoribotyerbak. Dakavllkurtratup.” the interpreter said, gesturing to an empty hammock stretched between two support beams. Jewel now realized how tired she was and didn't bother trying to figure out what the man had said. Dylan climbed into the hammock and Jewel followed after him, being careful not to hurt his back. She noticed that something about his back looked wrong, but the thought left her mind as she sat her head down on his shoulder. This was the first time she had been able to sleep next to him since she had left over a week ago. The comfort and contentment of being held

in his embrace quickly lulled her to sleep, and she didn't notice that both of his arms seemed to be working now.

Eve sprinted down the bright pink corridor giggling. She was wearing a beautiful blue gown trimmed with gold lace. She heard Lizzy's footsteps ahead of her and she darted into a side passage to avoid her. The sudden change in momentum made her lose her balance and she flung an arm out to catch herself. Her hand and forearm sunk into the wall and when she pulled it out it was covered in cake and frosting. Eve licked her fingers clean as best she could then willed the rest of it to disappear. She continued running through the cake maze, delighted that she had found such a wonderful friend in such a wonderful place.

Jewel awoke to the sizzling of a frying pan over a fire accompanied by a delightful aroma. As she shifted her weight the hammock swayed slightly, and Dylan groaned. With a yawn he stretched his arms over his head and arched his back.

"Dylan!" Jewel cried, alarmed, "your back. Don't hurt yourself."

"I think," he said, sitting up and rubbing his shoulder with one hand, "that our hosts have done me a favor during the night. Or it could have been the tea."

Jewel lifted up the back of his shirt, which was still torn, but saw that underneath his skin was whole and bore no evidence of the gashes that had occupied it previously. Jewel noticed that she felt invigorated and energetic except that she was very hungry.

Dylan said, "I'm starving and something smells delicious."

Jewel looked across the room and saw three men and two women sitting on the floor next to the fireplace. A large pot hung by a handle over the fire and one of the men was using a ladle to fill their bowls. Dylan struggled awkwardly out of the hammock and then helped Jewel to her feet. As they approached the group Jewel recognized a few of them from the previous night's party. The interpreter was not present, but their body language conveyed a friendly message of welcome as they greeted Jewel and Dylan with smiles and nods. Someone found two more bowls and Jewel soon found herself devouring a thick spicy stew. The taste was unique but reminded her of bacon and sausage. Quickly they both emptied the bowls and were served seconds. One man seemed to be telling a story or possibly several jokes, because he

would talk at length and then the rest of the group would erupt in laughter before allowing him to continue. Feeling somewhat separated since she couldn't follow the conversation, Jewel sent a thought to Dylan.

I... I'm sorry. I'll never leave you again. I feel so terrible. I... I meant to come back, but the Order... Her chin quivered and she stared into her stew, afraid to look at him.

She felt his hand take hold of hers. *It's okay. What's done is done. The first thing we have to do is get you back home.*

What? Jewel was startled and confused. *We can't go back home. Aura isn't there.*

What do you mean?

Jewel had been putting it off because she was ashamed of how she had made such a mess of everything. With a sigh she told him everything that had happened from her arrest all the way to her daring escape and how her family had now gone into hiding at his grandparents place in Macon.

Oh Jewel. I feel terrible.

You don't have anything to feel terrible about! Jewel insisted. *I'm the one who took the staff out too soon. I'm the one who was stupid and childishly transported and got arrested. I'm the one who is being chased by the Order.*

I... Jewel, this isn't your fault. Like I told you before, you were ready for the staff, otherwise the case wouldn't have opened. And I don't blame you for leaving New York. I wasn't making it easy on you, and I should have realized that I was asking too much.

The Kentuckians had finished breakfast and the last of them had finally left, taking the empty pot with him. Jewel and Dylan were alone by the dying fire as the morning sunlight crept through a nearby window. Something had been nagging at Jewel ever since she had left him on Hannibal's doorstep.

"Why aren't you mad at me?" she asked, finally, wondering why Dylan had truly never been upset at the cruel words she had said so long ago in New York.

"Huh?" he seemed surprised by the question, "Why would I be? I mean, this whole mess is my fault. I can't be mad at you. You're doing the best you can to help me, even though you don't want to. I understand why you're mad at me, though. I've made a mess of things."

"Dylan, I'm not mad at you," Jewel said, wondering how he could think that she was.

"But... but you said..." he began, looking confused.

"In New York I thought you were mad at me," she interrupted, "because of those terrible things I said that night. I wouldn't blame you if you were. I said a lot of stuff that I shouldn't have. I was cruel."

"But... you were right!" Dylan protested.

"No," Jewel interrupted again, "I wasn't right. I was mean, and I knew I was mean. I knew that you should have been terribly upset with me, and I followed you all day scared out of my mind that you would start yelling at me at any moment."

"But..." he began but Jewel put a finger to his mouth.

"I was guilty, and I knew I needed to be punished, so I was punishing myself all day by being afraid of you. That's why I didn't talk."

"I... I thought you were still mad at me for bringing you there," Dylan explained, "and for not kissing you right."

Jewel wrapped her arms around him amazed that he could be so dense. She smiled and said, "You kissed me wonderfully." Their noses touched.

"But, you said..."

"I said a lot of things I shouldn't have, Dylan. I was frightened and angry. I owe you an apology. You are right. This is not my fault. This is not your fault, or anybody's fault except Marcus Zitan for making this stupid curse. I love you, and I never want to lead a normal life if that means not being with you. I'm sorry I said all those things. I think..." she took a deep breath, "I think I wanted to see a reaction from you, because I was scared and you seemed so confident. That was why I teleported away. I wanted to scare you. I intended to come back after only a few minutes, but I was captured by the Order before I had a chance to do anything at all. I think that I wanted to overcome my fear by knowing that you were scared too."

"That doesn't make any sense," Dylan pointed out.

Jewel frowned at him and started to argue but then held her tongue. "It makes sense to me."

"Is that why you kept calling me perfect," Dylan asked, "because I seemed fearless?"

Jewel grinned, "I called you perfect because that's what you are, and I had no right to be angry with you for it. You can't really help it."

"But I'm not..." Dylan began but seemed to think better of it.

"I think we had better do it now, while we have time," Jewel suggested.

"Do what?" he asked.

"This," she replied and kissed him passionately. As she kissed him she cleared away her thoughts and opened her mind to him as they had not done in many days that seemed like years. Eagerly she drank in his fears, worries, and concerns, just as thirstily as she drank his other many emotions. She let herself feel and think with his mind about the recent week and could sense that he was doing the same. She had conversations with herself and felt the mild confusion that always mingled with his intense love. As their minds grew together and joined completely all the misunderstanding and apprehensions that each had about their relationship fell away. The anxieties that remained were those that they shared and they would therefore not be facing them alone, but together. The experience was not, this time, purely for the pleasure it gave them, but now served to reunite them wholly. As the kiss ended Dylan was breathing heavily.

"We need... to remember...to do that... more often," he sighed.

"I heartily agree. Now, what's the plan? We are still trying to save the world, right?" She asked playfully.

Dylan nodded and said, "I guess we should try to find Audrey. She's probably in Atlanta with Isaac but I don't know for sure. Sky won't go anywhere near it. Can your broom hold two people?"

"Yes, but it won't be able to go as fast."

"Okay. We head south on Sky first then. We'll stop at that pear orchard and leave Sky around there. He won't go far so we'll always know where to find him if we need him. After that we take the broom south to Atlanta and..."

Jewel frowned and asked, "We don't know how to get into Atlanta, do we?"

Dylan shook his head, "When I had my wand I found a fire-proofing spell, but I don't think something so simple would protect us from such a powerful enchantment. Even if we do figure out a way to enter Atlanta, we still have no idea what we'll find in there or even if Isaac and Audrey are there."

"What about Egypt then? People said Isaac hid there for a long time. We might find something," Jewel suggested.

"Maybe," Dylan sighed, "but we don't have any way to work a language charm. I wish I hadn't lost my wand. All I have is component magic and it isn't the right type of magic for this kind of thing."

"How do you know? Maybe there is a component spell that will let us understand other languages, or let us go into Atlanta."

Dylan shook his head. "Component magic has more raw power than other magic. It is unpredictable and always has purely physical effects in a wide area. It might cause a fire, but it is unlikely that it would protect from it. It might make loud noises, like it did in the cave, but I doubt we could find a component spell to translate a language."

"But," Jewel argued, "you said that your father taught you a component spell to make him forget stuff. That sounds more controlled."

"My father was a master of component magic, and besides, I don't know if it was a component spell. It could have been any type of magic, since I think I used it on myself to make me forget about it. If only I had kept my wand..."

"We could get you another one," Jewel suggested, thinking of how she had procured her broom.

"Jewel," Dylan said gravely, "as cavalier as you seem to be about stealing, I do not share your opinion that the end justifies the means. My need does not give me the right to take what is not mine. I will not judge you for what you have already done, but from now on I ask that you refrain from stealing."

Jewel felt herself get hot and she knew her face must be a bright pink. She felt immediately ashamed of herself for taking both the carpet and the broom. She looked away from Dylan.

"My love," he said tenderly, "Don't be ashamed. I said that I do not judge you and I meant it. I would have done the same in your situation. Now, however, we should be able to find a solution without resorting to theft. Cheer up."

She nodded but still felt bad. She hadn't really thought about her behavior objectively until now, and as she looked back on it she was ashamed. She feared that some of her behavior lately had been unlike her. The curse must be starting to affect her more. How was she going to fight it if she didn't even notice it was happening until it was too late? Should she tell Dylan? Was she even sure that it had been

the curse? Maybe she was just blaming the curse for her own behavior. She didn't want Dylan to think that she was using it as an excuse. She would not tell him now, but she would guard herself closely. If she felt as if she were doing things without meaning to then she would tell him.

As they exited the cabin Jewel saw Sky grazing at the edge of the village.

"Oh, he's all right. And there is my broom with him. It must have followed him around," she remarked to Dylan, but he was preoccupied.

The interpreter was speaking very quickly and holding out an animal-skin bag and a wooden bowl that was much deeper than the ones they had used before, almost like an oversized cup. Jewel couldn't follow any of the conversation, but she assumed that the bag contained the pepper-like substance. After the man left Dylan turned and smiled at Jewel.

"It is a gift, so that the spirits will smile upon us during our journey. He says to use it when we need divine help or if we are injured."

Jewel smiled, "That's nice. It did heal your back nicely. I hope we won't need to use it, though."

"Yeah. Hey, there's Sky. How did your broom get there? I thought it was in the woods still."

"If I'm going to steal a broom, I might as well steal a smart one," Jewel said wittily.

"Of course. What was I thinking? Forget I asked. Let's go then. I'm feeling quite energetic. Today is going to be a good day," Dylan said as he started walking across the field of tents towards Sky.

Jewel found that she shared his optimism and there was a noticeable bounce in her step as she walked next to him. She was sure that most of their confidence came from the tea. When they stopped they found that Sky did not share their spunk. He snorted at them angrily.

"Oh it's just a broom," Jewel replied, "It is supposed to stay where I can find it. It wasn't hurting you."

Sky stomped and scraped a hoof on the ground then shot a sharp blast of air through his teeth.

"Well, then you'll be happy to know that we are going straight to that pear farm. Goodness. You would have us believe you're starving

with the way you go on. There's plenty of grass around here. You're fine. Now stop being fussy and lets get going."

Sky whinnied one last time as Jewel climbed on his back, but the promise of returning to the orchard seemed to placate him. Dylan checked the straps on the travel pack and then climbed up behind Jewel. Some Kentuckians saw them and called out waving. Jewel smiled and waved and then Sky launched them into the air. Once they were in the air Jewel glanced back and saw the broom floating about ten feet behind them. Sky snorted again and feinted as if to tip them off and drop them to the ground below.

"Oh don't be silly Sky. Nothing will ever replace you. It's just a silly old broom. You will always be our friend." At this the peg neighed approvingly and banked south.

It seemed that they had flown so much that it was now routine. The trip from Kentucky to the Georgia border took most of the day, and when Jewel saw the familiar form of Lookout Mountain she became worried.

"Where are we going to sleep tonight, Dylan? We don't have a tent or any way to make a shelter. The Order is looking for us in Georgia and we can't stay in Tennessee, can we?" she asked.

"No, we can't. We have no idea where the fighting is right now between Tennessee and Carolina. It wouldn't be safe for us to land there for several reasons. In fact, I'd like to go as far into Georgia as possible. The Tennessee forces might try to take advantage of the unrest caused by Isaac Kane. I don't think they would attack any Georgia towns, but they might try to circle behind their enemies that way."

"But we can't go to Aura's..." Jewel protested.

"No, I'm thinking farther east," Dylan said as he nudged Sky and they began to bank left. "Toccoa is a small town and there should be large stretches of empty forest near it. It will take us less than an hour to get there, I think. It's as good a place as any to sleep under the stars." Something in his voice made Jewel think that Dylan was not looking forward to going near Toccoa.

"Um...have you ever been there before?" she asked, curious but not wanting to upset him.

"Once," he said grimly and she felt him tense. She decided not to ask him any more questions about it.

Jewel never had a chance to form her own opinion about Toccoa. As they were flying Dylan pointed out the few lights in the distant night horizon that marked the town and then urged Sky to descend. The thick foliage of the trees obstructed Sky's landing and forced him to touch down in a wide but shallow portion of a stream throwing up a spray of water as he did so.

"Great," Jewel said ruefully, "No tent and soaking wet."

"It could be worse," Dylan said as Sky carried them up the bank and out of the river. "You could have no tent, be soaking wet, and not have a loving husband who is perfectly capable of providing your every need."

Jewel raised an eyebrow, "Well I need a change of clothes and a place to sleep, so start providing."

"Okay, first we're going to gather up some fire wood," he said as he hopped off the pegasus.

"But I ache from riding. I was hoping to lie down for a bit," Jewel complained as he helped her down.

"The walk will do you good after the ride. Come on, I'm not going to leave you again."

Jewel pushed away from him slightly. "You don't trust me?" she asked.

"Don't be silly," he replied in a tone that insinuated that she would have to be crazy to suggest it. "But last time I was in the woods alone I was brutally attacked by a gargoyle and almost died. I'm still a bit apprehensive about it."

"Oh," Jewel said, "wait. You mean... you're scared of the dark now?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, little gemstone. I am not scared of the dark. I am scared of what could be hiding in it. Now stop being difficult and help me find firewood."

"Yes sir," Jewel replied and stuck her tongue out at him. After he kissed her they walked together in the dim moonlight and picked up fallen logs and twigs for a fire. Once they had a decent armload each they found a spot as far away from any trees as possible and set the wood down in a pile. With a quick 'Infernum' Dylan set it ablaze and they were bathed in a warm orange light. He unfastened and removed the travel pack from Sky so that the peg could wonder around the forest. Thinking that it might be unwise to leave it floating around the forest, Jewel deactivated her broom and leaned it against a tree.

"The sleeping bag and your blanket are still both shrunken," Dylan said as he was looking through the pack. "It looks like we'll just be sleeping on the ground under the stars by the fire. We can rest our heads on the pack at least. It's mostly soft."

Jewel had completely forgotten that her things had been miniaturized. "Oh, that's... that's fine Dylan. I don't care where we sleep. I just want to be with you."

He removed his shirt and set it on the ground. "You can sit here. That's very sweet, but we need to do something about this before long. We can't expect to save the world if we aren't even able to have a suitable camp. At least we still have brittle, stale chocolate and crackers." He blew a note on the kazoo and passed a cracker and a piece of chocolate to her. She took it and ate a bite. Even though she wasn't hungry she still liked chocolate, no matter how stale it was. He sat down by the fire and she took her place on his shirt next to him.

"That stew was filling," she commented between bites and snuggled up against him.

"Very," he agreed putting an arm around her. "Despite the problem of the language I enjoyed Kentucky very much. They are very friendly and fun, nothing like what I've heard. They probably aren't as trusting of other people. I wonder why they were nice to us..."

Jewel knew why. "You tried to understand their language. Most people probably don't bother."

Dylan nodded, "You're right. I've always heard that people from Kentucky were less intelligent than normal people, but that didn't seem to be the case at all. They were nice and friendly, but different. I guess some people just can't accept people who are different."

Jewel nodded and said, "I liked their tea. It was interesting."

"Interesting is a good word for it. Come over here and kiss me before I get too tired and fall asleep," Dylan suggested.

Jewel obliged. After a delightful time enjoying each other's minds and thoughts they drifted off into each others dreams and slept.

Much to Jewel's dismay they woke up the next morning completely soaked in dew. Jewel had told Dylan in no uncertain terms that she was not flying until her clothes were dry, and now he was returning from the forest with an armload of branches and sticks.

"Whatever did you do with our clothes?" Jewel asked, rummaging through the travel pack. She noticed that it now contained only the

two books, their journals, one magipen, the conjuring kazoo, and a miniature grill that they had not yet used.

"That's all I could find after the gargoyle attacked me. Sorry. Come to think of it, let me get that grill out. We can use it to dry our clothes faster. Jewel moved aside as he pulled the grill out of the pack and began unfolding it. It was a very simple design. A metal grate with four legs that could be positioned over a fire. After he finished setting it up Dylan picked his shirt off the ground, brushed it off and laid it on the grill above the flames.

"There we go, that should dry it much faster," he said smiling.

"But..." Jewel protested, "I can't take off my dress here. I'd need a tent or at least a robe or something."

Dylan looked around and said, "Nobody here except us chickens, but if you are worried about it, I'll let my shirt dry, then I'll let you wear it while we dry your dress. You look very cute in that, by the way. I've been meaning to tell you. Riding that broom you were a positively gorgeous little witch."

Jewel felt herself blush. She hadn't realized until now how much she had been hoping he would complement her dress. "Thank you," she said through a broad grin.

The fire must have encountered a particularly dry piece of wood, because the flames shot up higher and licked against the cloth of Dylan's shirt. Jewel heard sizzling as the water in the cloth flashed to steam. Dylan jumped forward and snatched the shirt off the grill.

"Wow. That was a close one. You would have had to go around without a shirt. That would be a shame," Jewel teased. She liked seeing his muscled bare torso. She looked at Dylan. He had a puzzled expression on his face and was rubbing a corner of the shirt between his thumb and forefinger.

"Did it burn?" Jewel asked.

Dylan shook his head and then, much to Jewel's surprise and dismay, he thrust his hand directly into the fire and left it there.

"No!" Jewel cried and threw herself onto him, pulling him away from the fire. They fell backwards onto the ground. "What were you doing?" Jewel asked, alarmed.

"It's okay," Dylan grunted, sitting up and showing her his hand, "It isn't even singed. The fireproofing spell that I cast on myself must still be working. I don't know why. It isn't supposed to last more than a day."

Jewel was flabbergasted. "Don't do that to me!" she scolded, "You scared me to death. I thought the curse was making you burn yourself or something." She felt her eyes start to water.

"I'm sorry Jewel," Dylan whispered as he wrapped his arms around her, "I didn't mean to. You're right. I shouldn't have done that."

"What are we going to do?" Jewel sobbed, "No matter what I do I'm always afraid that it's not me doing it, but the curse. I have to watch everything so carefully and even then I still don't know. What if we're doing what the curse wants us to right now? How do we know?"

"It's okay," he cooed to her, "We know because we know what the curse does, remember? My grandparents and parents didn't know, so we're already doing better than any before us in fighting against it. We aren't trying to raise Marcus Zitan back from the dead, are we?"

Jewel shook her head in agreement.

"Well then see? We aren't doing what the curse wants us to do. We are going to find a way to break the curse and save Audrey and my uncle and the rest of the world, so cheer up." He kissed her forehead when he finished.

"How though?" she asked plaintively.

"One step at a time, dear. First we need to dry your dress. Come on. Off with it before the fire dies down too much."

While Jewel stood by the fire wearing his shirt and watching her dress dry above the flames, Dylan retrieved one of the spell books from the travel pack and flipped through it. Jewel noticed that it was not the spell book that they had taken from the mansion in Macon.

"Is that the Zitan spell book?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he answered showing her the cover, "It has component spells listed in it. I'm trying to find something that might help us get into Atlanta, but I haven't had any luck yet."

Jewel had an idea. "Dylan," she said sharply, "that's it. Your house, back in New Atlanta!"

"What?" he asked, taking his eyes off the book and looking at her.

"Your father had a wand, didn't he? We can get a change of clothes, supplies. Your house should still be there, right? I mean, you inherited it. Rupert had to sell my house, but you still own yours, don't you?"

The look on Dylan's face suggested that he hadn't given the matter any thought at all until now. He replied, "Well, yes... I guess I do. I

mean. I own the mansion in Macon, so I must own my house as well. Jewel, that is a wonderful idea. I should have thought of it sooner. I love you!" He sounded very relieved.

He embraced her, and Jewel felt awkward. Until now it seemed that he had been leading, and she was only following. Jewel began to feel that she was his equal and wondered why she hadn't considered herself so before. She remembered his words that he had told her. He had said, "I will carry you when you fall, you will carry me when I fall..." Jewel suspected that not all men felt that way toward their wives. Her father certainly hadn't treated her mother as an equal, and Rupert was obviously the dominant figure in his relationship.

When their clothes were satisfactorily dry they mounted Sky and headed south toward New Atlanta. This, Jewel thought, would be their first time back since the feeder attack.

"Git, y'har me! Ah'll shoot ye raight 'tween yer eyes. I won't warn you again!" Bill yelled out the window as he was crouched on the floor of his house by the front door.

"Sir, as I said before. This property has been allocated for official U.W.O.M. use. We regret the inconvenience, but you are being relocated to a housing facility, and we will do everything in our power to facilitate your move."

"Iza concentration camp ye nitty bugger!" Bill yelled as he popped up, aimed the crossbow, and pulled the trigger. Wizz. Thump. The UWOM official screamed. A crossbow bolt was sticking out of his leg.

"Warnin' shot numby one! The sekin'll only warn yer friends," Bill yelled. "Now git outa Jawja an' ne'er come back!"

When the U.W.O.M. official gave the order to take Bill down with force the old farmer didn't stand a chance. It was a good fight though. He put his next bolt straight through the official's heart and killed another with a well aimed throw of his boot knife before the stasis spell hit him. As he blacked out he thought, "They should kill me now. I'm just going to take out as many as I can until they do."

As they approached New Atlanta Jewel saw a long line of people walking along the road towards the town. When they drew closer she could make out throngs of people sitting or standing all along the streets. Even before she had said anything Dylan urged Sky off course, and they landed in the woods a fair distance outside of town.

“What's going on?” Jewel asked him, puzzled.

“I don't know. I expected people to be living here, but there's so many. It's like some sort of festival or something.”

Jewel shook her head, “That didn't look like a festival. It seemed to me like those people didn't want to be there. It looked more like a prison or something to me.” She remembered her brief time as an inmate in the Georgia National Juvenile Women's Penitentiary. The people in New Atlanta had somehow looked just like the girls she had seen being marched past her cell.

“It couldn't be a prison. There weren't any fences or anything.”

Jewel remembered the amulet and shuddered. “Some prisons don't need fences. Maybe this is a bad idea. Let's just go. We can just take the extra time to go to Macon and get more supplies there,” Jewel suggested.

“No,” Dylan said, “I need a wand, and you were right. My dad's wand should be in my old house. All we have to do is go in and get it, and then we can leave.”

“Dylan,” Jewel pleaded, “we're fugitives! I'm an escaped convict! I'm telling you. There are soldiers from the Order in that town, I just know it. We'll be caught for sure. I can handle one or two mentally, but there's no way I can protect us against a dozen prison guards.”

“Jewel, I'm not sure it's a prison.” Dylan argued, “Maybe they are refugees. Maybe Isaac attacked another town, and they had to flee.”

Jewel thought about it for a moment. “Well, yeah, I guess that could be it. I still don't feel good about this.”

“We'll be careful, don't worry. My house is near the edge of town. We'll circle around that way in these woods, and then we'll be in and out in no time,” he assured her.

He urged Sky forward and the peg walked his way through the trees and around the city. Jewel wanted to object again, but she bit her lip. Maybe he was right. Maybe she was just being paranoid. Maybe she was just apprehensive because she had been attacked by feeders the last time she was here. She tried to clear her mind. Either way, she wanted to be ready to act if she had to. While they wound their way through the woods she quietly focused her thoughts.

“So then, what is more powerful than sacrifice?” Aura asked. Since there was little else to do while they hid from the law, she, Eve, and Rupert had begun searching through their spell books and the

psion texts for any possible ways of breaking the curse. Though Eve did not share his optimism, Rupert had said that since they now knew exactly how the curse had been cast and its purpose, they had a very good chance of finding out a counter spell.

“Well, I guess an equal or more valuable sacrifice, but we can’t do that,” Eve lamented.

“Well then what has the same value as life?” Aura asked, “Certainly nothing like wealth or power.”

“It’s old magic. Old magic is always the most powerful.” Rupert said.

“Okay. Is there an older magic?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. There have been sacrifices as far back as known history in every culture. Of all the old magic I think it’s the oldest.”

“What are the others?” Eve asked.

Both Aura and Rupert seemed reluctant to answer. Finally Aura said, “Um... this isn’t stuff that you need to know, Eve. You’re too young”—

Eve cut her off with a scream, “THIS IS NOT THE TIME! I’m your sister! Not your child! I don’t care if I’m eleven! I feel... I feel a hundred! If I were really a normal girl then I’d be in school with my friends! So just forget about all that so we can help Jewel! I need to know it! I’m... I’m the psion! You aren’t!”

She could tell that her words cut into Aura, but her sister composed herself quickly.

“I... you’re right, Eve. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Eve whimpered before she could continue. Eve wondered what was coming over her. They both fell silent for a moment before Rupert spoke up.

“Are you sure we can tell her Aura?” he asked.

She nodded, “We have to.”

He sighed heavily, “There are sixteen different types of magic. There are seven good forms, six dark forms, and three neutral forms. You already know about the neutral forms. They are rod-assisted, musical, and Iconical. The old dark magics are hate, torture, sacrifice, pentagram, blood and... and perversion.” He stumbled over the last word.

“What’s perversion mean?” Eve asked innocently.

Aura interrupted, “Eve, I... we can’t...”

“But...” she started to protest.

“No!” Rupert shouted, “Absolutely not! Enough of this. You are too young. No. Out of the question. I won't have it. It's enough that you know what they are called. You don't need to know what that is. The old good magics are...”

In a fit of rage Eve reached into Aura's mind and instantly found out what perversion meant. “Eve! No!” Aura yelled feeling her intrusion but being powerless to stop it. As soon as Eve knew, she wished that she hadn't. Her mind reeled, and she sat down heavily.

“Oh...” she said, not knowing what else to say. Aura sat down next to Eve and cradled her in her arms.

“I'm so sorry, Eve.” she said, but Eve barely heard her. Eve tried to fight back the tears but could not.

Rupert was at a loss. He said weakly, “The... the old good magics are Love, Self-Sacrifice, Beauty, Psionic magic, Faith, Component magic, and Astrological magic, but they aren't as easy to use, and no one really understands them. The only love magic that we have been able to use is the Family Bonds and Love Bonds to cure things like feeder sickness. Component magic is too unpredictable, and Psionic magic isn't very powerful. Self-sacrifice and the others are only theoretical. No one has ever been known to actually use them. There have always been stories even before the Great Change, but nothing helpful.

Eve simply nodded, only partially hearing him. “I think I want to lie down for a while. Can I have some chocolate?”

Aura nodded, “There's a little left. You can have it all. Rupert and I don't mind phantom food.”

Eve ate only a bite, but Aura assured her that she would save the rest for her. Eve let her mind drift in a daze and then let herself escape to sleep. She tried to forget her horrible vision by playing with Lizzy. She had not talked about the curse or Marcus Zitan at all since they had first played dress up. Instead she spent her time with Lizzy playing or having huge feasts. Eve now escaped to her dreams, the only place she felt she had a friend.

Jewel followed closely behind Dylan as they crept through the thick underbrush forest. The back wall of his house was only a few yards ahead of them. He pointed to the back window.

I used to use this all the time when I wanted to sneak out. It goes right into my room. I learned how to unlock it from the outside, in case I ever got locked out by accident. Stay here and—

I'm going with you. Jewel interrupted with such force that Dylan would not be able to argue.

Ok, Stay close and be quiet. My parent's room is down the hall. We go in, we get the wand, we leave. We can get other supplies somewhere else.

Okay.

He crossed the clear patch of grass quickly, and Jewel stayed so close her hip never left his. In a moment he had opened the window. He poked his head inside.

It looks clear. I'll give you a boost, then come in after you.

He locked his hands together and leaned down so that she could put her foot in them. Strongly but gently he helped her through the window, and she landed with a thump. He followed and crossed the room. Easing the door open so that the hinges wouldn't creek he peered out into the hallway.

Looks fine. Let's go.

They both darted down the hallway to the door at the very end of the hall. Again he eased this one open slowly and closed it in the same way after they were inside.

Oh, good. This is going to be easy. He took two quick steps across the room, snatched the wand from its stand, and hurried back to her side.

Can we go out this window? Jewel asked.

No, it faces the street. Back the way we came. We'll be fine.

Still silent, and feeling more like a burglar now than she had either of the times she had actually stolen, Jewel followed Dylan back to his room. She wished she could look around and see what his room was like, but he gave her no time. He rushed her quietly out the window and then they were slinking back through the forest towards the clearing where they had left Sky. Jewel felt as if it was all over before it began, but her heart was racing.

As he helped her climb up onto Sky's back he said, "See, sometimes things go exactly as planned."

Jewel smiled and turned around to kiss him. Sky took off, and they left behind the sinister prison camp that had so recently been their happy and carefree home town.

Atlanta was not burning. There was no smoke, no fire. The buildings were charred black and in ruins as if the town had recently burned, but the ever-present conflagration that had persisted for so many years seemed to have simply died out. Sky still refused to take them very close, and landed on the last patch of green grass. After they dismounted, and Dylan shouldered the travel pack, Sky quickly retreated with a snort.

“You can go on to that pear farm,” Dylan told him, “We’ll meet you there old friend.” Sky did not wait to be told twice.

“Dylan... why...” Jewel trailed off.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I’m more concerned with those.”

Jewel looked over to where he was pointing. Perched on the highest portion of one of the crumbled buildings was the ghastly floating form of a feeder. As Jewel began to survey the city, this time looking up, she saw that there were hundreds, possibly thousands of them drifting through the buildings. They did not, however, advance. They milled about, as if they were cattle wondering about aimlessly. They were everywhere except on the smooth, clear, pristine roadway that led straight into the city.

“What... what’s that?” Jewel said as she peered into the distance. It seemed almost as if one of the buildings was still on fire. A bright orange flame seemed to rise up at the end of the road.

Drawn to it, Jewel began to walk forward, and Dylan stayed at her side. Mesmerized they marched into the city, ignoring the feeders that surrounded them. At last they drew close enough to see that it was not a burning building.

It was the oddest thing. The giant sandstone pyramid jutted up towards the sky. The rubble of demolished buildings laid scattered and pointed outwards, as if they had been thrown away as the ancient Egyptian tomb sprouted from the ground.

“I... I don’t like this,” Jewel stammered, clutching Dylan’s arm. “Why isn’t the city still on fire? Why haven’t we been attacked?”

She glanced backwards and saw that the feeders had come down onto the road, cutting off their escape.

“I don’t know,” he replied, following her gaze, “but there’s not much we can do now but go inside.” He walked forward into the archway at the base. Jewel followed him down the long, narrow corridor until it opened up into a large chamber littered with golden statues and relics. On a raised platform was a throne, and sitting on

the throne, was Isaac Kane. Jewel noticed his resemblance to Dylan immediately. They both had the same long brown hair. When he spoke his voice had a similar tone and quality.

“Well done!” he yelled to them and clapped his hands together mockingly, “Well done, Dylan.”

Jewel was now more frightened than ever. Dylan, however, remained focused on his plan.

“Isaac,” he said bravely, but Jewel could hear the tremor in his voice, “we have come to stop this. We are going to end this curse once and for all.”

“Oh rich! Oh how delightfully precious,” Isaac mocked, “No, Dylan and, this must be Jewel, Dylan and Jewel, you have come to do no such thing. You have come as you were meant to. You have obeyed the staff. Now be a dear and give me those two spell books.”

Jewel couldn’t find her voice, and Dylan seemed to be at a loss for words as well.

Isaac continued, “Did you honestly think that two pathetic teenagers could possibly hope to fight the curse? How naïve. My grandmother was the greatest sorceress of all time. My mother and father wielded more power than any after the Great Change. Still they all fell as you have fallen. Everything you have done since you reassembled the staff has been its will. The first incantation notified me of the staff’s location, and ever since, your purpose has been to deliver to me the spell books of my mother and of Marcus Zitan. I, of course, took it upon myself to facilitate your journey as best I could. But where are my manners? I must introduce you to my mistress. Darling, could you come out here please. We have guests.”

Audrey emerged from a passageway on the other side of Isaac’s throne holding the staff, but she had changed. Her hair, instead of being blond, was now jet black, and her skin was paler than ever.

“Audrey!” Jewel cried, taking a few steps towards her cousin before Dylan’s hand on her arm stopped her.

“Oh,” Isaac said in his maniacal voice, “I’m afraid she doesn’t answer to that name any more, do you, Cleopatra?”

“No,” Audrey answered, and her voice was cold and unnatural, “I do not. Dylan, don’t you recognize your dear great grandmother?”

Jewel looked back and forth between them. She had no idea what she had expected to find in Atlanta. But it certainly wasn’t this.

“I’m afraid that they don’t understand, dear.” Isaac said to Audrey.

“Let me tell them,” she replied, not taking her eyes off of Jewel, “I so rarely am offered the opportunity to boast.”

“Go on then. I don’t expect that they shall be leaving any time soon,” Kane replied.

Jewel heard Dylan’s thought, *Listen to what they have to say, maybe-- SILENCE!*

A sharp blast of pain shot through Jewel as the cold voice of Cleopatra interrupted his thought.

“I’ll have none of that,” she scolded them, stepping down the stairs towards them. The staff thumped against the stone floor with each step.

“In all my centuries, and oh yes, there have been many of them, I have never ceased to delight in the failures of mortals. Anything you wish to say will be shared with me and Isaac, but do listen instead. You may learn something.”

Jewel was in a panic, and her mind was now completely closed. It was a terrible feeling. She only now realized when it was gone, how much she had grown accustomed to their constant link.

“Before what you have called the Great Change, and that is a misnomer because nothing really changed, it was believed that magic did not exist or did so only rarely. This is because mortals are often narrow-minded fools. It was only the ambitious that learned of the powers that lay in secret, ripe for the taking. I was among the first...”

Jewel watched as the walls and floor of the chamber wavered and dissolved. She looked out upon a vast stretch of desert littered with pyramids and small stone buildings. She was Cleo: a peasant woman in Egypt. She experienced the scene, but could not act.

Cleo ducked behind a stone archway as he turned and she held her breath. Had he seen her? If he had she knew she would soon be dead. The cool desert air carried the scent of the Nile, and she waited for a long silent minute before emerging from her hiding place and resuming her pursuit. He had not seen her. She saw him turn a corner and disappear behind the edge of the large pyramid. Stepping lightly only with the balls of her bare feet she followed and peered around the corner. He was ascending the great pyramid. He was going to the top, where he would meet the gods. She had no idea what gods they were, but that was where he got his power. She saw him stop at the summit, and to her he was only a tiny speck. Carefully she climbed the great

steps, fearful of being seen, but only by him. Everyone else would be at the feast. She should have been at the feast.

She was only about fifteen stone steps away from him when the sky opened up in a bright column of light. It encompassed the summit of the pyramid for only a moment and then was gone. Now there were two figures on top of the pyramid. She heard voices, but the language was not Egyptian. She had never heard anything like it. Afraid to advance any further while the strange visitor was present she eased over to the side of the stairs and onto the smooth slanting surface of the pyramid. After a few minutes there was another great pillar of light, and she heard his footfalls coming back down the steps.

She withdrew the knife from her belt and gripped it tightly with both hands. If he had been alert he would have seen her. He could have stopped her. But he was not alert. After he passed she thrust the knife deep into his back, throwing all of her weight into him until she felt the handle become slippery with blood. As he choked and tried to cry out she whispered in his ear.

“Your reign is over, Ra.”

As his hands slipped away from the Great Staff her fingers closed around the cool gold shaft, and she let him fall. Leaving the knife jutting from his back she took her prize and left to introduce herself to her people as Queen.

The vision dissolved, and Jewel found herself sitting on a throne on a raised dais at the end of a large open room. Thousands of people filled the room and were kneeling and bowing towards her.

Again the scene melted away, and she was a powerful Queen of Spain. Again and again Jewel lived brief moments of Cleopatra's life, and each time she was a powerful dictator. More than once Jewel found herself being addressed as the 'First Lady' while standing next to the president of the United States. Each time she had felt herself controlling the man completely with her mind.

Finally she was Cleo Kane and lived in New York. Her taste for American politics had waned, and she now spent her time enjoying the pleasures that life in New York afforded her. She effectively created the illusion that Don Marcus Zitan was responsible for the atrocities there. The truth was that they both delighted in the suffering of the fools that kept themselves in the dark and denied the existence of magic. She enjoyed the break in the monotony, since the Zitan family was made up of some of the most worthy adversaries she had ever encountered.

Then Jewel was back in the pyramid in Atlanta looking across the room at Audrey's smiling face framed in her unnatural black hair. Dylan was shaking her gently.

"Jewel, wake up, are you okay? What's wrong? Isaac, What have you done to her?"

"It's okay," Jewel said, shaking her head.

"Don't worry, Dylan." Cleopatra commented, "I have only shown her my triumphs. Many ages have come and gone, my dears, and in that time many have discovered my secret, and all have tried to take it from me, but none came as close as Don Marcus Zitan. I should have known that a city such as New York would someday breed a man that would rival my ambition, but it is a lady's weakness to be drawn always to places of wealth and power. I knew he would try, of course, but I never thought he would be so clever. When I realized what he had done to the staff in his attempt to secure his own immortality so long as I had mine... Well, I'm afraid that in my fury I did something quite rash. I took my own life. Oh, don't be so surprised. I cannot die. I made sure of that long ago. When I, as spirit, found that the curse was likely to be successful even without me I knew that I had to return and face it. For that, your cousin proved quite useful. I do so much enjoy having such a young body. Even if Isaac and I bring Marcus Zitan back from the dead, I do believe he would be begging us to kill him again long before we are finished with our plans. But we have no reason to bother with such trivialities. Soon your foolish sister will have broken Zitan's spell for me, and I will be free to resume my post as Queen. Georgia, of course, will only be the beginning. After that this world will kneel before me."

"You... you... let Audrey go! I'll... I'll kill you!" Jewel screamed and wanted to charge forward, but found that she couldn't move.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Cleopatra said calmly, "but you will hand over both of those spell books you've so helpfully brought us."

Jewel had no intention of giving this horrible woman anything, but still she found herself opening the travel pack that was slung across Dylan's shoulder. She retrieved both Veronica Kane's and Marcus Zitan's spell books and held them out towards Cleopatra.

"Thank you so much, dear," Cleopatra cooed as she took both books, "It would have been so difficult to get these ourselves.

Emanuel Kane was quite clever about the enchantments that he placed on his study. And since Marcus placed a 'True Age' charm on the city of New York I'm afraid I am unable to set foot near that city ever again. It would do a terrible number on my figure, you see. Of course I had my revenge, didn't I Dylan? Marcus's son should be quite insane by now. So enough of this foolishness Dylan. Hand me the staff sheaf."

Dylan had managed to recover somewhat and was now pointing his father's wand at Cleopatra. "I... I can't let you do this..." he stammered.

She smiled wickedly, "You two amuse me. Don't make me kill you so soon. Hand over the sheaf. You should probably give me that wand too before you hurt yourself. The curse does not yet have as tight a hold upon you as it does your wife. I will not force you either. It amuses me to let you choose. Hand over the sheaf, or your wife watches you die, and I take it."

Jewel saw the look on Dylan's face and remembered how he had looked when he had faced the spider months ago under the stars. His actions, unlike hers, were not governed by the curse yet, and as a psion she knew that Cleopatra was not using her powers against him. She was not lying. She was letting him decide on his own. Unable to act and uncertain of what she would even do if she could, Jewel hoped for a moment that he would fight, and then hoped for a moment that he would not. Afraid of either outcome and unable to wish or hope for either one, she waited in agony as she watched Dylan tremble and sweat.

"What will it be?" the evil sorceress asked coldly, smirking at Dylan.

"I... I'll...I can't" Dylan tossed the wand onto the floor and turned to Jewel. "I can't do it. I can't kill her. I remember the spider. I'll do everything I can to stop her, but I can't kill her." He reached into his pocket and took out the small gold rod. Cleopatra took it, and with a word the staff changed. Where there was once deep brown cherry wood now shone the brilliance of pure gold.

Jewel smiled at Dylan, and was thankful that at least she could still do that of her own free will. "I love you," she whispered to him.

"I love you too," he said, stepping close to her.

Cleopatra's cold voice interrupted them, "Isn't this precious. No time for it though. Off to the dungeons with both of you!"

Without even a verbal incantation Jewel found herself surrounded by darkness. She waved her arms, trying to find Dylan, but her hands encountered only cold air.

“Dylan!” she yelled, but the only response was a quite echo off of stone walls.

Dylan yelled, “Jewel!” but there was no answer. Instead he heard a strange scraping sound, as if something very large was dragging across the floor. Dylan's arms were suspended above his head, and he felt the cold iron shackles clasped around his wrists. He was sitting with his legs crossed beneath him, but he could feel similar shackles around his ankles. Awkwardly he struggled to his feet so that he could lower his arms. It seemed he had only the two positions to choose from, and neither was likely to be very comfortable for any amount of time. He tried to squint, searching for any light in the darkness, but he saw nothing. For a moment he thought that he might be blind.

“Infernum,” he said, looking at where his hand should be.

His relief at seeing the momentary flame was quickly overshadowed by a glimpse of his prison. He was at the center of a square cell that was barely ten feet across. Beyond the iron bars was nothing but blackness. Still the strange scraping sound persisted. Something hard and rough poked at his back and he jumped. Something that seemed like a tree branch scraped against him, as if trying to pull him towards the side of the cell. Soon another jabbed into him and then another. He twisted and squirmed, trying to fight them off. He wished that he could find a piece of dirt or moss, but knew that his hope was only wishful thinking. In a desperate attempt to identify his attackers he again cast the firestarter spell. He immediately wished he had not.

First he saw the eyes: great, numerous eyes, clustered together and shining in the brief light. Next he saw the mandibles: immense fangs jutting out below the eyes and dripping with venomous saliva. Finally he saw the legs: thicker than his own and longer than the height of a tall man. They pushed through the bars of the cage, greedily, hungrily probing for their meal. The vision of the gigantic spiders was too much for Dylan. His vision blurred and darkened. His stomach churned. He vomited and passed out. As he slumped to the ground his arms jerked violently and then supported his limp form.

Still the spiders continued their assault, but the shackles and bars kept Dylan unharmed.

Dylan had no idea how many days or weeks he spent in the cage. Occasionally he would feel his stomach grow heavier, exactly as it had in the hospital when he had been fed by conjuring food directly into his stomach. His every waking moment was a nightmarish torment of fighting against the spiders. Sleep came only when he was too fatigued to remain awake, and he only slept for brief amounts of time before either his nightmares or the spider's efforts roused him again. At first he tried to stay hopeful by thinking of Jewel. He focused on his memories of her, but it became more difficult with each passing moment. Soon his mind was nothing but a jumble of fear and despair except one memory.

Fireworks exploded overhead as he faced the blanket. He knew Jewel was behind him. He reached for his shoe, but she screamed something. He changed his plan. Kneeling down he reached for the corner of the blanket. The spider jumped, and Dylan couldn't move his arm away fast enough. Pain shot through his arm as the fangs sunk into his flesh. He knew the poison would be flowing through his veins. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop it. He looked backwards towards Jewel and saw the giant spiders hauling her into the forest beyond the campfire. The fireworks continued to explode overhead. The sounds of the party still floated across the clearing.

"What are you doing with her?" he heard a voice yell. Dylan turned to see Jewel's father charging towards him. When he arrived the small, fist-sized spider leapt onto the big man's shoulder.

"You stay away from my spider!" Jewel's father yelled and stormed back out of the clearing.

Dylan looked down at the blanket. It was the spider's. He needed to return it.

Gradually Dylan's thoughts and memories became twisted towards his newfound delusion.

Jewel knew exactly how long she was in the darkness of her own cell. After countless days of crying, she had finally composed herself enough to consider escaping. She had first walked in the dark, holding her hands stretched in front of her until she had found a grimy stone wall. She had followed the wall until she found an opening and had continued through it, always keeping a hand on the stone, trying to

find the extent of her prison. After several long hours she gave up. It seemed to go on forever in a mazelike fashion, and without being able to see she knew she had little chance of ever exploring all of it with any certainty, much less escaping. The first time her stomach had filled had surprised her, but by now she had gotten used to it. While the days seemed to string together with nothing to mark them but her own erratic sleeping habits, she still knew exactly how long it had been. Ever since she had first become a woman her body had been a perfect calendar. She knew many girls that were not as regular, but she always started every twenty-eight days. She therefore had no reason to doubt that somewhere outside this dismal prison the months had begun to grow cold, and the leaves were beginning to change. Each day she had continued in the darkness, still hoping to find some end to the maze. Her dress had become filthy and torn, and she had eventually removed it and used it as a rag to clean the muck and grime from her skin as best she could. Each time she settled down to sleep she attempted to focus her mind and clear her thoughts, but it was no use. Her abilities as a psion seemed to have disappeared completely, and that, more than anything, made her feel terribly alone.

Love Completed

Ever since his wife's death Bill had read the obituaries, knowing that each time one of his friends passed on, there was one less person who would attend his own funeral. He did not fear death, but as he had approached the end of his life the loneliness had steadily grown. He never would have expected, however, what form his funeral would actually take.

The United World Order of Magic official stood next to the giant hole filled with hundreds of bodies wrapped in burial cloth. There was no eulogy. There was no somber crying. As the workers took up their shovels and began filling the grave, the Uwom official thought about his comrades who had fallen to the hands of these war criminals. One old man alone had killed and injured several men using no magic, but only because the soldiers had underestimated him. The Order would not be making the same mistake again. Georgia had been openly rebellious against the Order for too long, but now they would see reason. The official spat into the grave.

"Death was too good for them," he commented and turned to leave. As he made his way back to the town of New Atlanta he had no idea of the pride and honor that Bill and the countless other Georgians had felt as they died valiantly for their freedom.

Eve, Aura, and Rupert had made little progress in their efforts to find an answer to the curse because they had soon encountered a much

more immediate problem. Refugees from the north had poured into Macon, met quickly by the Free Georgia Militia. Overnight Macon had become the new capitol of Georgia in what was now a full-blown war effort against the Order. Rupert was now at their headquarters: the Macon courthouse as he had been for long hours every day. As one of the few remaining former members of the Georgia Magus he had taken it upon himself to help train the militia's new recruits. Aura also had her hands full, working in the newly restored Macon magic factory. She was learning how to make wands, and even though she was not a psion herself, her extensive knowledge on the subject had proved invaluable. Girls and women of all ages came to the mansion for training. Eve was kept busy with the arduous task of searching each of their minds for clues to their ability, and when Aura taught classes Eve attended both as a student and as an assistant teacher. Eve's attendance, however, was uncommon. She now spent nearly sixteen hours of each day asleep, and less and less of it was restful. More often than not she escaped to the comfort of Lizzy's room to play. Many of the school teachers who had survived now taught in the Macon school, but gone were the politically correct lessons that forbade the use of magic. Students were instructed in combat and protective spells and urged to continue their practice at all times. As the factory produced wands, the first and best were distributed to the militia, but many were also donated to the school. Soon the children would no longer need to share. Eve, being young, did not yet have her own wand, but she kept a pocketful of sawdust on her at all times as did every child who was old enough to speak. The component spell: "nonincantum" prevented or delayed the use of most magic in a wide area and was now taught as widely and freely as the fire starting charm.

Eve scowled as Aura dropped the bundle of food into a chair in their room. "More conjured phantom food?" Eve asked spitefully.

Aura nodded. They, like most others, had donated their horn of plenty to the war effort, and even though there were several horns producing food around the clock, there was still not enough to go around unless it was conjured and multiplied.

"I know you don't like it, Eve, but we all have to make sacrifices."

"I just wish I could have a little piece of chocolate, or something with some taste," Eve said, thinking of the recent feasts that she had been having with Lizzy.

“We all do, sis. I’m so sorry.” Aura looked at the open book in front of Eve who was sitting on her blanket which was her bed. “Find anything?”

Eve shook her head, “It’s hopeless. Where are Jewel and Dylan? Why haven’t they come back?” Eve had been expecting her sister to return all summer, but as Autumn began she became increasingly worried.

“I don’t know, but I’m sure they’ll be okay. We can’t let ourselves worry too much. I need you to be strong.”

Eve felt angry at being told this for what she thought was the millionth time, but just then the door opened, and Rupert walked in looking tired. Eve looked back at the book but didn’t really read anything. Whenever she and Rupert talked they always had a fight.

“Welcome home, darling,” Aura greeted him, “How was work?”

“Fine, I guess. A patrol has gone missing, so we think the Order might have gotten them, or Kane’s feeders. We’re fighting a two-front battle here, and we’re outnumbered on both sides. These boys have spirit though, but that’s not enough. I have to constantly remind them of that. If you could see the lack of discipline...” He paused, and Eve looked up to see him looking over at her. Scowling she looked back down at the book. Discipline was the word that he always used when talking to her. He also seemed to resent her constant sleeping, despite her assurance that much of it was spent talking with Marcus Zitan’s daughter. Eve had neglected to mention what she did with Lizzy all day.

“Eve and the girls are doing very well,” Aura interjected. “All of them can think-talk with each other now, and just the other day Vivian forced me to write a naughty word on the blackboard. I was so proud of her, but of course I had to pretend like I wasn’t and reprimand her for it.”

Rupert nodded and turned to Eve, “Have you made progress with the girl in your dreams?”

“Her name is Lizzy,” Eve snapped for what felt like the hundredth time. The least he could do would be to remember her name.

“Of course. Have you made any progress with Lizzy? What have you talked about?”

“She doesn’t like talking about her father. We talk about other stuff. Sometimes she lets things slip, but I still haven’t found out anything useful.” Eve said angrily, though she wasn’t sure if she was

angry at Rupert or at herself. She knew she wasn't doing as much as she could be doing to investigate the curse.

"Well, keep at it I guess. Be careful that you don't get trapped again so that you can't wake up. Don't neglect your schoolwork either." He said in a tone that reminded Eve exactly how he felt about her sleeping habits. "What's for dinner?"

Aura gestured to the chair of conjured phantom food, and Eve was happy to see Rupert's crestfallen expression.

"Better than starving, I suppose," he said, patting his belly which had shrunk considerably in the past few months.

After dinner they all settled down to sleep. Fur Oshus curled up at her feet, and Eve went through the motions of clearing her mind and let herself drift off to sleep. She was surprised, however, when she did not see Lizzy or Lizzy's room.

"Vivian!" she exclaimed!

Vivian was a chubby black psion a few years older than Eve who was taller than most girls her age. She had been teased for her awkwardness until her ability as a psion had blossomed faster than any of the others. Now she was treated with respect, out of admiration by the other psions, and out of fear by the kids who did not share her power. She and Eve had recently become friends.

"I knew I could do it!" Vivian said happily. "I was reading through one of the books about dream talking and I wanted to try it tonight. Eve, you're naked!"

"So are you. It doesn't matter here. I've done this before..."

"Who's that?" Vivian asked, pointing behind Eve.

Eve's heart dropped into the pit of her stomach, and she turned around, already knowing who would be behind her. Standing there was Lizzy.

"Oh no..." Eve breathed.

"Did you bring a friend for tea?" Lizzy asked excitedly.

"You already knew how to dream talk and you didn't tell me!" Vivian exclaimed, sounding hurt.

"Wait, no, it's not like that Viv. This isn't the same," Eve tried to explain.

"Who is this?" Lizzy asked, "Tell her not to yell. I don't like yelling."

"Don't tell me what to do!" Vivian shouted.

Eve was caught between them, looking quickly from one to the other.

"Please, stop it," she begged both of them. "Calm down. Lizzy, this is Vivian, she is my friend. Vivian, this is Elizabeth. She's a ghost."

Vivan asked, "A ghost?" but Lizzy cut her off.

"I am not a ghost!" Lizzy yelled, hurt. "Why would you call me names, Eve? I thought we were friends! I let you try on my dresses!"

Eve hadn't expected this. She hadn't meant to insult Lizzy. She turned around to see the girl crying.

"I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that you aren't alive."

"You meany!" she yelled as tears streamed down her face. "I didn't want to do it! I told you! He made me do it! I never want to see you again!"

Lizzy disappeared instantly, and Eve was left looking into the nothingness. She turned and looked at Vivian who was standing with a confused look on her face.

Eve sighed. She was mad at Vivian for upsetting her friend, but she knew that yelling at her wouldn't help anything. She tried to stay calm. "Let me explain."

After Eve finished her story Vivian said, "So you dream talk with a dead psion who was sacrificed to this curse and you haven't told anyone?"

"No. Aura knows, but she asked me not to tell anyone. I was going to tell you, I really was. But we haven't been friends very long, and the subject hadn't come up yet," Eve said truthfully. She hadn't told Vivian only because she wasn't sure if she would keep it a secret.

"That's fair, I guess. So how much have you found out about the curse?"

Eve blushed, she felt guilty about how she had been spending her time with Lizzy. "Not much," she said and saw Vivian scowl. Vivian was always in the top of all her classes. She would never have ignored the problem like Eve had, and that made Eve feel even worse. She decided to try to change the subject, "Why were you trying to dream talk with me tonight? Don't you usually try out your psion work with Jenny?" Jenny was Vivian's little sister.

"I wasn't really trying to talk to you. Jenny and I both decided to try it when we went to sleep tonight. I had expected to see her, but instead I saw you."

"Oh, I guess we both were doing it at around the same time."

"I'm sorry about the whole thing with Lizzy. Do you think she'll be okay?"

"I hope so. She doesn't have anyone else to talk to, so maybe she'll forgive me and give me a chance to explain. She really doesn't like being dead, I think."

Vivian smiled, "I can understand that. I'll try to be nice to her too if she comes back. So is this all there is? Didn't I hear her say something about tea and trying on clothes?"

"Oh, yeah, let me show you," Eve said, glad that she knew something Vivian did not, because that was rarely the case in class. She focused her mind and imagined her room back home. Instantly it appeared, with a few modifications.

"Wow! How did you do that?"

"Just imagine something and think really hard about it being there. It will appear. It seems completely real too."

Eve saw Vivian narrow her eyes in concentration, and a pair of jeans and a t-shirt appeared in her hand.

"Cool," she said, and dressed. Eve, not to be outdone, conjured clothes for herself, but made them appear already on her body.

What followed was an unspoken contest of sorts as they both took turns conjuring various things each in an effort to impress each other. It ended when Vivian's sister appeared lifelessly between them.

"You can't do people or animals," Eve pointed out. "They aren't real, so they just stand there. They don't even blink unless you make them do it."

Vivian's sister blinked. Vivian said, "Neat," and her sister disappeared. In her place appeared a large black man with a thick grey beard and mustache. Eve had seen Vivian's father only once at school. He raised a hand jerkily and put a finger up his nose.

Both girls exploded into laughter, and Eve lost control of herself and everything disappeared, leaving them laughing in the vast expanse of nothingness.

"I never thought about that," Eve said after they both composed themselves, and her room had returned. Rupert appeared in front of her and began a goofy, awkward dance like a gorilla. They both laughed at this and began another contest, making fun of various teachers and students. Eventually they tired of the game and sat on the floor talking.

“So what are you going to ask Lizzy when she comes back?” Vivian asked, not knowing that this was the last thing Eve wanted to talk about.

“I don't know. Mostly we just play. She doesn't like talking about her father or anything else related to her death.”

Vivian shot Eve a stern look that reminded her of Rupert. “You can't just ignore it. Isn't your sister: Jewel counting on you to find out how to break the curse?”

The simple question cut into Eve deeply, and she started crying.

“I... I know.” She said with her face in her hands. “But it's so hard. Until we became friends last week I didn't have anyone to talk to. Lizzy listens to me. Lizzy doesn't treat me like a child. When I'm with her I don't have to eat yucky conjured phantom food. I can wear pretty dresses instead of my sister's stupid hand-me-downs.”

“Tell me about it,” Vivian said, and Eve was glad that she had not told her that it could be worse like Aura always did. “Jenny and I hate conjured food. As soon as we can dream talk with each other we'll go nuts with being able to eat.” As if to make her point a basket of food appeared between them, and Vivian took an apple and began to eat. Eve followed her example and began to eat a banana.

“But we can't ignore the problem,” Vivian said between bites, and Eve was amazed at how much she had changed the statement by saying 'we' instead of 'you' as Rupert would have. “Will it help if I play with you and Lizzy too? That way we can both enjoy it but at the same time try to help Jewel.”

It was as if a dam had broken. Eve had been dreading tackling the problem alone and now she no longer had to. She felt instantly energetic and more confident and now wished that she and Vivian could talk to Lizzy immediately.

“Oh yes!” she exclaimed, “That would be great. Thanks, Viv.”

“No problem. But what was that you said about the spell being ancient magic? I've never heard about that.”

“Oh, the curse on the staff was a sacrifice assisted spell. Lizzy was the one sacrificed. It is supposed to be the strongest ancient dark magic. The others are hate, torture, and something called perversion. But trust me, you don't want to know what perversion is.” Eve shuddered and continued, “The old good magics are love and self-sacrifice, but there are supposed to be others.”

“Self-sacrifice? But didn't you say that was what the girl did?”

Eve shook her head, “Rupert says that isn't the same thing. No body knows much about self-sacrifice, because it's just a legend. He says that it has something to do with giving up what you want in order to help someone else. The girl's father made her sacrifice herself because he wanted to live forever. That isn't the same thing, I guess.”

“So it's like fasting.”

“What?” Eve didn't understand the word.

“Fasting. It's when you stop eating, or stop eating a particular type of food, for a short time. My dad taught me about it. My family does it sometimes.”

“Is it magic? What does it do?”

“Not really. It makes you better at stuff, while you are doing it and afterwards. That's why I'm so quick to learn how to use my psion abilities, and why I am so good at school. I remember things better and can focus my mind more easily.”

“But...” Eve started, not wanting to be rude.

Vivian laughed. “I know. I'm big. My whole family is big, but that's no excuse. I don't exercise enough, and when I'm not fasting, I don't eat well. I don't mind. Everyone at school can tease me if they dare. I'm happy, but I'm trying to lose weight because I want to, not because of what other people think. Now it will be much easier. I'll just eat whatever I want here and diet in real life. It's easy enough since we all eat phantom food anyway.”

“So fasting is a form of self-sacrifice and it actually works,” Eve said thoughtfully, heartened by the idea that there might be an answer to the curse. “Do you know of anything else like that?”

“Not really. Of course I know all about Love Bonds and Family Bonds, but I never thought about love as old magic, I guess it would have to be, since it's been around since before the Great Change.”

“But,” Eve continued, trying to work out the problem that she had been ignoring for so long, “If someone were to give up something valuable enough, it might break the curse. What is more valuable than life?”

“Freedom,” Vivian said instantly, and Eve gave her a surprised look.

“Freedom?” Eve asked.

“Yeah, freedom is what makes life worth living. My brother is always saying that. He's a soldier in the Georgia Free Militia. He's always talking to the other men in town whenever they talk about giving up and letting the Order take over Georgia. Sometimes I hang

around and listen. My mom calls me a tomboy, because I'm always more interested in 'boy' stuff. My brother says that we are fighting for freedom, and that is what the war is all about. He says that the lives of the soldiers who die in the war are worth it, and that one man's freedom is worth more than any number of lives.”

“I've never really thought about it like that.”

“Well, it makes sense. Life isn't worth living if you aren't free, and even if you are free and someone else isn't, then my brother says that we have a moral obligation to help that person free themselves. He also says that anyone who doesn't value their freedom more than their life isn't ever really free.”

“Like the curse,” Eve said, trying to wrap her mind around the concept that seemed much too large for it, “That is what I am fighting for, freedom from the curse for Jewel. That reminds me of something my sister said.”

“What's that?”

“She and Dylan said that they would gladly risk death to break the curse, and that they would be willing to die if it would keep us from being harmed by the curse. Isn't that the same thing?”

Vivian nodded, “I guess so. Your sister doesn't fear the curse because it might kill her. Your sister fears the curse because it controls what she does. That sounds like wanting freedom to me.”

Eve formulated the thought and was terrified. Who could give up their freedom to break the curse? Would she be willing to do that for her sister? Eve had never before considered that a happy ending for Jewel would not mean a happy ending for her.

“What's wrong?” Vivian asked after Eve had been silent for several moments.

“I... I think I know a way to break the curse,” Eve said painfully.

“What? How?”

“Lizzy said something once. Before when I was trying to find out who her father was. She said that she was helping Isaac Kane. She said that she was helping her father. Sometimes when we are playing she'll stop and say that she has to go, because she has to do something. That must be when she is forcing people to do stuff that they don't want to do. I don't know much about it, because she doesn't like to talk about it. But if I were...”

Vivian looked concerned, “You don't mean...”

"If I stayed in the staff with her... forever and kept her from going, or if I went with her and kept her from making people do things then the curse wouldn't work. I tried it the first time she said she needed to go when we were playing dress up. She started to stay, but then something pushed me out of the staff, and I woke up. I never really thought about it until now."

"Well then that wouldn't work then, would it?" Vivian offered, trying to talk Eve out of the idea. "If you try it again you'll just get pushed back out of the staff."

Eve had another horrible thought, "Not if... not if I'm dead. Like she is. I'd be trapped in the staff with her forever, just like her."

"Eve, no. There has to be another way. There has to be something else you can do!"

"What then? If I knew of anything else then I'd do that, but what else is there? Of course I don't want to do it. I don't want to die. As much fun as it is to play with Lizzy, I don't want to be trapped with her forever. I don't want anything that has happened in my life because of this stupid curse!"

"There has to be another way. We'll look for another way together. If we can't find one... I don't know. But we'll look for another way first, okay."

"Yeah, of course. I'm not even sure if it would work anyway." Eve also wasn't sure that she would do it even if she knew it would work.

"Okay, just promise me you won't do anything without talking to me about it."

"I won't. Thanks, Viv, I really needed your help."

"No problem, Eve. Right now I'm tired because I was up all day, and it seems that dream talking isn't restful. I need to go to sleep," Vivian said then looked around. "Um, how do I do that?"

"That's a good question. Sometimes I lie down in a bed here and just fall asleep. I wake up on my blanket at home. If you want to wake up, I guess you could try pinching yourself, but I've never thought to try it."

"Wow, that's such an obvious idea I don't think I ever would have thought of it. I'll try it," Vivian said then pinched herself hard on her arm. She disappeared immediately.

Eve smiled and then turned off the lights in the dream. She settled down to sleep. Unlike her time in a coma, she was able to drift off to

sleep easily. She knew that if she were ever to carry out her newfound plan to trap herself with Lizzy then she would never sleep again.

Isaac Kane heard the sound of metal slam against stone and looked up to see Cleopatra storming across the throne room. The look of rage on her face made him shrink backwards in the throne unconsciously.

“What's wrong, dear?” he asked carefully.

“Nothing,” she barked, “That little welp psion has been taking her sweet time breaking this awful curse. I swear, if I could use any of the ancient good magic I'd do it all myself.”

Isaac was puzzled, “But you said that it was taken care of. You said she wouldn't have any problems.”

“She wouldn't if she had a brain in her skull, but all you mortals are alike. Dimwitted fools. I took care of it now. One way or another that curse will be broken before we have to reanimate my late lamented nemesis. I did everything but hand her written instructions on how to do it. Finally I'll be free of this wretched geis. When it happens just remember where your loyalties lie. It's your good fortune that you are useful to me at the moment. When you become expendable then you'll have only my good graces to protect you.”

Isaac bowed his head and said, “Yes, of course mistress.”

It was Sunday, but Rupert was still away training recruits. Eve sat and ate her phantom soup with forced spoonfuls. Fur Oshus mewed plaintively after eating half of his dish of phantom tuna. Eve scratched behind one of his ears with her free hand. She looked over at Aura who was writing out a lesson plan.

“What's more valuable than life?” Eve asked, wondering if Aura would think of freedom as more valuable.

Aura looked up at her, “What?”

“I'm still trying to figure out how to break the curse. It is strong because a life was given up in order to create it. What's more valuable than life?”

“Nothing. Life is precious.”

Eve wondered how two good people could have such wildly different answers to the same question. “What makes life worth living?” she asked, voicing Vivian's statement as a question.

“Life is worth living because it is good. Death is bad. Why would you ask that? Don't you think life is worth living?” Aura got up and moved to sit beside Eve. Eve could feel the concern in her mind, but knew that Aura had not fully understood the question. Eve didn't know if she herself understood it.

“No, nothing like that. I know life is worth living, but... aren't there things worth dying for? Like the soldiers in the militia? Why are they willing to die?”

Aura's words were soft and comforting, but Eve sensed in her mind that the thought behind them was incomplete. “They die to protect our lives, sis. A few soldiers die to protect many others.”

“But,” Eve protested, “The Order isn't trying to kill us, are they? Why are we fighting against someone who doesn't want to kill us?”

“Sis, these are complicated questions. What do they have to do with the curse?”

Eve couldn't respond without explaining what Vivian had said. Eve wasn't sure if she understood the concept of freedom being more important than life enough to explain it. Instead she said, “I just want to know. Why are we fighting them if they don't want to kill us?”

“Eve, the Order kills many people that disagree with them. Georgia has always disagreed with them about many things. That is why they have killed many Georgians in this war. We fight against them to protect others from the same fate.”

“But why don't we just agree with them? They won't kill us if we agree. What is so important that we disagree with them enough to go to war?”

“Sis, again, this is all very complicated. I'm not saying that you are too young to understand it, but I am saying that they are very difficult things to understand. Even I don't understand it all the time. Rupert understands it much better than I do. Maybe you should ask him.”

Eve scowled. She didn't want to ask her brother-in-law anything. Aura saw her look of anger and resentment.

“Sis, you can't stay mad at him. He just wants the best for you. He's trying to protect you. He's trying to protect us all.”

“He treats me like a child. You try to protect me but you don't treat me like a child,” Eve pointed out.

“Eve, I always have and always will treat you like my sister. That is different. Rupert has a hard job. He has to look after our entire family. And besides, don't get mad at me, but you are a child.

Remember what happened when we didn't want to tell you what perversion was?"

Eve blushed and looked away at her hands, "I said I was sorry."

"I know, and I forgive you, but that's not my point. My point is that even though you are a smart and talented young woman, you do need our protection. Rupert's not perfect. He never will be. We're not perfect. But he is doing the best he can to protect us. He loves us, and we should trust him."

"I know, but why does he have to yell all the time?" Eve said bitterly.

"Honey-child, he's scared. We are all scared. He's a military man. He yells at his troops too, but you have heard how he talks about them here. He yells at them so that they will learn to obey him and not get themselves killed. He brings some of that home with him, and I've talked with him about it. He's trying. He really is, but it is hard for him. He's used to protecting and teaching soldiers, not young girls. He's very good at what he does, and we need to give him the benefit of the doubt. He cares about us much more than he cares for his soldiers, so his instinct is to yell at us much more. I'm very proud of how little he yells at us, in fact."

"I guess you're right," Eve said, trying to accept what Aura was telling her. "Still, can we talk to him about why we are fighting in the war together? I just don't want him to tell me that I'm too young to understand. I think I might know a way to break the curse, but I need an answer to this before I'm sure."

Aura's eyes got wide, "You think you can break the curse? What is it? What have you found out from Lizzy?"

Eve was glad that Aura remembered Lizzy's name, but still didn't want to tell Aura everything, because she knew how Aura would react. She said, "I'm still not sure. I think that there is something more valuable than life. And I think that is what we are fighting this war for, but I don't know and I don't want to upset you."

"Why would it upset me? What is more valuable than life?"

Eve looked up into her sister's eyes and with the heart of a child asked the most mature question Aura had ever heard her ask, "What is worth dying for?"

Aura choked on her words for a moment, "I told you, I think the soldiers are dying to protect many others. Life is worth dying for, but we can't use sacrifice to counter the curse. That would be wrong."

Eve nodded, "I don't know if life is what we are fighting for. I guess I do need to ask Rupert. Do you think I can ask him when he comes home tonight?"

Aura nodded somberly, "Yes, but let me speak to him alone first. I want to make sure he knows that you have a very serious question and need a clear answer. I still can't promise that he will be able to answer you. I think he will give the same answer I have."

When Rupert had arrived home Eve could tell immediately that he was in a bad mood, but as Aura had suggested, Eve picked up Fur Oshus and left the room. She would take a walk, and that would give Aura enough time to prepare Rupert for her questions.

Almost an hour later Eve stood at the doorway to their room, clutching Fur Oshus tightly against her. She was afraid, but whether it was because she did not want to talk to Rupert, or because she did not want him to give the answer she feared, she did not know. She opened the door, and her heart sank into her stomach. Rupert was sitting in his chair facing her. Aura was not there.

"Aura had to go out for a bit. She tells me that you have something important to ask me," he said, and though his voice was calm, they still contained that hint of authority that Eve so detested. She didn't want to do this alone. Why had Aura left? Eve nodded, and let Fur Oshus jump out of her arms onto the floor. When she didn't speak, Rupert prompted her, "Well, come on then. You can ask me anything you like."

Eve bit her lip and looked away from him. Why did he have to make her feel so small? Why couldn't he just be nice, like her sisters?

When she still didn't speak he said, "Aura told me that it had something to do with breaking the curse. What is it? What have you found? This is important, remember. We don't have time to spare. Out with it."

This made it worse. Eve had tried to be prepared. She had decided everything that she was going to say, but now the words wouldn't come.

"Girl, Aura was very serious with me about how important this was. If you're pulling some prank just to mess with me then I don't appreciate it."

"SHUT UP!" Eve screamed at him, "JUST SHUT UP! You don't have to yell at me all the time! Why can't you just let me ask you the question? Why do you have to sit there and make me feel like a stupid

little girl? You probably can't even answer my question! I should just ask Vivian's brother anyway! I hate you!"

Eve ran back out the door and dashed down the large stairway leaving Rupert sitting with his jaw hanging open and staring out the door. She was halfway to Vivian's house before she even realized that she was going there. She broke into a run. She needed to talk to someone.

Jenny, Vivian's little sister answered the door when Eve knocked.

"Is Vivian home?" Eve panted, out of breath from running.

Jenny nodded and yelled back into the house, "Vivian, it's Eve!"

When Vivian arrived at the door Eve flung herself into her arms and began crying. It was several minutes before Vivian thought to try to use her powers to calm her down.

Eve, it's okay. You're okay. What happened?

Eve's thoughts were a jumble of fear and anger, but Vivian got most of the story from looking into her recent memories.

"Come on up to my room," Vivian said to her and led her up the stairs. "Jenny, tell mom to put out another plate for dinner."

Vivian's room was familiar, even though Eve had never actually been there. Vivian had reproduced it exactly during their contest in the dream. The only difference is that there was no table full of delicious food. Soon Eve calmed down.

"I need to talk to your brother," she said.

"I know. I still think we should look for another way to break the curse."

"Yeah," Eve agreed, since she was still terrified of the entire idea. "But I have to know if it would work. I have to know if giving up freedom is more powerful than giving up life."

"We can ask him during dinner. He always likes to answer any questions I have. Come on." Vivian stood up and motioned towards the door. Eve followed her downstairs.

"It's so nice to have you for dinner," Vivian's step-mother greeted her as they entered the kitchen. She was a kindly Chinese woman. Vivian's real mother had died shortly after Jenny was born. Vivian's brother, Ben, was a tall, muscular young man who wore his militia uniform everywhere. Vivian's father was fat and elderly, and reminded Eve of Rupert.

"Thanks," Eve answered smiling across the table at all of them. Somehow this family seemed more like she thought a family should

be. She remembered the dinner that her own family had once shared at Aura's house before Jewel and Dylan had left. Maybe some day she would have that again.

Dinner was, of course, phantom food, but Eve didn't mind because she really wasn't in much of a mood to eat anyway. Eve barely followed the polite conversation around the dinner table as the five of them ate, until Vivian spoke up.

"Ben, Eve needs to ask you something. It's about the war."

The large black man looked up surprised, but with a warm smile on his face. "Ah, another smart girl like you, Vivian? Well, Eve, I'll be glad to answer whatever questions you have as best I can."

"I..." Eve balked, remembering how Rupert had yelled at her.

Vivian's large father leaned forward and said, "Don't be shy, dear. There are no questions that cannot be asked in this household." With this one sentence his resemblance to Rupert melted away.

"I need to know why we are fighting the war. What is so important that soldiers are willing to die?"

Ben's eyes got wide for a second. "Wow, that is a very important question. I'm surprised that you thought to ask it. I'm impressed. Why do you think we are fighting it?"

Eve shrugged, "My sister says that the soldiers fight to protect our lives. Vivian said that they are fighting to protect our freedom. Which is it?"

"Let me see if I can answer that. This is complicated. How much do you know about the United World Order of Magic?" Ben asked.

"Not much, I guess."

Ben spread his arms, "Well then, it seems we have some explaining to do. Father, would you like to tell her about the Order?"

The old man cleared his throat. "Of course. The Order was created a few years after the Great Change in an attempt to prevent the many wars and conflicts that had erupted all over the world. They believed that by restricting and controlling the use of magic that they could bring peace back to the world. They mean well, but their methods are... Well, it is their goal to be the only ones allowed to use magic. They believe that they would then be able to force the world to be peaceful."

"Isn't that a good thing?" Eve asked, judging from his tone that he didn't think so.

It was Ben who answered, "No. They think that they know better than everyone else how their lives should be lived. They want to rule

everything that happens in peoples lives. This is why we are fighting the war. When the Order tries to take away our freedom to use magic, they are taking away our freedom to protect ourselves. We are fighting this war because we believe that no one should ever have to give up that basic right. Freedom to protect our way of life would be the answer to your question. Freedom and life are both very precious things. You can not have life without freedom. Giving up freedom, is the same as giving up your life, but if you fight for freedom until death, then you may lose your life, but never your freedom."

"So, is freedom more important than life?" Eve asked, confused.

He shook his head, "It isn't that simple. Freedom and life are equally important, but freedom is the only one we have any control over. Someone can take your life even if you don't want them to, but they can only take your freedom if you let them. May I ask why you want to know all this?"

Eve hesitated, but Vivian said, "It's okay, Eve. You can tell them."

Eve swallowed hard and then launched into an explanation of the curse, starting with as much of Dylan's story of his family as she could remember and ending with her experiences with Lizzy. By the end she was in tears, but Vivian's father and brother had not interrupted. Vivian's mother rushed over and hugged Eve tightly as both men sat back in their chairs heavily.

"What do you think, Vivian?" her father asked, and this surprised Eve. Rupert would never have asked her opinion.

"I don't know. I don't want her to do it, but so far it seems to be the only way," she answered.

Eve wiped her tears away and looked up at Vivian's father. He had a solemn expression on his face.

"Often," he said, "War forces us to do many things that we would prefer not to do. Eve can talk with this girl for a reason. Nothing happens by chance. This girl, it seems, gave up not only her life, but also her freedom. I don't think that doing the same would be enough. The reasons behind our actions are as important as the actions themselves. Before you do anything, you must know the girls reason for wanting to help her father. You must also know your own reasons for wanting to help your sister. Once we know that, we may have an answer."

"She said that she had to, because he told her to," Eve offered.

Ben shook his head, "Dad is right. It must be something deeper. You must find out what the real reason is. You should talk with Lizzy tonight, and Vivian should go with you."

Eve lay back on the cot on the floor of Vivian's room. She cleared her mind and heard Vivian's steady breathing that told her she was doing the same. She drifted off to sleep, and there was Lizzy's room. Lizzy was sitting at her table having tea with her bear and her doll. A moment later Vivian appeared.

"I'm sorry, Lizzy," Eve said, taking the empty seat at the table across from her.

"I'm sorry too," Vivian said, conjuring another chair and sitting down.

Lizzy looked at Vivian, scowled for a moment, but then said, "Hey, I'm Elizabeth, but you can call me Lizzy. This is Poofy Bear and this is Karabell. And you already know Eve. Want some tea?"

Vivian smiled, "I'm delighted to meet you. I would love some."

"Lizzy," Eve began after they all had a steaming cup of tea in front of them. "I need to talk to you about your father."

"I hate him. I don't want to talk about him," she snapped, frowning and scrunching up her face.

"I know, but this is important. Why do you help him?"

"He told me to. I'll get in trouble if I don't."

Eve shot a desperate glance at Vivian as if to say, "See?"

Vivian placed a hand on Lizzy's shoulder. "He can't punish you here. You don't have to worry about getting into trouble."

Lizzy seemed as if she was about to reply, but then her expression became vacant. "I have to go. Daddy needs me. I have to help him."

"What?" Vivian asked and looked at Eve.

Eve stood up and moved next to Lizzy. "You don't have to go. You can stay here and play with us. You won't be punished. Right, Viv?"

Vivian said, "That's right," but then clapped both hands over her ears and doubled over as if in pain. A moment later Eve felt the growing pressure pushing against her.

"Fight it," Eve managed to whisper and pushed back against the feeling.

"I have to go!" Lizzy shouted.

Vivian disappeared, and Eve fought harder, but knew she was losing. "Okay, you can go, but can I come with you?"

Immediately the pressure abated.

"Yeah, I guess so," Lizzy replied, and the scene around them changed. It was different than when they had rearranged the rooms. Somehow Eve knew that this was no longer a dream, but that they were in a real place.

It was a brightly lit and cluttered small office. A desk on one wall occupied most of the room, and a man in a UWOM uniform was standing up straightening his tie. After a moment Eve realized that she was looking in a mirror from the point of view of the man.

He has to write something, Lizzy's voice echoed in Eve's mind, and along with the thought came a myriad of emotions and feelings. Eve was angry about something, but she recognized the feeling as foreign, exactly as when Jewel had transferred Aura's emotions into her mind. She was experiencing either the man's emotions, or Lizzy's, or both. The man approached the desk and picked up a quill and a piece of paper. Eve felt Lizzy's touch on his mind as she forced him to write.

No, we don't have to do this, Eve objected, and attempted to stop her.

Yes, we do. I have to help daddy! Lizzy cried, and Eve felt an overwhelming hatred well up inside her. She thought of Rupert and how he treated her like a child. She hated him. At once she pushed with her mental powers, and the man began to write. Uncontrollably Eve's feelings towards her brother-in-law mingled with Lizzy's anger at her father and the two young psions forced the man to finish his order and sign it. He exited the office and handed the parchment to a clerk outside. Soon it was over, and the vision disappeared, replaced by Lizzy's room. Eve was aghast at what she had done. She had not meant to, but she had been unable to control herself. She pinched herself hard and woke up.

"Eve! Are you okay? What happened? We tried to wake you, but we couldn't!" Vivian cried when Eve sat up. The room was brightly lit by the light of a lantern on the nightstand, and Vivian's brother was sitting next to Eve's cot looking concerned. Eve told them both the whole story, feeling ashamed that she had not been able to stop Lizzy.

"Don't feel bad," Ben said after she finished, "You did wonderfully; better than I had hoped on your first attempt. We now know much more about the magic involved."

"What do you mean?" Vivian asked.

“The girl's hate towards her father is what fuels the curse. Hate is one of the ancient dark magics. This girl's life and freedom was sacrificed to form the curse, but now her hate drives it. Like you said, you couldn't control yourself because of your feelings towards your brother-in-law. Until you forgive your brother-in-law, you won't be able to fight against the curse, and I believe that the way to break the curse would be for Lizzy to forgive her father.”

“Forgive him? For what he did to her?” Eve said, appalled.

“Don't worry. This means that you won't have to sacrifice yourself or your freedom. If you can convince the girl to love her father and forgive him, then the curse will no longer have a source of power.”

The realization was nearly too much for Eve. She launched herself at him and threw her arms around him as far as they could reach in a tight hug.

“Oh thank you!” she cried, tears streaming down her face onto his shirt. Vivian joined them hugging Eve and Ben, and Eve let herself enjoy their newfound hope.

The task, however, was not a simple one. When Eve returned home the next morning, accompanied by Vivian and her brother, Rupert was furious that she had run off. He had been polite while they were present, but as soon as they left he launched into a tirade about how worried he and Aura had been.

“I wasn't in any danger!” Eve protested, “I was at Vivian's. I told you I was going to ask her brother. I already said I was sorry!”

“That's not the point,” he fumed. “I'm grounding you. This is for your own good. You are to be with either Aura or me at all times. You are all we have left.”

“Don't say that!” Eve screamed, “You act like Jewel and Dylan are dead! And Audrey too. Well they aren't. I just know it. Their going to be fine! Don't say things like that! I bet you don't even care that I know how to break the stupid curse! I found out because I went to Vivian's! So I don't need you and your stupid rules!”

Rupert looked speechless and sat down in his chair heavily.

Aura crossed the room and knelt next to her, “You know how to break the curse? Why didn't you tell us before?”

Eve pointed at Rupert accusingly, “He was too busy yelling at me. He's always yelling at me. I went to Vivian's because he didn't even let me ask him my question! Vivian's family answered it for me. So I

don't need him or his stupid yelling. Why didn't you stay here? Why did you make me have to talk to him alone?"

"Eve... I... I'm sorry. I should have been here. You're right."

Rupert interjected, "You're taking her side on this? I told you, she didn't even ask me a question. I asked her what her question was, and she just ran off."

Aura yelled, anger in her voice, "I have a good idea of what happened, and I've told you before that you can't treat us like your soldiers! And you can't treat Eve like a child. She's a psion."

Rupert stood up, "She's not you, Aura. You can't live your dream through her like this. She is a child. Don't think I don't know how glad you are that she is a psion. You are using her to make up for not being one yourself. It isn't good for her. It isn't good for you."

Eve began to speak but Aura squeezed her hand and said, "No! None of this is good for any of us! We are at war! We are fighting this curse! We are barely anything resembling a family! But Eve is the only one that can help Jewel! You may have resigned yourself to thinking that she is gone. It's easy for you! You lose soldiers all the time! Jewel is my sister, and I won't believe she is dead until I see her body! As long as I believe she is alive then I will help Eve break this curse any way that I can!"

Rupert stormed out of the room. Aura was crying. Eve had never before seen her sister have a fight with him. She had no idea what to say.

After a few moments Aura said, "I'm sorry you had to see that, Eve."

"It's okay, I'm mad at him too," Eve offered.

"So, how are you going to break the curse," Aura asked in an effort to change the subject.

Eve swallowed, "Well, that's the problem. First I have to forgive Rupert then I have to convince Lizzy to forgive her father."

Aura smiled weakly, "Sounds like it's still hopeless, then."

Eve gave a forced laugh, "Yeah. Next to Rupert, Marcus Zitan seems almost nice sometimes."

Aura hugged Eve more tightly, "He means well. Just remember that. I need to forgive him too, and I'll also have to apologize to him too. I'd better go do that."

“Okay,” Eve said as Aura stood up, “I’m going to dream talk with Lizzy. I might as well get started on talking with her about her father. I don’t even know how to begin.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. You’re a psion. I love you, sis.”

“I love you too.”

Lizzy steadfastly refused to talk about her father or anything else besides trying on clothes or having tea. Eve knew the dresses were beautiful, but they no longer seemed to matter. She watched Lizzy try on gown after gown and made an honest effort to sound sincere each time she complemented her on how they looked. Her mind was focused mainly on looking for any opening in the conversation to bring up Lizzy’s father. When at last such an opportunity presented itself, it was not the one she had been hoping for.

“I have to go,” Lizzy said abruptly, glassy eyed.

“No, not again. Lizzy, please. You don’t have to go anywhere. Stay here,” Eve begged desperately.

Lizzy shook her head furiously. Immediately the pressure began to assault Eve. She fought, but that only slowed it slightly.

“At least,” Eve gasped, “let me come with you again.” She hoped that this time she may be able to succeed where she had previously failed.

Lizzy nodded, and at once the scene changed. It was completely dark, but Eve felt cold, wet stone under her bare feet, and one of her hands was pressed against a grimy brick wall. The thoughts of the officer had been foreign, but Eve recognized the mind she and Lizzy now occupied.

No! Jewel, don’t do anything she tells you to do! She cried out, but there was no reply. Eve felt Lizzy’s hate for her father well up, and her own resentment towards Rupert joined it. She struggled, but still Lizzy prevailed. Jewel’s hand moved away from the wall and she took a few steps. Eve knew from Lizzy’s mind that Jewel had passed by an archway, and wondered why the curse did not want her to find that particular passageway. However this action did not seem to be the only one Lizzy intended. Eve felt terrible. Fueled by their mutual dark emotions, she and Lizzy forced Jewel to continue walking through the darkness.

Rupert was running back towards the room. He had a wildly angry expression on his face, and Aura knew he must be furious with her. She dashed to him immediately.

“Oh darling, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have—”

“Get back into the room!” he barked at her fiercely, and Aura stepped back afraid. She had never seen him like this. Was the curse affecting him?

“I know you're mad,” she tried to console him as he continued to rush towards her. “You have the right to be mad. I never should have—Eeep!”

She was cut off when he reached her and in one swift movement lifted her in his strong arms as he had on their wedding night. “Don't worry about that now,” he said. “We have to get Eve. I've already warned the people downstairs.”

Aura was confused, “What? What's wrong? What's going on?”

He carried her through the door and set her on her feet. He began to toss their few possessions into a satchel. “Wake Eve. We have to go. The Order is attacking in full force. We are retreating to the caves and mines in the area.”

Aura felt a sharp pang in her stomach, and the next thing she knew she was doubled over looking down at the floor which was now covered in her own vomit. Rupert rubbed her back with one hand and held her hair with the other.

“Okay, you got that out of the way. It's natural. Don't worry. Just compose yourself and wake up Eve. I'll finish packing.”

Aura nodded weakly, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and then kneeled down next to her sister. She shook Eve's shoulder gently.

“Eve, wake up. Eve?” She shook harder. A new fear manifested itself in her mind. Was Eve in a coma again? Why couldn't she wake her? She had only laid down a few moments before.

Rupert threw the last of their things into the satchel and looked down at them. “Is she not waking up again?”

Aura could only nod. Why was all this happening to her family? Would she ever feel safe again? Rupert knelt down and slapped Eve's face smartly. Still her sister remained unresponsive. He lifted up one of her eyelids but her eyes had rolled backwards. Aura only saw the bright whites.

“Carry her,” he said. “I have our things. There isn't a moment to lose.”

Aura lifted her sister carefully, and Rupert retrieved the blanket and stuffed it in with the rest of their things. He hurried them out of the door and down the stairs.

Rupert stopped so abruptly at the bottom of the stairs that Aura almost bumped into him. She looked up from Eve and over her husband to see two of the militia officers standing in the front room. Each had a wand pointed at the other.

“We can't just run away!” one yelled, and Aura recognized him as Vivian's brother, Ben. The other was a lieutenant named Dale.

“Lower your weapon, soldier!” Dale yelled, “We have our orders. We are hopelessly outnumbered. We will retreat and regroup.”

“Every time we retreat we give them more of Georgia! We must fight even if it means our death! I'll not take orders from a coward! That is how we got into this mess in the first place!”

“This is treason, soldier. Don't make me use this!” Dale flipped his wand slightly.

It seemed that neither man had noticed that they were not alone.

“Lower your weapons!” Rupert yelled, his voice booming across the hall. He had not drawn his wand.

The two men looked over at him, but did not obey his command as Aura had expected them to. He outranked them both. Why did they not obey?

“That was an order!” Rupert yelled, and his wand appeared as it always did, so quickly that Aura had not seen him move.

“Captain, I am arresting this private on charges of treason. I will not lower my weapon while he threatens me,” Dale said coldly, not taking his eyes off of Ben.

Ben barked, “I'll take no orders from cowardly dogs. You can run if you like, but I choose to fight. If you aren't with me, then you are against me.”

“Fellow Georgians,” Rupert said, “If either of you dies today, you both die today. I will not give the order again. Stand down, or both of you are being court-martialed. You are delaying my family and endangering their lives.”

Slowly both wands dropped as each man was unwilling to move faster than the other. When they turned and saluted Rupert he ignored them and pushed past them.

As he passed he said, "As much as I'd hate to have to tell your father, Ben, if you don't follow orders, I'll kill you myself. Fall in behind me, both of you. You're on guard duty for these two ladies."

"Sir! Yes, sir!" Dale replied. At first it seemed that Ben was going to protest, but when he saw Eve his expression changed.

"Sir! Yes, sir!" he said and fell into step beside Rupert.

Eve, Lizzy, and Jewel continued in the darkness as three people in one body. As hard as she tried, Eve was unable to overcome the waves of resentment against her brother-in-law, and so they continued to guide Jewel's steps. Eve had tried to find out what they were causing Jewel to do, but it seemed that even Lizzy did not know. She only knew what actions were required at each particular moment, and had no idea of the purpose behind them. Eventually, however, it seemed that their mission had been accomplished because again she and Lizzy were back in Lizzy's room. Eve was about to speak when she felt a sharp pain in her side and woke up.

She was not, as she had expected to be, in her room. She saw open sky above her and she felt arms carrying her. She looked up at her sister. Eve was bouncing up and down and it took her a moment to realize that they were running.

"Aura, what's going on?" she asked, but her words were drowned out by Rupert's loud voice.

"Feeders! In the trees! Keep them away from the women."

Eve looked over, but instead of her brother-in-law, she saw the familiar form of Ben. He pointed his wand into the forest, and a bright orange sphere shot out from the tip and sailed into the trees. It was accompanied by a loud explosion. Briefly she saw a hideous face illuminated in an orange glow and shut her eyes to block it out. She felt something wet hit her cheek and looked up. Tears were streaming down Aura's face.

Aura glanced down for only a moment. "Close your eyes, Eve. Don't look."

"What's going on?" Eve asked again.

"The Order attacked Macon. But it's going to be all right. We escaped in time. We are going somewhere safe." Aura said, her voice almost drowned out by more explosions around them. Each one bathed them in an orange glow.

"Did you leave a note for Jewel?"

Aura's expression went pale, and she almost tripped. "Oh, Eve. I'm so sorry. I forgot. But there wasn't time. We just barely got away in time."

Eve was horrified. She now knew for certain that Jewel was still alive, but now she still might never see her again. She looked away from Aura, and another flash of orange erupted in the trees. Too late Eve shut her eyes. The second vision of the feeder assaulted her mind and she passed out.

When Eve awoke she saw first the form of Rupert sitting a few feet away on a small boulder illuminated by white light from the tip of his wand. She heard low, regular breathing next to her and rolled over on the blanket to see Aura asleep. Beyond her was Ben, holding his own glowing wand, but at first Eve did not recognize him. His skin, once a deep umber, was now ashen, as Jewel had been while she was in the hospital. Next to him asleep on a blanket, was Vivian, who was similarly pale. His breathing was labored. They were at the edge of a huge cavern, illuminated by a forest of glowing wands. A vast crowd of silhouettes moved about the cave.

"It's not your fault, Ben," Rupert was saying, "It could have been any of us. He's in a better place. We were lucky to get out of there alive."

"I... I... if I hadn't kept us, if I hadn't disobeyed orders, he might still be alive. I should be court-martialed." Ben breathed haltingly.

"You don't know that. We did what we had to do. Dale did what he had to do. He died for his country valiantly in battle. We should be proud of him and honor his memory. I'm not going to lose two good men today over this. Like it or not, your field promotion stands, Lieutenant. After today we'll need all the good soldiers we can get. Now get some sleep, you've been through a lot today."

Ben nodded and set his wand on the rock as he slid down onto the blanket next to his sister.

"How are you feeling, Eve?" Rupert asked, and Eve jumped. She hadn't known that he knew she was awake. He moved closer and knelt down beside her.

"Fine, what's going on? Who's Dale?" she asked.

"He was a very brave man. He died protecting you, protecting us. But we're safe now. We're in one of the caves outside Macon. The color seems to be returning to your skin, and your hair is only pink. The roots are still red, though."

At his words, Eve held her hand up in the light and saw that her skin was slightly paler, and her freckles were gone. She held a strand of her hair in front of her face, and indeed it was a vivid shade of pink.

“What happened?” she asked.

“You looked at a feeder. I guess you only got a brief glimpse. Your eyes are still a nice shade of green, and your pupils are round. You’ll be fine.”

“Why aren’t you...”

“We train our soldiers not to look directly at them. Aura and I managed to avoid their gaze. Many of the soldiers, like Ben over there, were not so lucky. Some had to look at them in order to aim their spells. You should thank him when you get a chance. He saved our lives.”

“What about Vivian? Did she see one? Will she be okay?” Eve asked, throwing a concerned glance over to her friend’s sleeping form.

“She’ll be fine. She didn’t see one. We had to transfer Ben’s sickness through his family bond to her. Just like what they did at the hospital with Jewel and Dylan, you remember? Two people can fight it fairly effectively.”

His mentioning of Jewel reminded Eve of her vision. “I know that Jewel is alive! She’s trapped in some dark maze or something, but she’s still alive.”

“What?” Rupert asked, looking startled, “How do you know?”

Eve tried to ignore her anger at him. She saw in his mind that he did believe her. His words indicated otherwise, but it seemed that he simply wanted to know. He did not doubt her claim. She described for him her dream and how Lizzy had forced Jewel to act, but left out the parts about her resentment of him. When she finished Rupert had a thoughtful expression on his face.

“How many times has she done this?”

“She’s said that she has to leave many times, but I’ve only went with her once before this. She made an UWOM official do something, but I’m not sure what.”

“Considering the recent attack, I have a good idea what she made him do. This gives us quite a bit of information about how the curse works. You say it is fueled by her hate for her father?”

“Yeah, Ben and Vivian helped me figure that part out.”

Rupert nodded, “So the curse uses sacrifice, and hate. Very powerful ancient magic indeed, but knowing your enemy is half the

battle. If the hate fuels it, then we don't need to counter the sacrifice. We only need to counter the hate. If you can somehow convince the girl to love her father again, the curse should be broken.”

“How?” Eve cried despondently, “He made her kill herself. I don't think there is any way to forgive that. What could I say to her? She won't even talk to me about him.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder roughly, but Eve felt a wave of emotion pour from him. Above all, he loved her and her sisters and was terribly afraid for them.

“Eve, I'm not good at things like this. I'm a soldier. I fight with magic, and tactics. I... I kill enemies. I've never had to deal with anything like this before. I'm sorry. That's why I'm so bad at talking with you. Aura and I fight because of it too. I think... I think that you are much better qualified to combat this than I am. You should ask Aura—and Vivian too, you girls seem to be better at this emotional stuff.”

In that moment Eve felt her resentment towards him begin to fade. Eve had never been able to understand all the explanations that Aura had ever given her for Rupert's gruff attitude, but now she began to see. Still, much of the feeling remained. She now saw a way to combat at least her own turmoil that helped fuel the curse when she joined Lizzy. If she could overcome that, then she would be one step closer to helping Lizzy overcome her own hatred.

“You look tired,” Rupert said, interrupting her thoughts. “Get some real sleep. You'll feel better when you wake up.”

Eve nodded. She could see in his mind that he didn't want her to talk with Lizzy again tonight, and for a moment she wanted to, just to spite him. She wished she didn't, because it was evidence that her resentment still remained. It was her fatigue that made the decision for her, and she drifted off to sleep without dreaming.

The next morning Eve awoke to only the light of Ben's wand, except for a few specks in the distance on the other side of the cavern. Aura was leaning against the rock with the wand at her back so that it illuminated the book that she cradled in front of her face. There was a basket of fruit between them. Eve realized only then how hungry she was and couldn't remember the last time she had eaten. Anything, even conjured phantom food, would do. As she moved to sit next to Aura she grabbed a peach. Her sister seemed engrossed in the book and didn't notice her until she bumped against her.

“Oh, hey sis. I didn't see you get up. How are you feeling?” Aura asked.

“Fine. What are you reading?” Eve didn't recognize the book as any of the psion texts.

“It's a medical journal about feeder sickness. I borrowed it so I can learn how to help Ben and Viv. They've been sleeping for quite some time now. There's not much we can do, but there are a few things that help speed up the healing process.”

Eve took a bite out of the peach before responding. She almost choked and then instantly spit the chunk of peach out on the ground. Something was wrong with her food. Soon she noticed that Aura was laughing.

“I think this peach is bad. What's so funny?” Eve asked.

Aura smiled and said, “Honey-child, that's a real peach. You just weren't expecting it. Take another bite.”

Eve looked down at the fruit dubiously. She carefully took a small nibble. Expecting the taste made all the difference. It was the most delicious thing she had ever tasted. It was true that she had been having feasts often in her dreams, but she now realized that nothing could compare with real food. Her dream food had tasted exactly as she thought a peach was supposed to taste, but her memory must have been incomplete. Greedily she devoured it, and soon her hands and face were sticky with the juice. She sucked on the pit and stared at the basket.

“You can have one more, but that's it,” Aura said. “We need that fruit to help them.” She gestured to where Vivian and her brother were sleeping.

“It's for them?” Eve asked, feeling guilty for eating food that had been intended to help her friends.

Aura nodded, “It's okay though. We have enough. They can only eat a few bites whenever they are awake, which won't be often. The rest of their food has to be transported directly into their stomachs.”

“I think I'll wait and save one for later. Is there any conjured food? I'm still hungry.” It took a great deal of self-control for Eve to say this, and she still eyed the basket longingly.

“Actually, we have regular phantom food, so you don't have to worry about it being stale.” Aura said, and gestured to the horn of plenty next to the basket.

“Why do we have our horn back?” Eve asked as she leaned forward and picked it up.

“There aren’t as many people to feed,” Aura said sadly, and Eve felt a wash of guilt pour over her again. Her food wasn’t stale because people had died. She wished that she was still eating stale food. With a sorrowful command she dumped a few chocolate bars out of the horn, not for the taste, but because they were convenient to eat. It wasn’t even junk food. Horn food always had all the right nutrients.

“When will they get better?” Eve asked between tasteless bites.

“It’s hard to say. Ben wasn’t hurt as badly as Dylan was, and Vivian wasn’t hurt at all, so they should heal much faster. They are still transferring, though, so they will appear to get worse. Once they start to get better, we’ll have a good idea of how long it will take.”

Eve nodded and took another bite of chocolate. After a moment she said, “Rupert saved our lives, didn’t he? And Ben helped him? And... and someone else... someone died?” She bit her lip.

Aura sat the book down and put an arm around her. “That’s right. Rupert was in the front when three feeders attacked from the woods to either side of us. Rupert stood his ground and told me to keep running. I... I didn’t see exactly what happened. I was busy carrying you, but Rupert told me the story later. Ben threw himself in the way of two that attacked Rupert. Dale killed the third but not before it had touched him. Just before he died he threw himself at the other two feeders and pushed Ben out of the way. Rupert and Ben killed them, but it was too late. Dale was gone. Rupert carried Ben the rest of the way. If it wasn’t for them...”

They sat in silence. Eve thought of the ghastly vision of the feeder illuminated in the orange glow of the spells and shuddered. She felt a new appreciation for her brother-in-law and the soldiers under his command.

“Do you pray?” Eve asked after a few minutes had passed.

“Of course, why?”

“Vivian’s family did it once. I didn’t really understand it. We never prayed at home.”

“Yeah,” Aura said, “Daddy didn’t really think much of it. Do you want to pray now?”

“I guess. Should we?”

“I think so. I can’t think of a better time for it.”

Huddled together in a cave of refugees the two sisters began to pray. They first prayed for Dale and then the family that he left

behind. Then for all those who had lost their lives or family in the war. They prayed for Jewel and Dylan and then for Rupert, Vivian, and Ben. Eve prayed for Lizzy, and then on Aura's suggestion they prayed for Isaac Kane. Once they started, Eve found it comforting and it seemed that there were too many needs to count. Eve found it surprising that Aura prayed for the United World Order of Magic even though they were their enemies. After more than an hour they stopped, only to start again when they remembered to pray for each other. By the time they finished, they were both in tears.

Later that day, or night, Eve didn't know which, Aura taught her pspion class. Eve was thankful that all of the students had escaped unharmed, but was saddened to find out that almost all of them had lost husbands or brothers or fathers. Quickly the studying was forgotten as the women gave each other comfort. Eve began to realize that these people were all her family and remembered something Ben had said once: "Georgia is not a country it is an ideal. Georgia lives on in each of us who fight for freedom." She had not understood what he had meant then, but now she thought she did.

"Thanks," Eve said across the table at Lizzy, accepting a steaming cup of tea. "I need to talk to you about your father."

Lizzy's expression changed immediately as it always did whenever Eve tried to bring up the subject, but this time Eve was determined. She thought of the first time that she had helped the curse. Rupert had told her that the Uwom official must have been considering ordering the attack on Macon and the curse had forced him to do something that he might not have done otherwise. Eve felt that it had been her fault that so many had died. She never wanted to do anything like that ever again.

"I don't want to talk about him. I hate him." Lizzy complained.

"I know, but don't you hate making people do such terrible things?"

"I don't really make them. They already kind of want to do it. I just help them decide."

Eve let out a frustrated sigh. "Yeah, but sometimes they decide to do bad things. Wouldn't it be better to leave them alone and let them decide for themselves?"

"They don't do bad things. They are helping daddy."

“Lizzy, when we made that man sign that paper, he was ordering soldiers to kill innocent people. Just like when your father told you to kill yourself. Isn't that bad?”

Lizzy shook her head and frowned. “They deserved it, just like I deserved it.”

Eve's anger at the first statement was overshadowed by her surprise at the second. “Lizzy, you didn't deserve what your father did to you.”

Lizzy nodded fiercely, still frowning. “Yes I did. He said that I was bad. It was my punishment. I was always bad, but I'm helping him now. He won't get mad at me if I help him.”

“Why... why did your father say that you deserved it?”

“I let mama die.”

Eve was speechless. She needed to know more, but had no idea how to convince Lizzy to tell her the entire story. After a few moments a thought struck her.

“Lizzy, can I look inside your mind? I want to know what happened.”

Lizzy shook her head, “I don't want to die again. Don't make me do that again.”

“I won't look at that, I promise. I just want to know what happened to your mother.”

“I don't remember. I was little.”

“Please, Lizzy. This is important. I'll just look. Afterwards we can play in the candy maze or play dress up or do whatever you want, okay?”

Lizzy's expression seemed to brighten. She didn't smile, but her frown went away. “Yeah, okay. I guess.”

Eve cleared her own mind and reached out to Lizzy's. It was difficult, since she had to make the connection through their weak Friendship Bond, but Eve had the benefit of excellent training. Carefully she pushed past Lizzy's emotions and thoughts and into her memories. She swept past the recent ones in a quick blur all the way to Lizzy's first memory.

Noise and colors surrounded her. A giant woman's face was above her, and Eve recognized her only as a vague symbol that could be translated as mother. Eve was wrapped in a small blanket, and her mother was cradling her in her arms. Frightened by the noises she let out a loud cry. Immediately a loud banging rang out from somewhere. Her mother made soft noises at her and, reassured, she

went quiet. She felt motion as her mother moved, carrying her across the room. Her mother lowered her gently into a pile of clothes and covered her with some of the garments. Though she was hidden, she could still see a small sliver of the room. Her mother cooed at her gently, encouraging her to keep quiet. Then she raised a wand and spoke. Eve's eyes grew heavy. As she drifted off to sleep she heard a loud crash and the door to the room flung open. Her mother fell to the floor at the feet of a dark figure, and then Eve drifted off to sleep.

When the vision ended Eve withdrew from Lizzy's mind and saw her crying across the table.

"If..." Lizzy sobbed, "if I had been quiet. Mama wouldn't have gone away."

Eve moved to kneel down beside her, "Lizzy, it's not your fault. You were only a baby." Eve struggled to find words that might convince Lizzy. Eve knew that the girl should not blame herself, but was at a loss. With no solution readily at a hand, Eve gave up for the moment. They spent an enjoyable evening playing, as she had promised, but Eve went to sleep with a heavy heart.

Later the next day she sat with Aura and the group of women. Eve had just finished relating the story to them, and they were all silent in thought. After a long pause, it was Aura, who spoke.

"You have to meet her. All of you. She needs a family. Eve is a good friend, but this girl needs more. You must all join Eve and dream talk with Lizzy."

It was such an obvious thing. That night the group of psions, apart from a few who did not feel comfortable with the idea, or who were not proficient in dream talking, linked minds with Eve when she lay down to sleep.

"I brought some friends for tea," Eve said as Lizzy gaped in surprise at the crowd. Eve was quite certain that in Lizzy's short, but long life, she had never seen so many people at once.

In the months that passed Aura began to feel more and more depressed. She was still teaching her class, but most of the psions did not attend. She could not blame them. She had instructed them to spend their time with Eve, dream-talking with Lizzy. They had even worked out a rotation so that at least one of them would be with her at all times. The few girls that remained were the ones that had not

progressed far enough to be able to do so or simply did not want to participate. Eve still told her in detail whatever happened during their long nights with the girl, and it seemed that they had been making great progress, but for Aura it was not the same. Now, more than ever, she was aware of her own limitations. She was idly flipping through one of her textbooks when Eve awoke and rushed over to her with a broad smile on her face.

“We did it!” Eve cried gleefully.

Aura's dolor disappeared immediately. “What? Really? How? What happened?”

“Well, we were all playing with Eve and being nice, like we normally do, when, get this, she said she wanted to talk about her father! Mostly we just listened and let her talk, like you told us. After a few hours she told us that he wanted her to help him again, but then she said she didn't want to go! She said she loved him too much to continue helping him hurt people. She said that she was going to stay with her new family. We did it. The curse is broken. I just know Jewel will come home as soon...”

Aura saw the color drain from her sister's face and she drew her close in a tight hug as they both began crying.

“Jewel is trapped somewhere,” Eve sobbed. “I don't know how to help her. What if we were too late? It's been months since I saw her in that vision. What if...”

The unasked question hung in the air for a moment.

“It'll be okay,” Aura cooed. “Jewel is strong. She can take care of herself. You did what you could. I'm sure she'll be all right.”

Jewel felt something change. She was still in the darkness of the maze, but now her mind was clear. It was similar to how she had felt after conquering the amulet. Whatever had been blocking her psion powers before seemed to have gone. She stood up, and even such a basic action now felt odd. It was so simple a thing, to command her body to move and have it obey, but she now realized that it was something that she had not felt since she had reassembled the staff. She wondered how she could have not noticed the change then. Why had her control returned? She nurtured a momentary hope that the curse had been lifted. She hadn't done anything, though. Had Dylan somehow found a way to break the curse? Would he be on his way to rescue her? She had a terrible thought. Had he given his life somehow to defeat it? Panic rushed through her, and she struggled to

contain herself. If he had, then she needed to escape on her own. Perhaps she was free only for a short time. If so, she must act quickly, but what should she do? She couldn't escape if she couldn't even see. If only she was still affected by the feeder sickness then she might be able to escape. How had she overcome it? Why had the feeders in Atlanta not affected them? Could she go back? She and Dylan had found themselves cured of the sickness after the first time they had joined minds. They had gone back through each other's memories. Jewel took a breath and closed her eyes. She focused her mind and began to envision her recent memories. She began moments before, when she had been despondently crying against the wall of the maze. Carefully she urged time backwards in her mind and watched her vision of Cleopatra's life in reverse. With increasing speed the action progressed backwards. She relived her battle with the amulet, her trek through New York, her many flights with Dylan across the country. Finally she relived sharing her memories with Dylan for the first time. This is what she focused on. How could she reverse what they had done to conquer the feeder sickness? How would she know? She opened her eyes, but the darkness remained. What had she done? She studied the vision.

She was Dylan, looking desperately at the feeder that floated in between him and the book. She passed through the thing, retrieved the book, and then the scene changed. Still the darkness remained around her. Jewel swallowed hard and steeled her resolve. She reversed time again and carried herself back, out of the cave, and to the hospital. She relived the dismal months lying in the hospital bed next to Dylan and was glad that her memory was only short minutes each day separated by sleep. Soon she heard Dylan whispering thanks into her ear and then she was back in the circle of protection. As she came to the first time she had ever seen a feeder, she felt it. Terror, like nothing she knew could exist, filled her as she looked at it. She felt it draining and consuming everything from her, and like her struggle with the amulet, Jewel's first instinct was to retreat from the vision back to reality. Her abilities as a psion, however, allowed her the self-control necessary to persevere. She allowed the life to drain from her until it seemed she might die. Just before the end, she drew herself out of the vision and opened her eyes.

The maze was bright, as if lit by sunlight, and there were no shadows. Jewel doubled over, fell to her knees, and vomited. She saw

the dark blood splatter onto the floor and across her pale hands. Her dirty hair was bright white in the places not covered in filth. She was too weak to support herself, and she slumped onto the floor, rolling to the side as best she could to keep herself out of the mess. She lay on her back as pain rocked her entire body. She spasmed again and turned her head as she vomited more blood. The agony was unbearable.

“Dylan! Help me!” she choked and felt something open in her mind. There it was, a link to him that was unmistakably their Love Bond, but it felt strange. Maybe the difference was that she was not under the power of the curse. This must be how it was supposed to feel. She was comforted by hope. He was alive!

“I love you. Forgive me.” Desperately she took the pain and torment and pushed it through the bond. As she did she felt the echo of his pain and wished that she could have found another way. But this was the only way. If she did not, she would die. She resolved herself and finished the transfer. At once she began to feel better, but the corridor remained bright. She laid back and let herself rest. She felt her stomach fill with food as she drifted off to sleep.

“I love you to, spider.” Dylan mumbled in his delusion as he struggled against the chains that held him. He no longer wanted to escape the creatures outside his cell. He longed for them. He cried out to them. They would protect him from his greatest fear: Jewel. He was overjoyed when the cell became bright and he could see them. He gazed lovingly into their beautiful eyes. He ached to feel the sting of their glorious fangs.

Jewel got up instantly when she woke, but she still felt weak and had to brace herself against the wall of the corridor as she walked. She struggled to remember the many twists and turns. More than once she looked down to see her own recently made footprints in the grime when she had been sure that she was in a new section of the maze. After several such occurrences she soon could not find a corridor that didn't have her footprints. Jewel stopped to collect her thoughts. She looked around for something to write on even though she knew that she wouldn't find anything. She refused to accept the possibility that she could not escape, but how could she find a way out even if there was one? As far as she could tell, the maze was actually fairly small, but seemed to be enchanted to appear large and winding. She closed

her eyes and focused, attempting to draw a picture of the maze in her mind. No matter how she tried, it didn't make sense. Every time she had tried she would end up back where she started even though she knew that she should not have. It was as if the walls were moving.

Jewel stood up and drew a large X in the grime on the floor. She began to walk through the corridors. She walked straight until the hallway took a left. After a while the hallway turned right. At the end of the corridor, was a large X. Jewel was disappointed at first, but then noticed something. She wiped up the grime with a foot, but this time she drew a large arrow pointing straight down the corridor. Again she followed the hallway until she returned, but this time, the arrow was facing the other way. Jewel smiled. Somehow the portions of the maze seemed to be rotating or moving soundlessly. One of her arrows was even cut in half, with an entire hallway separating the line from the point which now faced the wrong way. Jewel began to methodically mark the floor with arrows, careful not to step on any of them. When she was finished she had a fairly clear picture of her prison in her mind. It seemed that there were nine square sections of the maze that either rotated or switched places with other sections. Each section contained several corridors, most of which turned at right angles or even looped in a u-turn. Sometimes a corridor would lead to a dead end, but then after that section had moved the path would be open. Near the center was the large square room in which she had initially arrived. As far as Jewel could tell, the section that she was in never moved, and neither did those next to it. There also seemed to be corridors on the outer edge of the maze that never moved at all. She suspected that the maze rearranged itself only when she was far enough away not to notice. To test her theory, Jewel walked into a set of corridors that she had identified as a different section. She continued past that into yet another section, listening closely. She heard nothing, but when she attempted to return, the part of the maze that she had started in was now completely different. Instead of a long straight corridor ending in a left turn, there was now an abrupt left turn. Without entering that section she walked back again and again returned. The corridor she passed through and the small segment of the one she entered briefly remained unchanged, but again when she returned to where she had started it was different. It seemed that any section she occupied along with the ones next to it remained unchanged, but whenever she strayed farther from a section it would

move. Jewel repeated the process several times and found, as she had suspected, that there were four different sides to each section. With this information she began to map the maze in her mind. It was a slow process, because the many twists and turns would have made the maze confusing even if it did not rearrange itself. After countless long hours Jewel finally had a clear picture of the maze, but it seemed that there was no exit. She had almost given up hope of escape when she heard a dull thud echo through the corridors. Another followed, and Jewel hurried through the twists and turns as quickly as she could. She had to retrace her steps often in order to move sections so that she could pass through them, but eventually the sound grew louder until she came to a dead end. The pounding seemed to be coming from somewhere just beyond the wall. Her mental image of the maze told her that she was near the outer edge. Whatever it was, the sound was outside.

“Hello?” Jewel yelled.

The pounding stopped, and a muffled voice yelled, “Jewel! Is that you?”

Jewel’s heart leapt, “Dylan, there’s just a stone wall here. I can’t get through.”

“The room should rotate. You have to go away from it first. One of the sides will have an opening. It’s hard to explain.”

“Don’t worry, I know how it works. I’ll be right back.”

She dashed through the maze as fast as her weary legs would take her. Adrenalin pumped through her on the way back, but when she returned there was still a dead end.

She yelled, “The wall is still here. I’ll try again.”

“I heard it move. Good job. It won’t take more than two more tries.”

Jewel dashed back through the maze again and when she returned she was overjoyed to see that the dead end now took a sharp turn. When she rounded the corner, however, her joy faded.

“It’s different, but still a dead end!” she shouted.

“That’s because the door is closed. I’m trying to open it.” There was another deafening crash as something slammed against the stone on the other side. The corridor shook. Chips of rock showered down from the ceiling and slid off the stone wall in front of her.

“Stand back! I’m going to blast it open!”

Jewel retreated back around the corner and wondered how Dylan had escaped. Her thoughts were interrupted by a thunderous crash as a

shower of rocks and dust blew into the corridor. She coughed and shielded her eyes as bright light streamed in around her, nearly blinding her. She felt a hand on her arm.

"The light. I can't see," she cried.

As he helped her to her feet, Jewel cleared her mind and found that it was as easy as simply tensing a muscle. One moment she was blinded by the light, and the next she was shrouded in darkness. Only a faint glow of light pierced through the dusty air. Urged by the hand on her arm she scrambled over the debris and out into a brightly lit sandstone chamber. She turned, eager to see her love again.

He emerged, crawling over the rocks, and as he stood Jewel immediately stepped back, horrified.

"Isaac!" She cried in despair.

"No, don't run," he pleaded, his voice now sounded almost exactly like Dylans. It seemed to have lost the unnatural quality it had had when she first met him. "It's okay. The curse is lifted. I'm here to help."

Jewel couldn't believe it. He must be trying to trick her. She had to get away from him. She looked at the wand in his hand, knowing that at any moment he would raise it and kill her.

"Jewel. Don't be afraid," he begged. "Check my mind. Look for yourself. I never meant to do all those things. Please."

In her panic Jewel had completely forgotten her psion abilities. Instantly she touched his mind, but it was not, as he had suggested, to check if he was trustworthy. Isaac threw the wand onto the stone floor in front of her feet.

"Please, Jewel. That was unnecessary. I'm not going to hurt you. Just look for yourself. You can trust me."

Jewel hesitated. Was there something in his mind that would hurt her? Did he have a way of taking away her powers if she looked at his motives?

"No," she said, "Where is Dylan?"

Isaac looked pained as he said the name, "Cleopatra... she has him. She's done something to him, Jewel. We have to help him. We have to stop her. You can't do it alone. You have to trust me. Please."

Something about his tone made Jewel begin to doubt. Slowly she reached out towards his mind. At first she encountered intense fear, and then there behind it, was a startling benevolence. This man was

not only kind and trustworthy, but he seemed to be more loving and gentle than any man Jewel had ever met. In fact, Jewel had only encountered emotion like this once before. It seemed that Isaac Kane was similar to Dylan in many respects.

As he felt her touch he breathed, "Thank you," and approached her. As he wrapped his arms around her in a fatherly embrace, Jewel stood speechless. She was overwhelmed with emotion.

"How?" she asked weakly.

"Cleopatra wanted the curse lifted too, but she can't use any of the good ancient magic. She wants to overthrow Georgia and wage war against the world. The curse kept her focused on resurrecting Marcus Zitan, so she couldn't do anything else. Somehow she arranged all of this so that she would regain her staff and those spell-books before your sister would break the curse. She must know that I'm against her now." Isaac said as he retrieved his wand from the floor. He shuddered. Jewel could tell from his mind that Isaac would prefer to die than to be a slave of the curse or Cleopatra ever again. "We have to act quickly. Dylan is in one of the dungeons. Cleopatra... isn't here. She took the feeders on another attack before the curse left. She surely knows it's gone now. We don't have much time. She would have started on her way back here as soon as it lifted. This way."

Jewel rushed after him as he sprinted across the chamber and through an archway. As it darkened he whispered an incantation and lit their path with the glow from his wand. They made their way quickly through the twists and turns of the pyramid until they emerged in a large dark chamber. Isaac stopped so abruptly that Jewel bumped into him. She heard the cold, evil voice before she moved to see Cleopatra standing next to Dylan in the center of the room.

"Dylan!" Jewel cried.

"I really must thank your sister, Jewel. I could never use the ancient magic necessary to break the curse. It is comforting to be free of it, though I admit it puts me in a difficult situation. I had grown fond of Isaac. It will be a shame when I kill him."

Jewel had expected Dylan to call out to her, but instead he retreated and hid behind Cleopatra as she spoke.

"What have you done to Dylan?" Jewel yelled angrily.

Cleopatra grinned maliciously. "Allow me to demonstrate. Dylan, be a dear and dispose of Isaac."

Dylan began to advance, and at once Jewel said to Isaac, "Don't hurt him."

Isaac nodded and raised his glowing wand, but soon figures emerged from the darkness all around them. Jewel was horrified. A dozen or more gigantic spiders began to advance on them. As one passed Dylan he placed a hand on it and climbed up to sit astride it. Isaac hesitated, and a spider to his right shot out a strand of web that attached to his wand and jerked it out of his hand.

“I’d love to stay and watch the fun, dear,” Cleopatra said, “but I have some pressing matters to attend to. Momentum Transportum Totalis In—”

Jewel pushed into her mind and stopped the spell. It was much different from any of the times she had done it before. The mind she touched was, to her surprise, Audrey’s, and there was a powerful force that pushed against her. It was as if a great pressure was squeezing her out. Jewel steeled her resolve and pushed as hard as she could, entering her cousin’s mind completely. Pain encompassed her, but she let her mind ignore it. In the real world, her body collapsed to the floor, thrashing in agony, but Jewel felt nothing.

How dare you! It was Cleo, and Jewel could feel her anger and rage.

Jewel, help me! I don’t want to do any of this. What’s happening to me?

It’s okay, Audrey. I’m here now.

GET OUT! Cleopatra shot a torrent of anguish and terror at her, and Jewel felt her will drain away from her. Audrey also felt it and collapsed to the floor. The staff clattered against the hard stone. It seemed that Cleo was willing to let Audrey die if it would take Jewel with her. Jewel grabbed desperately at a piece of Audrey’s mind and cut it off from the rest. She entered into the portion and felt Audrey cling partially to life.

Insolent fool! Do you think that such petty tricks can stop me? Capturum Psionum, Invoke!

Jewel felt Audrey’s free will begin to depart and then her own began to do the same. Almost reflexively she divided the small section again. She formed a closed room, separate from everything, and pulled herself and Audrey into it. With a last-moment burst of inspiration she grabbed hold of Cleopatra’s consciousness as well and began to pull her in.

No! Cleopatra cried as she realized too late what was happening. With a pop their awareness of the outside world disappeared and

Cleopatra stood in front of Jewel. Audrey was between them, cowering on the floor. Walls surrounded them. Outside their bodies lay on the stone floor, motionless.

Isaac jumped out of the way as one of the spiders lunged towards him. He had to scramble again to avoid a second. As he retreated from a third his back pressed against the stone wall. He looked over at his wand that provided the only light in the room, and then at the horde of spider silhouettes that separated him from it. He slid sideways along the wall as the beasts approached.

“Don’t do this, Dylan.” He cried desperately but his nephew was unresponsive.

A spider leapt at him as he backed into the corner of the room, and Isaac slid down quickly onto the floor. The sharp fangs struck against the stone wall inches from his head, and Isaac felt a spray of venom hit his face. He cringed in pain as it burned his skin. The spider reared up on its back legs as it readied itself for another strike. Isaac turned his head away, not wanting to see the killing blow. His nose brushed against the grimy stone wall, and for a moment the shadows moved so that from across the room his wand illuminated the brick in front of his face. He saw it there on the wall. He heard the hiss, and the shadows moved as the spider struck. His hand seemed to move in slow motion as he pawed at the wall.

“Totum Paralsum!” he cried as he threw the mold into the air.

Everything stopped.

Two huge glittering fangs hung in the air less than an inch away from his neck. Dylan sat, frozen, on top of one of the spiders with his hand pointing at Isaac and a wild look on his face. Isaac scooted along the floor underneath the spiders and emerged behind them. His heart raced as he picked up his wand. It took a few moments to find it on the floor because he refused to take his eyes off of the spiders.

He raised his wand to point at one of them and yelled, “Contractis!” The spider began to shrink and soon it was no larger than a small pebble. He walked around the room, using the spell to reverse his own magic, since it had been his own spell that had enlarged them in the first place.

“Never again,” he muttered, as he lifted Dylan’s frozen form off of the last spider and cast the final spell. He lowered Dylan to the floor.

“Imobilis!” he chanted pointing the wand at Dylan.

With a wave of his wand and another well spoken incantation Dylan's rigid form went limp, and his eyes darted back and forth. He looked confused. It seemed that he wasn't expecting to be defeated when he had been moments away from victory.

Isaac said, "Don't worry. I'm a very powerful magician. Your father wasn't the only one who thought it was a good idea to learn component magic. As soon as we fix whatever sorcery has poisoned your mind, I'm sure you will be glad that you weren't able to kill me. Hold tight right here. I need to check on the rest of your family."

Isaac was glad to find that Jewel and Audrey were both still breathing. Despite several attempts, both magical and non-magical, however, he was unable to rouse either of them. He worked a few charms and found that they both seemed to be completely absent. It was like nothing he had ever seen. He levitated all three bodies and flew them ahead of him through the corridors and into the main chamber of the pyramid. Since he could not touch the staff, he left it on the floor where it had fallen. When he reached his throne he let them float gently onto the floor. He sat down heavily on the steps next to the bodies and tried to think of some way to fix the evil he had wrought.

The United World Order of Magic storage room was filled with various magical artifacts. Mirrors, lamps, brooms, carpets, musical instruments, books, potions, and many other more exotic items filled the shelves and cabinets. One wall held a long row of hooks. On each hook hung an amulet. The seventh one from the left had a notice attached to it that indicated that the item was faulty and out of service. It was designed to prevent any person who wore it from taking it off or using her powers. Inside the amulet, in a small room was Jewel. It is difficult to say if it was the real Jewel, or simply a copy. Some might call it a shadow. She had all her memories up to the point where she had overcome the amulet. After that, there was nothing. No present, no awareness. Jewel had completely removed that part of herself while fighting the amulet. She now did something similar to Cleopatra.

"You fool!" Cleopatra yelled at Jewel. "Do you know what you've done?"

"I know what I'm doing," Jewel replied.

Cleo looked angry for a moment, and then confused. “What have you done to my powers?”

“Nothing, they just don’t work the same here. It is impossible to explain unless you have done it before, as I have. You might understand a bit more in a moment.”

Cleo, furious, stepped forward and slapped Jewel smartly across the face. Jewel didn’t even flinch.

“We can’t feel pain here,” Jewel said, her mind focused only loosely on the conversation. She hoped that Cleo would have as much difficulty in escaping as she had. That should give her enough time.

Cleo turned and screamed, banging against the walls. Jewel glanced down and saw Audrey’s form begin to fade. It was working. By the time Cleo turned from the wall, Audrey was so transparent that she was nearly invisible.

“What are you doing to her?” she cried.

As Audrey disappeared, Jewel said, “Nothing. She’s not coming with us.”

“Coming with us? What are you doing? Who is that?”

A meek voice came from behind Jewel, “Are you friends of Eve? Do you want to have tea?”

And with that it was almost done.

Isaac jumped to his feet when Jewel stirred and sat up.

“Jewel! Are you okay? What happened?”

Jewel asked, “Where’s Dylan? Where’s Audrey? Where’s the staff?”

“Dylan and Audrey are right there, behind you. The staff is back in the dungeons. What is it? What’s going on?”

“No time to explain. Will they be safe here? Take me to the staff.”

“Yes, they’ll be fine. Through here.”

Isaac led Jewel again through the winding passageways by the light of his wand until they came to the Staff of Ra lying near the center of the large dungeon chamber. She knelt down and lifted it easily. The gold that now covered the cherry wood was cold against her skin.

“We have to destroy it,” she said, and as the words left her mouth a deep sorrow filled her. Now that she had the staff again, she did not want to destroy it. She thought about Audrey and Dylan and the rest

of her family and resolved herself. So long as the staff remained, Cleo would eventually break free.

“Destroy it? How?” Isaac asked.

“Let me find something,” she said. She gripped the staff and whispered, “Sumnum,” even though she had no idea where she had learned the spell. The Zitan family spell book appeared in her hand.

“Momentum Transportum Totalis Invoke,” she continued and they appeared back in the chamber with Dylan and Audrey. Jewel opened the book to a page and handed it to Isaac and began drawing a pentagram on the ground with the end of her staff.

“Read the second part,” she commanded him, indicating the page containing the Greater Circle of Protection spell. Isaac nodded. They performed the magic quickly and the air around them seemed to explode outwards when they finished. Jewel stood on a small circle of stone surrounded by infinite space speckled with stars. Isaac stood on the other side of the circle, and Dylan and Audrey lay between them.

“Open to the back of the book,” Jewel said. “There are component spells there.”

Isaac did so and said, “You want me to look for something powerful enough to destroy the staff, then?”

Jewel nodded, “Just tell me what component you need.”

At length he stopped at a page. “This one should do it, but...”

“What is it?”

“The component is the fresh blood of a psion virgin,” he said weakly.

Jewel grimaced, “After everything I have been through. This shouldn’t be a problem. Do you have a knife?”

“Jewel, no. I can look for another spell—” There was no time to argue with him. Cleo would soon break free if they did not destroy the staff right away.

“Sumnum!” Jewel shouted, and one of Aura’s kitchen knives appeared in her hand. Before Isaac could stop her she pressed the knife into her hand and slashed it across her palm. Bright red blood welled out. She held her hand out towards Isaac.

“Do it!” she commanded, and she considered touching his mind to force him. She didn’t have to. He nodded and scooped some of the blood into his cupped hand. He turned towards the edge of the circle. Jewel stroked the staff longingly one last time and tossed it out of the circle. It landed on the starlit black sky with a clatter.

“Totodestructum,” Isaac cried as he tossed the handful of blood out of the circle.

The earsplitting explosion shook the ground so forcefully that both of them stumbled. Fire and devastation raged around them and seemed as if it would break through and consume them at any moment. As Jewel knelt down she tried to conjure them all away and was halfway through the incantation before she remembered that she no longer had the staff. The edge of the circle began to fade and she huddled with Isaac at the center. Jewel lifted Audrey, who was closest to her, to keep her away from the edge, and Isaac did the same for Dylan.

“Can you get us out of here?” Jewel yelled over the din to Isaac.

He shook his head. Audrey clapped her hands over her ears.

“Audrey, you’re awake! Are you okay?” Jewel asked looking down and hugging her cousin. Her hair had changed back from black to blonde.

Audrey nodded, and Jewel looked into her mind. Her cousin was back to normal. Still, she thought, what good would it do them if they died? The circle continued to shrink, and the tempest that raged around them showed no sign of dying down.

“We have to get out of here. The spell is failing!” cried Isaac, but Jewel barely heard him. Behind him, just outside the circle, in a small break in the vortex of fire, she saw her staff lying in a pool of molten gold.

She remembered what Dylan had told her. “Marcus Zitan stole the sheaf of the staff and trapped his daughter in it when he cast the curse.”

How could she have been so blind? She only needed to destroy the sheaf, not the entire staff. Now she had foolishly destroyed the only thing that could save them.

“Isaac! I have to get the staff! Find a spell that will protect me.”

“What? That’s nonsense. We are destroying the staff. What are you talking about?”

“It’s the sheaf. That’s all we had to destroy. And it’s gone. Find something fast, before the rest of the staff gets destroyed. Hurry!” She shot a burst of urgency at him, and he began fervently flipping through the pages of the spell book. The circle continued to shrink and Jewel could feel the heat of the flames as they licked at her. Her skin began to redden and blister.

“This one might protect you for a moment, but I’m not sure,” Isaac said after what seemed like an eternity.

“Fine, do it. Now!”

“Infernis Negatis.”

Jewel didn’t wait to be sure that the spell had worked. She threw herself past Isaac and thrust her arm out towards the staff. The pain was horrible. Her arm flared and smoked. The fire singed away all her hair. She smelled nothing but sulfur and ash. She clasped her fingers around the staff and it felt like ice. She cried out and felt Isaac’s strong arms pull her back. She felt her fingers begin to slip from the staff. Her arm was black and charred. Pieces of flaming flesh began to drop off and disappear into the fire that surrounded her. While one finger was still on the staff she cried out.

“Momentum Transportum Totalis Invoke!”

Even though Jewel had envisioned Dylan’s empty dark cavern, she thought she saw a vision of many specks of wand light all around her. As she lost consciousness she must have hallucinated, because she heard Eve’s voice.

When Jewel awoke, she found that she had not hallucinated. Most of her upper body was covered in bandages, and her head was wrapped in so much gauze that she could only see out of one eye. There above her were the smiling faces of Aura, and Rupert. Someone was hugging her, and she tried to look down, but found that she could not.

“Eve, she’s awake. I’m so glad to see you,” Rupert said. Aura was holding one hand over her own mouth and wiping tears with another. She seemed unable to speak.

Eve’s head popped up into her field of vision, and she began talking rapidly. “Oh, sis! I’m so glad you’re okay! I broke the curse. Well, really I had some help, but I just knew you would come back. Oh it was so terrible. You were all burnt and everything and when everyone saw Isaac they wanted to kill him but Rupert convinced them not to until we have a trial so now he’s in jail but Audrey was telling everyone that he helped save you and no one believes her except us and Dylan’s been acting strange so we had to lock him up too but I didn’t want to but now that you’re better I’m sure everything will be okay and as soon as you can you’ll have to tell us what happened.”

“Eve, calm down. Don’t rush her. She can’t talk yet.” Rupert reprimanded.

Eve seemed to think for a moment and then said, “Yes sir. I’m sorry.”

I can think talk. Jewel sent.

Eve clapped both her hands over her mouth and gasped.

Oh. Tell me what happened! Did Isaac really help you? What’s wrong with—

Jewel cut her off. *Sis, I’m tired. You’re right. Everything will be better once I’ve healed. I’ll tell you everything soon, okay?*

Okay, should I tell them to let Dylan out?

No, something’s wrong with him. I’ll have to see if I can fix it. Just be patient for now.

In the weeks while Jewel recovered, Uwom withdrew its forces from Georgia, and the Georgians left their many caves and underground bunkers to rebuild their war-torn country. The Militia awarded many medals to soldiers and civilians, living and dead who had fought bravely for their freedom. Jewel told Eve everything that happened, on the condition that she would not try to break Isaac free or tell anyone else what happened just yet. The courts called Jewel as a witness for Isaac Kane’s trial, and at first Jewel wanted to simply show up with her staff and tell them that he was innocent and she would not let them punish him. Aura, however, convinced her that the courts were a vital part of their freedom, and that it would be best if she simply told them her story. On the day before the trial Jewel was finally able to walk on her own, but her hair had only recently begun to grow back. She and Eve made their way to the La Fayette jail where the militia had moved Dylan. Isaac was in a maximum security prison outside Macon: the new capitol.

When Dylan saw Jewel he threw himself underneath his bed and refused to come out or speak. The only emotion that Jewel could find was terror. His hair and skin were still white, and he wore sun glasses even though the room was nearly dark. Despite both their best efforts, they could not enter his mind at all. Depressed, she and Eve returned home after sunset.

“What’s wrong with him?” Eve asked as they got ready for bed.

“I don’t know. Cleopatra did something to him while we were separated. If we can’t fix it...” Jewel trailed off.

“We’ll fix it!” Eve said, reassuringly. “We broke the curse, you defeated her and saved Audrey and Isaac. Hey, that’s it. Isaac might know what she did. You can ask him after they release him from jail.”

Jewel forced a smile, "Yeah. Okay. You're right."

Isaac Kane's trial was unlike Jewel's. The jury, not a judge, sat at the front of the courtroom. A judge was present, but he was a member of the jury, only one out of twelve votes. Isaac Kane sat in a chair in front of the Jury. There were no lawyers present, and every seat in the room was filled with members of the community.

"We are here today," the jury foreman said, "to hear accounts of Isaac Kane's actions and to make a decision concerning his guilt or innocence. We have heard countless testimony concerning his attacks on our nation. He does not deny any of this. He has called only one witness in his own defense. Today we will hear what she has to say. Jewel Summers-Farseer, would you please have a seat?"

Jewel stood up from her seat in the back next to Aura, Eve, Audrey and Rupert and made her way to the chair at the corner of the room. She still walked with a limp from her injuries, but she leaned heavily on the staff, holding the cherry wood tightly. Sitting on the chair she could comfortably address everyone in the jury and audience. Isaac Kane gave her a weak smile, and she returned it.

"Mrs. Farseer. Please tell us anything you have to say that you feel is relevant to this case. After we have heard it we may have a few questions for you."

Jewel launched into her story, having spent many hours thinking about what she was going to say. She had decided finally that she would simply tell them everything that happened. She told them the truth, in every last detail she could remember. Her story wasn't even partially finished when the sun set and a few of the audience members illuminated the room with their wands. The jury took only short bathroom breaks and one small break for dinner. Even when night had fallen they still continued to listen and take notes. Most people in the audience also stayed through the night. Sunrise was creeping through the windows as she finished by telling them how Isaac Kane had saved her life.

When she finished the jury foreman said, "And is Audrey Price here today?"

Audrey raised her hand timidly.

"The facts presented here by your cousin. Are they true in so far as you have experienced."

"Yes, sir."

He turned towards Jewel. "And this spell book, the one with the curse in it. Do you have it?"

"Yes, my brother-in-law has it with him."

"Mr. Brown, could you bring that here for us to examine?"

Rupert did so, and the foreman opened the book to the proper page, read it, and passed it along to the other members of the jury.

"Very well, we will take a break, because it has been a long night. We will meet tomorrow morning. Mrs. Farseer, I ask that you be here in case we have any further questions to ask you. Court adjourned."

The next morning the Jury did have many questions to ask Jewel, but she answered them all truthfully. In the late afternoon the jury retired to a private room in order to discuss the case. They returned less than an hour later.

"It is the unanimous decision of this Georgia Court of law that Isaac Kane was under the influence of this curse. We also suspect that many others have been affected by it as well. We applaud Ms. Eve Summers for her bravery in the face of the curse at such a young age. We commend Mrs. Farseer for ridding our nation of an unknown and terrible evil. We pardon Ms. Price from any actions while under the influence of the curse. We hereby dismiss all charges against Isaac Kane and welcome him as a citizen of Georgia. We also recommend that the Georgia militia take measures to insure that such a curse does not take hold of our fair nation again. That is all. Court adjourned."

If Isaac Kane had been pardoned only two days before, there would have been a terrible uproar of outrage, but by now almost everyone knew Jewel's story. The audience cheered. Isaac was smiling broadly as he stood up from his chair. The crowd lifted Eve, Jewel, Audrey, and Isaac up side by side and carried them on their shoulders out of the door cheering. The celebrations lasted on into the night, but Jewel's heart was not in it. Late in the night, after the festivities died down, Jewel found Isaac and pulled him aside.

"What did she do to Dylan?" she asked, tears streaming down her face.

"I'm not sure," he replied, "She did something to his memory, corrupted it somehow. You should be able to fix it. You're a psion."

"I tried. There is so much fear there. I can't get in. Eve tried too, but she can't either. No one else knows his mind well enough."

"Oh. I was afraid of that. I can fix it then. I just didn't want to do it until you had a chance to try."

“What? Why didn’t you fix it then?”

“Well... it... I would have to erase his memory. I’d have to go all the way back to the corrupted part, and once a memory is erased, it can’t be restored.”

“Oh. So... he won’t remember anything? How far back would you have to go?”

“Cleopatra said something to me about his memory of spiders when she ordered me to enlarge those beasts you saw in the dungeon. She corrupted that memory because of something he said to you. ‘I remember the spider’ I think. Do you know what he was talking about?”

Jewel nodded. “That was the first night we kissed. My sister’s wedding. March 5th.”

“We’ll have to erase his memory all the way back to there then. I’m sorry Jewel.”

Jewel felt weak even though she knew that it was a small price to pay. He might come to love her again, and even if he did not at least he wouldn’t be harmed. They snuck away from the party and headed towards the jail.

“What are our two hero’s doing down here?” the guard called, smiling. Jewel suspected he was not happy about having to work tonight.

“We’re here to help Dylan. He’s the real hero,” Isaac said, and Jewel smiled at the thought. He was the real hero.

“He’s still there. He doesn’t say much except sometimes crying about some spider. I don’t think you’ll have much luck with him, but missy, if you can do half the stuff you say you did, then I don’t doubt you can help him.”

Again when Jewel entered Dylan threw himself to the back of his cell, screaming. Isaac Kane drew his wand and pointed it through the bars.

“The evening of March 5th?” he asked Jewel.

Jewel nodded somberly, and Isaac cast the spell.

Dylan looked down at the only woman he would ever love. She was raptly staring at the fireworks that she loved so much as they exploded against the night sky. He wondered if she was comfortable and asked her. She took a few moments to answer before telling him

that she was fine. She stared at him, and after a few moments a pained expression crossed her face.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked.

She looked back towards the sky, and Dylan’s mind exploded. Everything was a blur. His head tingled, and he felt nauseous and disoriented. He reached out to steady himself on the ground, but instead fell onto hard concrete floor. Around him the room was spinning. Everything was unbearably bright. He vomited.

He heard Jewel say, “Open this door!”

What door? They were outside. Weren’t they? What had happened? Was the curse finally taking him? His father had said that it might attack at any moment, and that they had no way of knowing what form it would take. Had his mother found the staff?

He felt soft arms around him.

“Oh darling. I’m so sorry. It was the only way. It’s okay now.” Jewel said. What was she talking about?

“Dylan,” another deeper voice called out, “Don’t worry. Your memory has been erased. It is not March 5th. Do you understand me?”

Dylan shook his head. He didn’t understand at all.

“It is November 21st. You have just forgotten almost a years worth of memories. Just stay calm.”

What? Dylan squinted through the brilliance at Jewel and gaped in horror. Her beautiful long red hair was now just short curls. Her arm was heavily bandaged and he could see severe scars along her shoulder. Her bandaged hand held...

“What are you doing with the staff?” he cried. “I told you to keep it hidden!”

“It’s okay, my love. We broke the curse.”

The other voice said, “Don’t worry now. Just relax, Dylan.”

He held a hand over his eyes to keep out the light. He looked over and immediately jumped to his feet. He recognized his uncle from pictures he had seen.

“Stay away from us Isaac. I won’t let you hurt her!”

Isaac backed away with his hands held up in front of him. “I’m not going to hurt anyone, Dylan. The curse is broken. You did it. You just don’t remember.”

“No. That can’t be. You’re doing something. This isn’t real. Jewel, did he do this to you?” Dylan realized that he couldn’t even be

sure that this really was Jewel. He backed away from both of them, looking around the cell for a piece of dirt. He had to escape.

"Jewel, stop him. He's going to attack," Isaac said as Dylan reached a hand towards the ground. Jewel said the first spell that came into her mind.

"Momentum Transportum Totalis Invoke."

Dim, muddy rock replaced the cell around him. Dylan recognized the cave. He had been here many times before, but how had Jewel known about it? And why was it so bright?

"I'm sure you can see, but I can't," Jewel said up to him as she sat in the mud and smiled at him.

"Jewel, what is going on? I was on the blanket with you, and then all of a sudden everything was bright, and you were with Isaac. Why do you have the staff? Are you helping him?"

"Darling, I can't answer any of that until you realize that you've lost your memory. It's November, not March."

It just couldn't be true, but Jewel was smiling up at him sweetly. Dylan wrinkled his forehead in deep thought.

"Okay, assume that I believe you. What does that have to do with you and the staff? And why are you calling me 'darling' and 'my love'? I thought you just liked me as a friend."

"Of course, I forgot. For you it hasn't happened yet," Jewel said as she stood up.

"What hasn't happened?"

"This," Jewel said, and threw her arms around him and kissed him.

For Dylan it was an odd thing, to kiss someone who seemed so comfortable kissing him, when he had never kissed her. Dylan stood frozen with no idea of how to react.

Jewel drew back from him. "You might want to try kissing me back. That's what you did that night under the stars and fireworks."

"But... what?" Dylan said, still at a loss.

"I'm trying to let you know everything that has happened since then, but you are making it difficult, my husband."

"Husband? What?" Dylan drew back from her.

"You don't like being married to a powerful psion sorceress who just saved the world?"

"Psion? Sorceress? What?"

"I'm sure you are making all sorts of confused faces that I can't see. If I do something, will you promise not to freak out?"

"I don't know if I can freak out anymore than I already am, Jewel."

"Okay. My appearance is going to change a bit. Don't worry. I can change it back whenever I want."

"Okay," he said, but then almost fell over as he stumbled backwards in surprise. "Jewel, that's feeder sickness. You... what... what's going on?"

"Hold up your hand, dear. You're the same, see?"

Dylan stared at his own ashen hand.

Jewel continued, "Now I can explain everything, but you have to believe me. Otherwise we aren't going to get anywhere, okay?"

"Uh," said Dylan, still looking at his hand in amazement. "How do I even know that you are really Jewel?"

"Easy. You fell in love with me at a Christmas party while I was wearing the same blue dress that Eve was wearing at Aura's wedding. That's when you started calling me gemstone."

"What? I never told you that. I never told anyone that."

"You told me after March 5th. Remember, you've got a lot of catching up to do."

"Okay. Uh, yeah. I guess I believe you, Jewel. Just tell me what's going on."

Jewel had told the story so many times now that it rolled off her lips easily. She left out unimportant parts and gladly answered every question he asked. Jewel informed him of his parents' deaths as gently as possible, and he took it fairly well. When Dylan heard about his injuries at the hand of a gargoyle he rubbed his hand on his back and felt the rough scars. He asked many questions that Jewel could not answer, because she had not been with him.

When she finished she added, "So you picked the right person to give the case to. You don't have to worry about the curse ever again."

"I... I don't know what to say Jewel. I believe you. But this seems like some crazy dream. I didn't experience any of it. I mean, I love you, but it doesn't feel like we're married or anything."

"Oh, we still haven't had a ceremony yet. I'm sure we'll get around to it."

"But... I haven't even kissed you. I mean... I know I've kissed you, and you kissed me earlier, but..."

Jewel said nothing, but leaned forward slightly.

He continued, "I didn't even know you liked me. I hoped, but it always seemed like we were just friends. I didn't want to ruin that."

Jewel wanted to speak, but kept silent. She resolved not to say another word to him until he figured it out and kissed her properly without her having to tell him to.

"Now I find out that all this has happened, and apparently we're supposed to be in love. It all seems so sudden."

Was he determined to be difficult? Jewel continued to smile sweetly at him. He'd figure it out, she was sure.

"I mean, I'm glad that the curse is lifted. I'm glad that you're okay. I'm so sorry about your parents and everyone else and those terrible burns and your hair. I feel like this was all my fault and I never even knew it happened."

Jewel took a deep breath and leaned forward a bit more. She continued to smile and tilted her head slightly to one side. This was as far as she was going to go, and she'd hold this pose if it took all night.

"I just... I don't know what to make of all this..." Dylan trailed off and finally looked back at Jewel. As he had talked he had been looking at his hands and fidgeting. Their eyes met for a moment, and he looked away again uncomfortably. Jewel continued to smile and eventually he looked up at her a second time. Again he made eye contact, and she flashed him a loving smile. Slowly, as if he was afraid that she might slap him as he drew closer, his face moved towards hers. Jewel did not move. She was not going to make the same mistake she had before. Either he was going to kiss her properly, or they would stay here forever. He tilted his head slightly as their noses brushed, and Jewel closed her eyes. They kissed, sweetly and innocently, exactly as they had the first time, but now they would not be interrupted. Once they began, neither of them wanted to stop, and it wasn't very long at all before Dylan rediscovered the joy of their mental bond. As their minds joined Dylan learned much of what had happened directly from Jewel's memories, and she could tell that it made him feel better. The next day they returned to Aura's house covered in mud. Isaac had informed everyone about Dylan's memory loss, and he had no trouble acclimating to his new life.

They sold his house in New Atlanta and used the money to fully restore his mansion in Macon. Aura and Eve took Jewel shopping and bought her the beautiful green wedding dress as well as matching ones for themselves and Audrey. Jewel had a Christmas wedding, because

Dylan loved the time of year that marked his love for her. Rupert gave Jewel away wearing his officer's uniform, and Isaac, who had recently enlisted in the militia, got a special leave from basic training to attend. Aura, Eve, Audrey, and Vivian all cried. There were many fireworks that night.

Jewel rolled over and looked at Dylan as he slept. Beyond him a warm orange glow began to shine through the window. Chirping and twitters of early morning winter birds floated in from outside. A phoenix, glowing a bright red and green soared over the trees in the distance. Soon Dylan's face was bathed in the light of sunrise. A rooster crowed, and Jewel snuggled close against her husband's side. She smiled as she drifted back to sleep.

It was morning: the first day of her new life.

Author's Note

This novel was my first venture into teen fiction. My previous works have all been directed towards an older audience, though I believe that all books should be considered by everyone, regardless of age. Love Eternal was very entertaining to write and I hope that it has been fun for you to read it. While I wrote this novel I frequently listened to it being read by a text to speech program while I lay down to sleep. This made it very easy to write the entire novel quickly without having to use too much of my time rereading it. I live in Georgia and I have a profound love for the areas in this novel. I have been to the caves north of La Fayette and as such I have put many caves into all of my novels. They are beautiful and I highly recommend visiting some if you can. The government of Georgia in this novel should mirror that of the constitution of the United States. It is not my intention to advocate the dissolution of the union. I love both my country and my state and consider them as my home. The political situations of the various states are only possible outcomes. It was very difficult to imagine the impact that the Great Change would have on the U.S.A. and the rest of the world. It should not be assumed that this is the way I want the world to be, only a possible result. I have never been to New York, and I am sure that it is a wonderful city. I hope that I have not offended anyone with my description of the cursed version. The themes and ideas of this novel are very powerful and moving to me. I do believe that freedom is more valuable than life. I also believe that love and forgiveness are more powerful than hate and greed. I have tried to present these themes in an entertaining way that can be readily understood by all readers. These ideas should not be adult ideas and therefore I consider my novel appropriate for teen readers. Writing from the point of view of a teenage girl was difficult and I must thank my cousin, Audrey and my sister-in-law, Jenn for providing me a wealth of information and insight into the female mind. The inspiration for my characters was taken from a combination of people that I have met and my own thoughts of how I would react in a similar situation.

I started the rough draft on March, 24th 2006 at 1:00 AM and finished it on May, 23, 2006 at 1:40 AM. This was the first novel that I outlined in great detail, though I wrote the first book of the novel with no outline. I started the novel in the same way I started all of my

writing. I took a single scene and wrote, letting the characters grow in my mind to see what happened. After the first seventy pages the story began to form in my mind in full and I wrote my first outline. After I had finished 150 pages I rewrote the outline and changed several points and events, including adding in Jewel's arrest, which was very fun to write. The ending of the novel was similarly altered but the primary theme always remained the same, since the message of the novel is meant to extol the power of forgiveness, love, selflessness, and freedom. The primary passion of my life is my faith. Jesus Christ sacrificed himself on the cross to forgive my sins, and I find myself unable to find a more compelling story subject. Love Eternal is obviously a love story, but it is also a story of redemption. Conquering our own fallible nature is, like conquering the curse, impossible by ourselves. Only when we trust in the forgiveness that is freely given are we set free. I hope that this novel will encourage all who read it to love each other and look past our faults and failures. Love and enjoy the life that God has given us, and trust that he will take care of us and others. We must not judge others. Instead I hope that we will comfort each other in our own walks through life and look inward to grow into the people God wants us to be. I hope that this novel entertains not only those who share my faith, but also those who do not. I am overjoyed that you have read it, and I will do my best to make all of my future novels enjoyable as well.

3rd Edition Author's Note

I now consider this novel finished. In the first and second edition there were a few shaky plot points that needed polishing. Now that has been corrected. This book may still contain typos. I hope not. But the story is complete. I do not expect to make a 4th Edition.

4th Edition Author's Note

Of course I was wrong. While the story of the 3rd Edition was complete, there were a few minor matters of plot that still needed retooling. My father read the 2nd edition and upon finishing provided me with 3 wonderful pieces of paper that listed page number and line numbers of a large number of minor errors that I had missed during my many revisions. My mother also read it and gave me some valuable criticisms. My longtime friend William Kemp was nice

enough to read over the manuscript as well, and as a direct result of his suggestions I have made some key plot revisions. The storyline has not changed much, but the flow of the story is now much improved. I added nearly 1000 words to Love Divided and about 500 to Love United. These changes serve to make a few of the plot points less coincidental and more believable. I also had to add in a bit of foreshadowing to the entire novel so that some events towards the end of the novel do not seem out of place. I also expounded on a few of the stronger scenes and cut back a few of the scenes that did not need to be so elaborate. My brother was also kind enough to read the novel and give me some useful suggestions.

I dearly hope that this is the last revision, as I sorely need to spend my time writing the sequels. Thank you so much for reading.