

fire study



MARIA V. SNYDER

Maria Snyder

Fire Study

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The battle of her life has begun In the barren territory of Sitia, power comes at a price. Yelena Zaltana possesses the most terrifying magic in the district – the ability to capture and release souls. While the sinister council that rules the area meets to decide Yelena’s fate, she sets out on a perilous journey to capture a Soulstealer, her own dark counterpart...when she comes face-to-face with someone far more dangerous. With her homeland at risk, Yelena is prepared to give everything she has to save the ones she loves. But Yelena must learn that in the war between good and evil – there can only ever be one victor. A CHRONICLES OF IXIA NOVEL 'A compelling new fantasy series' – Rhianna Pratchett, SFX on Poison Study The Chronicles of Ixia Poison Study Magic Study Fire Study Storm Glass Sea Glass Spy Glass Shadow Study

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FIRE STUDY

“You need my permission to exit the Keep,” Roze said.

“This is *my* domain. I’m in charge of all magicians, including you, Soulfinder.” Her hands smacked her chair’s arms. “If *I* had control of the Council, you would be taken to the Keep’s cells to await execution. No good has ever come from a Soulfinder.”

The other Masters gaped at Roze in shock. She remained incensed. “Just look at our history. Every Soulfinder has craved power. Magical power. Political power. Power over people’s souls. Yelena will be no different. Sure now she plays at being a Liaison and has agreed to my training. It’s only a matter of time.”

Looking over her shoulder, she gave me a pointed stare.

Keep out of Sitia’s affairs. And you might be the only Soulfinder in history to live past the age of twenty-five.

Go take another look at your history books, Roze, I said. The demise of a Soulfinder is always reported along with the death of a Master Magician.

Roze ignored me as she left the meeting room.

FIRE STUDY

Maria V. Snyder



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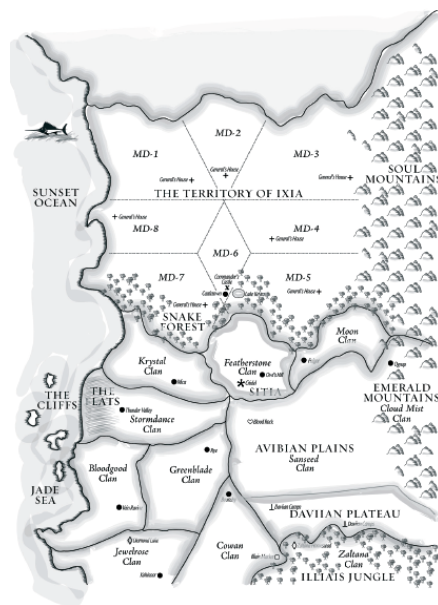
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THE TERRITORY OF IXIA



To my parents, James and Vincenza,
for your constant support and encouragement
in all my endeavours. You sparked the fire.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

By this time you all should know how wonderful my husband, Rodney, can be. After all, I have thanked him and listed the many ways he supports me in the acknowledgements of my first two books. However, the writing wouldn't get done and the holes in plot logic wouldn't get filled without him. So once again, thanks go to him, because I don't ever want to take him for granted. And thanks also go to my two little sparks who fire my imagination – my children, Luke and Jenna.

One of the best decisions I've made is to attend Seton Hill University's graduate writing programme. Through this programme, I've learned so much and met a talented group of writers. Thanks to them all, and special thanks go to my critique partners, Diana Botsford, Kimberley Howe and Jason Jack Miller, who helped me with this book. Kim, I hope this reads better than the ingredients on a frozen dinner! I would also like to thank my Seton Hill mentor, David Bischoff.

First drafts of novels can be pretty rough, but my editor, Mary Theresa Hussey, has the knowledge and experience to wade in and guide me to calmer waters. Thanks, Matrice, for all your hard work and the smiley faces on my manuscript. They keep me going!

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Many thanks to Henry Steadman, who did a fantastic job with the cover art for all three Study books. I love them – they are perfect!

Researching for a book is always fun, and this time I enrolled in a glass-blowing class. My appreciation for glass art rose considerably as I struggled to craft simple items from molten glass. Thanks go to my teacher and glass artist, Helen Tegeler, whose patient instruction not only added to my knowledge of glass for this book, but made the experience a blast.

And, finally, heartfelt thanks go to my army of Book Commandos! They're out in the trenches promoting and recommending my books to all who will listen, affixing stickers, and handing out bookmarks. Thanks to my Aunt Bette, whose efforts in the field earned her the rank of General. The Commander would be proud.

1

“THAT’S PATHETIC, YELENA,” Dax complained. “An all-powerful Soulfinder who isn’t all-powerful. Where’s the fun in that?” He threw up his long thin arms in mock frustration.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but *I’m* not the one who attached the ‘all-powerful’ to the title.” I pulled a black strand of hair from my eyes. Dax and I had been working on expanding my magical abilities without success. As we practiced on the ground floor of Irys’s Keep tower—well, mine too, since she has given me three floors to use—I tried not to let my own aggravation interfere with the lessons.

Dax was attempting to teach me how to move objects with magic. He had rearranged the furniture, lined up the plush armchairs in neat rows and turned the couch over on its side with his power. My efforts to restore Irys’s cozy layout and to stop an end table from chasing me failed. Though not from lack of trying—my shirt clung to my sweaty skin.

A sudden chill shook me. Despite a small fire in the hearth, the rugs and the closed shutters, the living room was icy. The white marble walls, while wonderful during the hot season, sucked all the heat from the air throughout the cold season. I imagined the room’s warmth following the stone’s green veins and escaping outside.

Dax Greenblade, my friend, tugged his tunic down. Tall and lean, his physique matched a typical Greenblade Clan member. He reminded me of a blade of grass, including a sharp edge—his tongue.

“Obviously you have no ability to move objects, so let’s try fire. Even a baby can light a fire!” Dax placed a candle on the table.

“A baby? Now you’re really exaggerating. Again.” A person’s ability to access the power source and perform magic manifested at puberty.

“Details. Details.” Dax waved a hand as if shooing a fly. “Now concentrate on lighting this candle.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him. So far, all my efforts on inanimate items were for naught. I could heal my friend’s body, hear his thoughts and even see his soul, but when I reached for a thread of magic and tried to use it to move a chair, nothing happened.

Dax held up three tan fingers. “Three reasons why you should be able to do this. One, you’re powerful. Two, you’re tenacious. And three, you’ve beat Ferde, the Soulstealer.”

Who had escaped, and was free to start another soul-stealing spree. “Reminding me of Ferde is helping me how ...?”

“It’s *supposed* to be a pep talk. Do you want me to list all the heroic deeds you’ve—”

“No. Let’s get on with the lesson.” The last thing I wanted was to hear Dax recite the latest gossip. The news about my being a Soulfinder had spread through the Magician’s Keep like dandelion seeds carried by a strong wind. And I still couldn’t think about the title without a cringe of doubt, worry and fear touching my heart.

I pushed all distracting thoughts aside and connected to the power source. The power blanketed the world, but only magicians could pull threads of magic from it to use. I gathered a strand to me and directed it to the candle, willing a flame to form.

Nothing.

“Try harder,” Dax said.

Increasing the power, I aimed again.

Behind the candle, Dax’s face turned red and he sputtered as if suppressing a cough. A flash seared my eyes as the wick ignited.

“That’s rude.” His outraged expression was comical.

“You wanted it lit.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want to do it for you!” He glanced around the room as if seeking the patience to deal with an unruly child. “Zaltanas and their weird powers, forcing *me* to light the candle. Pah! To think I wanted to live vicariously through your adventures.”

“Watch what you say about my clan. Or I’ll ...” I cast about for a good threat.

“You’ll what?”

“I’ll tell Second Magician where you disappear to every time he pulls one of those old books off his shelf.” Bain was Dax’s mentor, and, while the Second Magician delighted in ancient history, Dax would rather learn the newest dance steps.

“Okay, okay. You win and you’ve proved your point. No ability to light a fire. I’ll stick to translating ancient languages.” Dax made a dour face. “And you stick to finding souls.” He teased, but I sensed an undercurrent to his words.

His uneasiness over my abilities was for excellent reasons. The last Soulfinder was born in Sitia about a hundred and fifty years ago. During his short life, he had turned his enemies into mindless slaves and almost succeeded in his quest to rule the country. Most Sitians didn’t react well to the news about another Soulfinder.

The awkward moment passed as a mischievous glint lit Dax’s bottle-green eyes. “I’d better go. I have to study. We have a history test tomorrow. Remember?”

I groaned, thinking of the large tome waiting for me.

“Your knowledge of Sitian history is also pathetic.”

“Two reasons.” I held up my fingers. “One, Ferde Daviian. Two, the Sitian Council.”

Dax gestured with his hand.

Before he could say anything, I said, “I know. Details, details.”

He smiled and wrapped his cloak around him, letting in a gust of arctic wind as he left. The flames in the hearth pulsed for a moment before settling. I drew closer, warming my hands over the fire. My thoughts returned to those two reasons.

Ferde was a member of the unsanctioned Daviian Clan, who were a renegade group of the Sandseed Clan. The Daviians wanted more from life than wandering the Avibian Plains and telling stories. On a power quest, Ferde had kidnapped and tortured twelve girls to steal their souls and increase his magical power. Valek and I had stopped him before he could complete his quest.

An ache for Valek pumped in my heart. I touched his butterfly pendant hanging from my neck. He had returned to Ixia a month ago, but I missed him more each day. Perhaps I should get myself into a life-threatening situation. He had a knack for showing up when I most needed him.

Unfortunately, those times were fraught with danger and there hadn’t been many chances to just be with each other. I longed to be assigned a boring diplomatic mission to Ixia.

The Sitian Council wouldn’t approve the trip until they decided what to do with me. Eleven clan leaders and four Master Magicians comprised the Council, and they had argued about my new role of Soulfinder all this past month. Of the four Masters, Irys Jewelrose, Fourth Magician, was my strongest supporter and Roze Featherstone, First Magician, was my strongest detractor.

I stared at the fire, following the dance of flames along the logs. My thoughts lingered on Roze. The randomness of the blaze stopped. The flames moved with a purpose, divided and gestured as if on a stage.

Odd. I blinked. Instead of returning to normal, the blaze grew until it filled my vision and blocked out the rest of the room. The bright patterns of color stabbed my eyes. I closed them, but the image remained. Apprehension rolled along my skin. Despite my strong mental barrier, a magician wove magic around me.

Caught, I watched as the fire scene transformed into a lifelike picture of me. Flame Me bent over a prone body. A soul rose from the body, which I then inhaled. The soulless body stood and Flame Me pointed to another figure. Turning, the body stalked the new person and then strangled him.

Alarmed, I tried to stop the fire vision to no avail. I was forced to observe myself make more soulless people, who all went on a massive killing spree. An opposing army attacked. Fire swords flashed. Flames of blood splattered. I would have been impressed with the magician's level of artistic detail if I hadn't been horrified by the blazing carnage.

In time, my army was extinguished and I was caught in a net of fire. Flame Me was dragged, chained to a post and doused with oil.

I snapped back to my body. Standing next to the hearth, I still felt the web of magic around me. It contracted and tiny flames erupted on my clothes.

And spread.

I couldn't stop the advance with my power. Cursing my lack of fire skill, I wondered why I didn't possess this magical talent.

An answer echoed in my mind. *Because we need a way to kill you.*

I stumbled away from the blaze. Sweat poured down my back as the sound of sizzling blood vibrated in my ears. All moisture fled my mouth and my heart cooked in my chest. The hot air seared my throat. The smell of charred flesh filled my nose and my stomach heaved. Pain assaulted every inch of my skin.

No air to scream.

I rolled around the floor, trying to smother the fire.

I burned.

The magical attack stopped, releasing me from the torment. I dropped to the floor and breathed in the cool air.

"Yelena, what happened?" Irys touched an icy hand to my forehead. "Are you all right?"

My mentor and friend peered down at me. Concern lined her face and filled her emerald eyes.

"I'm fine." My voice croaked, setting off a coughing fit. Irys helped me sit up.

"Look at your clothes. Did you set yourself on fire?"

Black soot streaked the fabric and burn holes peppered my sleeves and skirt/pants. Beyond repair, I would have to ask my cousin, Nutty, to sew me another set. I sighed. I should just order a hundred of the cotton tunics and skirt/pants from her to save time. Events, including magical attacks, conspired to keep my life interesting.

"A magician sent me a message through the fire," I explained. Even though I knew Roze possessed the strongest magic in Sitia, and could bypass my mental defenses, I didn't want to accuse her without proof.

Before Irys could question me further, I asked, "How did the Council session go?" I hadn't been allowed to attend. Although the rainy weather wasn't conducive for walking to the Council Hall, it still rankled.

The Council wanted me well-versed in all the issues they dealt with on a daily basis as part of my training to be a Liaison between them and the Territory of Ixia. My training as a Soulfinder, though, remained a subject the Council hadn't agreed on. According to Irys's theory, my reluctance to begin learning could be the cause of the Council's indecision. I thought they worried I would follow the same path as the Soulfinder from long ago once I discovered the extent of my powers.

"The session ..." Her lips twisted in a wry smile. "Good and bad. The Council has agreed to support your training." She paused.

I steeled myself for the next bit of news.

"Roze was ... upset about the decision."

"Upset?"

"Fiercely opposed."

At least now I knew the motive behind my fire message.

"She still thinks you're a threat. So the Council has agreed to let Roze train you."

I scrambled to my feet. "No."

“It’s the only way.”

I bit back a reply. There were other options. There had to be. I was in the Magician’s Keep, surrounded by magicians of various skill levels. There had to be another who could work with me. “What about you or Bain?”

“They wanted a mentor who was impartial. Out of the four Masters, that left Roze.”

“But she’s not—”

“I know. This could be beneficial. Working with Roze, you’ll be able to convince her you’re not out to rule the country. She’ll understand your desire to help both Sitia and Ixia.”

My doubtful expression remained.

“She doesn’t like you, but her passion for keeping Sitia a safe and free place to live will override any personal feelings.”

Irys handed me a scroll, stopping my sarcastic comment on Roze’s personal feelings. “This arrived during the Council session.”

I opened the message. In tight-printed letters was an order from Moon Man. It read, *Yelena, I have found what you seek. Come.*

2

THE MESSAGE I HELD WAS typical for Moon Man, my Sandseed Story Weaver and friend. Cryptic and vague. I imagined he had written the note with a devilish grin on his face. As my Story Weaver, he knew I sought many things. Knowledge about Soulfinders and finding a balance between Sitia and Ixia resided at the top of my list. A quiet vacation would be nice, too, but I felt certain he referred to Ferde.

Ferde Daviian, the Soulstealer, and killer of eleven girls had escaped from the Magician's Keep cells with Cahil Ixia's help. After the Council failed to recapture him, they debated for an entire month about how to find them both.

My frustration mounted with every delay. Ferde was weak from when I had pulled the souls—his source of magical power—from him during our fight. But all it would take was another girl's murder for him to regain some of his strength. So far, no one had been reported missing, but the knowledge that he remained free clawed at my heart.

To avoid imagining the horror Ferde might cause, I focused on the message in my hand. Moon Man hadn't specified to come alone, but I dismissed the notion to tell the Council as soon as the thought formed in my mind. By the time they decided what to do, Ferde would be long gone. I would go without informing them. Irys would call it my rush-into-a-situation-and-hope-for-the-best method. With only a few minor mishaps, it had worked in the past. And at this point, rushing off held more appeal.

Irys had moved away when I unrolled the message, but, by the way she held herself so still, I knew she was curious. I told her about the note.

"We should inform the Council," she said.

"So they could do what? Debate every possible issue for another month? The message invited me. If I need your help, I'll send for you." I sensed her resolve softening.

"You should not go alone."

"Fine. I'll take Leif with me."

After a moment's hesitation, Irys agreed. As a Council member, she wasn't happy about it, but she had learned to trust my judgment.

My brother, Leif, would probably be as glad as I was to get away from both the Keep and the Citadel. Roze Featherstone's growing animosity toward me put Leif in a difficult situation. Apprenticed to Roze while training at the Magician's Keep, he had become one of her aides upon graduation. His magical skill of sensing someone's emotions helped Roze determine a person's guilt in a crime, and his magic also aided victims in remembering details about what had happened to them.

Leif's first reaction to my reappearance in Sitia after a fourteen-year absence had been immediate hatred. He had convinced himself that my kidnapping to the Territory of Ixia had been done to spite him and my return from the north had been an Ixian plot to spy on Sitia.

"At least we should tell the Master Magicians about Moon Man's message," Irys said. "I'm sure Roze would like to know when she can begin your training."

I frowned at her, and considered telling her about Roze's petty fire attack. No. I would deal with Roze on my own. Unfortunately, I would have plenty of time with her.

"We're having a Masters meeting at the administration building this afternoon. It will be the perfect time to inform them about your plans."

I scowled, but she remained steadfast.

"Good. I'll see you later," she said.

Irys sailed out of the tower before I could voice my protest. I could still reach her with my mind, though. Our minds always remained linked. The connection was as if we both stood in the same room. We each had our own private thoughts, but if I "spoke" to Irys, she would hear me. If she

did probe into my deeper thoughts and memories, it would be considered a breach in the magician's Ethical Code.

My horse, Kiki, and I shared the same connection. A mental call to Kiki was all that was needed for her to "hear" me. Communicating with Leif or my friend Dax proved more difficult; I had to consciously pull power and seek them. And, once found, they had to allow me access through their mental defenses and into their thoughts.

Although I possessed the ability to take a shortcut to their thoughts and emotions through their souls, the Sitians considered the skill a breach of the Ethical Code. I had scared Roze by using it to protect myself against her. Even with all her power, she couldn't stop me from touching her essence.

Anxiety rolled in my stomach. My new title of Soulfinder didn't sit well with me, either. I shied away from that line of speculation as I wrapped my cloak around me before leaving the tower.

On my way across the Keep's campus, my attention returned to my musings about mental communication. My link with Valek couldn't be considered a magical connection. To me, Valek's mind was unreachable, but he had the uncanny ability to know when I needed him and *he* would connect with me. He had saved my life many times through that bond.

Turning Valek's snake bracelet around my wrist, I pondered our relationship until a biting wind laced with icy needles drove away all warm thoughts about him. The cold season had descended on northern Sitia with a vengeance. I shuffled through slushy puddles and shielded my face from the sleet. The Keep's white marble buildings were splattered with mud and looked gray in the weak light, reflecting the miserable day with perfection.

Spending most of my twenty-one years in northern Ixia, I had endured this type of weather for only a few days during the cooling season. Then the cold air would drive the dampness away. But, according to Irys, this horrid mess was a typical Sitian day during the cold season, and snow was a rare event that seldom lasted more than a night.

I trudged toward the Keep's administration building, ignoring the hostile stares from the students who hurried between classes. One of the results of capturing Ferde had been the immediate change in my status from an apprentice of the Keep to a Magician's Aide. Since Irys and I had agreed to a partnership, she offered to share her tower. I had accepted with relief, glad to be away from the cold censure of my fellow students.

Their scorn was nothing in comparison to Roze's fury when I entered the Masters' meeting room. I braced myself for her outburst, but Irys jumped from her seat at the long table and explained why I had come.

"... note from a Sandseed Story Weaver," Irys said. "He may have located Ferde and Cahil."

The corners of Roze's mouth pulled down with disdain. "Impossible. Crossing the Avibian Plains to return to his clan in the Daviian Plateau would be suicide. And it's too obvious. Cahil is probably taking Ferde to either the Stormdance or the Bloodgood lands. Cahil has many supporters there."

Roze had been Cahil's champion in the Council. Cahil had been raised by soldiers who had fled the takeover in Ixia. They convinced Cahil that he was the nephew of the dead King of Ixia and should inherit the throne. He had worked hard to gain supporters and attempted to build an army to defeat the Commander of Ixia. However, once he discovered he was really born to a common soldier, he rescued Ferde and disappeared.

Roze had encouraged Cahil. They held the same belief that it was just a matter of time before Commander Ambrose set his sights on conquering Sitia.

"Cahil could bypass the plains to get to the plateau," Zitora Cowan, Third Magician, offered. Her honey-brown eyes held concern, but as the youngest of the four Master Magicians her suggestions tended to be ignored by the others.

"Then how would this Moon Man know? The Sandseeds don't venture out of the plains unless it's absolutely necessary," Roze said.

“That’s what they want us to believe,” Irys said. “I wouldn’t put it past them to have a few scouts around.”

“Either way,” Bain Bloodgood, Second Magician, said, “we must consider all options. Obvious or not, someone needs to confirm that Cahil and Ferde are not in the plateau.” With his white hair and flowing robes, Bain’s appearance matched what I had assumed to be a traditional magician’s uniform. Wisdom radiated from his wrinkled face.

“I’m going,” I declared.

“We should send soldiers with her,” Zitora said.

“Leif should go,” Bain added. “As cousins of the Sandseed, Yelena and Leif will be welcomed in the plains.”

Roze ran her slender fingers along the short white strands of her hair and frowned, appearing to be deep in thought. With the colder temperatures, Roze had stopped wearing the sleeveless dresses she preferred and exchanged them for long-sleeved gowns. The deep navy hue of the garment absorbed the light and almost matched her dark skin. Moon Man had the same skin tone, and I wondered what color his hair would be if he hadn’t shaved it off.

“I’m not sending anyone,” Roze finally said. “It’s a waste of time and resources.”

“I’m going. I don’t need your permission.” I stood, preparing to leave.

“You need my permission to exit the Keep,” Roze said. “This is *my* domain. I’m in charge of all magicians, including you, Soulfinder.” Her hands smacked her chair’s arms. “If *I* had control of the Council, you would be taken to the Keep’s cells to await execution. No good has ever come from a Soulfinder.”

The other Masters gaped at Roze in shock. She remained incensed. “Just look at our history. Every Soulfinder has craved power. Magical power. Political power. Power over people’s souls. Yelena will be no different. Sure now she plays at being a Liaison and has agreed to my training. It’s only a matter of time. Already ...” Roze gestured to the doorway. “Already she wants to run off before I can begin lesson one.”

Her words echoed through the stunned silence. Roze glanced around at their horrified expressions and smoothed the wrinkles from her gown. Her dislike of me was well-known, but this time she had gone too far.

“Roze, that was quite—”

She raised her hand, stopping Bain from the rest of his lecture. “You know the history. You have been warned many, many times, so I will say no more about it.” She rose from her seat. Towering a good seven inches above me, she peered down. “Go, then. Take Leif with you. Consider it your first lesson. A lesson in futility. When you return, you’ll be mine.”

Roze made to leave, but I caught a thread of her thoughts in my mind.

... should keep her occupied and out of my way.

Roze paused before she exited. Looking over her shoulder, she gave me a pointed stare. *Keep out of Sitia’s affairs. And you might be the only Soulfinder in history to live past the age of twenty-five.*

Go take another look at your history books, Roze, I said. *The demise of a Soulfinder is always reported along with the death of a Master Magician.*

Roze ignored me as she left the meeting room, ending the session.

I went to find Leif. His quarters were near the apprentice’s wing on the east side of the Keep’s campus. He lived in the Magician’s building, which housed those who had graduated from the Keep and were now either teaching new students or working as aides to the Master Magicians.

The rest of the magicians who had also completed the curriculum were assigned to different towns to serve the citizens of Sitia. The Council tried to have a healer in every town, but the magicians with rare powers—like the ability to read ancient languages or find lost items—moved from place to place as needed.

Magicians with strong powers took the Master-level test before leaving the Keep. In the past twenty years, only Zitara had passed, bringing the number of Masters to four. In Sitia's history, there never had been more than four Masters at one time.

Irys thought a Soulfinder could be strong enough to take the Master's test. I disagreed. They already had the maximum, and I lacked the basic magical skills of lighting fires and moving objects—skills all the Masters possessed.

Besides, being a Soulfinder was bad enough, having to endure and fail the Master test would be too much to bear. Or so I guessed. The rumors about the test sounded horrific.

Before I even reached Leif's door, it swung open and my brother stuck his head out. The rain soaked his short black hair in an instant. I shooed him back as I hurried into his living room, dripping muddy slush onto his clean floor.

His apartment was tidy and sparsely furnished. The only hint of his personality could be gleaned from the few paintings that decorated the room. A detailed rendering of a rare Ylang-Ylang flower indigenous to the Illia's Jungle, a painting of a strangler fig suffocating a dying mahogany tree and a picture of a tree leopard crouched on a branch hung on his walls.

Leif scanned my bedraggled appearance with resignation. His jade-colored eyes were the only feature that matched my own. His stocky body and square jaw were the complete opposite of my oval face and thin build.

"It can't be good news," Leif said. "I'd doubt you would brave the weather just to say hello."

"You opened the door before I could knock," I said. "You must know something's up."

Leif wiped the rain from his face. "I smelled you coming."

"Smelled?"

"You reek of Lavender. Do you bathe in Mother's perfume or just wash your cloak with it?" he teased.

"How mundane. I was thinking of something a little more magical."

"Why waste the energy on using magic when you don't have to? Although ..."

Leif's eyes grew distant and I felt the slight tingle of power being pulled.

"Apprehension. Excitement. Annoyance. Anger," Leif said. "I take it the Council hasn't voted to make you Queen of Sitia yet?"

When I didn't answer, he said, "Don't worry, little sister, you're still the princess of our family. We both know Mother and Father love you best."

His words held an edge, and I remembered it hadn't been long since he had wanted to see me dead.

"Esau and Perl love us equally. You really do need me around to correct your misconceptions. I've proved you wrong before. I can do it again."

Leif put his hands on his hips and raised one dubious eyebrow.

"You said I was afraid to come back to the Keep. Well—" I spread my arms wide, flinging drops of water onto Leif's green tunic "—here I am."

"You are here. I'll grant you that. But are you unafraid?"

"I already have a mother and a Story Weaver. *Your* job is to be the annoying older brother. Stick to what you know."

"Ohhh. I've hit a nerve."

"I don't want to argue with you. Here." I pulled Moon Man's note from my cloak's pocket and handed it to him.

He unfolded the damp paper, scanning the message. "Ferde," he said, coming to the same conclusion. "Have you told the Council?"

"No. The Masters know." I filled Leif in on what had happened in the meeting room, omitting my "exchange" with Roze Featherstone.

Leif's wide shoulders drooped. After a long moment, he said, "Master Featherstone doesn't believe Ferde and Cahil are going to the Daviian Plateau. She doesn't trust me anymore."

"You don't know that for—"

"She thinks Cahil is headed in another direction. Normally she would send me to determine his location and send for her. Together, we would confront him. Now I get assigned the wild-valmur chase."

"Valmur?" It took me a moment to connect the name with the small, long-tailed creature that lived in the jungle.

"Remember? We used to chase them through the trees. They were so fast and quick, we never caught one. But sit down and hold a piece of sap candy and they'll jump right into your lap and follow you around all day."

When I failed to respond, Leif cringed with guilt. "That must have been after ..."

After I had been kidnapped and taken to Ixia. Although I could imagine a young Leif scampering through the jungle's canopy after a fleet-footed valmur.

The Zaltana Clan's homestead had been built high in the tree branches, and my father had joked that the children learned to climb before they could walk.

"Roze could be wrong about Cahil's intentions. So pack some of that sap candy. We might need it," I said.

Leif shivered. "At least it will be warmer in the plains, and the plateau is farther south."

I left Leif's quarters, heading to my tower to pack some supplies. The sleet blew sideways and tiny daggers of ice stung my face as I hurried through the storm. Irys was waiting for me in the receiving room just past the oversize tower entrance. The flames in the hearth pulsed with the rush of cold air slipping around the doors as I fought to close them against the wind.

I hustled to the fire and held my hands out. The prospect of traveling in such weather was unappealing.

"Does Leif know how to light fires?" I asked Irys.

"I think so. But no matter how skilled he is, wet wood won't ignite."

"Great," I muttered. Steam floated from my soaked cloak. I draped the soggy garment around a chair then dragged it closer to the fire.

"When are you leaving?" Irys asked.

"Right away." My stomach grumbled and I realized I had missed lunch. I sighed, knowing dinner would probably be a cold slice of cheese and mushy bread.

"I'm meeting Leif in the barn. Oh snake spit!" I remembered a couple of commitments.

"Irys, can you tell Gelsi and Dax I'll start their training when I get back?"

"What training? Not magic—"

"No, no. Self-defense training." I pointed to my bow. The five-foot-long staff of ebony wood was still threaded through its holder on my backpack. Drops of water beaded and gleamed on the weapon.

I pulled it free, feeling the solid weight of the staff in my hands. Underneath the ebony surface of the bow was a gold-colored wood. Pictures of me as a child, of the jungle, my family, and so on had been etched into the wood. Even Kiki's loving eyes had been included in the story of my life. The bow moved smoothly in my hands. A gift from a master craftswoman of the Sandseed Clan who had also raised Kiki.

"And Bain knows that you won't be at his morning lesson," Irys said. "But he said—"

"Don't tell me he assigned homework," I pleaded. Just thinking about lugging the heavy history tome made my back hurt.

Irys smiled. "He said that he would help you catch up on your studies when you return."

Relieved, I picked up my pack, sorting the contents to see what other supplies we would need.

"Anything else?" Irys asked.

“No. What are you going to tell the Council?” I asked.

“That Roze has assigned you to learn about your magic from the Story Weavers. The first documented Soulfinder in Sitia was a Sandseed. Did you know that?”

“No.” I was surprised but shouldn’t have been. After all, what I knew about Soulfinders wouldn’t fill a page in one of Master Bain’s history books.

When I finished packing, I said goodbye to Irys and muscled my way through the wind to the dining hall. The kitchen staff always had a supply of travel rations on hand for the magicians. I grabbed enough food to last us a week.

As I drew closer to the stables, I could see a few brave horse heads poking out of their stalls. Kiki’s copper-and-white face was unmistakable even in the murky half-light.

She nickered in greeting and I opened my mind to her.

We go? she asked.

Yes. I’m sorry to take you out on such a horrible day, I said.

Not bad with Lavender Lady.

Lavender Lady was the name the horses had given me. They named the people around them just like we would name a pet. I had to smile, though, remembering Leif’s comment about my bathing in the pungent herb.

Lavender smell like ... Kiki didn’t have the words to describe her emotions. A mental image of a bushy blue-gray lavender plant with its long purple cluster of flowers formed in Kiki’s mind. Feelings of contentment and security accompanied the image.

The main corridor of the stable echoed as if empty despite the pile of feed bags nearby. The thick supporting beams of the building stood like soldiers between the stalls and the end of the row disappeared into the gloom.

Leif? I asked Kiki.

Sad Man in tack room, Kiki said.

Thanks. I ambled toward the back of the barn, inhaling the familiar aroma of leather and saddle soap. The dry smell of straw scratched my throat and clung to the earthy scent of manure.

Tracker, too.

Who?

But before Kiki could answer I spotted Captain Marrok in the tack room with Leif. The sharp tip of Marrok’s sword was aimed at Leif’s chest.

3

“STAY BACK, YELENA,” Marrok ordered. “Answer me, Leif.”

Leif’s face had paled, but his jaw was set in a stubborn line. His gaze met mine, questioning.

“What do you want, Marrok?” I asked.

The bruises on Marrok’s face had faded, but his right eye was still puffy and raw despite Healer Hayes’s efforts to repair his broken cheekbone.

“I want to find Cahil,” Marrok said.

“We *all* want to find him. Why are you threatening *my* brother?” I used a stern tone to remind Marrok that he now dealt with me. Having an infamous reputation had a few advantages.

Marrok looked at me. “He works with First Magician. She’s in charge of the search. If she has any clue as to where to find Cahil, she’ll send Leif.” He gestured to the bridles in Leif’s hands. “On a day like today, he’s not going to the market or out for a pleasure ride. But he won’t tell me where he’s going.”

It continued to amaze me just how fast news and gossip traveled through the Keep’s guards.

“Did you ask him before or after you pulled your sword?”

The tip of Marrok’s blade wavered. “Why does it matter?” he asked.

“Because most people are more willing to cooperate if they don’t have a weapon pointed at their chest.” Realizing that Marrok was a career soldier who did most of his talking with his sword, I switched tactics.

“Why didn’t you plan to follow Leif?” Marrok’s tracking abilities had impressed the horses so much that they had given him the name Tracker.

Marrok touched his cheek and winced. I could guess his thoughts. Marrok had followed Cahil with the utmost loyalty, but Cahil had beaten and tortured him to find out the truth about his common heritage, leaving Marrok for dead.

The soldier sheathed his sword in one quick motion as if he had made a decision. “I can’t follow Leif. He would sense me with his magic and confuse my mind.”

“I can’t do that,” Leif said.

“Truly?” Marrok rested his hand near his sword, considering.

“But I can,” I said.

Marrok’s attention snapped back to me.

“Marrok, you’re hardly fit for travel. And I can’t let you kill Cahil. The Sitian Council wants to talk to him first.” *I* wanted to talk to him.

“I don’t seek revenge,” Marrok said.

“Then what do you want?”

“To help.” Marrok gripped the hilt of his weapon.

“What?” Leif and I said at the same time.

“Sitia *needs* Cahil. Only the Council and the Masters know he doesn’t have royal blood. Ixia is a real threat to Sitia’s way of life. Sitia needs a figurehead to rally behind. Someone to lead them into battle.”

“But he aided in Ferde’s escape,” I said. “And Ferde could be torturing and raping another girl as we speak!”

“Cahil was just confused and overwhelmed by learning the truth of his birth. I raised him. I know him better than anyone. He probably already regrets his rashness. Ferde is most likely dead. If I get a chance to talk to Cahil, I’m positive he would come back without a fight, and we can work this out with the Council.”

Power brushed me.

“He’s sincere about his intentions,” Leif said.

But what about Cahil's intentions? I had seen him be ruthless and opportunistic in his quest to build an army, but never rash. However, I had only known him for two seasons. I considered using magic to see Marrok's memories of Cahil, but that would be a breach in the magician's Ethical Code unless he gave me his consent. So I asked for it.

"Go ahead," Marrok said, meeting my gaze.

Pain lingered in his blue-gray eyes. His short gray hair had turned completely white since Cahil's attack.

Granting me permission was enough to convince me of his sincerity, but despite his good intentions he still wanted to build an army and attack Ixia. And that ran counter to what I believed. Ixia and Sitia just needed to understand each other and work together. A war would help no one.

Do I leave Marrok here to influence the Council toward an attack, or take him with me? His skills as a tracker would be an added benefit.

"If I allow you to come with us, you must obey *all* my orders. Agreed?" I asked.

Marrok straightened as if he stood in a military formation. "Yes, sir."

"Are you strong enough to ride?"

"Yes, but I don't have a horse."

"That's all right. I'll find you a Sandseed horse. All you'll need to do is hold on." I grinned, thinking of Kiki's special gust-of-wind gait.

Leif laughed and his body relaxed with the release of the tension. "Good luck convincing the Stable Master to loan you his horse."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Garnet is the only other horse in the Keep's stables bred by the Sandseeds."

I wilted in defeat just thinking about the stubborn, cranky Stable Master. Now what? No other horse breed would be able to keep up with us.

Honey, Kiki said in my mind.

Honey?

Avibian honey. Chief Man love honey.

Which meant, if I offered to bring some Avibian honey back for the Stable Master, he might lend me his horse.

We left the Citadel through the south gate and headed down the valley road. Farm fields peppered with corn stubble and wagon ruts swept out from the right side of the road. The Avibian Plains dominated the left side.

The long grasses of the plains had turned from yellow and red to brown in the cold weather. The rains created extensive puddles, transforming the rolling landscape into a marshland and scenting the air with a damp smell of earthy decay.

Leif rode Rusalka, and Marrok had a death grip on Garnet's reins. His nervousness affected the tall horse, who jittered to the side at every noise.

Kiki slowed so I could talk to him. "Marrok, relax. I'm the one who promised to bring back a case of Avibian honey plus clean the Stable Master's tack for three weeks."

He barked out a laugh but kept his tight grip.

Time to switch tactics. I reached for the blanket of power hovering over the world and pulled a thread of magic, linking my mind with Garnet's. The horse missed Chief Man and didn't like this stranger on his back, but he settled when I showed him our destination.

Home, Garnet agreed. He wanted to go. *Pain*.

Marrok's rigid hold hurt Garnet's mouth, and I knew Marrok wouldn't relax even if I threatened to leave him behind. Sighing, I made light contact with Marrok's mind. His worry and fear focused more on Cahil than on himself. His apprehension came from not feeling in control of the powerful horse underneath him despite the fact that he held Garnet's reins. And also from not being in charge of the situation, having to take orders from *her*.

A dark undercurrent to his thoughts about me pulled a warning bell in my mind, and I would have liked to explore deeper. He had given me permission to see his memories of Cahil, but he hadn't given me *carte blanche* to probe. Instead, I sent him some calming thoughts. Even though he couldn't hear my words he should be able to react to the soothing tone.

After a while, Marrok no longer held himself so rigid, and his body moved with Garnet's motion. When Garnet felt comfortable, Kiki turned east into the plains. Mud splashed from her hooves as she increased her pace. I gave Leif and Marrok the signal to let the horses have control.

Please find Moon Man. Fast, I said to Kiki.

With a slight hop, she broke into her gust-of-wind gait. Rusalka and Garnet followed. I felt carried by a river of air. The plains blurred under Kiki's hooves at a rate about twice a full-speed gallop.

Only Sandseed horses could achieve this gait, and only when they rode in the Avibian Plains. It had to be a magical skill, but I couldn't tell if Kiki pulled power. I would have to ask Moon Man about it when we found him.

The plains encompassed a massive section of eastern Sitia. Located to the southeast of the Citadel, it stretched all the way to the base of the Emerald Mountains in the east, and down to the Davian Plateau to the south.

On a normal horse, it took about five to seven days to cross the plains. The Sandseeds were the only clan to live within the borders, and their Story Weavers had shielded their lands with a powerful protective magic. Any stranger who ventured into the plains without Sandseed permission became lost. The magic would confuse the stranger's mind and he would travel in circles until he either stumbled out of the plains or ran out of water and died.

Magicians with strong powers could travel without being affected by the magic, but the Story Weavers always knew when someone crossed into their land. As distant cousins of the Sandseeds, the Zaltana Clan members could also travel the plains unharmed. The other clans avoided the area altogether.

Since Marrok rode on a Sandseed horse the protection didn't attack him and we were able to ride all night. Kiki finally stopped for a rest at sunrise.

While Leif collected firewood, I rubbed the horses down and fed them. Marrok helped Leif, but I could see exhaustion etched in his pale face.

The rain and sleet had slowed during the night, but gray clouds sealed the sky. Our campsite had plenty of grass for the horses. It was on a high spot in the plains next to a rocky outcropping with a few scrub trees growing nearby, and was a solid place for us to stand without sinking ankle-deep into the mud.

Our cloaks were soaked, so I tied my rope between two trees to hang the wet garments. Leif and Marrok found a few dry branches. Making a tent of the twigs, Leif stared at the wood and small flames sprang to life.

"Show-off," I said.

He smiled as he filled a pot with water for tea. "You're jealous."

"You're right. I am." I growled in frustration. Leif and I were both born to the same parents, yet we had different magical powers. Our father, Esau, had no overt magic, just a flair for finding and using the plants and trees of the jungle for food, medicines and his inventions. Perl, our mother, could only sense if a person had magical abilities.

So how did Leif get the magical abilities to light fires and sense a person's life force while I could affect their souls? With my magic, I could force Leif to light a fire, but couldn't do it on my own. I wondered if anyone in Sitian history had studied the relationship between magic and birth parents. Bain Bloodgood, Second Magician, would probably know. He owned a copy of almost every book in Sitia.

Marrok fell asleep as soon as we finished eating our breakfast of bread and cheese. Leif and I remained by the fire.

“Did you put something in his tea?” I asked.

“Some fiddlewood bark to help him heal.”

Wrinkles and scars lined Marrok’s face. Through the yellowed bruises along his jaw, I spotted some white stubble. His swollen eye oozed blood and tears. Red streaks painted his right cheek. Healer Hayes hadn’t allowed me to help with Marrok’s recovery. He had only let me assist with minor injuries. Another who feared my powers.

I touched Marrok’s forehead. His skin felt hot and dry. The fetid smell of rotten flesh emanated from him. I reached for the power source and felt the Sandseeds’ protective magic watching me for signs of threat. Gathering magic, I projected a thread to him, revealing the muscles and bone underneath Marrok’s skin. His injuries pulsed with a red light. His cheekbone had been shattered and some bone fragments had gotten into his eye, affecting his vision. Small dark growths of an infection dotted the ruined area.

I concentrated on the injury until his pain transferred to my own face. A sharp needle of pain stabbed my right eye as my vision dulled and tears welled. Curling into a ball, I pushed against the onslaught, channeling the magic from the power source through my body. The flow chugged, and I strained. All of a sudden the current of magic moved with ease as if someone had removed a beaver’s dam, washing away the pain. Relief swept through me. I relaxed.

“Do you think that was a good idea?” Leif asked when I opened my eyes.

“The wound was infected.”

“But you used all your energy.”

“I . . .” I sat up, feeling tired but not exhausted. “I—”

“Had help,” a voice snapped out of nowhere.

Leif jerked upright in surprise, but I recognized the deep masculine tone. Moon Man appeared next to the fire as if he had formed from the rising heat and ashes. His bald head gleamed in the sunlight.

In deference to the chill, Moon Man wore a long-sleeved tan tunic and dark brown pants that matched the color of his skin, but no shoes.

“No paint?” I asked Moon Man. The first time I had met him he had coalesced out of a beam of moonlight covered only with indigo dye. He had claimed to be my Story Weaver and proceeded to show me my life’s story and unlocked my childhood memories. Six years of living with my mother, father and brother had been suppressed by a magician named Mogkan so I wouldn’t long for my family after Mogkan had kidnapped me.

Moon Man smiled. “I did not have time to cover my skin. And it is a good thing I came when I did.” His tone conveyed his displeasure. “Or you would have spent all your strength.”

“Not all,” I countered, sounding like a belligerent child.

“Have you become an all-powerful Soulfinder already?” He widened his eyes in mock amazement. “I will bow down before you, Oh Great One.” He bent at the waist.

“All right, enough,” I said, laughing. “I should have thought it through before healing Marrok. Happy now?”

He sighed dramatically. “I would be content if I thought you learned a lesson and would not do it again. However, I am well aware that you will continue to rush right into situations. It is weaved into your life’s pattern. There is no hope for you.”

“Is that why you sent for me? To tell me I’m hopeless?”

Moon Man sobered. “I wish. We had heard that the Soulstealer had escaped from the Magician’s Keep with Cahil’s help. One of our Story Weavers scouting in the Daviian Plateau sensed a stranger traveling with one of the Vermin.”

“Are Cahil and Ferde in the plateau?” Leif asked.

“We think so, but we want Yelena to identify the Soulstealer.”

“Why?” I asked. The Sandseeds didn’t waste time on trials and incarceration. They executed criminals on capture.

However, the Daviian Vermin had been very hard to find, and they had powerful magicians. The Vermin were a group of Sandseed youths who had become discontented with the Sandseed lifestyle of keeping to themselves and limiting contact with the other clans. The Vermin wanted the Sandseed Story Weavers to use their great powers to guide all of Sitia and not just the inhabitants of the plains.

They had broken from the Sandseed Clan and settled in the Daviian Plateau, becoming the Daviian Clan. The plateau’s dry and inhospitable soil made farming a nightmare, so the Daviians stole from the Sandseeds, and earned the nickname of Vermin. The Sandseeds also referred to the Vermin’s magicians as Warpers, since they used their magic for selfish reasons.

“You need to identify the Soulstealer because he may have harvested more souls, and only you can release those souls before we kill him,” Moon Man said with a flat and emotionless voice.

I grabbed his arm. “Have you found any bodies?”

“No. But I am concerned about what we will discover when we raid their camp.”

The horror of the last two seasons threatened to overwhelm me. Eleven girls mutilated and raped by Ferde so he could steal their souls and gain more magical power. Valek and I had stopped him before he could collect the final soul. If he had succeeded, Sitia and Ixia would now be his to rule. Instead, I had released all those souls to the sky. To think that he might have started again was unbearable.

“You’ve found their camp?” Leif asked.

“Yes. We put our lives on hold,” Moon Man said. “The warriors of the clan have done a complete sweep of the plateau. We found a large encampment on the southern edge near the border of the Illiais Jungle.”

And close to my family. I must have gasped because Moon Man touched my shoulder and squeezed.

“Do not worry about your clan. Every Sandseed warrior is ready to attack if the Vermin show any signs of departing their camp. We will leave when the horses are rested.”

I paced around the campfire, knowing I should get some sleep but unable to still my racing thoughts. Leif groomed the horses and Marrok slept. Moon Man reclined next to the fire, staring at the sky.

Marrok woke as the sky darkened. His eye had stopped weeping blood, and the swelling was gone. He probed his cheek with a finger. Amazement lit his face until he spotted Moon Man standing next to him. He jumped to his feet and pulled his sword, brandishing the weapon at the Story Weaver. Even armed, Marrok looked slight next to the muscular Sandseed, who towered six inches over him.

Moon Man laughed. “I see you are feeling better. Come. We have plans to make.”

The four of us sat around the fire while Leif made dinner. Marrok settled next to me, and from the corner of my eye I could see that whenever Marrok touch his cheek, he stared at Moon Man with a fearful fascination. And his right hand never strayed far from the hilt of his sword.

“We will leave at dawn,” Moon Man said.

“Why does everything have to start at dawn?” I asked. “The horses have good night vision.”

“That will give the horses a full day to recover. I will be riding with you on Kiki. She is the strongest. And once we reach the plateau, there will be no rest stops until we join the others.”

“And then what?” I asked.

“Then we will attack. You are to stay close to me and the other Story Weavers. The Soulstealer will be protected along with the Warpers. Once we break through the outer guards, then the hard part begins.”

“Dealing with the Warpers,” I said.

He nodded.

“Can’t you move the Void again?” Leif asked.

The Void was a hole in the power blanket where no magic existed. The last time the Sandseeds had uncovered a Vermin hideout, it had been protected by a shield of magic that created an illusion. The camp appeared to be occupied by only a few warriors. When the Sandseeds had moved the Void over the Vermin, the illusion was broken. Unfortunately, the encampment held four times the number of soldiers, and we had been vastly outnumbered.

“They are aware of that trick and will be alerted to our presence if we try to move the power blanket,” Moon Man said.

“Then how are you going to beat the Warpers?” I asked, worried. If the Vermin had access to magic it would be a difficult battle.

“All the Sandseed Story Weavers will link together and form a strong magical net that will seize them and prevent them from using their magic. We will hold them long enough for you to find the Soulstealer.”

Breaking his silence, Marrok asked, “What about Cahil?”

“He helped the Soulstealer escape. He should be punished,” Moon Man said.

“The Council wants to talk to him,” I said.

“And then *they* will decide what to do with him,” Leif added.

Moon Man shrugged. “He is not a Vermin. I will tell the others not to kill him, but in a large battle it might be hard.”

“He’s probably with the Davian leaders,” Marrok said.

“Marrok—you and Leif find Cahil and take him north of the fighting and I’ll rendezvous with you after the battle.”

“Yes, sir,” Marrok said.

Leif nodded, but I could see a question in his eyes.

Problem? I asked in his mind.

What if Cahil convinces Marrok not to take him back to the Council? What if they join together and I’m outnumbered?

Good point. I’ll ask Moon Man to—

Assign one of my warriors to stay with Leif, Moon Man said.

I jerked in surprise. I hadn’t felt Moon Man draw power to link with us.

What else can you do? I asked.

I am not telling you. It would destroy my mysterious Story Weaver persona.

The next morning we saddled the horses and made our way south toward the plateau. Even with the weight of two riders, Kiki easily carried us. Stopping only once for a warm dinner and sleep, we reached the border in two days. At sunset on the second day, we stopped to rest the horses at the edge of the plains.

The flat expanse of the plateau stretched to the horizon. A few brown clumps of grass clung to the sunbaked surface. While the plains had a few trees, rolling hills, rocks and sandstone protrusions, the plateau had bristle bushes, coarse sand and a few stunted spine trees.

We had left the cold, cloudy weather behind. The afternoon sun had warmed the land enough for me to take off my cloak, but as the light slipped into the darkness, a cool breeze stirred to life.

Moon Man left to find his scout. Even at this distance from the Vermin camp, it was too risky to make a fire. I shivered as I ate my dinner of hard cheese and stale bread.

Moon Man returned with another Sandseed.

“This is Tauno,” Moon Man said. “He will show us the way through the plateau.”

I peered at the small man armed with a bow and arrows. Only an inch taller than me, he wore short pants despite the chilly air. His skin had been painted, but in the dim light I couldn’t discern the colors.

“We will leave when the moon is a quarter up,” Tauno said.

Traveling at night was a good idea, but I wondered what the warriors did during the day. “How do the Sandseeds stay hidden in the plateau?” I asked.

Tauno gestured to his skin. “We blend in. And hide our thoughts behind the Story Weavers’ null shield.”

I looked at Moon Man.

“A null shield blocks magic,” Moon Man explained. “If you were to scan the plateau with your magic, you would not sense any living creature behind the null shield.”

“Doesn’t using magic to create the shield alert the Vermin?” I asked.

“Not when it is done properly. It was completed before the Story Weavers left the plains.”

“What about the Story Weavers behind the shield? Can they use magic?” Leif asked.

“Magic can not penetrate the shield. It does not block our vision or hearing, just protects us from being discovered by magical means.”

As we prepared to travel, I thought about what Moon Man had said, and realized that there were many things I still didn’t know about magic. Too many. And the thought of learning more with Roze quelled my curiosity.

When the moon had traveled through a quarter of the black sky, Tauno said, “It is time to go.”

The muscles along my spine tightened in apprehension as Moon Man settled behind me on Kiki’s saddle. What if my lack of magical knowledge caused me to endanger our mission?

No sense worrying about it now. I pulled in a deep breath, steadied my nerves and glanced at my companions. Tauno sat with Marrok on Garnet’s back. From the pained expression on Marrok’s face, I knew he wasn’t happy about sharing his mount with a Sandseed warrior. And to make it worse, Tauno insisted on being in front and holding Garnet’s reins.

To stay behind the null shield, our path through the plateau had to be precise. Tauno led us. The soft crunch of the horses’ hooves on hard sand was the only sound.

The moon crawled along the sky. At one point I wanted to yell out and urge Kiki into a gallop just to break the tension that pressed around us.

When the blackness in the sky eased in the east, Tauno stopped and dismounted. We ate a quick breakfast and fed the horses. As the day brightened, I saw how well Tauno blended in with the plateau. He had camouflaged himself with the plateau’s colors of gray and tan.

“We walk from here,” Tauno said. “We will leave the horses. Take only what you need.”

The clear sky promised a warm day so I removed my cloak and stowed it in my backpack. Dry air laced with a fine grit blew, scratching at the back of my throat. I decided I needed my switchblade. Strapping the sheath around my right thigh, I removed the weapon and triggered the blade. I treated the tip of the blade with some Curare. The muscle-paralyzing drug would come in handy if Cahil wouldn’t cooperate. After I retracted the blade, I positioned the weapon in its holder through a hole in my skirt/pants pocket. I wrapped my long black hair into a bun and used my lock picks to keep the hair in place. Finally, I grabbed my bow.

Dressed for battle, though, didn’t mean I was prepared for battle. I hoped I would be able to find Cahil and Ferde and take them without killing anyone. But the grim knowledge that I would kill to save myself formed a knot in my throat.

Tauno scanned our clothes and weapons. Leif’s machete hung from his waist. He wore a green tunic and pants. Marrok had strapped his sword onto his belt. The dark brown scabbard matched his pants. I realized that we had all dressed in the colors of the earth, and, while we didn’t blend in as well as Tauno, we wouldn’t stand out either.

We tied our packs and supplies onto the horses’ saddles, then left the horses to graze on what little grass they could find, and walked south. The plateau appeared deserted. The need to search the area with magic crept along my skin, and I tried to ignore the desire. Connecting with the life around me had become almost instinctive and I felt exposed and out of sorts by not knowing what breathed nearby.

Taking a circuitous path, Tauno eventually stopped. He pointed to a cluster of spine trees. “Just beyond that copse is the camp,” he whispered.

I searched the plateau. Where was the Sandseed army? The earth undulated as if the sand had liquefied. The waves on the ground grew. I clamped a hand over my mouth to stifle a cry of surprise. Row upon row of Sandseed warriors stood. Camouflaged to match the sand, they had been lying on the ground in front of us and I hadn’t noticed them.

Moon Man smiled his amusement at my dismay. “You have been relying on your magical senses and have forgotten about your physical senses.”

Before I could respond, we were joined by four Sandseeds. Though they dressed the same as the warriors, these Sandseeds held themselves with authority. They issued orders and power radiated from them. Story Weavers.

A male Story Weaver handed Moon Man a scimitar. His sharp gaze pierced me as he studied my features. “This is the Soulfinder?” Doubt laced his words, but he spoke softly. “She is not what I expected.”

“What did you expect?” I asked.

“A large dark-skinned woman. You look like you could not survive a sandstorm let alone find and release a soul.”

“It’s a good thing you’re not my Story Weaver. You’re easily distracted by the pattern of the cloth and can’t see the quality of the threads.”

“Well done,” Moon Man said to me. “Reed, show us the camp.”

The Story Weaver led us to the trees. Through the spiky needles on the branches, I saw the Daviian camp.

The air shimmered around the camp as if a bubble of heat had gotten trapped near the ground. A large cook fire burned in the central area. Many people scurried about either helping with breakfast or eating it. Tents fanned from the area, extending out until they reached the edge of the plateau.

Squinting in the sunlight, I looked beyond the encampment’s border. Just the tops of the trees in the Illiais Jungle were visible. They reminded me of a time when I had stood on a platform built near the peak of the tallest tree in the jungle and had seen the flat expanse of the plateau for the first time. The sheer rock drop-off into the jungle had appeared to be an impossible climb. So why set up camp there? I wondered.

Moon Man leaned next to me. “The camp is an illusion.”

“Do you have enough warriors to attack?” I asked, thinking the illusion hid many more Vermin. “Every one.”

“All—” The Sandseeds yelled a battle cry and dashed toward the camp.

Moon Man grabbed my arm, pulling me with him. “Stay with me.”

With Leif and Marrok right behind us, we followed the Sandseeds. When the first warriors crossed into the illusion, they disappeared from sight for a moment. The sound of rushing water reached my ears as the chimera dissipated.

I blinked a few times to adjust my vision to what the Daviians had concealed. The central fire remained the same. But instead of many Vermin around the flames, there stood only one man. The rest of the camp was empty.

4

WHEN THE ILLUSION disappeared, so did the expanse of tents and all the Davians. The lone man standing by the fire collapsed before the Sandseed warriors could reach him.

Evidence that a large army had camped here was imprinted on the ground. Although, by the time the Sandseed leaders restored order to the milling warriors, many of the Davian tracks had been ruined.

And the only witness had taken poison.

“One of their Warpers,” Moon Man said, nudging the corpse with his bare foot. “He held the illusion and killed himself once it broke.”

“If you can clear the area, I might be able to tell you where they’ve gone,” Marrok said.

The Sandseed warriors returned to the copse of spine trees. Moon Man and I stayed by the fire as Marrok and Leif circled the camp. Marrok looked for physical evidence while Leif used his magic to smell the intentions of the Davians.

I projected my mental awareness as far as I could. If I sought a specific person, then I could reach them from far away, but with a general search my magic could only extend about ten miles. I reached no one in the plateau, and the bounty of life in the jungle was too overwhelming to sort out.

When they had finished their circuit, Marrok and Leif returned. Their glum expressions reflected bad news.

“They’ve been gone for days. The majority of the tracks head east and west,” Marrok reported. “But I found some metal spikes with rope fibers in the ground near the edge of the plateau. A few Vermin could have climbed down into the jungle.”

I touched Leif’s arm. “The Zaltanas?”

“If the Vermin can even find our homestead among the trees, they’re still well protected,” he said.

“Even from one of the Warpers?” I asked.

Leif blanched.

“Are the ropes still there?” I asked Marrok.

“No. The others must have waited and either cut the rope or taken it along with them,” Marrok said.

“Do you know how many went down?” Moon Man asked.

“No.”

Leif said, “There were so many scents and emotions mixed together. The need for stealth and urgency predominated. They moved with a purpose and felt confident. The eastern group, though, had the most men and they ...” Leif closed his eyes and sniffed the breeze. “I don’t know. I need to follow their trail for a while.”

Marrok led Leif to the eastern tracks. I asked Kiki and the other horses to come to us. While waiting for them, Moon Man and the other Story Weavers split the warriors into two groups, and sent two scouts, one to the west and the other to the east.

But what about those that went down the rope to the jungle? What about Cahil and Ferde? Were they even with the Davians? And, if so, which way had they gone?

When the horses arrived, I grabbed my pack off Kiki’s saddle. Opening it, I pulled my rope out and headed for the rim of the plateau. I found one of the metal spikes Marrok had mentioned and tied the end of the rope to it. On my belly, I inched closer to the edge until I could see down into the jungle.

The sides of the cliff appeared to be smooth, with no handholds in sight. I tossed the rope over, but knew it wouldn’t reach the bottom far below. The end stopped a quarter of the way down. Even with a longer rope, the climb looked dangerous. Water sprayed out of fissures in the rock face about halfway down. The stones below glistened.

I considered the descent. A desperate person might attempt it, but Leif's assessment of the Vermin hadn't included desperation.

Moon Man waited for me by the horses.

"When the scouts return, we will set out," he said.

A notion that had been bothering me finally clicked. "Your people have swept the plateau and have been watching the camp. How could the Vermin slip away without you knowing?"

"A few of their Warpers had been Story Weavers. They must have learned to make a null shield."

"That would only hide their presence from a magical search. What about seeing them?"

Before Moon Man could answer, a shout rang out. Leif, Marrok and the scout ran toward us.

"Found a trench," Marrok panted.

"Heading east then north." The scout gestured.

"Ill intent," Leif said.

North toward the Avibian Plains. Toward the Sandseeds' unprotected lands because their warriors were here in the plateau. Every one.

Moon Man covered his face with his hands as if he needed to block out the distractions and think.

The second scout arrived from the west. Puffs of sand from his passage reached us before he did.

"Another trench?" Marrok asked.

"The trail ends. They doubled back." The scout reported.

Moon Man dropped his hands and began shouting orders, sending the warriors northeast at a run, ordering the Story Weavers to make contact with the people who stayed behind on the plains.

"Come on," he said, turning to join the others.

"No," I said.

He stopped and looked back. "What?"

"Too obvious. I don't think Cahil would go along with that."

"Then where did he go?" Moon Man demanded.

"The bulk of the Daviians went east, but I think a smaller group either went west or south."

"My people are in trouble," Moon Man said.

"And so are mine," I replied. "You go with your warriors. If I'm wrong, we'll catch up with you."

"And if you are right, then what?"

Then what, indeed. There were only three of us.

"I will go with you," Moon Man said. He called one of the Story Weavers and a touch of magic pricked my skin as they linked their minds.

Not wanting to intrude on their mental conversation, I focused on finding Cahil. I examined the edge of the plateau. A branch from one of the tall jungle trees reached toward the cliff. I could use my grapple and rope and hook it—

No, Leif said in my mind. *Suicide*.

I frowned at him. *But I could swing—*

No.

Nutty could do it. Our cousin climbed trees as if valmur blood coursed through her veins.

You're not Nutty.

I reluctantly abandoned that course of action. Even if I could swing to the tree, I doubted anyone else would follow me. Then I would be alone. I berated myself for being worried about being on my own: living in Sitia had made me soft.

It has made you smarter, Leif said. Then he added, *not much smarter, but we can still hope for improvement*.

"Where to?" Tauno asked as he joined our group.

I looked at Moon Man.

He shrugged. “He is better at scouting than fighting. We will need him,” he said with certainty. I sighed at the implication. “West.”

Perhaps we would find a better way down into the jungle or, failing that, we would follow the plateau’s edge west toward the Cowan Clan’s lands. Once in Cowan land, we would turn south into the forest then loop east into the Illiais Jungle. And hope we weren’t too late.

We mounted the horses. Tauno and Marrok once again led us. The point where the Davians had turned around was obvious even to me. The hard-packed sand had been scuffed where they stopped, and only flat unblemished sand continued westward.

Tauno halted the horses and waited for more instructions.

“A ruse. I can smell deceit and smugness,” Leif said.

“Why so smug?” I asked. “Laying a false trail is a basic strategy.”

“It could be Cahil,” Marrok said. “He tends to think he is smarter than everyone. Perhaps he thought this would fool the Sandseeds into sending half their warriors in the wrong direction.”

I projected my magical awareness over the smooth sand. A few mice skittered into the open, searching for food. A snake curled on a warm rock, basking in the afternoon sun. I encountered a strange dark mind.

I withdrew my awareness and scanned the plateau. Sure enough there was a small area a few feet away where the sand looked pliant, as if it had been dug up and packed back down. I slid off Kiki and walked over to the patch. The sand felt spongy beneath my boots.

“A Vermin must have buried something there,” Marrok said.

Tauno snorted with disgust. “You have probably found one of their waste pits.”

With Moon Man still on her back, Kiki came closer. *Smell damp*, she said.

Bad damp or good damp? I asked.

Just damp.

Taking my grapple out of my pack, I started to dig. The others watched me with various expressions of amusement, distaste and curiosity.

When I had dug down about a foot, my grapple struck something hard. “Help me clear the sand.”

My reluctant audience joined me. But eventually we uncovered a flat piece of wood.

Marrok rapped his knuckles on it and proclaimed it the top of a box. Working faster to remove the sand, we sought the edges. The round lid was about two feet in diameter.

While Tauno and Moon Man discussed why the Vermin would bury a circle box, I found the lip and pried the top up. A gulp of air almost sucked the lid back down.

Everyone was stunned into silence. The lid covered a hole in the ground. And, judging by the pull of air into its depths, a very deep hole.

5

THE SUNLIGHT ILLUMINATED a few feet of the hole. Below the lip a couple rough steps had been cut into the sandstone.

“Can you sense anyone in there?” Leif asked.

Pulling a thread of power, I projected into the darkness. My awareness touched many of those dark minds, but no people.

“Bats,” I said. “Lots of bats. You?”

“Just smug satisfaction.”

“Could this be another false trail?” Marrok asked.

“Or a trap?” Tauno asked. He glanced around with quick furtive movements as if worried the sand would erupt with Vermin.

“One of us needs to go inside and report back,” Moon Man said, looking at Tauno. “I knew we would need a scout.”

Tauno jerked as if he had stepped on a hot coal. Sweat ran down his face. He swallowed. “I will need a light.”

Leif retrieved his saddlebags and removed one of his cooking sticks. “This won’t burn long,” he said. He set the end on fire and handed the stick to Tauno.

With the flaming stick to lead the way, the Sandseed scout crawled into the opening headfirst. Tempted to link my mind with his to see what he found, I forced myself to focus instead on the ground beneath my feet, trying to discover a sign of life that would indicate the end of the cave.

The jungle’s pulse throbbed in my soul, but I couldn’t tell if it came from an opening below the ground or just from being so close to it on the plateau.

Waiting proved difficult. I imagined all types of hazards in Tauno’s way and was convinced he had fallen and broken a leg or worse when he appeared at the hole’s opening.

“The steps lead to a big cavern with many tunnels and ledges. I spotted a few footprints in the dirt, but had to come back before my light died,” Tauno said. “I also heard water gurgling nearby.”

Now we knew. Vermin had gone through the cave.

“Leif, what do you need to make a light last longer?” I asked him.

“You’re not thinking about going in there, are you?” Marrok asked, sounding horrified.

“Of course. You want to find Cahil, don’t you?”

“What makes you so certain he went that way?”

I looked at Leif. Together we said, “Smug satisfaction.”

While Leif and Tauno returned to the Daviiian camp for firewood, Moon Man and I discussed what to do with the horses. We would need Marrok’s tracking skills and Tauno’s keen sense of direction to find our way through the cavern. Leif and I needed to take Cahil back to the Council, so that left Moon Man.

“I am not staying behind,” Moon Man said.

“Someone needs to feed and water the horses,” I said.

Kiki snorted at me. I opened my mind to her.

Don’t need, she said. We wait then go.

Go where?

Market. An image of the Illiais Market formed in my mind. As the main southern trading post for Sitia, the market was tucked between the western edge of the Illiais Jungle and Cowan Clan lands.

How do you know about the market? I asked.

Know land like know grass.

I smiled. Kiki’s concise view of life kept surprising me with its many layers of emotion. If I could view the world the same way, I knew it would make my life easier.

Moon Man had been watching me. “Perhaps Kiki should mentor you.”

“On what? How to become a Soulfinder?”

“No. You *are* a Soulfinder. She can help you *be* a Soulfinder.”

“More cryptic Story Weaver advice?”

“No. Clear as air.” Moon Man drew a deep breath and grinned at me. “Let us get the horses ready.”

We removed their bridles and reins and packed the tack into their saddlebags. When Leif and Tauno returned, we sorted our supplies, distributing them among our packs and repacking the rest into the saddlebags. The horses would keep their saddles on, but we made sure nothing would hang down or impede their motion.

My pack weighed heavier than usual, but I had an uneasy intuition we might need a few of the items inside.

When we were ready, Leif lit the firewood torches dipped in the plant oil he had stored in Rusalka’s saddlebags. He left most of his odd concoctions and medicines behind, boasting he could find anything we needed in the jungle.

“*If* we find a way out,” Marrok muttered. “What will we do if we become lost in the caves?”

“That will not happen,” Moon Man said. “I will mark our way with paint. If we can not find our way through, we will return to the plateau. The horses will wait until Yelena tells them to go.”

Moon Man wrapped his muscular arm around Marrok’s shoulders. Marrok tensed as if he expected a blow.

“Trust yourself, Tracker. You have never been lost,” Moon Man said.

“I have never been inside a cave.”

“Then it will be a new experience for both of us.” Moon Man’s eyes glinted with anticipation, but Marrok hunched his back.

I wasn’t a stranger to small dark places. Before becoming the Commander’s food taster, I had spent a year in the Commander’s dungeon awaiting execution. While I wasn’t anxious to return to a confined space, I would push past my nerves to recapture Ferde.

“There are a few caves in the jungle,” Leif said. “Most of them are used as dens by the tree leopards and are avoided, but I’ve explored some.” His gaze met mine and, by the sad smile, I knew he had searched those caves looking for me.

Tauno and Marrok each held a torch. With Tauno leading the way, I followed, crawling headfirst through the small opening. Leif was close behind, then Marrok and finally Moon Man.

The torchlight illuminated the three-foot-wide tunnel. Shovel marks scraped the rough walls, indicating the space had been dug. The steps turned into bumps that helped slow our progress as we slid down the sloped passageway. I coughed as the dust of our passing mixed with the steady flow of cool damp air.

When we reached the cavern, the tightness around my ribs eased. Tauno’s light reflected off stones resembling teeth. A few of these hung from the ceiling and others rose from the ground as if we stood inside the mouth of a giant beast.

“Don’t move,” Marrok ordered as he examined the floor.

Shadows danced on the pockmarked walls as Marrok searched for signs. Deep wells of blackness indicated other tunnels, and small puddles of water peppered the floor. Dripping and running water filled the air with a pleasant hum that countered the unpleasant wet mineral smell mixed with a sharp animal musk.

Moon Man hunched his shoulders and short breaths punctuated his breathing.

“Is something wrong?” I asked him.

“The walls press on me. I feel squeezed. No doubt my imagination.” He went to mark the tunnel to the surface with red paint.

“This way,” Marrok said. Amplified by either the stone walls or by fear, his voice sounded louder than usual. He showed us a series of ledges descending down a chute.

The smell rising from the chute turned sharp and rank. I gagged. Tauno climbed down. The ledges turned out to be large chunks of rocks stacked crookedly on top of one another. In certain places he hung over the side and dropped down. We followed and with some mumbling and cursing we caught up to Tauno.

He waited on the last visible ledge. Beyond him, the chute ended in a pit of blackness. Tauno dropped his torch. It landed on a rock floor far below.

“Too far to jump,” Tauno said.

I pulled the grapple from my pack and wedged the metal hooks into a crack, glad I had decided to bring it along. Tying the rope onto the hook, I tested the grapple’s grip. Secure for now, but Moon Man braced himself and gripped the rope when Tauno swung over the edge and descended.

Moon Man’s forehead dripped with sweat despite the cool air. His uneven breathing echoed off the walls. When Tauno reached near the bottom, Moon Man released the rope. The grapple held Tauno’s weight. He jumped the last bit and picked up the torch, exploring the area before giving us the all-clear signal. One by one we joined him at the bottom of the chute. We left the grapple in place in case we needed to return.

“I have some good news and some bad,” Tauno said.

“Just tell us,” Marrok barked.

“There is a way out of this chamber, but I doubt Moon Man or Leif will fit.” Tauno showed us a small opening. The torch’s flame flickered in the breeze coming from the channel.

I looked at Leif. Even though Marrok was taller than him, Leif had wide shoulders. How had Cahil and Ferde fit through? Or had they traveled a different way? It was hard to judge size based on a memory. Perhaps they hadn’t encountered any trouble.

“First explore the tunnel. See what’s on the other side,” I instructed.

Tauno disappeared into the hole with a quick grace. Leif crouched next to the opening, examining it.

“I have more plant oil,” Leif said. “Perhaps we can grease our skin and slide through?” He stepped back when Tauno’s light brightened the passageway.

“It gets wider about ten feet down and ends in another cavern,” Tauno said. Black foul-smelling muck covered his feet. When questioned about the mud, he wiggled his toes. “The source of the stench. Bat guano. Lots of it.”

Those ten feet took us the longest to traverse. And I despaired at the amount of time we used to squeeze two grown men through a narrow space. It might be impossible to catch up with Cahil and the others. And Moon Man’s panic attack when he had become wedged for a moment had set everyone’s mood on edge.

Standing ankle deep in bat droppings, we made for a miserable group. My dismay reflected in everyone’s face. And it wasn’t due to the putrid and acidic smell. Leif’s shoulders were scratched raw and bloody, and the skin on Moon Man’s arms looked shredded. Blood dripped from his hands.

Moon Man’s breathing rasped. “Go back. We should ... go back.” He panted. “Bad idea. Bad idea. Bad idea.”

I suppressed my worries about Cahil. Connecting with the power source, I gathered a fiber of magic and sought Moon Man’s mind. A claustrophobic fear had pushed logic and reason aside. I probed deeper into his thoughts to find the strong unflappable Story Weaver, reminding him of the importance of our journey. A Sandseed Story Weaver would not let himself panic. Moon Man’s breathing settled as calm reclaimed his emotions. I withdrew from his mind.

“I am sorry. I do not like this cave,” Moon Man said.

“No one does,” Leif muttered.

Keeping my thread of magic, I focused on Moon Man's arms. Large chunks of his skin had been gouged out. My upper limbs burned with pain as I concentrated on his injuries. When I could no longer endure the stinging fire, I used magic to push it away from me. I swayed with relief and would have fallen to the floor if Leif hadn't grabbed me.

Moon Man examined his arms. "I could not lend you my strength this time," he said. "Your magic held me immobile."

"What's this?" Leif asked.

He raised my hand into the light. Blood streaked my skin, but I couldn't find any damage. When I had helped Tula, one of Ferde's victims and Opal's sister, Irys had speculated that I had assumed her injuries then healed myself. I guessed it had been the same with Marrok's crushed cheek. But seeing the physical evidence turned Irys's theory into reality. I stared at the blood and felt light-headed.

"That's interesting," Leif said.

"Interesting in a good way or bad?" I asked.

"I don't know. No one has done that before."

I appealed to Moon Man.

"A couple Story Weavers have the power to heal, but not like that," he said. "Perhaps it is something only a Soulfinder can do."

"Perhaps? You don't know? Then why have you led me to believe you know everything about me?" I demanded.

He rubbed his newly healed arm. "I am your Story Weaver. I do know everything about you. However, I do not know everything about Soulfinders. Do you define yourself strictly by that title?"

"No." I avoided the title.

"Well then," he said, as if that settled the matter.

"Let's go," Marrok said through his shirt. He had covered his nose and mouth to block the smell. "The Daviians' trail through this muck is easy to follow."

With Marrok in the lead, we stepped with care. About halfway through the bats' cavern, I sensed an awakening. Sending a thin tendril of power, I linked with the dark minds above me as they floated toward a collective consciousness. Their need for food pushed at me, and, through them, I felt the exact location of each bat, of each wall, of each exit, of each rock, and each figure below. They launched.

"Duck!" I yelled as the cloud of flying creatures descended.

The drone of beating wings reached a crescendo as black bodies flew around us. The air swirled and filled with bats. They deftly avoided knocking into us or each other as they headed toward the exit, seeking the insects and berries of the jungle.

My mind traveled with them. The instinctual exodus of thousands of bats flying through the tight tunnels of the cave was as organized as a military attack. And like any well-planned event, it took time for all the bats to leave.

The muscles in my legs burned when I finally straightened. The flapping and fluttering sounds echoed from the tunnels then faded. I looked at my companions. No one appeared to be hurt, although a few of us were splattered with dung.

Marrok had dropped his torch, and his arms covered his head. He puffed with alarm.

"Captain Marrok," I said, hoping to calm him. "Give me your torch."

My order pierced his panic. He picked up the unlit stick. "Why?"

"Because the bats have shown me the way out." I cringed as my hand closed on the muck-covered handle. "Leif, can you relight this?"

Leif nodded. Flames grew. When the torch burned on its own, he asked, "How far to the jungle?"

"Not far." I led the group, setting a quick pace. No one complained. All were as eager as I to exit the cave.

The sound of rushing water and a glorious freshness to the air were the only signs we had reached our destination. The day had turned into night while we had traveled through the cave.

From the bats, I knew water flowed along the floor of the exit and dropped down about twenty feet to the jungle. The waterfall splashed onto a tumble of rocks.

The others followed me to the edge of the stream. We doused the torches and waited for our eyes to adjust to the weak moonlight. I scanned the jungle below with my magic, searching for signs of an ambush and for tree leopards. Necklace snakes were also a danger to us, but the only life I touched were small creatures scurrying through the underbrush.

“Prepare to get wet,” I said before wading into the cold knee-deep water.

My boots filled immediately as I sloshed to the edge. There were plenty of rocks below to climb on, but they were either under the water or wet. I eased off my backpack and threw it down, aiming for a dry spot on the rocky bank.

“Be careful,” I instructed.

I turned around and crouched, leaning into the force of the water. Keeping my face above the stream, I stuck my feet over the edge and felt for a foothold. By the time I reached the bottom, my clothes were soaked. At least the water had washed away the foul-smelling dung.

Once everyone climbed down, we stood dripping and shivering on the bank.

“Now what?” Leif asked.

“It’s too dark to see trail signs,” Marrok said. “Unless we make more torches.”

I looked at our ragtag group. I had a dry change of clothes in my backpack, but Tauno and Moon Man had nothing with them. The bank was big enough for a fire. “We need to dry off and get some rest.”

“You need to die,” a loud voice said from the jungle.

6

ARROWS RAINED DOWN. Tauno cried out as one pierced his shoulder.

“Find cover,” Marrok ordered. An arrow jutted from his thigh.

We scrambled for the underbrush. Moon Man dragged Tauno with him. Marrok fell. An arrow whizzed by my ear and thudded into a tree trunk. Another slammed into my backpack before I dived under a bush.

I scanned the treetops with my magic, but couldn’t sense anyone.

“Null shield,” Moon Man shouted. “No magic.”

Marrok lay in the open, unmoving. Arrows continued to fly, but they missed him. He stared at the sky.

“Curare!” I yelled. “The arrows are laced with Curare.”

The ambushers wanted to paralyze us, not kill us. At least not yet. The memory of being completely helpless from the drug washed over me. Alea Daviian had wanted revenge for her brother’s death, so she had pricked me with Curare and carted me to the plateau to torture and kill me.

Leif yelped nearby. An arrow had nicked his cheek. “Theobroma?” he asked before his face froze.

Of course! My father’s Theobroma, which had saved me from Alea. I ripped open my pack, searching for the antidote to Curare. The rain of arrows slowed, and a rustling noise from above meant our attackers were climbing down. Probably to take better aim. I found the brown lumps of Theobroma and put one into my mouth, immediately chewing and swallowing it.

Moon Man cursed and I broke cover to run to him. An arrow hit my back. The force slammed me to the ground. Pain rippled through my body.

“Yelena!” Moon Man grabbed my outstretched arm and pulled me to him.

“Here.” I panted as the Curare numbed the throb in my lower back. “Eat this.”

He ate the Theobroma lump without a moment’s hesitation. An arrow’s shaft had pinned his tunic to a tree.

I lost feeling in my legs. “Are you hit?”

He ripped his shirt free and examined the skin along his right side. “No.”

“Pretend to be,” I whispered. “Wait for my signal.”

Sudden understanding flashed in his deep brown eyes. He broke the shaft off the arrow that had missed him, and wiped blood from my back. Lying down, he held the shaft between two bloody fingers of his left hand which he placed on his stomach, making it look like the arrow had pierced his gut. His right hand gripped his scimitar.

Men called as they reached the jungle floor. Before they could discover me, I put my right hand into my pant’s pocket, palming the handle of my switchblade. Numbness spread throughout my torso, but the Theobroma countered the Curare’s effects to a point where limited movement remained. Even so, I lay still, pretending to be paralyzed.

“I found one,” a man said.

“Over here’s another.”

“I found two,” a rough voice right above me said.

“That’s the rest of them. Make sure they’re incapacitated before you drag them out. Dump them beside their companion in the clearing,” said a fourth voice.

The rough-voiced man kicked me in the ribs. Pain ringed my chest and stomach. I clamped my teeth together to suppress a grunt. When he grabbed my ankles and hauled me through the bushes and over the uneven stones of the bank, I was a bit glad for the Curare in my body. It dulled the burning sting as the left side of my face and ear were rubbed raw by the ground.

The Curare also dulled my emotions. I knew I should be terrified, yet felt only mild concern. Curare's ability to paralyze my magic remained the most frightening aspect of the drug. Even though the Theobroma counteracted it, Theobroma had its own side effect. The antidote opened a person's mind to magical influence. While I could use magic, now I had no defense against another's magic.

Marrok still lay where he had fallen. The loud scrape of Moon Man's weapon on the ground reached me before he was dropped beside me.

"His fingers are frozen around the handle," one of the men said.

"A lot of good it will do him," another joked.

Listening to their voices, I counted five men. Two against five. Not bad odds unless my legs remained numb. Then Moon Man would be on his own.

Once the men brought Leif and Tauno to the bank, the leader of the attackers dropped the null shield. It felt as if a curtain had been yanked back, revealing what lurked behind. All five men's thoughts were open to me now.

Their leader shouted orders. "Prepare the prisoners for the Kirakawa ritual," he said.

"We should not feed these men to it," Rough Voice said. "We should use their blood for ourselves. You should stay."

My gaze met Moon Man's. We needed to act soon. I suppressed the desire to make mental contact with the Story Weaver. Their leader had to be a strong Warper to have created such a subtle null shield. There was a chance he would "hear" us.

The crunch of gravel under boots neared. My stomach tightened.

"I have orders to bring the woman to Jal," the leader said from above me. "Jal has special plans for her."

Without warning, the arrow in my back was yanked out. I bit my tongue to keep from yelling. The leader knelt next to me. He held the arrow, examining the weapon. My blood stained the smooth metal tip. At least the tip wasn't barbed. Strange I should worry about that.

"Too bad," Rough Voice said. "Think of the power you could have if *you* performed Kirakawa on her. You might become stronger than Jal. *You* could lead our clan."

My lower back pulsed with pain. The Theobroma was working. Another minute and I should regain the use of my legs.

"She is powerful," the leader agreed. "But I do not know the binding rite yet. Once I bring her to Jal, I hope to be rewarded and allowed to ascend to the next level."

He smoothed tendrils of hair from my face. I made a conscious effort not to flinch as his fingers caressed my cheek.

"Are the rumors true? Are you really a Soulfinder?" he whispered to me. He stroked my arm in a possessive way. "Perhaps I can siphon a cup of your blood before I deliver you to Jal." He reached for the knife hanging from his belt.

I moved. Pulling my switchblade from my pocket, I triggered the blade and rolled over, slicing his stomach open. But instead of falling back in surprise, he leaned forward and wrapped his hands around my neck.

A blur of motion beside me, and Moon Man leaped to his feet, swinging his scimitar in a deadly arc through Rough Voice.

I struggled with the leader. His weight trapped my arms. The pressure from his thumbs closed my windpipe. He attempted to connect with my mind, and would have succeeded with his magical attack if the Curare on my switchblade hadn't worked so fast to paralyze his power.

One problem remained. Trapped under the frozen Vermin, I couldn't breathe.

Moon Man, I called. Help!

One minute. The clang of weapons split the air.

I'll be dead in a minute. Just push him off. A brief flurry of steel hitting steel was followed by silence. The man on me fell to the side. I freed my arms and pried his hands from my neck.

Moon Man reengaged in the battle. He fought three men. One man's decapitated head rested next to me. Lovely.

My short blade wouldn't last against their long scimitars and my bow was in the jungle with my pack. Gathering power, I sent a light touch to one man's mind. Relieved he wasn't a Warper, I sent him puzzling images to distract him.

He dropped out of the fight with Moon Man and stared at my approach with a baffled expression. The man raised his sword a second too late. I stepped close to him and nicked his arm with my switchblade, hoping Curare still clung to my blade. Unable to use his sword, the man dropped his weapon and lunged. His intent to subdue me rang clear in his mind, but I deepened my mental connection and forced him to sleep.

With only two attackers left, Moon Man had both their heads off in short order. He strode over to the man sleeping at my feet and raised his scimitar.

"Stop," I said. "When he wakes, we can question him about Cahil's plans."

"The other?"

"Paralyzed."

Moon Man rolled the leader over. The blood from his stomach wound had pooled on the rocks. After touching the man's neck and face, Moon Man said, "He is gone."

The cut was deeper than I thought. A felt a tinge of guilt as I scowled at the body. The leader probably had more information than the other man.

"It is a good thing. He was a Warper. We would not have gotten anything from him except trouble."

I looked at the scattered carnage. The headless bodies cast macabre shadows in the pale moonlight. The side of my face and the wound in my back throbbed. The cool night air felt icy on my wet clothes. Tauno and Marrok both needed medical attention, and we couldn't go anywhere until the Curare wore off. And the thought of spending the night surrounded by corpses ...

"I will take care of them," Moon Man said, reading my thoughts. "And I will build a fire. You take care of the wounded. Including you."

Pulling the arrows from Marrok's thigh and Tauno's shoulder, I gathered power but couldn't assume their injuries. The Curare in their bodies blocked my magic. An interesting discovery. It seemed when under the influence of the drug, a person couldn't do magic or be affected by it.

I mulled over the implications as I searched in my pack. Finding a few lumps of Theobroma, I gave it to Moon Man to melt over the fire and feed to our paralyzed companions. From my own experience with Curare, I knew the drug didn't affect the body's ability to swallow, breathe and hear. So I told them what I planned to do.

The last of my energy faded after healing my own wound. I curled into a ball on the ground and fell asleep.

When I woke, watery streaks of color painted the sky. Moon Man sat cross-legged next to a fire, cooking a divine-smelling hunk of meat. My stomach grumbled in anticipation.

I checked on the others. Marrok, Leif and Tauno still slept. Leif's cut had scabbed over, but I would need to heal Marrok's and Tauno's wounds. Moon Man had tied the Davian prisoner's arms and legs with some jungle vines even though the Vermin remained unconscious.

Moon Man gestured for me to join him. "Eat first before you heal them." He handed me a sliver of meat speared on a stick. When I sniffed at the offering, he said, "Do not analyze it. It is hot and nourishing. That is all you need to know."

"Why do *you* get to decide what I need to know? Why can't you just give me the information I ask for?" My frustration extended beyond the mystery meat.

"That would be too easy."

“What’s wrong with easy? I can understand if the most stressful aspect of my life was worrying about Bain’s next history test, but lives are at stake. Ferde could be stealing another’s soul and I might have the power to stop him.”

“What do you want? For me to tell you to do this or do that and wa-lah!” Moon Man flourished his hand in the air. “Instant success!”

“Yes. That is exactly what I want. Please, tell me.”

A thoughtful expression settled on his face. “When you were training to be the Commander’s food taster, would you know what the poison My Love tasted like if Valek had just described it to you?”

“Yes.” There was no mistaking the sour-apple taste.

“Would you trust your life on that knowledge? Or others?”

I opened my mouth to reply but paused. Now I couldn’t remember the poisons I hadn’t tasted or smelled. But I’ll never forget the tartness of My Love, the rancid orange flavor of Butterfly’s Dust, and the bitter thickness of White Fright.

“I’m talking about magic. Testing food for poisons is different.”

“Is it?”

I pounded my fist on the ground. “Do Story Weavers sign a contract or make a blood oath to be difficult and stubborn and a pain in the ass?”

A serene smile spread on his face. “No. Each Story Weaver chooses how he will guide his charges. Think about it, Yelena. You do not respond well to orders. Now eat your meat before it gets cold.”

Stifling my desire to fling the food into the fire and prove the insufferably smug Story Weaver right about my inability to take orders, I bit off a large chunk.

Spiced with pepper, the oily meat tasted like duck. Moon Man fed me two more pieces before he would let me return to the sleeping men and heal them. Tired, I snoozed by the fire.

When everyone had roused and gathered around the campfire to eat, we discussed our next move.

“Do you think they would set more ambushes in the jungle? Leave more Warpers in our path?” I asked Moon Man.

He considered my question. “It is possible. They left one at the camp who sacrificed himself. This one was supposed to come back. Our spies have determined the Daviian Vermin have about ten Warpers—eight now. Two are very powerful, and the rest have various lesser talents.”

“The ambush leader had enough magic to create and hold a null shield.”

Moon Man turned the meat roasting over the fire. “A valid and alarming point. Which means they might have been performing Kirakawa for some time.”

“What’s Kirakawa?” Leif asked.

“It is an ancient ritual. It has many steps and rites. When done correctly, it transfers the life energy of one person to another. All living beings have the ability to use magic, but most cannot connect to the power source. A person performing Kirakawa will either increase their magical power or gain the ability to connect with the power source, and therefore become a Warper.

“Their leader mentioned levels and a binding rite. They are probably using the Kirakawa to grant certain members magical abilities and increase certain Warpers’ powers. Their leader would not want all the clan members to be equally powerful.”

“How is the Kirakawa different than the Efe ritual Ferde used?” Leif rubbed the cut on his cheek.

“The Efe ritual binds a person’s soul to the practitioner, increasing their power. While blood is needed, it isn’t the medium holding the power in Efe. The soul carries the power. And the person performing the ritual must be a magician.”

“It sounds like anyone can use this Kirakawa to gain power,” Leif said.

“*If* they knew the proper steps. With the Kirakawa, the victim’s soul is trapped in blood. It is gruesome, too. The victim’s stomach is cut open and the heart is removed while the victim is still living. The Kirakawa is also more complex than the Efe ritual.”

“Could any magician use Efe? Or just the Soulstealer?” I asked.

“A Soulfinder could, but no one else. Is that a straight enough answer for you, Yelena?”

I didn’t dignify his comment with a reply. Instead, I asked about Mogkan, Alea’s brother. In Ixia, he had captured over thirty people, turning them into mindless slaves so he could siphon their power and augment his own. Valek and I had eventually stopped him from gaining control of Ixia, which explained Alea’s desire for revenge.

“Mogkan tortured them both physically and mentally until they could no longer bear to be aware of their surroundings. They retreated within themselves and just became a conduit for him to exploit. Their magic remained in their bodies.”

The implications over the different ways for people to abuse power raced through my mind. “Going back to the Kirakawa. If the Daviiian Vermin have been performing it for a while, then they could have more than eight Warkers.”

Moon Man nodded. “Many more.”

Paranoia sizzled up my spine. Convinced Warkers surrounded us, my desire to return my friends to the safety of the plateau pressed between my shoulder blades.

However, if the Daviiians wanted to find more victims for their ritual, the Zaltana Clan teemed with people and magicians. With the Warkers using a null shield, the clan would have no warning. Fingers of desperate fear squeezed my stomach as the images of my mother and father being mutilated filled my mind.

7

“HOW DO YOU COUNTER the null shield?” I asked Moon Man, failing to keep the panic out of my voice. The jungle around us darkened and I imagined predators lurking behind every tree and bush. Only the small fire we huddled around gave off any light.

“Magic cannot pierce the shield, but find a way around the shield’s edges and you can use your magic.”

“What are the shield’s dimensions?”

“Depends on the strength of the builder. The one we used in the plateau was as tall as a man astride a horse, and as wide as thirty men. But we had four Story Weavers combine their powers to build it. For one Warper, the shield would have to be smaller.”

I looked up at the trees. The ambush had come from above. Would they use the same tactic for another ambush? No. If the first attempt hadn’t worked, then a different strategy would be used. Being higher than your target had many advantages, and if I climbed into the tree canopy, I might be able to get past the edges of another null shield and discover where another ambush lurked.

Knowing my next move helped to dampen my terror for my family. I made contact with Kiki, projecting my awareness up toward the plateau.

Any trouble? I asked.

No. Bored, she replied. *Go?*

Yes. I’ll meet you at the Illiais Market rendezvous location.

I then told my plan to the others.

“Not without me,” Leif said. “I grew up in the jungle. I know every leaf and tree.” His body stiffened with determination.

“That is why you need to stay with them. To show them the way to the homestead. To help them avoid predators.”

Leif crossed his arms over his broad chest. But he knew I made sense, so he couldn’t argue.

“I need to question our prisoner before I go. There could be a chance the other Vermin might not be targeting my family.”

The man groaned and blinked at me when I woke him from his deep sleep. Moon Man had been right to tie his arms. There hadn’t been enough Curare left on my blade to paralyze him.

The Vermin’s tunic and pants had been ripped, and I glimpsed portions of blackish-red tattoos on his brown skin. Moon Man reached over and ripped the man’s right sleeve off.

The Story Weaver pointed to the symbols on the man’s arm. “He has made the proper blood sacrifice to prepare for the Kirakawa ritual. That ink in his skin has been mixed with blood.” Moon Man’s shoulders dropped as if he grieved. “The Sandseeds were wise to banish the old rituals.”

“You were misguided and fooled into following the teachings of Guyan,” the prisoner said. “Not wise but weak and pitiful, giving up your power to become docile pathetic Story Weavers instead of—”

Moon Man grabbed the man by the throat and lifted him off the ground. *Docile* and *weak* were not words I would have used to describe the Story Weaver.

“Where did you get the instructions?” Moon Man asked, shaking him.

The man smiled. “I am not telling you.”

“Instructions?” I asked.

“The details for the old rituals had been lost to time. At one point in history, we knew how to perform many different rituals to increase our power. Our clan passes information down to our children through teaching stories. Once Guyan became our leader, the evil ones who knew the required steps were killed. The information should have died with them.” He dropped the Daviian to the ground.

I remembered Dax reading a bunch of ancient tomes when we had tried to interpret Ferde's tattoos to discover why Ferde had been raping and killing those girls.

"There were a few books in the Magician's Keep. A Sandseed might have written the instructions and symbols down before they died. Perhaps there is another copy that the Vermin are using." I turned to the man. "I guess you're not going to tell us what the Vermin's plans are either?"

He met my gaze and sneered. It was all I needed. My family could be in danger. I sent a rope of power toward his mind and rifled through his thoughts and memories, extracting the information I needed. I suppressed the pang of guilt and my recollections of when Roze Featherstone had tried to examine my mind in a similar fashion. She had thought I was a spy from Ixia, and the Ethical Code didn't apply to spies or criminals. I could argue the same in my defense. Did that make me the same as Roze? Perhaps. The thought made me uncomfortable.

Besides a few horrid memories of watching an initial level of the Kirakawa ritual, the man knew almost nothing. Ordered to stay behind and ambush anyone who came out of the caves, his small unit had scheduled a rendezvous with the larger jungle group at a later time. Where and when the meeting would be, he had no idea. And, more important, he didn't know what the others planned to do.

He had a few tidbits of information. I confirmed that both Cahil and Ferde had come this way and they traveled with a group of twelve Vermin.

"Fourteen is not enough to win in an attack on the Zaltanas," Leif said, pride in his voice.

I agreed. "But winning isn't everything."

My anxiety to leave increased a hundredfold. A group of Vermin had entered the jungle and my clan could be in trouble. Images of my father and mother being captured and staked to the ground replayed in my mind. The thought of my cousin Nutty climbing without care through the trees and falling into a trap, hurried my preparations.

I shouldered my pack, threading my bow through its holder. "What about our prisoner?" I asked Moon Man.

"I will take care of him."

"How?"

"You do not want to know."

"Yes, I do. I want you to tell me everything!"

Moon Man sighed. "The Vermin were once a part of the Sandseed clan. They are our wayward kin, and they are infesting the rest of Sitia. How we deal with them is in accordance to our laws, and it is the proper way to take care of Vermin."

"And that would be?"

"You exterminate them."

A protest perched on my lips. What about those members who might have been misguided? But my question remained unvoiced. Now wasn't the best time to argue crime and punishment.

Instead, I gazed at the tall trees, looking for a way up into the canopy, wishing I hadn't left my grapple and rope in the cave. I found a long vine and used it to climb into the higher branches. After a moment to reorient myself—the Zaltana homestead was to the west—I swung over to the next tree.

I kept my magical senses tuned to the life around me, seeking the Davians and other predators as I traveled toward home. The web of branches and crowded trees slowed my progress. After a few hours, my sweat-soaked clothes were ripped, and my skin burned and itched from innumerable cuts and insect bites.

Resting on the branch of a hawthorn tree, I scanned the area between me and Moon Man. There was no sign of any intelligent life so I linked my mind with Moon Man's and Leif's.

You will be safe to travel to this area, I said, picturing the small clearing below. *Stay there until I contact you again.*

They agreed.

After I rested, I pushed my way through the jungle's canopy, staying alert to any sign of the Davians. The rhythm of climbing from tree to tree combined with the steady pulse of the jungle's undisturbed life force. When an out-of-tune presence plucked at my senses, my energies focused on the distant ripple. Engrossed, I concentrated on discovering the source. A man in the tree canopy. Before I could determine if he was friend or foe, my left hand grasped a smooth and pliant branch. Surprised, I jerked my awareness back and my mind connected with a hunter lurking in the trees.

The leaves rustled with movement. The terrifying rasp of a stirring snake surrounded me. The limb under my feet softened. I scrambled for a solid branch, and touched nothing but the snake's dry coils. The necklace snake's coloring blended with the jungle's greenery so well that I couldn't determine where the rest of it lay.

I closed my eyes and projected into the snake's mind. It had looped part of its body between two branches, creating a flat net now closing around me. Pulling my switchblade from my pocket, I triggered the blade.

When the heavy coils of the snake dropped onto my shoulders, I knew I had mere seconds before the predator would wrap around my throat like a necklace and choke me to death. I sensed satisfaction from the snake as it moved to tighten its hold.

I stabbed my knife into the snake's thick body. Would the Curare on the blade affect the creature? Mild pain from the thrust registered in the snake's mind, but it considered the wound minor.

The snake contracted around me, trapping my legs and left arm. I realized the necklace snake held me aloft. If I cut through its coils, I would plummet to the ground.

Another loop brushed my face as the snake tried to encircle my neck. I pushed it away with my free arm. A coil slid up my back.

Deciding the odds of surviving a fall were better than dying by strangulation, I stabbed my blade in the nearest coil with the intention of sawing through it. Before I applied more pressure, the creature stopped.

Perhaps Curare had paralyzed the snake. I pulled the blade out and the snake resumed its tightening. The Curare hadn't worked. But when I reinserted the knife, the creature paused. Odd. I must have found a vulnerable area. We were at an impasse.

Through my link with its mind, I sensed the snake's hunger warring with its desire to live. I tried to control the predator's will, but our minds were too incompatible. Even though I could feel its intentions, I couldn't direct its movements.

I wanted to avoid killing the snake, but I could see no other way. Once dead, I should be able to cut my way back into the trees.

"Hello. Is someone in there?" a man's voice asked.

My struggle with the snake had seized all my attention. Cursing myself for forgetting the man, I directed my mind into the tree canopy and encountered the well-protected thoughts of another magician. But Warper or Story Weaver, I couldn't tell.

"Has the snake got your tongue?" He laughed at his own joke. "I know you're there. I felt your power. If you don't belong in the jungle, I'll gladly let the snakes have you for dinner."

"Snakes?" I asked. His speech patterns sounded familiar. Not Davian. Not Sandseed. I hoped Zaltana.

"Your necklace snake has sent a call for help. You might kill this one and untangle yourself, but by then its kin will be here to finish the job."

I scanned the jungle canopy and, sure enough, I felt five other snakes moving toward me.

"What if I do belong in the jungle?" I asked.

"Then I'll help you. But you'd better make a strong case. Strange things have been happening lately."

I thought fast. "I'm Yelena Liana Zaltana. Daughter of Esau and Perl and sister to Leif."

"Common knowledge. You have to do better."

Soul mate to Valek, the scourge of Sitia, I thought, but knew that wouldn't help my case. I searched my mind for a bit of information only the Zaltanas knew. The problem was, since I had been raised in Ixia, I knew only a few things about my lost clan.

"I could send you on a wild-valmur chase, but wouldn't it be easier if I gave you a piece of sap candy?" I held my breath, waiting.

Just when I was convinced I would have to cut my way out of the snake before its brothers arrived, a low drumbeat throbbed. More beats followed. The vibrations pulsed through the snake.

The snake relaxed. A gap appeared above my head and a green painted face smiled down at me. He extended his hand, which was also camouflaged. "Grab on."

I clasped his wrist. He pulled me from the snake's net and onto a solid branch. Relief puddled in my knees and I had to sit down.

The man's clothes matched the jungle's colors and patterns. He placed a leather drum on the branch and played another song. The snake unraveled and disappeared into the jungle.

"That should hold them off for a while," he said.

From his clothes and dyed-olive hair color, I knew the man had to be a Zaltana. I thanked him for helping me.

His answering nod reminded me of someone. "Who are you?" I asked.

"Your cousin, Chestnut. I was out on patrol when you were here the last time so I didn't get a chance to meet you."

After living in Ixia for fourteen years, I had finally returned to a home I hadn't known existed. It had been such an emotional whirlwind, and I had met so many cousins, aunts and uncles it was unlikely I would have remembered him even if I had been introduced to him.

Seeing no sign of recognition on my face, he added, "I'm one of Nutty's brothers."

Nutty's stories about her siblings had been humorous and I remembered a game I used to play with her against her brothers before my kidnapping.

"How did you control the snake?" I asked.

"I'm a snake charmer," he said as if the title explained everything. But when I failed to respond, he said, "It's part of my magic. The necklace snakes are very hard to spot. Not only do they blend in so well, but also they mask their life energy. Even if you're able to sense the other jungle animals you probably wouldn't feel the snakes. Not until it was too late." He rubbed his hands together in appreciation. "They usually hunt alone, but if one gets into trouble it can call to the others with a low sound we can't hear. My magic allows me to locate the snakes and hear their calls. And my drum is my way to talk to them. It doesn't work on the other animals." He shrugged. "But I keep the snakes away from our homestead."

"You were out on patrol when you heard my snake?" Funny how I had become possessive of the creature that had tried to squash and eat me.

"Yes. Although, when I left this morning, I had hoped to find more than snakes." He gave me an odd look. "I guess I just did. Why are you here, Yelena?"

"I'm following a group of people who had been living in the plateau," I said. "They came through here. Has anyone seen them?" But what I really wanted to ask was had they attacked the clan? Were my mother and father okay?

"Seen? No. Strangers are in the jungle, but we can't find them and ..." He paused, probably considering what information he should divulge. "Perhaps it would be best for you to talk to our clan elders. Are you alone?"

"No. My brother and some Sandseeds are traveling with me."

"In the trees?"

"On the ground." I told Chestnut about the attack and how I had been acting as a scout for our group.

Chestnut accompanied me to the Zaltana homestead. It contained a vast network of living, sleeping and cooking areas connected by bridges and suspended above the ground. Hidden by the thick jungle vegetation, the homestead was hard to find, but once inside the complex, I continued to be amazed the tree canopy could camouflage such a collection of rooms.

Built of wood, the floors of the buildings were anchored to wide branches. Ivy grew on the outside of all the walls to hide their shape. Almost all of the furniture was constructed of wood, and rope hammocks provided comfortable places to sleep. Handcrafts made of jungle items like seeds and sticks decorated the various rooms, including animal sculptures created by colored pebbles glued together.

The main thoroughway of the homestead tended to be common areas of each of the families within the clan. The living and sleeping quarters branched off from the public rooms.

Besides being extensive, the homestead was also well defended. The Zaltana magicians kept a vigilant watch for any strangers.

After our arrival, Chestnut hurried to find the clan elders and I scanned the path back to Moon Man. Once I was certain that the way was clear, I made contact with the Story Weaver's mind.

Come, I told him. *Come quickly*.

We are on the way, he replied.

I raced to my parents' suite. A few surprised glances and quizzical calls followed me as I dashed toward the Liana quarters, but I ignored them.

My mother, Perl, paced the living room. The air smelled like ginger and cinnamon, but her perfume distillery set up on the long table against the back wall appeared to be empty.

"Yelena!"

She flew into my arms. A few inches shorter than me, the slender woman clutched me as if to keep from falling.

"Mother. What's the matter?" I asked.

"Esau," she said, and cried.

I suppressed the urge to shake her as she sobbed in my arms. Instead, I waited for the flow of tears to subside before I pulled her away and looked into her light green eyes. "What about Father?"

"He's missing."

8

I RESISTED THE URGE to use magic to calm my mother. Many horrible scenarios played in my mind before she settled enough to tell me the details. My father had been expected back from an expedition yesterday and had failed to return.

“There was a clan meeting,” Perl said between sobs. “A couple of scouts had gotten lost, and he went to find them.”

“Lost scouts?”

She gave me a watery smile. “Some of the newer ones will lose their way. Esau always finds them. No one knows the jungle as well as he does.”

“Maybe one of the scouts was hurt,” I said, hoping to calm her and to stop myself from imagining Esau being a victim of the Kirakawa ritual. “Why was he expected yesterday?”

“Another clan meeting. The jungle creatures have been restless and disturbed and we can’t pinpoint why. When the two scouts failed to return, the clan decided everyone should stay close to our homestead. Each night we gather in the common room to make sure everyone is safe. Esau was only supposed to be gone a few hours.” Tears tracked down her cheeks.

Her face reflected the hours of worry and fear. Her long hair had more gray than black. I couldn’t leave her alone, yet I needed more information.

“I have to talk with the clan elders,” I said. “You can come along only if you promise not to get too upset.”

She agreed, but uncertainty filled her eyes. Her hand went to her throat. Maybe taking her with me was a bad idea. Perhaps Nutty could stay with her?

Perl stiffened as if with a sudden realization. “Wait,” she said before bolting toward the lift.

As I watched her pull the ropes and ascend to the second floor of the apartment, my heart filled with dread. Esau had invented that lift, using vines from the jungle and a pulley system. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if anything happened to him.

Panic made me fidget, and just as I was about to call out to Perl to hurry, the lift moved. My mother had splashed water on her face and had tied her hair back. She also wore my fire amulet around her neck. I smiled.

“For strength,” she said, and she met my gaze. This time only stubborn resolve radiated from her. “Let’s go.”

I thought about the fire amulet as we made our way to the homestead’s meeting room. Winning an acrobatic contest during an Ixian fire festival, I had achieved a moment of pure joy in the midst of hell. Reyad—one of my captors, the first man I’d killed—had tried to keep me from participating, and I was severely punished for my disobedience, but I knew I would do it again. I now realized the stubborn streak from both my parents had kept me fighting despite Mogkan and Reyad’s efforts to control me.

Our clan name might be Zaltana, but our family name was Liana, which meant vine in the old Illiais language. Those vines grew everywhere in the jungle, pulling down trees in their search for the sun. When cut and dried, the vines turned rock hard.

Looking at the firm set of my mother’s shoulders, I knew she had reached the point where she would no longer bend to her emotions, but do what was needed to help find her husband.

The common room was the largest area of the homestead. Big enough to hold the entire clan, the round area had a stone fire pit at its center. The black ashy remains of the fire drifted in the sunlight, streaming from the smoke hole in the room’s wooden ceiling. Benches made of branches and hardened vines ringed the pit. The scent of many perfumes lingered in the air and I remembered the first time I stood here.

The entire clan had filled the room then. Curious to see the lost child returned from—according to their viewpoint—the dead, they peered at me with a mixture of hope, joy and suspicion. My hopes for an uneventful reunion dissolved when my brother declared to all that I reeked of blood.

Chestnut interrupted my reminiscence by introducing me to the clan elders. “Oran Cinchona Zaltana and Violet Rambutan Zaltana.”

They bowed in the formal Sitian greeting. Their dark faces creased with worry. These two dealt with the day-to-day problems of the clan when our clan leader, Baval, was at the Citadel. Missing scouts plus unexpected guests equaled big problems.

“Your friends have reached the palm ladder,” Violet said. “When they climb up, they will be escorted here.” A slight smile flickered across her face.

Relieved they had arrived safely, I projected my awareness to encourage Leif to hurry. When Leif opened his mind to me, his annoyance was clear.

You should have taken me with you to search for the Vermin, he said. Leif’s muscles ached from the day-long march through the jungle. The trails tended to get overgrown quite fast in the steamy warmth, and Leif had had to cut a path for the others with his machete.

We can fight about it later, I said. *Right now I need you here.*

I can’t leave Tauno.

Leif and Marrok had reached the tree canopy, but through Leif’s eyes I saw Tauno frozen about halfway up the rope ladder, clutching the rungs with a death grip.

I moved my awareness to Tauno. Although he couldn’t hear my words in his mind, I sent him calming emotions, reminding him how he had climbed down from rocks in the blackness of the cave. I chased his memory of that descent and realized why he hadn’t been frightened then.

Close your eyes, I instructed.

He did. Tauno relaxed his hold and climbed the ladder.

I pulled away and reconnected to Leif. *Hurry.*

By the time Leif and the others joined us, I felt my desire for action pushing out, threatening to explode. I updated the clan elders on what I knew, but the only information that Oran and Violet added was the direction that the lost scouts had been assigned. South and east, and Esau had gone east first to find them.

“It has to be the Daviians,” I said. “We have to rescue them before they can do any part of the Kirakawa ritual.”

“Let’s go.” Leif held his machete tightly, a fierce countenance on his square face.

“You do not know for sure if the Vermin have your father,” Moon Man said. “Or where they are. Or how many Warpers there are. Or how well defended they may be.” The words tumbled out in a rush. Moon Man’s eyebrows pinched together, reflecting his obvious discomfort with being surrounded by walls.

“All right, Mr. Logic. How do you propose we get this information?” I asked.

“Marrok and Tauno will search for trail signs and report back.”

“Where?” I asked.

“To the east.”

“And stumble into the same ambush as my father? They’ll be caught and killed,” I countered. “It’s too risky to send people out there. The jungle is the perfect setting for ambushes. Unless—” A sudden idea circled in my mind. I thought it over, looking for any holes. If the Daviians hid behind a null shield, no magic could pierce it, but mundane physical things like sound and light would.

“Unless,” Leif prompted.

“Unless we could get a bird’s-eye view,” I said.

“They probably have men stationed in the trees,” Marrok said. “Isn’t that how the scouts would have been captured?”

“Actually I was being literal. I could link with one of the birds in the jungle and see out through its eyes.”

“You will not see much during the daytime,” Moon Man said. “The Vermin will be well camouflaged. In the night, they will need a small fire and the moon to perform even the first level of the Kirakawa ritual.”

A cold wave of dread washed over me. “The moon rose last night.”

“Too soon. They need time to properly prepare themselves.”

“For someone who claims the old rituals have been lost, you certainly know a lot about them,” Marrok said. Accusation laced his voice.

“The specifics of the ritual have been forgotten, but some knowledge about them has been included in our teaching stories,” Moon Man replied, meeting Marrok’s stare. “It keeps us from making the same mistakes over and over and over again.”

A warning to Marrok or just cryptic Story Weaver advice, I couldn’t tell. Marrok rubbed his healed cheek. He tended to stroke the spot whenever he was upset or frightened. The wounds from Cahil’s beating went deeper than shattered bone fragments. Broken trust was harder to fix than bones. I wondered if Marrok would change his opinion about Moon Man if he knew the Sandseed had helped repair his injuries.

“Can a bird see at night?” Leif asked, bringing our attention back to the problem at hand.

“There’ll be light from the fire,” Marrok said.

“But what about guards in the trees or outside the firelight?” Tauno asked. “We need to know how many Vermin are there.”

I considered the difficulties and a solution flew into my mind. “Bats.”

Tauno hunched over. “Where?”

“I’ll link with the bats to find the Vermin. Their fire should attract insects the bats like to eat,” I said.

“Can we afford to wait until dark?” Leif asked. “What if Yelena can’t locate them with the bats? Then we will have wasted time that could have been spent searching for Father.”

“Yelena will find them,” my mother said. She had kept her promise and controlled her emotions during our discussion. Her confidence in me was heart-warming, but I still worried. Three lives were at stake.

“What happens when we find the Vermin?” Marrok asked.

“An army of Zaltanas could capture them,” Leif said.

“That might or might not work,” Moon Man said. “It will depend on how many Warperts they have with them.”

“No. It’s too risky.” Oran Zaltana broke the silence he had held during our discussion. “I won’t send clan members until we know what and who we’re dealing with.”

I glanced at the floor beneath the ceiling’s smoke hole. The patch of sunlight had shifted. It would be dusk in a couple hours. “Let’s find the Vermin first and determine their strength. Everyone else should eat and rest. It might be a long night.”

When we filed out of the common room, Chestnut touched my arm. He had stood apart from our group as we talked. His dark brown eyes showed concern. “Esau is my favorite uncle. Let me know if I can help.”

“I will.” I followed Leif and Perl back to her apartment. She made us sit down on the couch Esau had built from vines. The leaves in the cushions crackled under my weight. Perl went into the kitchen and fetched a tray of food and tea. Our mother hovered over us until we ate. I pushed the fruit and cold meat past my numb lips and chewed without tasting.

Eventually fatigue from climbing through the jungle caught up to me and I dozed on the couch. Nightmares about serpents coiling around my body plagued my sleep as they hissed in my ear.

“—wake up. It’s getting dark,” Leif whispered.

I blinked in the gray light. Perl, curled in a ball, dozed on one of the armchairs. Moon Man stood near the door to the apartment.

I woke my mother. “Can you fetch the clan elders? We’ll need to make plans once I’ve found Esau.”

She hurried out the door.

“Where do you want to go?” Leif asked.

“Upstairs, to my old room,” I said and headed for the lift.

Leif and Moon Man joined me in the closet-size lift. Two thick ropes went through holes in the ceiling and floor. Moon man bent over to fit. His breath came in uneven huffs and he muttered about Sandseeds, the plains and suffocating.

Leif and I pulled on the ropes and the lift began to move. We ascended to the upper level and walked down the hallway. My room was on the right. Pulling back the cotton curtain, I let Leif and Moon Man precede me into the small clutter-filled space.

A few years after my kidnapping, Esau had started using the area for storage. Fourteen years of collecting jungle samples had resulted in rows and rows of shelves filled with glass containers of every size and shape. The only places free of the assortment were a small bed and a wooden bureau.

Wanting to focus all my energy on linking with the bats, I stretched across the bed. “Try to keep all distractions away from me and be ready to help.”

Leif and Moon Man signaled their understanding. Both had enough magical energy I could draw from if needed. I tried to keep the horrible thoughts about Esau’s plight in the back of my mind as I projected my awareness toward the mouth of the cave. The bats would soon be leaving their roost in search for food.

My mind met the dark consciousness of the bats. They didn’t perceive the world by sight, but by sensing objects and movement around them. Unable to direct them to where I wanted to go, I flew with them, my mental perception floating from one bat to another, trying to make sense of my location in the jungle. The flutter of wings and hum of insects cut through the silent night air.

Even though the bats had spread over many miles, they remained connected to each other, and I soon had a detailed mental image of the jungle. It was a bird’s-eye view without colors—just shapes, sizes and movement. In my bat mind, the trees and rocks were not visual, but in scapes of sound.

The straight walls of the Zaltana homestead felt odd to the bats. They avoided the clan’s dwellings, but I jumped over to the minds flying east of the homestead.

Frustrated because I couldn’t affect their movements, I had to wait and watch until one bat found a small campfire. I channeled my awareness on the bat as it dived and flew through the hot rising air, snatching the insects that danced above the light.

Instinctively avoiding the creatures below, the bat stayed high in the air. I used the bat’s senses to determine the number of Vermin. Three around the fire, two crouched in the trees and four stood guard outside the camp. A pair of tents were close to the fire. Three unmoving forms lay flat on the ground next to them. Alarmed, I focused my attention on them until I felt their chests rise and fall.

When I had the exact location of the Vermin’s camp in my mind, I withdrew from the bat’s consciousness.

“There are nine of them,” I said to Leif and Moon Man. “I don’t know how many are Warpers.”

“We should have enough Zaltana magicians to overpower them,” Leif said. “If we could surprise them, it would give us the advantage. Can you form a null shield?” Leif asked Moon Man.

“No. That is not one of my skills.”

I sat up. A wave of dizziness crashed into me and I hunched over until the feeling passed. Linking with the bats had used my energy. Moon Man put a steadying hand on my elbow and his strength coursed through me.

I thought about what Leif said. If we attacked with a large group, the Vermin would know we were coming, and they would either flee and hide again, or fight back. Either way they would have time to kill their prisoners. The element of surprise was key, but how to achieve that?

“Could Tauno shoot the guards with Curare-laced arrows and immobilize them?” Leif asked. “Or could we blow treated darts through reed pipes?”

“Too many trees,” Moon Man said.

“It would be hard in the dark,” I agreed. “We could get close and jab them.”

“But what about the guards in the trees? Getting close without alerting them is a difficult if not impossible maneuver,” Leif said.

If I’d had the ability to control the bats, I could use them as a distraction. We needed something else to cause a commotion. I followed the logic and found an answer.

Leif, sensing my mood, smiled. “What are you scheming, little sister?”

9

WE DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TIME to waste. Leif, Moon Man and I rushed down to my parents' living area. Perl had returned with Oran and Violet.

"Did you find them?" Perl asked.

"They're about three miles southeast of us."

"We'll need some magicians and soldiers," Leif told Oran.

"How many are there, and what do the Vermin plan to do?" Oran asked me.

"Nine. And it doesn't matter what they plan. The Vermin have Esau and your scouts. We need to rescue them!"

Oran hemmed and hawed. "We should consult Councilman Baval—"

"Baval's at the Citadel. It will take weeks to get a reply." I suppressed the desire to wrap my hands around Oran's thin neck.

"We can't leave our homestead unprotected," Violet said. "We'll call a meeting and request a few volunteers."

Sitians! I thought in exasperation, couldn't do anything without consulting a committee. "Fine. Call your meeting. Do whatever." I shooed Oran and Violet out the door.

"Yelena—" my mother began.

"You can scold me later. We're leaving now."

Leif and Moon Man looked at me as if waiting for orders. "Get Tauno and Marrok. I'll catch up to you at the base of the ladder."

"Where are you going?" Leif asked.

"To get our distraction."

They hurried from the room and I was about to follow when my mother grabbed my arm.

"Just a minute," she said. "There are only five of you. What are you planning? Tell me now or I'm coming along."

That Liana stubbornness radiated from her and I knew her threats weren't idle. I sketched a brief outline of my plan.

"That won't work without some help," she said.

"But I'm going to—"

"Need more incentive. I have just the thing. Go. I'll meet you at the base of the ladder." Perl rushed off.

After a few minutes of frantic searching, I found what I needed. By the time I slid down the ladder, the others were ready. Shafts of bright moonlight pierced the darkness of the jungle floor, giving just enough light to make out the shadowy shapes of the tree trunks.

I told Tauno and Marrok how to approach the Vermin camp and guards and instructed them on where to position themselves nearby. "No noise. Keep your distance. Wait for my signal before attacking."

"Signal?" Marrok asked. His face hardened into grim determination, but uncertainty lurked behind his eyes. Even though Cahil had issued orders to his men, Marrok had really been the one in charge.

"Something loud and obnoxious," I said.

Marrok frowned. "This isn't the time to joke."

"I wasn't joking."

After a mere moment's hesitation, Marrok and Tauno set off.

Moon Man stared after them. "What about us?"

There was a faint rustling from above as someone took hold of the rope ladder. A few heartbeats later, Chestnut joined us on the jungle floor. He wore a dark-colored tunic and pants, and his drum was tied to his belt. The green paint and dye had been washed from his hair.

"I'm glad I could help," Chestnut said. "But you need to know I've never done this before."

"Done what?" Leif asked. "Yelena, what's going on?"

"I'm hoping Chestnut will be able to call a few necklace snakes to join the Vermin's party."

"Ah. Your distraction," Moon Man said.

"How close do you need to be?" I asked Chestnut.

"Probably within a mile, but it'll all depend on how many snakes are around." He hesitated. "I'm used to chasing them away, not calling them. What if it doesn't work?"

As if on cue, the rope ladder swung with the weight of another person. Perl descended. She moved as graceful as liquid, and I would have bet Nutty hadn't been the only Zaltana child to drive her parents crazy by learning to climb before she could walk.

"Here." My mother handed me ten grape-size capsules and several straight pins. "Just in case your first plan fails."

"What if the second plan fails?" Leif asked.

"Then we'll storm the camp and hope for the best. Come on." I put the capsules in my pocket, put the pins through my shirt so they didn't stick me, adjusted my pack so its weight rested between my shoulder blades, and pulled my bow.

"Be careful," Perl said.

I hugged her before setting off. While I had told Marrok and Tauno to take a wider more circuitous path to the Vermin, I wanted to lead the three men straight toward them. Once again I made a light mental connection to the bats flying above us. Guided by the bats' shape map of the jungle, I moved with ease through the tight trail even though the tree canopy blocked the dim moonlight in places.

The jungle's night sounds echoed in the damp air. A howler bat cried in a loud staccato. Valmurs climbed and swung through the trees. The rustle and shake of branches and bushes hinted at the unseen activity of other night creatures.

About a mile from the Vermin camp, I halted. Chestnut leaned his forehead on a nearby tree and power brushed my skin.

"There is only one snake nearby," he said. "He is waiting for the men in the trees to stumble into his trap. Necklace snakes are not active hunters. They prefer to lie in wait, using the element of surprise." Chestnut looked at me. "And I don't want to teach them how to hunt."

"That is a good point," Moon Man said.

"Now what?" Leif asked.

"I'm thinking," I said.

"Think faster," Leif urged.

One snake wasn't enough. Time for Perl's suggestion. I handed everyone two capsules and a pin. "Get as close to the guards as you can. Poke a small hole in the capsule and squirt the liquid near them. Don't get it on you," I instructed.

"Why not?" Leif asked.

"You'll have a necklace snake trying to mate with you."

"Gee, Yelena. I'm so *glad* you're home," Leif grumbled. "It's good to know Mother is doing something useful with her time."

"I thought your mother made perfumes," Moon Man said.

"It all depends on how you look at it," Chestnut said. "To a male necklace snake, that stuff *is* a perfume."

“There are six guards. Moon Man, Leif and I will each spray two,” I said. Taking off my pack, I stashed it behind a tree. “Chestnut, you stay back here. Can you keep the snakes from grabbing us when they come?”

“I’ll try. They have an excellent sense of smell so get clear once you spray that stuff.”

“What about the guards in the trees?” Leif asked.

“Aim high and be quiet about it.”

Leif muttered to himself as the three of us fanned out to approach the Vermin guards. Chestnut stayed behind to communicate with the predators while we moved into position. Once our distraction arrived and the guards became busy dodging amorous snakes, Leif and Moon Man would find Marrok and Tauno and await my signal. I would spy on the Vermin in the camp.

I crept through the trees, seeking a sign of the guards. I disconnected with the bats and reached out with my mental awareness, searching for the Vermin.

Beyond the outer guards, I knew the camp held six people, three Davians and three Zaltanas, yet I couldn’t detect them, which meant someone had erected a null shield. At least one of the Vermin was a Warper and he could be performing one of the Kirakawa rites while we snuck around in the dark. It was then I realized the sounds from the jungle had ceased.

My heart drummed a faster beat as my stomach cramped with fear. A presence hovered above me and I connected with a man crouched in the lower branches of a tree. His mind was alert for signs of intruders, but he hadn’t detected me. Poking a hole in one capsule, I sprayed the liquid along the tree’s trunk, and then slipped away.

Five minutes later, I found my second guard. She failed to notice my approach and I squirted some of Perl’s snake perfume on the bushes near her. I hoped she would rub against them at some point.

As I retreated, I tripped over a buttress root and fell. I turned over on my back in time to see her aim an arrow at me.

“Freeze,” she shouted. “Hands up.”

So much for being quiet. I raised my hands and cursed myself for not reestablishing my link with the bats. Through their eyes, I never would have tripped.

She called to another guard.

“Stand up slowly,” she ordered. “Leave your weapon.”

My bow rested on the ground within reach.

She stepped closer and peered at me in the semidarkness. The guard gasped and said, “Soulfinder.”

I rolled as her weapon twanged and snatched my bow. The arrow stuck the dirt. I jumped to my feet, swinging my staff in a wide arc. The end of my weapon caught her behind her ankles. I yanked her feet out from under her. She went down with a loud oath. The black shape of her partner grew bigger as he ran toward us. Great.

The air filled with a strange rasp as if a person had pulled a rope from a wooden holder very fast. The noise grew louder and came from all directions. The three of us stopped. All thoughts of fighting banished as we searched for the source of the sound.

A necklace snake slithered past my legs. It aimed for the female guard and wrapped around her with amazing speed. All my preconceptions about a slow-moving creature dissipated.

The other guard looked at his partner and bolted. Another snake slid after him. The vibrations of the necklace snakes and Chestnut’s drum thrummed in my chest.

I projected into Chestnut’s mind for an update. He kept the creatures from going after us, but he didn’t know how long he could maintain control.

Faster is better, he said.

Right. I switched my awareness to Moon Man. He and Leif had marked the other four guards. They waited with Marrok and Tauno for my signal.

Running toward the campfire, I avoided snakes, terrified guards and broke through the null shield. I stumbled for a moment as an array of thoughts and emotions washed over me. The air was charged with magic and fear. My panic pressed on my back, but I forced myself to slow down.

When I reached the edge of the Vermin camp, my blood turned to ice. Three men pulled out the stomach of one of the prone forms on the ground. The Vermin turned their attention to me, their surprise evident in their openmouthed gapes. I had moved without realizing it and stood in the middle of their camp, screaming at them to stop.

10

WE BLINKED AT EACH OTHER for a stunned moment. Blood and gore dripped from the Vermin's hands. The three men then returned to their macabre task, ignoring me. Astonished, I moved toward them, raising my bow to strike when a blistering force slammed into me from behind as if I'd been struck with a red-hot iron pan.

I hit the ground hard. My bow flew from my grasp. My breath whooshed out. Searing pain clung to my back; I rolled over, convinced my clothes were on fire. Gasping for air, I thrashed on the ground until I spotted what had attacked me. I froze in horror. The Vermin's campfire had grown to three times its previous size. A man stood in the midst of the roaring bonfire.

The man stepped from the burning wood. Scorched black from head to toe, small flames clung to him like feathers. He advanced toward me. I broke my paralysis and scrambled away from him. He stopped. A trail of fire linked him with the campfire.

"Did I surprise you, my little bat?" the man asked. "Counted nine when there really were ten. Hot little trick."

He knew my consciousness had flown with the bats. But *who* was he?

I scanned the surrounding jungle, looking for my backup. Leif and my friends were at the edge of the clearing. Their arms and hands were raised as if they protected their faces from a searing wind. Sweat and soot stained their clothes and they averted their gazes from the man.

"No help from them, my little bat. They will burn if they come any closer."

I tried to project into the flaming man's mind, but his mental defenses proved impenetrable, a Warper of incredible strength. Running out of options, I glanced behind me and caught sight of my bow.

The blazing Warper pointed and a line of fire appeared between me and my weapon. I jumped to my feet. The heat singed the hair in my nose. The moisture evaporated from my mouth. I tasted ashes. A wall of hot air pushed against me and the Warper was before me. Yet his connection with the burning wood remained.

"Fire is your downfall, little bat. Can not call it. Can not control it."

My body roasted as if I had been staked to a spit over a giant campfire. I cast my awareness into the jungle, hoping to find help. Nothing but the panicked thoughts of my friends and one curious necklace snake nearby.

Just when I thought I would faint, he extended his hands and a bubble of cool air caressed my skin. The break from the heat was an intoxicating relief. I swayed.

"Take my hands. I will not burn you. Travel with me through the fire."

"Why?"

"Because you belong to me."

"Not good enough. Many others have made that claim."

"I need you to complete my mission."

"Which is ...?"

The flames on his shoulders pulsed in amusement. He laughed. "Nice try. Take my offer or I will burn you and your friends into a pile of ash."

"No."

Flaring brightly, the flames jumped in size before he shrugged. "No matter."

The cold air disappeared and I gasped. The heat's intensity robbed my lungs of air.

"I need only wait until you go to sleep, little bat. Then I will take you."

My throat strained as my vision scrambled. Sleep was a nice way of describing the process of suffocation. It was a strange notion, but it gave me an idea.

With my last bit of energy, I grabbed a capsule from my pocket and crushed it in my hand. The sticky liquid coated my palm, dripping down my arm. My legs buckled as I collapsed to my knees. The last thing I remembered before the world melted was a brown and green coil reaching for me.

I woke, shivering. Chestnut's concerned face peered at me. He waved a large leaf, fanning me with cool clean air. Exhaustion lined his brown eyes.

"I guess that's one necklace snake who'll go away hungry," Chestnut said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, wincing at the sharp pain in my throat. When I tried to sit, I realized we were on a tree branch.

Chestnut helped me. "If you died, I told the snake he could eat you." He smiled.

"I'm sorry to disappoint him."

"No matter. Perhaps we'll have some extra Vermin to feed him." His grin faded.

I jerked as my memory returned. "The Fire Warper! My father! The others! What—"

Chestnut raised his hand. "When the snake grabbed you and pulled you into the trees, he distracted the Warper long enough for Leif to break through the wall of heat. With Moon Man's help, Leif was able to quench the link between the main fire and the Warper." Chestnut glanced away. "The Warper disappeared." He shuddered. "The remaining Vermin ran off, with Moon Man, Tauno and Marrok chasing after them."

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