



**Eloria's Tear**

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## **Blurb**

Tough times have led Wendy Martin into debt with a vicious moneylender who's now out for her blood. So when she gets her hands on a map leading to Eloria's Tear, a legendary magic stone worth a fortune, she immediately leaves home to search for it.

On her way, she meets Zander, a mercenary swordsman afflicted with a curse that gives him the scales, yellow eyes, and claws of a dragon. He offers his services as a guide and bodyguard in exchange for the chance to use the Tear's purification powers to become human again.

As they travel together, her curiosity about Zander blooms into an unexpected attraction. Behind his fierce appearance and guarded nature, she sees a caring and gentle soul. But Wendy's had a lifetime of bad luck with men, and she's afraid to love again. Zander, meanwhile, is convinced that no one can desire a man with scales.

When they find Eloria's Tear, they discover that once Zander uses it, its powers will disappear, leaving the Tear a worthless lump of rock. Zander must sacrifice his last chance at humanity, or Wendy will lose her life.

## Chapter One

Wendy smelled magic.

She froze, clutching her grocery bags to her chest, and sniffed the air again. No mistake. Beneath the sour odor of garbage from an alley, beneath the salty fish-smell of the nearby river, was the sharp, burnt scent of magic. Powerful magic.

Prickling energy washed over her, and the hairs on the nape of her neck stood at attention. She dropped her grocery bags. They hit the street, and three green apples rolled out. She ignored them and whirled around, heart pounding.

Brick apartment buildings loomed on either side of the narrow cobblestone street. The kerosene streetlamps cast puddles of yellow light, but their glow couldn't penetrate the inky shadows all around. The pale light of a half-moon gleamed through the clouds. Her pulse filled her throat. Someone—or something—was out there, hiding in the darkness, watching her.

She suddenly wished she'd taken a coach. Or chosen a better hour to go shopping. But then, manning her shop all day, she rarely had a chance to get out before dark.

"Who's there?" she shouted.

Silence.

She clenched her hands. Magic crawled over her skin like electric ants, making her itch. She fought the urge to shake herself. Her eyes darted back and forth, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Just your imagination," she murmured. But she didn't really believe that. She recognized the feeling all too well. Someone nearby was using the Gift to probe her, searching for weaknesses, chinks in her mental armor.

She thought about running, but that wouldn't do much good. You couldn't outrun magic. Besides, if it came down to a choice between fight and flight, she would choose the former.

Wendy lifted her right hand, fingers spread. Her Gift welled up, hot and cool at the same time. It flowed out from her heart and along her arm, into her hand. Her palm tingled and pulsed with soft, white light.

At best, she could produce a harmless flash or a puny spurt of flame, but it might be enough to dazzle an assailant and give her a chance to run. She took a deep breath. "Okay," she called, raising her voice. It didn't tremble, thankfully. "I know you're there. Why don't you just come out? Or better yet, get lost and let me go home. I'm not in the mood for games."

She heard a chuckle from the shadows. "That's too bad," said a deep, male voice. "Because I want to play."

She spun around. Too late, she felt a tingle at the base of her skull. A thin, cold line of power snapped through her head. She couldn't move. She opened her mouth to scream. Pressure constricted her throat, and her vocal cords stiffened, trapping the cry before it could escape.

She started to fall. Gloved hands grabbed her before she hit the street.

The man dragged her into a nearby alley, shoved her against a brick wall and pinned her. A silver wolf mask covered his face, its teeth bared in a snarl. They gleamed in the

faint moonlight. She stared, caught between bewilderment and terror. "Evening, my dear," he whispered. His breathing rasped behind the mask. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you...much. I'm just the errand boy." He played with a lock of her hair, twisting it around two fingers. "I have a message from Ms. Eva Drizell."

Wendy's blood turned to ice-water. She would have preferred a mugger to one of Drizell's men.

"She's tired of waiting," said the man. "She wants to know when she'll have her money."

The invisible wire around Wendy's neck loosened, freeing her vocal cords. She swallowed. Her pulse hammered in her throat. "Soon, she'll have it soon. I just need a little more time."

"That's not the answer she wants. Though I must admit, it's the answer *I* wanted." He snickered. Deep within the holes of his mask, his eyes glinted, like coins at the bottom of a well. "Makes it more fun for me."

She gritted her teeth. If she could just move...

"Don't bother. I'm inside your head." He tapped his temple with one gloved finger. "I can hear your thoughts. They're racing around, buzzing like mad bees behind those pretty brown eyes. If you decide to try anything, I'll know. There's nothing you can do. Just relax and enjoy the ride." The man reached down, under his coat. His hand emerged holding a thin, curved knife.

Wendy stared at the blade, breathing fast.

"She said to take a bit of skin if you couldn't pay. And for each day that passes after this, another bit. I'll start with the left ear," he said, and lowered the knife.

Pain flared, sharp and hot, through her earlobe. She opened her mouth to scream, but the invisible hand of magic squeezed her throat, cutting off air and voice.

"Shhh." He petted her hair. "Just a little bit, see?" He held a bloody scrap in front of her eyes. "Another bit tomorrow, unless you pay up." He pushed the scrap of flesh into a tiny envelope and tucked the envelope into his pocket. Her skin crawled as he trailed a finger down her cheek. "Such a pretty face." He leaned closer. "It would be a shame to spoil those lovely features."

*Come on, come on!* Her breathing quickened as she strained against the spell. Her uncooperative body wouldn't move.

The man lifted his mask, just enough to expose his mouth. He ran his tongue slowly along her neck, leaving a warm, liquid trail, like a slug. One hand slid beneath the hem of her tunic. *Oh God, no!*

Fear and revulsion spiked through her. *Don't panic.* He was distracted now. If she could calm down, she might have a chance. Mustering her willpower, she slowed her breathing and sought the center of calm within. Then, with a burst of effort, she shoved him out of her head and rammed her knee into his groin.

The man staggered backwards with a loud "oof!" He doubled over, cradling his crotch. She turned to run, but the man grabbed her and slammed her against the wall again. He pinned her with his body, holding her wrists, and laughed breathlessly. "The kitten has claws!"

"Get your hands off me." Her voice shook.

"As you wish." He stepped back. "I have what I came for, anyway." He pulled the bloodstained envelope from his pocket, stroked it with one finger and tucked it away

again. "A little piece of you."

"You're a sick son of a bitch, you know that?"

"Yes, I've been told that once or twice." He gave her a small, mocking bow. "I'll be seeing you again." He levitated straight up and disappeared into the darkness.

Wendy slid down the wall, trembling, heart socking against her ribs like a fist.

"Bastard." She wiped the gooey saliva off her neck with one sleeve. Her ear burned and throbbed. She touched it, and her fingers came away wet with blood. More blood dripped down her neck, hot and thick.

She wondered what he planned to do with the scrap of flesh from her earlobe. Maybe she didn't want to know.

She grabbed a wad of tissues from her pocket, pressed it against her bleeding ear, and stood. Head buzzing, stomach queasy, she crept out of the alley on jelly legs. She looked down at her bags of scattered groceries, then knelt and began picking them up.

How was she going to get out of this mess?

She'd been asking herself the same question for months. So far, an answer hadn't presented itself.

Clutching the bags, she turned onto Phoenix Street and walked past rows of dark, empty shops, toward Wendy's Magic Emporium, the store that doubled as her home.

Her whole being ached. More than scared, she just felt tired—tired of dealing with things beyond her control, tired of watching her back, tired of threats and ultimatums. She wanted to take a hot bath and collapse into bed. Somehow, she doubted she'd be getting much sleep that night.

\* \* \* \*

Wendy rubbed her temples. A headache brewed behind her eyes. "Sorry, but I can't sell you a love potion."

"Why not?" The young man's lips protruded in a pout. She half-expected him to stomp his foot like a three-year-old.

She sighed and stared at him from across the counter. He looked about twenty-two, pasty and heavysset, his broad face sprinkled with pimples and crowned with thin blond hair. "Look, I'm not going to argue. There's nothing to argue about."

"Just tell me why."

Hot, red flickers of pain danced behind her eyes. "Love potions are illegal in Garna. Just possessing one can get you about six months in prison, never mind selling it."

"I thought you'd sell anything for the right price."

She frowned. "Who told you that?"

"Some friends. This guy Bill, he had a bottle of Brain-Boost Elixir. Said you sold it to him."

A flush rose into her cheeks. Damn. She had to be more careful, or she'd have the nice men from the Bureau of Magical Artifacts and Potion Control knocking on her door, and there were one or two things in her shop she didn't want them to find. Like that imported dragon-horn powder. "Well, he told you wrong," she said. "Even if love potions were legal, I wouldn't stock them. That stuff is rape in a bottle."

He slouched and dug his hands in his pockets, looking up at her from beneath the caveman-like shelf of his brow. "I've known guys who used that stuff. They must've gotten it somewhere, so where'd they buy it?"

"I have no idea," she said. "Listen, if you like, I can sell you an attractiveness potion. Not really the same thing, but it might get you what you want. And it's legal."

He squinted. "What's the difference?"

"Any magic used to influence other people's thoughts or perceptions is forbidden under the Free Will Act. An attractiveness potion temporarily changes your physical appearance, but it doesn't affect the other person, so it's still allowed."

"Wait, temporarily? When will it wear off?"

"A few weeks," she said. "Of course, I can't guarantee she'll say yes if you ask her out, but it'll improve your chances. Hang on..." She turned, scanned her rack of potions, then plucked a pink glass bottle from the shelf. She undid the stopper and poured a bit into a shot-glass. "I'll let you test it. This dose will only give you about an hour. The full bottle will give you twenty days. By then, I'm sure, you'll have won her over with your charming personality."

He blinked and scrunched up his forehead. He didn't seem to realize she was being sarcastic. Just as well. "So then what? I take another?"

"You can, but I wouldn't take more than three or four bottles in a row if I were you. Your flesh might start to rot. Here, try it." She held the shot glass under his nose.

He slurped it down and grimaced. "Tastes like shit." He coughed. "Ugh. It's burning my throat."

"Yeah, strong potions will do that."

He coughed again, then wiped one hand across his mouth. His eyes watered. "When's it start to work?"

"Just give it a minute."

He blinked, then raised his hands and rubbed his face with his short, stubby fingers. "My skin's tingling." As she watched, his acne melted away, his puffy cheeks sucked in, his cheekbones pushed upward, and his blob-like nose narrowed. His straw-like hair thickened and brightened. His stomach sucked in, and his chest thrust out.

"Here." She shoved a mirror at him.

He peered at his reflection, and his now sky-blue eyes widened. "Hey, wow. Not bad. How much for that bottle?"

"Three hundred. Cash."

His jaw dropped. "That's nuts! Who'd pay that much for a measly bottle of potion?"

"The ingredients aren't easy to come by."

He grumbled, dug in his pocket, and pulled out a fistful of shakas. Somebody really wants to get laid, she thought.

She counted the coins into her register drawer, wrote up a receipt and handed a copy to him. "You want me to wrap this up?"

"Just give it to me." He snatched the bottle from her hand and stomped out of the shop. The door slammed, and the bell above it jingled.

What a toad. No wonder he'd wanted a love potion. Girls probably ran screaming from him, and not because of his looks. "And my mother asks me why I'm not dating anyone," she muttered. Men and their endless quest for pussy. Virility potions, confidence potions, attraction charms. All they ever wanted was help getting some hapless girl into the sack.

She opened her register and counted through the stacks of coins inside. "449, 450, 451," she murmured. 451 shakas, plus a stack of credit slips. Fat lot of good those did

her. She made a mental note to hang up that NO CREDIT sign today. The customers would moan and groan, but she could no longer afford to run her business on the promise of being paid on some future date.

She dumped the coins into a pouch, then walked to the back of the shop and tucked the pouch into her safe alongside the money from earlier that week. Her funds added up to just over a thousand shakas. Not nearly enough to pay back her mountain of debt. She'd just have to hope it would be enough to keep Drizell happy a little longer. Or at least keep her henchman from cutting anything else off.

Wendy locked the safe-box and shoved it into the pantry.

She needed some tea. Head pounding, she filled a silver kettle and set it on the stove. She turned on the gas, opened a cabinet and hunted through her teabag stash, wondering if she had any of that peppermint blend left. Her mother had given her a box last Yule. *Peppermint Comfort* it was called, or something like that, and God knew she needed some comfort right now.

Her ear throbbed dully. She'd closed the wound with some Heal-Quick potion last night, but her earlobe still looked a little funny with a quarter-inch missing from the bottom. She supposed she was lucky. He could have taken a lot more.

She found the wooden box in the back, opened it and dumped a scoop of green tea-leaves into the pot.

The bell over the door jingled.

She kicked a chair and stubbed her toe. "Damn it!" She bit her lower lip as her toe throbbed.

She was in no shape to deal with customers today. Like she had a choice.

She hurried to the front of the shop and stretched her lips into a toothy grimace, the closest thing to a smile she could manage. "Hello," she said, "Welcome to Wendy's Magic Emporium. Can I help..." She fell silent as the man stepped inside.

A silver wolf mask greeted her horrified gaze. The man cocked his head, lifted one hand, and wiggled his fingers in a sly little wave. "Good afternoon."

She gulped. Her heart hammered her ribs. "What the hell are you doing here? Get out."

"My employer wants to speak with you. I'm to escort you there."

"I'm busy. The shop doesn't close for another three hours."

"I really don't think you want to keep her waiting. It would be very unwise to anger her." He snickered. "People who anger my employer tend to wind up dead."

She couldn't argue with that. She clenched her teeth, flipped the sign in the window from OPEN to CLOSED and followed him outside. A black coach waited on the street. The man opened the door and bowed. "After you, my lady."

"And here I thought chivalry was dead," she said. "You've got nice manners for a sadistic lunatic. But if it's all the same, I'd rather not share a coach with you. I'll take my own."

"Drizell insisted I bring you directly to her. I promise you will not be harmed...not by me, anyway. I was ordered not to lay a hand on you."

"Nice to know." Wendy hesitated. She still didn't want to get into the coach, but really, what choice did she have? She stepped inside and sat.

The masked man sat next to her and shut the door. The driver cracked his whip, and the horses broke into a trot. She sat, hands fisted in her lap, mouth dry. She watched from



the corner of her eye as her "escort" leaned back in his seat, tapped his gloved fingers against one thigh and whistled a bright little tune. She felt like a mouse trapped in a cage with a snake. Her heartbeat filled her throat.

The coach took them to a street lined with huge, stately houses. A manicured lawn surrounded each one. At the street's end loomed a castle-sized mansion of white stone, with columns, arches and red-shingled roofs. The yard boasted a white marble fountain the size of an ordinary person's house, three-tiered and carved to resemble a flock of swans frozen in mid-flight. Water bubbled out of their open beaks. Kerosene lamps stood on poles around it, lighting it from all sides. The fountain couldn't have been more tacky and ostentatious if the maker had pasted fist-sized emeralds all over it, but then, tact and restraint were not Drizell's strong suits.

The coach dropped them off in front of the mansion. The masked man opened the door, and they got out. As the coach drove away, Wendy stood, staring at the huge house. She dried her sweat-damp palms on her trousers, took a deep breath, and tried to ignore the trembling in her knees.

"Right this way." He led her down a cobblestone pathway lined with trees and flowerbeds. He walked with a bounce in his step, hands in his trouser-pockets. She crept along behind him as they followed the path to a set of marble steps leading to the front door.

The man pressed the doorbell with one gloved finger, and Wendy heard a soft chime from within the house. A moment passed. Then the doors opened to reveal a pale, cadaverous man in a butler's uniform. He looked down his long nose at them, as if they were a pair of squashed beetles. "Yes?"

"Tell Ms. Drizell that I've brought the girl."

"One moment." He closed the doors.

*The girl?* That was downright insulting. If Wendy hadn't been so paralyzed with fear, she would have given the creep a piece of her mind.

A few minutes passed. The doors opened again to reveal the butler, still wearing the same disdainful expression. He bowed stiffly and swept an arm out. "Right this way, please."

They followed him into the mansion, down a spacious, well-lit hall with black marble walls. Gaudy chandeliers, dripping with crystals, hung from the ceiling. The hall ended in a marble staircase with a gold banister. The butler led them up the stairs and down another hall, to a mahogany door. He knocked. "Ms. Drizell, your guest has arrived."

"Come in," said a rich, smooth female voice.

The butler opened the door.

The masked man turned to face Wendy. "Here's where we part ways. Drizell doesn't need me present for this little discussion."

She would have been relieved, if she didn't know that a much more dangerous lunatic lay just beyond the door.

She crept forward into a spacious study. The butler shut the door behind her.

Sunlight spilled in through a picture window, illuminating the oyster-white walls and black, marble-tiled floor. The back wall bristled with swords. Steel and silver, curved and straight, short and long, they gleamed in the soft light like rows of shiny teeth. Their hilts glittered with rubies and emeralds. Ornamental or not, she didn't doubt the mounted

swords were all sharp-edged and lethal...like their owner.

A tall, thin woman sat at a desk, a house of cards in front of her. She held one card in her long, manicured fingers.

Eva Drizell might have been anywhere from thirty to fifty. She had a skeletal look, her skin pulled tight and smooth over long bones, her eyes sunk deep in their sockets. It was the look people got when they'd used a few too many age-cheating spells. Tonight she wore a long, slinky white dress, scooped low to show a generous helping of cleavage, and her ice-blonde hair had been pulled into a tight braid. Chains of tiny sapphires sparkled around her neck and wrists.

She looked up. "Ms. Martin." She set the card down and rose to her feet in one smooth, fluid movement. "Just the person I wanted to see." She approached, her knife-sharp heels clicking on the floor. Her perfume hit Wendy in the face—a thick, cloying smell, like rotting flowers and honey.

Wendy's instincts screamed to turn and flee. She felt like a mouse pinned by the stare of an elegant, crafty cat. Somehow, she stood her ground.

Drizell leaned close, until Wendy thought she'd gag on the reek of perfume. Smooth, pale fingers touched Wendy's forearm, and she felt the press of long nails against her skin. "Do you have my money?"

Wendy stared into those cool, pale green eyes. Power shimmered around Drizell like an aura. As if being the richest woman in Garna wasn't enough, her Gift was formidably strong. If she chose, she could fry Wendy to ash where she stood. Knowing that didn't help Wendy's confidence, but somehow she found her voice and did what she usually did when overwhelmed with fear: started blurting out smart-ass remarks. "Your henchman is a real charmer."

"Oh, you mean the Jackal?" She smiled.

"That's what he calls himself? Well, I guess that explains the Halloween mask. Though it looked more like a wolf to me. Where'd you dig that creep up?"

Drizell shrugged. "Some prison in Pocopo. He's no more than a dime-store sociopath with a few artistic affectations. There are hundreds like him, but he serves his purpose."

"Seemed like he was really looking forward to cutting more pieces off me. What does he do with the bits he slices off? Eat them? Make a necklace out of them? Keep them in a scrapbook?"

She blinked. "I assure you, I have no idea."

"Well, keep the Jackal on a leash from now on. If you have a problem with me, talk to me yourself. Don't send one of your dogs."

Drizell's smile slipped away. "I'd advise you to guard that tongue, my dear, or you may lose it. I take it you don't have the money?"

Wendy swallowed, mouth dry. "I can give you a thousand."

She pursed her full, blood-red lips. "I don't want pocket change. I want the full amount."

"I'll have the rest soon. Really soon."

"I do hope so," said Drizell. She pinned Wendy with her cool stare. "You do know you're looking at ten months' worth of interest? At twelve percent, it adds up quickly." Her fingers dug into Wendy's biceps. "You've accumulated twenty-two thousand in debt."

Wendy flinched. "I know."

"And how are you going to pay off all that?" She dug her fingers in a little deeper.

Wendy's heart socked against the wall of her chest. "Business has been good lately. Lots of money coming in," she lied. "Give me one more month. I'll have it by then, for sure."

Drizell let out a small, delicate sigh. "Where have I heard that before? I've been very patient, Ms. Martin, but my patience has limits. Do you want to know what happened to the last man who gave me too many excuses?"

"That's not necessary," said Wendy, though she had a feeling she was going to hear it anyway. She was right.

"They found the poor fellow hanging upside down from a tree. His eyeballs had been removed, his arms broken, and his back was a bloody mess. Most of the skin had been flayed away. A miracle he survived, really. Of course, he couldn't talk about what had happened to him. Apparently, someone also removed his tongue." She clucked softly and shook her head. "A tragic incident."

Wendy's breathing quickened.

"Consider this my last warning," said Drizell. She leaned forward until the tip of her nose almost touched Wendy's. "I'll give you exactly thirty days. One month, and then I'll hunt you down, wherever you are, and squeeze the money out of you with my bare hands. Or perhaps..." She smiled. "You have family, don't you? A mother and a sister, I believe."

Wendy's blood turned to ice water. "Don't you dare hurt them."

"Get me my money, and they'll be fine. I don't like hurting people, you know. But sometimes people need a little persuasion."

"I swear to God, if you hurt my family in any way, I'll kill you."

Drizell tilted her head back and laughed. "You? A grubby little waif with no more than a struggling shop and a thousand shakas to her name? What are you going to do?" She smiled, her eyes cold, and poked one finger into Wendy's chest. "I'm a member of the oldest, most powerful family in this city. I have connections everywhere. No one can touch me. If you try to expose me, I will have you and your entire family killed. A word from me will wipe them off the face of Garna. You can't do anything to me. You wouldn't dare try."

Wendy's hands clenched. Her nails bit into her palms.

"Do you doubt my power? Perhaps I need to give you a demonstration." She pointed a manicured talon at Wendy.

Her throat tightened, and suddenly she couldn't speak, couldn't draw breath. Her eyes bulged. Her hand flew to her throat as the pressure on her trachea increased. Her vision grayed out, and her head swam. She dropped to her knees. Then, suddenly, the pressure was gone, and air rushed into her lungs. She doubled over in a fit of coughing.

"I could have crushed your windpipe," said Drizell. "It's quite easy to kill someone. Like squashing a spider." She pressed her thumb and forefinger together, inches from Wendy's eyes. "I could have done the same thing from fifty feet away, outside your house, while you slept. I could do it to anyone."

"You wouldn't get away with it," Wendy said, her voice thin and raspy.

"You don't think so? Try me." She smiled. "I've gotten away with worse. It's amazing what people will overlook when there's a fat pile of money in it for them. There's not a man or woman in this world who can't be bought, you know."

Wendy stood and rubbed her throat. Her eyes watered with pain. Hatred welled up

inside her, hot and thick. She wanted to ram her fist through those dainty, pearl-like teeth. "If you're so damn rich already, why do you care so much about collecting my debt? Wouldn't it be easier to just...let me go?"

Drizell sniffed. "Nice try."

"Seriously. Why?"

She shrugged. "I am a lender, my dear. If I let one person get away with not paying me, then word will spread, and soon everyone will be slacking off on their payments. If you want to get anything done in this world, you need to make people afraid of you."

Drizell snapped her fingers. "Jackal!"

The door opened, and the Jackal's silver-masked face peered in. "Yes?"

"Escort Ms. Martin out, please."

"Of course." He made a deep, exaggerated bow in Wendy's direction. "Follow me, my lady."

Wendy glared at Drizell, shaking. "I'm warning you. Don't lay a finger on my family. Do whatever you want to me, but leave them out of this."

"Good day," said Drizell.

The Jackal gripped Wendy's arm and steered her out of the room, down the hall. He leaned close and whispered, "I heard everything. You know what this means, don't you?" His arm slipped around her throat, pulling her close. He drew his knife.

Wendy's breathing quickened. She struggled, even knowing she couldn't escape. A cold barb pierced the base of her skull, paralyzing her. She sagged against him, helpless.

One gloved finger caressed her shortened left earlobe. "It looks like your ear's healed up nicely. But now they're uneven." The knife's edge touched her right earlobe. He leaned closer, until his breath rasped close to her ear. "The least I can do is give you a matching set."

He sliced.

Frozen by magic, she couldn't even scream.

\* \* \* \*

Back in the shop, Wendy brewed another pot of tea. Her hands shook as she measured spoons of peppermint blend into the pot. Her right ear throbbed. She'd dabbed some Heal-Fast on it and wrapped it in linen bandages. Now she just had to figure out a way to hide her truncated earlobes from the rest of the world. Maybe a new hairstyle.

Of course, she had bigger problems right now.

She thought about Drizell's smug smile, and her hands shook harder. "That bitch," she whispered. "That cold-blooded, murderous bitch."

What kind of mess had she gotten herself into? She'd known from the beginning that Eva Drizell wasn't on the right side of the law, but she'd had no idea how far that lunatic would go to get her money. Worse, now her family was in danger. If Drizell hurt them...

Wendy gulped. She'd die before letting anything happen to her mother or little sister, but she knew she couldn't protect them from someone as powerful as Drizell. She had one month to come up with twenty-two thousand shakas, and there was no way she could earn that much from shop-sales. She had to think of something, fast.

She paced the room, gripping fistfuls of her hair.

In the front, someone knocked on the door. "What now?" She decided to ignore it. She wasn't in any shape to talk.

Another knock, louder this time.

She clenched her teeth. Damn it. He wasn't going to go away. She stormed to the front of the shop, opened the door, and glared at the man outside. "We're closed," she said. "Come back tomorrow. Unless you want to buy twenty-two thousand shakas' worth of merchandise, that is."

"I'm not buying," said a deep, smooth voice. "I'm selling."

Wendy stared at the newcomer. He was tall and lanky, clad in a stiff-collared black overcoat and black boots. His dark hair was so shiny and flat it appeared to have been lacquered onto his skull. He carried a slim leather case in one hand. "You *do* buy magical items here, don't you?"

"Normally, yes. But I'm a little short on cash right now. You'll have to try someone else."

"I think this will be worth your while. In fact, this could prove quite profitable for you. I want to offer you a rare opportunity. May I come in?"

She hesitated. It was probably just a ploy. She knew that. Still, she was desperate, and desperation was the mother of gullibility. If there was even a slight chance he was selling something of real value, she couldn't pass this up. "Okay, you've got ten minutes to make your pitch. If I'm not interested by then, you'll have to leave."

"Agreed."

"Let's see what you have."

He stepped inside. "What I have, Ms. Martin, is information—information that could make you rich, if you're willing to take a few risks. Is there someplace we can sit down?"

She nodded. "In the back."

She led him to the cluttered room in back of the shop, where a rickety table jostled with the stove for space. "I was just making some tea. Do you want some?"

"No, thank you." The man took a seat, leaned back, and crossed his legs.

The kettle whistled. She turned off the gas, filled a mug with steaming peppermint tea and sat across from the man. "So what is this information?"

"I'll make this brief. You've heard of Eloria's Tear, I take it?"

"Who hasn't?" She sipped her tea. "Actually, I did my senior paper on it back at the University. There's some debate about whether it even exists. I'm inclined to think it does. There's enough historical documentation behind it, but..."

"Supposing I knew where it was. How much would you pay for that information?"

Wendy's jaw dropped. She set her tea down, sat up straighter and stared at him, but she saw no hint of a playful smile on his face. "You're joking."

"I'm quite serious."

"You are talking about *the* Eloria's Tear, aren't you? The legendary holy stone created by St. Eloria? You know where it is?"

"Correct."

"And you expect me to believe you? People have been trying to find Eloria's Tear for centuries."

"I have in my possession a very old, very valuable document. A scroll with a detailed map leading straight to the Tear. Some grubby, illiterate miner found it in an underground ruin in Pocopo. He had no idea what he'd stumbled upon. He sold it to me for seventy-five shakas." The man chuckled. "I doubt that dirt-crusted simpleton will ever realize what he gave up."

Yuck, thought Wendy. This guy practically exuded sleaziness, like an oily substance seeping out of his pores. She had the impression she'd have to wipe something slimy off the seat when he left. But if he was telling the truth... "So where is it, this scroll?"

The man stood. He set the leather case on the table, flipped open the clasp, and lifted the lid. Inside lay a cloth-wrapped bundle. Wendy watched as he unwrapped it, revealing a yellowed scroll so old it looked like it might crumble apart at a touch. A chill crept up Wendy's spine. The scroll emanated a sense of age and power, so strong the air shimmered around it. Her Gift wasn't good for much, but she could sense magic. She breathed in, and it coated her tongue, rich and bitter-sweet, like fine wine. Mesmerized, she reached out to touch the faded parchment.

He snapped the case shut. "Tut-tut," he said. "No touchy."

Wendy scowled. "Okay, let me ask you this. If this is real, why don't you just go after Eloria's Tear yourself? Surely, that's worth more than whatever you could make selling the scroll to me."

"Because I'm not a treasure hunter. Poking around in ruins and dark caverns has never held much appeal for me. It's a tedious, time-consuming process."

"You could hire someone to find it for you."

"If I did that, there's a good chance I'd never get it. Whoever found the Tear might run off with it and sell it on some underground market, then disappear with the money. Even if that didn't happen, I'd have to deal with the Bureau of Magical Artifacts and their meddling, since the Tear would almost certainly be classified as a level five artifact. I don't want the bother. I'm a man who likes to make money with as little effort or fuss as possible."

"That, I believe."

He smiled that thin, tight-lipped smile. "So, are you interested?"

"I want to see that scroll first. Give me a chance to look it over, to make sure it's the real deal."

"Don't be stupid. You know it's not a fake. You felt its power, didn't you?"

"Yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean it contains what you say it does."

He shrugged. "If you're not interested, I can easily take my offer elsewhere. You're simply the first person on my list. Believe me, there'll be no shortage of potential buyers." He buffed his nails on his coat collar. "I happen to know, however, that you're in a rather thorny predicament with a lender. I thought you'd appreciate this opportunity."

She tensed. "How do you know anything about my situation? Have you been spying on me?"

"I wouldn't call it spying. I just keep my ear to the ground. I like to know what's going on in this city. It's good for business...and my sources tell me you've run into trouble with Drizell. Judging by your ears, she's starting to get impatient."

So he'd singled her out because he knew she'd be desperate enough to buy without asking too many questions. Highly suspicious. Yet the scroll wasn't a fake, she was certain of that much. "How much do you want?"

"One thousand."

Wendy sucked air through her teeth. She'd known it wouldn't be cheap, but that was all the money she had in the world right now. She gulped, and her tongue stuck like glue to the roof of her dry mouth. "I can give you three hundred."

"I'm not going to haggle with you. One thousand is my price. Considering the rarity

of what I'm selling, it's an extraordinary bargain."

"I don't have that much."

"Then I'll find someone who does." He stood and picked up his case again.

"Wait!"

"Are you serious about this or not? I'm a very busy man. I can't stand here chatting with you all day. I'm supposed to be meeting my associate in..." He lifted a gold watch on a chain and glanced at it. "Half an hour."

"But..."

"One thousand, and not a single shaka less. Are you buying? Or shall I take this offer to the next person on my list?"

"Just give me a minute. Half a minute. I need to think."

"All right, but the clock is ticking."

Wendy buried her fingers in her hair. Her head spun. This was insane. She couldn't spend her last thousand shakas on a wild gamble like this. Still, Eloria's Tear was worth far more than a thousand shakas. If this was real, she could pay off her debts and be free of Drizell for good. "Five hundred," she blurted out. "How's that?"

"One thousand."

"Six hundred."

"Never mind," said the man. He turned. "I can see I'm wasting my time here."

She groaned. "Wait, wait! Just a minute..." She dragged her battered safe-box out from the pantry, spun the combination lock and lifted the lid. "This had better be for real." She pulled two fat pouches from the safe and tossed them onto the table. "One thousand. Go ahead and count it. Now, can I see the damn thing?"

He smiled. "Of course. Be careful. The parchment is very fragile." He flipped open the leather case.

Holding her breath, Wendy touched the scroll. The ancient parchment was soft, almost silky. As she unrolled it, a warm, tingling energy crept through her fingertips and up her arm. Startled, she jerked her hand back, then touched the parchment with one finger. The energy flowed through her again. Goose bumps rose on her skin. She closed her eyes, heart thumping. Deep in her mind, she heard distant voices, a ghostly chorus whispering half-understood words. The whispers echoed upward from the darkness beneath her thoughts, rose from within her and whirled around her like a wind.

She'd never felt anything like it.

She opened her eyes, dazed, her head still humming with those half-heard voices. She took a deep breath and focused on the scroll. Writing covered the yellowed parchment. She recognized the letters as ancient Kadish. The spidery ink-lines had faded over time, so only a dim ghost remained, but most of it was still legible. There were maps, too; detailed drawings of chambers and tunnels.

Wendy had studied Kadish in college, but most of that knowledge had slipped away now, and she recognized only a few words. She could translate it later, though. Her eyes skimmed over the first map, an ink drawing of a landmass shaped like a dragon's head. She didn't recognize any of the words written around it, but she recognized the land's shape. "The Northeast Territory," she murmured.

"That's correct." He counted coins into stacks, a smirk on his lips. "Inside the Edge Mountains. Travel north to a town called Jacob's Hill. It's about a day and a half by broomstick. From there, it's just a short hop to the foothills. The scroll gives you all the

information you need to find the entrance."

"Entrance?"

"To the city. There's an abandoned rock gnome city inside the mountains. The Tear is hidden somewhere inside."

"One more thing," said Wendy. "If I need to ask any questions, can I get in contact with you?"

"Of course." He pulled a card from his pocket and held it out between his first two fingers. She took it, being careful not to let her fingers brush his; she felt a strong aversion to touching him. "The name's Threed." He bared his teeth in a smile. "A pleasure doing business with you."

"The pleasure's all mine," she muttered.

He gathered his money and stood. "You understand, of course, that this information is only for your eyes. Don't tell anyone where you're going or why. Otherwise, you may find that the Tear is gone when you arrive."

"I'm not an idiot."

"Good. And one more thing. Be careful. Whoever hid Eloria's Tear may have left something to guard it. There's no telling what's inside those mountains."

"Thanks. I'll remember that."

"Good day, Miss Martin." He walked out.

Wendy stared at the card, a rectangle of stiff, white paper with the name A. THREED stamped in black, and an address below it.

She'd just handed all her remaining money to a man who practically had "untrustworthy" written on his forehead. No contract, no way to get her money back if this turned out to be a bust. She wondered if she'd just done something incredibly stupid. Probably. But what choice did she have? One thousand shakas wouldn't have kept Drizell happy for long, anyway. She had to take a risk.

"Never look back," she whispered and slipped the card into her pocket.

\* \* \* \*

"This is crazy."

"Don't worry." Wendy handed her sister the register keys. "I'll be back in a week. Two weeks, tops. I really appreciate you watching the shop while I'm gone. Just remember to lock up at night, and don't sell anything in the red cabinet to minors. I've written you a whole novel of instructions, so if you're uncertain about anything, just look it up."

"I still think you're crazy." Julie planted her hands on her hips. "I mean, you said yourself this guy was a scumbag."

"He was an ass, but the scroll was the real deal."

"He could have just enchanted it to feel real."

"I would have known."

"How?"

"I don't know if I can explain it. But I wouldn't have gotten very far in this business if I couldn't tell the difference."

Julie crossed her arms over her chest. "Even your Gift can be wrong sometimes."

"Come on, sis." Wendy forced a smile. "Where's your sense of adventure? If this pays off, we'll be rich beyond our wildest dreams."



"And if not?"

She shrugged. "Then I'll be out a thousand shakas and a little bit wiser."

"Just like that?"

"I just have to see if this is for real, or the lost opportunity will haunt me the rest of my life. Think about it. No more money problems for any of us. We'll pay off Mom's house. You can finish school. We'll eat lobster every night."

"If this pays off."

"Well, yeah. But I have a feeling it will. Just don't tell Mom about this yet, okay? If she asks, tell her I'm visiting a friend."

Julie sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "This is just like when we were kids. You were always running off to do some crazy, dangerous thing, and somehow you always convinced me to lie for you. I don't know why I let you do this to me."

"Well, you know how Mom worries. The truth will just scare her."

"It scares *me*. This is all so sudden. I mean, you're going into the middle of nowhere, alone. You could be kidnapped and sold into slavery, or raped by bandits, or—"

"That isn't going to happen. I'll be flying over most of that territory. And I can check in with you using the scrye-glass. You still have yours, right?"

"Of course. But scrye-glasses only work over a certain distance. Once you're out of range—"

"I know. You'll just have to trust that I know enough not to get myself killed."

"I don't feel at all confident of that. I wish you'd at least wait 'til tomorrow. Wouldn't it make more sense to travel in daylight?"

"I can't really explain it, but I have to go tonight."

"This isn't like you, being so secretive." Julie bit her lower lip. Suddenly, she looked much younger than her twenty-two years. "What aren't you telling me?"

The sour taste of guilt filled Wendy's mouth, and she had to look away. She couldn't meet those big, concerned brown eyes. "I can't explain it. I'm sorry. This is just something I have to do."

"I can see I'm not going to talk you out of it," Julie said quietly. "Just be careful. Okay? Promise?"

"Promise." Wendy gave Julie a quick, firm hug. "Thanks for doing this. I really appreciate it."

Julie sighed. "Whatever. Just try to come back in one piece."

"You're almost as bad as Mom."

Julie paused. "Wendy? What happened to your ears? They look...different."

"Oh." She swallowed, mouth dry. "I, uh, decided to have my earlobes shortened. Haven't you heard? It's the new look. Lots of people are doing it."

Her explanation must not have been very convincing, because Julie's look of baffled concern deepened. "If you say so." She paused. "You're pale. Is something wrong?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Just tired. I didn't sleep well last night." Wendy cleared her throat. "I need to go pack." She turned and trudged upstairs.

The room above the shop doubled as her apartment. Cramped and cluttered, more an attic than a living space, it served her needs nonetheless. A four-poster bed stood in one corner, covered with a rumpled patchwork quilt her mother had given Wendy for her sixteenth birthday. Above the headboard was a bookshelf. Well-worn textbooks—*The Complete Guide to Potion-Making*, *Magical Artifacts*, and *Magical Law*—stood

alongside cheap, paperback erotic novels. On the bedside table sat Filbert, the stuffed dragon she'd had since she was three, now faded to a soft olive green. A small, dingy, round window let sunlight in, and a cracked mirror stood next to the bed.

She checked her reflection and ran a brush through her tawny, shoulder-length hair. She tied most of it back in a loose tail and arranged the rest so it covered her ears, then threw some clothes into a pack. She'd already dressed for the journey: wool tunic, trousers, heavy boots and gloves...and of course, her big, warm cloak, dyed a rich navy blue. She slipped her faded, canvas pack on under the cloak and tightened the straps. With the broom-handle under one arm, she walked downstairs.

Julie had waited. "Is that all you're bringing?"

"Almost. Hand me those keys."

Julie passed Wendy the ring of keys, and she unlocked the red cabinet behind the counter. She scanned the shelves, selected a thumb-sized bottle of green potion, and tucked it into her pack.

"What's that?"

"Boost juice," she said. At Julie's puzzled look, she added, "A magic-strengthening potion. I don't expect to get in any trouble, but if I need to, I can take that to give my spells some more oomph."

"Isn't that a controlled potion?"

Wendy winced. She made a mental note not to underestimate her sister's knowledge of magical law. "Kind of."

"What do you mean, kind of?" Julie crossed her arms over her chest, and for a moment she looked so much like their mother that it was scary.

"I mean, you can sell it as long as you have a permit. I'm in the process of getting one, but the permits cost three hundred shakas and there's usually a month-long wait. It's just another way for the city to make money. Come on, don't look at me like that. You know I'm honest, I just don't have any patience for red tape. What difference does it make whether I have some piece of paper with official seals all over it?"

Julie sighed. "This is exactly why you get into trouble and end up paying those enormous fines. Honestly, I don't know how you're still in business after that mess with the dragon-horn powder. I guess now isn't the time, but when you get home, we're going to have a talk about this."

Wendy's shoulders relaxed. By that time, hopefully, Julie would have forgotten. "Sure."

Julie held out one hand. A silver stud earring with a bright blue stone glittered in her palm. "Take this too."

"What is it?"

"A charm against pregnancy and diseases."

"Why would I need that? I'm not planning to get laid during this trip."

Julie gave her a solemn look. "It might happen whether or not you want it. You're a woman traveling alone. There are certain dangers—"

"Oh, stop it!" she snapped. "I'm not going to get raped. You've been listening to Mom too much. She's got you thinking the world is filled with shadowy bogeymen waiting to leap out and snatch young women. I told you, I'll be on my broom the whole time. How many rapists do you think are lurking in the lower stratosphere?"

"Just take it. Take it, and I'll shut up and let you go."

Wendy sighed, took the earring and secured it to her right ear. She looked at her sister's round, freckled face and felt her expression soften. "Thanks, Julie. I'll contact you tomorrow." She walked toward the door.

Julie reached out and caught her arm. "You sure you're okay?"

Wendy tried to speak. Her throat swelled with unshed tears. She swallowed and nodded. "Sure. Sure, I'm fine." She walked out of the shop.

As soon as she stepped through the door, her chest tightened and her heart leapt. She was leaving Julie alone, vulnerable. What if Drizell came after her family while she was gone?

Wendy took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Drizell had given her a month. They'd be safe for that long, at least. And if she didn't pay Drizell, her family *would* be targeted, no question about it. She hated leaving them alone, but she had no choice. Eloria's Tear was her last chance to save them...and herself.

## Chapter Two

Wendy walked down the street. Even after dark, the city of Garna bustled with life. Two businessmen in high-collared overcoats walked behind her, arguing through their woolly beards. A woman in a long, black dress and black gloves strolled by, talking to someone in a palm-sized scrye-glass. A coach clattered past, drawn by two stocky cream-colored horses. White plumes streamed from their nostrils as their breath struck the chilly air.

Wendy checked her money pouch. One lonely shaka glinted at the bottom. Before she left the city, she needed to make some quick cash, enough to keep her fed for a few days, at least.

She walked onto a narrow street and spotted a small shop with the name ALL THAT GLITTERS stenciled onto the glass window. Below that, a wooden sign propped in the window read, "We buy and sell used jewelry, lockets, watches, trinkets, and anything else that shines or sparkles. All sales final."

Wendy stood outside the door. She reached into her trouser pocket and pulled out a gold chain with a small locket attached. Her name had been engraved on the front in flowing calligraphy, surrounded by a delicate border of roses and vines.

Grandma Mary had given the locket to her for her tenth birthday, along with a note: "Inside this locket is the answer to all your problems." Wendy had opened the locket to find a tiny mirror inside. It was the last thing Grandma Mary had given her before she died. It was also the only non-magical item of any value that Wendy owned.

She chewed her lower lip and stared at the tiny locket in her palm. She ran a thumb over its surface, feeling the thin, delicate lines that spelled out her name. Then she opened the shop door and stepped inside. An old man sat behind the counter, inspecting a ruby the size of a grape. A pipe stuck out of his mouth, and the smoke wreathed his head in hazy circles.

"Excuse me," said Wendy.

He looked up and blinked at her through his small, square spectacles. His eyes were a watery brown, the whites stained a dingy yellow.

She set the locket on the counter, her fingers trembling slightly. "How much can I get for this?"

The man picked up the locket and turned it over in his long, twig-like fingers. He flipped it open, shut it, tapped the metal with a tiny hammer, held it up to the light and examined it under a lens. "Hmm." He chewed the end of his pipe. "12 karat, I'd say. I can't sell it as it is, since it's personalized, but I could melt it down. I'll give you fifty shakas."

Wendy winced. "That's all?"

"You won't find a better price, I guarantee it. But if you like, you can verify that for yourself and come back later. If you find a better price, I'll match it."

Wendy didn't have that kind of time. "I'm sure it's more than 12 karats," she murmured, though she had no idea. "And the workmanship is really nice. You might be able to sell it as a whole piece, even with the name. Couldn't you make it sixty?"

"Fifty," he said. "I'm sorry, but we all have a mortgage to pay, my dear."

"Tell me about it."

"Will you be selling?"

She stared at the locket. A lump filled her throat, and she choked it down. "Yeah."

The man counted coins onto the countertop. Wendy took them and left the shop. Fifty shakas. Enough for a meal and a night in an inn, maybe. She guessed it was better than nothing. "Sorry, Grandma," Wendy whispered.

She turned onto a side-street and looked around, searching for a good take-off spot.

Broom-flight technically wasn't allowed within city limits. About six years ago, some idiot—probably drunk—had flown into the side of a building, fallen, and crashed into someone else's roof, killing himself and ruining the roof. People wrote lots of angry letters demanding a law of some sort, though they seemed more upset about the property damage than the dead man. So the politicians passed the Flight Restriction Act. Now, everyone complained about the law or ignored it outright. Of course, you could still get ticketed if a patrolman saw you, so it paid to be discreet.

Wendy slipped into an alley, behind a row of trash-bins. The ripe smell of soggy, moldy food permeated the air. A stray cat let out a startled meow and darted away.

Ignoring the stink, she dug through her pack, pulled out a pair of flight goggles and fastened them over her eyes. Then she straddled her broomstick and stilled her mind. The broomstick twitched and shivered between her thighs like a restless horse. Her feet left the ground as the broomstick floated a few feet into the air and hovered, rotating. Wendy tilted her head back and stared at the sky. Up, she thought.

She shot skyward with a burst of speed, up past the homes and shops, past the great stone clock tower, with its polished granite face and painted numbers as tall as men. The roofs grew smaller and smaller beneath her as she soared toward the clouds. She saw the river, dark and glimmering with reflected lamplight as it snaked through the city's heart. She saw a great barge drifting along, belching smoke as smaller, narrower boats maneuvered around it.

She rode the wind like a bit of driftwood on the crest of a wave, gripping the broom tight with her thighs and hands. Excitement bubbled inside her. She loved flying: the roar of wind in her ears, the dizzying view of the world spread out beneath her. Most of all, she loved the sense of absolute freedom. In the air, there were no boundaries. She could go anywhere, do anything she wanted.

Her mother hated broom-travel and constantly sent her statistics about broom-related deaths. "If you have to ride that ghastly thing, at least wear a helmet," she'd said. Like a helmet would save her if she plummeted three hundred feet and landed on her head.

Statistics or no statistics, Wendy felt safer in the sky than she did on the world below. Up here, nothing could hurt her. Nothing could touch her.

She tightened her grip on the broom handle and leaned forward. The broom leapt higher, startling a flock of geese. They scattered with loud honks. Cold wind whipped through her hair and stung her cheeks. Coaches crept along the streets below, tiny as beetles.

She felt a twinge of pity for those who would never experience this joy. Only the Gifted could fly.

The city streets gave way to a patchwork of farmland, dotted with red barns and houses, then farmland became rolling, open fields and pastures. High overhead, the waxing gibbous moon shone like a half-lidded silver eye, and stars pierced the blackness,

sharp points of light. To the west, the river spilled into the Long Lake. She adjusted her course and followed the lakeshore north. A black expanse of land lay beneath her, broken by the occasional, tiny cluster of lights. High above the world, suspended between the vast dark land and the vast dark sky, she felt suddenly small and lonely—a tiny, insignificant speck of matter in an expanse of nothing.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, Wendy landed in a small town called Bingleton. The shop-windows were dark, the streets quiet.

She dug her scrye-glass out of her pack and stared into its murky depths. She focused on an image of Julie's face but the depths remained murky. Either Julie was out or Wendy was too tired to activate the connection. She sighed and slipped the glass back into her pack. She'd try again once she'd had some sleep.

She rented a room in a dingy, whitewashed building that served as the local inn. The room was slightly larger than a closet and about as cheerful and welcoming as a crypt, but she was too tired to care.

She scrubbed her hands and face in the wash-basin, stripped to her underclothes and collapsed into the narrow bed. The mattress seemed to be carved from granite and her muscles ached from the long flight, but it was a relief just to lie down. She fell asleep within minutes and dreamed.

She saw a man writhing on a dirty, cement floor, his back flayed bloody, his face shiny with sweat and tears. Eva Drizell stood over him with a whip and a smirk on her painted lips. She raised the whip and brought it down with a crack, and the man screamed. Then the man's features wavered and changed, and it wasn't a man anymore. It was Julie.

Wendy woke with a strangled gasp. She lay in the dark for a few minutes, heart hammering.

She'd left Julie and her mother alone in Garna. What if Drizell came after them while she was gone?

For a moment, Wendy wanted to hop back on her broom and rush back home, just to be sure her family was safe. Go home and forget this stupid quest. But stupid or not, this quest was her only hope.

Still, she knew she'd never get back to sleep unless she made sure Julie was all right. She dug through her pack until she found her scrye-glass. It was tiny, no bigger than her palm, a disk of dark, misty glass with a simple copper frame. She and Julie had gotten a matching set for Yule when Wendy was thirteen and Julie, eleven.

Wendy cradled the glass in both hands, took a deep breath, and concentrated. Light flickered across the dark surface. For a moment, the whole glass glowed white, then the light faded and Julie's face peered at her through the murky darkness. The blurry image sharpened, and her sleep-fuzzy voice said, "Hello?"

Wendy sighed and closed her eyes. Thank God. "Hi, Julie."

"Wendy, it's 2:00 in the morning."

"Sorry. I tried scrying you earlier, but I couldn't get a hold of you. Do me a favor, will you? Scrye Mom and make sure she's okay too."

"Is there any reason she wouldn't be okay?"

Wendy hesitated. For a moment she wanted to tell Julie everything, just to have the

crushing weight of secrecy off her chest. But she couldn't. Julie would contact the police, and Drizell had assured Wendy that if that ever happened, there'd be hell to pay. "I'm just concerned about you guys, that's all. You know, being away from home...it makes me a little nervous. I guess some of your paranoia is finally rubbing off on me." She forced a chuckle.

"Wendy..."

"Just be careful, all right? You and Mom both."

"Sure." A long pause. "You'd tell me if something was really wrong, wouldn't you?"

The bitter taste of shame lay thick on Wendy's tongue. "Of course I would." Tears stung her eyes, and she blinked them away. She reminded herself that the less her family knew, the safer they were. She didn't want them involved in this mess at all. A dark voice in her mind reminded her that they were already involved, whether she wanted it or not. "I'll let you get some sleep now. Bye, Julie. I love you."

"I love you too," said Julie. She sounded surprised, and a little confused. It was a given that they loved each other, of course, but Wendy could count on one hand the times they'd actually said it to each other in their adult lives. "I love you" was something you said to your mom, not your little sister. "Good night."

"Good night." The glass flickered and went dark.

Wendy buried her face in the pillow. She thought about Julie's concerned brown eyes.

If anything happened to her...to either of them...

Wendy swallowed, hard.

She slipped the glass into her pack, rolled onto her side, and tried to put it out of her mind. There was nothing she could do right now, and she needed sleep.

But sleep was a long time in coming.

### Chapter Three

Wendy left early the next morning and resumed her journey. She flew for most of the day, stopping in the next town to buy a meat pie and a coffee. Afterwards, she counted the contents of her money pouch and winced. Her funds were dwindling rapidly. "Nothing to be done about it," she said and got back on her broom. She'd just have to be extra careful with her remaining money.

As she flew, the land beneath her changed. Towns became smaller and less frequent. The rolling hills and pastures became dense forest.

She reached Jacob's Hill that evening. True to its name, the town stood on a hilltop, surrounded by a thick, twenty-foot-high stone wall with a guard-tower on each end. Beyond lay the Darkleaf Forest, an ocean of trees. If she strained her eyes she could see the Edge Mountains—from this distance, no more than a series of hazy gray bumps on the horizon.

She landed inside the wall just as the first raindrops hit the ground.

The town wasn't much: a handful of whitewashed houses with thatched roofs, a general store, a bake-shop and a dilapidated little church. Kerosene lamps on poles lined the cobblestone streets, casting pools of warm, golden light. She walked down the street, looking for an inn and hoping she had enough money to buy a hot meal.

She spotted a two-storied, red painted building with a sign over the door. THE LUCKY DOG INN AND TAVERN, it said. The words arched in a horseshoe shape over a painting of a yellow dog with a grin and a beer mug balanced on its nose.

A weathered, smudged sign had been propped in the window: COME ON IN, TRAVELER! SIT A SPELL.

"Don't mind if I do," said Wendy. She opened the door.

The tavern was dim and smoky, with warm, wood-paneled walls and a stone-lined hearth. Red glass lamps hung from the ceiling and oak tables stood empty, awaiting customers.

"Evening, Miss," said the man behind the counter. His bald head gleamed. The sleeves of his tunic had been rolled up, leaving his muscular arms bare. On his left arm, a tattooed panther snarled. On his right, a buxom mermaid blew a kiss. "What can I get for you?"

Wendy's stomach rumbled, and she winced. She'd wanted to hold onto her remaining funds, but she was so hungry. "A roast beef sandwich would be nice. Anything with meat, actually. Just get me two slices of bread and pile a bunch of dead animals inside."

His eyes twinkled. "The works? You got it. Want a beer with that?"

"God, yes."

He vanished through the door behind the counter.

Wendy sat down at a table and stretched her shoulders. Her spine cracked, and she winced. As much as she liked flying, she had to admit that sitting hunched over a broom for hours was hell on her back.

The tavern-keeper appeared with a tall, foamy glass in one hand and a plate in the other. He set both in front of her. "Beef, mutton, turkey and bacon on rye," he said, "with goat cheese and pepper sauce. Enjoy." Between two thick, dark slices of bread, slices of



meat dripped with cheese and sauce. Wendy's mouth watered, and her stomach roared like a volcano.

She polished off the plate within minutes, guzzled down her beer, and dug out her money pouch.

The tavern-keeper approached and glanced at her empty glass. "Want another?"

"No thanks. Um...how much do I owe you?"

"On the house. Don't worry about it."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "You look like you could use a break. No offense."

She glanced down at her damp, bedraggled clothes. There were no mirrors in the tavern, so she could only imagine how her face must look—weary, pale, with dull, haunted eyes. No wonder he felt sorry for her. She opened her mouth to laugh, but the laughter lodged in her throat. She swallowed. "Thanks."

"Name's Bill, by the way." He glanced at her pack. "Mind if I ask where you're bound?"

"The Edge Mountains."

He raised his eyebrows. "Not that it's any of my business, but why?"

"I just want to see it. You know. Appreciate the scenic natural beauty. Do some hiking, maybe see a lake or two. The whole tourist thing."

Bill shook his head and muttered something.

"Is something wrong?"

He met her eyes. "Like I said, it's none of my business, but I'd stay clear of those mountains, if I were you."

"Why's that?"

He leaned closer, his face solemn, and dropped his voice to a near-whisper. "They're haunted."

"Are you serious?"

He nodded. "My Uncle Thomas was a treasure hunter. He got an itch to explore those mountains. Thought there might be something important hidden there. When he came back, his hair had gone white with shock. He said..." Bill paused. "Beg your pardon, I'm not trying to scare you."

"Go on," she said.

"He took two of his best men with him into the mountains, and neither one came back. He said the shadows came alive and swallowed them whole. He could hear 'em screaming from inside the darkness. Blubbering like little kids, he said. These were tough men, seasoned explorers, but whatever they found...well, it must've been pretty horrible. My uncle barely escaped with his own skin. He was never the same after that. Kept to himself, hardly ever left the house."

"He said the *shadows* came alive? Do you believe that?"

"Don't know, Miss. All I have to go on is what he said. But mark my word, there's something unnatural in those mountains. I hate to think of a young lady alone in a place like that."

"I'll be careful," she said. Ghosts indeed, she thought. Local legend to titillate tourists, more likely. Still, a hint of unease wriggled into her heart.

He picked up her empty glass. "I'll just refill this for you. No charge."

"Thanks. How much is a room, by the way?"

"Thirty-five a night."

She winced. That would just about clean her out. Good thing he hadn't charged her for the meal. She'd been hoping against hope he might let her stay for free, but human generosity only extended so far.

The door opened, and she looked up. A cloaked, hooded figure entered the tavern and wiped his boots off on the mat. Rain plastered the cloak to his broad shoulders.

"Evenin', sir," said Bill. "What can I get for—" His voice died abruptly, his eyes widened, and the color drained from his face. Confused by his reaction, Wendy looked at the newcomer a second time.

A gray scarf covered the man's nose and mouth, and elbow-length gloves hid his hands and forearms. All she could see were his eyes. His yellow eyes. As they moved, they caught the light and shone like the eyes of a cat, two luminous disks in the darkness of his face.

Without a word, the man walked over to a corner booth and sat down.

Bill cleared his throat, his face still sheet-white. He looked at Wendy. "Will, uh, will you be staying the night, then?"

"Well, I can't sleep outside, not in this storm. I just hope it'll clear up tomorrow. I hate flying in the rain, and it's a good three hour broom trip to the Edge Mountains."

Bill didn't reply. He seemed distracted; his eyes kept darting from Wendy to the stranger in the corner.

She glanced at the cloaked man, who sat motionless, his arms folded on the table, his gaze downcast. She wanted to ask Bill if he knew the man, but when she looked up, Bill had already vanished back into the kitchen.

Oh well. The cloaked stranger, while spooky-looking, didn't seem inclined to bother anyone.

Wendy rummaged through her pack and found a stack of bound papers. She'd copied all the maps from Threed's scroll and translated the instructions as best she could. The scroll itself lay hidden in a box under a floorboard in her room; the ancient parchment was too fragile to survive a long journey. She undid the string binding her papers and spread them across the table. Her eyes skimmed over the lines of translated text. "Under the hooked peak, look for a rock shaped like a hawk's head," she whispered to herself.

Outside, thunder growled, and rain pattered against the windowpane. A flash of lightning lit up the glass, followed by another crack of thunder.

The back of her neck tingled, as if ants crawled under her skin. Someone was watching her. Wendy raised her head. The cloaked figure sat in his corner, silent and motionless.

He was looking at her.

A tiny shiver ran from the base of her neck, down her spine. His cloak shifted to one side and she glimpsed the sword at his hip. The hilt jutted from a scuffed, leather scabbard. Her heartbeat quickened. A swordsman? What was a swordsman doing here, in this little town?

Bill set a full glass on the table. "Here you go, Miss."

Wendy blinked. "Oh, thanks." She took a swig and licked foam off her upper lip. "By the way," she said, lowering her voice, "do you know who that guy in the corner is?"

"No idea." Bill cupped one hand around his mouth and dropped his voice to a whisper. "But he creeps me out something fierce. Did you note those eyes? Mark my

words, those aren't human eyes. Send shivers up my spine, they do. I can't very well throw him out though, not on a night like this." His voice rose to a normal volume as he asked, "You want anything else?"

"No thanks. I'm fine."

Bill retreated to the kitchen. Wendy slipped her notes into her pack. She took another gulp of beer and leaned back, watching the strange man from the corner of her eye. She wondered how good his hearing was. A normal person wouldn't have been able to hear Bill's words, but then...

He stood. Her heartbeat quickened as he walked across the room, toward her. For someone so big, he moved very gracefully, smooth and silent. Like a jungle cat stalking its prey, she thought. Not a comforting analogy, but it seemed apt, especially with those weird, luminous eyes focused on her.

Wendy fidgeted. His shadow fell over her, and her heart jumped into her throat. Suddenly, her mind was filled with every scare-story her mother had ever told her about young women being accosted on solitary trips.

She looked up and met his eyes. They *were* yellow, no doubt about it. Even stranger, the pupils weren't round, but vertical ovals tipped with sharp points on each end, like the eyes of a cat. Wendy's fingers tightened on her glass. Cosmetic spells could alter the appearance of a person's eyes, but if he'd used a spell on himself, she'd feel it. There was no spell.

He leaned a little closer, and she saw something even weirder than the yellow eyes. His skin was blue. Okay, more of a bluish-gray, but definitely not a normal, human skin color. Just what the hell was he?

"I want to talk to you," he said. His voice was soft but very deep. "May I sit?"

She swallowed again. Her mouth seemed to be full of sand. "Go ahead."

He pulled out a chair and sat. She eyed his huge shoulders and muscled arms. He could probably snap her in half like a twig if he wanted.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said as if reading her mind.

Wendy managed a tiny smile. "That's good. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I saw you fly into town earlier, and just now I heard you talking to the innkeeper. You're going to the Edge Mountains."

"Not to be rude, but what's it to you?"

"I think we're looking for the same thing."

A fresh shiver ran down her spine. It was hard to look away from his eyes. They held her pinned to the spot. Suddenly, she knew how a rabbit felt under the tawny stare of a fox. "What makes you think I'm looking for anything? Maybe I'm just sight-seeing."

"I also heard you talking to yourself. 'Under the hooked peak, look for a rock shaped like a hawk's head.' You're obviously searching for something."

"You heard me whispering? From across the room?"

He shrugged. "I have good ears."

"So why do *you* think I'm going to the mountains?"

He leaned even closer. "To find Eloria's Tear."

Wendy's jaw dropped, then snapped shut. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Too late. Your face has already given you away. You know, don't you? You know how to find it."

"Are you reading my mind?"

"I'm no sorcerer. I just put two and two together."

She took a deep breath. "Okay, so we're both looking for Eloria's Tear. So what?"

"I want to offer my services as a guide."

She blinked. "What?"

"I'm offering to be your guide and bodyguard. To see you safely to your destination. I want you to hire me."

"Um...thanks. But I think I'll pass. For one thing, I'm broke, so even if I wanted to hire a bodyguard, I couldn't. Besides, I'm almost at the end of my journey. Another two or three hours by broomstick, maybe, and I'll be there. I don't need any help."

"I think you do," he said. "You're not very familiar with this territory, are you?"

"No, but what does it matter? I'll be flying over it."

"You can't travel over the Darkleaf Forest by broomstick."

"Why not? What's stopping me?"

"Nothing...unless you care about getting there alive. There are dragons in this part of the country. In the air, you'd be an easy target."

Wendy's shoulders stiffened. "Dragons? Here?"

He nodded. "Red dragons. Smaller than the blues, but far more vicious."

"Dragons don't attack people very often," she said, trying to sound more confident than she felt. "They'll attack livestock once in awhile, but they avoid humans when they can."

"Who are you trying to convince? Me, or yourself? Dragons will attack anything that moves. They're carnivorous, territorial, and very aggressive. And they have excellent eyesight. They can spot you in the sky from miles away. Flying up there, you'll have no cover whatsoever. The last traveler who tried to fly over the forest was discovered a few weeks later, in a stream, with most of the flesh picked off his bones."

"I...I never heard about that."

"If you don't believe me, ask one of the locals."

"Fine, I will. But even if it's true, so what? If I can't fly, I'll hire a coach."

"There's not a coachman anywhere in this land who'd take you. There are no roads between here and the mountains. The forest is so dense in places, it's treacherous even for horses. Anyway, you just said you were broke, so how are you going to hire a coach?"

"Touché," she muttered.

"The only way to get to those mountains is on foot. There's a good hundred miles of forest between here and there. A short journey by broomstick, maybe, but traveling a hundred miles by foot over difficult terrain will take you a week, at least. Probably longer. Without a guide, you'll be hopelessly lost. And those woods are filled with wild animals, not to mention bandits. You need someone who knows the terrain, someone who can protect you."

"I'm not helpless," she protested, rather feebly. "I know some self-defense."

He raised an eyebrow. "You think you can fend off a dragon or a gang of bandits? Alone? That would be some feat for an unarmed slip of a girl."

Heat rose into her cheeks, and she lowered her eyes, unable to meet his gaze. Damn it. "Okay, so I'm in over my head. But how do I know you can protect me from dragons and bandits? How do I know you're not all talk?"

"You want proof of my strength?"

"Something like that. Do you have references?"

He pulled a fist-sized chunk of limestone from his pocket.

She stared at it, then at him, wondering if he was crazy. "That's a rock," she said.

"Exactly."

"Um...is this supposed to tell me something?"

He closed his fingers around the chunk of stone and squeezed. She heard a creaking sound, like ice splitting, then a loud crack. The rock crumbled to dust and fragments, which ran out of his hand like sand.

Wendy stared, gripping the edge of her seat. Her eyes had gone so wide, they felt as if they might tumble out of her sockets. She swallowed, trying to work up some juice in her dry mouth, and shrugged. "So you're strong. So what?"

"If you need further proof of my qualifications, I can show you my skill with a blade, but I think we should go outside for that. I don't think the tavern-keeper would appreciate me hacking up his tables."

"Look, all this is beside the point. I have no money. I couldn't hire you even if I wanted."

"I don't want money."

"Then what do you want? Don't tell me you're just offering to protect me out of the kindness of your heart."

He chuckled behind his scarf. "No. I do want something." He leaned forward. "I want a chance to use Eloria's Tear on myself. After that, it's yours. I don't care what you do with it."

She frowned. "What do you need it for?"

"That's my own business."

"If all you want is the Tear, why don't you just go after it yourself? Why do you need me?"

"Because you know where it is." His hand gripped the edge of the table, gloved fingers digging into the wood so hard she thought it would splinter. "You do, don't you?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. That's why I came here. What about you? What are you doing here?"

"I've been hunting Eloria's Tear for years, following rumor after rumor. False trails." He clenched one hand. "I interrogated every scholar and historian I could find, scoured every ancient book for hints. I now know that it's hidden somewhere in the Edge Mountains. The question is, where? It's sure to be cleverly hidden. I could search those mountains for years and never find it. I needed more information, so I came to Jacob's Hill to see if the locals knew anything, but so far, they won't talk. They have a powerful, superstitious fear of those mountains."

"The mountains are filled with catacombs. There's a hidden entrance. I know how to find it."

"How?"

She smiled, leaned back and crossed her legs. "You don't really expect me to give you an answer, do you? You've just shown me that I need you to reach the mountains, and you need me to find the Tear. But if you know how to find it, you won't need me, and you won't have any incentive to see me there safely."

"Does that mean we have a deal?"

She hesitated. "I need to think about it. Give me tonight to mull it over."

"Fair enough. Tomorrow, if you've decided you want my help, meet me at the north

gate at sunrise. If I don't see you, I'll assume you've decided against it."

"Okay."

He stood and started to turn.

"Wait," said Wendy.

He stopped and looked over one shoulder.

"You never told me your name."

A brief pause. "It's Zander."

"I'm Wendy Martin." She smiled and stuck out her hand. "Nice to meet you."

He hesitated, then grasped her hand and shook it once. His hand felt odd through the glove, hard, almost scaly. And...were those *claws*? She didn't have much time to wonder. He released her hand quickly, then turned away. "Remember," Zander said, "the north gate at sunrise."

"If I decide to hire you."

He nodded and walked out of the tavern, into the rainy night. The door creaked shut behind him.

Bill poked his head out of the kitchen. "That strange fellow left, did he? Good. I hope he wasn't bothering you, Miss."

"No, he wasn't." She cleared her throat. "Bill? Could you tell me something? Do red dragons ever attack people?"

"Oh yes. Matter of fact, we've had several attacks 'round these parts in the past few years. Those scaly critters have become a regular menace...and of course, we can't kill 'em, dragons being a protected species and all. Since you brought it up, I was wondering how you planned to cross the Darkleaf Forest. This isn't good territory for broom travel. 'Course, I'm sure you know that. I'm sure you've got something figured out."

If only, thought Wendy. It seemed Zander had been telling the truth about the dragons, anyway. "How safe is it to travel through the forest on foot?"

"Not safe at all, Miss. Those woods are thick with bandits and all manner of dangerous beasts...not to mention, it's easy to get lost if you don't know the area. You're not planning to walk to the Edge Mountains, are you?"

"Well, uh...I was thinking I could hire a coach."

"That'll be tricky, seeing as how there are no roads between here and the mountains." He frowned. "Beg your pardon, Miss, but have you really planned this out?"

She winced. "I may have to make a few adjustments to my plans."

She stared at the tabletop, her insides in knots. Zander was right. There was no way she'd make it to the Edge Mountains without a guide...and right now, he was her only option. Even assuming there was another guide willing to make the journey, she had neither the money nor the time to shop around. But how could she be certain he was trustworthy?

She couldn't, of course, but her options were running out. If she wanted to find Eloria's Tear in time to save her family, she had to take this chance. She'd just have to stay on guard and hope he wasn't a conman or a homicidal maniac.

The odd thing was, she did trust him...sort of. Just as she could sense fakes and imitations when dealing with magical artifacts, she could sense dishonesty in people. She'd gotten that sense with Threed, the man who'd sold her the map. But Zander, weird and intimidating though he was, had not set off that internal radar. She didn't know what sort of person he was, but something deep in her gut told her that everything he'd said

tonight was the truth. When he'd said *I'm not going to hurt you*, she had believed him.

"If you're ready, I'll show you to your room," said Bill.

"Thanks."

Bill led Wendy upstairs to a small bedroom. A lamp stood on a table in the corner and cast a soft, flickering light over the sparse furniture: a bed, a wash-basin, and a corner privy. He bid her goodnight and shut the door. She kicked off her boots and sat on the edge of the bed. She looked out the window at the dark sky. Wind howled outside, and rain slid down the glass. A leaf blew out of the darkness and plastered itself against the wet pane, a splotch of bright green. Then the wind whisked it away.

She rummaged through her pack until she found her scrye-glass. She peered into its murky depths and focused her mind. The glass flickered, then went dark. She shut her eyes and focused harder, holding the image of Julie's face in her mind.

She heard Julie's voice faintly, as if from the other end of a long tunnel. "Wendy?"

Wendy opened her eyes. A dim, blurry face flickered in the glass. "Julie, can you hear me?"

"Wendy, I c..." Her voice faded out. The image vanished, then reappeared. "...too far. I think..." Her voice faded again, and the image winked out. The glass was dark and empty.

"Damn it!" Wendy shut her eyes and concentrated. After a few minutes, she opened her eyes and sighed. No good. The glass was still dark. She'd passed out of Julie's range.

Wendy set the scrye-glass aside, stretched out on her back and laced her fingers together behind her head. She stared out the window and listened to the keening wail of the wind. It sounded like a lost child, alone and scared.

She was the farthest she'd ever been from Garna, from her home. She didn't think she'd ever been in a place where she couldn't reach her sister by scrye-glass. She felt as though an invisible cord had been severed, and she had been set loose to drift.

She closed her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Wendy left the inn at dawn, carrying only her pack. The tavern-keeper had agreed to hold onto her broom until she returned. She'd debated taking it with her, just in case, but if she couldn't fly, a broom was just one more thing to lug around. The pack was heavy enough.

A wash of pale light covered the sky. The sun still hid behind the horizon, but the people of Jacob's Hill already milled through the streets. A woman in a flower-patterned dress hung wet clothes on a line while a group of small boys ran amok, hooting and laughing. The smell of hot cinnamon buns wafted from an open door, and her stomach growled. She pressed a hand over it and cast a longing glance at the little bakery. She opened her money pouch and looked at her meager funds, then at the tempting array of scones, cookies, and cakes.

Her good sense wrestled with her stomach. Giving in, she walked through the door and spent her last shaka on a sweet roll. She ate it as she walked, then licked the sticky icing from her fingers.

She found Zander waiting for her at the north gate, still wearing his gray cloak, hood and scarf. His sword rested against his hip. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"You don't seem surprised to see me."

"Why should I? We agreed to meet here."

"Did you have any doubts that I was going to come?"

"No. I knew that once you confirmed the truth of everything I told you, you'd come to the conclusion that you needed help and that I was your only option. You don't seem like you're in a position to be choosy."

"How would you know that?"

"You aren't difficult to read. In the future, you may want to learn how to conceal your feelings when dealing with strangers. Your desperation was so thick I could practically smell it."

"That would be my new desperation-scented shampoo. You don't like it? I've been told it's an aphrodisiac." In response to his blank stare, she added, "That was a joke."

His brow furrowed, and he studied her as if she were some species of animal he'd never seen before. After a moment, he looked away. "You have enough provisions for two weeks? You'll need food for the journey back, as well."

She slapped her forehead. Provisions! She hadn't even thought of that. "I, uh..." Heat rose to her cheeks, and she looked down. "I don't have any provisions."

"Then you'd better make a trip to the general store before we leave."

She fidgeted, feeling like a naughty child who'd spent her allowance on candy. "I don't have any money, either. I used up the last of it today."

"Well then, what do you expect to eat? Air?"

She clenched her jaw and looked up. "I didn't realize I'd have to pack for a long journey, okay? When I left home, I thought I'd just be traveling a few days. And I've had a lot of stuff on my mind." Her excuses sounded feeble even to her own ears. She hid her face in her hands and groaned. "God, I'm such an idiot. What am I going to do?"

He sighed. "Never mind. I had a feeling you'd need these." He held out a cloth satchel.

She took it, peered inside and felt her eyes widen. An array of tins and pouches stared back at her.

"Jerky, dried fruit, and travel biscuits," he said. "It should be enough for the journey, if you ration it carefully. There's a full canteen as well."

"Wow," she said. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me. I just want to get on the road as soon as possible."

"But what will you eat? You don't even have a pack."

"I'll hunt and forage. I've done it before."

"If you say so."

He looked up and raised one hand, signaling the guard in the tower. The guard raised his own hand in reply, then grabbed a lever in both hands and turned a huge crank. Unseen gears turned, squeaking and grinding. The gates creaked open. Zander strode through, and Wendy followed him along the broad, packed dirt road, down a grassy hill.

The road dwindled to a weed-choked path as the forest engulfed them. The leafy canopy blocked most of the sunlight. A few golden shafts fell through the gaps to form a lace of light and shadow on the forest floor. Trees loomed all around them, some taller than the tallest buildings in Garna. Moss and underbrush grew thick on the ground, and tree-roots webbed the earth like huge, dark veins. Silence blanketed the forest, broken only by the soft twitter of birdsong. The mossy carpet seemed to swallow and muffle their footsteps.



"It's so quiet," she murmured.

"Only because you're used to the noise of civilization. The forest is filled with life. If you stop to listen, you'd be surprised what you hear."

She tilted her head back and stared at the treetops. She hadn't been inside a cathedral for years, but being in the forest felt somehow similar. The branches overhead formed an arched ceiling, and beneath that natural roof lay a vast, open, dim space pierced by sunbeams. A huge, brown moth flitted by. The soft coo of a pigeon broke the deep hush. "Do you think we'll run into any dragons along the way?"

"Pray we don't."

"I've never seen a real dragon before."

"Then count yourself lucky. Most who've seen them don't live to talk about it."

She lapsed into silence and walked behind him. She couldn't help admiring his uncanny grace. Despite his size, he never bumped into or brushed against anything. He stepped over a mossy log and ducked beneath a low bough, his movements fluid as a cat's. She had to jog to keep up.

"Stay close to me," he said.

"I'm trying. Your legs are longer than mine." She brushed sweat-damp hair from her brow, puffing for breath. "You know, if we had horses, we could probably cross the forest much faster."

"Can you afford a horse?"

"Point taken. But why don't you have one? I mean, I'd think if you do a lot of traveling, a horse would be a good investment."

"My presence spooks most horses. I've yet to find one that will carry me. Besides, I have perfectly good legs. Forcing another creature to bear my weight seems cruel and pointless."

"I guess I've never thought of it that way." She walked behind him, staring at his back. "Zander?"

He stopped and looked over his shoulder. His yellow eyes stared into hers, and her heart fluttered.

In the sunlight, his eyes shone a brilliant gold, speckled with amber flecks and bordered by thick, silvery-blue lashes. She'd never seen anything like them. His eyebrows were the same silvery color. Even more remarkable, his blue-gray skin—what little she could see, anyway—was made up of countless, tiny, hexagonal scales, like an iguana's. She wondered if he had scales all over his body. "Yes?" he asked.

She realized she'd been staring, and flushed. "I just wondered...aren't you warm in those clothes? I mean, the hood and scarf and all."

"I prefer to keep myself covered," he said, and turned away. "It keeps people from staring."

"Well, I'm the only one around now. If I promise not to stare, will you take it off?"

His shoulders tensed beneath the cloak. He didn't look at her, but when he spoke, his voice was very soft, very cold. "You want to see the freak show?"

"It's not like that!"

He turned and faced her. "Then what is it like?"

Her tongue crept out, moistening her dry lips. His tone was calm and controlled, but she could feel his anger boiling just beneath the surface. His golden eyes had darkened a shade. "When I'm talking to someone, I like to see his face. That's all. If we're going to be

traveling together, I may as well see what you look like. I mean, you're not really going to leave that hood and scarf on the whole time, are you?"

Zander hesitated. Then he reached up and pulled down his hood, revealing a head of thick, short hair. It shone a pearly gray-blue, a few shades lighter than his skin. His ears were pointed and leaf-shaped, like an elf's, but bigger. He pulled down the scarf, exposing the rest of his face. Tiny, interlocking blue scales covered his skin, but otherwise his features were human, his nose strong and straight, his mouth full and firm. The lips were a deeper shade of blue, almost indigo, the color of a ripe plum.

His yellow eyes glared at her, as if daring her to gasp in horror and fling up her hands, or run away screaming.

"There," she said, smiling. "Isn't that better? It must get pretty stuffy under that scarf."

"I suppose so." He frowned and averted his eyes, but not before she caught the puzzled look in them. "We'd better keep moving." He turned and strode forward.

She followed. "How many days do you think it'll take us to reach the mountains?"

"If we keep up a steady pace, five days. Realistically, it'll probably take us six or seven."

She winced. She'd have to ration her food very carefully...and she'd only brought one change of clothes, which meant she'd probably smell like a barn after a day or two. Nothing to be done, she thought. She sighed, adjusted the straps of her pack, and kept walking.

The path had vanished entirely, swallowed by weeds and grass. The forest looked the same in every direction. She couldn't even see the sun through the dense canopy, so there was no way to orient herself, no way to tell east from west, north from south. But Zander seemed to know where he was going.

It occurred to her that she was completely at his mercy. Of course, if he'd wanted to hurt her, he could have done it by now. Still, she was in the middle of the woods, alone with a man she'd just met the other night—a man big enough to overpower her easily, if he so chose. She'd put her life in his hands. Her hand drifted to the stud in her ear, the charm Julie had given her to protect her from pregnancy and diseases, and suddenly she was glad she'd worn it.

She stepped over a bush. Thorns scraped her ankle, and she winced. Amazing, how his cloak never seemed to snag on branches, yet she was already covered in scratches and had a rip in her sleeve. "This forest must hate me." She picked a leaf out of her hair. "I swear, these trees are out to get—"

"Shhh." He froze.

"Zander?"

He pointed.

She looked up. A small gasp leapt from her throat.

A spotted tree cat crouched on a low bough of a nearby oak. Its gray and gold dappled fur nearly blended in with the leaf-shadows. Brilliant green eyes stared down at them.

"Oh," she breathed, caught between admiration and fear. The cat was almost eight feet long from nose to tail-tip. Powerful muscles shifted beneath its short, glossy coat as it crawled along the bough, long, black claws gripping into the bark. Its striped tail flicked back and forth.

"Don't move," whispered Zander. He gripped his sword-hilt and slid the first inch of blade from its sheath.

Half-lidded eyes stared down at them. Then the cat turned its gaze away, as if losing interest, and climbed higher into the tree. Within seconds, its long, sleek body had vanished into the leafy canopy.

Wendy let out a breath. She hadn't even realized she'd been holding it.

Zander stared into the treetops. "Walk away, very slowly," he murmured. With one hand still on his sword-hilt, he began to walk.

She followed, craning her head back to peer into the treetop, but the cat was nowhere in sight. "I've never seen a wild tree cat before. Are they dangerous?"

"They can be. Quick movements or loud noises can provoke them. The most important thing to remember is, if you see one, don't run. They'll give chase."

She gulped.

For the next half-hour, she jumped at every flicker of movement and rustle in the vegetation. Then, gradually, she relaxed and began to enjoy the serene, natural beauty of the forest. She was so accustomed to the din and bustle of Garna. Even at night, when she lay in bed, there was always the rattle of carriage-wheels and hooves from the street below. There was something almost spiritual about the pristine silence.

She rummaged in her pack, pulled out two strips of jerky, and offered one to Zander, but he shook his head. She shrugged and took a bite. "So, where are you from?"

"I'm not from anywhere," he said.

"What do you mean? You have to be from somewhere."

"I prefer to roam. I don't like staying in one place for long."

"Well, then, where were you born? Where did you grow up?"

He hesitated. "A city called Shardin."

"I've heard of that. That's in the southeast, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Did you like it there?"

"What does it matter?"

She frowned. "I'm making conversation. It's what people do. You know, I ask you something about yourself, you ask me something about myself, and thus we pass the time."

"I dislike frivolous conversation."

She rolled her eyes. What a grump. "Fine. If my conversation is so tedious, I'll let you brood in stony silence and think your dark, complex thoughts. I'm sure they're fascinating."

He cast a glance in her direction, then stared straight ahead and kept walking.

She sighed. He didn't even respond to teasing. Or maybe he didn't realize he was being teased. If he was going to be like this the entire time, this was going to be one boring journey.

She let her gaze wander. She smiled and pointed. "Look." A herd of deer grazed in a sunlit clearing about fifty feet away. She noticed a few fawns among them, their dappled backs bright.

"I don't have the tools to hunt anything that big," he said. "You need a bow and arrow to bring down a deer."

"I'm not interested in hunting them, I'm just pointing them out. I know they're just

part of the scenery for you, but I'm a city girl, remember? The only animals we ever see are pigeons and cart-horses. Look at them! There's got to be..." She counted silently. "At least ten."

"Indeed."

She walked toward them.

"What are you doing?"

"I just want to see how close I can get without spooking them."

"Why?"

"I told you. I grew up in a city. I never get a chance to see deer up close." She moved closer. One of the bucks looked up and swiveled his ears toward her. She froze, then crept another few feet forward.

Zander crossed his arms over his chest. "We should keep moving."

"Give me a break. If I'm going to trudge through a hundred miles of forest, then I'm going to try to enjoy the scenery a little. Two minutes won't make a difference."

He rubbed his temples as if warding off a headache.

Wendy had an urge to stick her tongue out at him. She suppressed it and crept closer to the herd of deer.

A buck raised its antlered head. Large, dark eyes swept over the surrounding forest. She hid behind a tree and held her breath. The buck lowered its head. She watched a tiny fawn nosing the ground, searching for grass.

Zander seized her arm and dragged her back, away from the deer.

She whirled to face him. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Down," he hissed, and pushed her to the ground onto her stomach.

"Hey!" She tried to stand. "What's the big idea? You—"

He wrapped a hand around her mouth, silencing her, and pinned her to the ground. His weight pressed down on her back, flattening her breasts against the dirt. She lay trapped between the ground and his hard body, unable to talk or even cry out. She was helpless. Breathing fast, she squirmed. A muffled whimper escaped her mouth.

He lowered his head. His warm breath tickled her ear. "Lay very still," he whispered. Even with his lips almost touching her ear, his voice was barely audible. "If you move, we're dead."

Her heart pounded. She tried to turn her head, to meet his eyes, but with his gloved hand wrapped across the lower half of her face, she couldn't budge. His thumb pressed into her cheek. Tears stung her eyes. She made a muffled sound.

"Quiet!" he whispered.

The urgency in his voice sent a jolt of fear through her. She fell silent, heart thumping.

She heard a low whoosh overhead, as if something huge had just passed above them, and a rush of wind stirred her hair. A huge, winged shape swooped down on the herd of deer. They scattered, white tails flashing, and the thunder of pounding hooves filled the clearing. The winged beast seized a doe and dragged her to the ground. Wendy saw the flash of red scales in the sun, and her blood turned to ice.

A dragon.

The doe squealed, legs thrashing, eyes rolling. Wendy watched, holding her breath, as the dragon bit into the struggling doe's neck. Powerful jaws closed with a crunch. The doe kicked out one last time, then went limp. The massive jaws opened, and the doe's

head dropped to the ground, glassy eyes open.

The dragon raised its wedge-shaped head and belched a cloud of smoke. Its sleek, sinuous body stretched from one end of the clearing to the other, as long as three horses standing nose to tail, covered with rust-red, overlapping scales. Sunlight shone through the semi-translucent membranes of its wings, illuminating the web of dark veins within. Sharp, curved horns sprouted from its brow. One bronze-gold eye swiveled in the socket, and the oval-shaped pupil contracted to a black slit. For a moment, that cold eye seemed to focus on Wendy. Then it swiveled away.

The dragon's nostrils flared, and smoke curled out as a low rumble rose up from its chest. Blood dripped from its open muzzle and its dagger-like fangs. The dragon flicked its tail, raised one forefoot, extended four black talons, and slashed open the deer's belly. The narrow head lowered and a long, red tongue lapped blood from the open wound. The dragon pushed its snout into the gash, tore a mouthful of entrails from the doe's body and slurped them up. With one talon, it pulled out a dark, purplish organ the size of a cantaloupe and ate it in two gulps.

Nausea gripped Wendy's stomach. Hot, sour bile rose into her throat, and she swallowed.

The dragon grunted in satisfaction and gripped the doe's carcass with its forefeet. Its claws dug deep into the doe's flesh as the dragon's wings beat, and its body lifted into the air, carrying its prey with it. Wind whipped through the clearing like a miniature gale. The dragon soared higher, through the treetops, and vanished into the blue sky.

For several minutes, neither Wendy nor Zander moved. She lay beneath him, hardly daring to breathe. She felt his heart thumping against her back, felt her own heart punching her ribs. At last, he slid his hand from her mouth. She licked her lips and whispered, "Is it safe?"

"Yes. It's gone." He rose to his feet. "We were lucky. The wind was in our favor."

She stood, trembling. Her knees wobbled, but held. She took a deep breath. "Why didn't it see us? It was so close. I thought for sure we were goners."

He brushed off his cloak. "Dragons can see great distances in any light, but their vision relies on movement. Hold perfectly still, and you're invisible to them."

"Oh." She stared at the clearing. A splotch of blood, dark as tar, marked the spot where the deer had died. She shuddered, then looked at Zander. A strange feeling washed over her. He had shielded her with his body. "Thank you," she said. "If you hadn't spotted that thing when you did, it might've gotten us."

"That's what I'm here for, isn't it? That's the bargain. I get you safely to the mountains, you show me the way to the Tear."

She brushed a few strands of hair from her eyes. "Yeah, I know you aren't doing this for charity. But thanks anyway."

He looked away. His cheeks turned a dusky blue. His pointed ears darkened several shades, too.

She stared at him in amazement. Was he blushing?

He turned his back to her. "Let's go," he said gruffly. "And don't run off again. Stay close to my side. I can't protect you if you insist on running headfirst into danger at every opportunity."

She rolled her eyes at his tone, but kept her mouth shut. He had just saved her from being eviscerated. She supposed he'd earned the right to lecture her, at least a little.

She followed him, staring at his broad back. She remembered the sensation of his hard, muscled body pressed against hers, how big and warm he'd felt. Her stomach fluttered. At the time, she'd been too terrified to really think about it, but she hadn't been so close to a man for almost...God, had it been that long?

A flush crept into her cheeks.

Don't think about it, she advised herself. It didn't mean anything. He needed her alive in order to get Eloria's Tear. He had to protect her. He was her guide, nothing more.

## Chapter Four

The sun sank in the west. Fiery light bled through the leaves and painted the forest a deep golden amber, but Wendy was in no condition to appreciate its beauty.

She stumbled over a root and grunted with pain. "Damn!" Her feet throbbed. Grimacing, she pressed one hand over a stitch in her side. She really wasn't cut out for foot-travel.

"It'll be dark soon," said Zander. "We should make camp."

"Yes. Please. I'm dying." She sat on the ground and massaged her aching calves.

He watched her. "You know, if you were in that much pain, you could have said something earlier."

"I didn't want to slow you down."

"Actually..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

She glanced at his face and winced. "You've been adjusting your pace for me this whole time, haven't you?"

He shrugged. "I'm used to walking long distances."

Wendy sighed. "And I'm not exactly the athletic type." She unlaced her boot and tugged it off, wincing. "Back in middle school, I used to fake asthma attacks to avoid running the mile. I'd bet anything that you were one of those kids who always finished first and made the rest of us look bad."

"I never went to school."

"Oh." For a moment, she was too surprised to say anything else. In Garna, parents were obligated to send their children to school for at least the first five years. "Well, you didn't miss much. It was mainly just to keep us busy until we were old enough to get jobs." She tugged off her other boot and flexed her toes, then peeled off her wet, dirty socks and draped them over a nearby branch. "Yuck. And I only brought one extra pair. If I'd known I would be walking so far, I'd have packed a lot differently." Wendy stared down at her swollen feet. "But then, I didn't have much time to prepare."

Zander pulled a small object from under his cloak and handed it to her.

She studied the unlabeled, blue glass bottle. "What is it?"

"Ointment. Rub it onto your feet. It will help with the pain."

She stared at him, surprised. "Thank you."

"I'm going to gather some kindling for a fire." He walked off, into the forest.

Wendy opened the bottle and massaged the thin, milky ointment onto her feet. It smelled like lavender. The pain faded as a soothing warmth sank into her muscles, and she sighed with pleasure. She'd have to remember to ask Zander about the ingredients of that stuff.

As late afternoon deepened to twilight, Zander returned with an armful of sticks. He scooped out a small fire-pit, filled it with kindling and pulled a piece of flint from his pocket.

"You don't need that," said Wendy.

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows.

She crouched by the pile of kindling and held one hand over it, fingers spread. She closed her eyes and quieted her mind.

"What are you doing?"

"Shhh." She held the image of a flame in her mind. It glowed, sharp and bright, a dancing orange tongue against a solid blackness. Her breathing slowed and deepened as she focused all her concentration on that image. Her Gift welled up inside her and flowed outward like warm liquid, moving down her arm and through her hand. Her palm tingled as the magic spilled through her skin. She heard a crackle and opened her eyes to see a small flame licking the kindling. She smiled and dusted her hands together.

"You're a sorceress," said Zander, a hint of surprise in his voice.

She laughed. "Barely. I can do a few simple spells and sense other people's magic, but that's about it." She sat cross-legged and warmed her hands over the dancing flames. "Why so surprised? You knew I had the Gift, didn't you?"

"Yes. But I didn't realize you knew flame spells. I thought only sorcerers knew such magic."

She smiled. "Well, if you want to call me a sorceress, I won't object. But it's a pretty low-level spell, really, one of the first things they teach Gifted students."

He watched the flames. Reflected firelight danced in his eyes. "What else can you do?"

"Let's see." She tapped a finger against her chin. "I can conjure light. I'm passable at healing, as long as the injury isn't too deep or serious. I can levitate small objects if I really concentrate, but it always gives me a nasty headache, so I try to avoid that."

"But you flew to Jacob's Hill on your broom, didn't you?"

"That's different. The brooms used for flying are specially made. They're already spelled, so anyone with the Gift can activate them and direct them."

"Interesting," he murmured.

"I guess it is. It's so much a part of my everyday world that I don't think about it, though." She was very aware of Zander's nearness, his gaze on her. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling. Just odd. Her heartbeat tripped along a little faster than normal, and her skin tingled, the way it sometimes did when she felt a powerful magic nearby. "No offense, but how is it you know so little about the Gift?"

"Where I grew up, magic isn't very common."

"Ah," she said. "In Garna, my home city, almost everyone has at least a spark of the Gift. But I've heard it's different in other parts of the world, that in some places the un-Gifted are the norm rather than the exception." In Garna, the un-Gifted were treated as unfortunates, their condition regarded as a mild disability, but she thought it tactful not to mention that. "I guess people who are alike tend to naturally drift together. No one wants to be the only Gifted person in a city of un-Gifted, or vice versa. I suppose if I lived in one of those places where the Gift was rare, people might be nervous around me."

"Then you understand why I avoid people," he said. "No one is like me."

She hesitated and picked at her nails, trying to select her words with care. "I guess it's hard to be different."

"That's why I want to find Eloria's Tear," he said.

Wendy stole a glance at his eyes. In the dim light, his pupils were almost round. When his eyes moved, they caught the firelight and shone like jewels.

He picked up a stick and poked the kindling. He turned over a chunk of wood. A



shower of sparks rose into the air. "Where did you learn of the Tear's location?"

"A man sold me an ancient scroll with a map. He said his name was Threed."

Zander raised an eyebrow. "How do you know he didn't forge the map himself?"

"They weren't forgeries. I can feel the difference."

"Feel?"

She raked a hand through her hair. "I know it sounds weird. But sometimes I can feel an object's...realness, for lack of a better term. Comes in handy when you run a magic shop. I can't count the number of people who've tried to sell me fake unicorn horns, fake magic amulets, fake treasure maps. But this map was real. Whoever made it was powerful, and power leaves a kind of residue, like a scent. You know the story behind Eloria's Tear, right?"

"Vaguely. For all the time I spent researching the Tear, I found very little about its origins. Wasn't Eloria a saint?"

"More like a priestess," said Wendy. "Back then, the word they used was *shani*. It means a powerful holy person, like a sorceress who uses her powers to do good deeds in God's name. Eloria traveled around healing people, exorcising demons, and purging dark magic from cursed places. Stuff like that. Anyway, she grew old and sick, and she knew she was going to die soon. But she wanted to continue helping and protecting the people, so she sealed her powers—her soul, some people say—into a tear-shaped stone. And that's about it. The Tear is supposed to be as powerful as she was, and she was one of the strongest *shanis* who ever lived."

"I see. But then, why is it hidden away?"

"There's where the legend gets a little cloudy. Some people say the government decided it was too strong, that it might be dangerous in the wrong hands, and decided to destroy it. But that doesn't seem likely. A holy item can't be used to cause harm...not to humans, anyway. Others say a demon lord hired someone to steal and hide it. After all, since holy items can hurt demons, Eloria's Tear would be a powerful weapon against them. There's even a theory that Eloria's followers stole and hid it because they were tired of seeing petty officials squabble over who should have it and how it should be used. No one really knows."

"And why are you searching for the Tear?" he asked. "What's in it for you?"

"The money. I want to sell it."

"That's all?"

Wendy hesitated. She really didn't want to tell him about how her mounting debt and poor choice of lenders had put her entire family in danger, so for now, she'd leave it at that. "Pretty much, yes. Do you really think Eloria's Tear can make you human? I mean, it has incredible powers, but I don't know if it can transform a person into something else."

"It's said the Tear can purify the impure, wash away the taint of darkness and evil. Despite all my research, I don't know much more about it." He ran one palm over his face. "My condition is the result of dark magic. Perhaps the Tear can make me human again."

"Again? You mean, you haven't always been..."

"I haven't always been this monstrosity you see before you, no. I was a man once. I don't remember much of my life back then, and what few memories I have are dim and hazy, but I know that much. I also know that the sooner I find the Tear, the greater my

chance of regaining my humanity. I've been researching my...condition. Changes wrought by magic can usually be reversed within the first few years, but over time, they become permanent. Perhaps it's already too late, but this is my last hope. I have to try."

"What happened?" she asked quietly.

"I'd rather not talk about it."

Wendy bit her lower lip. Zander sat, elbow resting on his knee, his eyes distant and unfocused, his jaw a tense line. "Did someone do this to you?"

"I said I'd rather not talk about it," he snapped.

She hugged her knees. "You don't need to be so touchy."

"I don't like being probed or interrogated. My past is my own."

"Fine. I get the message."

Silence stood between them like a wall. She wondered why she even tried. She'd already made up her mind that she wasn't in the market for a man. Hell, she'd been trying to convince her mother of that for years. So why did she suddenly find herself wanting Zander to open up to her? Why was she so intrigued by him?

Well, forget it. She had enough to deal with. Getting closer to him would just make things complicated. He didn't seem interested in her, anyway.

He stood and turned. "I'm going to set a few snares. With any luck, we'll have rabbit in the morning."

"What if a dragon or a tree cat shows up while you're gone?"

"Wild animals won't go near fire, if they can help it. Stay close to the fire, and you'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I won't be long." He walked into the forest. The darkness swallowed him.

She huddled by the fire, hugging herself for warmth. The forest loomed around her, ominous and dark. Wind moved through the trees, making leaves whisper and branches scrape together. Something rustled in the underbrush, and she tensed. A squirrel, she told herself. Or a raccoon. But her heart wouldn't stop pounding.

She usually wasn't so scared of the dark. But after the encounter with the dragon...

She shivered at the memory of those sharp, dripping teeth. Trying to distract herself from thoughts of what might be lurking amid the trees, she fumbled through her pack until she found a pouch of dried fruit. She sat, nibbling an apricot. Somewhere out in the darkness, an owl hooted. She heard a rush of wings and a squeal as something small and helpless died.

She scooted closer to the fire.

To give herself something to do, she opened her pack again and rummaged until she found her scrye-glass. She knew she was far out of range by now, but she could try, at least. She clutched the glass and focused her thoughts on Julie. With her mind, she reached out across the darkness between them, across forest and field, hill and town, to Garna, where Julie lay in bed, dozing, her scrye-glass on the bedside table.

The dark glass flickered, then went blank. Wendy sighed and put the scrye-glass away. She wondered if Julie was worried about her. She wondered if she was safe.

Drizell's voice echoed in her mind: *You have a family, don't you?*

Hot anger and cold fear shot through Wendy like twin jets of water. Her breathing quickened. She shook, thinking of Drizell's smug, bony face, her ruthless green eyes. If

Drizell ever, *ever* touched her family...

Images flashed unbidden through her mind. She saw Julie hanging upside down, her eye-sockets empty and glistening, her bloody mouth open in a scream. She saw her mother bound, gagged and blindfolded, writhing on the floor as the Jackal approached with a grin and a knife in his hand. *No*. She pressed her hands to her ears, as if that could somehow shut out the ugly visions.

Julie contorted on the ground, her arms and legs broken...

Her mother screaming as the Jackal raped her...

*No!*

Wendy heard the rustle of approaching footsteps and looked up. "Zander?"

"It's me." He emerged from the darkness. His face was calm, closed off. Unreadable. When he saw her face, he froze. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

"You're pale."

She looked away. "This forest spooks me. I keep hearing things in the dark."

"The forest is always full of sounds. Not all of them signal danger."

She nodded, but didn't reply.

"We should get some sleep," he said.

"Yeah." She pulled a folded blanket from her pack and spread it across the ground. "I didn't really expect to need this thing when I left Garna, but I'm glad I brought it." She glanced at him. "You didn't bring a bedroll or a blanket. What are you going to sleep in?"

"Nothing." He sat, leaned his back against a tree trunk and folded his arms. "I'll sleep like this."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I need to be able to wake at the slightest noise. Being a little uncomfortable helps me do that."

"That doesn't sound very pleasant. Won't you wake up sore?"

Zander shrugged. "I'm used to it."

She wrapped the blanket around herself like a cocoon. Already, she yearned for a hot bath. Her clothes were sticky with sweat, despite the chill in the air. She could only imagine how bad they'd be after a week or so.

She cast one last glance over her shoulder at his motionless form. "Goodnight, Zander," she said. "Sweet dreams."

For a moment, he was silent, and she wondered if he'd already fallen asleep. Then his voice came, so quiet it was almost inaudible. "I've never had a sweet dream."

Wendy watched him a moment longer, wondering if he'd meant for her to hear that. Then she rolled onto her side, facing away from him, and closed her eyes.

She thought it would be difficult to sleep in the open forest, with mysterious sounds all around her, but she'd underestimated her exhaustion. Her eyelids sank shut. Within minutes, she was asleep.

\* \* \* \*

*She lay on a stone slab, arms and legs shackled. Tubes ran into her wrists. She tried to sit up, but her body wouldn't budge. A weak groan escaped her throat. Her vision swam. Dim, hazy shapes surrounded her. She couldn't move, couldn't speak. Couldn't even think.*

*A dark shape loomed over her. With an effort, she focused her eyes and saw a man's face, his eyes cold and ruthless. In one hand, he held a hypodermic filled with a black, evil-looking liquid. A long, thick needle gleamed in the dim light. "What's wrong?" he said. "You wanted to be stronger, didn't you?"*

*She groaned again and tried to shake her head. This wasn't how she'd wanted it.*

*A deep chuckle. "You should feel honored. This is very rare stuff, you know. Very costly. They don't sell essence of blue dragon at any common shop." He tapped the hypo with one long, pale finger. "Relax. It'll only hurt for a minute."*

*Panic jolted through her. Her muscles twitched. She tried to sit up, then sank back to the stone slab as a wave of weakness washed over her. Her vision blurred and dimmed as she fought for consciousness. The man watched her, a smirk on his thin lips.*

*"No." It took all her effort to form the single word. It emerged thick, slurred.*

*"Too late for that, now." He jabbed the needle into her thigh. The liquid drained from the hypodermic. Burning heat spread outward from the needle, as if he had injected molten lava into her veins. She screamed. Her muscles convulsed. Her insides burned and boiled. Sharp, thin pains shot through her, like glass shards piercing her flesh. The convulsions came faster, harder. Her body wrenched and twisted, and her head knocked against the stone slab. She screamed again...*

\* \* \* \*

And woke with a gasp.

Wendy lay on her back, heart racing, drenched in sweat. The dark forest loomed around her. Somewhere nearby, an owl hooted. It took her a moment to remember where she was, who she was.

She sighed, sat up and mopped sweat from her brow. "What a dream," she whispered. Her heart was still pounding, and a sense of terror and dread still hung over her like a shadow. That man...

She shuddered, remembering his eyes, eyes that had stared at her with no trace of warmth or humanity.

Zander moaned. She looked at him. He was still asleep, sitting upright and breathing heavily. His head rested against one shoulder, and his arms lay limp at his sides.

"Zander?"

He moaned again, a low, helpless sound. His eyes rolled beneath the lids. "No," he murmured, his voice thick with sleep. "No, please."

She crawled to his side. She looked at his face and saw the shining lines of tear-tracks on his cheeks. His brows drew together, and a small furrow appeared in his forehead. A small sound, almost a whimper, escaped his throat, and fresh tears seeped out from beneath his lids. She shook him. "Zander, wake up."

His eyes snapped open and for a moment, he didn't seem to see her. His wide eyes stared straight through her as his shoulder trembled beneath her hand.

"It's okay," she whispered. Impulsively, she smoothed his silvery hair. Cold sweat drenched his brow. "Just a bad dream."

His eyes focused on her. He blinked a few times, then looked away.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine," he said gruffly. He pulled away from her, shoulders rigid, and wiped his wet face with one sleeve. "I need to be alone," he murmured and stood.

"Wait." Wendy leapt to her feet, heart pounding. "Was...was there a man with a hypodermic needle?"

He whirled around, eyes wide. "What?"

"I had the same dream. I was shackled to some kind of stone table. There was a man. He injected me with this black stuff." She hugged herself. Even now, the memory chilled and sickened her. "It was horrible. I felt so helpless."

Shock flashed across his face. Then his eyes narrowed. "You looked into my mind."

"No, I..."

"You spied on my dreams." He grabbed her shoulders and stared hard into her eyes, his lips peeled back from sharp teeth. "Didn't you?"

She tried to pull away. "I didn't do anything, I swear! Nothing like that has ever happened to me before."

He glowered at her. In the dark, eyes glowing, teeth bared, he looked like a demon. "Do you expect me to believe it was coincidence that we shared the same dream?" His fingers tightened on her shoulders.

"Let me go!" She kicked his knee, hard.

He grunted in pain and released her. She stumbled backwards, panting, and retreated to the edge of the campsite. "Get a grip on yourself! What's wrong with you?"

He stood, teeth and fists clenched. "Stay out of my head."

She glared at him. "Even if I wanted to get into your head, I wouldn't know how. I told you, I didn't do anything!"

He blinked. The anger faded from his eyes, replaced by confusion and uncertainty. "You didn't?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you! Now will you please relax? For a moment, I thought you were going to kill me."

He took a deep breath and let it out. His fists unclenched. "All right. So I overreacted a little."

"A little? You scared me half to death."

He had the decency to look embarrassed, at least. "I'm sorry. I just don't want anyone else inside my head."

"I'm telling you, I couldn't mind-probe someone to save my life."

"But you have the Gift."

"Not just any magic-user can read minds or enter dreams. It takes a special talent. What makes you so sure it was your dream, anyway? Maybe you were sharing mine."

He shook his head. "It was mine." His eyes lost focus, as if he were staring at something far away. Then he met her gaze and frowned. "Have you ever heard of anything like that happening? Two people sharing the same dream?"

"I haven't, except..." She paused. "A professor of mine said that when a psi-magician's powers are first emerging, she often picks up on the thoughts or dreams of people around her without meaning to...but that usually happens during adolescence. I'm twenty-five."

"What are you saying? That you might have this power after all?"

"I doubt it. A sorceress can develop and strengthen her existing powers, but it's rare for new powers to surface after puberty."

"Then why? How?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose. A blossoming headache pulsed behind her right

eye. "I keep telling you, I don't understand how it happened." Was it possible? Could a new power be surfacing within her? It did happen with adults, once in a blue moon. Some dormant ability rose to the surface like a bit of shipwreck debris washed onto the shore. Stress was often the catalyst, and God knew she'd been under a lot of that lately. Unease crept over her heart like a shadow. She wasn't sure she wanted some new, unfamiliar power...especially if it meant other people's nightmares invading her head. She had enough trouble with her own bad dreams.

She watched as Zander paced the edge of the campsite. "It must have a cause," he said. "Things like that don't just happen, surely."

"It could be a fluke." She hoped it was.

He faced her. "So how can we prevent it from happening again?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You really, really don't want me in your head, do you?"

"I value my privacy." His gaze shifted away. "There are certain things in my mind I don't want anyone to see."

"Well, there are charms designed to prevent mental invasions. I have some back in my shop, but that doesn't do us much good. I could try making one, but I can't guarantee that it will work."

"Try," he said. "Please."

"Okay. Hang on..." She hunted around the campsite until she found a flat, pale rock about the size of her palm. She pulled a blackened stick out of the fire. With the tip, she scratched a crude design onto the rock, an open eye with a triangle in the pupil. She held an open hand over the makeshift amulet and let her Gift flow over it, into it. The rock glowed a soft blue. "There." She handed the rock to Zander.

Zander studied it. "This will protect me?"

"It should. It's the best I can do, anyway."

"How does it work?"

"The amulet's function depends on the symbol engraved on its surface." She pointed at the design on the rock. "The eye symbolizes the mind, or a passageway into the mind, and the triangle is a symbol of protection or power, so putting the triangle inside the eye is kind of like putting a lock on the door into the mind. There's hundreds of different symbols you can use. I had to memorize them all for my final." He gave her a puzzled look, and she added, "I took a class in amulet making."

"Did you pass?"

"Squeaked by with a C."

He stared at the amulet. "So I just carry this, then?"

"You can put it in your pocket. It should work as long as it's close to your body."

"Thank you."

"No problem." She cracked a weak smile. "I don't want your crazy dreams invading my head again, either."

He averted his gaze. "I'm sorry about the way I reacted."

"Don't worry about it." She hesitated. "I guess we should get some sleep."

He nodded.

Wendy lay down and wrapped herself in her blanket. This time, she lay awake for almost an hour. She kept thinking of Zander's dream, the terrible, helpless feeling of watching the needle descend, watching that evil black liquid drain from the hypo as it filled his veins, burning him from the inside, burning away his humanity...

Her vision blurred. She blinked, and a warm tear slid down her cheek. Surprised, she brushed it away. It wasn't even her nightmare, yet the memory was strong enough to bring tears to her eyes. How much worse must it have been for Zander?

She glanced at him. He sat with his back to the tree trunk, facing away from her. Quiet, even breathing echoed through the silence. She couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes. After some tossing and turning, she drifted off. There were no more dreams.

## Chapter Five

Wendy woke, her body a collection of aches and pains. She sat up, winced and rubbed her sore legs.

"Feeling rested?" asked Zander.

"I feel like I've been trampled by a herd of wild horses."

"You'll feel better once you get moving."

"I hope so." She sniffed the air. A warm, meaty aroma tickled her nostrils, and her mouth watered. Zander sat cross-legged in front of the fire, turning something on a makeshift spit. "What's that?"

"Breakfast. I checked the snares earlier. We're having rabbit today."

She watched the rabbit turn over the crackling flames. Zander had already skinned it, and apparently he'd been cooking it for awhile. Tender reddish-gold meat glistened with juices. "It smells delicious. Is that basil?"

He nodded. "I picked some wild herbs this morning and crushed them into the meat."

"I didn't realize you were such a chef."

A tiny smile curved his lips. "Chef' is stretching it a bit, but I've learned to cook for myself over the years. Pure trial and error." He turned the spit again. "I learned how to hunt and trap the same way."

"I'm impressed." Her stomach rumbled. She slid out from under the blanket, her stiff muscles protesting every movement.

"It should be done, now." He lifted the spit off the fire. "Help yourself."

She pulled off a bit of meat with her fingers and placed it on her tongue. Her eyes rolled back in pleasure. Maybe it was just her hunger, but the rabbit meat, lightly spiced and smoky, was the best thing she'd tasted all month. "Delicious."

"Thank you." She noticed he'd taken his gloves off. His fingers were armored with metallic blue-gray scales and equipped with sharp black claws, but the palms were human-looking enough, aside from their color.

On impulse, she took his hand in both of hers, and Zander froze. She stared at his palm and trailed one finger lightly over his lifeline. The skin was warm and leather-hard.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just looking at your hands." She touched the tip of one claw. "Don't these ever get in the way?"

"I can retract them when I need to."

She studied the marble-smooth tips of his fingers. "You don't have any fingerprints."

He pulled his hand back. A dusky, blue flush crept into his cheeks, and she had to hide a smile. For someone so tough, he blushed an awful lot. "I'm not a specimen," he muttered.

"Sorry. I'm just curious." She watched him as he ate. He kept his eyes averted.

Once they finished eating, he stood and kicked dust over the campfire's remains. "Are you ready?"

"Almost." She strapped on the pack and winced. Her shoulders were still sore. She rubbed one.

"Let me carry that if you can't handle it," he said.



"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I don't want you overexerting yourself. If you pass out from exhaustion, I'll have to carry you *and* the pack."

Her back stiffened, and she lifted her chin. "I may not be the athletic type, but I'm not so useless that I can't carry my own stuff."

"All right. Just let me know if you start getting tired."

Dead leaves crunched underfoot as they walked. She found a patch of safrel, pulled off a handful of the dark red leaves and popped one in her mouth. After a few minutes of chewing, she felt the plant's effects spread through her body, quenching the fire in her muscles like cool water. She knew it wouldn't last long, but it was better than nothing. Oh, why hadn't she thought to bring some real pain-relief potion with her? Or some Heal-Fast? Or better yet, a horse. Why not wings, while you're dreaming? she thought and sighed.

She picked a leaf out of her hair and glanced at Zander. "So you really don't remember anything of your life before..." She trailed off, searching for a polite way to say it. "Before your change?"

He shook his head. "Nothing specific, anyway. I seem to remember I lived in a city, and spent a lot of time running away and hiding. But it's like remembering a dream."

Wendy thought of the countless street urchins in Garna—thin, ragged, dirty boys and girls with sharp, cunning faces. They lived off what they could steal from carts or pick out of garbage bins, slept in doorways or abandoned buildings. "Once you become human again, what do you think you'll do?"

"Do?"

"You must have some idea. What do you imagine yourself doing after you use Eloria's Tear on yourself?"

"I don't know," he said. "I suppose I'll keep doing what I'm doing now."

"And what's that?"

"I'm a mercenary. I travel from place to place, offering my services as a sword-for-hire."

"Don't you want to settle down somewhere? Start a family, or a business?"

"Somehow, I can't see myself settling down."

"But don't you get lonely?"

"I've always been alone," he said. "I'm used to it."

As the sun reached its zenith, she glimpsed a bright sparkle through the trees. Shielding her eyes with one hand, she squinted against the sunlight. "Is that water ahead?"

Zander nodded. "The Whisperdeep River."

"That's right. I remember seeing it on the maps. We won't have to cross it, will we?"

"No. It curves toward us from the west and runs parallel to our course." He pushed a branch aside. "There it is."

The Whisperdeep was wide and sluggish, a band of smooth water, dark as tea, the banks overgrown with thick grass and cattails. The water would have appeared motionless, but for the scattered leaves drifting gently along its surface.

"Water. Thank God. My canteen is getting low." She shook it. "And I could really use a bath. I haven't had a chance to wash for two days."

"We shouldn't linger here. Bandits and outlaws makes their camps along this river."

The longer we stay, the greater our chance of being attacked."

"I won't take long, but I'm not going to pass up this chance. I can't stand being dirty another moment. My skin is crawling."

He sighed. "Very well. We'll refill the canteens first, but we'll need to boil the water. Do you have a cooking pot?"

She shook her head. "I know an easier way." She crouched by the riverbank and filled her canteen, then closed her eyes and tapped into her Gift. It spread through the water, destroying the microscopic life-forms within. Her eyes opened. "There. It should be fine now."

He furrowed his brow. "What did you do?"

"It's a water-purification spell. I use it sometimes for potions, since a lot of recipes call for purified water. The microbes and chemicals can interfere with some magical ingredients."

"Are you sure it worked?"

She took a swig. "Yup. Taste it." She held the canteen out to him.

He took a cautious sip. "It does taste clean."

"See? Here, I'll do yours too. Hand me your canteen." She filled it with river-water and tapped into her Gift again. A moment later, she handed the canteen back to him.

He sniffed the water and took a sip. "Well, that saved us an hour or two. Your Gift is a useful thing."

Warmth rose into her cheeks. At school, she'd excelled in book studies, but she'd always struggled with practical magic. Spells which came effortlessly to her peers left her exhausted. She wasn't used to being praised, much less for such rudimentary spells. "It's nothing, really. Anyone with the Gift can do it." She stood and dusted off her trousers. "Well, I'm going to test the water." She took off her boots and socks, rolled up her trousers, and waded into the river up to her calves. Cold mud squished between her toes.

"How is it?"

"Nice and cool." She paused. "Say, there isn't anything dangerous living in this river, is there?"

"Yes," he said. "It's filled with crocodiles, snapping turtles and leeches the size of small dogs. And fish with sharp teeth, who love to nibble on tender human flesh...especially girl-flesh."

She froze. "Are you serious?" Then she saw the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, and scowled. "You're making fun of me." She splashed water at him. The droplets fell short of their target, but it was satisfying to see him twitch and raise a hand to shield his face.

He sniffed. "Just don't wade out too far. The river may look tame, but the undercurrents can be strong."

"I'll be careful." She paused. "Um, do you think you could go stand over there, behind that tree?" She pointed to an oak about twenty feet away.

He raised his eyebrows. "Didn't you agree to stay in my sight at all times?"

"I'm not going to strip down and wash myself in front of you. I do have an ounce of modesty, you know." She turned away, her cheeks hot. "You'll still be able to hear me. Just go behind the tree and face away from me for awhile."

"Very well. But I'll warn you, I'm coming out in fifteen minutes, so don't take long."

"I already promised I wouldn't," she said and splashed him again. This time, a few

water droplets landed on his cloak.

He turned and walked to the tree. Wendy waited until he was out of sight, then stripped off her baggy tunic and tossed it onto the shore. Her cotton brassiere joined it a moment later. Cool air washed over her naked, upper body, and her nipples tightened. Shivering, she returned to the riverbank to strip off her trousers and undergarments, then waded deeper into the river, up to her waist. Trying not to think about leeches or snapping turtles, she took a deep breath and submerged herself completely. She came up with her teeth chattering. The water, which had been pleasantly cool on her bare legs, now felt icy cold. She shook out her wet hair, turned and waded back toward the shore. Goose bumps rose on her wet skin as she stepped onto the bank.

She had no towel, so she'd have to make do with clothes against wet skin. She dressed quickly. As she laced up her boots, something rustled in the underbrush. She heard the unmistakable crackle of twigs underfoot as someone approached. Wendy gulped and straightened as three men emerged from the forest.

All three wore ragged, deerskin trousers and tunics and carried short swords in leather sheaths. The tallest had long, greasy black hair, waxy-pale skin and a pointed face, like a fox. Another man sported a thick, matted beard, and a third was as bald as an egg, with a squashed-looking nose and tiny, dim eyes. The three men leered at Wendy, and her stomach clenched.

Bandits.

Mr. Greasy grinned, revealing several missing front teeth and diseased-looking gums. "Well, what have we here?"

His friends, Mr. Beard and Mr. Bald, snickered.

"Looks like a half-drowned kitten," said Mr. Bald. A gold tooth glinted between his lips. "What's a little girl like you doing out in the woods on her own, eh?"

"Stay back," she said. "I'm a sorceress."

They roared with laughter.

"Ooh," said Mr. Beard. "Scary. Look at me shake!"

"I'm warning you—"

Zander emerged from behind a tree. He drew his sword, and the ring of steel filled the air as he stalked toward the bandits. "No one touches her."

Mr. Bald turned his beady eyes to Zander. His smile faded. "What the hell are you?"

"I'm your death, should you lay a hand on that girl." Zander positioned himself between Wendy and the three men. "Back away, or you'll be wearing your own guts."

The bandits' faces darkened. Damn. If a fight broke out, this could get ugly.

"Look, no one has to die," she said. "Just leave us alone, and we'll all go our merry ways."

Mr. Beard sneered at Zander. "Your wench always do the talking for you?"

"She's not mine. I'm her bodyguard," said Zander. "And if you call her a wench again, I will cut out your tongue."

"Oh really?" Mr. Beard snickered and turned to her. "Oi there, wench! Once we kill this blue bastard, I'm going to take you back to my tent and show you the time of your life. What do you think about that, wenchy?"

Mr. Greasy and Mr. Bald howled with laughter, smacking their thighs.

"Hey, there, wench! Want a suck on my pole?" shouted Mr. Greasy. He placed his hands on his hips and thrust his pelvis at her. "Got a nice fat sausage for you."

"Charming," she said. "Your mother must be so proud. And when's the last time any of you have taken a bath? If I got any closer to you, I'd get fleas."

"Now, dearie, that isn't very nice. But I have a feeling you'll be singing a different tune when I'm pounding my hammer into that plump, juicy—"

Zander roared. The men fell silent as the echoes rebounded through the forest. The color drained from their faces. Zander's hands tightened on his sword-hilt. "Retreat," he said. "Now."

Mr. Beard's Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. He took a step back. Then his courage seemed to flare up. He squared his shoulders, narrowed his eyes and scowled. "Retreat, eh? And why would we do that? Looks to me like you're outnumbered, mate." He lifted one hand and snapped his fingers. Two more men dropped down from the trees. One brandished a curved blade, the other, a club. Both were large and muscular. Mr. Beard smirked. "Five against one. Not good odds for you, I'd say."

A cold smile spread across Zander's face. "Looks like pretty good odds to me."

Wendy stared at him, and a chill raced up her spine. There was no trace of fear in Zander's eyes.

"You're mad if you think you can beat us all," said Mr. Greasy. He drew his short sword and brandished it. "If you think we'll show you any mercy, you're wrong."

"Tell you what," said Mr. Bald. He grinned, showing a gold tooth. "Give us the girl, and we'll let you go. See, my men and I, we're all a bit lonely after so many weeks in the forest without a woman. It's not like we're going to hurt her or nothing..."

"Yeah," said Mr. Greasy. "After we've all had a few turns, we'll let her go."

"We'll be real gentle-like."

"Speak for yourself, mate."

Zander's ruthless smile never wavered. "I've been more than generous with the warnings. This is my last one."

Mr. Bald's grin faded. Anger flared in his eyes. "I see you ain't going to make this easy on yourself." He shrugged. "So be it." He drew his sword.

"Zander." Her voice shook. "This doesn't look good."

Zander looked over one shoulder, and his eyes locked with hers. "Run," he said.

"But—"

"Run!"

Wendy turned and bolted into the forest. She didn't look back. Branches snagged her tunic and clawed her arms, leaving bloody scratches. She leapt over a tree root and ducked under a bough, panting. A vision of Zander, covered in wounds and surrounded by sneering bandits, flashed through her mind. Her chest tightened. No—he wouldn't die. He knew what he was doing, surely. But how could he possibly defeat them all?

Behind her, a short, strangled scream pierced the air. Another scream rang out, followed by a choked gurgle.

She tripped, landed on her hands and knees, skinned her palm on a rough patch of gravel, stumbled to her feet and kept running, her palm stinging like fire. Leaves slapped her face. Her heart lurched in her chest and a deep, throbbing stitch sank into her side like a blade. When she couldn't run another step, she collapsed against a tree. Sweat trickled down her neck and plastered her tunic to her skin. Each breath scoured her lungs like nettles.

"Gotcha," hissed a voice.

She started to turn. A cudgel swung through the air and slammed into her temple. Stars burst across her vision. She stumbled and fell to her knees, trees and sky whirling around her.

Rough hands grabbed her, shoved her to the ground, and pinned her arms. A narrow face leered at her through a curtain of greasy black hair. His breath, sour and hot, hit her in the face like a slap. She twisted, trying to break free of his grip.

Damn it! If only she was a real sorceress, one who knew some decent defensive spells, she'd put this punk in his place. "Let me go!" she said through gritted teeth.

He laughed. "Go ahead. Struggle. Makes it more fun for..."

She kned him in the groin. He gasped and clutched his balls with one hand. Tears ran from his eyes, cutting paths through the dirt on his face.

She squirmed out from under him and stood, but before she could run, he tackled her and grabbed her hair. "You little bitch!" He backhanded her, and her head snapped to one side. "You're going to pay for that. I'm going to make you bleed. You—"

A blade sprouted from his chest. His body convulsed as his eyes bulged from the sockets.

Zander stood behind him, wild-eyed and splattered with blood, his sword buried to the hilt in the man's back. He yanked his sword out, and the man slumped to the ground like a string-cut marionette. Zander's broad shoulders rose and fell with his ragged breathing, and sharp, white teeth glinted between his lips.

Wendy scooted backwards, away from the corpse. She gulped and looked up at Zander.

He wiped his sword off on the dead man's tunic, then slid the blade into its scabbard and stood, staring at her.

She wet her dry lips, her heart thumping. "Are they..."

"Dead. All five, including this one." He nudged the corpse with his boot and growled. "Thugs. They only attack when the odds are stacked in their favor. Four of them boxed me in while the last one ran after you. I couldn't stop him. I worried I might be too late, that he might have—"

"I'm fine. A little bruised, but it could be worse."

He crouched. "You're bleeding," he said softly.

She touched her temple, and her fingers came away sticky with blood. "It's nothing. I'll probably have a bump, but I don't think I'm concussed. What about you? Are you okay?"

He nodded.

"Is all that blood theirs?"

"Most of it."

She stood. A wave of dizziness washed over her, and blackness ate at the edges of her vision. She swayed. Zander gripped her arm, steadying her. She looked at the dead bandit and gulped. She'd seen dead people before, at funerals, but this wasn't quite the same. People in coffins were made up to look peaceful, like they were asleep. This corpse didn't look asleep. His eyes stared at nothing, frozen open in a look of horror, and his mouth gaped in a silent scream. Her eyes flicked to the dark, bloody hole in his chest, then darted away. Nausea roiled inside her, and hot bile surged into her throat. She turned away, one hand pressed to her stomach.

Minutes ago, this bloody piece of meat had been a talking, walking, thinking human

being. A nasty one, but still. The reality of death hit her like a punch in the gut, and a fresh wave of dizziness and nausea rolled over her. "Let's get out of here." Her voice emerged small and tremulous.

"Are you going to be sick?"

She shook her head. "I'll be fine. I just need to get away from that...thing."

"Lean against me if you need."

She nodded and leaned against his shoulder. It felt big and solid, an anchor in a spinning world.

Zander retrieved her pack from the riverbank, and they began to walk. For a few minutes, neither of them spoke. Only the crunch of dead pine needles broke the silence. She couldn't seem to stop shaking. Only when they were a good distance from the bandit's corpse did they pause to rest. She leaned against a tree and wiped the sweat from her brow with one forearm. Her head still ached, but at least the dizziness had receded. "Sorry," she murmured.

"Don't apologize. You're not used to seeing death. There's no shame in being affected by it."

She stared at the ground through tear-blurred eyes. "Are we going to bury the bodies?"

"No," he said. "That would take us all day, and probably all night as well."

"It doesn't seem right, just leaving them to rot in the sun."

"They don't deserve any better. Those men are worse than animals. They would have done unspeakable things to you if they'd had the chance."

"I know they weren't nice people, but still. I don't like to think of them being picked apart by scavengers."

"I don't understand you. Even now, my blood boils to think..." He stopped, jaws clenched tight, and took a deep breath. "We don't have time to waste. Some of their fellow bandits will find them and bury them. They look after their own kind."

"If you say so." It still seemed wrong, but she had to admit, she really didn't want to spend the next ten hours digging graves for men who probably would have raped her and sold her into slavery if they'd had the chance.

She looked at Zander. Blood soaked his arm from shoulder to elbow. More blood saturated his tunic. It clung to his back, wet and dark, ripped in several places. She glimpsed the lips of a deep gash through one of the rips. "You *are* hurt."

He shook his head. "It's nothing."

"You've lost a lot of blood. At least let me take a look at it. I might be able to heal it. Why don't you take off your tunic?"

"No."

She rolled her eyes. "You know, 'machismo' is just 'masochism' rearranged. Well, almost. I think there's an extra 's' in there somewhere."

He raised his eyebrows. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning it's stupid to endure pain if you don't have to. If you leave these alone, they'll get infected."

"I'll wash and bandage them later. I've suffered worse wounds than these. I can deal with it."

"See, that's what I'm talking about. Why suffer when I can heal them now? It'll only take ten minutes. Do you think I'll screw it up? Or are you just so proud that you can't

stand the thought of accepting any help from anyone?"

He averted his eyes. "That's not it."

"Then what is it?" She waited for an answer. When it didn't come, she placed her hands on her hips and glared. "Look, you've saved my life twice now. Let me do something for you. What's the big deal?"

"I'm ashamed." He glared at her. "Is that what you want to hear?"

For a moment, Wendy was too surprised to answer. "Ashamed? Of what, being hurt?"

He shook his head. "I'm ashamed of this body." He stared down at one clawed, scaled hand, then clenched it into a tight fist. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I don't want you to see me."

"Is that what this is about? Really?"

He didn't answer, just stared at his boots.

She touched his arm and felt the muscles tense beneath her fingertips. "You think I'm bothered by the scales? I'm not. Why do you keep expecting me to recoil in horror?"

"Everyone else does."

"I think you just need to give people a chance. Not everyone is so prejudiced. Won't you let me help?"

He nodded without looking up.

"Here, turn around. Can you take off your shirt?"

He peeled off the blood-spattered tunic.

She touched his back. He let out a soft grunt of pain. "Sorry," she said quietly. "I'll be as gentle as I can."

He nodded, still without looking at her.

Zander's upper body was firm and sculpted. Muscles rippled in his shoulders and upper back. With his clothes off, he somehow looked even bigger. His broad chest tapered down to a narrow waist, and scales covered his back. They were larger than the ones on his face, coin-sized and shiny blue-gray, like some rare, precious stone. Triangular gray spikes ran down his spine from the spot between his shoulder blades to the small of his back. The largest were about two inches long, thick as a finger.

A gash ran from one shoulder to the center of his back. She touched the edge lightly, and he flinched. "Relax," she said softly. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and summoned her Gift. It spread outward from her heart, filled her, flowed down her arms, into her hands and through her fingertips. When she opened her eyes, a soft, white glow enveloped her hands. The light flowed over Zander's skin, surrounded and seeped into the wound. She focused her mind and Gift on the bloody gash and slowly drew the edges shut.

His breathing quickened.

"Almost done," she said. The white glow pulsed softly as the wound shrank and closed. She exhaled and wiped her brow with the back of one hand. "There. Finished." She flexed her fingers and winced. For some reason, they always ached after a healing. "Be careful for the next few days, okay? The muscles are going to be stiff, but as long as you don't strain anything, you should be fine."

He grabbed his tunic and pulled it over his head. "Let's keep moving."

"You're covered in blood. Don't you want to wash off in the river?"

He shook his head. "Our path will follow the river for awhile. We can wash later."

He started to walk.

She caught his arm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then why won't you look at me?"

He turned and stared down at her, his face solid and impassive, his yellow eyes shielded. For a long moment, he said nothing, simply held her eyes with his. A muscle twitched in his jaw, then he turned away again. "I told you, it's nothing." He started walking.

As she followed, she clenched her hands until the nails pressed into her palms. He hadn't even thanked her! Probably resented the fact that he'd needed someone else's help. Shows me for trying to be nice, she thought. Next time, she'd let his wounds fester and get all oozy and disgusting.

She glared at his back, trying to burn a hole through his flesh with her eyes alone. But if he felt anything, he didn't show it.

\* \* \* \*

An hour later, they stopped, and Wendy waited behind a nearby tree while Zander washed off the blood in the river. She sat, her back against the trunk, hugging her knees to her chest. Unable to resist, she snuck a quick peek around the tree.

He stood waist-deep in the water, his shirt off. Wet scales reflected the sun. The water somehow brought out the blue in them, so his whole body gleamed like a huge sapphire. Pale, blue-gray hair clung to his neck, slick and dripping. Her eyes wandered over the hills and valleys of muscle in his back as he rubbed away bloodstains with his hands. A flush crept into her cheeks. He was so very *big*, so overwhelmingly male, his shoulders and arms aggressively muscular.

She hugged her knees tighter, aware her heart was beating fast. Her body felt strange, every nerve alive and tingling. She thought about the intensity of his eyes whenever he looked at her, and his full, dark lips, sensual lips, lips made for kissing, for loving. Those lips didn't fit the stony, guarded expression he wore like a mask.

He was beautiful. The realization startled her, but as soon as it crossed her mind she knew it was true. He was strangely, devastatingly beautiful...not in spite of, but because of his uniqueness. She wanted to run her hands over that firm, sculpted body, to taste those plum-colored lips.

She averted her gaze, face hot, but his image lingered in her mind's eye, etched there in lines of blue fire. Her nipples had hardened to stiff, tender points. She looked down and saw them poking through her shirt. Great. If he saw her like this, it would be awkward, to say the least. Think about un-sexy things, she told herself. Algebra. Cat vomit. Mr. Barker, her old Practical Magic professor, with his cheese-like body odor and the long, white ear-hairs he never trimmed. She shuddered.

Even that didn't work for long, however. Her thoughts kept drifting back to Zander.

She heard a splash as he emerged from the water, then, moments later, the soft crunch of approaching footsteps. She looked up. He stood next to her, fully dressed, his hair still wet and clinging to his face and neck. A droplet rolled down his throat, over his Adam's apple. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah." Her voice emerged as a faint croak. She picked herself up and brushed the loose grass off her trousers. She couldn't seem to meet his eyes.



## Chapter Six

They walked for the rest of the day. As the sun set, they made camp. Wendy chewed a piece of jerky and looked at Zander. He sat on the other side of the fire, arms crossed atop his knees, staring into space. She remembered the sight of him naked in the river, and her ears burned. He'd scarcely said a word to her since they resumed their journey. Had he noticed her peeking? She fidgeted, wishing he would say something, anything, or at least look at her.

God, this was ridiculous. She was twenty-five years old. She hadn't been a blushing virgin for about nine years, and even then, she'd never gotten so ridiculously flustered over a guy. What was wrong with her?

"I never thanked you," Zander said. "For healing me, that is."

"Eh? Oh." Her ears were now burning so hotly she was sure her hair would catch fire at any moment. "You're welcome. It was no trouble, really."

He stared at her. She stared back, fidgeting and feeling painfully frumpy in her baggy, shapeless tunic.

"How can you look at me like that?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"I don't understand how you can stare at me without flinching. I can barely stand to look at myself."

She hesitated. "You aren't hard to look at, Zander." Boy, that was an understatement. "You're different, but that's not always a bad thing."

"I know what I am. I can't even walk into a village without hiding my face and body. If I don't cover myself, people gasp and go pale when they look at me. Women grab their children's hands and hurry away. Once, when I went into an inn with my face uncovered, the innkeeper ordered me to leave. I was upsetting his customers, he said."

"I'm sorry. People can be stupid and judgmental, I know. But not everyone is so hung up on appearance."

"It's not just the way I look. It's what I am."

"What do you mean?"

He met her gaze, and there was something terribly tired in his face, a shadow in the depths of his eyes. "I'm something unnatural. Something that shouldn't exist. People sense that about me. I can't blame them for being uncomfortable. I just can't figure out why you're different."

Her heartbeat quickened. "I'm different?"

"You smile. You tease me. You get annoyed with me. You're not afraid. You treat me like you'd treat anyone else. Why?"

She shrugged. "Why should I treat you any differently?"

His gaze pinned her again. "Tell me now, and tell me truthfully," he said. "Are you bothered by my appearance?"

"Of course not. That's what I've been telling you all along. Are you only just now starting to believe me?"

"It's not an easy thing to believe," he murmured.

"It's true."

"Tell me what you see when you look at me."

She hesitated. There was a challenge in his voice, in the thrust of his jaw. "I see a man," she said at last. "A proud, stubborn, willful man."

"That's all?"

"Okay, a man who happens to have scales and yellow eyes. What else do you want me to say?"

For a moment, he was silent. His gaze never left hers. "Tell me about yourself," he said at last.

"What do you want to know about?"

"Anything. Your parents, your brothers and sisters, if you have any. Your work."

"As for parents, I just have my mom. My dad took off when I was little. I have one sister, Julie, who's three years younger than I am. She's attending the University right now, and she works part-time at my shop, helps me out when I need an extra pair of hands. I guess that's about it. Running the shop takes up so much time, lately I've felt like it's my whole life. I had friends in college, but I've kind of fallen out of touch. I guess I've always been like that, more focused on my studies or my work than my personal life. But I love magic. I've always found it fascinating. In school, I was disappointed to learn that my Gift wasn't that strong."

"Do you have a lover?"

Wendy looked down at her hands, her mouth dry, her heartbeat filling her throat.

After a moment, Zander said, "Never mind. I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay. I...I don't have anyone like that. It's been awhile since my last boyfriend left. Two and a half years, to be precise. I guess these days, I haven't had time to date." She twirled a lock of her hair, eyes averted.

"Is something wrong?"

"Maybe I'm a little nervous."

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of that."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know, really. Maybe I'm afraid you think I'm an idiot."

"Why would I think that?"

"I just feel like I'm in over my head. I've gotten us into trouble twice now, and both times, you've had to save me."

"The second time wasn't really your fault." A faint smile touched his lips. "I don't think you're an idiot. Perhaps a little impulsive..."

She smiled back. "You don't know the half of it. My impulses have gotten me in plenty of trouble."

He held her gaze for a moment. Her heartbeat quickened again, and she couldn't look away. She wondered if he had any idea what those eyes could do to her.

"How's your head?" he asked.

She touched the bump on her temple and winced. "Oh. It's fine. I wish I had some ice to put on it, but I'm sure the swelling will go down soon."

"Can you heal it, as you healed my injuries?"

She shook her head. "I can't use healing magic on myself. I often wish I could. It would be nice to just magic away a headache, but it doesn't work that way."

"Let me take a look." He walked over and crouched by her side.

Wendy's heart jumped as Zander leaned in and brushed her hair aside to inspect the bump. He was so close that she could feel the warmth emanating from his body. "There's no blood," he said.

"That's good." Her own voice sounded far away. Her heart pounded so hard she wondered if he could hear it.

"You're flushed," he said. "Do you have a fever?" His hand pressed against her brow. "You feel very warm."

Her lashes fluttered, and a wave of weakness swept over her at his touch. She closed her eyes, afraid of what he might see in them. "I'm fine." She swallowed, mouth dry. She turned toward him and found her face just inches from his. She froze. Even the breath seemed to freeze in her lungs.

His eyes were so close to hers she could see each long, silvery lash, each fleck and striation in his irises, like amber shards floating in pools of liquid gold. Something shifted in those eyes. The cool, guarded look slid away, and heat burned in their depths. His warm breath tickled her lips, and she trembled.

He pulled away and rose to his feet. "I can't blame you for being afraid."

"What are you—" She fell silent as realization dawned. He'd mistaken her reaction for fear. "I'm not afraid," she said. "Why would I be afraid?"

"I killed five men today."

The words hit her like a splash of cold water. Again, she saw the dead man in her mind, the gaping, bloody hole in his chest. She took a deep breath. "Well, yeah. You're my bodyguard. That's what you're supposed to do, isn't it? Protect me?" Her voice emerged soft and shaky. "You were doing your job, that's all."

"I could have frightened them off. I could have killed one or two and let the rest escape. But I didn't let them. I killed them all without thinking twice." He stared down at his hands, then slowly clenched them into fists.

She stood, reached out and touched his arm. "Look at me."

He hesitated. Then, slowly, he turned to face her. "I'm a killer, Wendy," he said quietly. "It's how he made me."

"He?"

For a moment, Zander said nothing, just stared into space. He seemed to be engaged in some silent struggle with himself. "I was an experiment. A deranged sorcerer decided to play God by combining humans and animals. Many of his first experiments never lived. Some of my earliest clear memories are of seeing the horrors that my fellow captives became, twisted, malformed creatures begging for death. I was his first success...or at least, the first to survive the transformation."

A chill crept up Wendy's spine. "You're talking about chimeras. Blending two or more life-forms through magic. We were taught about that in school, but it was all theoretical knowledge. It's illegal to even attempt it."

"Someone did."

"Dear God," she whispered.

"He locked me in a cell, like an animal. He used his magic to erase my past, to rip my memories from my brain." One fist clenched at his side. "He wanted a soulless puppet, a vessel to fill with programmed orders. My identity was just an inconvenience to be dealt with. But even after he'd wiped my mind clean, I retained some sense of myself...enough to know that I hated him, that I wanted to escape. I hid my hatred. I

pretended to be empty, like the others. Then, when the opportunity came, I struck out. I killed him and fled with his blood on my hands."

She listened, one hand pressed to her mouth.

"For months, I lived like an animal in the wilderness, eating what I could find. I learned to avoid people. Eventually, I learned how to tan the hides of the animals I killed. I made clothes for myself. With my abnormalities concealed, I could go into civilization again. I hired myself out as a mercenary for awhile. It was all I knew how to do. Then I heard a rumor of a legendary stone that can purify dark magic."

"Eloria's Tear."

He nodded. "I thought perhaps, if I could find that stone, it could purge the foreign essence from my body. Even if I can never regain all that I lost, maybe I can be human again. I don't know if it will work, but it's my only hope. I've talked to healers, to sorcerers. I've bought potions and charms. I even allowed a priest to perform an exorcism on me. But no one has been able to reverse the changes. If the Tear cannot help me, then nothing can."

"Who was he, the sorcerer who changed you?"

"He called himself Ajed, though I doubt that was his real name. It doesn't matter now, anyway. He's dead."

"To think that someone could do such horrible things to people and get away with it...it's monstrous."

"It happens more often than you'd think. Now I'm no longer a man, but I'm not an animal either. I'm nothing. A patchwork joke, stitched together from scraps of other creatures."

"Zander..." She didn't know what to say. Her heart ached for him. He had nothing; no home, no family or friends, at least none that he could remember. He was completely alone. No wonder he was so serious all the time.

She tried to imagine what it had been like for him after escaping his captor: a lone man, trapped in a strange new body with no memories to guide him. And given his appearance, it couldn't have been easy for him to find help. People tended to run from things they didn't understand. Or try to kill them.

"I don't want to be a monster anymore," he said.

On impulse, she took his hand in hers and squeezed it. His breath caught in his throat. "You're not a monster, whatever you think. You're a person."

He shook his head. "I struck down Ajed without a thought. I ripped out his throat with my bare hands. I killed those bandits. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed their fear, their pleas for mercy. God help me, I didn't even hesitate." His hand trembled in hers. "Seeing the horror in your eyes when I killed that man...I..." He bowed his head.

She rubbed his hand. "You did what you had to. I understand that."

"But you were horrified."

"Well, yeah. I've never seen someone killed right in front of me. I'd have to be made of stone not to feel something. But I'm horrified about what I saw, not about you. I know you won't hurt me." She cupped his cheek, slid her palm along his jaw. "It's not what you are that makes you good or evil, it's what you do with it, the choices you make."

"Wendy..." His voice cracked.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. He stiffened in surprise, then slowly raised his arms and hugged her back. Pressed against his warm, hard

body, she breathed in his scent, an earthy, very male scent.

She raised her head, met his gaze and opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say a word, his mouth pressed against hers. A languid warmth spread through her muscles, and she went limp in his arms. Her eyes closed, her lips molded to his, softened beneath the pressure of his mouth. She felt his sharp teeth through his lips, and a little thrill raced through her. She laid a hand on his chest. His heart pounded beneath her palm, so hard and fast it seemed it would burst through his ribs.

Zander moaned against her mouth. His hands framed her face, thumbs caressing her cheekbones. He ran his tongue over her lower lip, then slipped it into her mouth. After a moment, he pulled back, eyes burning with need. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

She lowered her eyes, her cheeks warm. She'd never thought of herself as beautiful. People generally didn't notice her much at all. No one had ever looked at her the way Zander was looking at her now.

His thumb touched her lower lip, stroked it. A small sound, half a moan and half a whimper, escaped her throat. Heat spread through her body, and her nipples tightened to hard, aching points.

Breathless, she touched his cheek and let her fingers trail over his jaw. His scales were warm and smooth. His lids lowered, and he gazed at her from beneath those beautiful, thick, silvery lashes as her fingertips wandered over his face. She ran her thumbs over his thick brows, stroked his full lips and combed her fingers through his hair. Her hands came to rest on his huge shoulders, and she felt the muscles tense, then relax beneath her palms. She glanced down, and flushed when she saw the bulge in his trousers.

He leaned toward her. His lips grazed her neck.

Her pulse beat fast beneath his mouth. His hands gripped her shoulders, so tight it almost hurt. He rubbed his face against her neck, nuzzling her like a huge cat. She stood on tiptoe and brushed her lips against his earlobe. Her tongue crept out and traced the outer rim of his pointed ear. A shuddering breath escaped his lips. His hands convulsed and tightened. Sudden, sharp pain shot through her as his claws pierced her left shoulder.

Wendy gasped.

Zander jerked back. His claws glistened red with her blood. Horror flooded his face.

"It's okay," she said, though her voice shook. She touched her shoulder. When she pulled her hand away, blood glistened on her fingertips. "I'm fine. It's not deep."

He turned his back to her, breathing hard. His fists clenched, opened and clenched again. "Forgive me," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

"It's all right. It was an accident."

For a moment, he didn't move. He stood, facing away, his back rigid with tension. Then he turned to face her. His expression had gone blank. "I sometimes forget I'm stronger than a human." He stared down at his hands, then his gaze focused on her face. "Let me have a look."

She pulled the collar of her tunic to one side, revealing four small punctures, red against her pale skin.

He studied the wound. "I'll get you something for this."

"Okay."

He left the clearing and returned minutes later with a sprig of something green and leafy in one hand. "This will keep the punctures from getting infected." He broke the

stem and squeezed clear sap onto the wound. The ache cooled.

"Thank you," she said. She glanced at the plant. "Is that tullsworth?"

He nodded.

"I recognize it. It's the main ingredient in Heal-Fast potion." Her voice sounded flat and awkward in the silence. It was a silly thing to say, under the circumstances. She just felt the need to say something.

He didn't reply. He kept his eyes downcast as he squeezed more sap from the thick stem. She clenched her teeth in frustration. The window that had opened briefly between them had slammed shut.

\* \* \* \*

Later, she wrapped herself in her blanket and shifted, trying to get comfortable. Something poked her back, so she rolled onto her side.

Zander sat with his back against a tree, arms folded over his chest. His eyes were closed, but she could tell by the tension in his shoulders that he was still awake. She wanted to say something to him, she just didn't know what. Every time she opened her mouth, her courage faltered, and she lapsed back into silence.

Damn it. Why was it so difficult to talk to him? They'd finally started to relax, to trust each other...and now Zander had retreated back into his shell.

She rolled onto her other side, so her back was to him, and curled up. "Are you angry?" she asked at last.

A long pause. The campfire crackled and wind rustled through the treetops. "No," he said finally, "not at you."

"Who then?"

"Myself, of course. I could have seriously hurt you."

"Well, you didn't, so everything's fine. Don't worry about it. Okay?" Silence. "Come on. It was an accident."

"I should have better self-control. It's easy to forget how fragile, how vulnerable humans are."

"I'm not that fragile."

He muttered something noncommittal.

She sighed. Just an hour ago, they'd been locked in a passionate embrace, kissing. She wanted to walk across the clearing, wrap her arms around him and pick up where they'd left off, but she knew it wouldn't be the same now. It was as if he suddenly didn't trust her. No, she thought, that wasn't it. He didn't trust himself. And she didn't know what to do about it.

Discouraged, she nestled deeper into her blanket and closed her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

*She huddled in a corner of her cage, staring through the bars. Her captor stood just out of her reach, grinning. "Hungry?" A glistening haunch of raw meat dangled from his hand. He held it outside the bars, taunting her.*

*She dropped her gaze to hide the fury in her eyes. Her hands clenched into tight fists, claws digging into her palms. She burned to drive her fist into his mouth, to smash his gleaming, white teeth, to mash his lips and nose to a bloody pulp, but her only hope of*

*escape lay in feigning docility. If she could convince him she was only a dumb animal, a brute, he would relax his guard. She schooled her face into a blank expression, looked up and reached for the meat, but her captor pulled it back.*

*He wagged a finger at her. "Tut-tut. If you want your food, you have to beg like a good little pet." His fingers tightened on the slippery meat. "Beg me, you animal."*

*Her heartbeat quickened. Rage pounded in her head, crept across her vision in a red haze. She trembled, trying to contain it, and lost the battle. With a roar, she lunged, her gaze focused on the man's throat as she imagined her teeth sinking into the soft flesh, ripping through the skin, tearing out his windpipe in a spray of hot blood...*

*Pain exploded through her head. She fell to the floor, writhing. The pain shot down her spine, blazed through her limbs, igniting every nerve. So much pain. Her captor laughed. "You stupid brute. When will you ever learn? You can't fight me."*

*She screamed...*

\* \* \* \*

Wendy woke, gasping for breath. Her body shuddered and shook with spasms as her heart slammed against her ribs. Sweat and tears stung her eyes. She could still feel the ghost of that searing pain in every nerve, still hear that man's laughter echoing round and round in her head, maddening, mocking and cruel.

Nearby, Zander moaned and shuddered.

"Zander," she called in a whisper. She crawled to his side and shook his shoulder. "Zander!"

He woke with a start and stared at her, panting. His face gleamed with sweat. He blinked, then let out a shuddering sigh and looked away. "It happened again, didn't it?"

She nodded.

He bowed his head, resting his forehead against one knee. "I'm sorry. I don't want to subject you to this."

"It's not your fault." She remembered that burning, all-consuming agony and shuddered. "What was that?"

"What?"

"That pain. How did he do it? It was like being burned alive."

He stared at the ground. For a moment, she thought he wasn't going to respond. "A control crown," he whispered. "Do you know what that is?"

She shook her head.

"It's a type of magical device, a band of metal fastened around the victim's head. Here." He tapped his forehead. "My captor could activate it with a word or a thought. How I hated that thing. I tried everything in my power to remove it. The crown was designed so that even touching it caused me agony, but still, I spent hours trying to pry it off. I'd try until I passed out from the pain." His eyes had gone distant, unfocused.

"Sometimes he used it on me even when I hadn't disobeyed him. Just to keep me on my toes, he said. He'd laugh as I writhed on the floor, screaming. Sometimes he'd just leave it on...leave me alone in that dark, foul-smelling cell with my brain on fire and no idea of how long I'd have to endure it."

"That...that's awful," Wendy whispered.

"The pain was bad, but nothing I couldn't handle. What I hated more than anything was the feeling of helplessness, the knowledge that my life was in his hands and there

was nothing I could do about it. The humiliation was like a hot coal burning in my chest. The physical pain came and went, but that burning sense of powerlessness, of rage, was always there. I felt like he'd stripped me of my humanity. My hatred for him was the only thing I had to cling to, the only thing that kept me sane through those long, dark days."

She swallowed. Her throat felt tight. "How could he have gotten away with all this for so long? Making chimeras, using the Gift to inflict pain—those things are forbidden under the strictest magical laws. Where was his lab? Or his dungeon, whatever you want to call it. The place where he kept you."

"I don't know. When I escaped, I was disoriented, half-mad. I recall very little from that time."

"You must remember something."

He paused. "It was in a desert. A desert with orange sand. That's all I know."

"And you're sure he's dead now?"

Zander smiled, a hard, unpleasant expression. "I watched the life fade from his eyes. I listened to his last, gurgling breaths as he choked on his own blood. Afterwards, I doused him with oil and set him ablaze, just for the pleasure of watching his corpse burn to ashes. I watched until he was nothing but charred, blackened bones smoking on the floor of his laboratory. Yes, I am sure."

Wendy didn't know how to respond to that. For a moment, neither one of them spoke. Then, unable to bear the silence, she said, "I guess that amulet didn't work, after all."

He took it out of his pocket and stared at it. "I guess it didn't."

"Maybe I got the symbol wrong. Or maybe my Gift just isn't strong enough."

"It was worth a try."

"I just wish my magic was good for something besides lighting campfires."

"You healed my wounds, didn't you?"

"Yeah." She forced a tiny smile. "I guess I did." She paused. "You don't have to keep that amulet, if you don't want. I mean, I won't be offended if you just throw it away."

He took her hand, pressed the amulet into her palm, and curled her fingers around the smooth stone. She stared, surprised. His fingers were warm against hers. "Maybe it will work better if you keep it with you. It's my dreams invading your mind, after all. You're the one who needs protection from me, not the other way around."

"Maybe." She slipped the amulet into her pocket, looked into his eyes and bit her lower lip. "About...about earlier..." Her cheeks grew warm. "You know. When we kissed."

"How is your shoulder feeling?"

"Um...fine, thanks. I just wondered..."

"It was a mistake." He looked away. "It's been a long time, a very long time, since I've been so close to a woman. I'm not accustomed to it. I lost control." He met her gaze. "It won't happen again. I promise."

Something seemed to deflate inside her, leaving her chest hollow and cold. "I see." Silly, thinking he wanted her. He just craved a woman's touch. Any woman's. Only natural, she supposed. He'd been alone for so long, and whatever had been done to him, he was still a man with a man's needs. At least he was being honest. Still, his words left a bitter taste.

But why should she care? Was she falling for him? She was usually smarter than



that. Theirs was supposed to be a professional relationship, and business never mixed well with romance. Besides, she could only imagine how Mom would react if she brought a man with scales home for dinner.

She started to smile at that thought, but the expression withered quickly.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next few days, Zander retreated deeper into himself. He spoke little, and his face gave away nothing. Wendy found herself doing things to agitate him, hoping for a reaction, any reaction. But he never rose to the bait. He tolerated her antics with impassive stoicism, which left her feeling like a foolish child and—at the same time—made her burn with frustration. She wanted to shake him until his teeth rattled.

He walked ahead of her, his pace steady and untiring. She watched him, grinding her teeth. At last, unable to bear it anymore, she grabbed his arm, yanked, and spun him around to face her.

He stared down, his face a wall.

She waited for him to speak, but he didn't. Her grip tightened on his biceps. "What's the matter with you? Why won't you talk to me?"

He tensed. "I—"

"You've been ignoring me ever since we..." She faltered, flushed, and went on, "Since that night. You won't even look at me. You act like I don't exist."

He pulled his arm from her grip. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. You've barely spoken ten words to me in the past three days."

"I'm not a man to waste words. I thought you would have realized that by now."

His words stung like a slap. "So talking to me is a waste, then?"

"I didn't say that."

"But that's what you meant, isn't it?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "What do you want from me?"

"Just acknowledge me once in awhile. Treat me like a person. It hurts to be treated like an object. I'd think you, of all people, would understand that."

His shoulders went rigid. He turned away. "We don't have time for this."

She blew a sigh between her teeth. "Fine. If talking to me is such a burden, I won't say another word." She walked ahead of him, teeth gritted so hard her jaws ached. Stupid, letting herself get riled up like this. Tears stung the corners of her eyes, and she blinked them away. Was she really just a nuisance to him, after all? In the end, it seemed, that was all she ever was to men. Eventually, they always tired of her and left her behind. Her father had skipped town when she was seven. Her boyfriends had dropped her as soon as they found a prettier pair of legs. Every time she started getting close to a man, he started pulling away.

Once, she'd shared that observation with her mother, who brushed it aside with a wave of her hand. "If you give men their space, they'll come back to you eventually," she'd said.

Her mother had been giving their father "space" for fifteen years. She'd never remarried, or even dated, because she still believed he was coming back. Wendy knew better.

When men went away, they didn't come back.

## Chapter Seven

The Edge Mountains loomed, gray and bleak.

Up close, they seemed impossibly big. They filled the sky, a solid, imposing wall of rock. Wendy shielded her eyes with one hand. If she squinted and craned her neck, she could just make out the snowcapped peaks, white against the blue sky. "Wow," she said.

Zander stood beside her. They hadn't spoken much since their argument. "So here we are," he said. "From this point on, you take the lead. You do know where to go, don't you?"

"Um...kind of."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I mean, yes, I do. Just let me think for a moment." She studied the mountains, comparing them to the map in her head. After a minute or two she spotted a peak with an odd, hook-shaped tip, and a flutter of excitement danced in her stomach.

"You see something?"

"Yes. The directions said to look for a hooked peak, and there it is." She pointed. "See it?"

He nodded. "Let's go."

They trudged through the foothills, climbing over stony ridges toward the titanic rock faces of the mountains. Pine trees grew thick around them, and lichen dappled the pale rock. The ground sloped upward, steep in places. She soon found herself panting for breath. Sweat dampened her back and armpits, despite the cool air. At last, they reached the base of the mountain.

"What now?" he asked.

"Hang on." She shielded her eyes from the sun with one hand and scanned the surrounding area. She didn't have to look at her notes to remember the line: *Look for a rock shaped like a hawk's head.*

There!

Ahead stood a rock as tall as a man. If she looked at it from a certain angle, the jagged outcrop resembled a hawk's profile. She could make out the jutting beak, the brow-ridge, the shallow indentation of the eye. Her heartbeat quickened. "It's over here!" she called, beckoning Zander. Without waiting for him, Wendy ran toward the outcrop and skidded to a halt. If the map was right, the entranceway should be on the mountainside directly facing the hawk's head. She looked but saw only solid rock.

Of course, she thought. The entrance was hidden. She just needed to find the trigger-point...except the scroll hadn't offered any instructions about that. She closed her eyes and ran her hands over the smooth rock, searching for any irregularity.

She felt Zander's gaze on her. If, after coming all the way out here, she couldn't figure out how to open the entranceway, she was going to look pretty stupid. What would they do if she didn't find anything? She pushed her worries aside and focused. It *had* to be there. It just had to be.

Her fingertips found a hairline crack, and her pulse quickened. She opened her eyes and saw that the crack formed a perfect circle, about six inches in diameter. "This must be it," she said. She pushed. Nothing happened. She gulped. "I know this is the right

place. The scroll said..."

"Let me try."

She stepped aside, and Zander studied the rock. "Here?" He pointed.

She nodded.

He slammed a fist into the stone circle. Wendy jumped. At first, nothing happened. Then a low, grinding rumble filled the air, underscored by a thousand tiny crackles, like splintering wood. She watched, jaw hanging, as a section of the mountain slid to one side like a massive door. Bits of stone broke off and fell, rattling. Dust clouds filled the air. She pulled back and shielded her mouth with one arm, coughing.

The rumbling stopped. Ahead of them stood a rectangle of perfect blackness, about twice her height: a doorway. A chill scurried down her spine, and a swirl of nervous excitement danced in her belly. "This is it."

"It looks like you were right, after all."

"Of course I was." She planted her hands on her hips and lifted her chin. "I never doubted for a second."

"We'll need some light," he said. "In that darkness, even my eyes will be useless."

"Leave that to me." She raised one hand and tapped into her Gift. A ball of pale blue light blossomed a few inches above her palm, where it spun in place, shining like a tiny moon. "There. That should stay for a few hours, at least."

"And when it disappears?"

"Then I'll make another. Light is the easiest spell in the book."

"Good. We won't need to bring any torches." He strode forward, and Wendy followed him into the stone tunnel. The ball of light trailed along at her side like a faithful pet, bathing the tunnel walls with soft, silver-blue radiance.

The air was cool and dry. A musty smell, like old parchment and dust, tickled her nostrils. Engraved runes marched across the smooth, granite walls, countless tiny shapes covering the stone from floor to ceiling. She traced one delicate symbol with a fingertip, wondering what the runes meant. They were no language she recognized. Had they been carved into the rock by the same people who'd hidden Eloria's Tear within? Or were they even older than that?

As they rounded a bend in the tunnel, she looked over one shoulder. She could no longer see the comforting light of the outside world. They were wrapped in darkness and silence, surrounded by cold stone walls.

"Just how deep does this tunnel go?" asked Zander.

"Hold on," she said. "Let me get the map." She took off her pack, crouched, and rummaged through the contents until she found her papers. She unfolded them and studied her scribbled notes.

He peered over her shoulder. "I can't make out a word of it. What is it, some ancient language?"

"No," she said. "Just my messy handwriting."

"Hmm. And you can read that?"

"Of course." She shuffled through papers until she found the map. "Ah, here it is."

He leaned closer and studied the rough drawings. "There's an entire city inside this mountain." She heard the surprise in his voice.

She nodded. "My source said it's an abandoned rock gnome city. The inside of this mountain is a honeycomb of passageways and caverns."

"All this was made by rock gnomes?"

"That's right. They're renowned for their stone-working skill. Hence the name."

"I've never met one."

"Neither have I, but we studied them in school. They're very reclusive, very shy. They hate humans, generally stay as far from our civilization as they can, so they abandoned this place when humans started colonizing the area."

"But the closest human settlement is Jacob's Hill. It's a hundred miles away."

"Apparently, even that was too close for them. There's a reason why not many people have met a rock gnome. Thousands of years ago, some human tribes used gnomes for slave labor, and the gnomes have never quite forgiven us for that. Can't say I blame them." She tucked the map under one arm, stood, and strapped her pack on. "It may take us awhile to navigate these tunnels, but at least here we won't run into any pesky bandits or dragons." She paused as a memory suddenly surfaced, and goose bumps rose on her arms. "Say, Zander, you haven't heard any rumors of ghosts in these mountains, have you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, it's silly. But the innkeeper told me these mountains are filled with ghosts. Probably just a local superstition."

"What else did he say?" he asked. He wasn't smiling.

"Something about how his uncle came here a long time ago and was almost eaten by a shadow. Crazy, right?"

Zander made a noncommittal sound. Not the comforting reply she'd hoped for.

In the warm, safe, fire-lit tavern, the man's stories had seemed laughable. Here in the cold, dark belly of the mountain, they seemed unnervingly plausible. But there wasn't much they could do about it, either way. If there were ghosts, there were ghosts.

They kept walking, Wendy's light-sphere floating ahead, until they came to the tunnel's end: a stone wall with three doorways. Above each doorway, the carved, fanged snout of a gargoyle protruded, and malevolent stone eyes stared down at her. The light-sphere's flickering glow danced on those wrinkled, gray faces, making the eyes seem to move. A fresh shiver ran through her. "I have to say, I'm not really fond of the decor. It doesn't exactly scream 'welcome'."

"Maybe it's not meant to," he said. "I take it rock gnomes weren't fond of visitors."

"No, probably not."

He looked from one doorway to the next. "Which way?"

Wendy unfolded the map and beckoned the light-sphere. It dipped down and hovered over the parchment, illuminating the lines of ink. "Left," she said.

"You're sure?"

"According to the map, the left corridor will take us to the center of the mountain. That's where Eloria's Tear is."

They walked through the leftmost doorway. Their footsteps echoed in the silence. Something tickled Wendy's skin, and she looked down to see a huge, pale spider crawling up her forearm. She shrieked and swatted it off. The spider tumbled into darkness.

Zander whirled around and drew his sword. "What is it?"

Wendy looked down, cheeks hot. "A spider."

He sheathed his sword. "Don't scare me like that. I'm on edge as it is."

"Sorry. I'm usually not such a girly-girl, honest. I just have a thing about spiders."

And rats. And snakes. Okay, most creepy-crawlies."

"But you're not a girly-girl."

"Oh, be quiet." They resumed walking. She remembered the spider's spindly legs, and her flesh crawled. If spiders were the worst thing that awaited them in these tunnels, though, they'd be lucky. "What do you think Eloria's Tear will look like?"

"You don't know?"

"Well, it's tear-shaped, obviously. But as far as the color and size, none of the legends seem to agree."

"If you don't know what it looks like, how will you find it?"

"I'll feel its power, of course." Now that she mentioned it, she could feel the faint, distant pulse of magic, like a great heart beating somewhere in the mountain. Or was it just her imagination? She closed her eyes and concentrated. Yes, she could feel it. The magic called to her, thrummed in the marrow of her bones. Her skin tingled, and goose bumps rose on her arms and legs.

"It looks like we've reached the end," said Zander.

Wendy opened her eyes and peered ahead, into the gloom. Sure enough, an arched door loomed before them. The ancient, weathered gray wood almost blended in with the surrounding rock. Bas relief carvings covered its surface from top to bottom, raised runes and fierce, pointed, carved faces with long beards. Iron wall-sconces bracketed the door. The torches had long since burned out.

She pushed one shoulder against the door, but it wouldn't budge. She shoved harder, grunting.

"Let me." said Zander. He rammed his shoulder against the door. The door creaked open, and flecks of rust fell from the ancient hinges.

Wendy stepped through, holding her breath. Beyond lay a cavern. She couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction, but there was a sense of tremendous, open space all around her. She took a step forward, and he grabbed her arm. "Let me go first." He stepped into the cavern, and abruptly, lights flared on all around them. She gasped and flung her hands in front of her face, blinded. She heard the hiss of steel as he drew his sword. "Who's there?" he snarled.

Silence.

Slowly, she lowered her arms. Her mouth fell open.

Before them lay a cavern, so enormous that the biggest building in Garna could have fit into a corner. Stalactites and stalagmites met in the center, forming natural columns. Doorways and windows honeycombed the rock walls from floor to ceiling. Stone buildings filled the cavern from wall to wall, and streets of smooth, polished stone ran between them. Everywhere she looked, glass light-globes glowed softly, like luminous pearls scattered throughout the cavern. "Looks like we found the heart of the city." She glanced at her own light sphere, hovering at her side. "I guess we won't need this for awhile." At her mental command, the light sphere flickered and died.

"We're not alone," said Zander. He stood, clutching his sword, looking back and forth. "Someone turned on those lights."

"I think we just reactivated an old spell. The globes are probably enchanted to light up whenever someone enters the cavern."

He frowned. "But no one's lived here for hundreds of years."

"Spells can last a long time if they're cast right. I don't think anyone's in here."

He lowered his sword, looking a little embarrassed. "Well, you never know," he muttered, and sheathed the sword. "Stay on guard."

They walked down the central road, through the empty city. Wendy's head swiveled back and forth. She noticed a building resembling a library, with stone dragons guarding the entrance, their mouths open as if to spew fire at visitors. Next to it stood a many-tiered temple, each layer lined with bas relief carvings. Looking closer, she saw that each layer told a story. In one, a line of carved gnomes marched over rocky terrain, wrists shackled, heads bowed, faces deeply lined with suffering. Behind them loomed a pack of fearsome giants with whips, their eyes like balls of fire, their mouths filled with sharp teeth. With a chill, she realized those terrifying oppressors were humans.

The street led into a round, open courtyard. A dry fountain stood in the center. Two carved phoenixes stood back to back, wings spread, beaks open.

"Hard to believe they just left all this behind," she said.

"Is Eloria's Tear somewhere in this city?"

She studied her map. "No, it's just beyond, in something called the inner sanctum. But there's another chamber between this cavern and the sanctum. I can't tell what it is. From the map, it looks like there's nothing in it, but..."

"But that would be too easy."

She sighed and folded up the map. "Yeah."

They walked past the fountain, past more buildings, until they reached the other side of the cavern. The street led to a wide, arched doorway. Bas relief carvings of demonic figures with bulbous eyes and sharp teeth surrounded it, and above it, she saw words engraved into a smooth, square stone panel. "I don't suppose you can read Gnomish?" she asked Zander.

"Not a word."

She stared into the solid darkness behind the doorway. "Guess there's nothing to do but go through."

They walked through the doorway, into the blackness beyond. As soon as they left the cavern, the city lights died behind them. Sure enough, it had just been an old spell set off by their approach.

Wendy summoned another light sphere. It blossomed in the darkness and hovered, but did little to penetrate the dense gloom. She concentrated and the ball of light flared brighter, illuminating the cavern. Rough stone walls soared upward to a ceiling lost in shadow. At first glance, she thought the floor was made from some very smooth, shiny black stone. Then she realized it was water. Beyond the narrow ledge where they stood, the whole, vast cavern was filled with water. The sphere's pale light glittered on its surface. "Wow," she said. "A lake inside a mountain. I wonder how deep this is."

"Hard to say. The water's opaque. Could be two feet or two hundred."

A narrow stone bridge ran across the lake, to a doorway on the other side.

"That bridge doesn't look very safe," she said. "And I'm a terrible swimmer. Maybe we should retrace our steps. There's got to be another way to the inner sanctum."

"I doubt it. Besides, if we get lost we could wander around in this labyrinth for days or weeks. We'd best stick to our course."

She knew he was right, but still, something about that lake filled her with a cold, heavy dread. She stared at the black water and saw the surface ripple. A small gasp leapt from her throat.

"What's wrong?"

"Something moved in there." She placed a hand over her pounding heart. "Do you think there might be anything alive in that lake? Is that possible?"

"Fish, maybe. Even underground, without sunlight, life finds ways to thrive. In any case, there's nothing to do but cross."

She didn't want to cross, but she knew Zander was right. There was no point in putting it off.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She nodded and followed him onto the bridge. There were no railings, nothing to grab onto if she slipped, just a strip of stone barely four feet wide. Water licked the edges. She heard a soft splash and turned to see a huge, finned tail break the surface. A moment later, it vanished back into the water. Her pulse thudded in her throat. "Zander," she whispered, "I saw..."

"I know," he said, voice grim. "I saw it too. Just keep walking, and stay close to me." He drew his sword.

Movement flickered in her peripheral vision. As she turned, a black tentacle shot out of the water and raced toward her. Zander leapt in front of her and swung his sword. The blade whistled through the air and sliced through flesh, and a severed tentacle as thick as a man's forearm fell to the bridge. Dark blood oozed from the end as it flopped back and forth.

Wendy stared, cold with horror. "What the hell is that thing?"

"Never mind." Zander grabbed her arm. "Run!"

They broke into a run. She panted, struggling to keep up. "I'm slowing you down! Go on without me!"

"Not a chance."

A reptilian head burst out of the water, dark and bristling with spines, its filmy white eyes as big as fists. Its jaws gaped, revealing a forest of long, needle-sharp teeth. Zander raised his sword, but not fast enough. The beast's head swung toward him on its long neck, and its teeth sank into Zander's shoulder. He roared with pain and dropped his sword.

Without thinking, Wendy grabbed the sword in both hands, leapt and plunged the blade into one bulging eye. The beast released Zander and reared back with a hiss. Its long neck whipped back and forth, blood flying from its ruined eye. One flailing tentacle knocked Zander off the bridge. He hit the water with a splash, and the lake swallowed him. The creature retreated back into the lake and vanished below the surface.

"Zander!" screamed Wendy. She dropped to her knees and plunged a hand into the icy water. "Grab my hand!"

A hand closed over hers, gripping tightly.

With a grunt of effort, she pulled Zander out of the water, onto the bridge. He lay shivering and drenched. Dark blood soaked through the shoulder of his cloak. "Zander," she gasped. "Are you—"

"My sword," he said between clenched teeth. "Where is my sword?"

The sword lay a few yards away. She grabbed it and brought it to him, and his fingers closed tight around the hilt.

The light-sphere flickered and went out.

"Damn!"

"What happened?" he panted.

"The spell wore off. Hang on..." Wendy reached for her Gift, trying desperately to focus. She heard a splash in the darkness, and a small, startled shriek leapt from her throat.

"Concentrate!"

She clenched her hands into fists and shut out her fear, shut out the knowledge that a deadly monster lurked somewhere in the darkness, ready to strike at any moment. At last, a pale light blossomed in the air. She breathed a sigh. "Finally!"

An inhuman screech rent the air as the beast's head burst from the water and shot toward Zander. Jaws gaped to reveal a long, greenish tongue and a black, glistening throat ringed by rows and rows of sharp teeth. Wendy screamed. With a roar, Zander leapt into the air and swung the sword. The blade whistled through the air and cleaved through the beast's neck. The head dropped off and hit the bridge with a splat. The body collapsed into the lake, and its thunderous splash showered her with foul-smelling water. The monster sank like a stone, bubbles rising from its titanic corpse. A moment later, the lake's surface smoothed and became calm, black glass once again.

Zander sagged to his knees, panting. The sword dropped from his hand.

Wendy stared at the decapitated head. One filmy white eye bulged while the other oozed out of the socket like a dollop of red jelly. Open jaws bristled with teeth. Even in death, the thing's face looked like something out of a nightmare. She shuddered and kicked the head off the bridge. With a splash, it disappeared into the dark water.

Zander picked up his sword, sheathed it, and rose to his feet. He staggered a few steps, then sagged to his knees.

She crouched beside him, slipped an arm around his waist and pulled him to his feet. He cried out in pain. "Hold on." She hobbled forward, supporting him. Blood dripped to the stone below as they staggered across the bridge.

At last, they reached the doorway. She flung herself through and collapsed to the floor, panting. Sweat trickled down her sides and back. Beside her, Zander leaned against the wall. He closed his eyes, chest heaving, shoulders sagging. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"It's nothing."

"You'd say that even if your arm was hanging by a thread. Let me have a look." She stood and examined the bite on his shoulder. Blood drenched his tunic, plastering it to his scales. She peeled the cloth away to get a better look, and her mouth went dry. A row of deep tooth-punctures, big as coins, ran across his shoulder and chest. Blood ran from the wounds in glistening, dark streams, and it was obvious from his ragged breathing that he was in agony.

"Can you heal it?" he whispered.

"I think so. Hang on." She closed her eyes and stilled her mind. Her Gift flowed, warm and tingling, through her fingers. She set her hands on his shoulder, and he gasped. She bit her lower lip, focusing all her energy and strength into her fingertips. Her hands trembled, despite her efforts to hold them steady. She'd never tried to heal a wound this serious before. What if she screwed up and made it worse? She'd heard stories about that happening—patients dying when some inexperienced sorcerer botched a healing attempt. Her heartbeat quickened, and her chest muscles tightened. She didn't have the training for this. She...



*No.* She was not going to panic and descend into hysterics. She had to do this. She owed him that much. *Relax. Concentrate.* She took a deep breath and swept aside her thoughts. Her trembling fingers stilled, and the punctures in his flesh shrank. The flow of blood from the wounds slowed, then stopped as she knit the severed blood vessels and torn muscle tissue. After a few minutes, the wound had vanished. "Whew. That wasn't too hard." She flexed her sore fingers. "I must be getting better at this healing stuff. How does it feel?"

He raised and lowered the arm. "It's fine. Not even stiff."

"Good." She wiped one sleeve across her sweat-soaked brow, then averted her gaze. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"You got that wound because of me. I'm always slowing you down, putting you in danger."

He laid a finger against her lips. "Enough of that. You've been an invaluable help to me. Without you, I never would have made it this far."

A flush rose into her cheeks. "Thank you." Even so, she promised herself, she would make an effort not to hold him back anymore. She was tired of needing to be saved.

"Now," said Zander, "where do we go next?"

"I'll check the map. Just give me a few minutes." She sat on the floor and leaned her back against the cool, stone wall. Her face burned with exertion, and sweat soaked her tunic. "Magic is exhausting, and I'm not used to using my Gift this often. I feel like I've just run five miles."

"Rest, then." He placed a hand on her forehead and smoothed her hair back. She blinked, surprised by the tenderness of the gesture. His palm felt pleasantly cool against her fever-hot skin.

The light-sphere flickered and died again, plunging them both into blackness, but she didn't have the strength to summon her Gift again so soon after that healing. A heavy, dull lethargy crept over her mind. She would have loved nothing better than to close her eyes and sleep for about three days...but of course, they couldn't afford to dally that long.

For some time—it might have been a few minutes or an hour—she floated in and out of a half-doze. When enough of her strength had returned, she stood and dusted herself off. "I guess we should take a look around, shouldn't we?" She raised one hand, and a new light sphere blossomed and brightened. Soft, silvery light illuminated the stone walls.

She gasped.

Mummified corpses littered the floor. Seven of them, to be precise. Shriveled, brown remnants of flesh clung to ancient bones. Scraps of decayed clothing hung from the bodies. One sat propped against the wall, jaw hanging open in a ghastly grin.

Wendy gulped. She felt as if an icy hand had reached into her body and squeezed her heart. "Well, isn't this comforting."

"What is this place?" asked Zander.

She pulled the map from her pocket and unfolded the parchment. "According to this, we're very close to the Tear. It should be in the next room." Her heartbeat quickened. Now that she wasn't so focused on not getting killed, she could feel the magic again, stronger than before. It slid over her skin, rushed through her and filled up the hollows of her body, warming her like some rare and wondrous elixir. The hairs on her neck stood

on end. "Do you feel it?" she whispered.

"Feel what?"

"I guess you have to have the Gift. I can feel the Tear's power."

He stared at her intently. "What is it like?"

"I don't even know how to describe it." She stood and tucked the map under her arm. Her eyes wandered over the shriveled corpses. "How long do you suppose these guys have been here?"

"Many, many years, from the looks of it."

"I wonder what killed them. Do you think this place is booby-trapped? Like, if we step on the wrong stone, the doors slam shut and then poison gas comes in through the vents? Or the room floods with water or the walls start closing in, or..."

He chuckled, but it sounded forced. "You read too many books."

"Maybe, but you have to admit, this is pretty creepy. Let's get out of this room."

"No arguments here."

They walked through the huge room, toward the doorway at the other end. Then she felt something that wasn't the Tear's magic, something distinct, separate and somehow *wrong*. It was like listening to a melody and hearing a discordant note creep in. She froze. Her skin prickled as she felt that other power moving toward them. Whatever it was, it was big...and unfriendly.

Zander looked at her. "What's wrong?"

"Something is coming."

He frowned. "What is it?"

"I don't know." She swallowed, her throat tight. "Zander..." Something cold rushed into the room like a wind, and she gasped. Dizzy, she swayed and fell to her knees.

He crouched beside her and clutched her shoulders. "Wendy, what's going on?"

She trembled. "Something doesn't want us here. I ... I think whoever hid the Tear in this mountain, they put something here to guard it. And now it's coming for us. It's very close." She hugged herself. "Zander...I'm scared." Her voice emerged small and shaky. She hated the sound of it, but she couldn't help herself; at the touch of that dark power, all her strength had fled. Whatever was coming toward them, it was evil. There was no other word for it. Evil and very, very strong.

"Don't be afraid." His hands tightened on her shoulders. "I won't let anything happen to you. I swear it."

"You don't understand. We can't fight it. We have to run."

"There's nowhere to run." He stood and drew his sword. "We have no choice. We must fight."

A low rumble, like thunder, drifted from the doorway at the room's end. A pair of green, glowing eyes appeared in the blackness beyond. Wendy gasped as a huge, four-legged shape strode out of the darkness. The thing was vaguely cat-shaped, but it had no flesh, no definite form. It was like shadow made solid, as if all the darkness in the room had drawn together into one concentrated mass. Its eyes blazed like balls of green fire. She could see the doorway through its body, dimly, like looking at something through tinted glass or dark water.

The thing opened its mouth, roared and charged straight at them.

Zander leapt and swung his sword. The blade passed through the shadow-thing's body as if it were smoke. The thing pounced, its shadow jaws open and spiky with

shadow teeth. Its darkness rushed over him, engulfed him, swirled around him.

He froze. His sword clattered to the floor. He screamed, and the sound went through her heart like a blade. "Zander!" she cried.

The shadow-thing passed through him, and he collapsed to the floor. He lay, shuddering, eyes wide and blank.

The shadow-thing turned its blazing green eyes to Wendy. She stared at it, cold inside. "What did you do to him?"

The dark, spiky maw opened in a roar that seemed to shake the whole mountain. The floor vibrated beneath her feet. Dust and flakes of stone fell from the ceiling. The creature fell silent and took a gliding step toward her.

She stood, frozen. This was a demon. It had to be. She knew enough to recognize it, but her Demonology classes could never have prepared her for the real thing. The cold, penetrating light of its eyes blotted out her rational mind, filling her head with the blind buzz of panic. She could feel the intent behind those eyes. It wasn't like human intelligence; there was nothing remotely human about this thing. No emotions, no thoughts. Just dark, single-minded purpose, and a power so vast and ancient it threatened to crush her.

She gave her head a sharp shake, banishing the paralysis in her limbs and brain. *Think!* She had only a few precious moments to act before the demon swallowed her as it had Zander. She took a step back, mind racing. Weapons obviously did no good against this thing. She had to try something else. She doubted her Gift would be strong enough, but she had to try. The only other option was to run, and that was out of the question. Even if she could outrun a demon—which she doubted—she would rather die than abandon Zander.

She thrust her hands out and concentrated.

The shadow-thing cocked its head, as if waiting to see what she would do.

"Come on, magic," she whispered. She took a deep breath and reached into her deepest reserve of strength. "Come on." She spread her hands and focused her Gift until her fingertips tingled with warmth.

A few orange sparks sputtered from her fingertips and fizzled out in midair.

The shadow-thing let out a rumbling growl, and its dark body shook and rippled. She could have sworn it was laughing at her.

Frantic, she ran to Zander's side and grabbed his arm. "Get up!" She pulled. He lay limp, his face blank, his eyes staring into space. "Damn it, Zander, snap out of it!"

The shadow-thing glided toward her.

She turned to run, but it was too late. The dark shape swam over her and engulfed her in blackness.

A chorus of high-pitched howls filled her ears and echoed in her head, wild, wailing cries, like the voices of the damned. Dark wind rushed around her, roaring. The blackness pressed in on her like oil, thick and foul. It filled her mouth and nose, filled her eyes, reached down her throat and into her ears. She tried to scream, but only a choked whimper emerged. The darkness laughed and pressed in, crushing her. It rushed into her head, suffocating her thoughts. She struggled, but her movements grew weaker with each second. With a last, strangled cry, she plummeted into nothingness.

## Chapter Eight

Wendy woke on the floor, head aching. She opened her eyes a crack. The room was empty. She could no longer sense the shadow-thing's chilling, dark presence.

She sat up. Things seemed to slide around in her skull, ripping bloody paths through her brain, and she groaned. "Zander?"

No response.

She looked around. Zander lay a few yards away, motionless, his back to her. She crawled to his side, gripped his shoulder and rolled him onto his back. Wide eyes stared straight through her. His face was slack, and a thin line of drool ran from one corner of his mouth. "Oh no," she whispered. "Oh, please no." She pressed her ear to his chest and sighed with relief when a faint heartbeat reached her. "Thank God," she murmured, sat up and patted his cheek. "Wake up."

No response.

She bit her lower lip. "Come on, Zander." She patted his cheek again, harder. "This isn't the time to take a nap." Still nothing. What was going on? The shadow-thing had swallowed her too, but she'd awakened with nothing more than a bad headache. Why was he like this?

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the stone amulet. The symbol glowed in lines of blue fire. Had the amulet protected her, or at least spared her the worst of it? That had to be it. She couldn't think of any other reason.

She pressed the amulet to his chest, hoping against hope it might have some effect, but he didn't respond. The amulet dropped from her hand and rolled across the floor. Whatever had happened to him, the damage was already done.

The shadow-thing was gone now, but for how long? How much time did they have, before it realized one of the intruders was still conscious? She heard a faint rumble, like distant thunder, and froze. It was still there, somewhere in the mountain—she could feel its presence, as strong as the Tear. But while the Tear's magic was bright and clear, the demon's was black and oily. A shudder of revulsion ran through her very soul. If she never saw it or felt its power again, it would be too soon.

"Zander, wake up!" She slapped him, hard, across one cheek. His head rocked to one side and her hand stung from the impact, but still, he didn't respond.

She gripped his shirt in both hands and pulled him upright. His head lolled. "Don't you dare leave me. I need you! Zander!" He remained motionless, shoulders sagging, head bowed, like a string-cut marionette.

She lowered him to the floor and took a deep breath. Panic nibbled at the edges of her mind. She had a stupid impulse to start screaming, as if that would help anything. Earlier, she'd told herself that she was tired of needing to be saved, but sometimes it was tempting to be the damsel in distress. You didn't have to do anything, just wait and wait until someone saved you. Or until you died. Like her mother, waiting and waiting for Wendy's father to come back, watching out the window every day, hoping he'd come back and rescue her from loneliness...

Wendy slapped both hands to her cheeks, hard enough to make them sting. "Get a grip," she whispered and closed her eyes. Deep breaths. Focus on the situation. She

wasn't going to be the damsel in distress this time. If she didn't do something, they were both dead. *Think*. What could she do?

Zander was still alive, just unconscious. His mind was still there, locked somewhere inside his comatose body. *If I could reach his mind...* She wet her dry lips. She knew very little psi-magic. She'd discovered early on that she had no talent for it, so she'd avoided taking more than the bare essentials in school. Still, she could try. She had to. His life might depend on it.

Her mind rushed back to the night she'd first picked up on Zander's dreams. Maybe she really was developing a new power. Maybe something dormant within her had surfaced, triggered by the near-constant anxiety and fear that had plagued her ever since she got involved with Drizell.

She pressed her fists to her temples and tried to remember what she'd learned in Mental Magic 101. "Okay," she murmured. "Let's give it a shot."

She laid her palm on his forehead, closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. In and out, in and out. The tension flowed from her muscles as she stilled her thoughts and tapped into the cool, quiet place at the center of her being. Her Gift rushed through her body like wind through trees.

She focused that power into the spot where her hand touched his brow. As they'd taught her in class, she visualized a plain, wooden door with a brass knob, constructed every detail in her mind, down to the patterns in the wood-grain, until the door was so real she could reach out and touch it. She grasped the knob, turned it, and opened the door. Beyond lay a blackness deeper than night, darker than pitch. She dried her sweat-damp palms on her trousers. Her heart beat in her throat. She prayed she wasn't making a big mistake. But then, what did they have to lose?

She steeled herself and stepped through the doorway, into his mind.

Cold, airless darkness sucked her in, surrounded her, until she floated in a vast, empty space. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Shoving her fear aside, she focused her Gift outward. Her thoughts spread like a thousand tendrils through the emptiness, searching for some flicker of thought, some hint that Zander was still there.

At first she encountered only emptiness. Then a dim, far-off flicker, like a single candle glowing in the corner of a shadowy room.

She took a deep breath and plunged headfirst into the void. She hurtled through nothing, toward that distant point of light.

\* \* \* \*

*The sour stink of ale hung in the air.*

*A boy stood facing a broad-shouldered, heavysset man with greasy, matted hair and a stained tunic. "Lousy, good for nothing little rat," the man growled. He backhanded him across the face, and the boy fell to the floor. "Talk back to me, will you?" The man grabbed fistfuls of the boy's shirt and dragged him to his feet.*

*He struggled as the man's breath, reeking of ale, hit him in the face. "Let me go!"*

*Rough hands flung him to the floor. "You're nothing but a burden. I should toss you out with the other garbage. I put food on our table and give you a roof to sleep under, and what do I get from you? Nothing!"*

*The boy glared up at him, his chest burning with rage. Warm blood oozed from a cut on his lower lip. He picked himself up, off the floor, and walked across the room.*

*"Where the hell do you think you're going?"*

*"I'm leaving."*

*"Fine!" the man bellowed. "Leave, then! You want to run wild with all the other little hoodlums on the street? Go on, be a thief. Be a whore like your mother for all I care."*

*His hands balled into fists. "My mother was not a whore."*

*"As if you'd know anything about her! If it weren't for you, she'd still be alive."*

*"Shut up!" Tears blurred his vision. "I hate this place. I hate you."*

*"Then go. But if you walk out that door, don't you dare come back. If I ever see your face again, I'll crack your skull open and dash out your useless brains like I should have done the day you were born! Do you hear me?"*

*The boy strode out the door, jaw clenched. Tears stung his eyes, and he dashed them angrily away with one hand. No more tears, he promised himself. No more weakness. From now on, he was going to look after himself. He walked down the street, away from the dirty hovel he'd shared with his father for all his eleven years of life. He'd never thought of it as home.*

*A flash of light, then the light faded and the dirty house was gone, replaced by a dark city street. Rain pounded the cobblestones and turned the roads into rivers of mud. The yellow, smeary light of street-lamps glowed through the gloom.*

*The boy huddled in an alley. Rain slicked down his hair and plastered his tattered, ill-fitting clothes to his body. Cold pierced his skin and burrowed into his bones, a fierce, unrelenting cold that numbed him to the core. He hugged his knees to his chest and shivered, wishing for a hearth fire, a blanket, a candle to warm his stiff, aching hands. Anything.*

*A nearby tavern-door swung open. Warm air and laughter blasted out, and two men, flushed and leaning against each other, stumbled onto the street. Drunken guffaws filled the air as they walked past the alley. They didn't spare the boy a second glance.*

*The aroma of mutton stew and fresh bread drifted from the tavern. His stomach rumbled, and he pressed a hand to it. Teeth chattering, he stood and slowly approached the half-open door.*

*A man's broad-shouldered form filled the doorway. He glowered, hands on his hips. "What do you think you're doing?"*

*The boy flinched at the deep, booming voice. "I'm hungry."*

*The man eyed his ragged clothes. "You got money?"*

*"No, but I thought maybe...if you can spare anything, even a crust..."*

*"Get out. I don't want no beggars hangin' around my tavern, scarin' off my customers. You want food, bring some money." The door slammed shut.*

*The boy stood on the doorstep, head hanging.*

*A man in a long, dark coat walked past, heavy boots splashing through puddles. He held an umbrella as he strode briskly, head bowed against the rain. A fat money-purse jingled on his belt. Two shakas spilled out and hit the cobblestones. The boy stood up straighter. His gaze fastened on the coins. He darted forward, crouched and reached for the nearest one.*

*The man's boot came down, hard, on his hand. He cried out and tried to pull away.*

*The man's heel ground down on his hand, almost hard enough to snap the bones. "Filthy gutter rat," the man muttered. He grabbed the two shakas from the street, aimed a kick at the boy, and kept walking.*

*The boy scrambled back into the alley, cradling his injured hand against his chest. He glared out through a curtain of wet, disheveled dark hair. Then he threw back his head and roared, a wild, wounded, animal sound, filled with pain and blind rage. Thunder rumbled, as if in answer.*

*Flash.*

*The street was replaced by a large, dimly lit room, an abandoned warehouse, empty save for a few barrels in one corner. The boy stood in the middle of the room, shadowboxing. "I'll show them," he muttered. His fists stabbed at the air. Dirty, disheveled hair hung in his face. "Gutter rat, am I? I'll show them they can't kick me around! This rat has teeth!" He spun around and kicked, his leg lashing out at his invisible opponent. He dropped to the floor and did push-ups until he collapsed, panting, his face drenched with sweat. A moment later, he leapt to his feet and resumed shadowboxing, a hard knot burning in the center of his chest like a hot coal. "I'll make them pay!" He kicked the empty barrels, and they rolled across the floor. His foot came down on one, smashing it to pieces. He pummeled the others with his fists. The wood splintered and tore his knuckles, bloodying them, but he paid no heed. He kept pounding, striking out with fists and feet until the barrels had been reduced to scattered bits of debris. He stood, fists clenched and dripping blood, his body suffused with the dull burn of exhaustion. But it wasn't enough. He whirled around and punched the wall, leaving a crimson smear. He struck out again, then again...*

*Flash.*

*The boy dug through a garbage bin. He stood on tiptoe, bare, lean, dirty arms submerged up to the elbows in the metal bin, ignoring the smell of rotting meat and the buzz of flies. He fished out a half-eaten ham sandwich in a greasy paper wrapper, and his stomach rumbled. The bread was almost fresh, untouched by mold or rot, and he hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. Mouth watering, he brushed dirt off the bread and opened his mouth.*

*"Put it down," said a deep voice.*

*The boy tensed and looked up. Three young men in sleeveless black tunics loomed in the mouth of the alley. All wore red headbands and sported dragon tattoos on their bare, muscular arms, and all looked a few years older than him. The biggest placed his meaty hands on his hips and narrowed his dark eyes. "I said put it down, you scrawny rat."*

*The others snickered.*

*"Why?" he asked.*

*The man lifted his chin and pointed a thumb at his chest. "Because we're the Royal Dragons and this is our turf. Everything here belongs to us."*

*The boy glared at him, rage bubbling in his veins. "What does it matter to you what I take from the garbage bins? You're not going to eat this."*

*"Hear that, Kale?" The man on the left sneered. "He must think he's pretty tough." Kale, obviously the leader, took a step forward. "What's your name, rat?"*

*"Zander."*

*"You listen to me, Zander. I make the rules here. You're trespassing. We didn't give you permission to forage in our garbage."*

*The boy didn't move.*

*Kale's expression darkened. "Maybe you need to dig the crud out of your ears. I don't think you heard me."*

*The other boys grinned like sharks as they watched their leader march up to Zander. Kale smacked the sandwich from his hands. It hit the street, and Kale stepped on it, squashing it beneath his boot. He smirked. "Looks like you need a lesson in respect, you dirty gutter r—"*

*Zander slammed the heel of his hand into Kale's nose. Kale staggered backwards with a squeal as blood gushed from his nostrils. "Bastard!" he gasped and swung his fist.*

*Zander ducked, and the fist sailed over his head. His foot shot out and swept Kale's legs out from under him. Kale crashed to the street, bellowing like a wounded bear. He leapt up, swinging his fists. Zander moved back and forth, avoiding each punch effortlessly. His rage had vanished, and in its place was a cool emptiness, an emotionless void in which everything seemed clear. His opponent's moves were clumsy, easy to predict, easy to dodge. He thrust one arm out, fingers pressed together to form a knife-like point, which he drove into Kale's kidney. Kale cried out, then crumpled, moaning, to the ground. He writhed in pain, his face a mask of blood and tears.*

*His lieutenants were no longer grinning. They stood, mouths open, as the color drained from their faces.*

*"Get him, damn it!" Kale screeched. "Don't just stand there, help me!"*

*The two hulking figures made a half-hearted charge toward Zander. Zander moved like a blur. One man pulled a knife, and Zander knocked it from his hand. His foot cannoned into the other man's stomach, and he staggered backwards with a grunt. Kale started to stand, and Zander's fist plowed into his temple. He fell.*

*Zander stood, panting, fists clenched. Blood trickled from a small cut on his cheek, but otherwise he was unharmed. "Get out of here." Even to his own ears, his voice sounded cold and flat. Merciless.*

*The two lieutenants grabbed Kale and dragged him to his feet. Kale hung limp between them, half-conscious, his breathing raspy and wet. The trio stumbled out of the alley. "Kid's a damn demon!" muttered one man. He cast a half-frightened, half-furious glance at Zander over one shoulder. "Freak!" he shouted.*

*Zander watched them go. Alone, he stared down at the squashed sandwich, then turned away. He trembled, still seething with rage. Then the anger ran out of him, like water down a drain. His shoulders slumped, and he bowed his head, hair falling across his eyes. A tear ran down one dirty cheek. He wiped it angrily away with the back of one hand and walked down the narrow alley, away from the garbage bin.*

*Flash.*

*A forest clearing. Overhead, a full moon shone through the clouds, ringed by a halo of ghostly mist. The steady thrum of insects' chirping filled with trees.*

*Zander stood alone in the clearing's center, a double-edged long sword in one hand. He thrust the sword, spun, jabbed at the air, his movements swift and precise. A leaf fell from one tree and spiraled downward. His gaze focused on it, and his blade whistled through the air. The leaf, now two perfect halves, drifted down to rest on the grass.*

*"Well done," said a voice.*

*His back stiffened, and he whirled around.*

*A tall, thin form stood at the edge of the clearing, wrapped in a gray cloak. A hood covered his head and drowned his eyes in shadow, leaving only a thin-lipped, smiling mouth visible. "Not many swordsmen have such precision," said the cold, dry voice. "You wield your strength well."*



*"Who are you?" he asked. "How long have you been watching me?"*

*"Long enough," said the man.*

*"I don't like being spied on." Zander took a step toward him. "Only enemies hide their presence."*

*The man held up a hand. "Don't be so hasty. I observed you out of admiration, not intent to harm. And I revealed myself, did I not? I'm here to offer you a deal." The man's smile widened beneath the shadowy hollows of his eyes. "You want to be strong, don't you?"*

*"What of it?"*

*"I can make you stronger than you've ever dreamed possible."*

*He studied the newcomer, fingers tight on his sword-hilt. "What's in it for you?"*

*"First, tell me. Why do you desire power?"*

*"I'm losing my patience with you."*

*"It's a simple question," said the hooded man. "Answer, and I will tell you whatever you wish to know."*

*Zander stared at him for a long moment, then replied, "Because in this world, strength is the only thing that matters. Because without it, you're anyone's meat, a dog to be kicked around and abused. Everything people do, everything they strive for, is ultimately for power. Anyone who believes otherwise is fooling himself."*

*The hooded man nodded, as if the answer somehow satisfied him. "True."*

*Zander pointed his sword at the man. "Now, enough of these games. Tell me who you are."*

*"I am a sorcerer. You may call me Ajed."*

*"Is that your true name?"*

*"It is as true or false as anything else you might call me. A name is only a name. The one I was born with has no meaning to me anymore. To those who know me, I am Ajed."*

*"Prove to me you're really a sorcerer."*

*The man raised a hand and murmured something under his breath. A wind swept through the clearing, stirring the grass and lashing the trees into a frenzy. Dark clouds rolled over the moon and lightning danced in the sky. Zander tensed and raised his sword. Ajed lowered his hand and the wind died down. The clouds rolled away, leaving the sky clear and calm. Stars glimmered softly. "Convinced?" asked the man.*

*"Very well, you've proved your power."*

*"Then do we have a bargain?"*

*"You still haven't told me what's in it for you."*

*"I am a scientist, of sorts. My area of study is the creation of superhuman beings."*

*"You're talking about tampering with nature. That's dark magic, isn't it?"*

*The man waved his hand, as if to brush aside the question. "'Dark' and 'light' are merely convenient labels. It is true, the authorities would not approve of what I'm doing. But then, nothing worthwhile is ever done with the authorities' approval. If such stuffy little men had their way, we'd all still be huddled in grass huts, hunting our prey with stone daggers and spears." Eyes glinted within the darkness of the man's hood. "You're a mercenary. Are you really so squeamish about breaking the rules?"*

*"What makes you think I'm a mercenary?"*

*"Oh, I know about you. Your ruthlessness is almost as famous as your skill with a blade. You're just the sort of man I've been looking for: strong, cunning and not afraid to*

*take chances. You'd make an ideal superhuman."*

*"Let me get this straight," said Zander. "You're trying to figure out how to make humans more powerful. You want me to be your subject."*

*"Correct. I won't lie to you, there is risk. With innovation, there is always some risk. But if all goes according to plan, your gains will be tremendous. So, do we have an agreement?"*

*Zander sheathed his sword. "I'll come with you," he said, "but before I agree to anything, I want to know more. I want you to tell me exactly what you're planning to do and what will happen to me if I agree. And if you double-cross me or deceive me in any way, I will make it my personal mission to kill you. I don't care how powerful you are. I'll find a way. Is that clear?"*

*"As crystal." He turned. "Come with me."*

*Zander followed him into the woods.*

*Flash.*

*Bound to a metal table, Zander screamed and thrashed as the black liquid seared through his body, burning away his humanity. Ajed's mocking laughter echoed around him. Scales crackled over his skin. His body arched off the table as another wave of pain crashed through him. "Stop this!" he shouted, his voice raw and hoarse. "Let me go!"*

*"Too late for that," said Ajed. He approached, carrying something resembling a metal helmet. "But don't worry. Soon all this pain and fear will be washed away."*

*Zander recognized the object, and dread gripped his heart. "No!" He thrashed harder, roaring.*

*Ajed chuckled. "You're a real animal, aren't you?" His eyes narrowed. "That's good. Why do you think I chose you? You already have the soul of a monster. All I have to do is give you a matching exterior."*

*"No...no..."*

*"But first, a few adjustments to make your mind more pliable."*

*The helmet lowered over Zander's eyes. He screamed...*

*Flash.*

*Zander stood over Ajed's corpse. The sorcerer's wide glassy eyes stared up at nothing. Zander was naked, breathing hard. Blood dripped from his claws. He looked at them, clenched his hands into fists. Then he flung his head back and roared.*

*Flash.*

*Zander trudged, naked and dripping with sweat, through a desert of orange sand. Dunes stretched in every direction. The sun blazed, a white coin of light in the cloudless blue sky. Its heat pressed down like a huge hand trying to flatten him into the ground. Wind whistled, and gritty sand scoured his face. He coughed and shielded his face with one hand.*

*Hot sand burned his bare feet, exhaustion weighed him down, and a savage, tormenting thirst tore at his throat. But he trudged onward. His body wanted to fall and let the sand enfold him like a blanket, but he forced his legs to keep moving. To stop was death, and he refused to die.*

*Rage churned within him, rage, the motor that had driven him his whole life. To die was to let them win, everyone who'd ever kicked him, spat at him, called him a filthy gutter rat, all those sneering faces, those indifferent eyes. They thought he was better off dead, so he would live, just to spite them. He would live.*

*His knees gave out. He collapsed, gasping hot air through his raw, tortured throat. His vision blurred. A moment later, those weary, sand-stung eyes focused on a tiny plant close to one hand, a plant with a star-shaped white flower. He stared at it. It meant something, something important, if he could just focus his mind...*

*Then realization hit like a thunderbolt. It meant the end of the desert. Plants meant animals, animals meant food, food meant life.*

*His heartbeat quickened. With one finger, he touched the fragile blossom, caressed a soft petal. Then he summoned every scrap of willpower left in the battered, weary shell of his body, stood, and pressed on through the burning sands.*

\* \* \* \*

The last traces of memory faded away, and Wendy hovered in blackness, alone. It took a moment for her to reestablish her sense of self. Her mind whirled with the implications of all she'd seen...but a tour of his memories, however interesting, wouldn't help her awaken him. She needed to go deeper, to find his consciousness, wherever it was hiding.

*Zander!* she cried out with her mind. *Zander, where are you?*

A glimmer of light appeared in the blackness. Her heart leapt. She focused all her willpower and attention on that speck and pulled herself toward it. As she raced through the blackness, the speck grew, blazed brighter and took on a shape she recognized.

Zander floated in darkness, his eyes closed, his body limp. He was naked, wreathed in a pale blue light. Dark hair drifted in loose strands around his face as if he were underwater. He's human, she thought, startled. No scales, no claws. Just skin. She reached out and saw her own fingers stretching through the darkness, pale and faintly luminous. She touched the smooth, tanned flesh of his arm. He felt like ice. "Zander, can you hear me?"

No response.

She realized, with a jolt, that he was fading. His body had grown transparent and blurred, like a reflection in a pool. She felt him slipping away, sliding deeper into the darkness. If she didn't reach him soon, she'd lose him forever.

Without thinking, she pulled him close, pressed the length of her body against his and kissed him. She breathed into him and felt his icy lips soften and warm. His body grew solid and heavy in her arms, as if he were becoming more alive, more real with each breath she pushed into his body. She slid her fingertips over the velvet heat of his skin, feeling the hard, defined muscles beneath.

His eyelids opened a crack. Long, black lashes fluttered a few times, then parted, and his eyes focused on her face. Dark brown, human eyes. "Wendy," he whispered.

"I'm here."

"So cold. Why am I so cold?"

"Just hold onto me." She hooked her legs around his. Their bodies pressed together, skin to skin, interlocking like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. His fingers slid into her hair and gripped tightly as she pressed her lips to his again and breathed warmth into his lungs.

"Where are we?" he whispered, his lips moving against hers. Their faces were so close that his long lashes brushed her skin when he blinked. "What is this place?"

"It's a little hard to explain. But I'm going to bring us back."

"How?"

"Trust me." In truth, she had no idea how she was going to get them out of here. She'd never gotten this far in her Mental Magic classes. But she had brought herself here. There had to be a way to go back...right?

Wendy took a deep breath and closed her eyes. In her mind, she formed a doorway. She poured all her strength and focus into it, making the image as sharp and clear as she could, and when she opened her eyes, it was there, etched in lines of shining fire against the blackness. As she watched, the door opened and light poured through, blinding her. Zander raised one arm to shield his eyes from the glare.

"Hold on to me," she said. Her arms tightened around him. Then, with a thought, she propelled them both through the doorway. The light engulfed them. It scorched her retinas, seared her skin, filled her nose and mouth like water. Half-blinded, she could only cling to Zander as they hurtled upward through a spinning tunnel of light, toward a dim opening far above.

There was a sickening jolt, as if she'd just crashed into a brick wall. The light shattered into a thousand pieces. Then, for awhile, there was only darkness.

## Chapter Nine

Wendy woke with a gasp, heart galloping, cheek pressed against the cold stone floor. Sweat trickled down her brow and stung her eyes.

Zander lay next to her, motionless, his eyes closed, his breathing quiet and even. She tried to open her mouth, but her lips seemed glued together. She pried them apart and grimaced as the film of dried spittle broke. The inside of her mouth seemed coated with fur. How long had she been unconscious? In the maze of his memories, she'd completely lost her sense of time.

A dull pain throbbed behind her forehead. She moistened her dry lips with a nearly dry tongue and cleared her throat, dislodging what felt like a ball of glue. "Zander?" Her voice emerged as a faint croak. She sat up, gripped his shoulder and shook him. "Zander, wake up. Open your eyes."

He stirred. A tiny furrow appeared in his brow. Then his yellow eyes opened and blinked. "Wendy?" he murmured.

"Oh, thank God." She smoothed his hair. "I thought I'd lost you."

With a soft grunt, he sat up and looked around, a dazed expression on his face. He touched trembling fingers to his forehead. "I don't know what happened. That...thing swallowed me, and then I was someplace dark. Someplace cold. And then you were there, and..." He looked at her with dawning wonder. "You brought me back, didn't you? How?"

"To be honest, I'm not sure. I've never done anything like that before. When I came to, that thing was gone, and you were in some kind of coma. I couldn't wake you, but I could feel you somewhere inside, so I went in and..."

"You went into my mind?"

She heard the edge in his voice and tensed. "I didn't know what else to do. Should I have left you there to die?"

"No," he said quietly. He looked away for a moment, then met her gaze. "I owe you my life. Thank you."

"I got lucky. I shouldn't have been able to do what I did. I'm not strong enough, not by a long shot. I really don't understand it." She stared at her hands. "I've never been any good at psi stuff. I mean, not that I've had many opportunities to try, but in school we practiced on volunteers. I was never able to get more than a flicker, or a hazy picture. But with you, it was so clear. Like being there in person."

"You said it's possible to manifest new abilities under stress. It looks like you have more power than you thought."

"Yeah. It's kind of scary. I thought I knew who I was and what I could do. Now I find out this weird power's been sleeping inside me all along, and I never suspected it was there."

"What did you see?" he asked.

"Memories." She bit her lower lip. "I'm sorry, Zander."

"For what?"

She remembered the things she'd seen through his eyes, the terrible, crushing loneliness, the cruel and indifferent faces staring at him, the harsh voices that cursed him

and called him a gutter rat. The world had rejected him, cast him aside like a piece of garbage. Tears blurred her vision. "I never realized..." A tear slid down her cheek. "I wish I could have known you then. I wish I could've shown you there was more to the world than suffering and loneliness."

His eyes widened. "Wendy..."

Another tear ran down her face. "I can still feel you in my mind. Still feel your pain. Your anger."

"Don't cry. Please."

She sniffled and wiped the back of one hand across her cheeks. "Sorry. I just..." She stopped. "Wait a minute. You told me you'd lost all the memories of your human life. You said that guy erased them."

Zander hesitated. "He did. Or he tried, rather. Either the spell was flawed or my mind was stronger than he anticipated, because my memories began to return after a few days. I recovered myself bit by bit. By the time I escaped, I knew who I was and what I'd lost, which made my condition that much harder to bear."

"Why did you lie to me?"

He sighed. "I didn't want to tell you about my past. You saw what it was like. There's nothing but pain and ugliness. I was a street thief, just another ragged stray to be kicked out from underfoot." He clenched his fists. "Even my own father despised me."

"Are you sure? In the memory I saw, he was drunk. People say things when they're drunk, things they don't mean—"

He shook his head. "People say things they don't mean when they're sober. When they're drunk, they say exactly what's on their mind, because they're too far gone to care about the impact of their words. My father resented the fact that I'd ever been born, and he made no secret of it. So I left, but then I discovered the rest of the world viewed me the same way my father did. I was a burden, a nuisance, and they let me know it with every look, every word. I told myself that I'd never be treated like that again."

"Is that why you went with him?"

"With who?"

"Ajed. The sorcerer."

"So you saw that, as well."

She nodded.

"Yes, in the beginning, I went with him by choice. When I realized what he was doing, how depraved and dangerous his experiments were, I told him I wanted no part of it. But by then, it was too late. He'd already hooked his claws into me, and he wouldn't let me go." His lips pressed together in a thin, hard line. "He'd been collecting others like me. Thieves, mercenaries, bandits. Gutter rats who'd grown into hard, bitter men. He promised us a chance at power, and we went blindly, eagerly into his trap. I was a fool."

Wendy looked into his face, studied the firm set of his mouth, his shielded eyes. She'd always known there was pain in his past—it was etched into every line of his face, buried deep in his eyes, behind the cool veneer—but she hadn't known the full extent of it. He'd grown up in a world without love, without compassion. She had always resented her own father for leaving and felt sorry for herself over his absence, but at least she'd had a loving mother and a loving sister. No one had ever given Zander so much as a kind word.

He stood. "We can't afford to linger here. That creature may return."

She rose and dusted off her trousers. "You're right. It's still somewhere in the mountain. I can feel it. I don't think it knows we're still conscious...yet, anyway."

He glanced at her. "How did you remain unaffected, anyway?"

"You know that charm I made? I guess it wasn't totally worthless, after all."

"The charm protected you? Truly?"

"That's the only explanation I can think of." She cracked a weak smile. "This is just my lucky day, I guess."

"It seems that way."

"Still, we can't assume my luck will hold. Come on. Let's find what we came here to find."

They strode forward, toward the doorway at the hall's end. Toward Eloria's Tear.

The doorway led into another, smaller chamber. A stone door stood before them, and beyond, the magic beckoned. She could almost hear it, like a low, throbbing hum. In the door's center was a stone circle with a triangle painted onto it in some dark substance that had grown flaked and faded with time.

Zander studied it. "What is that?"

"A sealing charm."

"Is that blood?"

"Looks like it. Lots of powerful spells call for blood." She wondered if it was animal or human, decided she didn't really want to know. When she touched the door, a tingling warmth rushed over her, and she pulled back her hand.

"You feel something?"

She nodded. "The sealing charm is still active, but the magic doesn't feel very strong. Not surprising." She placed her hand on the stone circle, fingers splayed. "The spell was probably cast centuries ago, and even the toughest spells don't last forever. The oomph starts to wear off after awhile."

"Can you undo it?"

"I think so, but there might be a physical lock too. If I neutralize the spell, can you get the doors themselves open?"

"Yes."

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and probed the seal with a cautious mental finger. Gradually, the spell took shape in her mind: a complicated knot of magic, like countless interwoven threads, mind-boggling in its complexity. If it had been fresher, it would have been impossible to undo, but some of the threads had decayed over time. She picked at a frayed edge, testing its strength.

"Well?" he said. "What do you sense?"

"Shhh." She scanned the seal, ferreting out each weakness. She plucked at one thread, then another, listening as the magic resonated within her mind like tiny bells. She tugged a cord in the spell-seal's center. A deep, satisfying tone rang in her head. *Ah. There.* She pulled the cord. The knot unraveled and the seal dissolved into nothing. A loud crack split the air. She opened her eyes and watched as the stone circle split in half and fell to the floor. She dusted her hands off.

Zander raised his eyebrows. "Does this mean the spell's undone?"

"Pretty sure. Only one way to find out."

"What if it isn't? The magic's not going to burn us to a crisp, is it?"

"No, it's not that kind of spell. Just a garden variety seal to keep the doors from

opening. They must have figured no one would get past the lake-monster and the shadow thing."

"I'll take your word for it." He rammed his shoulder against the doors. They didn't budge. He rammed them again, then a third time. They burst open. Heavy hinges squealed and dust fell from the doors in chunks, showering the floor.

Inside lay a stone chamber, no bigger than the average living room. In the center stood a block of stone, and on it, a carved jade box engraved with delicate, curling designs. Wendy approached. Her hands trembled with anticipation as she lifted the box's lid. Inside lay a black tear-shaped stone the size of a fist, gleaming in the silvery glow of her light-sphere.

Zander peered over her shoulder. "Is that it?"

She nodded. "Eloria's Tear. It doesn't look like much, does it?"

"No. It doesn't."

She touched its surface, and the jolt of power nearly knocked her over. She stumbled, and he caught her.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. The magic is just really strong. It caught me by surprise." She straightened, took a deep breath, and touched the stone again. This time, the rush of power wasn't so overwhelming. She relaxed and let the magic wash over her in waves, like warm air caressing her skin. Slowly, she lifted the Tear from the jade box. Her fingertips tingled.

He held his hands out, and she placed the Tear in them. "I don't feel anything."

"Of course not," she said, "you don't have the Gift."

He frowned. "How does it work? How do we use its powers?"

She tapped a finger against her chin, thinking. "Give it back to me. I want to try something."

He handed her the Tear, and she closed her eyes. Cautiously, she probed the Tear with a tendril of her Gift. The stone grew warm in her hands, and her eyes flew open. The Tear glowed a soft, cool white. A woman's voice emanated from the Tear, soft and echoing: "What do you wish of me?"

Wendy stared, speechless.

"It talks," Zander whispered. He stared, the Tear's glow reflected in his wide eyes.

She licked her dry lips, remembering the legend that Eloria had sealed a piece of her own soul inside the Tear. Most historians rejected the idea. Some even considered it blasphemous. A soul, they said, could not be divided, and a piece of it certainly couldn't be locked inside an object, and if it could, a saint like Eloria would never do such a thing.

"Are you Eloria?" asked Wendy.

"I am what remains of the woman called Eloria," the voice replied.

"So the legend is true," she murmured. This was going to piss a lot of people off, but then, the truth usually did.

"Eloria," he said, "my name is Zander. I'm a chimera. My body has been twisted with dark magic. Can you make me human again?"

"Let him hold me," said the Tear.

He held out his hands, and Wendy placed the glowing stone in them. For a long moment, no one spoke. The Tear's light pulsed. They watched, holding their breath.

"The foreign essence is woven through the deepest fibers of your being," said Eloria, "and the magic binding it there is powerful. To purge your body of that essence would



take all my strength. It would very likely destroy me."

"Destroy you?" said Wendy. "What do you mean?"

"Using magic drains me." The Tear's light pulsed as she spoke. "The stronger the spell, the more magic required. If anything remains afterward, even a single spark, I can replenish my strength. But if I use all my power for one spell, there will be nothing left of me."

Wendy's heartbeat quickened. She took Eloria's Tear from Zander. "You're saying that if you cure him, you'll lose your power and become just another rock."

"Correct."

"Meaning it will kill you?"

"I am not alive, so I cannot die. Even if my power is extinguished, my energy will simply dissipate and become a part of everything once again. It makes no difference to me. If anything, I would prefer to rejoin the rest of Creation, rather than remain trapped in this stone for the rest of eternity. Ask, and I will purify him."

"But then..." She gulped. She couldn't sell a rock. She couldn't pay back Drizell with a rock. This wasn't good. "We ... we might need some time to think this over."

"As you wish. Awaken me once you've decided." The white glow faded. The Tear sat, dark and cool, in her hands.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"If I use the Tear to become human," he said, "it becomes worthless to you. Is that it?"

"Yeah," she said. "That's pretty much it." Which meant that only one of them could get what they needed. Either he would have to sacrifice his last shot at humanity, or she would have to return empty-handed and face Drizell's wrath. Of course, he had no idea how serious her situation was. He had no idea that if she didn't pay up soon, her entire family would suffer.

Zander clenched his fists. "Damn it," he whispered.

She took a deep breath and realized she was trembling. "Listen, we can figure this out later. Let's just get out of here. I don't want to wait and see what other nasty surprises this place has in store for us."

His jaw tightened. "Agreed." He paused. "Maybe I should carry the Tear."

"Afraid I'm going to run off with it?" she asked. Her voice emerged sharper than she'd intended.

"Are you afraid *I'm* going to run off with it?"

"I need it, Zander. You don't understand." She heard the desperation creeping into her voice. "If I lose this, I'll lose everything."

"You think I'm going to double-cross you? Knock you out and run off with the Tear? Fine. If you trust me so little, then carry it yourself."

She glared at him. "Fine. I will." She slipped the Tear into her money pouch and draped the cord around her neck so the Tear rested against her chest like a pendant. She turned and walked out of the room. Her throat tightened, and unshed tears burned in her eyes. She blinked them away.

She hated this, but she couldn't afford to take chances. All her hopes, her life and the lives of the people she loved, were pinned on this rock.

\* \* \* \*

They walked back through the skeleton-strewn hall, across the dark lake—the surface remained placid and undisturbed this time—and through the empty stone city, into the labyrinth of tunnels. Wendy glanced down at her map. She touched the Tear where it rested against her chest, pulsing like a second heart. The back of her neck tingled, and she turned to see Zander looking at her intently, his expression cold. Her fingers curled around the Tear and clutched it tight.

She heard a distant rumble and looked up. Her mouth went dry. "It's coming."

"What?"

"That shadow thing. I feel it."

"How close?"

"I don't know. But it's coming fast."

He grabbed her hand and ran.

She stumbled. "I can't keep up!"

He swept her up in his arms and kept running. The stone walls flew past to either side as she clung to his neck, breathless. She hadn't realized just how fast he could go when he really needed to, but even so, he couldn't outrun the shadow thing for long. Its dark energy rushed toward them like an avalanche. She craned her neck, staring into the tunnel behind them, and saw the green glow of its eyes. Its roar shook the tunnel walls.

She clung to him, heart racing. She didn't think the amulet would protect her a second time.

The shadow-thing's body filled the tunnel, huge and close, jaws gaping.

"Wendy!" he shouted. "The Tear!"

She looked at the pouch and gasped. Eloria's Tear glowed like a star, its light pulsing through the pouch.

She grabbed the pouch and yanked the drawstring open. Eloria's Tear fell into her hand, blazing white. Heat seared into her palm as she gripped the stone, but she dared not let go. Jaws clenched, she held the Tear high. It flared brighter, dazzling her eyes. Light spilled out between her fingers and filled the tunnel. The shadow-thing recoiled.

It seemed her luck had decided to hold out a little longer, after all.

"Almost there," Zander panted.

Ahead, the entrance glowed with sunlight. She held Eloria's Tear tight. The stone burned bright and hot, throbbing in her hand. Its glare flared brighter, burning her retinas, and she shut her eyes.

A roar split the air. Her eyes opened just in time to see the shadow-thing dissolve. Light stabbed through its body like a dozen knives, and a moment later, it broke apart and melted into nothing. The luminous green eyes winked out like candles. The blinding glare faded, leaving the tunnel dark and empty, but Zander didn't slow. He charged through the doorway, into the bright daylight. He set her down, then collapsed, panting, against a nearby outcrop. "That thing. Is it..."

"Gone. Eloria's Tear destroyed it." The Tear's white glow had faded, leaving the stone black and cool in her hand, but she still felt the pulse of its power.

He straightened and wiped one sleeve across his brow. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah." She stared at the Tear and shuddered. "This rock gives me the creeps."

"Even though it just saved our lives?"

"I've never felt such strong magic before. Holding it feels dangerous, like I'm holding a stick of dynamite with the fuse lit."

"But you said it's holy magic. Doesn't that mean it can only heal, not hurt?"

"Well, you saw what it did to the shadow monster. 'Holy' is in the eye of the beholder." She paused, watching him from the corner of her eye. He'd carried her to safety. How many times now had he risked his life for her? How many times had he put himself between her and danger? Even after he knew the Tear's location and didn't need her anymore, he had stuck with her, done everything in his power to keep her safe. The hot, sour taste of guilt filled her mouth, and she lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry for not trusting you earlier," she said quietly. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"I can't blame you." He gave her a strained smile. "After all, I was a thief for many years, and a ruthless killer-for-hire after that. How can you trust me to behave honorably? In your shoes, I wouldn't trust me either."

"No, I should know better. I don't really believe you're going to double-cross me. In fact, here." She dropped the Tear back into its pouch and slipped it around his neck. "You can carry it, if you like."

He studied her face. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

He touched the pouch. "What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. But I bet we can figure out something. We can talk about it more on the way back." She sighed. "I swear, this has been the most stressful week of my life. Dragons, bandits, lake-monsters and demons. I'm amazed I haven't had a mental breakdown yet." She forced a smile. "I can't wait 'til we're back in town. I want a hot bath, a hot meal and a warm bed, in that order. I'm just about..." She froze. Something rustled in the nearby underbrush. "Do you hear that?"

More rustling. Shapes moved in the shadows of the nearby forest.

Zander growled, whirled around and drew his sword. "Who goes there?"

A cloaked, hooded figure emerged from the forest, his arms folded over his chest, his eyes drowned in shadow. He chuckled. "Impressive. I must admit, I didn't expect you to get past the Mind Eater."

Zander's eyes widened. "Ajed?" he whispered. Then he shook his head. "No. You're dead."

The man smirked. "No, I'm not Ajed...though I knew him. Now there was a man with some bright ideas. His research has benefited me greatly." He tilted his head to one side. "And you, if I'm not mistaken, are one of his flawed creations."

Zander snarled, showing his teeth. His fingers tightened on his sword-hilt.

"Wait a minute." She stared at the hooded figure, mouth dry. "I recognize your voice."

"I suppose there's no need to hide it, is there?" He pulled his hood off, revealing a narrow face with sly, pointed features.

"Threed." Her voice emerged breathless with shock. "What the hell are you doing here?"

His smile widened. "Did you honestly believe I wasn't interested in Eloria's Tear? You knew something was amiss when I sold you that scroll, but you buried the knowledge out of greed and desperation. You didn't see what was right in front of your nose."

"You mean..."

"You've been dancing on my strings this whole time. I have been watching you,

tracking your progress. You played your part quite nicely." He held out one pale hand. "Now, hand over the Tear, if you please."

Her jaw clenched. "You used me. You wanted Eloria's Tear for yourself, but you didn't want to risk your own hide, so you found someone else to do the dirty work."

"You figured it out. Very good."

"Well, Threed, or whatever your real name is, if you think we're going to just hand it over without a fight, you've got something else coming. You can have the Tear over our dead bodies."

"I wouldn't say that if I were you." Threed raised one hand and snapped his fingers. Four huge, humanoid shapes emerged from the forest gloom, clad only in pale loincloths. They strode forward, eyes glinting, teeth bared.

Wendy gulped.

The man-shaped creatures stood eight or nine feet tall, their bodies bulging with muscle. Green scales covered their backs and limbs, and segmented plates armored their chests and bellies. Their faces looked like something out of a nightmare, half-man and half-reptile. Their tiny, snake-like eyes gleamed a pale amber, empty and expressionless as glass beads.

"What the hell are those things?" she whispered.

"Chimeras," Zander said.

"That's right." Threed grinned at him. "You were a botched job, a failed experiment. But I learned from Ajed's mistakes, and now I have surpassed him. These are my Reptans. They are superior to you in every way, larger, stronger, faster and more ruthless. And they will obey me unconditionally. Unlike Ajed, I have perfected the art of mental manipulation."

The four Reptans stood motionless, their snake-like eyes focused on Wendy and Zander.

"This doesn't have to end in violence," said Threed. "I'm a reasonable man. All I want is the Tear. Give it to me, and we can all go home safe and happy."

"Fat chance," she said. "We risked our lives for this. Just what do you want with it, anyway?"

"That's none of your concern." He snapped his fingers again. "Number Three."

One of the lizard men stepped forward.

"Persuade them," said Threed.

The Reptan glided toward Wendy, thick tail swinging behind him. For such a big creature, he moved with an eerie grace, like a snake swimming through the grass.

Zander stepped forward, stood between her and the hulking reptile, and brandished his sword. "Stand back!"

The Reptan didn't hesitate. He kept coming, mindless as an avalanche and just as deadly.

Zander charged with a roar and swung his sword. It bounced off the Reptan's chest as if it were rock. He swung again, and the Reptan raised one arm, blocking the blade.

Again and again he attacked, and the Reptan parried his blows with boulder-like fists. He leapt back, panting, then lunged again. The Reptan swung one muscled arm and knocked the sword from his grip, then grabbed his head between massive, clawed hands and began to squeeze. He screamed.

"Stop it!" Wendy shouted. She ran forward and punched the Reptan's side, as hard as

she could. Pain shot down her arm.

One beady amber eye rolled toward her. The Reptan dropped Zander and turned to face her. Zander hit the ground, stirred and propped himself up on one arm, blood trickling from his ear. He was breathing hard, his eyes dazed. "Wendy..."

The Reptan grabbed her waist and hoisted her off the ground. She struggled, striking out with fists and feet, but he ignored the blows as if they were raindrops.

Zander crawled toward his sword. Threed snapped his fingers, and a second Reptan stepped forward to block him.

"The pouch around his neck," said Threed. "Take it."

The three Reptans surrounded Zander. Two held him down, pinning his arms and legs, while the third seized the pouch and yanked, snapping the cord around his neck. The Reptan carried the pouch to Threed and handed it to him.

Threed opened the pouch. The black stone dropped into his palm, and his face lit up, lips stretching into a wide, eager grin. His fingers curled tight around the stone. He looked up, and his gaze swept over the four lizard-men. "Return to me!"

Reptan Number Three dropped Wendy, and she landed with a bone-jarring thud. The others released Zander and moved toward Threed, gliding on their thick, muscular legs. Threed slipped Eloria's Tear under his cloak. He pressed the tips of his long fingers together and bowed his head, murmuring a spell.

Zander growled and propped himself up on one arm. His eyes burned with a fierce, cold light. He leapt to his feet, drew his sword, roared, and charged. Threed smiled and thrust one hand out. A blast of air and light knocked Zander backwards. He hit the ground and skidded.

Wind whirled around Threed and his minions. A cocoon of light enveloped them. Then the light faded, and they were gone.

"Damn!" Zander pounded the ground with a fist.

Wendy picked herself up, winced, and rubbed her sore bottom. She limped toward him. "We'll get it back," she said. "Don't worry."

"How? They could be anywhere on the continent!" He struck the earth again. His shoulders slumped, and his head bowed so his hair swung down to hide his face like a curtain. "How could I let this happen?" His fingers clenched, claws digging deep trenches in the dirt. "It's gone. After years of searching, I finally had it in my grasp, and now..."

She knelt in front of him, gripped his chin and lifted his face. "Zander, listen. We can find him."

He blinked. "How?"

"Well, it's a pretty good bet he went back to his lair, right?"

His brows knitted. "Lair?"

"Sure. Guys like him always have a lair. They need someplace to keep all their dark magic stuff, right?"

"How do you know this?"

"It just makes sense. I mean, he's been creating chimeras. It's not like someone can just do that in their basement. Even if he's not in his lair now, he's bound to return sooner or later. This guy was Ajed's colleague, or at least, he borrowed a lot of Ajed's research. I'd bet anything that he's just using Ajed's old lab."

"It's possible," he murmured. "But what makes you so certain?"

"I'm not. But it makes sense, right? Threed strikes me as a secondhand type of guy."

He doesn't like to work, so he figures out ways to profit from other people's work."

"Even if that's true, we don't know where the lab is."

"Yes, we do." She pointed at him. "You've been there. You know where it is."

"I told you, I don't..."

"The information is there in your head, whether you remember it or not. It's in a desert with orange sand, right? There's only one desert on the continent with orange sand, and that's the Kanti Desert in the southwest. Flying over it by broom, it won't be difficult to spot a big building in the middle of nowhere. If you saw the place again, do you think you'd recognize it?"

"Possibly. But..."

"But what?"

"We can't possibly get there in time. It'll take us a week just to get back to Jacob's Hill."

"Not if we fly."

"If we fly over the Darkleaf Forest, we stand a good chance of being attacked by dragons...but that doesn't even matter, because we don't have a broom. We left it back in town. Damn!" He stood, whirled around and raked his claws down a boulder. She winced at the screech. "By the time we reach Jacob's Hill on foot, he'll have sold the Tear, or hidden it where no one will ever find it. We'll lose our chance forever."

She bit her lower lip. Then an idea struck. "I could try a summoning spell. I know what the broom looks like and where it is...roughly."

He stared at her. "You can do that? Summon it from this distance?"

"Not normally. Luckily, I brought a little something in case a problem like this sprung up." She took off her pack and rummaged through it. "I'd completely forgotten I brought this. Let's see...aha!" She pulled out a tiny glass bottle filled with bright green liquid.

"What is it?"

She tilted the bottle back and forth. "A magical enhancement potion, otherwise known as boost juice. This will strengthen my Gift for the duration of one spell. Grabbed it from my shop before I left. I'd been hoping not to need it—it's expensive stuff. Even a little bottle like this usually sells for about five hundred, and I could've used that money. Oh well."

"If you take that, then, you'll be able to summon the broom?"

"I don't know. But I have to try. Unless you can think of something better?"

He shook his head. "What about the dragons?"

"I guess we'll just have to risk it. Otherwise, we'll lose our chance, and the Tear will be gone forever."

"Are you willing to take that risk?"

"I am if you are."

He nodded, his face grim. "Let's do it."

She pulled out the bottle's stopper and downed the potion in one gulp. It burned her throat like molten metal. She grimaced and muffled a cough against one fist. "Ugh. The best potions always taste the worst."

"Is it working?"

"Give it a minute." Heat filled her belly and spread outward, tingling. "I think I'm feeling...oh yeah, I'm feeling it." She clenched and flexed her hands, breathing harder. It

was as if someone had injected liquid lightning into her veins. A bright, sizzling energy filled her body, down to the tips of her fingers and toes. Her very cells seemed to swell to the bursting point with life. She stood. "I think I can do this. But I'll have to maintain my focus for a long time. I'll need total silence. If you distract me at the wrong moment, I could lose control of the spell, and then we'll never get the broom back."

"Understood."

"You may as well sit down. This could take awhile." She closed her eyes, pressed two fingers to her forehead, and focused her mind. She conjured a mental image of her broom, seeing every detail: the pattern of the wood-grain, the length and color of the bristles, the small crack near the end of the handle. Next, she summoned an image of the storage room at the inn in Jacob's Hill. She'd only gotten a brief look at the room, but she did her best to reconstruct the layout in her head. She saw the broom in one corner, leaning against the wall, and visualized it rising slowly into the air. It hung suspended a few feet above the ground, wobbling.

There was no way she'd be able to get it through the locked door, so she focused instead on the small, grimy window and turned the broom toward it. She was going to have to break the glass. No helping that. With her Gift, she rammed the broom through the windowpane. The glass shattered, and the broom sped down the street. A woman shrieked. A dog barked. The broom rounded a corner, then soared into the air, over the town wall, over the forest. It raced higher still, until the trees were no more than a rumpled green blanket on the earth below. The mountains loomed in the distance, hazy gray shapes. They drew closer, closer, as the broom sped through the damp, fleecy patches of cloud, over the dark, snaky shape of the river, over the foothills, to the place where Wendy and Zander waited. For an instant, she saw both of them from above: Zander sitting on a boulder, hands on his knees, and herself standing, two fingers still resting against her brow, her eyes shut tight.

She opened her eyes, and the broom fell into her hands. She stared, open-mouthed.

"Impressive," he said.

"I didn't really expect that to work," she murmured. "How is this even possible? I only closed my eyes for a few minutes."

He shook his head. "You were like that for over an hour. I was afraid to disturb you."

"An hour? Really?" She ran her hands along the smooth, well-worn handle. "It didn't seem like that long." Her own voice seemed to be coming from faraway. She felt spacey, detached, as if a part of her were still flying over the forest.

"That potion is strong stuff," he said.

She nodded, though a part of her wondered if it was all the potion's doing. Her power had been growing in such strange and unpredictable ways. "We only have one broom, so you'll have to ride with me."

He regarded the broom with a small frown. "Will that thing carry us both?"

"It'll be a tight fit, but we can do it." She straddled the broom. "Mind you, I still plan to make a stop at Jacob's Hill. I know you're eager to go after that creep, and I don't blame you, but we need to replenish our supplies. Even by broom, it'll take us a good day and a half to reach the Kanti Desert."

He straddled the broom. With both of them on, there was scarcely an inch of room to spare. "Where do I grip it?"

"You'll, um..." Heat crept into her cheeks. "You'll have to put your arms around my

waist."

He slipped his arms around her, and his broad chest pressed to her back. "Like this?"

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. Having his lean, hard body flush against hers was a bit distracting, to say the least, but she'd just have to deal with it. "Okay. Hold on tight." The broom rose a few feet into the air.

She heard a soft, pained grunt. "These brooms really aren't designed for men, are they?"

"They make protective cups for that kind of thing. Do you think you can hold out until we reach Jacob's Hill?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really." She tilted her head back and stared at a patch of blue sky visible through the treetops. Her feet left the ground as the broom floated up. His arms tightened around her. "I'll go slowly," she said. The broom drifted through the gap in the treetops. A flock of startled sparrows burst from the trees in a rush of wings as they soared into the clear, blue sky. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

"I'll be fine." His voice was calm, but she felt his heart beating quickly against her back.

They sailed through the air. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the Edge Mountains looming behind them, the naked gray peaks like the backs of huge rhinoceroses. Wind whipped back her hair and roared in her ears. So far, so good, she thought. The knot in her gut loosened, and she concentrated on staying balanced.

She'd never flown broomstick with another person. It felt awkward, delicate. Brooms weren't really designed for two. One wrong move might topple them both and send them plummeting to the ground, but she felt it wise not to mention that to Zander.

"Look behind us," he said.

She looked over one shoulder, craning her neck, and spotted two winged shapes in the blue sky. At first, she thought they were hawks. Very big hawks. As the shapes flew closer, however, she saw the red scales, the long necks and huge, toothy mouths.

"Dragons," she whispered. Her mouth turned to parchment, and her heart lurched into her throat.

She leaned forward, urging the broom on. They shot forward in a burst of speed, but when she looked over her shoulder, the dragons were still gaining. She heard the flap of leathery wings. "This is not good," she muttered. "This is really, really not good."

"Fly faster."

"I'm flying as fast as I can."

The dragons drew closer. One flew alongside her, scarcely a broom's length away. She saw the dirt crusting its plated underbelly, the wet, pink lining of a flared nostril. A gold-bronze eye rolled toward her. The dragon snapped, teeth clashing together like a steel trap just inches from her shoulder. She threw her weight to the other side, veering away from the dragon. Another appeared on her right side, cutting off her retreat. A third flew below. The dragons were boxing them in. She remembered learning in school that red dragons were the most intelligent of all predators.

Damn.

"I'm going to draw my sword!" Zander shouted, his voice almost lost under the roar of wind.

"No, don't let go! You might fall! Let me try something first."



The dragons closed in. She gulped. Dragons had excellent eyesight, Zander had told her. Maybe their eyes were more sensitive than most animals'. Maybe a sudden flash of light would disorient them. But using the Gift took calm and control. Could she manage a spell while hurtling through the air several hundred feet above ground with three hungry dragons closing in around her?

She had to. If she didn't...

She took a deep breath and thought back to her Defensive Magic class, where the professor had forced his students to go through a series of exercises. First, he'd had them summon their Gifts while standing with books balanced atop their heads. Once they mastered that, he'd made them try it standing on one leg while he tickled their noses with a feather. "If you can't summon your Gift in the face of distraction," he said, "it will be useless as a defensive weapon. Do you think an attacker will wait politely while you go through your meditation exercises? Eh?" At the time, Wendy had grumbled curses. Now, she offered him a silent thanks.

She shut out the rest of the world and focused on her breathing. Her racing heartbeat slowed. The dragons receded into unimportance. There was only herself and her Gift. Her thoughts slipped away, leaving her mind open and clear, a vessel waiting to be filled. Her Gift welled up from the center of her being, flowed through her veins and suffused her body.

A dragon veered toward them, jaws gaping. She thrust out one hand, and white light burst from her palm. The dragon fell back with an ear-shattering shriek. She blinked, hard. The flash had dazzled her eyes as well. Stars danced in front of her. When her vision cleared, she saw the dragon flying in wild loops. Smoke poured from its burned-out eye sockets.

Did I do that? she thought, dazed.

The dragon spiraled lower, shrieking, and crashed into the trees.

She heard a low, rumbling growl, and looked to the right to see the second dragon pulling dangerously close. Smoke streamed from its nostrils. Its mouth opened, and it belched out a ball of flame. She screamed and lurched to one side, narrowly avoiding the fireball, which dissipated in midair. The dragon flew closer, and one huge, clawed forefoot swiped at her, missing her by inches.

Zander drew his sword. He tightened one arm around her waist, holding himself steady as he swung the blade. It sliced through the dragon's neck, and blood sprayed from the stump as the head fell, tumbling through the air. For a moment the dragon's body remained in midair, wings flapping, as if it didn't yet realize it was dead. Its movements slowed, then stopped. The body seemed to fall in slow motion, turning over and over before crashing into the treetops below.

"Whew," breathed Wendy. "That was—"

Something huge and solid rammed into them and knocked them spinning through the air. For a dizzying, stomach-turning moment, they were upside down. A scream burst from her throat as she slipped and felt her bottom leave the broom. She gripped it tighter. Zander clung to her, and she clung to the broom handle, breathless with terror...

Then the broom righted itself, and Wendy clutched it tight, gasping for breath. She looked up just in time to see a dragon fly straight at them, teeth bared. Its jaws stretched open. Time slowed. She saw the long red tongue, the knife-like yellow teeth, the strings of saliva between them, and the dark, glistening throat, like an open grave.

She didn't have to summon her Gift this time. It lunged forward, springing from the depths of her mind like a panther.

Her hand shot out, and fire burst from her fingertips. She watched, entranced, as flame poured over the dragon in a boiling orange stream and engulfed its body in a brilliant halo. The dragon fell, ablaze and screaming. The flames died away in midair, leaving only a charred lump which slammed into the ground and lay motionless.

She took a shaky breath and tightened her grip on the broom. I just killed two dragons, she thought. Her mind whirled.

Behind her, Zander moaned.

She looked over her shoulder. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"Just nauseous."

"Try not to throw up on me." She scanned the skies. "Are they all gone?"

"Yes."

"Good." Her heart galloped. Sweat trickled down her sides. "I've never shot fire out of my fingers before. Amazing what you can do under stress." But if this kind of stress was the price for high-level magic, she'd be content to remain a mediocrity for the rest of her life. A wild, shrill giggle bubbled up from her throat.

"Wendy?"

"I just remembered—" She giggled again, breathlessly. "Dragons are a protected species. We killed three. Do you think we'll get fined?"

Her laughter must have sounded a bit hysterical. He regarded her with a concerned frown. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Just a little ... unsteady. Need to catch my breath." She swallowed another giggle and realized her hands were shaking so hard, she could scarcely grip the broom-handle. Deep breaths, she thought. She could fall apart later. Right now, she needed to hold this broom steady and stay on guard in case they were attacked again. She gripped the wooden handle tighter.

The rest of the flight went by uneventfully, however. At last, she spotted Jacob's Hill, rising up through the trees like a cool, sparkling blue oasis in the middle of a scorching desert. "Thank God," she said. "I can't wait to get back to civilization. I'm going to order a huge meal and a tankard of ale."

"I thought you were broke," he said.

"I am."

"Then how are you going to pay the innkeeper? Or buy supplies, for that matter."

She grimaced. "I'll have to see if they accept credit." Story of my life, she thought.

## Chapter Ten

The tavern keeper glared at Wendy and crossed his tattooed arms over his chest. All traces of his former good humor had vanished. "Credit? You're asking a lot of trust from me, don't you think? Especially after your broom smashed my window. When I agreed to keep that in storage for you, I didn't expect it to develop a mind of its own."

"Ah, yeah, sorry about that." She rubbed the back of her neck. "I'll pay you back for that, too, with interest. I just need a little time."

He shook his head. "Sorry. Maybe you missed the sign on the front counter." He pointed with his thumb. "There it is. Cash only."

"Come on, Bill. Give me a break."

He harrumphed. "My generosity only stretches so far. I'm a good-natured man, but I'm not a fool. If I took credit from every traveler and vagabond who stepped into my tavern..."

She flushed. "Vagabond? I'll have you know I'm a respectable businesswoman! I own the most popular potion shop in Garna!"

"Then you shouldn't have any trouble paying me up front."

Zander stepped forward. He wore his hood and scarf, hiding his features, but Bill flinched nonetheless. When Zander reached beneath his cloak, Bill tensed and put up his hands. "Now, look, I don't want any trouble..." He fell silent as Zander pulled out a fat deerskin pouch. Coins jingled inside.

"This should cover the window, along with our meal and any other expenses, with a little extra leftover for your trouble."

Bill blinked and took the pouch. He opened it and peered inside.

"Is that satisfactory?" Zander asked.

"Er...yes. This should cover it."

"Then we'll have two ales, two bowls of venison stew, and a loaf of bread with butter. And the young lady wants a hot bath."

"Right. Sure." Bill scratched his bald head. "Will you be staying the night?"

"No. We have business elsewhere," Zander said.

Wendy winced. She knew they couldn't afford to waste time, but still, a warm bed sounded pretty good at the moment. She'd just have to hope the effects of the boost juice held a little longer, or she'd be too exhausted to fly. Lucky Zander—he didn't seem to tire as easily as a human.

Zander turned and walked to the table in the corner.

She followed. "I didn't know you had money."

He shrugged. "I never said I didn't."

"You could have mentioned it earlier."

The corners of his eyes crinkled. Though it was hard to tell with the scarf covering his mouth, she thought he was smiling. "You never asked."

She made a small sound of exasperation. "And here I was, worrying myself into a frenzy over how we were going to pay for this. I thought we'd be stuck washing dishes all night." She paused. "Thanks. I owe you one."

"It's no trouble. My last job paid very well."

She thought about asking him what his last job had been, wondered if she really wanted to know. "I didn't realize being a mercenary was so lucrative. Maybe I went into the wrong career."

"No, trust me, you don't want to be a mercenary."

She thought about it for a moment. "Maybe not."

They sat at the corner table and waited while a plump, blonde girl brought out two foamy mugs of ale and two bowls of steaming stew on a tray. Wendy's stomach rumbled.

The waitress's eyes darted to Zander, widened slightly, then darted away. Wendy could see her pulse racing in her throat. "Anything else I can bring you?" the girl asked, her voice a little unsteady.

"No, this is fine, thank you," said Wendy.

The waitress hurried away. Wendy tore off a piece of bread and dunked it in the stew. At the first bite, her eyes rolled up with pleasure. "Mmm." She swallowed.

"Delicious! After living on dried fruit and rabbit for a week, I was dying for some bread." She swallowed another mouthful, then glanced at Zander. He was still wearing his hood and scarf. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"People are staring at me," he murmured. One gloved hand gripped the table's edge.

She looked across the room. Two men sat at a table on the other side, their gazes fixed on Zander. When she looked at them, they averted their eyes and pretended to focus on their card game. "Don't worry about them," she said.

"Easy for you to say."

She sighed, leaned forward and lowered her voice. "People are going to look, Zander. There's no getting around that. But if you just act natural, eventually they'll get tired of looking. Acting like it bothers you will only draw more attention. You're not going to avoid eating in public because some random guys can't keep their eyes to themselves, are you?"

"I just don't like being stared at."

She touched his hand. "Eat. You don't want your food to get cold."

He hesitated. Then, slowly, he reached up and untied his scarf. It slipped off, and one of the men gasped. Zander tensed. Eyes lowered, he picked up his spoon and began to eat.

\* \* \* \*

Afterwards, Bill led Wendy up to a room with a huge, bronze tub in the center. Steaming hot water filled the tub. "I hope this is all right for you, Miss," he said. "Our little town doesn't have running water, but we filled the tub from the well and heated it with a spell."

The tavern keeper's attitude toward them had warmed quite a bit since he'd gotten paid, she noticed. "It's fine."

"I'll give you some privacy, then." He retreated from the room, closing the door.

She stripped off her grimy traveling clothes, stepped into the tub, and sighed with relief as she sank into the hot water. You could never fully appreciate baths until you'd spent a week traipsing through the woods with no hot water and no soap, she thought. She closed her eyes, leaned her head back against the tub's rim, and wondered if she was crazy.

Here they were, running off to the Kanti Desert with nothing but a hunch to guide

them. Who knew where Threed was holing up? She had no proof that he was using Ajed's old lab. Even if he was, would he be stupid enough to bring the Tear there, knowing Zander might remember the location? And even if they managed to find Threed's lair, it was probably guarded by throngs of those lizard-people. Or worse. Was it madness to think that she and Zander could just fly in and reclaim Eloria's Tear?

She didn't know. But she did know that she wasn't about to let her last chance slip away. She thought about Julie and their mother, alone and defenseless in Garna, and her resolve hardened. She couldn't let them be hurt because of her mistakes. She wouldn't. Even if her chances of recovering the Tear were a million to one, it was still better than nothing.

\* \* \* \*

"You know, neither one of us has suggested notifying the authorities," said Wendy. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, something's been stolen from us. You'd think the most sensible course of action would be to tell the police. That's what most people would do."

She walked down the main street of Jacob's Hill, loaded with fresh supplies from the general store. Zander strode just ahead of her, face hidden by his hood and scarf. "The police would laugh at us," he said. "People have been searching for Eloria's Tear for half a millennium. They aren't going to believe two random travelers finally got their hands on it. And even if we could somehow prove it, you know what would happen. They'd seize Eloria's Tear and declare it government property, and then neither one of us would get what we need from it."

"Yeah, that's kind of what I figured. I guess we're on our own."

They walked out through the town's main gates. "Ready?" she asked.

He nodded.

She straddled the broom. He sat behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Hold on tight," she said.

The broom twitched and leaped into the air. They soared higher until a patchwork of fields and farmland lay spread out beneath them. Their shadow glided over the land below, then shrank and disappeared like a melting puddle as they rose toward the white bellies of the clouds. She gripped the broom tight and leaned forward. The broom raced over the land, a tiny speck of matter caught between the land and the sky. A flock of crows flew past, cawing.

She breathed in the cool air and stared out into the west, where the hazy horizon melted into the sky. Giddiness spiraled up inside her, racing to her head.

Behind her, Zander made an odd noise.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Airsick," he murmured.

"Close your eyes. Looking down will just make it worse."

"They *are* closed. I haven't opened them since we left the ground."

"Then think of something else."

"I'm trying. It's hard to forget the fact that you're five hundred feet above the ground with nothing to support you but a piece of wood."

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing. Just hold on."

Once she'd reached a comfortable cruising height, she leveled her course, and for

awhile they flew in silence. The broom bobbed gently as waves of wind carried them forward. The sun traveled across the sky and dipped toward the western horizon, turning the sky a deep, dusky blue, and the clouds blazed pink, like smears of luminous paint. Sunset colors reflected in the placid mirror of the Long Lake. Flocks of birds sailed above the water, tiny black specks in the distance, and sailboats glided like white fins through the water. "Zander," she said quietly, "look."

"I don't know if I should."

"Trust me, this will be worth it. Look."

His eyes opened, and he stared out at the sunset. His expression didn't change, but she saw something shift deep in his eyes.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

For a moment, he didn't reply. Then he said quietly, "I've traveled a lot, but I've never seen so much of the world at once. Things look so different from the air."

"It's funny, isn't it? Looking at a map, it's easy to imagine territories and countries as real things, but from up here, there are no boundaries. There's just the land, sea and sky. It kind of puts things in perspective. People fight wars over boundaries, things that don't even exist, except as lines on maps. I sometimes think that if people could see the world like this more often, they would have a different perspective on...well, everything." She watched the sun sink until it kissed its own reflection in the lake. The water blazed orange. "It's getting late. We should probably land soon."

"Can you fly by night?"

"I can, but it's more dangerous. Besides, I need some sleep. I can't fly if I'm too tired to see straight."

She angled the broom downward, drifted lower, and landed in a grassy field by a small oak grove.

He dismounted, wincing. "I'm not sure I can take another full day of that."

"Hopefully you won't have to." She took off her pack and spread her blanket on the grass. "If we leave at dawn, we should reach the Kanti Desert by midday."

He nodded and stared into the distance.

"I don't think we need to build a fire. It's not cold, and the moon is full. Besides, I don't want to attract anyone's attention." She paused. "Why don't you lie down? Get some rest."

He shook his head. "I'll stand guard."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't think I can sleep. Not under the circumstances."

She kicked off her boots and sat, watching him. His back and shoulders were rigid with tension as he stared at the horizon. "You should at least try. If we're both fresh and rested tomorrow, we'll have a better chance at getting the Tear back."

"I'll be fine. I can go for three days without sleep if need be."

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean it's a good idea. What's wrong?"

He turned to face her. His eyes glowed like twin moons in the darkness. "I can't let him get away with this. I've waited too long, endured too much. We risked our lives for that stone, and he just reached out and snatched it away. I'm going to hunt him down and take back what's ours. I won't rest until then."

"Look, I want to catch him as much as you, but staying up all night and pacing won't bring us any closer to that goal. Getting a good night's sleep is much more practical. And

even if you can't sleep, just lying down might do wonders for your body."

He looked away. "I can't waste any time relaxing. I need to train, to prepare..."

"That's just going to make you more exhausted. By tomorrow you'll barely be able to stand up."

"I know my own limits," he said, his voice taut. "Don't presume to tell me what I can and can't do."

She sighed. "Aren't men supposed to be the logical sex? It'd be nice if you guys would live up to your reputation more often."

An irritated grunt was his only response.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you just lie down for a little while? Just a half-hour, and then you can do whatever you want. Okay?"

His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Just humor me. Please?"

"Well...all right. But just thirty minutes. No more." He stretched out on the grass.

"The blanket's big enough for us to share." She patted the spot beside her.

He hesitated, then rolled onto the blanket and lay facing away from her, his back rigid. Gradually, the tension eased out of his back and shoulders. His breathing slowed and deepened. A few minutes later, he let out a soft snore.

Just as she thought. He'd been so tightly wound, he hadn't even realized how exhausted he was. A smile tugged at her lips. For a few minutes, she listened to the gentle rhythm of his breathing. Then she rolled onto her side and closed her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Wendy woke at dawn. Dew pearled the grass, and a soft layer of mist blanketed the ground. She sat up, yawned, stretched and looked at Zander. He lay motionless, snoring beside her. "Hey." She nudged him. "Wake up."

He leapt to his feet and whirled to face her, drawing his sword in one smooth movement.

"Whoa!" She fell backwards, hands in the air. "Take it easy."

He blinked and sheathed his sword. "Sorry. You startled me." He looked around, his expression disoriented. "Did I fall asleep?"

"You were out like a light," she said. "What did I tell you?"

"I suppose I was a bit more tired than I thought."

"See?" She dug through her pack and pulled out a paper bundle of jerky. "Here." When she offered a strip to him, he took it. She chewed a mouthful of leather-tough meat and sighed. "What I wouldn't give for a nice cup of tea. Julie swears by her coffee, but to me, there's nothing better than waking up to a hot cup of cinnamon spice tea. Or maybe Peppermint Comfort. I love that blend. It reminds me of Yule."

"How can you think of tea at a time like this?" He didn't sound reproachful, just bewildered.

She forced a smile. "Sometimes a good cup of tea is the only thing that keeps me sane. As a kid, whenever I was depressed—when I got teased at school, or flunked a test, or was sick and couldn't sleep—my mom would make me a cup of tea with honey. It always made me feel better."

All traces of expression smoothed from his face. "I see."

She studied that calm, empty expression, the look she'd begun to recognize as his

shield. It occurred to her that, during the long tour she'd taken through his memories, she'd seen no trace of his mother. But his father had said something about her, hadn't he? *Be a whore like your mother for all I care.* "Zander..." She paused.

"I never knew my mother," he said, as if reading her mind. "She died when I was three."

"I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago," he said, his gaze averted. "I scarcely remember her now."

She studied the tense line of his shoulders and wondered when—if—he'd ever feel comfortable opening up to her. He'd grown so accustomed to burying his feelings beneath that cold veneer, hiding anything that could be perceived as a vulnerability. "You don't remember her at all?"

He was silent for a long time, staring off into the distance. Then he murmured, "I remember her voice. She used to sing to me." One hand clenched into a fist. "My father always blamed me for her death."

"But that's crazy. If she died when you were three, it couldn't possibly be your fault."

"My parents were poor. She was forced to do...certain things...to put food in my mouth. She wasn't made for that sort of life. It killed her."

"Zander, I..." She trailed off. What could she say? "I'm sorry" was so hollow, so feeble in the face of what he'd endured.

"It's all right," he said. "You don't have to say anything. I shouldn't have brought it up at all. There's no sense in digging up the past." He fell silent as she rose to her feet and hugged him. For a moment, he just stood, his back rigid, his arms at his sides. Then he hugged her back, gently, almost cautiously, as if he were afraid she'd break. "Thank you," he whispered. After a moment, he turned away. "We should get going."

They finished their quick breakfast of jerky, then mounted the broom and set off once more.

The land beneath them changed gradually. Green fields and forest gave way to brown earth speckled with shrubs. The hilly terrain resembled the backs of huge, leathery-skinned animals. Wendy flew lower, skimming over the low hills. The brown earth took on an orange tint, and the rolling hills became windswept dunes. In the far distance, mountains broke up the horizon, brown humps against a pale blue sky.

"Keep your eyes open," she said. "His lair could be anywhere."

"You were able to feel Eloria's Tear when we entered the mountain. Can you feel it now?"

She shook her head. Personally, she'd begun to doubt the wisdom of their plan. The Kanti was fairly small, as deserts went, but still, there was a lot of desert to search. They could fly back and forth all day and never find it. For a moment, she wondered if they really would be better off flying back to Garna and contacting the Bureau of Magical Artifacts to report the theft. Surely, that was more logical than trying to hunt down a rogue sorcerer on their own. But then, there was no guarantee that the Bureau would be able to help them either, and they didn't have any time to spare. Time was running out for both of them.

Her hands tightened on the broom handle. They'd come this far. They couldn't turn back now.

They flew over endless, rippling dunes, broken only by the occasional outcrop. She scanned the terrain for a sign of something, anything out of the ordinary. She'd begun to



give up hope when Zander pointed and said, "Look there."

She looked. A crumbling castle stood, half-buried in sand. "Looks like ruins," she said. "There's hardly anything left."

"Let's fly down and take a closer look."

She nodded and steered the broom downward. They landed just outside the castle. Wind whistled, and gritty sand stung her cheeks. She shielded her eyes with one hand, squinting as she studied the ruins. One stone wall remained standing, the edges worn and uneven. The other walls had been partially or completely destroyed, whittled down by time. A few lone columns stood alongside a crumbling arch. Stone bricks lay scattered across the sand. "See?" she said. "Not a lot here. Just..." She froze, and her eyes widened.

He gripped her arm. "What is it?"

"I feel it. Eloria's Tear. But how? He's not here. He can't be."

"Perhaps there's more to these ruins than meets the eye."

"Or I'm going crazy."

"I trust your senses. If you feel the Tear's power, then it's here. What direction is it coming from?"

She bit her lower lip, closed her eyes and focused. She felt the Tear's pulse through the soles of her feet, traveling up her legs and through her chest. Her eyes opened. "It seems to be coming from below us. But how is that..." Understanding dawned. "The lair must be underground!"

"Yes. That makes sense. Many of these old castles had underground dungeons." He looked around. "There must be an entrance somewhere."

"Let's look for it. Be on guard, though. He's probably got spell-wards all over the place to warn him of intruders."

"Can you feel the wards?"

She shook her head. "You can't feel a ward until you've set it off. Otherwise they'd be pretty useless."

"Then how are we supposed to be on guard against them?"

Hmm. He had a point. She thought for a moment. "Hang on. I might have a trick or two up my sleeve." She crouched and scooped up a handful of sand. She felt his gaze on her as she closed her eyes and tapped into her Gift. A moment later, she opened her eyes to find the sand in her palm glowing a soft blue.

She straightened and flung the sand. The wind whisked it away. As she watched, the glowing blue particles swirled on the wind, then drew together settled into new patterns. She smiled. "Aha."

He approached one cluster. Luminous particles floated a few feet above the ground, whirling in circles. "What just happened?"

"Careful, don't go too close. Those are the wards. I enchanted that sand so it's attracted to magic. Pretty neat, huh?"

He looked around. Five clusters of bright, blue specks spun in place, like planets orbiting invisible suns. "Remarkable. Where did you learn this?"

Inside her, something purred and preened. Another part of her noted, with chagrin, that she liked it when Zander praised her. "They taught us this trick in Defensive Magic. Our professor said that a lot of sorcerers waste time and energy trying to disable wards, but in most cases, all you really need is to know where they are." She wandered the ruins for a few minutes, staying well clear of the swirling blue particles. Her foot bumped

against something, and she looked down. "Hey, come look at this." She crouched and brushed away sand with her hands.

He crouched beside her and helped her to clear away the sand until they'd uncovered a metal disc, about five feet in diameter.

"This could be it." She stared at the disc, heart knocking against her ribs, and realized she was shaking.

He lay one large, warm hand on her back. "What's wrong?"

"I'm scared," she said quietly. "Scared of what's waiting for us down there. Threed's probably got more of those lizard-men guarding the place, and God knows what else. It seems so reckless, just charging blindly into the enemy's lair."

"You're right," he said. "It is reckless. Suicidal, even. That's why you're not going down there."

"What?"

"From this point, I'll go on alone. You brought me here, and I'm grateful for that, but there's no need for you to accompany me any further. For you, Eloria's Tear is just a magical artifact. For me, it's my last chance to reclaim my humanity. I'm prepared to risk everything for it. But I can't ask you to take such a risk. You have a life, a family. I have nothing but this last hope. I may die trying to reclaim the Tear, but I accept that." He stared down at his hands. "It will be better than living like this."

"Don't talk like that. That's crazy."

"This is something I must do, Wendy. Go back to Garna."

Her throat tightened. "You don't understand. I can't go back. I risked everything for this chance. If I don't recover the Tear, I won't be able to pay back Drizell, and then nothing can save me."

His silvery brows drew together. "What are you talking about? Who is Drizell?"

"Never mind. The point is, I'm sticking with you. If I return home without Eloria's Tear, I'll have failed myself and my family."

"I'm sure they'd rather have you back alive, even without the Tear."

"I know. But..." She bit her lower lip. After a moment, she sighed. This was it. She couldn't keep hiding the truth from him. "I'm in big trouble back home. When I opened my store, I wasn't prepared. It cost a lot more than I expected just to keep my business afloat. And on top of that, I was helping my mom with her mortgage and my sister with her school expenses. I had to take out a loan, but none of the banks were willing to give me one, so I turned to a private moneylender. A really, really bad one, though I didn't know how bad at the time. Have you ever wondered why my ears look like this?" She pointed to one shortened earlobe. "It's because she sent her henchman to start cutting pieces off me for every day I couldn't pay." Zander's eyes widened. "Now she's threatening to hurt my family if I don't give her what I owe her. But I can't. I'm totally broke. I spent my last thousand shakas on the map leading to Eloria's Tear, because I was completely desperate."

"Dear God. Wendy..."

"I need a lot of money, and I need it fast." Hot tears bubbled up in her eyes. She blinked them away. "I have to do this."

"Why didn't you ever tell me about this Drizell person?"

"You never asked," she murmured. "And... I was embarrassed. I wanted you to like me. I didn't want you to know how badly I'd screwed up my life. I thought if I told you,

you'd think I was stupid and irresponsible. And I couldn't really blame you."

"You're not stupid or irresponsible. You think I've never made mistakes? I don't know just how much you saw in my memories, but whatever mistakes you made, I can guarantee you that they're nothing compared to mine. If I'd known..."

"It wouldn't have changed anything. I didn't see any reason to burden you with my personal problems. But maybe now you'll understand why I can't just give up and forget about this."

"You still can. I can retrieve the Tear myself and bring it to you."

"Forget that."

"You don't trust me?"

"That's not the issue. If I just flew back to safety and left you to deal with this mess, my conscience would never let me hear the end of it. We both go back or we both go in. Either way, you're stuck with me."

His face tightened. "You're not a fighter. You wouldn't survive down there."

"Hey!" She poked his chest with one finger. "Are you forgetting that I saved your life?"

"That's different. That..."

"Fighting skills aren't everything. Do you really think you'll be able to take down Threed and all his minions with just a sword? You're going to need my magic. At the very least, I can guide you to Eloria's Tear. I can feel its power, remember? You can't. You'll be wandering blind without me."

He stood. "Enough of this. You aren't going down there, and that's final."

She placed her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Try and stop me."

"Don't think I'm above using force."

"Oh, please. What are you going to do, tie me up?"

"Not a bad idea."

"And then what? You die down there, and I die of thirst up here or get eaten by desert cats because I can't defend myself? If you're trying to keep me alive, tying me up and leaving me alone in the middle of the desert is a pretty stupid way to do it."

He scowled. "Maybe I'll just knock you out."

"You're bluffing. If you were going to do that, you'd have just done it instead of telling me first. But you won't, because if I wake up with a concussion I'll be too disoriented to fly. I'll be stranded. There's no way you can stop me unless you're prepared to endanger my life, which kind of defeats the purpose."

"This is absurd. I won't let you throw away your life like this."

"Who says I'm doing anything of the sort? I don't intend to die down there. You're not going to talk me out of this. The longer we stand up here and bicker, the greater our chance of being detected before we even set foot in the lair."

His jaw tightened and a muscle at the corner of his eye twitched. Then he turned away, fists clenched. For a moment, he stood motionless, his back to her. His fingers flexed, then clenched again. "I don't want to lose you," he whispered.

Her heartbeat quickened. She stared at his rigid shoulders.

A shudder ran through him. "If you die down there...I..."

She touched his shoulder. "If we don't get Eloria's Tear," she said quietly, "then I'll die anyway, along with my family. We need the Tear. And you need me to find it. That's just how it is."

For a moment, he didn't respond. Then he took a deep breath, and his clenched fists relaxed. "Very well."

She pointed at the manhole cover. "Do you think you can move that thing?"

He crouched and pushed. The cover slid to one side with a grating screech of metal on stone, revealing a round, black hole. She leaned over and peered into the darkness. There were rungs on the stone wall.

"We're going to need some light," he said.

She nodded and raised one hand. A silver glow blossomed above her palm. The light-sphere flew down into the stone chute, but even with the extra illumination, she couldn't see the bottom. "Nothing to do but go down, I guess."

"I'll go first."

"Okay."

He lowered himself into the chute, gripped the rungs with his gloved hands, and descended into blackness. She took a deep breath and dried sweat-damp palms on her trousers, her pulse jumping in her throat. Somehow, just looking down into that dark hole made her aware of just how risky this was, how completely nuts. But she couldn't back out now...especially not after the little speech she'd given. She gulped. Sure, she was good at talking tough, but she didn't feel very tough right now.

She took off her pack and dropped it on the ground. In all likelihood, they wouldn't need it, and extra weight would just slow her down. She steeled herself and stepped down, into the hole. Her foot found a rung. She took a step down and gripped the top rung with both hands, curling her fingers around the cool, slick metal. Step by step, she made her way down. The light-sphere bobbed at her side.

"I've reached the bottom," he whispered.

"Okay." Another few steps down, and her feet touched solid stone. She looked around. They stood in a wide stone corridor. Torches flickered on the walls. The flames had an odd, blue-green tint. Sorcerer's fire.

She rubbed her arms. The air was cool and dry, filled with a musty smell like a tomb.

"Stay behind me," Zander murmured and began to walk.

She followed. Barred cells lined the corridor. She glanced into one and saw a shriveled mummy in the corner, little more than a skeleton dressed in rags, its face frozen in a toothy death-grin. A black rat sat near its feet, nibbling a crumb of something. At their approach, the rat darted away with a patter of tiny feet and disappeared through a hole in the wall.

"Cheerful place." She brushed away a cobweb, glanced into the cell on her right, and saw another skeleton hanging in chains. "You'd think Ajed would've at least cleared out the bodies when he started using this as his lair."

"Maybe he thinks they add a certain something to his decor."

"Yeah, that extra touch of despair." In spite of herself, she glanced into the cell again. A fat spider crawled out of the skull's eye-socket, then back in through its nasal cavity. She wondered if it had spun a web in there, made its home in the space once occupied by a human's living gray matter. She shuddered. Get used to it, she thought. Worse things than a few moldy skeletons lay within this place, she was sure.

They reached the end of the hall. A set of stairs led further down. She stood, staring into the blackness below. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her dry mouth, and she swallowed, wishing she'd brought her canteen. Stupid, leaving the pack up there. Just one

more in a long string of mistakes.

He touched her arm and leaned closer, until his breath tickled her neck. "You're trembling."

"This place is evil." She rubbed her arms. "I feel it. It's like this slime covering everything." She took a deep breath, trying to steady her nerves. "I've never felt dark magic before. Not like this. It's so unnatural, so wrong. How can anyone stand to live surrounded by this feeling all the time? It would drive me insane."

"Last chance," he said quietly. "You can still go back. You don't have to see what's down there. You can get on your broom and fly home."

She shook her head. "I'm not leaving you."

He stared into her eyes. Then he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She stiffened in surprise as he held her tight against his chest, and his hand smoothed her hair. "Whatever happens," he whispered, "whatever we find down there, I'm glad to have you by my side."

She tried to speak, but nothing came out. A lump had risen into her throat, cutting off her voice. She hugged him back and pressed her face into the nook between his neck and shoulder. He smelled warm and alive and male, and she realized how much she'd missed being held by a man. Wrapped in his strong arms, she felt safe. But it wasn't just his physical strength. It was knowing that he cared about her, that he would do everything in his power to protect her. That knowledge came to her in a primal jolt, and in the same instant, she knew that she would do whatever it took to keep him alive, too.

He tightened his embrace, then released her. "Are you ready?"

She nodded. Her fear had receded, she realized. She still felt the evil of this place, like centipedes crawling beneath her skin, but it no longer threatened to overwhelm her. He had given her some measure of protection, as if he'd woven a spell-shield around her. But she knew it had nothing to do with magic...not the traditional kind, anyway.

Zander turned and descended the stairs, Wendy close behind him. They reached a solid steel door with a combination lock. The bright, shiny metal looked out of place amid the crumbling stone. She placed a hand against it and pushed, but the door wouldn't budge. No surprises there. "How are we going to get through this? Do you think you can pry the lock out with your sword?"

"Let me try something first." He lay one pointed ear against the door and closed his eyes. With one hand, he slowly turned the lock to the right, then stopped on the number three. He turned it again, to the left, and stopped on eight. She watched, mystified, as he fiddled with the dial, spinning it back and forth.

Several minutes later, she heard a click. He opened his eyes and dusted his hands together. "There. We should be able to open it now."

"How did you do that?"

"I'm a mercenary, remember? Getting through locked doors is a valuable skill in my occupation."

"I'm impressed."

He shrugged. "This is a White Star lock. They're shoddy, easy to crack."

"Either this man is very sloppy, or very certain that his hideout won't be found."

"Or just confident in his own power," he said.

"Maybe. I guess he doesn't consider little old us a threat."

His lips tightened in a cold smile. "We're about to prove him wrong." He pushed, and

the door creaked open.

They stepped into a huge, dimly lit room with metal walls. She heard water bubbling. As her eyes adjusted to the light, her stomach tightened.

Huge, column-like tanks surrounded them. The tanks ran from floor to ceiling, transparent tubes filled with greenish liquid. Humanoid shapes floated like embryos. Tubes ran from their wrists, their necks, their genitals. Breathing masks covered their mouths. Some of the specimens resembled the Reptans they'd seen earlier, but more human, less reptilian, as if they were still in the process of changing. Others were far stranger. One resembled a cross between a man and fish. Gills flared in its neck, red and raw-looking, and flat, saucer-like eyes stared blindly into space. She saw another man covered with coarse, brown fur, his face stretched into a catlike muzzle.

She stared at the array of chimeras, trapped between fascination and horror. "Dear God," she whispered.

Beside her, Zander made a small noise and sank to his knees.

"Zander?" She crouched beside him.

He stared at the tanks, his eyes huge. She gripped his shoulder and felt him shaking. He shut his eyes and whispered, "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Slowly, he stood. "I remember this place." His voice sounded strange, faraway. "I was in one of those things, those tanks. Most of the time, he kept me drugged, unconscious. But there were moments..." He trailed off.

"We don't have to stay here," she said quietly. "Let's keep moving."

He ignored her and walked over to the nearest tank. The man inside was young, hardly more than a boy, and still mostly human. But his skin had a greenish tint, and the beginnings of a tail sprouted from the base of his spine. She approached.

Zander stared in at the boy, his eyes haunted.

As she watched, the boy's eyes opened slowly above his breathing mask. They were blue, clouded with drugs and pain as they stared out. Bubbles rose from the metal mask strapped over his face.

Zander pressed a hand to the tank's smooth side. Slowly, as if the movement pained him, the boy raised his own arm, tubes trailing from his wrist and inner elbow, and placed his hand against Zander's, so that only the glass separated them. His eyelids fluttered, struggling to stay open. Wendy had the impression he was trying to communicate something. Then his hand slipped down, and his eyes sank shut.

"So many of them." She looked around at the long rows of tanks. "Where does he get all his subjects?"

"Slums, probably. There's no shortage of young men foolish or desperate enough to go with him. And of course, once they realize exactly what he has in store for them, it will be too late. He'll manipulate their minds as well as their bodies. By the time they emerge from those tanks, they'll be empty vessels awaiting his command." He growled and clenched his fists. "It's as if Ajed has been reborn. Threed picked up right where he left off."

She set a hand on his shoulder. "Once we get Eloria's Tear, we'll tell the authorities about this place. They'll shut it down and throw the bastard in jail. But right now, we have to focus on what we came here to do."

Without replying, he walked across the room to a long, metal box behind the row of

tanks. Tubes and wires ran into the box. It hummed, a low, vibrating hum that she felt in her teeth and bones. "This is the control panel," he said. He placed both hands on the box. His fingers clenched, and his claws punched through the metal. With a roar, he ripped off the top and threw it aside. The metal sheet clattered to the floor.

"Zander!"

He stood, panting, chest heaving as he stared at the array of exposed wires and tubes inside the box. He reached in.

"Zander, stop!"

He whirled to face her, and she shrank back. His eyes blazed like fire, and his lips pulled back from sharp teeth. "I'm going to rip this place apart." His fingers trembled, clenched, flexed. "So help me God, I'll destroy this manmade hell. I'm going to tear it down with my bare hands."

"Don't." She touched his shoulder. The muscles were rigid with tension. "There's nothing we can do for these people. If we tried to remove them from the tanks now, there's no telling what might happen. It might just kill them."

"That might be kinder."

Those cold, flat words sent a chill through her. "We don't have the right to make that decision. We don't know whether the process is reversible. Maybe they can still be saved."

He looked into the metal box, at the mass of gray tubing, like metal intestines. He looked at the half-formed chimeras, then back at the box and took a deep breath. She watched the rage bleed out of him, watched the flames die from his eyes, leaving them dark and empty. "You're right. I just..." He trailed off. Then he straightened, his jaw clenched. "Let's go."

They walked past the rows of tanks, past the floating forms of chimeras. Most were male, but Wendy noticed a few females as well. She wondered if Threed was planning to breed his creations. Her skin crawled. He's amassing an army, she thought. What was he planning? He didn't seem like the world-domination type. Ruling would be too much work for a lazy thief like him. But then, maybe the lazy thief was just a cover for some more sinister ambition.

They reached the far end of the room and walked through a doorway, into another chamber.

She looked around. "Looks like an S and M dungeon."

Shackles hung from the walls. Several long metal tables stood in a row, equipped with leather straps. In one corner stood a bulky, padded metal chair, complete with arm and leg shackles and an iron helmet with a mass of wires running from the back. On a low, wooden counter lay an array of glittering hypodermic needles, forceps, and pliers, along with a few objects she didn't recognize: a slim leather rod, a spiked harness, and something resembling a necklace made of tiny knives.

"Do I even want to know what this room is for?" she asked.

"It's a torture chamber," he said. His voice was calm, but she could see the pulse fluttering in his throat.

"The more I see of this place, the less I like this Ajed guy." She noticed a row of glass jars sitting on a high shelf. A muddy-brown, disembodied eyeball floated in formaldehyde, the optic nerve trailing off in a bloody string. A preserved heart floated in the jar next to it.

The Jackal would love this room.

She caught Zander staring at the array of metal instruments, a faraway look in his eyes. She took his hand and squeezed it. Without another word, they walked through the room, toward the doorway on the other side. They passed a shallow depression in the center of the floor, and she glanced down. Faded, dark stains ran toward a metal drain. She guessed that that dark stuff was probably not chocolate syrup. Feeling ill, she looked away.

They walked out of the room and down a long, torch-lit corridor, to an arched doorway. Beyond it lay a flight of stairs going down. Zander froze. "Do you hear that?" he whispered.

She listened. Voices drifted up from the darkness. Rough, raucous voices.

"There's someone down there," he said.

"Sounds like at least three people."

He nodded. "I'd better go on alone." She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off. "I'm just going to check it out. I'll come back up and get you when it's safe."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I thought we were in this together."

"There may be fighting. You don't have a weapon."

"I have my magic. You remember what I did to the dragons, don't you?"

"Could you kill a person if you had to?"

The question caught her off guard. She stared at him, not sure what to say.

"Killing a dragon isn't the same," he said. "What if you had to set another human being on fire? In a battle, you only have a split second to decide. Could you do that without hesitation? Could you extinguish someone's life?"

Pinned by his stare, she could only tell the truth. "I don't know."

"That's why I have to go alone."

She lowered her eyes.

He lifted her chin and met her gaze. "It's nothing to be ashamed of," he said softly.

"I don't want to be a burden."

"You're not. Never think that. But if you go into a fight without the intent to kill your enemy, you're doomed from the start. The enemy will not show mercy. Even a moment's hesitation could cost you your life." He touched her cheek. "Wait here. If it sounds like it's going badly, make a run for it."

She intended to do no such thing, but she knew that arguing the point wouldn't get her anywhere, so she just nodded. "Be careful. Okay?"

"I won't do anything stupid." He put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed. She looked into his golden eyes, wanting to say something, but suddenly unable to speak.

He held her gaze a moment longer. Then he released her, drew his sword and began his descent down the stairs. A moment later, he disappeared around a bend in the staircase.

She paced, her stomach a tight ball. A roar echoed up from the darkness. She tensed. Voices shouted. Someone let out a strangled cry. More shouting. The cacophony went on for a full minute, then...silence.

She stood frozen, staring into the blackness below.

Then she heard footsteps. Zander appeared around the bend and climbed up the stairs. Splotches of blood covered his shirt and hair. His sword looked as if it had been dipped in red paint.



"Zander, what..."

"It's safe," he said, his voice weary. "Come on."

She followed him down the stairs, through an arched doorway and into a huge, stone hall. A hearth blazed at one end of the room. A long table stretched from wall to wall, covered with platters and ale tankards. The greasy remains of a roast pig sat center-table, bones glistening in the firelight.

A dead Reptan lay stretched across the table, blood dripping from its slit throat. Another lay sprawled on the floor, face-up in a pool of blood. A third sat propped up against the wall, head bowed, as if it were taking a nap. Crimson stains covered its chest and stomach. The fourth had been decapitated in its chair. She couldn't see the head anywhere. Blood splattered the walls, the floor, the table.

Wendy stared. She swallowed, trying to generate some saliva. "You did this?"

"Yes."

Her mind whirled. Bile rose into her throat, and she choked it down. They were Reptans, she reminded herself. Monsters. Abominations born of dark sorcery. A voice in her mind whispered, *Are they really so much different from Zander?* After all, he'd been created in the same way...and, like Zander, these Reptans had once been human. "How did you manage to kill them all? Last time, you couldn't even touch them."

"I had the element of surprise," he said. "Though they didn't put up much of a fight. Threed overestimates these creatures. They may be larger and stronger than I am, but they're stupid. Without someone around to give them orders, they're useless."

Her stomach squirmed. She tasted that morning's jerky in the back of her throat.

"You don't have to look at them," he said. "Turn away."

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

"You're pale."

"I said I'm fine." She straightened and squared her shoulders. She wasn't going to do anything stupid like faint or throw up. She'd insisted on coming with him. If she lost her cool now, she'd never live down the humiliation.

She walked across the room, trying not to look at the corpses. But there was no way to block out the salty smell of blood.

She heard a low groan and froze.

Zander drew his sword.

Another groan, weak and hoarse. "There." She pointed to the Reptan on the floor. "He's alive."

The huge, scaled body stirred. Amber eyes opened, dull with pain.

Zander stepped between her and the Reptan. "Stay back. I'll take care of it."

The Reptan didn't move. It lay on its back in a dark pool of blood, staring at them through half-lidded eyes, its breath raspy and weak. Blood ran from its mouth, from a cut on its brow, from a deep gash in its side. Its eyes focused on Zander, and its jaws opened. "You," it whispered, its voice deep and scratchy. "You're...like us." The words were difficult to understand; that lipless, reptilian mouth wasn't meant for human speech. It sounded as if it were trying to talk through a mouthful of cotton. "You are," it whispered. "Aren't you?"

Zander didn't answer. He stood, back rigid, knuckles white as he clutched his sword-hilt.

"Kill me," croaked the Reptan.

Wendy's breath caught in her throat.

Zander didn't move.

"Kill me," the Reptan said again. Its pale, plated chest rose and fell with each labored breath. "Don't...want to live...like this." A tear ran from one amber eye, down one scaled cheek.

She watched in dismay. The bad guys weren't supposed to cry.

"Please," he whispered.

Until that moment, she hadn't thought of the Reptans as people. Not really. But now, looking at that twisted face, those dulled eyes, she felt her heart wrench. She pressed a hand over it as tears stung her own eyes.

Zander looked at her. "Go," he said quietly. "Wait outside the room."

Wendy didn't argue. She gulped and retreated from the room, back into the stairwell. Feeling sick, she faced the wall and wrapped her arms around herself. She heard a wet slicing sound and a short, strangled cry. Then nothing.

She stared at the floor as quiet footsteps approached, and a hand touched her shoulder. "Come on," said Zander.

She followed him across the room, toward the arched doorway at the far end. She didn't look at the dead Reptan.

Zander's hand remained on her arm. "Are you all right?"

"His eyes," she whispered. "They looked so sad."

"He knew what he'd become," he said. "I thought these creatures were empty, mindless. I was wrong. They've lost even more of their humanity than I have...but they retain enough awareness to know what's been stolen from them." A pause. Then, "It's not easy to live as a monster."

Wendy looked at him, but he wouldn't meet her eyes. He stared straight ahead, jaw clenched. "Zander..." She froze. Goose bumps rose on her skin. Power crawled over her, warm and cool at the same time, like a breath of ice and fire.

"What is it?"

"I feel it. Eloria's Tear. It's close." She grabbed his hand and jogged toward the doorway, heart racing.

They ran through the doorway and into another stone corridor. The corridor branched off into three separate halls. She took the center one without hesitation. The power beckoned her. Magic sizzled in the air, sharp as lightning. With each breath, its hot, bitter-sweet taste filled her mouth and slid down her throat, warming her insides. She came to another set of three doorways and took the leftmost one.

"I hope you know where you're going," he said.

"We're going the right way, I'm sure. It's getting stronger." They reached the hall's end and found themselves faced with another stairway. "How deep do these dungeons go?"

"Is it down there?" he asked.

She nodded. "It's almost directly below us." Her tongue darted out to wet her dry lips. "I'm pretty sure we'll find it at the end of these stairs. But..."

"But what?"

"It feels different than it did before. Darker."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Poisonous. Like something bad has been added to it."

"You're sure it's Eloria's Tear?"

"Yes, I'm sure. But it's been twisted, corrupted. It's like hearing the same song, but played in minor key. I can't explain it any better than that. I don't know what it means, but I have a bad feeling about it."

"Wait here," he said. "I'll go on alone."

She shook her head. "Not now. Not when we're so close." She forced a smile, though she was trembling. "You think I'm going to let you hog all the glory for yourself?"

"And what if Threed is waiting for us at the bottom of these stairs?"

"Then we'll face him together."

"This is madness."

"Maybe. But we've come this far. I'm not going to stop now."

He stared into her eyes as they leaned toward each other. His hands framed her face, and before she knew what was happening, he'd pressed his lips to hers. Her eyes widened. A wave of pleasant weakness washed through her, and her mouth softened beneath his. Her eyes slipped shut as her world contracted to the point where his mouth touched hers. The walls around them fell away. The floor beneath her feet vanished, and she floated, anchored in place by the pressure of his lips and the wet velvet of his tongue.

He pulled back. His eyes burned with a fierce longing, a terrible pain. He caressed her cheekbones with his thumbs. "I beg you," he whispered hoarsely. "Turn back."

She inhaled slowly, steadying herself. Her mind spun. His kiss had blown through her head like a whirlwind, scattering her thoughts in every direction, but she didn't have to think to answer him. "No."

"For God's sake..."

"We've been through this already. I'm not leaving you. We both go on or we both go back."

"You shouldn't be entangled in this mess. Threed is Ajed's successor. That makes him my enemy. I must kill him or die trying."

"That's stupid," she said, "and you know it." She grabbed his hands and pushed them down. She held his wrists tight as she glared at him. "You're a swordsman, and a damn good one, but that doesn't matter right now. You can't beat magic with a blade, no matter how good you are. He's going to be shielded with magic, you can bet on it. I may not be very strong, but at least I can try to neutralize his shield long enough for you to have a shot at him. If you go down there alone, you're dead."

He shook his head, a quick, almost violent jerk of movement. "You don't understand. I have to do this alone."

"Sacrificing your life won't do anyone any good, and that's what you'll be doing if you go down there with the intention of fighting him to the death. I won't let you."

His jaw clenched. "I can't lose you."

"You won't."

A spectrum of emotions moved across his face: fear, pain, anger, tenderness, longing, and finally a quiet resignation. He closed his eyes for a moment, and when they opened, they were clear and calm. "This is your choice?"

She nodded.

He took a slow, deep breath. "Then let's go."

Together, they descended the stairs.

## Chapter Eleven

They reached a solid oaken door, crisscrossed with iron bars. The Tear's power seeped through the wood and filled the hallway, making the hairs on Wendy's arms and neck stand on end.

"Should we knock?" she asked and cracked a weak smile.

"I have the feeling he already knows we're here."

"Yeah. Me too."

As if in response, the door creaked open. She gave a start and gripped Zander's arm, then forced herself to release it. He drew his sword, every muscle tense and ready, but nothing happened. The door remained open, waiting, as they stared into the perfect blackness beyond.

"Stay behind me," he said. "I'll protect you. You just focus on neutralizing his shield."

She nodded. Her heartbeat filled her throat as they stepped through the doorway.

She half-expected the door to creak shut behind them, like the door of a haunted house in a ghost story. It didn't. She stood, eyes straining against the blackness, afraid to go any further. She was just about to activate a light-sphere when every torch in the room suddenly flared to life. She winced and shielded her eyes, then lowered her hand.

They stood in a spacious room with rough stone walls. At the far end stood a gilded throne where Threed sat, clad in long, maroon robes, his lank black hair tied back and oiled so it gleamed like a scorpion's carapace. He smiled, his eyes cold. "Welcome," he said. "I've been waiting for you."

"I wouldn't be smiling if I were you," said Zander. "Your minions are dead."

"Yes, I know. I have to admit, I'm impressed. I wasn't sure you could take on all four of them."

"Not terribly broken up about it, are you?" Wendy asked.

Threed shrugged. "I can make more. You saw the lab?"

"Yes. I think the authorities are going to be interested in that," she said.

"I've no doubt they would be. Such a pity you'll never have a chance to tell them." He rose smoothly from his chair. "In fact, you'll never leave this room again."

And then the door did slam shut, with a resounding bang that made her jump. She steeled herself and tried to control her rapid breathing. Eloria's Tear was close. Its power breathed over her skin in a tingling rush of heat. She looked around, but there was no other furniture in the room, nowhere he could have hidden it, and he didn't seem to be wearing it around his neck. Where the hell was it?

Threed's smile widened. "You're looking for the Tear? It's too late. I've already absorbed it into my body."

Wendy saw her own shock reflected on Zander's face. "No," he said. "That's impossible."

"Nothing is impossible." Threed stood and laid a hand over his chest. "It's become a part of me. The ancient scrolls were right. It is the key to immortality, to ultimate power."

She shook her head. "Eloria's Tear is a holy artifact. It can't be used to gain power or dominate others," she said, but her voice trembled, belying her uncertainty. "Even if you

could absorb it into your body, it would purify all the dark magic inside you. You'd burn alive from the inside out."

His smile widened. "Not if it had been altered first. I made a few adjustments, made it more receptive to my kind of magic."

"You can't..."

"You stupid sheep. You just keep telling me what I can and can't do. I've already done it. Nothing is immune to the touch of the dark. I have become one with the Tear. You're just in time to witness my becoming."

"You can't be serious," she said. "You're either bluffing or you're completely out of your mind. There's no way a second-rate sorcerer like you would be strong enough to corrupt a powerful holy artifact like Eloria's Tear."

His eyes narrowed. "Second-rate, am I?" Then he laughed, though it sounded a bit stilted. "I think you're the one who's bluffing. I can hear your heart pounding. And I can taste your fear. I smell it in the air, like some exotic perfume. So sweet." He pursed his lips, as if to whistle, and sucked in a mouthful of air. "God, this power!" Threed ran his hands over his face, his chest. "Nothing can hurt me now!"

"All right, cut the theatrics already."

His smile faded. "What?"

"You know what I mean," she said. "This dime novel villain act. It's not impressing anyone. You think you're scary or something? Are we supposed to cower before you? You sound like an idiot."

"Shut up!" The corner of his eye twitched, and he thrust out a finger, pointing. "This isn't an act, it's me!"

"Uh-huh. I bet you just couldn't wait to give us that little speech. You had this whole thing scripted out in your head, didn't you? And now you're pouting because we aren't saying our lines right."

His face reddened, and his teeth ground together; she could hear it even from across the room. "I'm going to make you suffer," he hissed.

"Why, because I poked a hole in your fragile, over-inflated ego?"

"Wendy," Zander murmured from the corner of his mouth, "it might not be a good idea to make him angrier."

"If he's angry, he might get careless and make a mistake," she whispered back. At the same time, she wondered if she was being incredibly stupid. Her heartbeat filled her throat.

"You think you know anything about me?" Threed shouted, spittle flying from his lips. His face had gone almost purple, and veins stood out on his temples. "Do you have any idea how much I struggled and suffered to reach this point? All my life I've been a mediocrity, just another peon following in someone else's footsteps. For years I studied under Ajed, hoping to one day equal him, to surpass him, but no matter what I did, he was always a step ahead. God had given me the drive, the ambition, but not the power. I could only watch as others soared to greatness while I languished in obscurity! Do you know what that was like? How infuriating it was?"

"And now we're supposed to feel sorry for you? Because you didn't get the glory you think you deserved? Pardon me while I wipe a tear from my eye."

He bared his teeth in a grin that was half a snarl. "You're an insufferable little wise-ass, aren't you? Is that how you deal with terror? Well, quip away while you can. In the

end, I'll be the one laughing, because there's nothing you can do to stop me. This is my moment. I will become greater than Ajed could ever hope to be. I will realize his dream. I will succeed where he failed." He wrapped his arms around himself, breathing hard. Excitement flashed in his eyes. "The Tear burns like a sun inside me. I'm very close now. I can feel it."

"Feel what?"

"My transformation."

"What do you expect to become, exactly?" asked Zander. His voice was calm, even, but his knuckles were white as he clutched his sword.

Threed's grin stretched wider. "Wait and see."

Zander glanced over his shoulder at Wendy. "Is he shielded?" he whispered.

She reached out with her Gift and probed the air around Threed. "No," she whispered back. "But there's...I can't even explain it. There's this aura around him, like the air is boiling with energy. I've never seen anything like it. Be careful."

Zander nodded.

"You are right to fear me," said Threed. "I have become stronger than you can imagine. Soon, no one will be able to oppose me."

"Why?" she asked.

Threed tilted his head. "What do you mean, 'why?'"

"Why are guys like you always so hung up on getting ultimate power? Power to do what? What's the point? Is this just another way of compensating for a small dick?"

He threw back his head and howled with laughter. His eyes gleamed, and his grin stretched even wider until it seemed his face would split in half. Was it her imagination, or were his teeth growing sharper? "Power needs no reason," he said. "Strength is its own reward. If you ever felt what I feel now, you would understand. But you'll never have a chance." He took a step forward. "Your lives end here."

Zander roared and rushed at him, brandishing his sword. A bright light flared around Threed, and Zander bounced back as if he'd hit a wall. He hurtled through the air, as if a giant, invisible hand had grabbed and thrown him. His shoulder slammed into a wall, and he slid down.

"Zander!" Wendy ran to his side.

He propped himself up on one arm, breathing hard. "You said he wasn't shielded."

"He's not." She stared at Threed. "He shouldn't have been able to do that."

"What did I tell you?" shouted Threed. "You're helpless! I—" He gasped suddenly and doubled over. He trembled, hands pressed to his stomach. When he straightened, there was a look of rapture on his face. "It's happening!" He raised his hands. The nails sprouted and grew into long, black claws. He bowed his head, long hair falling around him like a curtain, and when he looked up, his eyes had gone jet black, devoid of iris or pupil. He threw his head back and roared. His shirt split down the middle. Muscles bulged through the rips.

She watched, jaw hanging. He wasn't just getting more muscular. His body was actually growing. With each breath he took, his form swelled.

Threed took a step toward them, grinning with a mouthful of needle-sharp teeth. His boots split, and his feet burst out, now huge and clawed. His face stretched like clay, mouth and nose pushing forward into a wolfish muzzle. Bones crackled and popped, rearranging themselves, as his eyes stretched into long, black slits. His nostrils flared, wet

and dark.

Zander clutched his sword. "What's happening to him?"

"I don't know." She trembled. "I've never heard of or read of anything like this. This shouldn't be possible."

Threed roared laughter. Spittle dribbled from his lips. A long, long red tongue snaked out of his mouth and swayed back and forth. He was over eight feet tall, every inch bulging with muscle, his clothes in tatters. His face was a demonic mask, filled with teeth, his eyes like burning black pits. He took another step toward them. One clawed hand reached toward Wendy.

"No!" Zander shouted. He rushed at Threed, leapt and swung his sword. Again, light flared around Threed, but this time, Zander's sword pushed through it. Yellow sparks flew through the air as he shoved the sword through the invisible barrier. The blade sliced through Threed's wrist, and he let out a piercing shriek. His clawed hand dropped to the floor, black blood and greenish smoke pouring from the wrist stump.

Threed howled. He swung his arm, batting the sword from Zander's hands, then raised his remaining hand high overhead and slashed downward with his knifelike claws. The blow knocked Zander to the floor. Threed growled and lifted one foot.

"Stop!" cried Wendy. She ran forward, but it was too late. Threed's foot came down, hard, on Zander's body. Something crunched, and Zander let out a strangled cry. He rolled onto his side, gasped, and coughed. Blood splattered onto the floor.

Threed kicked him to one side, then advanced toward Wendy. His face was a contorted abomination, somewhere between human and animal. He made a thick sound, deep in his throat, and stared at her. Blood dripped from his wrist-stump. As each drop hit the floor, it hissed, bubbled and steamed like acid.

Threed swiped at her with one clawed hand, but she lunged to one side, hit the ground and rolled. He turned toward her, a growl rumbling in his chest. She leapt to her feet and ran to Zander's side.

He looked up at her with pain-glazed eyes. Blood ran from one corner of his mouth. "Run," he whispered.

"I'm not leaving you." She grabbed his hand. "Stand up! We can still escape!"

"I'm already dead. Run."

She heard a low chuckle. A cold jolt of fear shot through her, and she looked up at Threed. He loomed over her, grinning, a nightmare made flesh.

A memory flashed through her mind. The broom. She'd summoned the broom. Could she summon something else? Could she, perhaps, summon the Tear from within his body?

She had to try. It was her only chance.

She thrust a hand out, fingers spread, and took a deep breath. Somehow, she pushed past the fear into the calm center where her Gift glowed, a warm, steady light. She reached into that light and pulled out the strength she needed. Warmth poured through her body. She focused the energy, directing it along her arm and into her hand. Heat glowed in the center of her palm as she stretched her trembling hand upward.

Threed froze, and his huge brow furrowed. "What are you trying to do?" he rumbled. "You think your magic is strong enough to defeat me? Me, the most powerful being in this world?"

She ignored him, focused on his chest, and visualized Eloria's Tear. She saw it buried

deep in his flesh, encased in a sheath of muscle and a web of veins. It pulsed inside his ribs like a second heart. She reached into him, through him, curled invisible fingers around the Tear and pulled it toward herself.

Threed let out a strangled sound. He clutched his chest, eyes bulging.

Come to me, she thought.

Threed's mouth opened wider. He coughed out blood. "No!"

"Yes," she said.

The skin on Threed's face wrinkled and tightened, as if it were being sucked inward. He moaned, a low, animal sound. Eloria's Tear burst from his chest, a circle of burning, white light, and smacked into Wendy's palm. She clutched it, even as its heat seared into her skin.

Threed fell to his knees, staring at the dark, bloody hole in his chest. For an instant, she glimpsed his beating heart through the gleam of gore and shattered bone. Then he flopped forward and landed, face-down, on the floor. His skin continued to shrivel and crumble until a dry, brown mummy lay before them.

She swallowed hard and looked down at Eloria's Tear. The brilliant white glow faded until it sat cool and smooth in her hand, black as night. The nauseating tinge of dark magic had vanished. There was only the deep, steady pulse of power. Freed of Threed's body, of his evil intent, the Tear had purified itself.

She looked down at Zander. He lay on his back, staring up at her with clouded, golden eyes. Threed's claws had ripped his shirt open, and three long gashes ran across his skin, but the surface wounds weren't the real problem. She knew, from his labored breathing, that something had broken inside him. The pain in his eyes ripped through her heart.

She touched his face with trembling fingers. "Hang on. I'm going to help you."

"Too late," he whispered. Then he forced a smile, though his face was drawn tight with pain. "I'm...glad you're safe."

"Don't try to talk." She pressed a kiss to his forehead and looked at the Tear, sitting quiet and inert in her hand. She placed it against his wounded chest. Nothing happened. Panic squeezed her heart. Heal, she thought. Still, nothing. Tears prickled in her eyes. Why wasn't it working? "Come on," she whispered. "Come on."

His breathing rasped in his throat. He coughed, and fresh blood ran from the corner of his mouth. His eyes lost focus, and the lids drooped.

"Hold on," she said. "Just a little longer." She placed both hands over the Tear and forced her own rapid breathing to slow. Closing her eyes, she cleared her mind and focused all her attention on her breathing, sought the center of calm within. Her Gift welled up, bright and alive. It spilled down her arms, through her fingers, into Eloria's Tear. The stone grew warm in her hands.

"What do you wish, child?" said a rich, smooth alto.

Wendy's eyes flew open. The Tear glowed a soft, soothing white in her hand. "...I want Zander to be all right." A tear spilled down her cheek. "Save him, please."

"You can save him yourself."

"No, I can't! I'm not strong enough!"

"You love him, don't you?" the Tear replied calmly.

Her breath caught in her throat. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I do. But..."

"Then you can save him. Reach out with your Gift. Feel the wounds in your mind."



Wendy took a deep, shaky breath and nodded. Her eyes slipped shut again as she reached out with her mind and touched his broken, bleeding chest. Tentatively, she probed the wounds with invisible fingers. She heard him groan, and her eyes flew open.

"Concentrate," said the Tear.

Wendy braced herself and pushed the invisible hand into his chest. He gasped. She kept her eyes closed, her mind focused. Her physical hands clutched the Tear as that ghost-hand moved within his body, passing through muscle and bone. She touched his heart. His pulse was weak and rapid, but the heart itself was uninjured, whole. Thank God.

She knew something was wrong, though. Pain pulsed within his chest. She moved toward the source and felt the jagged spear of a broken rib. The tip pierced his right lung.

Her chest tightened. How was she supposed to fix this? She wasn't a skilled healer; she could barely handle surface wounds, and internal injuries were much tougher. Her hands trembled. She tried to focus her Gift, but nothing happened. "It's not working," she whispered. Her breathing quickened. "I don't have the power. I don't have the experience."

"You don't need it. The Gift flows from your heart. Use your feelings for him."

Wendy gulped. She pushed aside her fear and gathered up all her memories of Zander. She thought of his face, alive and alert. His rare, fleeting smiles. His strong arms wrapped around her. His mouth on hers. "Don't die, Zander," she whispered. "Don't leave me." She held the memories tight against her heart, breathed gently on them to fan the flames of her emotions. The memories burned brighter and filled her with their clear light. When she couldn't contain them any longer, she released them. They spilled from her pores, swirled around her like something alive. The Tear grew hot in her hands. She gasped, eyes flying open, and saw white light spilling between her fingers, so bright it almost blinded her. The Tear pulled her feelings from the air, fed on them, grew bright with them, then poured them back into her in a tide of raw power. Magic rushed into her, so strong it made her dizzy.

"Now," said the voice of the Tear, "save him."

Wendy looked down at Zander, focusing on his chest. For a moment everything went dark, and then a soft blue glow appeared, and she realized she could see his bones and organs, luminous in the darkness, as if etched in lines of azure fire. She saw his beating heart, his lungs, the cage of his ribs. She moved the invisible hand of her Gift within his body and carefully, carefully manipulated the broken rib back into place. The jagged ends of bone flowed together like clay. She shifted her attention to the bleeding puncture in his lung and poured her Gift, her life into it. She filled it, sealed it, mended the torn tissue and coaxed the blood back into his veins. His lungs expanded, filling with air.

She withdrew back into her own body, shaking and drenched in sweat. The Tear's glow faded and died. She looked down at Zander. He lay, eyes closed, breathing slowly and evenly. Then his thick, silvery lashes fluttered open and his eyes focused on her face. "Wendy?" he whispered hoarsely. He touched his chest, winced, and tried to sit up.

"It's okay." She pushed him gently back to the floor. "Relax. You're safe." Tears filled her eyes, and she let out a small, choked sob of relief. "I thought I had lost you."

"You healed me."

"Well, I had a little help." She glanced at the Tear, then gave him a weak smile. She had never been so exhausted, or so relieved. She wanted to collapse to the floor and not

move for the next three days.

He fumbled for her hand, grasped it and brought it to his mouth. He pressed a kiss to her palm, and the warm touch of his lips sent a tiny tingle racing down the nerves in her arm. "This is twice, now, you've saved me."

"Are we going to start keeping score?"

He laughed, a soft, deep, throaty sound. Then his brow furrowed with concern.

"What about you? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just really, really tired." She glanced over her shoulder at Threed's corpse. It had dwindled back down to its normal size, though it barely looked human. The flesh had browned and shriveled, like an apple in the sun. She looked away.

"How did you do that?" he asked. "How did you pull the Tear from his body?"

"I just summoned it, like I summoned the broom earlier. It wasn't hard. I think the Tear wanted to come out." She stroked the stone's smooth, dark surface with her thumb. "Threed was an idiot to think he could control it. The Tear is too strong. If I hadn't pulled it out of him, it would have freed itself sooner or later."

"He was a fool," said Zander. "But a dangerous one."

A memory of Threed's wolfish muzzle and clawed hands flashed through her mind. She shuddered. "Why would he want to become something like that? I don't understand."

"Maybe he didn't fully understand what the Tear would do to him. Or maybe he didn't care. Power can be very seductive. I know that all too well."

"You would never have done something like this," she said.

"Don't be so sure. You didn't know me back then."

"Maybe not, but I got a tour of your memories, remember? I saw the kind of person you were. And I know you wouldn't have chosen to become something like that. You were just trying to survive. Threed was a power-hungry creep." She paused. "How do you feel? Do you think you can stand?"

He grunted and climbed to his feet. She noticed that even the shallow gashes on his chest had healed, though she didn't remember doing that. He picked up his sword, sheathed it, and offered her a hand. She took it. As he helped her to her feet, she stumbled and swayed. A wave of dizziness washed over her, and blackness swallowed her vision. When her eyes cleared, she found herself leaning against him, panting.

"Do you think *you* can stand?" he said.

"I think so..." She squeaked in surprise as he swept her into his arms. Warmth flooded her cheeks as he cradled her against his broad chest. "I can walk. Really."

"Maybe I want to carry you."

"You shouldn't strain yourself. After all you've been through..."

"I've never felt better." He smiled. "Just rest."

She didn't have the strength to protest. Clutching Eloria's Tear, she leaned her head against his chest as he walked across the room and up the stairs.

Before long, his breathing grew ragged. He stumbled and leaned one shoulder against the wall. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple.

"Put me down," she said. "You're going to pass out if you keep this up."

He set her on her feet. She looked up at him and brushed a few strands of hair from his face. "I'm glad you're all right," she said quietly. "When I saw you like that, I..." Her chest tightened at the memory. "If I'd lost you, I don't know what I would have done."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm fine. Thanks to you."

She blinked away tears and looked down, feeling uncertain and self-conscious.

The Tear's voice echoed in her mind: *You love him, don't you?*

She had answered without hesitation. Her heart had known the answer before her head. Had Zander heard? Did he know?

"Wendy? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing." She twirled a lock of hair around one finger, then quickly dropped her hand to her side. She'd tried everything to break herself of that silly, girly habit, but it still reared its head occasionally when she was flustered. "Do you remember the way out of here?"

"I think so."

"Good. Because right now I'm way too fuzzy-headed to be of any use."

"Follow me."

They made their way through the maze of corridors, through the banquet hall, past the dead Reptans, then through the room filled with chimeras in their bubbling tanks. Zander stared straight ahead. He neither quickened nor slowed his pace, but she felt him shudder.

"As soon as we get back to Garna, we'll tell the authorities about this place," she said.

"But it's too late for them," he replied. "They will share my fate."

"You don't know that. They aren't fully transformed yet. Maybe the process can still be reversed."

He said nothing.

They reached the entrance. Above them, she saw a circle of stars shining through the round opening. Night.

"Can you climb?" he asked.

"I think so. I'm feeling better now."

He set her down. "You go first," he said. "That way, if you start to fall, I can catch you."

She nodded and climbed the metal rungs. Halfway up, a wave of dizziness washed over her, and she had to stop and focus on clutching the rungs. Then it passed. She climbed up through the opening and collapsed onto the cool sand. She lay on her back, staring up at the clear, night sky. A cool breeze dried her sweat-damp brow.

A hand touched her forehead. She looked up to meet Zander's eyes. "Can you fly?" he asked. "You're not going to pass out when we're a hundred feet in the air, are you?"

She laughed breathlessly. "I won't. Promise." She strapped on her pack and mounted her broom. He sat behind her. "Hold onto this, will you?" She passed him Eloria's Tear, and he took it. "And don't drop it. God knows we've gone to enough trouble for this damned bauble."

"I'll keep it safe," he said.

The broom rose into the air. They turned and sped off, away from the ruins, over the rolling dunes.

## Chapter Twelve

They landed in a small town called Tarvell. Garna was still a good ten hours away. Wendy did not intend to fly that long without a hot bath and a long sleep first.

The town's single inn had no name. She recognized it as an inn only because someone had drawn a bed on the faded sign over the door. The innkeeper was a stout, balding man with a face as emotive as a trout's. "Only one room left," he told them. "One bed."

"We'll take it," she said. She was too tired to care. She'd deal with the implications later. "And a bath, please. Just a tub of cold water will do. I can heat it myself."

After a bowl of mutton stew, they trudged up the stairs. The bath waited in a small, drafty room. She heated the water with a spell and spent the next hour soaking. Afterwards, she dried herself with the sandpaper-rough towel provided by the innkeeper and dressed in her cleanest set of clothes. She emerged from the bathroom, toweling off her wet hair.

Zander waited for her in their room. He sat on the edge of the bed, his expression unreadable. "I asked the innkeeper if he had any spare cots," he said. "He said he'd check. That was awhile ago, though. I'm not sure he's coming back."

"We could ask him again."

He shook his head. "No need. I can sleep on the floor."

"I couldn't ask you to do that."

He shrugged. "It doesn't bother me. When I lived on the streets, I slept in alleys, on stairs, in doorways, anywhere I could find a place to lay down. Even as a child, when I lived with my father, I slept on a pile of blankets because we couldn't afford a proper bed. You get used to it after awhile."

She didn't know what to say. She stood, fingering the edge of her towel. Eloria's Tear sat on the bed, close to his hand. The lamp-light reflected on its glossy, black surface. "Zander, I..." She bit her lower lip. "I know how much it means to you to be human. If you like, we can..."

"Don't," he said. He stared at the floor. "If I use the Tear to cure my affliction, its power will be gone forever. You won't be able to sell it, not if its magic is spent. Knowing what will happen to you if you don't pay your debts, how can I ask the Tear to transform me? What kind of selfish monster would I be?"

"You mean..."

"Take it. It's yours."

"But you risked so much to find it. You've been searching for years. It's your last chance to become human. You said yourself that if you wait much longer, the chance will disappear forever. Are you all right with that?"

"All right with being stuck this way? No, not really. But if I selfishly used up the Tear's powers and you lost your life or your family because of it, I'd never forgive myself."

"There might still be a way to do both. Maybe we could find some way to amplify the Tear's powers so..."

"No," he said. "We don't have that kind of time. You need to pay off your debts, or

you'll be in danger. I won't let you be hurt on my account." His voice was soft, but underneath the surface was a steely determination, and she knew there was no arguing with him. Not on this.

She sat next to him and touched his arm. "I'm sorry."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for. I may yet find some other way to regain my humanity," he said, but she wasn't fooled. Eloria's Tear had been his last hope. She saw the defeat and resignation in his eyes, in the slump of his shoulders.

"Even if you never do," she said, "even if you stayed like this forever, would that really be so bad? I mean, you're not so hard to look at. You're just...different."

He looked up. His mouth tightened in a smile, but it didn't touch his eyes. "You said it once yourself. It's hard to be different. People tend to drift toward others who are like them. There's no one in the entire world like me."

"You never struck me as someone obsessed with fitting in. Even before your transformation, you kept to yourself, didn't you? So why do you care? Is it just attracting attention that you don't like?"

She saw him tense, resisting his emotions, but they were too strong for him. He buried his face in his hands. "It's everything," he said, his voice thick and hoarse. "People are uncomfortable around me. They're afraid of me. They try to hide it, but I can see it in their eyes. Just once, I'd like to walk into a pub or a shop and not feel every pair of eyes turn toward me, then quickly look away in fear."

"Zander..."

"I can't even look at my reflection, because I see what they see. I see a demon, an abomination, something that shouldn't exist. And I wonder if this is what my soul looked like all along, if Ajed just took my true essence and wrapped it around me like a shroud."

"That isn't true."

"You saw my memories yourself," he said, his face still hidden in his hands. "I grew up hating everyone. Even myself. I was obsessed with becoming stronger. All I cared about was power. I gave up my humanity to become stronger. Isn't that evil? How am I any different from Ajed or Threed?"

"You didn't choose this," she said. "He forced this on you."

"But I went with him of my own free will, even knowing he was evil. If I hadn't been so vulnerable to the promise of power, I wouldn't have fallen into his trap. He saw that weakness in me, that flaw in my soul."

She tried to pull his hands away from his face. "Look at me."

"I can't."

"Look at me, Zander. Please?"

For a moment, he didn't move. Then, slowly, he lowered his hands and met her gaze. His eyes shone with tears.

She caressed his cheek. "You're not evil. Eloria's Tear knew that. That's why it chose to heal you, to save your life."

"You healed me."

"I wouldn't have been able to do it without the Tear. It amplified my power, somehow, gave me the strength I needed."

He looked away. "Even if it saved my life, it can't change me back. It can't give me my humanity. Does that mean I deserve this? Is this my punishment for the way I've lived? To be an outcast forever, feared and hated by everyone who sees me?"

"That's not it at all. There's nothing wrong with you. If some people are bothered by your appearance, that's their problem, not yours. You don't have to care what they think. If you believe in yourself, if you know who you are, the opinions of strangers are just noise."

"It's not that easy."

"Why not?"

"Because..." He trailed off and clenched his hands.

"What is it?"

"Because even though I'm a monster, I still have a man's needs. I want to be loved by a woman, even knowing I don't deserve it." He blinked, and a tear ran down his cheek.

"Who could love a face like this? Who could want this body?"

"But there's nothing wrong with you!"

"Wendy..." He met her gaze. "Don't say something like that if you don't mean it. You must know how I feel about you. Please don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying. I really care about you."

"In spite of my appearance?"

"Not in spite of it. I don't want you to change, Zander. I like you just the way you are."

His breath caught in his throat. "Wendy, you...really?"

"Yes. Haven't I made it obvious?"

"It's so hard for me to believe. I thought once I was human, perhaps we might...but I never imagined that anyone could want me like this. The way I am now."

She shook her head, astonished. "You're gorgeous. I've been attracted to you since the day I met you. And..." Heat rose into her cheeks. "I think if you'd make love to me, I'd be the happiest woman in the world."

His eyes widened slightly. Then a smoldering need filled them, and he whispered, "Is that so?"

She nodded.

Slowly, he raised one hand to her face. His thumb touched the corner of her mouth, then brushed over her lips. The touch sent tremors through her. He leaned closer, eyes focused on hers. Then his mouth pressed against hers, hot, urgent and demanding. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tight against his broad chest. She slid her fingers into his thick, silvery hair and clutched it as he plundered her mouth.

When at last he pulled away, she was dizzy, breathless. He leaned close again. His lips grazed her ear, and her pulse quickened. He lowered her to the bed onto her back. His eyes burned with need as he gripped her wrist and raised her hand to his mouth. His lips grazed her knuckles. He kissed each fingertip, then pressed a kiss to the center of her palm. Each touch of his mouth sent a burst of electricity skittering down the nerves of her arm. Her nipples tingled and stiffened. Liquid heat pooled at the juncture of her thighs.

She curled her fingers around his wrist and studied his hand. Such big hands, she thought. She touched one fingertip to his broad, calloused palm, traced his lifeline.

His breathing quickened, and his lids lowered, giving his yellow eyes a feral look.

Encouraged, she kissed his wrist. She felt the blood running hot and fast through his veins, felt his pulse pounding beneath her mouth. She wrapped her lips around his thick forefinger and sucked, feeling the sharp point of his claw against her tongue. A soft groan rose up from his throat, and his eyes closed. His finger slid from her mouth with a soft

pop. His whole body trembled with anticipation, with desire. He leaned toward her until his warm breath tickled her neck. His lips brushed her ear. "May I undress you?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes."

He slipped his hands beneath her shirt, and she gasped at the heat of his fingers against her bare skin. Slowly, he pulled off her tunic. Cool air washed over her bare flesh.

His gaze focused on the nipples poking her thin cotton brassiere. His thumb brushed over one, and she gasped. A jolt of heat shot through her body. She watched, heart pounding, as his thumb traced a slow, delicious circle around the tingling nipple. Her thighs shuddered and pressed together. Her pulse throbbed between them, like a second heartbeat.

His gaze met hers. "Do you want me to keep going?"

She nodded, breathless.

His hand circled behind her back and unhooked her bra. It fell off, exposing her small, taut breasts. He slid his hands over them, his hard palms grazing her nipples.

She started to unbuckle her belt. He pulled her hands away and gently pinned them to the bed. "Let me." His gaze never left hers as he undid her belt and slowly pulled down her trousers. They joined her tunic on the floor. She sat upright in nothing but her panties, legs curled beneath her.

His knuckles brushed her cheek. "You're so beautiful," he whispered.

"So are you," she whispered back.

He slid his hands down to rest on the gentle inward curve of her waist. He lowered his head, and she felt his hot breath on one breast. His tongue traced her areola. As the saliva cooled, the flesh puckered around her nipple. He stared into her eyes as he lowered his mouth to her breast and engulfed her aching nub. His hot, wet tongue swirled around it. She felt the gentle press of sharp teeth, a thrill of danger, as his mouth tugged and sucked her nipple like a piece of candy. He moved to her right breast and gave its nipple the same treatment, first circling it with his tongue, then sucking.

Her fingers dug into the sheets. She panted, cheeks flushed. "Zander," she whispered. "Please..."

He raised his head. "What is it?" His voice was breathless, rough.

"Take off your clothes."

He hesitated.

"Please. I want to see all of you."

He took off his boots and socks, then stood, seeming suddenly awkward and unsure. She remembered how reluctant he'd been to take off his shirt, even to let her heal his wounds. For all his strength and beauty, he still saw his body as monstrous. He looked away, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Wendy...I..."

"Let me," she whispered. Her hands slid beneath his tunic, over his flat, hard abdomen, over his broad chest. She felt his heart beating hard and fast as she slipped off his tunic and dropped it to the floor. Looking up at his face, she trailed kisses over his belly and felt the muscles contract. Her finger moved slowly, deftly, as she unbuckled his belt, then pulled it off and let it drop to the floor. Still holding his gaze with hers, she untied the lacings of his trousers, and they slid down with a rustle.

He stood before her, naked. Without his clothes, he looked somehow even bigger than usual. His presence filled the room. Her gaze moved over his broad, powerful shoulders, his firm stomach and slim hips. His chest, stomach and inner thighs were

smooth-skinned and pale blue-gray, but the rest of his body gleamed gem-blue in the lamplight. Dusky azure scales glistened like precious stones. His maleness, the same dark plum-color as his lips, jutted out from his body, huge and engorged. Her heartbeat quickened at the sight.

He stood beside the bed, looking down at her, and she saw something in his eyes she didn't expect: fear. It lay beneath the desire like a shadow, cold and stark. Even now, he was afraid of rejection, afraid she would shrink away from him in disgust.

Her heart ached for him. She wanted to assure him there was nothing wrong with his body, that he was beautiful, special, unique. But mere words, she knew, would not convince him. She had to show him, and show him she would. Gladly.

She reached out and brushed the head of his shaft with her fingertips. She heard his breath snag in his throat, a little, hitching gasp. Heart pounding, she slid her fingers along the smooth, dark length of him. He moaned.

She curled her fingers around the rigid organ. It pulsed in her hand, hard and alive, like heated iron sheathed in velvet. Breathing hard, she leaned forward and opened her mouth. Her tongue slid over the smooth, round head.

He gasped.

A little thrill raced through her. Her lips grazed the head of his maleness, then she ran her tongue down its length, a slow, wet caress.

His eyes closed. He panted, his huge body trembling. His hands clenched, then flexed. "Wendy..."

"Does this feel good?" she whispered.

"Yes," he breathed. "God, yes."

She pulled him deep into her mouth. He reached down and gripped a fistful of her hair as she gently tugged and sucked him. He growled, a deep, rippling sound. His hips pushed forward instinctively. Then he pulled back, away.

She gave him a questioning look.

"If you keep that up, I won't be able to hold back. I don't want this to be over so soon."

She smiled. "Neither do I."

He climbed onto the bed. His gaze moved over her, lingering on her panties. "These are soaked."

She averted her eyes timidly. "I guess they are."

He smiled and touched her hot cheek. "Now you're shy? After you nearly brought me to my knees with your mouth?"

"It's been awhile," she murmured. "But they say it's like riding a broom. Once you learn how, you never forget."

"Is that what they say?"

"That's what they say."

"Let's find out." He hooked his thumbs beneath the waist of her panties and slid them down, past her knees, over her ankles. "Lay down."

Holding her breath, she lay down on her back.

He parted her thighs. "You're shaking," he said.

And she was—trembling with a delicious mixture of anticipation, thrill and uncertainty. She hadn't been a virgin for a long time, but she remembered that feeling, the breathless joy and fear of tasting something sweet for the first time. The same feeling



suffused her now, as if it were all new again. Excitement bubbled in her belly like champagne, swept through her veins in a heady, exhilarating rush. "Don't stop," she whispered.

He caressed her thighs. With one fingertip, he traced the moist furrow of her sex. Her toes curled.

"You're very wet." He smiled, showing a hint of fang. His thumbs brushed her outer lips and parted them, opening her. Her breathing quickened.

"Touch me," she said. "Please."

He arched one eyebrow. His smile widened. All traces of uncertainty and fear had vanished from his face. The look that crept in to replace them was delightfully, wickedly male and a little arrogant. "You're impatient."

"Zander, please..."

His finger slipped through her downy, wheat-yellow curls, found the sensitive little bud hidden among them and stroked it, the softest brush of flesh on flesh. She gasped. Her fingers kneaded the sheets. She tried to sit up, to see what he was doing, but he gently pushed her to the bed. "Just feel," he said.

She lay, heart thumping, as his finger circled that little silken bud. She felt it swelling under his skilled touch, every nerve tingling and alive. He pressed, and the pleasure spiked, so sharp it was almost unbearable. Then one long, thick finger slid into her wetness. "More," she breathed.

Another finger plunged inside her. His gaze met hers, checking the emotional weather in her eyes before returning to her sex. His fingers moved in and out. She could feel his claws inside her. They didn't hurt, but the sensation of their sharp tips grazing her flesh made her aware of how vulnerable she was, how much trust she was putting in him. She shivered and closed her eyes as his fingers stretched her gently open, preparing her body.

At last, his fingers withdrew. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He positioned himself over her. He had never looked so big. His eyes stared into hers, a deep, searching stare. "I love you," he said.

The words knocked the breath out of her. Before she could even think to reply, his cock slid into her wetness. Hard, hot flesh pressed into the soft glove of her body. He was bigger than either of her previous boyfriends. She felt her inner walls stretching wide to accommodate the length and girth of him. When he'd sheathed himself completely, he stopped, his gaze still locked with hers. She felt his breath on her lips as his wide eyes stared into hers. His need and hunger lay bare, as if all his barriers and shields had been ripped away in a single moment, giving her, for the first time, an unobstructed look into his soul. She stared into those naked eyes, mind whirling at the incredible intimacy of the moment, and she knew that he, too, could see into her, see her soul laid bare.

He pulled back until only the tip of him was still inside her, then pushed forward again. The second thrust was harder, swifter. She cried out.

"Are you all right?" The urgency and concern in his voice almost brought tears to her eyes.

"Yes," she breathed. "Don't stop."

He pulled back again, then pushed forward, in and out as his hips moved against hers in a slow, rocking motion. She wrapped her arms around him and thrust her hips upward

to meet his next thrust. She pressed against him, hungry for the heat of his skin. She wanted more. She drank him in through her pores, breathed him into her lungs, tasted his sweat. His lips found hers, devoured hers. Their tongues tangled in a wet dance as his hips pushed against hers, driving her into the bed. They melted together, spilled into each other, filled each other's skin. She heard herself moaning, high-pitched animal sounds, hungry and desperate. He filled her, fed her. Pleasure curled deep in her body, grew and swelled until she couldn't contain it anymore. "Zander!" she cried. Her body arched off the bed as a wave crested inside her and burst, shattering into a thousand glimmering fragments.

She went limp, panting. The room seemed to be going into free-fall around her. For a moment, she floated. Then the world settled into place.

He thrust again, then again, grunting under his breath. His body stiffened atop hers, and she watched the tide of pleasure wash across his eyes. They lost focus, and for a moment, he looked blind. His eyes rolled back and he collapsed, panting, his head on the pillow next to hers, his maleness still buried inside her. They lay together, motionless and drenched in sweat, their ragged breathing mingled.

A minute later, he pulled out and flopped onto the bed beside her, eyes closed. His chest rose and fell. Then he turned his head, opened his eyes, and stroked her cheek with a finger. They looked at each other, floating in the aftermath, unspoken messages traveling back and forth between their eyes. "I truly love you," he whispered.

The words melted her last defenses. A drugged glow spread through her heart like warm honey, and she knew there was no going back. He was inside her now, and whatever happened, a part of him would live there always, twined around her soul. The knowledge frightened her and thrilled her at the same time. "I love you, too, Zander."

His lips brushed hers. He stroked her hair, his eyes moving in tiny flicks as he studied her face, as if he were committing each detail to memory. Then he kissed her again, softly, his full lips molding to hers. He pulled back and touched her cheek. "I never dared to think..." He trailed off and lowered his eyes, hiding them beneath fringes of thick, silvery lashes. "I never imagined you could want me like this," he said at last.

"Then what did you think that kiss in the forest was about?"

"I thought you were afraid to refuse my advances. I was your guide, after all. You needed me. Afterwards, I felt I had taken advantage of you."

She laughed. The sound emerged deep, soft and throaty. "Afraid? Never. I wanted it, Zander. I wanted *you*."

"Just as I am?"

She nodded. "I wouldn't change you for the world."

He pulled her hand to his chest and pressed her palm against his heart. "Do you know, Wendy, it's been so long since I've loved someone, I'd almost forgotten what it felt like? I avoided it for so long. I thought it wasn't worth the risk. I was wrong."

"I thought I was done with love, too. I guess we were both wrong."

He chuckled, and she felt the vibrations of that deep voice throughout her body. "I've never been so happy to be wrong."

"Me too," she whispered. She closed her eyes, rested her head against his chest and drifted off, enfolded in warm, strong arms.

## Chapter Thirteen

They returned to Garna the next evening.

Wendy landed just outside the city, on a low hill overlooking the sprawl of streets and buildings. The river ran through the center, carrying boat-traffic, while the soft, yellow lights of street-lamps glimmered like a thousand fireflies. High above the city, the clock-tower chimed the hour. "There it is," she said, smiling. "My home." She turned to face Zander. "Are you ready?"

He pulled up his hood and tied his scarf over his nose and mouth, hiding all but his yellow eyes. "Now I am."

"Are you still determined to wear that? I'm telling you, it'll just make you look suspicious. Like you're planning a bank hold-up or something."

"Trust me," he said. "I'll attract more attention if I don't wear it."

She sighed. "Your call." Together, they walked down the hill, joined the foot and carriage traffic on the main road and followed it into the bustling heart of the city. Zander attracted a few curious stares, but for the most part, passers-by took no notice of him.

His eyes moved back and forth, scanning the streets. His shoulders were tense beneath his cloak.

"Relax," she said.

"It's been awhile since I've been around so many people," he murmured.

"We're almost there. My shop is just down the block. I have a little apartment above it." She noted each familiar sight with a little thrill. Despite her fatigue, her mood was better than it had been in months. She walked with a bounce in her step and kept fighting the absurd urge to break into song and start dancing like some princess in a kiddy show.

She was home. She'd found Eloria's Tear in time to pay Drizell. Very soon, she'd see her family again, safe and sound. And Zander loved her. What more could she ask for?

They reached the shop. "Here it is," she said. "Julie's probably inside. She's my sister. I told you about her, right?" Without waiting for an answer, she pushed the door open. The bell jingled overhead. "Julie! I'm—"

She froze. A wave of dizziness washed over her, and she gripped the doorknob to steady herself.

The shop had been trashed. A bookshelf lay on its side, its contents scattered. Broken potion bottles glittered on the floor, their contents spilled. The rug was rumpled, and it looked like someone had slashed the curtains with a knife. "Oh God," she whispered.

On the back wall, someone had tacked a note. Even without reading it, she had a pretty good idea of what it said.

She swayed on her feet. Her vision grayed out.

Zander caught her as she fell. "Wendy? Wendy, are you all right?"

Her eyes focused on his face. "Drizell." Her voice emerged as a faint croak. She felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach, and she wondered for a moment if she was going to throw up. "She's been here. Oh God. This is all my fault. I was too late."

"What happened here?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she straightened and walked across the room. At least there was no blood, she thought, but that was a meager comfort.

She approached the note on the wall and read the lines with growing dread: *My employer has grown impatient. I've taken your sister. If you don't bring the money by the 18th of September at 11:00 pm sharp, my employer will give her to me as a toy. Please don't come. Sincerely, J.*

"Jackal," she said between gritted teeth. "That sick bastard." The blood pounded in her veins. Memories flashed through her head: Julie's shy smile and wide brown eyes, her gentle teasing, her high, sweet laughter. She remembered the time Julie had stood up for her in third grade when Charlie Upton had picked on her, remembered sharing a bed with Julie when they were both small, staying up late, giggling and whispering jokes to each other long after they were supposed to be asleep.

She thought about Julie under the Jackal's blade, heard her sobbing, begging...

Wendy roared, ripped the note off the wall and crumpled it in one fist. Her shoulders heaved with each ragged breath.

She heard footsteps as Zander approached. "What does it say?"

"They took my sister!" She whirled around to face him, eyes filled with tears. "Drizell said she'd give me a month, but they took her anyway. And if I don't pay her by the 18th..." She froze, and dread squeezed her stomach. Today was the 18th. "What time is it?" She looked at the wall-clock. 9:16. A jolt of panic shot through her. "I don't have much time! I have to go there right now! I can give her the Tear, maybe it will be enough."

He gripped her shoulders. "Calm down," he said. "We need to call the police."

She shook her head, breathing hard. "You don't understand. This is Eva Drizell we're talking about. The police can't touch her. She's too powerful. She belongs to the richest family in Garna. They practically own this city's government."

"Even so, if your sister has been kidnapped..."

"Drizell has gotten away with murder before. Literally. She'll just bribe the right people and no one will lay a finger on her." She moaned. "Oh God, how could I let this happen? Why did I ever leave her alone here?"

"Easy. Don't panic. We need to think this through."

She tried to pull away. "There's no time! That bitch has my sister!" She wrenched away from him and ran out the door, into the street.

He followed, grabbed her arm and spun her to face him. "If you're going, then I'm going with you."

She shook her head. "There's no reason for you to get mixed up in this. This is my problem." Her throat knotted up. She swallowed and wiped the back of one hand across her streaming eyes. "I got her into this, I have to get her out. I don't want anyone else getting hurt because of me."

His grip remained firm on her arm. His scarf had slipped down, revealing his mouth. The muscles of his jaws tightened, and his lips pressed together in a firm line. "If this Drizell woman is half as bad as you make her sound, there's no way I'm letting you face her alone."

"Zander—"

"No arguments. I'm coming with you, and you can't stop me."

She opened her mouth to protest, but a sigh emerged instead. Looking into his eyes, she knew there was no talking him out of it. "Why does this sound familiar?"

"We just went through this outside Threed's lair. I couldn't convince you to abandon

me. Don't think I'm going to abandon you."

"I have to admit, it will be good to have you with me." She squeezed his arm. "Just be careful. Please. Drizell is dangerous."

He smiled, a thin, hard smile, like a blade's edge. "I'm dangerous, too."

A chill raced down her spine. Looking at that steely smile, those cold yellow eyes, she believed him. "Glad you're on my side," she said. "Let's go. If we catch a coach on the way, we can be there in fifteen minutes."

He nodded and pulled his scarf back up.

They hurried down the street. Wendy waved down a coach. The door opened, and they hopped in.

The driver looked over his shoulder. "Where to, Miss?"

"Primly Street," she said, panting. "Fast. We're in a hurry."

He cracked the reins, and the horses broke into a trot. The driver cast a nervous glance at Zander, who glared back at him. He cleared his throat and looked away.

Shortly after, the coach pulled up in front of Drizell's mansion. Zander paid the driver, and they stepped out of the carriage. The mansion loomed before them like a huge beast. Its countless windows glowed like yellow eyes.

Wendy took a deep breath and looked at Zander. "Ready?"

He nodded.

They walked up the cobblestone path to the front door. Eloria's Tear rested in a pouch around her neck. She touched it, heart thumping, then rang the bell. A moment later, the door creaked open, and the butler peered down at them. "We're here to see Drizell," said Wendy.

"Ah yes," said the butler. "She's been expecting you. But she seemed to think you'd be alone. Who is the gentleman?"

"My bodyguard," she said.

The butler raised his eyebrows.

"I want to be sure she doesn't try any funny business, that's all."

The butler shrugged, stepped aside and extended an arm toward the entrance hall in a "come in" gesture.

She entered, Zander close behind her. They followed the butler through the wide, marble hall, up the stairs, to the door of Drizell's study. The butler knocked.

"Come in," Drizell's voice sing-songed.

The butler opened the door. Wendy and Zander entered, and the door slammed shut behind them.

Eva rose from her desk. She wore a long burgundy dress. A fox-fur, complete with head and tail, lay draped around her shoulders like a pet. Tiny, glass eyes glittered in its pointed face. "Ah, Ms. Martin!" Drizell smiled and spread her arms. Rings sparkled on her hands, several to each finger. "Did you get my message? I sent the Jackal to deliver it." She chuckled. "Perhaps not the best choice, in retrospect. He does tend to get carried away."

"I swear, if that psychopath has hurt Julie in any way, I'll make you regret it."

"Relax. She's perfectly safe." Her gaze shifted to Zander. She pursed her lips. "And who, may I ask, is this?"

"I'm here to protect Wendy," he said.

Drizell placed a hand over her heart, a look of mock hurt on her face. "Why, Ms.

Martin, you trust me so little that you feel it necessary to hire a bodyguard when you enter my home? I'm wounded, truly." She paused and tilted her head. Her green eyes sharpened. "My dear, there's something different about you. I feel something...powerful. I taste it in the air. Magic. What is it?"

Wendy's jaw clenched. "First, you answer my questions. Where is Julie?"

Drizell wagged one long, bejeweled finger. "First, my money. Then we'll talk about sister dearest."

"If I give you what you want, you'll have no incentive to release her."

"And my word isn't good enough?"

"Your word is worthless. You deceived me. You said I could have a full month, but it hasn't been that long, and you took Julie anyway."

Drizell shrugged. "I haven't harmed her, have I? I'm just...holding onto her, you might say."

"Show me to her. Now."

"Show me the money, and I'll show you to her. You don't have to give it to me, just prove that you have it, and then we can make the exchange. Your sister for the cash."

"I don't have it in cash, but I have something worth far more than what I owe."

Drizell raised her eyebrows. "Oh? Show it to me."

Wendy pulled Eloria's Tear from the pouch and held it out.

Drizell's brows bunched together. "What is that?"

"Eloria's Tear."

Her eyes widened, and the color drained from her face. "I don't believe it."

"Believe it. You can feel its power, can't you?"

Her mouth opened in shock. She pressed trembling fingers to her lips. "How did you find it?" Before Wendy had a chance to reply, Drizell stalked toward her like a jungle cat, a hungry glint in her eyes. She stretched out her hands, fingers contorted like claws.

"Give it to me. Let me see it." She made a grab for the Tear.

Zander leapt forward and drew his sword. He stood between Drizell and Wendy, shoulders rigid beneath his cloak. "Don't touch her." His voice was low and menacing, just a half-step above a growl.

"The Tear stays with me until my sister is safe," said Wendy.

Drizell scowled, but took a step back. "I just wanted to take a closer look at it, to make sure it was real."

"You know it is. Give me Julie, and it's all yours."

Drizell sighed. "Very well." She turned. "Follow me." She glanced at Zander. "You may sheathe your sword. You won't need it."

"I'll keep it handy, if it's all the same to you."

She shrugged and sauntered across the room, toward the door. "Suit yourself." She pushed the door open.

Drizell led them down the hall to a simple, oak door. She pulled a tiny gold key from her pocket, unlocked the door and opened it.

Beyond lay a small room with granite walls. An oil lamp sat in the corner, flickering. In the center of the room stood a chair, and in the chair sat Julie. Wendy gasped. Julie's hands had been bound behind her back, her legs tied to the chair's legs, and she'd been blindfolded and gagged. Disheveled brown hair framed her face, and tears streaked her pale cheeks. "Julie," whispered Wendy.

Julie's head moved toward the sound of her voice. She made a muffled sound through the gag.

"You see?" said Drizell. "She hasn't been harmed. I kept my word. I told the Jackal in no uncertain terms that he wasn't to touch her until 11:00 pm. He begged and wheedled like a spoiled child, but I wouldn't let him."

"How kind of you," Wendy said through clenched teeth.

Drizell smiled, lips pressed into a thin line. "I've fulfilled my half of the bargain." She extended one hand and wiggled the fingers. "Now, give me that stone."

Wendy clutched the Tear. "First, let her go. I won't give you the Tear until she's free."

Drizell shrugged. "Untie her, then."

Wendy hesitated. She looked at Zander, then entered the room. Julie sat, breathing hard. She let out a muffled whimper. Wendy leaned closer. "It's okay," she whispered. "It's okay, Julie, I'm here. I'll get you out of this." She circled around to the back of the chair and undid the knots binding Julie's wrists. The rope slipped away. Wendy crouched and undid the ropes around her ankles and knees, then pulled off the blindfold. Julie's wide, wet brown eyes stared up at her, and Wendy's heart ached. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "This is all my fault." Tears welled in her own eyes. She pulled off the gag, then slid her arms beneath Julie's and helped her to her feet.

Julie staggered and collapsed against her. She let out a choked sob, hugged Wendy tight and pressed her face against Wendy's shoulder. "I thought I was going to die," she murmured.

"Shhh." Wendy stroked her hair. "It's okay now. No one's going to hurt you."

"Who are these people? What do they want from us?"

"Just money. I'm going to give them what they want, and then it'll all be over." She hugged Julie, hard. A tear slid down her cheek, into Julie's messy brown hair. A bitter knot of shame burned in her chest. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"I hate to break up this touching reunion," said Drizell, "but I don't have all night." She snapped her fingers and called, "Nigel!"

A moment later, the butler appeared. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I want you to escort Ms. Julie Martin to the door," said Drizell. "See to it that she gets a coach."

"What about Wendy?" Julie asked.

"I want her to remain here a little longer," Drizell replied.

"Why?" Wendy demanded. "I'll give you the Tear now, if you want. Then we'll all leave at once."

"Don't push your luck," Drizell said, "or I may change my mind about letting her go."

Julie looked at Wendy, lips quivering, her face wet with tears. "What's going to happen now?"

"You're going home."

"But what will happen to you?"

"I'll be fine." Wendy forced a smile. The most important thing was getting Julie out of here safely, she reminded herself. Once that happened, she could worry about the rest.

The butler approached. "Come with me, Ms. Martin," he said, looking at Julie.

She gave Wendy an uncertain look.

"Go on," said Wendy, holding the fake smile on her face. "It's okay. I'll catch up to you in no time. Promise."

"Wendy..."

She squeezed Julie's shoulder. "Trust me. I know what I'm doing." Which was a complete lie, but she wanted Julie out of this place. She could worry about herself later.

Julie bit her lower lip. She cast a frightened glance at Drizell, then followed Nigel the butler out of the room. Wendy watched her go, then glared at Drizell. "I want your promise that no harm will come to her."

"Relax," said Drizell. "What reason would I have to harm her? I'm not a sadist, you know." She extended a hand. "Now, give me the Tear."

Wendy hesitated, then handed Eloria's Tear to Drizell.

Drizell's fingers curled around the Tear, and her eyes widened. Her breathing quickened, and her breasts heaved, straining against the confines of her dress. "Power," she breathed. "Such power. I feel it coursing through my blood, bubbling in my brain. I can taste it like fine wine." She licked her lips, then pushed Eloria's Tear beneath her dress, into her cleavage. A small sigh of rapture escaped her parted lips.

Wendy resisted the urge to tell her and the Tear to get a room. "Great," she said. "You've got what you want. Now let us go."

Drizell's eyes opened, and a smile curved her red lips. "Not so fast."

Wendy tensed as a man stepped into the doorway. He wore a long, black overcoat and a silver mask. Her breath caught in her throat. She stared at the mask's narrow snout, its bared teeth and dark eye-holes. The man's breath rasped behind it, wet and heavy. "Good evening, my dear," said a deep voice. "Told you we'd meet again, didn't I?"

"Jackal," whispered Wendy.

"What is this?" Zander demanded. "What's going on?"

Drizell shrugged. "I promised the Jackal a playmate," she said. "And he gets quite cranky if he's denied his fun. I released your sister, as you asked. So now I have no choice but to give him you."

Wendy's teeth ground together. "You bitch."

"Sticks and stones."

The Jackal advanced toward her with the smooth, gliding movements of a predator. Zander blocked him, sword pointed at his chest. As Wendy backed away, Drizell seized her arm, manicured talons digging into her skin. Wendy's flesh crawled; she could feel the strength in that grip, both physical and magical.

The Jackal glared at Zander through the eye-holes of his mask. "I'd leave now, if I were you. The girl is mine."

"Touch her, and you die," Zander replied.

The Jackal pulled a knife from under his coat. He dropped into a half-crouch, masked face thrust forward, and growled.

Zander growled back, lunged and swung his sword. The Jackal yelped like a startled dog and jumped backward. His sword struck the Jackal's knife with a clang, knocking it out of his hands, and the Jackal raised his hands in surrender as Zander pressed the sword's tip to his throat. He shot a glare at Drizell. "Let Wendy go, or he dies."

Drizell laughed. "For a common mercenary, you're not bad."

The Jackal whined softly, hands still in the air. "Don't hurt me. I'm unarmed."

Wendy wasn't fooled; she knew from personal experience that the Jackal's Gift was



as sharp as his knives. "Don't let your guard down, Zander. He—" Pressure constricted her throat, cutting off air and voice, and only a choked sound emerged.

"Wendy, what's wrong?" Zander shouted over his shoulder.

Wendy tried to speak, but the pressure around her throat increased, and her vision went fuzzy. She clawed at her throat, gasping. She tried to push back with her own Gift, but it was no use; Drizell was too strong.

"Wendy!" Zander shouted. He turned toward her, eyes wide.

"Now, Jackal!" Drizell snapped.

Prickling warmth washed over Wendy's skin as the burnt, bitter-sweet smell of magic filled the air.

Zander raised his sword, froze, and grunted. His body jerked, then went rigid as every muscle locked into place. He stood with his feet planted wide apart and sword lifted over his head, his eyes wide open in surprise: a statue made flesh.

The Jackal giggled. "Got you!"

Drizell smirked. "Pathetic," she said. "You should have done more reference-checking before hiring this lug. A bodyguard with no defense against the Gift is useless. Such unusual eyes, though. What is he hiding under that hood and scarf, I wonder?"

With a burst of effort, Wendy tore free of Drizell's grip and lunged at the Jackal, hoping to distract him and break his spell. She thrust out an elbow, but before she could drive it into his midsection, a cold barb plunged through the back of her neck and into her skull. She hit the floor, paralyzed.

Drizell nudged her with a toe. "Don't you ever learn? You can't beat me."

Helpless, Wendy watched as Drizell sauntered over to Zander and pulled down his hood and scarf. Her eyes widened. "Oh," she breathed. "A chimera. How interesting." Her fingers traced his brows, cheekbones and lips. She pried his mouth open and touched a fingertip to one fang.

Rage boiled in Wendy's veins. She wanted to swat those manicured paws away from Zander, but her muscles wouldn't obey her. She lay on her side, breathing hard.

"I think I'll keep this one for myself," said Drizell. "Yes. I've been looking for a new guard, and he's perfect. So exotic and dangerous-looking."

The Jackal cocked his head to one side. "Didn't you just say he was useless?"

"Well, it's all about image, after all. He'll be little more than a decoration, but an intimidating decoration, nonetheless." She placed her hands on her slim hips and studied Zander as if he were a piece of art in a museum. "I'll be the only person in the city with a chimera at my disposal."

Zander's silvery lashes flickered as he blinked. His arms quivered, straining against the spell. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

Drizell glanced at Wendy and smiled like a cat with a mouthful of canary. "I know what you're thinking. 'He'll never serve you.' Not in his current state, perhaps, but there are ways around even the most proud and stubborn spirit." She placed one ruby-nailed finger against Zander's brow. "I'll hire a psi-magician to reformat his mind so he'll be completely loyal to me. He'll be my servant, my pet. He'll kill for me. Die for me, if necessary." She chuckled. "Thank you so much for bringing him. What a thoughtful gift."

Wendy glared at her, hoping Drizell could feel her hatred. *Don't you touch him*, she said, projecting her thoughts as hard as she could. *Don't you dare!*

"What about the girl?" asked the Jackal.

"She's all yours," said Drizell. "Have fun."

The Jackal laughed. "Hear that? We're going to have fun." He pulled a foot-long piece of copper pipe from under his coat. Looming over Wendy, he raised the pipe high into the air and swung it down. *Crack*. Pain exploded through the back of her head. As she plunged into unconsciousness, her last thought was, *Better me than my sister*.

## Chapter Fourteen

Wendy woke with a pounding headache. Memories swam through the darkness behind her eyelids, a string of flickering, hazy images. She saw Julie's terrified face, Drizell's crimson-nailed fingers holding Eloria's Tear, Zander frozen and helpless.

*Where am I?*

She tried to open her eyes, but they seemed glued shut. It took a few tries, but at last, she forced them open and looked around. She was sitting upright in a chair, hands bound behind the chair's back and feet to the chair's legs, in a cement room with a drain on the floor and a single, sturdy metal door. A lamp hung from the ceiling on a chain, bathing the room in dim yellow light. The ropes bit into her flesh.

The Jackal stood before her, and she felt his eyes staring at her from the dark holes in his mask. Not the most comforting sight to wake up to. "Why hello there, my dear," he purred. "Have a nice nap? Feeling refreshed?"

"Not really." Her voice emerged hoarse and cracked. She flexed her wrists, trying to restore some circulation to her numb hands. "What's up with that stupid mask, anyway? Why don't you take it off? Or are you afraid to show me your real face?"

He cocked his head. Then he reached up and slowly pulled off the mask.

Greasy, matted black curls hung down around his face. She saw his chapped and split lips, his white teeth framed by a scruffy five o'clock shadow, his eyes, muddy irises rimmed by bloodshot white. Those eyes shone with a hot, crazed fire, and what she saw in their murky depths was more frightening than a mask could ever be.

Her heartbeat quickened. She gritted her teeth and yanked on her restraints, but the knots had been well-tied. She couldn't budge. Damn. She swallowed. Her dry, swollen tongue filled her mouth. "I don't suppose I could have a glass of water?"

"Tell you what," he said. "If you behave yourself, you can have a drink in one hour."

"Oh goodie," she croaked. "And what are we going to be doing for the next hour?"

"I'm going to finish what I started." He pulled the long, thin knife from under his coat. "I've been looking forward to this more than you can imagine. You know, ever since we first met, I've been thinking about you. There's just something about you. The way you pretend you're not afraid, even when I can smell fear oozing from your every pore. The way you struggle to control your breathing when I lean in close. The way you never take your eyes from me."

"Are you going to ask me out on a date now?"

He chuckled. "You see? You're making jokes, even when I can see the stark, cold despair in your eyes. So many women start weeping and pleading before I've even laid a knife on them. Takes all the fun out of it."

She flexed her wrists, trying to loosen the knots. "What about men?" she asked, stalling.

"Men are full of bluster and threats at first, but they usually break as soon as I start cutting things off. Some of them scream louder than the women."

"So the Jackal swings both ways."

He shrugged. "Meat is meat."

Her hands tingled as the blood began moving sluggishly through the veins. She

gritted her teeth and wriggled her fingers. "If you kill me, you're going to have the police breathing down your neck. My disappearance is going to be noticed."

"Oh, don't worry. I won't kill you. She wants you alive. But I will have my fun." He ran his tongue along the blade.

"Couldn't you find a normal hobby? Like...I don't know, needlepoint, or collecting spoons? Something that doesn't involve cutting people up?"

"I like this one." He ran the flat of the blade along her cheek.

Her mind raced. How to get out of this? "Okay," she said, voice shaking, "I can see I'm not going to change your mind. But wouldn't it be more fun if I wasn't tied to this chair?"

He tilted his head to one side, doglike.

"It would be more...more sportsmanlike. You know. More of a challenge."

"Nice try," he said. "But I like you just how you are. If you're free to move around, you'll struggle and mess up my handiwork. I'm something of an artist, you know. Flesh is my canvas."

"You're afraid I'll hurt you if I'm not tied up. That's it, isn't it?" She tried to layer her voice with scorn. "You're afraid of me, a weak, defenseless little girl. What kind of man are you?"

He laughed. "I'm not a man at all," he said and snapped at the air. His sharp teeth clicked together a centimeter from her nose. "I'm a wild dog."

So much for appealing to his male ego. She stared at the knife in his hand, breathing hard. I won't die like this, she thought. I can't. "You're a coward," she said, desperate. "You know you'd be no match for me if I was free."

"Defiant to the end, are you? Good. I hate the ones who snivel. They're so boring." He licked his lips. "Even the defiant ones have a breaking point, though. Everyone does."

"What are you going to do?" She heard the quiver of fear in her voice and hated it.

"I'm going to start cutting off parts of you, my dear." He circled around to the back of the chair and seized her hand. "Yes. I think I'll start with a finger or two." He placed the blade's edge against the ring finger of her left hand.

She sat, breathing fast, heart beating so hard and fast she thought it might burst from her body. "No, no, please..."

The blade sliced through flesh and ground against bone. She screamed. The knife sawed back and forth. She felt the vibrations as the serrated edge bit through bone, but she couldn't hear it. She couldn't hear anything over her own screams.

With a wet snap, the knife sliced through the last string of meat connecting her finger to her hand. He smiled, wrapped the severed digit in a kerchief and slipped it into his front coat-pocket. He patted it.

She moaned. Blood dripped to the floor beneath her chair, dark and thick as syrup. Bile rose into her throat and blackness washed across her vision. For a moment, she thought she would pass out. Then the dizziness receded, and the pain crept in—a deep, dull, throbbing pain. The severed nerve endings screamed.

He clucked softly. "So much blood. And from such a little wound. I'll have to take some extra precautions." He undid the restraints on her wrists.

Just a few minutes ago, she had been thinking that if she could just get her wrists free somehow, she could grab his knife and disable him. Now, she was too dizzy and sick to react. It took all her concentration just to hold onto consciousness.

He freed her throbbing, bloody left hand, then tied her right hand to the back of the chair again. He smiled and lifted her left hand to his mouth, as if he were about to kiss it. Instead, he licked the blood from the stump where her finger had been. She screamed as his tongue raked across raw meat.

"Delicious." He smacked his lips, and blood stained his mouth like lipstick. "But if I let you bleed too much, you'll pass out, and we can't have that, can we? No. I want you alive and aware during the next few hours."

Magic washed over her hand, tingling. As she watched, new skin flowed over the wound, leaving a healed stump.

"Another?" he asked. By his tone, he might have been asking a guest if she'd like another powdered lemon square with her tea. He gripped her mutilated hand between a thumb and forefinger and placed the knife's edge against the base of her thumb.

She shook her head frantically. Screaming had rendered her throat raw, incapable of speech. He ignored her and sliced down again. She'd thought she had no strength left to scream, but she found she was wrong.

Her thumb came free with a gush of fresh blood. He tucked the bloody appendage into his pocket alongside her ring finger.

The raw stump burned. The pain whited out her vision, swamped her senses. Let me pass out, she thought. God must have been listening, for a moment later, darkness swallowed her.

\* \* \* \*

At first there was only the mist, dark and thick as soup. Wendy heard a voice at the edge of her consciousness, far away. The mist grew lighter, and she felt herself pulled upward toward some unknown destination. With the light came pain, a sharp, suffocating, nauseating pain. Her eyes winced open, and her surroundings crashed in on her. She looked around at the stone walls, the dull glimmer of the ceiling lamp.

She was on the floor, spread-eagled, head propped on a flat pillow. Looking at her hand, she saw that her newest wound had been healed. Where her finger and thumb had been were only two smooth knobs.

The Jackal's face slid into her vision. Dark eyes peered down at her. She whimpered and tried to pull away, but found she couldn't move. Her muscles had been reduced to cottage cheese, her limbs to sandbags. She could move her head and her remaining fingers a little, but that was all. She rolled her head to one side and stared at the needle puncture on her left forearm. He'd drugged her. No wonder.

"Happy now?" he said. "You wanted me to untie you."

She groaned. "Wasn't...what I had in mind," she murmured. Speaking took all her concentration. Her tongue felt like a block of wood.

He raised his knife, still stained with her blood. He touched the tip to her cheek, just below her left eye. "Let's see. What shall I take next? An ear? The tip of your nose, perhaps?" The knife wandered along her temple, traced the curve of her ear. She felt the cold edge of the blade against the base of her ear, then agony flared as the dagger sliced through skin and cartilage. She screamed...or at least, she was pretty sure she did. The sudden ringing in her ear blocked out all other sounds. When the pain finally faded enough for her to breathe again, she panted and looked up through dimming eyes at the object dangling in front of her face. It took her a moment to recognize her own severed

ear, waxy-pale and spattered with red, gripped between the Jackal's thumb and forefinger.

I'm in hell, she thought. A strange calm had descended upon her. She watched as he placed her bloody ear against his own head, as if trying it on. He glanced at his reflection in the knife-blade, grimaced, and slipped the ear into his coat-pocket. His bright gaze focused on her. "Hmm..." He tapped the knife against his front teeth. "Yes, I think the nose. You have such a cute little nose. Then I'll cut some pretty patterns along your cheekbones. I am an artist, after all. Your eyes I will leave untouched. I want you to be able to look in the mirror and see your new face staring back at you. Another scar...here..." He placed the knife-point on the center of her forehead and pressed down until blood welled up. "Yes. I'll carve the word 'eggs' on your brow."

"Why eggs?" She heard her own voice as though from far away.

"I like eggs." He pursed his lips. "Do you spell that with one 'g' or two?"

"Two," she heard her own voice reply.

He smiled. "Ah yes. Of course. First, a cut right here." He dragged the blade across her brow.

With a sudden burst of strength, she jerked away. The dagger's point sped across her face, across the lid of her left eye, across her cheek, and down to the corner of her mouth. Blood ran from the gash into her eye. It stung like tears.

"Damn it! Look what you made me do! It's ruined!" He quivered with rage. His face turned a deep purplish-red, and his eyes bulged until it seemed they'd pop from the sockets. "You...you..." He pressed his lips together and puffed out his cheeks, like a stubborn toddler holding his breath. Then he exhaled and took a deep breath. "I'll have to start over." He placed his fingertips on her face. Magic washed over her, a prickling heat. The cut itched and stung as it began to heal.

She stared at his blank expression, and her heartbeat quickened. Now was her chance. He was unguarded, focused on summoning his Gift. If she struck now...

She clenched her hands—what was left of them—and pushed aside the mental fog, the drugged lethargy. She forced herself to focus. A voice in her head cried, *What are you doing? It's impossible! You've been sedated. You can't...*

She shoved the voice aside. If she didn't act now, Zander would become Drizell's slave. Drizell would erase his personality, his self, and once that happened he could never be restored to normal. She held onto that thought, clung to it as she focused all her energy and attention inward.

Her Gift surged up within her and erupted like a geyser. Tingling heat rolled outward from her center in waves, filled her body. She stared at the Jackal's face as she focused that energy into a single point, feeding her own fear and pain into it. She forged all those feelings into a narrow, sharp blade of power...then she drove it into his mind.

He screamed and fell backwards, hands pressed to his face. His knife clattered to the floor. She gritted her teeth and sat up, panting. She twisted the invisible knife deeper into his mind, and he staggered away from her, gasping. He fell to his knees, arms wrapped around his middle.

"Doesn't feel very nice, does it?" she said through clenched teeth. "Not much fun when you're on the receiving end."

He whimpered and looked over his shoulder, his eyes wide, the whites showing all around. He'd bitten his lower lip, or maybe his tongue, and blood dribbled down his chin.

"Please," he lisped. "Don't..."

She drew back, then plunged the white-hot knife into his mind again. She imagined it slamming into his brain, sizzling as it sliced through soft, wet tissue, burning through layer after layer as it drove toward his vulnerable core. He fell with a scream, his hands pressed against his face. He writhed on the floor, kicking his legs like a child in the throes of a tantrum. "It hurts," he wailed. "It hurrrrts!"

"Can't take it, can you?" she shouted above his screams. "You goddamn coward! How about this and *this*?" She sliced into his mind again and again, wielding her Gift like a sword. He howled, flailing...then went limp. He lay on the floor, motionless and silent.

She rose to her feet. Her legs trembled. She staggered and leaned against the wall, dizzy. Blood dribbled down the side of her face from the hole where her left ear should have been. Her eyes slid out of focus. She stared at the needle-hole in her arm and wondered what he'd shot into her and how long she'd have to endure the effects.

Her heartbeat was fast but weak. Her head swam. She took a deep breath and forced her scattered thoughts into order.

First thing first. She had to get out of this room.

She walked past the Jackal and glanced down. His eyes had rolled back so only a sliver of white showed between his lids. Blood and thick, frothy saliva covered his lips and chin. His wet, raspy breathing echoed through the silence. She looked at the knife on the floor and picked it up. She curled her fingers around the black hilt and briefly contemplated slitting his throat, then shoved the thought away, repulsed. She'd never killed anyone, and she didn't want to change that if she could help it. He wasn't worth it.

She drunk-walked to the door, feeling her way along the wall until her fingers closed around the doorknob. Shaking, she turned the knob, half-expecting it to be locked. But the door opened so fast she stumbled and almost fell. She stepped out of the room, into a narrow hallway lit by dim ceiling lamps. She looked to the right, then the left, wondering where she was.

A loud, wet snore sounded behind her. She tensed and looked over her shoulder. The Jackal twitched, then lay still again.

She bit her lip. She had no idea how long he'd be unconscious. She had to keep him here somehow, but the door didn't seem to have a lock.

After a moment, she walked back into the room—ignoring the instincts screaming at her to flee—and toward the chair in the corner, giving the Jackal's unconscious body a wide berth in case he was faking. She grabbed the chair, dragged it out of the room, shut the door and wedged the chair under the knob.

There. That might not keep him in there forever, but it would at least slow him down, give her a chance to get far away from him.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached out with her Gift. She felt the pulse of Eloria's Tear above her. She needed to go up, then. Where she found Eloria's Tear, she'd find Drizell. And hopefully Zander.

Okay, so there were a few holes in her plan, but she didn't have time to think of anything better. She needed to do something before Drizell turned Zander into a helpless zombie.

She made her way down the hall, still clutching the knife in her good hand, until she came to a set of stairs leading up. She gripped the rail with the three remaining fingers on her left hand and began her ascent.

A wave of dizziness washed over her, and she swayed on her feet. Sweat welled on her brow as black spots danced in her vision. She clutched the railing tighter and prayed she wouldn't pass out. A moment later, the dizziness passed, and she continued her slow, arduous journey up the stairs. Urgency pounded in her veins, but with her head fogged by blood-loss and sedatives, she dared not move too fast. If she passed out now, all was lost.

She came to a door, opened it a crack and peered out. Beyond, she saw the main entrance hall. No one in sight. She slipped through the door and crept down the hall. The fog in her head had begun to clear, and moving her legs no longer felt like wading through molasses. That was probably a good sign. Still, her eyes kept sliding in and out of focus as she wobbled across the hall toward the stairs at the end. The Tear called her like a beacon. With each pulse, its power breathed over her skin like warm wind, seeped through her pores and swirled through the hollows of her body.

She followed the Tear's call up the stairs, down another hall. She passed a door and heard something from beyond: a deep half-moan, half-growl, a sound of pain and frustration. She froze. Zander?

She pressed her ear to the door. At first, she heard nothing inside. Then a clink of chains. Her breath caught in her throat. Eloria's Tear wasn't behind that door, but there was someone inside. If it was him...

She gripped the knife-hilt tighter, threw caution aside and flung the door open.

A lavish room lay beyond. A huge, gilded cage stood in the room's center, and in the cage crouched Zander, wearing nothing but a loincloth and a heavy, gold collar. A gold chain ran between his manacled wrists. His clothes lay in a rumpled pile in a corner of the room, along with his sword and scabbard.

He stood quickly, bumping his head on the cage ceiling. "Wendy!" He leaned forward and gripped the bars, staring out at her with wide eyes. "Dear God."

"I must look wretched," she said and forced a smile. "I've never seen such a horrified look on your face."

"What have they done to you? Your ear...and your hand, what happened to your hand?"

"I'll be fine. I can have everything re-grown by a healer." She hoped she was telling the truth. Her ear might be salvageable, but the wounds on her hand had already closed, and once the skin had been re-grown, there wasn't much you could do. But she'd worry about that later. Hell, she'd be lucky if she was alive to worry about it later.

She approached the cage. "Thank God you're still you; I thought I might be too late. I need to get you out of this thing." She studied the cage door, and her gaze focused on a large, golden lock.

"I've tried to break it," he said, "but with my hands bound like this there's not much I can do. I don't understand why I can't snap these chains." He pulled on them. "They don't look very strong, but no matter what I do..."

"The metal's probably spell-strengthened." She set a hand on the lock. "But I don't feel any sealing spells on this. It's just an ordinary lock. Careless of her," she muttered. Her fingers tightened around the lock. She closed her eyes, tapped into her Gift and slipped a tendril of power into the keyhole, then felt around inside the lock until she heard it snap. The lock fell to the floor, and she pulled the cage door open. "Hold the chain taut," she said.

He held his hands out, the chain stretched tight between them. She gripped the knife-



hilt in both hands and drove the point down, but the gold links refused to snap. She took a deep breath, let her Gift flow down her arms and into the blade, and drove the point down again. The chain broke, and the links scattered across the floor with a chorus of tinkles.

He stepped out of the cage and pulled her into a tight embrace. "I thought I'd never see you again," he whispered.

She hugged him back, then straightened. She couldn't allow herself to relax. Not yet. "I'm okay now. Mostly, anyway. We need to get out of here before Drizell..." She heard a footstep behind her and tensed.

"Before I what?" asked a cold, clear voice.

Wendy whirled around.

Drizell stood in the doorway, one hand on her hip, her eyes dark with anger. Eloria's Tear sparkled on a silver chain around her neck. Her eyes focused on Wendy, and her lip lifted in an expression somewhere between a sneer and a snarl, showing a row of small, pearl-like teeth. "How the hell did you escape?"

Wendy gripped the knife and faced Drizell, heart hammering. "Your henchman's not very bright," she said.

"What did you do to him?"

"Nothing permanent. Your concern is touching. I didn't realize you cared about him so much."

Drizell chuckled without humor. "I must admit, I've developed a certain fondness for the Jackal. He's like a pet. If he was careless enough to let you escape, however, he'll have to be disciplined." She took a step toward them. "I am not so careless."

Zander lunged and grabbed his sword. He raised it and spun to face Drizell, all in one smooth movement. Then he froze. His eyes went wide. He grunted, muscles trembling.

Drizell sighed and shook her head. "He doesn't learn, does he?"

"But this time you're alone," said Wendy. "You can't hold us both at once. I know how the Gift works. To use it on me, you'll have to let go of him first."

"Maybe. But I can take you out even without the Gift." She took another step forward.

Wendy's breathing quickened. She thrust the knife out. "Stay back. I'm armed."

"Don't be silly. You're injured and obviously disoriented, and I've studied the art of hand-to-hand combat for years. That little knife is no threat to me. Even if you could somehow get close enough to use it, you wouldn't have the guts. Do you really think you could kill me?"

"I think I could," she said. "In fact, I want to. Just give me an excuse, and I'll do it."

Drizell's face tightened. Then she smiled and held out a hand. Her voice softened, turned silky and persuasive. "Come now. This doesn't have to end in violence. I'm a reasonable woman. We can work something out. But I won't bargain when someone is pointing a weapon at me. Give me the knife."

Wendy shook her head and tightened her grip on the knife-hilt.

Drizell's face hardened. "Put it down, you little fool. You know you can't win. You're swaying on your feet as we speak. Another minute, and you'll pass out from blood loss. Tell you what? If you put the knife down now, I'll let you go."

"Yeah, right."

"On my honor," said Drizell. "What do I want with you now, anyway? I have what I

want." She stroked Eloria's Tear. "If that fool Jackal let you slip through his fingers, that's his problem. He can't complain to me. Be reasonable, dear. Put the knife down and go home. You can forget this whole mess."

"I'm not leaving without Zander."

"That's too bad, because I want him."

Wendy's teeth ground together. "Why do you do this?"

Drizell blinked. "Do what?"

"You're already filthy rich. You have everything you need. Why are you so desperate for more that you're willing to hurt people, kill people, to get what you want? What kind of void are you trying to fill?"

"Oh, now you're going to psychoanalyze me? That's cute."

"It just makes no sense. You don't need him. Wouldn't it be easier to just let us go? Would it kill you to do something decent for once?"

Drizell sighed. "Oh, Wendy. You're so very young. You don't really understand how the world works, do you? Well, I'll give you a little lesson." She wet her lips. "Life isn't fair. The only rule in this world is 'take what you can.' I learned that a long time ago. You think if you're honest and kind, you'll be rewarded somehow? Think again. The toughest, meanest bitch is the one who comes out on top. That's the world we live in."

"What does any of that have to do with us?"

"Just this: I never back down and I never give up." Her eyes gleamed bright with madness. "When I want something, I get it, through whatever means necessary. If you start a fight with me, I will win, no matter what it takes. Even if it costs my life."

"You'd rather die than not get the new toy you want?"

"I'd rather die than lose to a silly little girl like you."

So much for reasoning with her. She was crazier than the Jackal. "Well, I'm not going to hand him over to you. Either we both leave or I die here, fighting you."

"Is he really worth your life? He's just your bodyguard. Unless..." Her eyes narrowed. Then she flung her head back and burst out laughing. "You have feelings for him, don't you?" She wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. "Oh, that's too rich. You're in love with a chimera? A half-man? A freak?"

That was it.

Wendy roared and charged, knife clutched tight in both hands.

Drizell's eyes widened. She thrust out a hand. Something slammed into Wendy, as if she'd hit an invisible barrier, and she flew backwards through the air. Her shoulder hit the wall with a jarring impact, and she dropped to the floor, head spinning.

Drizell stalked toward her, heels clicking on the floor, face contorted in rage. "I would have let you go, but you just sealed your fate," she said. "Your life ends tonight, bitch." A barb of magic pierced the base of Wendy's skull, freezing her muscles. Drizell raised one stiletto-heeled foot high above Wendy's face. Wendy tried to roll away and found she couldn't. She shut her eyes—the only thing she could still move—and wondered how long it would hurt.

Then she heard a roar, followed by a short, strangled scream. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Drizell and Zander stood over her, Zander's sword sheathed to the hilt in Drizell's chest. The blade's bloody tip sprouted from her back. Drizell stared at him, eyes wide, mouth open. Her painted lips trembled. She looked down at the blade buried between her

breasts and coughed wetly. Blood dribbled down her chin.

Zander yanked his sword free, and Drizell fell to the floor in a heap next to Wendy.

Wendy scooted away from the body, relieved to find she could move again. Drizell's glassy, empty green eyes stared at her. She looked up at Zander, who stared down at her. Clad in only a loincloth, with his sword dripping and his eyes wild, he looked like a barbarian warlord. A chill ran down Wendy's spine. Zander wiped his blade off on Drizell's dress, then crouched and looked deeply into Wendy's eyes. His face softened. "Are you all right?"

"I think so."

He smoothed her hair. His gaze moved to the bloody hole where her ear had been and his face darkened. "He did this?"

"Yeah. Don't worry. I dealt with the Jackal. He'll be out of commission for awhile."

"I should have been there to protect you," Zander said quietly. "This is my fault. I wasn't prepared."

"It's okay," Wendy said and smiled, though her lips trembled. "We're safe now. You saved me."

"It was a close thing, though. Far too close." He looked at Drizell's body. "That woman was a lunatic."

She let out a shaky laugh. "I could have told you that."

He helped her to her feet and pulled her into a tight hug. Wendy's gaze moved back to Drizell's corpse, and she shuddered. Looking at those empty eyes, she felt an unexpected twinge of pity. She wondered what had happened to Drizell, if she'd been born deranged and power-hungry or if something had twisted her. Either way, she'd led a cold, empty life. For who could love such a monster?

"You should probably get dressed," Wendy finally told Zander. "We shouldn't stay here."

He retrieved his clothes from the corner and hastily donned them while she stared at Eloria's Tear, still resting between Drizell's breasts. She couldn't just leave it here. Steeling herself, she reached down, grabbed the silver chain and yanked. The chain snapped. She clutched Eloria's Tear, and it flared with a brilliant, white light. She gasped. The Tear pulsed in her hand like a living heart as a tingling warmth traveled down her arm and through her body. The healed stumps on her left hand glowed with white light. She watched, astonished, as her missing fingers re-grew. She reached up and touched her newly formed left ear.

She turned to see Zander, now fully dressed, staring at her in awe. "You used its powers on yourself."

She shook her head and stared at the Tear, mouth dry. "I didn't do anything. It healed me on its own."

He approached and tentatively touched her left hand. She wiggled the fingers and let out a small, breathless laugh of astonished relief. Whole again, she thought. As if that ugly incident in the torture chamber had never happened. Except she knew it had, and she knew she'd relive it in her nightmares again and again. But at least she wouldn't have to look at a reminder in the mirror every day.

She heard footsteps and looked up. The butler, Nigel, stood in the doorway. "Excuse me, ma'am, but I heard..." His gaze fell on the corpse, but his dour, placid expression never wavered. "Oh dear." He clucked and shook his head, as if he'd found spilled

raspberry jam instead of his employer's bloody body. "I knew this would happen someday. Poor girl."

"Poor girl?" Wendy repeated, incredulous. "That's *Eva Drizell*."

Zander glared at him. "You never saw us," he said, his voice a rough growl. "Got it?"

"Understood," said the butler. "I heard a commotion and came to see what the trouble was. When I arrived, you were already gone."

Zander pointed a clawed finger. "Make sure that's what you tell the police, because if they come after us, I'll assume you were the one who tipped them off."

"I assure you, I don't want any trouble. My late employer left me a tidy sum in her will, as she despised her family and had no friends. My only wish is to retire quietly, buy a house in Pocopo, and wash my hands of this messy business for good. I'm getting too old for all this nonsense."

"Sounds like a great idea," she said.

The butler left, muttering to himself.

She glanced at Drizell's corpse and gulped. "We'd better get out of here."

Zander took her hand. "Let's go."

They hurried out of the room, crept down the stairs and across the wide, empty entrance hall. Moonlight spilled in through the windows, washing everything in a cold, ghostly light. He opened the front door a crack and peered out. He nodded to her, and they slipped out into the night. Still holding hands, they ran across the manicured lawn and down the empty street, two dark shapes in the shadows.

They stopped on a street corner, panting. She looked up at him. His eyes caught the glow of a nearby streetlamp and shone in the darkness, reflective retinas flashing as he scanned the streets. "We're lucky. I don't think anyone saw us."

She bit her lower lip. She wanted to believe that they wouldn't get in trouble for this—they'd only been defending themselves against a ruthless lunatic, after all—but though Drizell had killed, maimed and tortured countless people, her official record was squeaky clean. Her powerful family would pull strings to make sure Drizell came out looking blameless in this, too...and they'd make hunting down her killers a top priority. Even if Drizell hadn't gotten along with her family, there was little doubt in Wendy's mind that they'd want revenge. "What should we do, Zander? We killed someone."

He shook his head. "No."

"But..."

"We didn't kill her. I did. You have nothing to fear."

"No! I'm not going to let you take the blame for this, Zander. I'm the one who got us involved in this mess. If not for me—"

He lay a finger over her lips. "I've killed before," he said. "I'm a mercenary, remember? I already live in the shadows. This doesn't change anything for me. There's no reason for you to share the blame for her death, especially when you had nothing to do with it."

She bit her lower lip. "But I was here. They'll find my blood. They'll question me. What should I say?"

"You'll tell them the truth." He stroked her hair from her face. "You've done nothing wrong, Wendy. She's the criminal. She kidnapped your sister and had you tortured. Even if they force you to take a truth potion, they can't extract any information to use against you, because you're innocent."

Tears filled her eyes. "I won't give them your name. I swear it. If they arrested you, I would never forgive myself."

He smiled. "What makes you think they can catch me? I'm an expert at not being found."

"What will you do?"

He hesitated. "I can't stay in Garna. I'll have to disappear for awhile."

Her chest tightened. She'd been afraid of that. "How long?"

He looked away. "I don't know. Until the investigation is over, at least."

She seized his hand. "Promise me you'll come back."

"Wendy—"

"Promise me!" Tears stung her eyes. "I won't lose you."

With his thumb, he wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'll return as soon as I can." He pulled her into his arms and held her tight.

She buried her face against his shoulder and clung to him. Her tears dampened his cloak.

He cradled her face between his hands and stared into her eyes. "I love you," he said. "Never forget that." His lips pressed against hers, and for a moment, she forgot everything—her torture at the Jackal's hands, the sight of Drizell's glassy, dead eyes, her fear for Zander. There was nothing but the heat of his mouth on hers, the pressure of his hands on her face, the scent of his skin, warm and earthy and male. She lost herself in his kiss.

Then he pulled away, staring into the darkness. She heard the clatter of a coach's wheels. He reached beneath his cloak, pulled out a few shakas and pressed the coins into her palm. "I'll return," he whispered. He kissed her again—a hard, fierce, brief kiss—then turned and vanished into the darkness.

"Zander!" she cried. But he was already gone.

The coach rolled up beside her and stopped. "Need a ride home, Miss?" asked the coachman.

She stared into the darkness.

"Miss?"

She took a deep breath. She needed to get home. She needed to contact Julie and make sure she was okay. "Yes, please," she said and climbed into the coach. The driver cracked the reins, and the horses broke into a trot.

She sat, staring numbly out the window. She felt something pulse in her hands and glanced down to see Eloria's Tear glowing faintly. She'd completely forgotten she had it. I should have given it to Zander, she thought. But of course, it was too late. She swallowed the lump in her throat and pressed the Tear to her heart.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

She looked up. "1703 Phoenix Street," she murmured.

The driver peered over one shoulder. "Beggin' your pardon, but are you all right? You look a bit pale."

She tucked Eloria's Tear beneath her shirt, hiding its light. "I'm fine."

\* \* \* \*

"What a crazy week it's been," said Julie. She sat at the table in the back of Wendy's shop, a mug of hot tea between her hands. Dark circles ringed her eyes, but otherwise she

looked remarkably well, considering what she'd been through. Of course, she'd had a few days to recover. "Looking back on it, it seems so unreal. Like a nightmare."

"I'm just glad it's over," said Wendy.

"I still can't believe you got mixed up with someone like Drizell. You should have told me sooner."

Wendy winced. Julie had already delivered a long, blistering lecture on the subject, and Wendy had blushed and squirmed through the whole thing like an embarrassed ten-year-old. Julie was her little sister, but at times, she made Wendy feel very young. "I didn't want to get you involved in my mess. I thought you'd be safer if you didn't know. I was wrong." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Julie. I really screwed up. I think I knew from the beginning that getting involved with Drizell was a bad idea, but I never dreamed it would end like this. I never thought she'd target you."

Julie laid her hands over Wendy's. "Hopefully you learned something from this. Next time you're in trouble, tell me. Don't try to shoulder every burden yourself."

"Don't worry. I'm never going to get into that kind of trouble again. I'm staying far away from lenders."

Julie leaned back in her chair and sipped her tea. "At least that particular lender will never hurt anyone again. Doesn't surprise me that someone wanted her dead." She paused. "You really didn't see any of it?"

Wendy shook her head. "Like I said, I barely remember what happened. It's all a blur. The healer said that's not uncommon. When the mind is under a lot of stress, it can't absorb things properly."

"The timing is pretty remarkable. I mean, the assassin arriving on the scene just as Drizell was about to hand you to that psycho."

Wendy tensed.

"It's one of those things that makes you believe in God, you know?" said Julie.

Wendy swallowed, her mouth dry. "Yeah," she said. Of course, she knew divine intervention had nothing to do with it, but she couldn't exactly tell Julie that Zander had killed Drizell. Or that Wendy herself had been directly involved. "I'm just glad I managed to grab Eloria's Tear before I ran out of there," she said. "I'm sure Drizell could have thought up some nasty purpose for even a holy artifact."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to hang onto it for awhile. Eventually, I'll probably donate it to St. Eloria's Hospital. Pretty appropriate, don't you think?"

Julie's eyes widened. "Are you kidding?"

"What's wrong with that? Why shouldn't I donate it? Since Drizell's dead, my debts have pretty much been cancelled."

"It's just not like you. I mean, imagine how much you could get if you auctioned it off. Do you know how many rich collectors would love to get their hands on that thing? They'd pay you anything, absolutely anything."

"Well, that was my original plan. But since I got home, I've been reconsidering. I've seen personally what Eloria's Tear can do, what it's capable of in the wrong hands. Selling it to the highest bidder is too risky. At least this way I know it'll be used to help people, and not just for some power-hungry bastard's agenda. Makes sense, right?"

"Sure. I'm just surprised, I guess."

Wendy rolled her eyes. "Am I really so greedy and heartless that you have to be

astonished whenever I do something nice?"

"No, of course not. But after all the trouble you went through for that rock, I'd think you would want something in return. You were gone for a long time."

Wendy winced. "Don't remind me. All that trudging through the forest, getting filthy and sweaty. Not to mention the lack of indoor privies. Ugh. I appreciate modern plumbing a lot more now, let me tell you."

Julie laughed. "Just don't tell Mom about your adventures. I'm afraid she'll have a heart attack."

"Don't worry, I've got it all figured out. I'm going to tell her I found Eloria's Tear in an antique store." She raised her tea mug to her lips.

"Hey, whatever happened to that guy?"

Wendy froze. "Who?"

"You know. The one with the cloak and hood. The one who was with you when you rescued me."

Her throat tightened. "He's gone."

"Gone where?"

"I don't know," she said. She looked away to hide the tears welling in her eyes. "But I don't think he's coming back."

"Are you okay?" Julie sounded puzzled. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, I'm fine. It's for the best, really." She forced a bright smile. Judging by the look on Julie's face, it wasn't remotely convincing, but she really wasn't in the mood to talk about Zander. "Hey, what do you want for dinner? I was thinking we could stop by Mrs. Muggen's and pick up a lamb steak. Maybe some plum wine and lemon cake to go with it. My treat."

"You should hold onto your money. You don't want to get into trouble again."

"I know. Believe me, I know. But I feel like celebrating tonight. I think I can afford to splurge a little."

"Well, okay." Julie smiled. "What are we celebrating?"

"We're alive," said Wendy. "That's cause enough for celebration."

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, after Julie had gone home, Wendy retreated to her room and buried her face against a pillow. Sobs shook her shoulders.

Pathetic, she thought. Crying in bed like a thirteen-year-old.

He'll come back, she thought. He promised. But a voice in her mind whispered, he's never coming back. And could she blame him? The police were still looking for Drizell's killer. They were questioning anyone remotely suspicious, forcing people to swallow truth potion before the interrogation. Wendy had mixed up a special brew to neutralize the effects and guzzled it on the morning before her own interrogation. She was pretty sure they'd bought her story, but she knew from newspaper reports that they had the Jackal in custody, knew they were planning to question him, too. He had seen Zander, and there weren't many other people who fit his description. At the very least, the police would know Zander had been there that night.

Unless...

An idea sparked in her mind. She stared at the ceiling, heart pounding, as the plan took shape in her head. It was crazy, audacious and risky. She'd be in big trouble if she

got caught. But it might work. She smiled.



## Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, Wendy dressed in a dark cloak and black gloves. She left the shop, stopped in a clothing boutique and bought a wide-brimmed velvet lady's hat covered with black silk flowers, the sort of thing she would normally never wear. A thick black veil hung from the brim, hiding her face.

She left the shop and walked down the street, face downcast, gloved hands folded in front of her. A coach stopped, and the door opened. "Where to, Miss?"

"Arkez Asylum, please."

The driver raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. She got in and sat with her hands folded in her lap.

The driver dropped her off in front of a foreboding stone building. Barred windows overlooked a bleak, gray yard. She walked up the path to the front door and entered the gloomy lobby. A lamp flickered on the desk where a heavysset man sat, his bulk squeezed into an undersized chair as he scribbled something into a ledger.

"Hello, sir," she said, keeping her voice high-pitched, soft and breathy, the opposite of her natural speaking voice. "I'm here to see one of the inmates."

The man looked up. His face was broad and pasty, with a bushy red mustache and small, bored eyes. "You're not carrying any magical artifacts, are you? You know they're not allowed in the asylum."

"Yes, I know."

"All right. Who are you here to see?"

"The one known as the Jackal."

He sat up straighter and squinted. "What's your name?"

"Debra. Debra Tanner."

"Why do you want to see him? You a relative of his? He claims to have no family."

She took a deep breath. "I'm...his lover."

The guard's jaw dropped, then snapped shut. "You don't say."

"I haven't seen him for some time," she continued, "but when I heard he'd been arrested and brought to Arkez, I simply had to come here." She kept her voice mousy and meek, her hands folded in front of her. "May I see him?"

He scratched his head. "No offense, lady, but you've got strange tastes. That guy's got a dozen counts of murder to his name. He liked to cut off pieces of his victims and keep them as souvenirs. When we found the room he'd been living in, it stank like a slaughterhouse. He had piles of cut-off hands in the closet and a necklace made of nipples hanging from his bedpost. Are you sure this is the man you're looking for?"

"Yes, I've heard the awful things they're saying about him. But I simply can't believe my Jack-Jack would hurt a soul. I'm sure this little misunderstanding will be cleared up in no time."

The man muttered something and shook his head. "I wouldn't get your hopes up. After his interrogation tomorrow, they're sending in a psi-magician to mind-wipe him. Though with psychopaths as deeply crazy as that one, sometimes even a full mind-wipe doesn't get rid of their homicidal tendencies."

Her heartbeat quickened. She'd come just in time. "Just let me see him, please. I need

to talk to him. Alone, if possible."

"Well, all right. I'll need you to sign this." He turned the thick ledger and pointed to a black page. "Just your name, the date, your address, and your relationship to the inmate."

She hesitated. Would they be able to identify her by her handwriting? No time to worry about that. It was too late to back out. She grabbed the pen and printed "Debra Tanner" in tiny, cramped letters that looked nothing like her usual handwriting. Next to it, she wrote a fake address.

The man shut the ledger and stood with a grunt. "I'll escort you to his cell, but you can't go in. You know that, right? It's against regulations. You'll have to talk to him through the window."

Damn. The door would almost certainly be warded to keep any magic from passing in or out of the cell. That put a crimp in her plans. "Couldn't you let me have just a minute or two alone in the cell with him?" She wrung her gloved hands. "If he really is going to be mind-wiped, this is my last chance to give him a proper goodbye."

He frowned. "Lady, this guy is dangerous. My supervisor made it clear I wasn't to let anyone in his cell without authorization."

"Jack-Jack wouldn't hurt me," she said. "Please, sir." She sniffled, pulled a silk hankie from her handbag and dabbed at imaginary tears beneath her veil. "I'd be so grateful if you could do this one tiny little thing for me."

He averted his eyes and tugged his shirt-collar. "I don't make the rules."

She'd been hoping to pull at his heartstrings, but maybe making him uncomfortable would work just as well. She buried her face in her hankie, snuffling, and began to bawl in loud, fake, hooting sobs. "It isn't fair!" she wailed. "All I want is a chance to hold him in my arms before I lose him forever! I want my Jack-Jack!" Oh, yuck, she thought. Had she really just said that? "Please, oh, please!"

"Listen..."

She stomped a foot. "I won't leave until you give me a few minutes alone in the cell with him!" she cried, her voice shrill with feigned hysteria.

He sighed, palming his face. "All right. All right. Just do me one favor."

She sniffled and hiccupped. "Wh-what?"

He pointed to a sharp silver letter opener on the desk. "Grab that and hold it to my back."

She blinked. "Why?"

"If I leave you alone in there with that psychopath and he kills you, I don't want to be blamed for your death. This way, I can say you threatened me, so I had no choice. Get it?"

"Oh." She hesitated, then picked up the letter opener. He turned around, and she pressed the tip to his back.

He put his hands up. "Okay, I surrender. Follow me."

"Thank you, sir."

He opened the door behind the desk, revealing a dingy brick hallway lined with barred cells. A sour smell of urine pervaded the air, and her nose wrinkled beneath the veil. She resisted the urge to ask if the inmates' cells were ever cleaned. That was something Wendy Martin would do, not meek crybaby Debra Tanner.

"Don't make eye contact," said the guard. He led her down the hall. Shrieks, laughter and catcalls followed them.

At the far end of the hall was a thick, solid iron door. He pulled a ring of keys from under his jacket and unlocked the door. He pushed it open, and the hinges squealed. Another hall lay beyond, narrower and dimly lit. At the hall's end was a single door with a barred window.

"We keep him isolated." He gave her a tight, hard smile. "The other inmates are scared of him."

A cold finger stroked her heart, and goose bumps rose on her arms. She really had no desire to come face-to-face with the man who'd lately played a starring role in her nightmares. But she'd made up her mind to go through with this.

The guard led her down the shadowy hall, to the cell door. She saw that she'd been right: someone had carved a six-pointed star, a powerful ward, into the door. Magic hummed in the stone floor beneath her feet.

Heart pounding, she peered through the barred window, into a tiny, brick cell. A cot stood against one wall, a chamber pot nearby. A single lamp provided the only light. There were no windows.

The Jackal sat in a corner in drab, gray clothes, his dark hair matted. He looked up. Glittering, black eyes stared at her. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

The guard shifted uncomfortably. "This is Ms. Debra Tanner," he said. "She's here to visit you. You recognize her, I take it?"

A sly smile crossed the Jackal's face.

She tensed. For a moment, she was certain he'd blow her ruse. Then he said, "Of course. How could I forget sweet Debra?"

"I'm going to let her into the cell," the guard said, and the Jackal's face lit up. "Behave yourself, all right? Promise?"

"Cross my heart," he said.

The guard pulled a brass key from his pocket. He unlocked the door, shoved Wendy in, then slammed the door shut. She heard the lock click. "I'll be back in ten minutes to let you out," the guard said.

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her dry mouth. She listened to the guard's retreating footsteps, the resounding boom as the hallway door banged shut behind him.

The Jackal stood and laced his hands behind his back. He licked his lips, and she wondered why she'd thought this plan would ever work. She may as well have jumped into a cage with a hungry lion. What if her magic wasn't strong enough? She'd overpowered him once, but that didn't mean she could do it again. Her heart thumped against her ribs and sweat trickled down her sides. She wanted to fling herself against the door, pound it with her fists and scream for the guard to let her out. But of course, it was too late for that. Panicking wouldn't do her any good, so she took a deep breath and steeled herself.

"Wendy Martin," he said. "What a pleasant surprise. Did you come just to say hello? Or did you have something a bit more intimate in mind?"

Her grip tightened on the letter opener's handle. "Stay back."

He lunged. She rammed her elbow into his sternum, and he staggered back. While he was still recovering, she kneed his groin. He dropped like a sack of bricks. Panting, she planted a foot on his chest and pointed the letter opener at his throat. "Don't move," she said.

He glared at her. "Go on and kill me," he growled. "Have your revenge. It doesn't

matter. They're planning to mind-wipe me tomorrow anyway."

"I didn't come here to kill you."

"Then what?"

She slowed her breathing and reached out with her Gift and her newly developed psi magic. With a tendril of power, she brushed the edge of his mind, and he froze. His eyes widened, and Wendy smiled. The boost juice she'd taken that morning had paid off.

He struggled. She pressed down harder with her foot, and he grunted with pain. She found the node controlling his willpower and seized it. He went stiff. His jaw clenched, and the corner of his eye twitched. She tightened her grip, digging her claws into the meat of his mind. His face went slack.

She removed her foot from his chest. He remained on his back, motionless. "Listen to me and listen well," she said. "Very soon, they're going to interrogate you. They're going to ask you about the night Drizell was murdered." He stared at her with empty, glassy eyes. Drool glistened on his lips. "You're going to tell them that you killed her. See, you had a thing for her, but she spurned your advances, and you just couldn't take it. You ran her through with a sword and fled the scene. Got it?"

A small nod.

She stared into his blank eyes. "What are you going to tell them?"

"I killed her," he murmured, his voice soft and distant. "I killed that bitch. She thought she was too good for me. I cut out her heart and put it in a box..."

"No. You didn't do anything with her heart. It's still in her body."

"But I want to keep it."

"No. You were so angry that this time, you didn't even take trophies. You just ran her through with a sword and left her there. Now, one more time. When they asked 'what do you know about the murder of Eva Drizell,' what do you say?"

"I killed her. Ran her through and left her to rot. Stuck-up bitch thought she was too good for me."

"Very good. You're a fast learner." She smiled. The expression felt hard and cold on her face. "Now, you're going to forget all about this conversation. After I leave the cell, you won't even remember I was here. But you'll remember what I told you."

She heard approaching footsteps.

"Stand up," she whispered.

He stood, head bowed and arms hanging limp at his sides.

The guard's face appeared in the barred window. "Okay, Ms. Tanner. Time's up." He unlocked the door.

She released her grip on the Jackal's mind. He raised his head and blinked. A puzzled look flickered across his face.

"Bye, Jack-Jack," said Wendy. She walked out of the cell. The guard locked the door behind her, and she followed him down the long, dimly lit hall, back into the lobby. She pulled her black kerchief from her pocket and dabbed her eyes, sniffing. "Thank you, sir," she said in a small, quivery voice. "You can't know how much this means to me."

He muttered something noncommittal.

She left Arkez Asylum, walked across the barren yard, across the street and around the corner. "Whew!" She flipped back her veil and wiped sweat from her brow.

She'd done it.

Now she just had to hope the guard wouldn't get curious and look her up in the

Registry, or he'd figure out there was no such person as Debra Tanner. And if he told anyone about her visit, someone might put two and two together and realize the witness's mind had been tampered with. Of course, even if they suspected, no one would know who had done it. No one had gotten a clear look at her face. She'd made sure of that.

She took off her flowered hat and black gloves, shoved them into the nearest trash bin and kept walking, heart pounding with exhilaration. She'd done it. If her plan worked, the case would be closed by tomorrow, and Zander would be safe.

Now, she just had to find him.

\* \* \* \*

Wendy returned to the shop to see a black carriage parked outside. Two stocky geldings swished their tails, their breath streaming from their nostrils in white plumes. On the side of the carriage, the words BUREAU OF MAGICAL ARTIFACT AND POTION CONTROL had been stenciled in white.

Her stomach tightened. Exactly the sight she'd always dreaded. "Excuse me," she called to the driver. "What are you doing here?"

The tall, lanky man glanced at her. "Not my place to say, Miss."

"This is my shop. I want to know what's going on."

"You'll have to talk to Mr. Bridle. He's inside right now."

She walked toward the shop and heard voices arguing behind the door. There was Julie's voice, raised in anger, and a man's, irritated and fussy, but she couldn't understand what they were saying. Wendy entered the shop to see Julie standing with her fists on her hips, facing a short, rotund man in a dust-brown suit and a little round hat. The man had a monocle and sported a large, bushy salt and pepper mustache.

"This is ridiculous!" Julie's cheeks blazed with color, and her brown eyes flashed. Wendy rarely saw her so riled up about anything. "My sister risked her life for that stone! And now you're just going to march in here and take it? You may as well be wearing a mask and holding a dagger to my throat, because this is a robbery!"

"For goodness' sake, don't be so dramatic," said the man. "You and your sister will be duly compensated."

"That's not the point! What gives you the right?"

"This gives me the right," said the man, and held up a piece of paper with a wax seal stamped on the bottom. "The Bureau of Magical Artifact and Potion control has issued..."

Wendy cleared her throat.

Both Julie and the mustachioed man whirled to face her. "Wendy!" Julie cried.

"Ms. Martin, I presume," said the man. "I'm Robert Bridle, Secretary of the Bureau of Magical Artifact and Potion Control. How do you do?"

"I was doing great until you showed up. What's this about you taking Eloria's Tear?"

His mustache twitched. "I can see you're both determined to be difficult about this. Very well. Yes, I'm here to seize possession of the Tear. We received reports from several citizens who sensed a strong magic in the area, so we decided to do some investigation. The Tear is a level five artifact, clearly too powerful to be in the hands of a citizen. We will compensate you with a sum of forty-thousand shakas, as I've been trying to explain to this young lady. I think it quite generous."

Julie scowled. "She could get twice that much if she found the right buyer, but even

if you were offering her a hundred-thousand, it wouldn't change anything. It's hers."

"Nonsense," said the man, and puffed out his chest like an irate turkey. "It belongs to the proper authorities. You two would have no idea how to use it, anyway."

Wendy clenched her fists. "Do you have any idea what sort of hell I went through to get that thing?"

"As I said, you will be duly compensated. We're prepared to negotiate—"

"I don't care how much you offer me. I'm not handing it over."

"I don't think you realize the position you're in, Ms. Martin. You have no choice in the matter. If you don't cooperate, we'll have the police here in a few hours. They'll search the place from top to bottom. They'll find it, wherever you've hidden it, and then you'll be looking at a fat fine for disorderly conduct and refusal to cooperate with the law. You might even get some jail time. In the long run, you won't accomplish anything by resisting, so why don't you just make this easier on both of us?"

Wendy took a deep breath. She wanted to scream curses at the man, but getting pissed wouldn't help anything, and it would probably hurt. *Think*. If she could just hold onto it long enough to find and help Zander... "Listen. Can I keep the Tear for just a little while longer? Say, six weeks?"

His brow furrowed. "What exactly do you need it for?"

"It's not for me. It's for someone else, only...I don't know where he is right now. Just give me a little time, and then I'll turn over the Tear without any complaints, I promise." Of course, at that point its powers would be gone, but they didn't need to know that.

"I'm sorry, but I simply can't accept that," said Bridle. "I have my orders. I came here to retrieve Eloria's Tear, and that's what I intend to do. Now, where is it?"

She scowled. "You can have it over my dead body."

"Well!" The man placed his hands on his hips and sniffed. "I see we're going to do this the hard way. I'll give you one last chance to cooperate. I warn you, Ms. Martin, you do not want me as an enemy!"

"Oh, please. There's nothing you can do. You don't have a warrant to search my place."

"No, but I can easily get one."

"Fine, then get one. But until you can show me a warrant, you have no right to be here. This is my store, so get out."

"I'll be back, mark my word!" He shook a finger at her, then walked out of the shop, huffing and muttering under his breath. The coach door slammed, then the horses broke into a trot, and the coach rolled away.

"Snooty bastard." She kicked the wall, stubbing her toe, and winced.

"I'm so sorry, Wendy," said Julie. A tear ran down her cheek. "After everything you went through, to think they could just..."

"They aren't getting the Tear."

Realization dawned on her face. "You're going to hide it somewhere outside the house before they get back, aren't you?"

"No. I'm going to take it and leave the city."

Julie's eyes widened. "Where will you go?"

"I don't know yet. I just know that I can't let them have it, not after everything I went through...and I don't trust those Bureau guys. Who knows what they're planning to use it for?"

"But..."

"Wait here." Wendy ran up the stairs and pulled the wooden box out from under her bed. When she'd first hidden the Tear inside, she'd carved a ward into the lid to mask its power, but apparently it hadn't been enough.

She flipped open the box to confirm that Eloria's Tear was still inside. Then she snapped the lid shut, tucked the box under her arm, threw some clothes into a pack, grabbed her broomstick, and went downstairs. Julie waited, wringing her hands. "When they come back, tell them you tried to stop me," said Wendy. "There's no reason you should get in trouble for this, too."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes. I'm sure. It'll take him a few hours to fill out all the paperwork he needs for a warrant. I can be well out of the city by the time they get back here."

"I can see I'm not going to change your mind about this." Julie hugged her tight. "Just be careful. Please."

She returned the hug, gave Julie a reassuring smile and left the shop, wondering if she'd gone crazy. They'd probably send patrols after her. They'd track her down. Even if they didn't, she'd have to come back to the city at some point, and when she did, she'd probably be in a lot of trouble.

Oh well. She'd deal with that when the time came. She'd fought dragons, bandits, chimeras, a crazy sorcerer and Eva Drizell, and she'd defeated them all. She could handle a few bureaucrats. Right?

She mounted her broomstick and took off. Soon, the city lay behind her, and she sailed over an expanse of farmland and fields. Now she just had to find Zander and give him the Tear. "If I were Zander, where would I go?" she murmured.

Then it came to her. He would go to Threed's lair and free the captive chimeras. She turned her broom and flew south, toward the Kanti Desert.

When she arrived, the lair was empty. All that remained of the lab was a few empty tanks and pieces of smashed machinery lying on the floor ... but there was no trace of Zander. She'd arrived too late.

Frustrated, she took to the air again and left the desert behind. As she sailed over green fields, she spotted a two-legged, furry form walking along the road below. She landed by the roadside and called out, "Hello."

The traveler stopped and turned to face her. He was a tall, lean man covered from head to toe in shaggy brown fur. Golden-green eyes peered out of a catlike face. He carried a satchel over one shoulder and wore only a ragged pair of trousers. "Hello," he said warily.

"Did you come from the underground lab, by any chance?"

He tensed. "What's it to ya?" His voice was deep and growly, but it somehow sounded very young.

"Nothing. I just wondered if you've seen a man with blue scales. He'd probably be wearing a cloak and hood. Name's Zander."

The cat-man's eyes widened. "He freed us. He led us out of the desert. Do you know him?"

She nodded. "Can you tell me where he went?"

He scratched the tuft of fur atop his head. "Said he was headed toward the Edge Mountains. Don't know any more than that."

“Thanks.” She straddled her broom and shot skyward. It wasn’t much to go on, but it was something.



## Chapter Sixteen

Thunder rumbled.

"Great," muttered Wendy as she trudged through the forest. Mud sucked at her boots. The first few, cold raindrops hit the back of her neck and trickled down the collar of her tunic, making her shiver. She looked up at the dark clouds massing overhead.

Her stomach gurgled. She'd run out of dried food yesterday, and she didn't know how to set snares. Her breakfast that day had been a handful of wild berries, followed by large helpings of nothing for lunch and dinner.

She'd been following the trail for hours. There wasn't much to go on. A snapped twig here, a bent leaf there, the occasional, faint boot-print...and once, a shining, silvery hair caught on a maple branch. That single hair, and a tip from a local farmer who'd seen someone in a hood and cloak, gave her hope that the person she was tracking might be Zander. Maybe it wasn't enough to prove it, but damned if she was going to give up now.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and called, "Zander!" The echoes of her voice faded away into silence. She sighed and raked a hand through her damp hair. She'd been calling his name and stumbling through the woods all day. She was probably attracting every robber, rapist and wild animal for miles around.

She stopped to lean against a tree, then glanced at the ground and saw the shallow impression of a boot in the mud. Her heartbeat quickened, and she broke into a run.

Ahead, she spotted a dark opening in a hillside. A faint orange glow emanated from within. She held her breath and crept closer, peering into the darkness. Roots squiggled through curved, earthen walls. Once, perhaps, the hollow had served as the den of some predator, a wolf or a bear. Now, a campfire flickered inside, its light dancing on the walls. A dark form sat with its back to her.

She cleared her throat.

The form twisted around to face her. Yellow eyes shone in the darkness.

"Zander." She smiled. "Thank God."

His eyes widened, and his shoulders went rigid beneath his cloak. "Wendy! How did you find me?"

"What, no hello?" She ducked into the den and sat next to him.

He looked away, his jaw clenched. "No one was supposed to find me. I thought I was well-hidden." He met her eyes, and there was something challenging, almost angry, in his gaze. "How did you do it?"

She hesitated. After weeks of searching, this wasn't exactly the warm welcome she'd hoped for. "Luck and persistence, I guess. I stopped in every village I came to and asked around. Most people tend to remember when they see a yellow-eyed man with a cloak and hood."

He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. "You shouldn't be here. It's dangerous."

"Gee, I'm happy to see you too."

"I'm a fugitive. I'm probably wanted for murder by now. If you're seen with me, you'll become a suspect."

She pulled a soggy newspaper from her pack and tossed it into his lap. He blinked. "Read it," she said.

He picked up the paper. *Jackal Confesses*, said the headline. He looked at her, brow furrowed. "What is this?"

"Just read it," she said.

He read out loud: "'The recently captured serial killer known as the Jackal confessed under the influence of truth potion to murdering wealthy heiress Eva Drizell. The Jackal, apparently enraged when Drizell spurned his advances, attacked and killed her with a sword.'" He raised his eyes. His silver brows bunched together. "But this makes no sense. Why would he confess if he didn't kill her?"

"I don't know," she said, "but this means you're safe now, doesn't it? They have their murderer."

"You know something about this," he said. "You had something to do with it."

She widened her eyes and gave him her best innocent look. "Why would you say that? I was as surprised as anyone else when I read about this."

"Wendy."

She sighed. "Okay. Maybe I planted one or two little suggestions in his head. It doesn't matter. He was slated to be mind-wiped anyway. He's got seven counts of murder and thirteen counts of rape to his name. One more killing won't change his sentence. It's not like I framed an innocent man."

"But if he was given a truth potion..."

"Truth potion just prevents people from telling deliberate lies. In his mind, it is true."

He stared at her, his eyes searching her face. "You made him believe he really did kill her? You have that kind of power?"

Wendy bit her lower lip. "I guess I do. My powers have grown quite a bit in the past month."

"That was reckless," he said.

Her back stiffened. "I cleared you of suspicion...at great personal risk, I might add. I spent almost a month flying around, asking questions and traipsing around in the woods to find you. And after all that, what do I get? Not even a thank you." She crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. "What's wrong with you? Why are you being so cold?" She heard the note of hurt peeking through the anger in her voice and hated it. "I thought you'd be glad to see me."

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "I am. More than you can imagine. But it's...complicated."

"Why? What's wrong? The case has been solved, you're not under suspicion any longer. You can come back with me. Come back to Garna."

He bowed his head. "I can't," he said. "I can't go back with you. I'm sorry."

"I don't understand."

He closed his eyes, as if in pain. "I didn't think I would have to do this. I never thought you'd find me."

She stared at him, stunned. For a moment, she couldn't speak. She felt as if she'd been punched in the heart. "Oh," she said. Her voice emerged cold and flat. It barely sounded like hers. "I see."

"Wendy, it's not—"

"I guess that 'I love you' stuff was only because you thought you'd never see me again." She narrowed her eyes. "You bastard. You were never planning to stay with me. You never wanted to."

"That's not—"

"I would have preferred honesty," she said. "Sometimes the truth hurts, but at least it doesn't leave you with false hope."

He buried his fingers in his hair. "Damn it, it isn't like that!"

"Then what is it like?" She was mortified to feel tears stinging her eyes. She blinked them away. "Why don't you want to come back with me?"

For a moment, he didn't reply, just stared into space. She waited, grinding her teeth. "Have you ever really thought about what it would mean for you to have someone like me in your life?" he said at last. "And I'm not just talking about my appearance. I'm a mercenary. A killer. I've lived by the sword since I was thirteen, and before that I was a street thief. I know nothing about living a normal, decent life. I've never had an honest job that didn't involve slaughtering people. I'm not a part of the world you live in. How do you think your family would react if you brought home someone like me?"

"They'd accept you," she said with more conviction than she felt.

"Are you so sure?" He stared at his scaled, clawed hands, then curled them into fists. "I make people uneasy. I see it, I feel it everywhere I go. Perhaps you can accept me for what I am, but what about them? And what about the rest of the world? If people know we're lovers, you'll be tainted by association."

"Is that all this is about?" she asked. "I don't care what they think, Zander. I don't care what anyone thinks. I love who I love. If the world doesn't like my choices, it can go fuck itself."

He shook his head. "It isn't that simple. Do you really think you could deal with it, day after day? The cold stares, the silence that falls when you enter the room with me? Maybe at first, it wouldn't matter, but eventually, you'd start to resent it. Eventually you'd start to resent me." He stared at the ground. "I've been an outcast my whole life. It's a life I wouldn't wish on anyone, least of all someone like you. You have too much to lose. I can't..." His voice caught in his throat. He lowered his head, hiding his eyes. "I *do* love you," he whispered hoarsely. "That's why I can't be with you. You deserve someone normal, someone who can give you a normal life."

She reached out, took his face between her hands and lifted it. He looked at her with naked pain in his eyes. "Zander, you idiot," she said softly, and smoothed his hair. "My family will not disown me because I bring home someone a little...different. They're better than that. As for the rest of the world, I really don't care. They can whisper and gossip and stare all they want. If I have you by my side, I can handle anything they dish out. Just please don't leave me for some stupid reason like that." Tears blurred her eyes. She blinked, and two tears spilled down her cheeks, but she no longer cared if he saw her crying. "Don't you understand? Nothing could hurt as much as losing you."

"Wendy..." He pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair.

She clung to him. "I was afraid I'd never see you again," she whispered, and hid her face against his shoulder. Tears dampened his cloak. He held her tight, stroking her hair, and after a few minutes she straightened and wiped her eyes. "I hate crying," she muttered. "My whole face gets red and puffs up like I'm having an allergic reaction. I look ridiculous."

"You look beautiful. As always."

She smiled weakly. "Liar." She rested her cheek against his shoulder.

"Do you have your broomstick?"

She nodded.

"We'll wait until this storm is over. Then we'll fly back."

"Sounds good to me." She slipped her arm around his waist. They sat in the cave, pressed close together, listening to the rumble of thunder and the drone of rain.

She thought about showing him now, taking Eloria's Tear out of her pack and saying, *It's all yours*. She couldn't wait to see the look on his face...but she realized, to her surprise, that a part of her was reluctant to give him the Tear. She wanted to wait a little longer. After he used it, she'd never get another chance to caress his scales, to admire the glint of firelight in those yellow eyes. She'd still love him when he was human, of course, but his differentness was part of what made him so attractive. She wanted to enjoy him as he was. A few more minutes wouldn't matter, in the long run.

"I'm sorry I assumed the worst of you," she said.

"You have nothing to apologize for. After the way I acted, I can't blame you."

She shook her head. "After all we've been through together, I should've had more faith. I just...I haven't had good luck with men. My last boyfriend left me after a few months. Said he 'needed some space' and some time to think about where this was going. He never came back. The one before that dumped me for a blonde waitress with a big chest. The last time I went on a date, the man tried to slip something in my drink. A love potion or a knock-out drug, I'm not sure which. Small wonder I stopped seeing people. And my dad...I told you about him, didn't I?"

"You told me he left when you were very young."

"Yeah. I was eight years old when he vanished for the final time."

"The final time?"

She nodded. "Even before his big disappearing act, he was never around much. He bought and sold magical artifacts for a living, so he'd go to auctions and marketplaces across the continent looking for new finds. But even when he was home, he wasn't very affectionate to any of us. Mom always said that was just his way, and that he loved us all very much, but even back then, I didn't buy it. If he loved us, why did he always seem like he was trying to avoid us? I got sick of hearing her make excuses for him."

She paused, staring into the fire. The flames crackled and danced. "My mom pretty much raised Julie and me alone. Oh, Dad sent money, but that was about it. Mom never seemed to resent him for it...or if she did, she hid her resentment. She pretended like everything was okay, but sometimes I heard her crying alone in her room. Then, one time, Dad left on a business trip and just never came back. And that was that. God only knows where he is now." She sighed. "We know he's alive. He still sends money once in awhile. My mom thinks he's coming back someday. She just can't accept that he's gone. I always vowed that I'd never become like her, always waiting at home and pining for a man who wasn't there. It just seemed like such a depressing, empty way to live. I love my mom and I respect her for having the strength to raise us both without much help, but I don't want to be like her."

He stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "If I'd known..."

"It's all right. I just...I can't live like that. I can't wait around at home for someone to come back to me, wondering if he's going to come back. I won't. If that's how it is, then it's better to just be alone." Tears welled up again. She wiped them away with her knuckles. "Damn."

He took both her hands in his, raised them to his mouth, and kissed them. "You are

the only person who's ever accepted me for what I am. You're the first true friend I've ever had and the only woman I've ever loved. I won't give you up. Not for anything." His hands tightened on hers.

She looked up at him. His golden eyes reflected the firelight. "You mean that?" she whispered.

"With all my heart." He framed her face between his hands, then leaned down and kissed her forehead. She closed her eyes, and he kissed her eyelids, first the left, then the right. He kissed the tip of her nose, her cheeks, the corner of her mouth. "You are precious to me," he whispered, his lips moving close to her ear. "Do you know that?"

She couldn't reply. His touch drove all thought from her mind.

His mouth pressed against hers. He slid a hand into her hair, and his warm fingers massaged the soft, sensitive skin at the nape of her neck. Tingles raced down her spine. He kissed her throat. His mouth lingered there, below her jaw. "Your pulse is racing," he murmured.

She placed a hand over his heart. It beat fast and hard against her palm. "So is yours," she whispered.

"You do that to me." Warm breath caressed her neck, and the hot, wet tip of his tongue touched her pulse. His big hands squeezed her shoulders, ran down her bare arms, then covered her own hands and gripped them tight. He held her hands there, pinned to her sides, as his mouth moved over her neck, then lower. He kissed the delicate hollow between her collarbones.

She moaned, and her breathing quickened. Her nipples tightened to taut points. "Please," she whispered. "I need..."

His mouth covered hers, stealing her words and breath. "Your clothes are soaked," he whispered. "You're going to catch a chill in these."

She shivered. "You know the best way to get warm, don't you?" she whispered back. "Sharing body heat."

"That's right. But we can't do it with you in those wet clothes."

"I'd better take them off, then." Slowly, teasingly, she undid the buttons of her shirt and slipped it off. Her breasts strained against the cotton bra beneath, nipples outlined by thin cloth. Zander ran his thumb over one sensitive peak, then lowered his head. His mouth closed over that stiff nipple and sucked it through the bra, sharp teeth pressing lightly against her flesh. She gasped. Heat spread outward from his mouth and rolled through her body.

"This too," he said, tapping a finger against her bra.

She undid the clasp and let her bra drop to the ground. Cool air washed over her bare, damp skin, raising goose bumps on her breasts and belly. His hands gripped her wrists as his mouth closed over her nipple again. He pulled it deep into his mouth and sucked. "Oh," she gasped. "Oh, Zander. More, please..."

He lifted his head. His eyes burned into hers. "More?" he whispered.

"Yes!"

"I may get a little rough." His mouth engulfed her nipple. He sucked it, hard, growling. His hands tightened on her wrists, as his mouth plundered her breast. She closed her eyes. His tongue lapped that sensitive little bud over and over as his lips tugged and tugged. She burned, teetering on that thin, bright line between pleasure and pain.

He pulled back, and Wendy looked down, panting. His mouth had left a neat ring of tooth-marks around her nipple. He hadn't penetrated the skin, but he'd come damn close. She felt her eyes getting wider as she looked at him.

"I got carried away," he said.

"No. No, it's all right." She stared at that dark ring, dazed. He'd marked her. "Don't stop."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

He smiled, a slow, dangerous smile. Teeth glinted between his lips. He pushed her to the ground and covered her body with his. His mouth crashed down on hers. She twined her fingers in his thick hair and gripped it tight as their tongues tangled together in a wet, urgent dance. He sat up long enough to slide off his shirt and toss it aside. She fumbled with the lacings of her pants, but he took her hands in his and pressed them to the ground. "Let me." With one hand, he untied the lacings of her trousers, his movements slow, almost leisurely. She wanted to tell him to hurry up; she throbbed with need. Then he slipped a hand inside her trousers and his palm brushed her sex. Even through her underwear, the sensation was so intense she gasped. He smiled, slid her trousers down, and hooked one finger under the waist of her underwear. "You won't be needing these, either."

"No," she said, breathless. "I won't."

He pulled them down. His hands slid along her calves, over her knees, her thighs. He leaned down to kiss her inner thigh, teasingly close to the place she needed his mouth most. "Your skin is so smooth," he murmured. "So soft. Like silk." His breath stirred the downy curls between her thighs, then he placed another kiss on her belly.

She moaned, thirsty for his touch. She grabbed his hand and pulled it toward her mound. He gripped both her hands and pushed them down. His eyes gleamed. "Not just yet."

"Please, Zander. I need it."

"I'll decide when you need it."

She bucked her hips, trying to rub against his stomach, but he arched away.

"Zander!" she growled.

He laughed. "Just wait." He swirled his tongue around her left nipple, then trailed kisses down the slope of her breast. Slowly, so slowly, he kissed his way down her stomach and along her left thigh, still holding her wrists. Then he pressed a kiss to the swollen lips of her sex, and she moaned. With the very tip of his tongue, he traced her wet furrow. Then his tongue delved between her lips and into her folds. He trailed a long, slow wet lick from bottom to top.

She panted, writhing.

He released her wrists, brushed his thumbs along the outer lips of her sex, and opened her. His tongue darted in and out, stroking here, flicking there, like a flame dancing over her flesh. Her breathing quickened, and her fingers clenched as his tongue plunged deeper inside her. He raised his head and licked his lips. One long finger slid into her body.

She bit her lower lip as she felt inner muscles spasm and clench around his finger.

"Let me touch you," she whispered.

He sat up. He was hard, straining against his trousers. She reached up and rubbed the

bulge, and he groaned, low in his throat. She undid the buttons of his trousers, and they fell with a rustle. She rubbed her cheek against his maleness, relishing the contrast of soft skin over hard, hot flesh.

He gripped her shoulders and pushed her to the ground, onto her back. Desire burned in his golden eyes as he stared down at her. "God, you're beautiful," he whispered hoarsely. Two long, thick fingers delved inside her. They moved in and out, stimulating her wet flesh as his mouth closed around her nipple. He sucked one, then the other, and continued to push his fingers deep into her until she was moaning and writhing.

"Please...Zander..."

He pulled his fingers out. His claws glistened with her wetness. "Please what?"

"Please. I need you inside me."

He smiled. A moment later, his erection pressed against the entrance to her sex, and he sheathed himself in her. Her walls stretched, and air hissed between her teeth at the tiny twinge of pain. He stopped. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She hooked her legs over his and pulled him deeper into her body. Her hands slid over his muscled shoulders, his broad back. "Don't stop."

His hips moved, grinding against hers, and she pushed upward to meet his thrusts. One hand slid into his thick hair. He moaned, low in his throat, as his thrusts quickened. He plunged into her again and again, until one hard surge shoved her over the edge. She cried out. Her fingers tightened on his hair.

With a final moan, he released into her, then pulled out and flopped down onto the ground. His body glistened with a sheen of sweat. Damp tendrils of hair clung to his brow and neck. His eyes closed. His chest rose and fell with each breath. Then he rolled onto his side and pulled her into his arms. For a few minutes, neither one of them spoke.

"I won't ever leave you again, Wendy," he whispered at last.

She pressed closer to him and rested her cheek against his chest. She felt his heartbeat against her cheek, steady and strong. "Promise?" she whispered.

"I promise." He kissed the top of her head.

She closed her eyes and held him tight. "I won't leave you, either."

Outside, the rain tapered off to a drizzle. The sun peeked out between the clouds. As morning dawned, a warm, buttery gold light spread across the forest. The leaves, glazed with rain, shone like polished jade. Birds sang as a wet, earthy smell drifted into the cave where Wendy and Zander lay in a comfortable tangle of limbs.

"Zander?" she whispered.

"Yes?"

"I have a surprise for you." She reached into her pack and pulled out the box holding Eloria's Tear. Then she flipped it open, revealing the smooth, dark stone.

His eyes widened. "What—"

"I don't need it anymore." She smiled. "With Drizell dead, my debts aren't an issue. I'm safe. The Tear is yours. You can become human."

Slowly, he reached out and took the Tear in both hands, ran his thumbs over its shiny, dark surface. "You mean it?"

"Of course."

He took a deep breath. His fingers tightened on the Tear. "I can become human," he said slowly, as if tasting the words, trying them out. "I can be normal again."

She nodded. "Go ahead."

He turned the stone over in his hands. "How do I...start it?"

"Let me try." She touched the smooth surface with her fingertips and reached out with a thread of her Gift.

The Tear glowed a soft white, and its voice spoke, clear and gentle: "What do you wish of me?"

She took a deep breath. This was it. No going back. She felt a twinge of mingled joy and regret. "Make Zander human."

"If I do that, my powers will vanish."

"I know," she said. "We're fine with that if you are."

"As you wish," the Tear whispered.

The glow brightened and spread over his hands, up his arms. His eyes widened. The glow crept over his shoulders and chest, up his neck and down his legs, until it had engulfed his entire body. Wendy had to turn her head aside and shield her eyes with one arm; he was too bright to look at. Moments later, the glow began to dim, and the Tear's voice spoke in her mind: *I cannot purify what is not impure.*

The light around Zander faded. He was unchanged.

Wendy blinked. "What ... why didn't it work?" She grabbed the Tear from him, stared at it, and shook it. "Hey. Hey, you. What gives? Why didn't you change him?" No response. She shook the Tear again. "Hey! Answer me!"

"It's no use," he said, his voice quiet and oddly calm. "Its powers are gone."

"But..." She looked from the Tear to Zander and back again. Pain ripped through her heart. Not for herself, but for him, for the dream he'd been denied. She felt as if her whole chest were splitting down the middle. Tears welled in her eyes and overflowed down her cheeks. "Why? What went wrong?"

"You heard it. 'I cannot purify what is not impure.' The Tear gave everything it had, but in the end, it wasn't enough." He caressed the stone with one clawed finger. "I knew from the beginning that this was only a chance, that there was no guarantee it would work. It's simply too late. Maybe if I'd tried it a year ago or even a few months ago, it would have worked. Or maybe not. It doesn't matter now. The changes have become too much a part of me." He stared down at his scaly hands. "I can't go back to what I was."

"It's not fair!" Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked them away and gritted her teeth. "I thought—"

"Shhh." He kissed her forehead. "It doesn't matter."

She stared at him and felt her brow furrow in confusion. "But I thought you wanted to become human."

"That's what I believed. But I think what I truly wanted was to be accepted. And you've given me that."

"You...you mean that?" she whispered. "You're okay with this? Really?"

He nodded. "When I was alone in the world, I believed that I needed to become human in order to be loved. I was wrong about that. I've changed a great deal since I first met you, Wendy. I've found peace with myself, with my nature. If you can accept this body, then so can I."

"Oh, Zander..." Love spread through her heart in a warm, soothing glow. She nuzzled against him. "The truth is," she whispered, "I like this body a lot." She ran a finger down his arm, relishing the feel of the smooth, pebbly scales. "I could say that I don't care about what you look like—that I love you just for who you are inside—but I'm



not sure that would be totally true. I mean, don't get me wrong, I love your mind and heart and everything inside you, but the truth is, I'm attracted to your scales and claws too. I love all of you, body and soul."

Zander smiled and touched her cheek. "I am so very lucky to have found you."

"Not as lucky as I am." She hugged him tight. "Let's go home."

"We will. Soon. I want to lie here just a few minutes longer." His arms tightened around her. As Wendy lay in the tiny cave, her sweat-damp body pressed against his, a sense of peace settled over her heart like a downy blanket. And though she was eager to return home to her family, a part of her wished the moment would never end.

## Chapter Seventeen

Wendy sat in a small, stuffy office at the Bureau of Magical Artifact and Potion Control. The room smelled like mothballs, dust, and paper. She wouldn't have thought that boredom had a smell, but there it was. She crossed her arms over her chest and waited as Mr. Bridle stroked his mustache and stared at Eloria's Tear. It sat on the desk in front of him, gleaming in the lamplight.

After a moment, he raised his eyes and scowled at her. "I could press charges, you know. You disobeyed a direct order from a government official. You left the city with a stolen artifact."

She resisted the urge to point out that she hadn't stolen anything, that the Tear had been hers to begin with; they were the ones who had barged in and tried to take it from her. Instead, she shrugged. "I brought it back, didn't I? I told you, I just needed it for a little while. You can have it now. If you want to drag me to court over this, go ahead, but since I'm already offering you the Tear, a court battle will just be a big waste of time and money for everyone involved. Even if you win, the city will end up spending more on the trial than they'd get from me in fines. Is it really worth the trouble?"

"Hmph." He picked up the Tear and turned it over in his hands. He took a magnifying glass from his desk drawer and squinted through it, examining the stone's surface. He tapped it with a tiny, steel hammer, producing a soft *ting*. Then he set it down and pressed his lips together into a thin line. "Well, it looks like the real thing. Only...I can't sense any magic from it."

"It's not a fake, I promise you. Have some specialists examine it if you want."

He glared at her. "You've done something to it."

"What, you're suggesting I sucked the magic out of it somehow? I'd have to be a much stronger sorceress to manage a trick like that."

"Then why can't I feel its power?" He held up the Tear. "What's wrong with it?"

"How should I know? But it's possible the magic just wore off on its own, isn't it? I mean, that thing was sitting in the mountains for centuries. Even the most powerful spells wear off eventually."

"You've used its powers, haven't you? You said you needed it for something."

"For a bet."

His eyes narrowed. "A bet?"

"Yeah. I bet someone that I could find Eloria's Tear, and I had to show it to him so he'd pay up. That's all."

"You're lying." He pointed a thick finger at her. "You ... I don't trust you. You're hiding something."

She gave him her best innocent smile. As she stared into his beady eyes, she reached out with a tendril of psi-power and brushed the edge of his mind. His back stiffened, then relaxed, and his face went slack.

Controlling the Jackal's mind had been a struggle. He'd fought her with every scrap of his will. With Mr. Bridle, it was amazingly easy. She'd only applied a little pressure, and now he stared at her, his jaw hanging open, his eyes blank as a doll's. Maybe her powers were getting stronger. Or maybe this guy was just an easy mark. Either way, it

made things simpler for her. "I'm telling the truth," she said, "and anyway, this isn't worth your time. You're a busy man. You've got a lot of things on your plate."

"I'm a busy man," he muttered. "I've got no time for this nonsense. You should see all the things on my to-do list. Ridiculous, what they expect of me."

"Why should you care if Eloria's Tear actually works or not? Your job was just to get it from me. Let the higher-ups worry about the rest."

"Yes. Yes, I'm not paid enough to deal with this nonsense. They can sort everything out. That's their job."

"Just take the Tear, give me the money you promised me, and we can both go our ways."

"Of course. Yes." He opened a drawer, dug around, and pulled out a fat money pouch. Coins jingled inside as he set it in front of her. "There you are, your compensation for the Tear. Now, go on. I've got a lot to do. No time to deal with this nonsense."

"Thanks." She took the pouch and left the office. As she walked back to the shop, she loosened the drawstring, opened the pouch and counted the coins inside. Forty thousand. Not bad for a rock.

I can't keep doing this, she thought. She'd gotten away with it twice now, but if she continued to manipulate people's minds, sooner or later someone would catch on, and then she'd be in big trouble. But after this, hopefully, she wouldn't need to use her newfound powers anymore. She'd had about all the adventure she could stand.

\* \* \* \*

Snow drifted from the sky in fat, wet flakes, transforming the city into a white-frosted storybook picture. Wreaths of holly and glistening silver garland festooned every house, and bells rang in the church towers.

"I love Yule," said Wendy. "All the lights, the decorations, people laughing and singing songs and giving gifts to the people they love. It's like an orgy of good cheer."

"Orgy is the right word," murmured Zander. He wore his usual hooded cloak, with a scarf across his nose and mouth. "There's a crazed quality to it all. It's as though people are gorging themselves on merriment, like some rich food, trying desperately to forget everything by drowning themselves in tinsel and bright paper."

"Trust you to put a negative spin on it," she said and poked his arm. She thought for a moment about what it must have been like for him growing up, surrounded every Yule by images of happy families, good food and cheer. Things he didn't have. She linked arms with him and snuggled against his shoulder.

A wheeled cart stood by the side of the road. A man stood beside it, bundled in a wool coat with a scarf and mittens. His breath steamed in the air as he handed a cup of hot cocoa to a little girl. The child scampered away.

"I'm going to buy some cocoa," said Wendy. "Do you want any?"

"No thanks. You shouldn't either. You'll spoil your appetite."

"You're not my mother."

He shook his head and muttered something behind his scarf.

She ran to the cart and dug two shakas out of her pocket. "One, please," she said, and dropped the coins into the man's mitten-clad palm.

"Whipped cream?"

She grinned. "The works."

He handed her a stiff paper cup of cocoa, with a dollop of whipped cream and a sprinkle of nutmeg on top. "Happy Yule."

"Happy Yule!" She hurried back to Zander's side, blew the steam from the cocoa, and took a sip. "Mmm." She offered the cup to him. "Try it, it's perfect."

He hesitated. She expected him to decline. He never took his scarf off in public if he could help it. But he accepted the cup, pulled his scarf down, and took a quick sip, leaving a dot of whipped cream on the tip of his nose. She stood on tiptoe and licked it off. He flushed and quickly pulled his scarf back up.

A man with a cane and a shabby brown overcoat walked past. He grinned at them, showing all his teeth, and raised one hand in a wave. "Happy Yule!"

"Happy Y—" she started to say, then froze. Was that the *Jackal*?

He cocked his head. "Do I know you?"

"Uh...no. I just thought you looked like someone for a minute."

"Well, of course. We all look like someone. It would be very hard to look like no one, wouldn't it?" Then he laughed, a little too loud and long.

"Um, yeah. Happy Yule."

He waved again and walked down the street, whistling a jaunty tune and spinning his cane.

"Was that who I thought it was?"

"Yeah, though he probably has a new name now. People who've been mind-wiped are always a little weird afterward. Memory-implants aren't like the real thing."

"I should kill him for what he did to you," said Zander, his voice flat and emotionless.

"Don't bother. He isn't worth it. It's not even really him anymore. The Jackal won't be hurting anyone else."

He frowned. "So he's not dangerous?"

"No." She hoped not, anyway. She remembered the guard at the asylum telling her that with the really crazy ones, sometimes even a full mind-wipe didn't cure their homicidal tendencies. She pushed the thought away. No point in worrying about it now.

They walked a few minutes longer, then Wendy pointed to a small, red brick house. Icicles dripped from the eaves, and smoke rose from the chimney. "There's my mom's house."

"Did you tell them?" he asked quietly.

"About what?"

"About my affliction."

"I told them you were a little unusual."

"That's all?"

"It'll be fine, Zander. Mom and Julie are both really open-minded. They're not going to chase you out of the house with pitchforks." She started to walk toward the house, but he remained standing where he was. She stopped and turned. "Zander?" She took his arm. "What's wrong?"

He lowered his eyes. For a moment, he didn't reply. When he did, his voice was so soft she had to strain to hear him: "I'm afraid. I think I'm more afraid than I was when we were about to enter Threed's lair."

"Don't worry." She leaned closer and whispered, "Everything will be fine. They'll love you, scales and all."

He shook his head. "It's not just my looks. It's everything about me. When they ask me where I grew up, where I went to school, what I do for a living, what am I supposed to tell them? That I'm a mercenary who grew up in a filthy slum, that I spent half my childhood on the streets stealing scraps of food? I don't want to tell them that. I don't want to talk about my past at all. But how can I avoid it?"

"I'll do most of the talking. If they ask you a direct question, just be vague."

"If they ask me what I do for work, what am I supposed to say?"

"Just tell them you're..." She paused. "Tell them you're an entrepreneur."

His brow furrowed. "Won't it seem like I'm dodging the question?"

"Just relax. My mom has been wanting me to meet a man for so long, she'll be desperate to like you. It doesn't matter what you say about yourself. Just eat lots of her food and give her compliments." She gripped his hand and dragged him toward the house. Despite her reassurances, her stomach was a tight knot as she bunched one gloved hand into a fist and knocked.

"Wait," he said. "What should I call her? Mrs. Martin?"

"Call her Mary. That's her name."

The door opened to reveal Wendy's mother wearing a green dress, a sprig of holly in her silvering brown hair. Her eyes brightened, and she pulled Wendy into a tight hug. "Wendy! I'm so happy to see you." She turned to him. "And you must be Zander. I've been looking forward to meeting you. Come in!"

They entered. Wendy took off her wet boots on the mat, hung up her coat and followed her mother into the living room, where a fire blazed in the hearth. Holly and red ribbons decorated every window and doorway, and the smell of ham and fresh coffee drifted from the kitchen.

"Dinner will be ready in a half-hour. Julie's in the kitchen now, making preparations. Aren't you going to take off your cloak, dear?" her mother asked, looking at Zander. Her voice was light and casual, but he tensed.

Wendy squeezed his arm.

Slowly, he pulled down his hood and slipped off his scarf. Wendy watched her mother, heart thumping.

Her eyes widened. "Goodness! Is that your natural hair color? What a lovely shade."

He blinked. His mouth opened, then closed. "Thank you," he mumbled.

Julie entered the living room, wearing a flour-covered apron. She wiped her hands on it and glanced at him. "Anyone want coffee?" she asked.

Minutes later, they all sat in the living room together, cradling hot mugs of coffee. "There's cream there if you want it," said Julie, pointing to the silver dish on the coffee table.

Wendy poured cream into hers until it turned a pale tan, then added several heaping spoonfuls of sugar.

"Goodness, Wendy," said Julie. "That's not even coffee anymore. It's like coffee-flavored pudding."

"Not everyone likes it black."

Julie grinned. She leaned close and murmured, so softly that only Wendy could hear, "I guess some like it blue."

Wendy gave a start, nearly spilling her coffee, and Julie leaned back with a small, smug grin. Wendy tried to glare at her, but ended up giggling instead.

"And what do you do for work?" Wendy's mother asked, looking at Zander.

Wendy tensed. An entrepreneur...why had she told him to say that? Her mother wouldn't swallow such a vague response. She'd assume he was unemployed, or involved in something shady, or...

"I'm a woods guide," he said. "That's how I met Wendy, you know. She needed someone to show her the way through the forest."

"How wonderful." She beamed. "Then you're an explorer of sorts?"

"Nothing so grand. I guide travelers, show them the best route, teach them to orient themselves by the position of the sun and moon. That sort of thing." He sipped his coffee. "I feel most comfortable in the wilderness, I suppose."

"You must have grown up near the woods."

"I grew up in a city, actually," he said. "I never saw a tree until I was fifteen. Perhaps that's why I like the forest."

Wendy expected to have to fend off a hundred questions about his past and occupation, but at that moment, Julie stood and said, "The ham should be done by now. Everyone ready for dinner?"

They all murmured assent, and Julie led them into the kitchen. The table had been set with Mom's best china and silver, and a bottle of plum wine stood on the table. Julie pulled a honey-glazed ham out of the oven and carved it up, while Wendy's mother filled the wine-glasses.

Zander packed away twice as much as any of them, asking for seconds and then thirds of ham and potatoes. For dessert, Wendy's mother brought out her specialty, strawberry-rhubarb pie. Afterwards, they all leaned back in their chairs and loosened their belts to accommodate full bellies.

Zander excused himself, and while he was away from the table, Wendy's mother leaned toward her, eyes sparkling. "I like this one," she said. "So big and muscular, but he has a gentle way about him. Do you think he's the one?"

Wendy flushed. "Mom..."

"It's a mother's prerogative to ask. You don't have to answer, dear." She sipped her coffee. "Your face answers for you, anyway."

Her face grew hotter. "You're not at all bothered by...how he is?"

"Did you really think that would be an issue? You should know me better. He's a good person and he makes you happy. That's the most important thing. I'm a little worried about his occupation, though. I mean, he a woods guide, and you with your shop in the city. You'll either have to do a lot of traveling, or one of you will have to relocate."

"We'll figure something out," she said. A knot inside her loosened and relaxed.

\* \* \* \*

That night, Wendy and Zander walked back to the shop, arm in arm. Snow drifted down, blanketing the world in soft, downy white. Overhead, a single, bright star glowed through a patch in the clouds, brilliant against the black sky. A warm glow suffused her whole being. Her tongue darted out and caught a snowflake.

"Your family is very kind," he said. "Very welcoming."

She grinned. "Yeah. I'm lucky to have them."

"I think they would not be so accepting, though, if they knew what I really did for a living."

"Do you like it? Being a mercenary, I mean."

"I don't know. It's just what I am. I've never thought about whether I liked it. Does it even matter?"

"Well, you don't have to be a sword-for-hire your whole life, you know. You could do something else."

"This is all I know. Can you picture me working as a baker, or a smith, or a merchant?"

"Well, no," she said. "But there are plenty of options."

He stared at the street as they walked. "I've been fighting for as long as I can remember. Fighting to eat, fighting to live. Just fighting. Sometimes I grow weary of it, but I don't know how to change. It's ingrained too deeply into me by now. At some point, your family will find out the truth. What will they think?"

"Don't worry about that. It'll all work out somehow."

"I wish I could share your optimism."

She squeezed his hand. "We'll jump that hurdle when we get there. You have to learn how to enjoy the moment and stop brooding about everything that could go wrong. We had a nice night, didn't we?"

A smile touched his lips. "The night isn't over yet."

Somewhere in the city, a church-bell chimed, announcing the midnight hour. "Now it is," she said.

He laughed, a soft, rich, bedroom sound. A shiver raced up her spine. He laughed so infrequently, but when he did, it was like velvet wrapping around her heart.

She looked into his eyes. He leaned closer and kissed her, slow and deep, as the chime of church-bells echoed through the city. Snowflakes fell on her cheeks and eyelids and melted into her skin. When he finally pulled back, she was breathless and dizzy, her head buzzing pleasantly, as if she'd had a bit too much wine. She giggled and tugged his hand. "Come on. We're almost home."

They reached the shop. She fumbled with her keys, unlocked the door, pushed it open and slipped in. He followed, shutting the door behind him, then wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. His lips devoured hers. His scent enveloped her, warm, spicy and earthy, as his tongue filled her mouth. Their lips parted, and she looked into his golden eyes. "Let's go upstairs," she whispered.

He lifted her into his arms, carried her up the stairs and lay her down on the bed. They wrapped their arms around each other and rolled in the covers. He kissed her fiercely, his mouth burning into hers. His hand slid beneath her tunic and covered her breast. She drowned in his kisses, came up gasping for air, then plunged back in, her mouth eager and hungry on his. They cast off their clothes and pressed against each other, into each other, as if they could meld their bodies through sheer force of will.

Outside, the snow fell thick and fast, piling on the windowsill. A gust of wind rattled the pane as the snow thickened to a blizzard and howled outside like a hungry wolf. But inside, they were very warm.

**The End**

**About the Author:**

Amanda Steiger has lived in the Midwest her whole life, though she enjoys regular visits to other galaxies and dimensions in her mind. She enjoys cold weather, daydreaming, supernatural romance, and anime. She lives with her family and one very spoiled little dog. You can contact her at [sekuiro@gmail.com](mailto:sekuiro@gmail.com)



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