

Kingdom of
Ash and
Briars

HANNAH WEST

HOLIDAY HOUSE / NEW YORK

For my parents, who always encourage my wishful want-tos,
and for Sarah, who wishes them as hard as I do

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Nissera



Galgeth

Darmeska

Marav
Sea

Mizrah
Sea



Calgoran

Arna

May Acre

Fywick

Jugglewell
Plain Valley

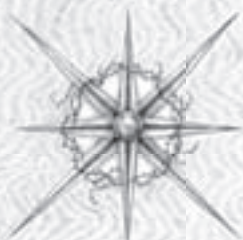
Pentaval

Volarre

Beyrian

Yorth

Perispos



Scales in Miles



KINGDOM:
CALGORAN



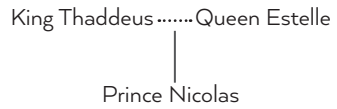
FAMILY:
ERMETARIUS



KINGDOM:
YORTH



FAMILY:
VELOXEN



..... indicates marriage

| indicates children

..... indicates siblings

--- indicates cousins

Prologue

History might be whittled down until all that remains are shining fables of fairy magic and curse-defying kisses. War might go unmentioned in the polished children's tales of the two girls with rose petal lips and hair of spun gold, the girls whom I was tasked with making queens.

The coming generations may forget that the price of the peace they will enjoy was paid in blood.

But for the historians, the truth-seekers and the curious: here is the light and the dark of it. Here is my story.

Part One



ONE

Each icy gust bit me to the bone. A daydream of roasting next to a fire in the kitchens while eating fistfuls of hot, flaky bread made the cold feel even harsher, the wind wetter and my stomach all the more empty. But the thought of death made me coldest of all.

I took inventory of my kidnappers' weapons. Two were armed with daggers while the other two carried bows and fully stocked quivers. Maybe they would cut me open like a sack of flour or snap my neck like a fattened, frantic chicken. Maybe they would leave me to freeze to death and I wouldn't be found until spring.

"You'll get no ransom, if that's what you want," I said to Hagan, the redheaded gardener. My arms were wrapped around his freckle-spotted neck, numb from taking the brunt of the snowy gusts. My teeth chattered so often I could barely prize them open to force out the words. "You ought to have kidnapped the lord and lady's daughter. You could have asked a fine price for Hazel."

Hagan snorted with laughter. "Aye, if I managed not to kill her in the meantime. I wouldn't go to that trouble for a thousand aurions."

“But you know Patsy doesn’t have the means to purchase my freedom, and the lord and lady aren’t going to pay a thousand aurions for me, or even fifty.”

Hagan shifted my weight on his back, hooking his arms under my knees. His bow dug into my ribs. I didn’t complain for fear that they would force me to walk again on numb feet. “I know better than to demand a price for the cook’s help.”

Hope left me like a last breath. They didn’t want ransom, and I had ruled out the possibility that they planned to use me for pleasure. Plenty of opportunities for that had passed by now. I could only wonder what fate awaited me.

My kidnappers had seemed so sure of themselves when they snatched me from the kitchen cellar of the manor and hauled me alongside the snowy road leading north. But as we stood at the outskirts of the Forest of the West Fringe, I felt a tremor in their resolve.

Once we plunged into the woods, the snowfall grew so dense, we faced the danger of hitting a tree nose-first before we caught a glimpse of it.

Hagan glanced nervously over his shoulder, his breath puffing out like pipe smoke in my face. “Let’s rest a bit, eh?” he said to the others, who studied their surroundings before nodding their heads. No one, not even hardened men like these, could feel at ease in the Forest of the West Fringe.

“This spot’s as good as any,” said the uncomely, squash-faced fellow with gray teeth, pointing at a cluster of evergreens. The men unburdened themselves and gathered beneath low branches that dipped under the weight of the thickening snow.

Hagan relinquished me with a relieved sigh. I lost my footing, but he grabbed me by the arm before I fell. “Don’t you

go runnin' off now, Bridget," he warned, as if I were an errant child.

"Bristal," I hissed, twisting out of his grip. But I stayed put as he asked. We both knew I wouldn't make it far in these woods, not without a proper cloak and winter boots.

While the four men pulled kindling from their packs and labored over a sputtering flame, I sat with my back against a tree, swallowing hot tears. They ate a meal of pork and bread, casting cagey looks over their shoulders. In the olden days, these woods had been rampant with terrible and beautiful creatures. Some said that if you journeyed deep enough, you could see shadows of things long thought to have fled the realm of Nissera.

"Should we give her something to eat?" the blond man, who I thought was called Elwood, asked the others.

"Why waste it?" asked the ugly fellow with the gray teeth, poking indelicately at the feeble fire. "This lass will be nothing but a drowned corpse in a few hours."

My stomach dropped. Drowning. I tried to slow my breathing, to comfort myself with the thought that it might merely feel like falling asleep. These men could surely think of worse ways to kill me if they wished.

"Why are you doing this?"

No one answered, though Elwood offered me a chunk of bread and meat. I wanted to turn it down, but he unfastened his cloak and swept it over my shoulders. This small act of kindness overthrew my resolve and I accepted the food, thankful that the bitter wind dried my tears before they fell.

"Don't worry," Elwood said. "You may survive."

"Don't make any promises," said the fourth, who had been

silent the entire journey. “Thousands have touched the Water and died. Do you know how many have lived in the last few centuries, girl?”

The fear latching onto my stomach got an even fiercer grip and twisted hard. I had heard stories of the Water, a pool that lay deep in the forest, deadly to most who dared touch it. Amid my shuddering, I barely managed to nod my head. But I knew. Everyone knew about Brack and Tamarice.

“Two,” he said, holding fingers up as his cold blue eyes bore into mine from underneath severe black brows. “Of all those people, only two were worthy to receive an elicrin stone. This bloke thinks you may be the third—I think he’s a fool.”

“I tell you, Trumble, I’ve seen her do magic!” Hagan said.

“Magic?” I asked in disbelief. “I don’t know the first thing about magic. If I did, do you think I would be the cook’s help? And wouldn’t I have escaped by now?”

“Don’t lie, brat,” Hagan snarled. He shivered and brought his hood up to cover his bright red hair. “Maybe you can’t control it, but I know what I saw.”

“Plenty of folks can do small magic, Hagan,” said Elwood. “Every proper household in the three kingdoms has a fairy these days, and they’re good for nothing but chores and parlor tricks. The cook herself is said to be a witch. I bet every last one of them would turn belly-up in the Water, and this one here doesn’t even claim to be their kind.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” said Trumble, the cold one with the blue eyes, breaking branches the size of my neck and tossing them onto the fire. “Throw all the witches in with their worthless brews and incantations. If every thesar wasted on that horse dung came to me, I’d be the richest man in Nissera.”

Hagan leaned over the flames. “It wasn’t small magic. I saw her change into a rabbit. She was in the snow and then pop! I hadn’t even blinked. I nearly fell off the ladder whilst I was thatching the roof of the garden shed, didn’t I, Gilroy?” He turned to the ugly man, who affirmed his account with a nod. Hagan went on. “That was when I knew she might survive, like one of them elicromancers in the history books.”

All four pairs of eyes turned on me.

Turn into a rabbit? Such power was only heard of in stories from the old days, when elicromancers had their own city, culture and language. But only two people had survived the Water to receive an elicrin stone in the last few hundred years. I opened my mouth to argue—to say that I hadn’t become a rabbit, that I couldn’t have, that I should be elbow-deep in dishwater right now rather than wandering through the forest in my apron—but I choked on my words. Hagan had been violent with me before when I managed to be inconvenient.

“Whether it’s true or you were up to your bollocks in ale makes little difference to me,” Trumble barked at Hagan. “It will only cost the cook’s brat if you’re wrong.”

“Aye, and maybe a few fingers!” the ugly man named Gilroy said as he rubbed his hands together to keep warm. “But it’s better this way, with the snow. They’ll think she wandered off and froze to death in the woods. If it doesn’t work, none will be the wiser when we’re back.”

That tale sounded likely enough, as I made a habit of roaming off after finishing my chores to escape the heat and clamor of the kitchen, not to mention the ridicule of the lord and lady’s daughter, Hazel. She thrived on watching me finish my chores, only to soil what I’d cleaned or dishevel what I’d straightened.

“Didn’t you come from the woods, anyhow?” Gilroy went on. “I’ve heard the story. You were covered in blood, speaking some nonsense language. All you knew was your name. Everyone but the cook thought you’d been whelped by wild dogs.”

“That’ll do, Gilroy,” said Elwood, voice hard.

I could stomach Gilroy’s torment. I had endured Hazel’s cruelty for years, and grown smarter for it. A reminder of my past could hardly crush my spirits. It was the truth, after all. Patsy, the cook at a manor house in Popplewell, had taken me in after I was found wandering at the edge of the woods. She brought me from town to town, hoping someone might recognize me and point her to my mother or father. When no one claimed me, she took me in and cared for me. The lord and lady of the manor were kind folk who allowed Patsy eight extra silver aurions a year for my care, as long as she made certain I was useful. They felt obliged; Patsy was so fine a cook that everyone in the nearby border villages suspected her of being a witch. Sometimes I wished she were. Perhaps then she could summon memories of my parents.

Other times, I preferred not knowing how I had turned up roaming the streets like a stray dog.

As I inched closed to my kidnappers’ fire to warm my purpling fingers, I thought about how it would take Patsy at least a day to realize I was nowhere to be found. She wouldn’t think to go prying for gossip about the manor gardener or three other townsmen who had happened to vanish for a day. It would be too late by then, anyhow.

We started off again, my hands now bound around Trumble’s sinewy neck.

The man who had given me the food and cloak leaned close

to me. His pale hair and brows softened the edges of his square jaw and straight nose.

“We may not even find the Water,” he said. “The elcromancers put up gates and laid an enchantment upon it. It keeps itself veiled from those it does not welcome, moving throughout the forest and only permitting those who may be worthy.” He wore a meager smile, and his colorful, captivated tone reminded me of Patsy’s storytelling voice, which I had heard so often as a girl. “I think Hagan’s right about you. And if he is right, do you know what will happen should we find the Water?”

I lifted my head, a small hope stirring inside me. But Hagan cut him off before he could say anything more. “That’s enough, Elwood,” he snarled. “If you tell her any more, things could get dangerous when she comes out of that Water.”

“Dangerous?” Elwood repeated as he trudged through the snow beside me. “She’s just a kitchen maid, and a slice of a girl.”

“Likely to piss herself soon, by the looks of her.” Gilroy’s laugh reminded me of the raucous little tawny-tits that crowed at dawn. I gritted my teeth and determined that no matter what befell me, I wouldn’t piss myself.

“Aye, but look at those eyes,” said Hagan. “Sharp and gray as moonlight.” He clamped his fingers around my jaw and squeezed. “She’s got streaks of magic in her blood. We’ll see what that looks like soon enough!”

Gilroy gave another tawny-tit laugh and Elwood fell silent, fixing his gaze on the road ahead. Anger and fear warred in my pulse, but I did nothing, recalling the bruise Hagan’s fist had left on my face years ago when I caught him stealing aged

sherry from the food cellar. He would no doubt do worse to me now; since I had grown older he'd started calling me "pretty one," and I had felt the urge to squirm under his gaze. I was old enough now to understand what had happened when I was young and saw him coerce one of the maids into the shed, a firm grip on her arm. I would rather jump into the Water than be next.

I tried to recall the legends of the Water, the stories Patsy and the maids had told me. It determined the fate of anyone who dared touch it—like the thousands dead before me. It either bestowed immeasurable power in the form of an elicrin stone or pulled you into its depths and destroyed you. The bodies of those it rejected were never recovered.

In olden days, many people had survived the Water, retrieving a powerful stone from the depths that made them ageless and immortal elicromancers. But a civil war between two factions of elicromancers had wiped most of them out a few centuries ago. After the Elicrin War, magic had greatly weakened in Nissera.

A man named Brack had been the first to survive touching its surface, and after him, a woman, Tamarice. Every soul in the three kingdoms knew those names. Not a soul would know mine.

Little as I wanted to, I clung tightly to Trumble. I feared what lay ahead much more than I feared even him.

"Look at that," Hagan breathed in awe. Streaks of silver flashed in the distance, barely perceptible in the fog. Mist rose from the forest floor and wind whispered through the barren branches.

"Impossible," Elwood muttered breathlessly. "We've already reached the gates."

Trumble handed me off to Gilroy, who smelled like a wet weasel. The men suddenly seemed to have an air of reverence—no, of fear. Their steps slowed and their breaths softened.

We drew cautiously near and saw silver trees glinting in the muted light. The two foremost were woven together to create a set of narrow gates stretching into unknown heights. If the mist hadn't been rippling like ghostly apparitions, the sight would have been more beautiful than fearsome.

Gilroy set me down, but kept a firm grip on my arm. "How are we supposed to get through?" he asked, voice lumbering through the eerie silence.

I looked up at the silver branches looming in the fog. Perhaps we would fail to even reach the sacred pool to begin with.

"Eh! What's this?" Hagan exclaimed.

All eyes followed his pointed finger. Gilroy dragged me forward so that he could get a closer look.

"It's an elicrin stone," Hagan mused.

Where there normally might be a lock, the gates held what looked like a jagged, uncut gem, blue as a sapphire and clenched in ornate silver garniture. Hagan extracted a knife and prepared to pry it off, but the cold man, Trumble, seized his arm.

"A fool you are!" he spat. "This place reeks of old magic. There's power here that would make even an elicromancer tremble, and you come pilfering like it's a jewelry box." He released Hagan's arm. "Let's do what we came here to."

Hagan made as if to argue but instead sighed, disenchanted. Eyes locked on the translucent gem, he slowly sheathed his dagger.

Gilroy seemed to recall the reason we were there and shook me by the shoulders to make sure I hadn't forgotten, either. "Well, go on then, boys!"

Hagan and Trumble pulled with all their strength, but couldn't budge the gate an inch. The elicrin stone flickered even in the absence of sunlight.

"Come off it, Elwood!" Hagan growled. "You going to help?"

We turned to Elwood, who looked pale and uncertain.

"Never mind that," said Gilroy, who held me fast, icy fingers at my nape. "Make her try."

After a hushed moment, they nodded at one another in agreement. Gilroy cut my bonds and the men retreated into the haze. I took a cautious step forward, watching the snowflakes kiss the earth.

"Get to it then!" Hagan prodded.

"What am I supposed to do?" I meant for my voice to sound sharp, as callused and strong as my hardworking hands, but it emerged feeble and thick with fear. I already knew the answer. I looked at the elicrin stone, trying not to notice what lay beyond the gates as my fingertips prickled in anticipation. The light reflecting in the gem seemed to shift and bend, revealing a multitude of rich, rippling hues.

I looked back at my captors, but the flash of a knife in Trumble's hand told me hesitating would only make matters worse. I faced the gates again.

I had worn fairy charms before, even held a stone that a traveling peddler claimed carried traces of deep magic. Those trinkets had produced a sort of chill, a peculiar tingling that traveled across my palm and under my skin, proving its

mystical qualities. Closing my eyes, I pressed my fingertips to the stone.

Heat coiled around my veins and burst through them like strands of fire consuming me from inside, only I felt no pain. My blood surged, carrying a shudder of heat to my core. This was no trinket.

The silence grew thick as I drew back and waited. Nothing happened. If it didn't work—if I promised never to tell what they had done—perhaps I would be allowed to return home.

But the uppermost branches began to untangle themselves. The silver slid away, revealing wet brown bark beneath. I gasped as the trees shrank, straightened their branches and grew sparse coronets of withered leaves. Only the tree embedded with the sparkling stone remained unchanged.

Hagan's voice barreled through the dense silence. "Ha! You see that? I'd say I well deserve my three quarters."

"Half," Elwood corrected, voice low. I turned around. He and Trumble hung back, stiff with hesitance.

I dug my heels into the snow as Gilroy dragged me forward, hauling me over the threshold. "You aren't getting scared now, are you, pretty one?" he goaded, making a show of his gray-tinged teeth. "We're nearly to the good part!"

With mounting terror, I watched the fog snake away from the Water. The surface shone silver, but I could see fragments of light breaking up the darkness, rays of color cast in all directions, tricking the eye so that its depth could no more easily be determined than the distance of the stars.

The men formed a half-circle around me. Gilroy shoved me toward the Water's edge.

"Please, I'm not what you think I am." I attempted to break

free from the heavy hands on my shoulders, twisting to face Hagan. "My guardian is a witch," I lied. "The powerful sort. But me, I've never done magic. I don't know how to do any of it, common or not." At least that part was true.

There was a touch of doubt in Hagan's hard eyes. He looked at Trumble. "What if it was the witch? What if she finds out and punishes us?"

Trumble's tone was final. "The girl opened the gates. She's coming out with an elicrin stone or not at all."

I turned to Elwood, my last hope.

"Please," I begged, the word emerging as a hoarse whisper. Elwood bleakly returned my gaze.

Trumble chuckled. "Don't be cross with him for not taking up for you, sweet. He has his reasons. Don't you, Elwood?"

Elwood stared at Trumble. He stiffened his jaw but kept silent.

"That's what I thought," Trumble said. "You can play the hero another day."

I felt a fresh round of fiery tears well up as Trumble tugged off my borrowed cloak and clamped a large hand on my shoulder.

"No!" I shrieked, beating my fists against his solid chest until the word became nothing but a scream. He yanked me close to the shore, dangling me so that my feet still touched the earth but the rest of me was poised over the Water. My warped reflection showed a sopping mess of dark hair, a stained apron and eyes alight with fear.

My left hand nearly touched the surface. I made a defiant fist.

"Shall I drop you in?" Trumble growled into my ear. I

shuddered as the cold caress of a knife trailed along the back of my neck.

“She’s scared enough!” Elwood pleaded.

Trumble didn’t react. “Let’s put it this way: you got a better chance of living by touching that water than by disobeying me.”

Biting back a sob, I uncurled my fist. The distance between the Water and my hand was imperceptible.

I shut my eyes and grazed the surface with my fingertips.

A ghostly calm swept over the world. Seconds passed, sinister in their silence, before an invisible force from below clenched my forearm with an icy grip and pulled me into darkness.

As I sank far beneath the surface, I heard a sound like crackling wood and watched in horror as a sheet of ice closed over the Water. I saw the four men’s tainted faces as if from a far-off world, listened as their voices drowned in pressing silence. The cold shocked my body so immediately that I couldn’t even will my limbs to struggle, to press toward freedom.

A long time seemed to pass as I drifted down. I began to wonder if I might already be dead, because at the center of the brilliant ice shone a white light. It lit up weeds swaying along the floor down below, and hidden among them, a glint of silver that looked like, of all things, armor.

It was a body.

Above me the ice cracked with a deafening sound. Fractures crept through it, splintering it into shards that burst down through the Water like a deluge of jagged rain. Only one of them fell slowly while the others raced back into the depths. The elicrin stone settled softly in my hand, illuminated by the white light and surging with warm energy I could feel in my blood.

I fought toward the surface, at last emerging into the biting air. The Water swirled with waves that gently nudged me toward shore.



The ache in my lungs slowly faded as I sucked in precious breaths. I rolled over and looked at the jagged treasure in my palm. It was a translucent blue-gray, like the color of the sky muffled by wispy clouds and falling snow.

Elwood lay panting in the snow next to me, blood smeared across his face and one eye swelling. He must have tried to save me.

Footfalls approached. I looked up to see Trumble standing over me with his knife, cold eyes fixed on my elicrin stone.

He had been right: I had more to fear from him than the Water. He was determined I would die today, fate be damned.

But no sooner did he pry the stone from my fingers than he discharged a vile curse and dropped it in the snow, the flesh of his palm seared. He glared at me before lurching forward as if to seize me by the hair, but I scrambled away and sprinted dizzily into the cover of the trees.

As I reeled through the mist, I felt a pang of regret at leaving the elicrin stone behind. But I wouldn't let them kill me after I had survived the Water.

My surroundings pulsed in my vision and I felt as if I were learning to use my legs again. Whether the Water had made me more powerful or muddled my senses, I couldn't tell. I only knew that it had changed me.

The kidnappers gave fierce chase, but their ungainly footsteps sounded far behind me. I swerved to avoid trees and sprang through the snow with less noise than a whisper,

tearing on until it seemed the kidnappers had lost my trail. As I came upon a clearing, I slowed to a canter, barely even short of breath.

The silver pool waited before me. I had unknowingly circled back to the Water, where Elwood stood alone at the edge. He held the precious object in a fold of his cloak.

From across the clearing, his eyes met mine in awe. Hand trembling slightly, he lifted the stone, offering it to me.

A whooshing sound followed by a swift thud made me lurch back—an arrow striking a nearby tree. The shot had been meant for me and narrowly missed.

Near the tree line, Hagan drew back another arrow. He let the string slip and before I could escape, a piercing pain wracked my side. I collapsed in the snow with a cry.

Fingers trembling, I reached down to feel the shaft of the arrow underneath my ribs. I registered with shock the sight of dark blood on my fingertips and, more absurdly, my unclothed body. But none of that seemed real. Only the sharp, cold, pain sinking through me was real.

The other two emerged from the wood. At the creak of a bowstring, I shut my eyes and waited for death again.

But light pierced the wintry haze as a strange man launched himself in front of Trumble's drawn bow. Before Trumble could react, the man tore the weapon from his hand and, without so much as touching him, sent him reeling across the clearing.

The stranger whipped around. He was tall and broad-shouldered, built like a soldier, with hair blacker than midnight. An emerald elicrin stone hung around his neck, marking him as one of the two remaining elicromancers in Nissera. But his most notable feature was the deep, disfiguring scar that ran

diagonally from his right temple, over the bridge of his nose, drawing to a jagged end near his left ear. His eyes locked on mine.

Meanwhile, Hagan stretched for the quiver on his back. He aimed for the scarred man's broad chest, but before he could let fly, a thin branch whipped down from the treetops to wrap around his wrists and neck.

Someone gave a little jerk of laughter. I looked up to see a young woman stride into the clearing and approach Hagan. She yanked one hand upward and the branches suspended Hagan high in the air, straining his arms in opposite directions. His face filled with blood and his screams were wrought with unsettling desperation. I knew that with any more pressure his body would rip apart.

"Tamarice!" the scarred man barked.

The young woman froze and calmly met his eyes. Her hands relaxed, and the branches slid away from Hagan's limbs, dropping him inelegantly on the ground.

When she noticed me lying in a pool of blood, she sprinted gracefully to my side. Her thick brown plait swept across my face as she leaned over me and studied my wound with the forced composure of someone who has seen worse.

"Hold on," she whispered.

A red gem swinging between her ribs lit up and the ground beneath me transformed from packed snow to soft grass. She laid her cloak over my body, careful not to let it touch the arrow, and gripped my hand in hers. Her eyes were soft and gold as nectar, warm with astonishing affection that comforted me even while I writhed in agony.

Gilroy attacked the disfigured man from behind with a

dagger. Tamarice turned to watch the struggle, unruffled. I saw a knife pressed against my male rescuer's throat and for a moment thought he had been overpowered. But an unseen force compelled the dagger and coaxed it from the wielder's hand. I heard the crack of Gilroy's bones as the knife bent back his fingers and tore from his grasp, lodging itself securely in the frozen ground at his feet.

Realizing they were outmatched, my kidnappers slowly rose to their feet, shoulders hunched in surrender.

"Drop your weapons," the powerful man commanded.

Soft thuds broke through the silence as the two who still held weapons obeyed him perfunctorily.

"Leave or die."

With one last awestruck glance at me and then the elicromancers, Hagan and Gilroy trudged toward the spot where the gates had once been, the second cradling his broken fingers. Trumble, seething with anger, spit blood on the miry snow and followed.

Elwood approached the disfigured warrior who had saved my life, taking a knee before him. Cradling my elicrin stone in his cloak, he lifted it toward the elicromancer. "Lord Brack, forgive me," he whispered, head bowed. "I wouldn't have done it if I'd had a choice." He looked at me, writhing in grass blotched with dark blood. "Forgive me."

The elicromancer's expression was cold. I feared what justice he might exact upon my kidnapper. But he used his own cloak to accept the stone, tucking it away in his tunic, then took a small leather pouch from the same pocket and offered it to Elwood.

Mystified, Elwood stood and accepted the mysterious gift.

My eyelids grew heavy and I flickered in and out of consciousness as I met his rueful gaze and watched him depart from the clearing.

The scarred man was a blur as he knelt at my other side.

“I’m going to take out the arrow,” he warned me. “So I can heal the wound.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and screamed as he ripped the point from my flesh. My consciousness reeled while the light from his green elicrin stone spread over me. He enveloped me with his cloak and lifted me.

Held against his chest, I felt his voice resound. I was unable to make sense of his remark as everything faded away. In fact, I was sure I imagined it.

“That was a clever trick, transforming into a deer. Clever indeed.”



TWO

“**T**hey thought they could use her.” A voice emerged from the profound silence. “As if an elicrin stone simply belongs to anyone who happens upon it. If we hadn’t intervened, she would be lying there dead, her power wasted.”

I wanted to climb out of the black fog in my mind, but the warmth of sleep held me captive. I recognized the voices, but they sounded distant.

“Yes, they were men without consciences,” Brack said. “But the last man was merely desperate.”

“Desperate?” the woman called Tamarice demanded. “Is that why you gave him a whole bag of gold aurions? You sympathize too easily.”

“His children were nearly starving. He didn’t want to take part. If you had heard his thoughts—”

“Whatever he was *thinking*, he still dragged a young woman to her probable death.”

“The gift was mine to give.” Brack’s voice was firm, but gentle.

“The point is that he deserved death and you rewarded him.”

“The last generation erected the gates around the Water for a reason: so that only those meant to open them would open them. She was meant to have an elicrin stone, to be here with us now. For all the things they did wrong, the kidnappers delivered her to her destiny.”

Tamarice let out a frustrated sigh. “I’ll get the old woman so she can tend to her.”

“That ‘old woman’ is an elder of this city, not a servant, and she deserves your respect. . . .” Brack trailed off as the other elicromancer’s resolved footsteps faded. He sighed wearily, turning toward me.

“She is clever, Bristal,” he whispered, though my eyes were closed and heavy with fatigue. “But I hope you are wise.”

After he left, I heard only a hearth fire crackling and mountain wind wailing at shutters.



An unforgiving ray of evening sunlight tinted the back of my eyelids red. The soreness of the arrow wound ranged from the tight, itchy flesh to the depths of my belly, forcing me to groan through cracked lips. As I blinked at an unfamiliar room, a face materialized next to my bed, edging closer as though inspecting me. The cloud of fatigue cleared and I took in a little girl’s straight orange hair and round eyes of glistening blue.

“Grandmum, she’s awake!”

“You made sure of that when you opened the shutters, Deirdrel.” The second voice belonged to a tall old woman whose gray hair held hints of faded auburn. She stood up from her seat by the fire and tested my skin for fever with a feather-light hand.

“I was just letting fresh air in,” the little girl argued. “It smells like sickness.”

“Where am I?” I croaked.

The old woman spoke. “A citadel in the Brazor Mountains called Darmeska. I’m Kimber, an elder of this city, and this is my granddaughter, Deirdrel.”

“Drell,” the girl corrected.

I had heard of Darmeska before. Patsy had shown me the map on display in the manor study and explained that it was where the descendants of the ancient elicromancers lived.

“Try to eat up while it’s hot,” Kimber said, placing a bowl of vegetable soup in my hands. The woman and her granddaughter’s Northern lilt was strong, much more colorful than my Volarian accent.

I sipped until I realized the breadth of my hunger, then began slurping the steaming broth, which ran down my chin as I swallowed spoonful after spoonful. I tried to sound polite between ravenous helpings. “Do you happen to know where my elicrin stone is?”

“Brack is keeping it for you. He will send for you when the healing spell has completed its work.”

Grimacing, I recalled the painful wound and my stark naked body in the snow.

“Do you want to see the best view of Darmeska?” Drell interrupted my thoughts, pointing at the window beside me.

I followed her gaze and my breath caught in wonder. The citadel must have been built into vast cliffs; I saw a dizzying view of the sprawling wilderness in the distance, glistening with ice and snow. The stacked lower levels spread out below us, an entire city staggering down the slope of a mountain.

“Are there galleries full of magical artifacts? That’s what people say.”

“Yes, we have preserved the culture of our ancestors, even if the magic has thinned in our veins.” Kimber closed the shutters, blocking out the chill. Her proud posture exemplified her status as an elder, and yet she was tending to me like a servant. Either the people of this city were very kind, or I was very important.

When I finished the soup, Kimber placed a teacup full of dark-ruby liquid on a saucer at my bedside. “Briarberry tea. It’s likely stronger than what you’re used to.”

It was bitter, much more robust than the peppermint tea we drank in Popplewell, but I detected a tad more sweetness with each sip. When I’d emptied the dregs, Kimber changed the poultice covering my wound. She took pains to ensure I wouldn’t see the brown-stained cloth, though I saw it anyhow. I gingerly traced my wound with my fingertips, surprised to find the beginnings of a taut, shiny scar and a stippled bruise rather than a jaggedly stitched wound.

An abrupt knock on the door signaled Tamarice’s entry. She looked even younger than I remembered, perhaps only a few years older than me in body, though the legends said she was a century old. Ladylike features—soft cheeks, a round nose, long lashes and lips so full and pink that other women would have pinched and painted theirs for the same effect—clashed with her powerful stance and wild dark braid. Her circular vermilion elicrin stone was set in a gold pendant that hung on a thick chain around her neck.

She strode up to me and examined my wound. “Are you feeling better?”

I lowered my dressing gown. “Much. I can never thank you enough for saving me.”

“I would have stopped that arrow if I’d gotten there in time. I’m just happy you’re alive.” Her eyes snapped to Kimber behind me. “Get her dressed. Brack is ready for her.”

“Brack said to send her when she’s well. Cheating death is no small matter.”

“She looks well enough to me.”

After a tense pause, the elder turned her back on the elicromancer and opened a massive wardrobe sitting against the stone wall of the bedchamber. She rifled through a small selection of winter dresses and picked out a dark blue wool dress, a pair of boots and a cloak.

“She can’t train in a dress,” said Tamarice, who wore a leather tunic, sturdy boots and a fur cloak.

“I doubt she will have any rigorous lessons today. Drell will go down to a clothier to buy her something more suitable.”

Drell narrowed her blue eyes at Tamarice. Her thin lips and straight orange hair made for overall peculiar features, but they were somehow pleasant on an otherwise plain face, which she screwed up in a frown. She moseyed out of the room, shoulders prouder than her grandmother’s.

Tamarice begrudgingly accepted the clothes from Kimber and helped me get dressed. She finished by tossing the cloak over my shoulders. “Follow me,” she said, already on her way into the stone corridor.

“Thank you,” I said to Kimber, feeling torn about Tamarice’s poor graces. The old woman smiled and nodded, and I hurried out of the room.

My bedchamber overlooked the city below, as well as the foothills and the forests beyond that eventually met civilization. But when I wiped away the condensation clinging to the

windows on the opposite side of the corridor, I saw a snowy plateau surrounded by cliffs that jutted higher still than the citadel. Whatever unknown wilderness of mountains and sea lay beyond them was unseen even from the topmost level of Darneska.

I ignored the pain of my mending wound as Tamarice led me down a drafty stone stairwell, moving slowly for my benefit. “High as we are, the slightest wind can sound like a howling storm,” she said. “So don’t be frightened thinking the fortress is going to come crashing down.”

“Where are the other people?”

“The common folk live down below. Thousands of elicromancers once filled these halls, but now it’s just you up here.”

“Where do you live?”

She removed a heavy latch from the wooden door and a burst of cold air raced around us. We walked through a small passage onto the mountain plateau. “Brack lives in that stone cottage set in the cliff face,” she said pointing to a stone hut with smoke pouring from the chimney and warm light from the windows. “And I have a home outside of the citadel, down by the river. Being an elicromancer isn’t much to boast of anymore. We don’t live in the extravagance many would expect.”

My dark hair blinded me as it whipped around in the freezing wind. I tightened the fur around my shoulders, gazing up at the mountains. “It’s extravagant to me.”

Tamarice led the way over the snowy plateau, which turned to grass beneath her feet. She was lean and powerful-looking, but as I watched her cross through the cutting wind, I realized that the look of power came from within rather than without.

It struck me then: I was like her. I was now one of the three

most powerful beings in the realm of Nissera. Soon everyone from Calgoran to Yorth would know my name.

My life in Popplewell suddenly felt as distant as a childhood memory. I wondered if I would ever go back to the manor, if I would have a chance to thank Patsy for her charity. I smiled to myself, thinking of Hazel's reaction to the news that I was an elicromancer. Knowing that in every shadow she would imagine me returning for vengeance was satisfying vengeance enough.

When we reached the hovel, Tamarice opened the door without knocking, casting a gold prism of light on the grass. She allowed me to step inside first. A sitting room with mismatched furniture held untidy stacks of books and loose parchment. In the corner near the fireplace stood an entrance to a winding stairwell, and to the left sat a small kitchen with a simple square table and other crude furnishings.

Remembering Brack's scar, I prepared myself to look on his marred features. But rather than a massive, marked young warrior, there sat a middle-aged man with cropped graying hair and a neat beard. There was no scar—just light eyes of an indeterminate blue-gray. He had a squarish face crossed with the leathery wrinkles that come to the weary too young.

Tamarice brushed past me to warm herself by the fire. Brack stood up from his ratty chair to welcome me.

"Brack . . . sir?" I ventured.

"Bristal, good evening. I'm surprised to see you up and about." The friendly voice was different from the one I had heard before. He set a chair near the hearth and gestured for me to sit. "I'm sorry if my appearance startled you," he said, removing the damp fur from my shoulders and replacing it

with a blanket. "I find it makes things easier to be young and strong when I have to fight. Otherwise, I don't mind this." He gestured at himself. "Care for briarberry tea?"

"You change your appearance?" I asked. "Oh, and yes, please."

"It took me more than a hundred years to learn how, and as of yet I've only managed to create two guises."

"One hundred years . . ." I repeated.

"Indeed. You must take pity on the rest of us to whom the power of changing forms doesn't come so naturally." He chuckled at my astonished look. "You're pale. Something to eat?"

"No, but thank you." My mind was far from my full stomach or my injury. "If you don't mind my asking, is this your . . . true self?"

"No. I've haven't appeared as my true self in many years."

I studied him as he hung a tea kettle over the fire. Though older now, he looked sturdy and square, like a retired soldier. The gentleness of his manner agreed with the mercy he showed my kidnappers by sparing their lives. I found it easier to believe he and the man who helped save me yesterday were one and the same.

I looked at Tamarice, now suspicious that her beauty was contrived. "Is that your real . . .?"

"Yes, it is," she said.

I turned back to Brack. "Why do you appear as either old or scarred? Can't you choose any form you wish?"

"I've found arrogance comes too easily to a young, handsome man. It's not worth the trouble." The kettle screeched. He retrieved it and poured me a cup of briarberry tea, then sat

facing me, his eyes bright amid somewhat weatherworn features. “So you have received an elicrin stone.”

My heart cantered. “Yes.”

He pulled a wrapped object from the pocket of his wool tunic and gave it to me. I unwrapped the cloth and saw the glistening surface of my pale blue gem catching the firelight. Feeling all was right with the world again, I tested its weight in my palm.

“We elicromancers have a purpose,” Brack stated carefully. “As gifted beings, we are destined to guide the kingdoms of men to prosperity and peace, to come to their aid when disaster or war threatens.”

“Or when Calgoran and Volarre cannot play as friends,” Tamarice said. “We like to slap their hands like strict governesses.”

“Yes, we aim to prevent proud, powerful men with armies from growing hostile,” Brack retorted. He looked at me. “I suppose you’re wondering where you come into play.”

I nodded.

“There’s been magic in your blood since you were born, magic that manifested itself as it chose, outside of your control. Until now.” Brack paused, his eyes alight. “The gardener claimed to witness something strange, something you did that only a very powerful being could do.”

“I turned into . . . a rabbit?” Watching Brack nod yes to my question felt even more absurd than saying the words aloud. I gasped, finally fitting truths together. “A few days ago, Hagan drank before thatching the roof. He knocked his ladder down but he mumbled something about one of the maids doing it to trap him. I was outside feeding scraps to the dogs, and I tried

to hide before he could blame me.” I remembered going dizzy, briefly losing my grasp on reality. “But . . . how did you know?”

“Brack is extraordinary, even among elicromancers,” Tamarice said. “You and I can manipulate physical matter. He can read and manipulate the mind.”

I tensed. Brack’s pale eyes shifted from me to Tamarice. “We are all equals. I have promised never to discern your thoughts.” He looked back at me. “And I promise the same to you.”

I realized I had been holding my breath since Tamarice last spoke, trying to keep my mind from producing thoughts for him to discern. “Um, all right,” I muttered. “Thank you.”

I didn’t know whether I could trust his promise. But when he smiled at my response, the soft wisdom in his eyes made doubt seem unnecessary.

“Though elicromancers have the same broad range of magical abilities,” he went on, “each one of us possesses a single gift that is accentuated more than the others. It could be mastery over fire, duplication, prophecy, the ability to turn one’s body into impenetrable crystal. . . . There are specialties beyond number. This gift usually manifests itself in some way, often uncontrollably, before the elicromancer claims an elicrin stone.”

“Brack is a Sentient,” Tamarice said. “I am called a Terrene, because my dominion is over the land and what grows from it. You’re a Clandestine.”

“Clandestine?”

“Even in the old days the gift was rare and greatly revered,” Brack added. “Until now, your talent for disguises has been muddled, unchecked and sporadic. But with an elicrin stone

to harness your power, you should be able to assume the form of any human or animal, and even change the appearance of other objects.”

A gasp of disbelief escaped my lips. How had so many people drowned in the Water if someone like me could emerge from its depths a hundred times more powerful? I looked at the emerald elicrin stone that hung around Brack’s neck. “Who were you before?”

Brack’s smiled ruefully. “The arrogant son of a wealthy man. I heard the thoughts of others incessantly, and while I delighted to use it to my advantage, it also plagued me. I knew that if I survived the Water, it would allow me to control my Sentience rather than be at its mercy. In the end, braving the Water also gave me a new sense of responsibility to this world. I no longer saw it as my own for the selfish taking.”

I turned to Tamarice, expecting to see her fixing me with the same meaningful look as Brack. But she walked away from the fire to pour herself a cup of tea.

Brack leaned toward me and placed a firm hand on my shoulder. I looked into the depths of his kind eyes, sensing a commission.

“As an elicromancer, you have the responsibility to keep peace between the nations and their people. Your life will no longer be measured by years or the span of mortal lives. Instead, you will mature until you reach the age at which your body ceases to grow, and you will remain that way for a long time.”

“A lonely time,” Tamarice amended quietly.

“You can choose to be mortal again, giving up your magic along with your responsibility to keep peace in these lands,”

Brack continued. "But if you choose to keep your elicrin stone, you will be challenged, frightened and endangered. You will put yourself aside over and over again, sacrifice the life you want to live for the life you must live. You may even wish you were never brought to the Water. But we promise to prepare you the best we can for whatever comes." His voice grew calm, intent. "I must ask you now: Will you commit to seeking the good of this world?"

At once I knew that this question would weigh on me all my life, no matter my answer. A prick of loss threatened to dampen the exhilaration of the moment. Beginning a new life meant saying a sad farewell to my old one, humble though it was.

More disturbing than that was the memory of the terrifying power hanging in the forest air. What if the unknown path held even greater terrors? It felt too soon to make such a promise.

But a force of pride and purpose rose up from somewhere deep in my chest, a place even deeper than where my heart thundered against my ribs. The elicrin stone in my hand pulsed with light as if to encourage me. It had chosen me. Now I would choose to become worthy.

All I managed at first was an affirmative croak. I swallowed and looked directly into Brack's unfaltering gaze. "Yes, I will."

A quiet moment passed during which I thought of how much power this small room contained. My eyes followed the crimson glow of the fire as it rose and fell like an engulfing tide.

"Then consider this your home." Brack squeezed my shoulder and stood up. "Do you wish to write your guardian? Do you need me to transcribe a letter explaining what's happened?"

“I can write it,” I said. “The lord and lady of the manor prefer their servants to be educated.”

Brack smiled, hauling a desk with ink and parchment toward me. “Well, that will make your elicromancy training much easier. If you can manage without your elicrin stone for now, I’ll have a jeweler make you one of these.” He lifted the heavy silver chain and setting that held his jagged emerald stone.

After I reluctantly lay mine back in the cloth he held, he bid us good-night and went out the door.

Dipping the quill in the silky ink, I began my letter to Patsy. After crafting the first sentence, I glanced up at Tamarice. She stood staring blankly into the flames, her red elicrin stone twisting with firelight and her pale fingers tight around her teacup.

“What was your life like before the Water?” I asked her.

The lovely elicromancer smiled, but the humor didn’t reach her shining bronze eyes. She took my empty teacup and turned away to pour us each another steaming cupful. “A tale for another time.”



With morning sunshine thawing the bitterness in the air, I smiled as I hiked back to Brack’s homestead a few days later. The low-lying mists had thinned, revealing silvery peaks jutting into a blue morning sky.

Taking the spiral stairs to the study as Brack had instructed me, I reached a circular room with a lofty ceiling made entirely of glass. Thousands of books lined the shelves, dense and cocooned in dust.

Brack stood amid the clutter, his pendant gleaming white.

Books slunk off the ledges and drifted about, their pages turning as he looked from one to the other, brow furrowed. With a flick of his hand, he sent one to a teetering stack while another soared to a shelf on the second landing.

My stone lay on a square of silk on the desk by the door. The jagged edges had been artfully foiled in silver with thin prongs to hold the stone in place. The pendant was attached to a long, sturdy chain. I brushed it with my fingertips, amazed that so fine a thing belonged to me. It had required years of trust for Patsy to let me wash the fancy dishes trimmed with gold roses.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I’ve enchanted it to adapt to your size so that you can wear it with any guise,” Brack said, halting the books in the midst of their dance and turning to face me. “Concealing it will be up to you, however. Concealing spells are simple, and you can hide it according to the situation.”

I slid it ceremoniously over my head, noticing that the cool metal chain on my nape didn’t feel as burdensome as expected. I anticipated a flash of light or a burst of powerful magic to surge out of it, but the elicrin stone just hung lightly against my ribcage. “So, how do I use it?”

“With the language of the ancient elicromancers. Every enchantment and spell corresponds with a phrase in Old Nisseran, which your elicrin stone interprets to an action. What you command, it will make happen. It’s as simple as that.” He placed his hand atop the wobbly stack of books. I had an ominous feeling that they were for me.

“So I have to learn a language before I can even use it?”

“This isn’t a simple fairy charm or a witch’s potion.”

I nodded, staving off disappointment.

“But since creating disguises is your natural domain, we can jump right into that discipline without words or spells.”

“Oh,” I perked up, circling my fingers around my elicrin stone.

“Let’s start now. Take off your boot, please.”

I slid it off and plunked it on the floor.

“Now, close your eyes, breathe in and concentrate on turning it into a slipper. Nothing fancy.”

Power swelled up within me like a river during spring rains. I felt my elicrin stone reacting, the magic within it and within me working in tandem. When I opened my eyes I found the boot was still a boot, though made of silk. Next, Brack asked me to turn a teacup into a teapot. I watched it grow, beginning to take on the shape I had envisioned—just before it burst into shards. I covered my head, but the porcelain pieces morphed into silken pink ribbons and fluttered to the floor. I lifted one from the sleeve of my tunic and rubbed it between my thumb and index finger in wonder.

Brack propped his fists on his desk and sighed deeply.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll do better next time.”

“No, you did very well. Forgive me. My mind is on other matters.”

I bit my lip, wondering if it would be audacious of me to ask for more information. Remembering that he had called us equals, I straightened my shoulders and opened my mouth, but he spoke first.

“You haven’t happened to visit the library yet, have you?”

“No, my lord.”

“You don’t need titles among friends, Bristal. I know acting subservient is a difficult habit to break.”

I lifted my chin. “Why do you ask?”

“Certain volumes and artifacts have gone missing, ones kept locked up by me and the elders of this city. Far be it for me to judge scholarly pursuits, but it seems someone has taken a rather fastidious interest in the kind of elicromancy we don’t ascribe to or permit.” He sighed. “I hoped it was simply you, being a curious novice.”

I shook my head. “No, I’m afraid it wasn’t me.” The phrase felt empty without a *my lord* at the end.

“If you . . .” he hesitated. “If Tamarice makes you uncomfortable with her ideas, don’t be afraid to tell me so. She’s always been fascinated by what some would call *gray areas* of magic. Now that we have you in our midst, her progressive ways put me ill at ease. I don’t want you to get overwhelmed.”

“I will look out for that,” I said. If the three of us were truly equals, I didn’t want to promise to report on Tamarice’s doings like a spy.

Brack nodded, the shadowy look on his face fading a bit. “Please do.” Footsteps clunked up the stairs. “That’s Drell here for your next lesson.”

“She’s going to watch?” I asked, heat rushing to my cheeks. “But I’ve only just started. . . .”

He strutted toward a cabinet holding an array of weapons. He chose a small sword with an enlarged pommel that was probably meant to keep it from slipping from my hand. “She’s going to teach.”

I blinked at him. “A child is going to teach me to fight?”

“I started learning when I was three,” the high-pitched, heavily-lilted voice said from behind me. Drell waltzed into

the room with her fists planted on her hips. “When was the first time *you* held a sword?”

“I never have,” I admitted.

“Exactly.” She unsheathed the dirk at her waist and struck a pose of readiness.

I laughed, thinking perhaps this was a joke, but Brack held out the lightweight sword for me to take. Drell stalked out of the room, leading the way down the stairs and out the door.

“Will your wound permit rigorous exercise?” Brack asked. “I can tell Drell to take it easy on you.”

“Don’t bother.” I smiled, looking up into his strangely sad eyes as I accepted the weapon. “Thanks to you, there’s not even a scar.”