

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:

Barry Lawler

The heroine of this fantasy novel is Alina who lives in a medieval-like time and place. The day before her 20th birthday, in an impetuous moment, she breaks a local superstition by standing in a sunbeam. This allows a fairy to kidnap her and take her to the fairy castle to be a servant for her frivolous daughter. There, Alina meets several other humans, some of whom are organizing a rebellion designed to free the humans. When escaping on her own doesn't work, she joins the rebellion. She also attends a fairy ball in disguise, survives a troll attack in the dungeon, helps effect a rescue from the dungeon, and develops friendships with some of the fairies, including her captor's son. Towards the end of the novel, the rebellion is successful, but it results in a fairy's capture by trolls. Alina has the choice to take the opportunity to escape or return to the castle in order to rescue the fairy. During her adventures, the heroine matures from someone accustomed to complying with her friends' and family's plans for her life to a more self-sufficient individual who charts her own course.

Key Words: Fantasy, fairies, coming-of-age

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Sunbeam: A Fairy Tale

by

Laura L. Cummings

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I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

Laura L. Cummings, Author

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Sunbeam: A Fairy Tale

Chapter I

When I visited the city for the first time at the age of sixteen, I found out that most children grow up with tales of trolls and ogres and other such monsters to frighten them on dark, windy nights. My childhood was somewhat different from the usual, in that, while I knew about trolls and the like, the prominent figures in all bedtime stories were fairies. There were bright angelic fairies, dark, mysterious fairies, good fairies, bad fairies, just plain mischievous fairies. While, in some ways, I found the fairies more frightening than the trolls and giants and other traditional fairy tale villains, they also fascinated me. I would request fairy stories every bedtime and, when asked, always suggested “playing fairies” with my friends. From the time I could talk, fairies held a key role in my imagination. What I didn’t realize as a child was that they would hold a key role in my life as well.

I was born the only child of a carpenter and his wife. The village I grew up in went by the name of Riverbank and, as you might have guessed, was situated on the edge of a navigable river. If you followed the river for a day’s journey you would come to the city. If you followed the river for a week you would reach the sea, but I never went that far. Our village was several miles off the main trade route to the city, and consisted of one street, a score of houses, a smithy, a meeting hall and four dilapidated inns. The inns dated from a time when our village had a small reputation for the now-dry hot springs nearby. Of more significance to this story, Riverbank lies on the edge of a great forest, which gave my father a steady source of materials for his carpentry.

I was raised on stories of the fairies that were said to live in the forest. Many of the stories were exciting tales of adventure in which the fairies served as heroes, but there were also cautionary tales of fairies stealing away disobedient and naughty children to serve in their realm forever.

Like most of the children in my village and the surrounding country, I learned early on the many things a child must do or not do to avoid this fate. Doing as you were told was the most mentioned precaution, but there were several less obvious ones. For example, one must never pick the first or only flower of its kind in any given place because it angers the fairies, who are the keepers of the plants and animals, to have the first fruits of their labor treated in such a fashion. Also, you must never allow fresh bread to cool indoors or on a windowsill for the smell attracts the fairies and once at the open window, there's nothing to stop them from coming inside and doing whatever they please. But most important of all prohibitions, a child must never stand in a sunbeam. For in such beams, the boundary between our world and that of the fairies is very thin, and if a child stands in one there is nothing to prevent him or her from being taken.

Of course, it would be ludicrous to avoid all sunlight. The only sun one had to worry about was distinct, visible beams, such as come through a small break in the forest canopy or shine through a window in the early morning or late afternoon. The kind of beam that one can see little specks of dust in, "fairy dust," my mother called it. One of my earliest memories is of chasing a ball across the floor of our house through a shaft of sunlight coming in the window and suddenly being scooped up by my mother and told in fierce tones to never do that again. At first I thought that I was not to ever play with my ball again, but she really meant that I was never to cross a sunbeam again. Unlike some

parents, who repeated the stories to keep their children well behaved, my mother truly believed most of them, though she would scoff if anyone suggested she was superstitious. My father always stayed quiet when my mother would speak about the fairies. This wasn't particularly noteworthy, since a whole day would go by sometimes without him uttering more than a few sentences. When I was older, I asked him straight if he believed in fairies, and he simply said that the world was full of strange things and he wouldn't wonder if fairies were one of them. Then he told me to mind my mother.

My father's shop adjoined our house, and he spent most of the daylight hours working in it. In the evenings he would often sit by the fire whittling pieces of wood into beautiful carvings which he would sell on his annual trip to the city. My mother kept busy with the day to day business of running a household. Bartering with neighbors over foodstuffs, fixing meals, sewing clothes, and keeping the house clean would keep her up working as late as my father.

The existence of fairies and the very real danger of being carried off by one were facts I trusted in implicitly until one day in my ninth year.

"I don't think fairies exist," had been the bold proclamation of my playmate, Grehelda, as she stood hands on hips facing the rest of us. Grehelda was the oldest and self-appointed leader of our band of four, which also included fellow village children Corice and Rolant. On that particular day, we were playing in the woods near the village as we often did. We had just finished an exhausting game of hide and seek, and were resting in a grassy patch when Grehelda made her announcement.

"Shhh. You don't mean that!" Corice sat bolt upright, eyes wide and hands clasped to her cheeks in delighted horror as she searched the surrounding trees for signs

of wrathful fairies. Corice was a month older than me and had long, silky, blond hair and clear blue eyes that always got her the role of princess when we played fairy tale. Rolant always got the role of prince by virtue of being the only boy. He was a little more than a year older than me and would have preferred, I think, to play with other boys.

Unfortunately, the closest boys to him in age were the butcher's twins, and they wouldn't have anything to do with him. So he played with us, although not always with much enthusiasm. He was small for his age and had dark hair and eyes set close together which gave him a sly appearance. People who didn't know him always commented that he looked shifty and untrustworthy when he was actually one of the nicest and most dependable boys in the village. I had, and still have, brown hair, brown eyes and a nose that is longer than it ought to be. Even back then, my nose was my biggest complaint about my appearance because it always got me the part of the evil witch. I thought that Grehelda's straight, black hair which fell clear to her waist qualified her to play the evil witch as much as my nose did me, but Grehelda didn't see it that way. She usually cast herself as "The Prince's Loyal Companion," which was ridiculous since she spent more time telling Rolant what to do than loyally following him.

One that day, Corice wasn't the only one shocked. Rolant had been picking apart a blade of grass, but froze when Grehelda made her announcement. As for me, I shivered as much as Corice and joined her in searching the surrounding foliage for signs of wrathful fairies, readying myself for flight should it prove necessary.

"I most certainly do mean it," said Grehelda, pleased with the reaction her words had caused. "I think it's just adults' way of making sure we mind them. You notice they walk through sunbeams all the time."

“That’s because fairies don’t take grown-ups, only children,” Rolant said, shaking his head at Grehelda’s ignorance.

She pursed her lips undaunted. “So they say, but I haven’t noticed any children getting taken either.”

“Sharla was taken,” Corice piped up. When she had all of our attention she added, “You know. My cousin from the city that came to visit two summers ago.”

“I thought she just went back to the city,” said Rolant, unconsciously bolstering Grehelda’s argument.

I backed up Corice. “My mother says that that’s what her mother *says* because she doesn’t want people to know.”

Corice nodded in satisfied agreement and looked to Grehelda to give in to the overwhelming evidence.

My answer didn’t seem to make an impression on Grehelda. “Well, I don’t think they exist,” she reiterated, looking from one to the other of us. “In fact…” an impish grin spread across her face. “I think we should test it.”

“Test how?” asked Rolant, eyeing Grehelda sideways, ill at ease at the direction this was taking.

Grehelda just grinned broader, the same sort of grin that had got Corice stuck in a tree one day playing princess in the tower and all of us soaking wet another when our homemade raft had gone to pieces in the middle of the river. We had learned to mistrust Grehelda’s grin.

Now she turned in a circle until she spotted what she wanted. I followed her gaze to where a bright spot on the ground just large enough for someone to stand in, signaled

the presence of a sunbeam.

“Grehelda!” I gasped, but she was already half-running towards it. Corice shrieked, and Rolant jumped to his feet and called, “Grehelda, stop!” Grehelda ignored us all and skipped right to the edge of the beam where she stopped and looked back at us.

“I’ll prove it,” she called, although I thought she didn’t sound as sure of herself as before. Rolant started toward her as she scrunched her eyes and jumped with both feet into the oval. Rolant jerked to a halt and all of us, Grehelda included, held our breath.

Nothing happened.

The birds continued to chirp, the nearby brook continued to bubble, and there was Grehelda, safe and whole and no fairies in sight. Grehelda stayed with her knees bent and her eyes shut for a few breaths, then blinked a couple times and straightened. She laughed, a little shaky at first, and began to twirl around in the beam calling in a sing-song voice. “I told you, I told you. No fairies. See?” She spread her hands out and laughed some more. “You should see yourselves!”

Relief, irritation and puzzlement flooded me all at the same time: relief that Grehelda was alright, irritation that she would do something so foolhardy, puzzlement because she did indeed appear to be none the worse for wear. No fairy had appeared and carried her off.

Rolant walked almost to the edge of the sunbeam and demanded with a shaking voice that she come out. I think Grehelda must have been looking for a reason to come out without appearing a coward because Rolant hadn’t stopped speaking before she scurried out. She marched jauntily back to us, exhilarated by her experiment. “No fairies,” she repeated.

But I was too much steeped in fairy lore to stop believing in fairies that day. I reasoned that there simply must not have been any around, and that Grehelda had been lucky indeed.

I didn't spend all my childhood playing and getting into trouble. I helped my mother around the house too. In fact, as I got older, household chores took up more and more of my time. The others helped their families too, but we were always able to find some time to spend together. We didn't play fairy tale anymore, but we tried to fit in walks and other more mature activities into our lives. Grehelda's schemes weren't tempered by age. For example, there was the time she suggested we investigate with only one candle the old ruined castle that stood a mile from our village. The candle had gone out when we were exploring the dungeons. Grehelda had been telling us ghost stories, and between the pitch darkness and Corice's shrieks, I don't know if we would have ever gotten out of there if not for Rolant who had the idea of following the wall back to the stairs.

Most times I knew that Grehelda was going to get us in trouble, but being the youngest I couldn't work up the nerve to say no. Besides, I liked and admired Grehelda. Corice would often protest but could be persuaded to do anything, and I think Rolant had decided it was easier to get us out of trouble than to talk Grehelda out of whatever whimsical idea she had at present.

Things continued in this comfortable vein until one day, with stars in her eyes, Corice announced she was marrying Elek, one of the butcher's sons. I had just turned seventeen, and though I'd realized somewhere in the back of my head that this would happen sooner or later, it seemed much too soon. Things changed after that. Corice

wanted to talk about Elek and their future together constantly: the house Elek was building, her wedding dress, the spinning wheel her parents were giving her for the wedding and “Isn’t he handsome?” Grehelda would be sighing and rolling her eyes the whole time, Corice would notice and they’d have an argument. When Corice did get married and stopped walking with us, it was actually more peaceful, although emptier without Corice. Grehelda pooh-poohed and set us on a rash of new adventures to ease the loss, but I know she felt it.

Corice had been married a little over a year when she had her first baby. It was about that time that I noticed my parents were holding long, intense discussions that would end on my entering the room, from which I surmised that I was the subject under discussion. One morning I had just come in from feeding our cow and was headed for my room when my father called to me across our front room. I walked over to them, detouring around the patch of morning sun streaming in the window out of habit, my mind on a pattern for a dress I was making.

“Alina, we need to talk,” my mother said. It was the sort of voice she used if I’d forgotten to do one of my chores. I wracked my brain, but couldn’t think of anything I’d missed.

“Talk about what?” I inquired cautiously.

My father spoke. “About your future, about a husband.”

If I had been holding something I would have surely dropped it. Whatever I’d been expecting, it wasn’t that. *Husband? Good gracious.* Thoughts of being sent to the city and paraded in front of possible beaux flashed through my head. Or worse, I thought of all the boys I disliked most in our village. Now that I thought about it, Hasper, Elek’s

twin, had been acting kind of strange around me since Corice got married. Elek was nice enough but Hasper...surely they didn't mean Hasper. My father must have guessed something of my thoughts because he hastened to add. "Rolant's parents approached us about a month ago and, after some thought; we think it would be a good match."

A good match.

Rolant.

I rolled the thought around in my head for a few seconds.

Rolant.

Aside from the fact that the whole idea of marriage seemed completely ridiculous, I realized I had no real objections to the suggestion. I liked Rolant well enough. I was fond of him. None of my dreams, discussed at length with Grehelda, had included Rolant but after all, why not? A thought struck me and I voiced it. "It would be a pity though, if our children got my nose and his eyes."

My mother humphed, and said to not talk such nonsense. But they both recognized my comment for the acquiescence it was.

When I repeated it to Grehelda later that day, she narrowed her eyes and agreed that it would be a shame, but not to worry much about it. "They're just as likely to have his nose and your eyes after all, and you do have pretty eyes Alina." I know my engagement came as almost as big a shock to her as Corice's had been, but she bore it well.

Rolant's parents wanted us to get married as soon as possible. Rolant was their only son, and they were anxious for some grandchildren, but my parents wanted to give me time and insisted that I not marry until I was officially an adult. Rolant's parents

reluctantly agreed to the wedding being a little more than a year away, on my twentieth birthday, twenty being the age that officially marked the beginning of adulthood in my village.

I received this news with some relief; I would have two more years to enjoy things as they stood. But I was wrong. After our engagement was announced, our relationship became strained and awkward. We suddenly found we had nothing to say to each other and spent most of our time in each other's company looking anywhere but at the other in embarrassed silence. We would have avoided each other altogether if it hadn't been for Grehelda who insisted, rightly enough, that if we were going to be married we had better get used to seeing each other and communicating. Grehelda would have liked things to stay like they were when we were children, and was disgusted that Rolant and I couldn't seem to be at ease around each other anymore. She finally gave up when Rolant declared he needed to work with his father more to "save some up for...." Here he turned bright red and didn't finish the sentence. Grehelda rolled her eyes, and I expended massive amounts of energy in a futile attempt to keep from turning as red as Rolant.

Time passed quickly, and I began to fear I would lose Grehelda too. As the day of my marriage loomed closer and closer, she became more and more withdrawn and morose. I tried to tell her that things would be the same, that it would be her, me and Rolant, just like old times but she didn't believe me. She began to pester me with questions such as, "Was I sure Rolant was the right one?" Grehelda had never been satisfied with my lack of enthusiasm for the marriage, and her nagging was part anxiety over our changing relationship and part genuine concern that I was headed into an

unhappy marriage. For awhile I thought she might be in love with Rolant herself, but I came to realize that with her head full of mysterious strangers and handsome princes she simply couldn't fathom that I would settle for Rolant.

And I did have my doubts. My nineteenth birthday rolled past, and I found myself wanting to be alone more. I started taking walks by myself, away from awkward conversations with Rolant and tiring debates with Grehelda over my marriage. Indecision wracked me. On the one hand, I had my parents' desires and my fondness for Rolant, on the other, I had the horrible sense that the day after our wedding I would realize it had all been a terrible mistake and it would be too late. Grehelda was always telling me that I was too easy-going and too easily swayed by others and that I should just make up my own mind and pursue my own course. Of course, she never liked it on those rare occasions when I followed her advice and my course went contrary to hers. I knew she was right though.

Several times I almost told my parents that I didn't want to go through with it, but I never could get up the courage. As time went on and the arrangements for the wedding worked into place I felt more and more as though I couldn't back out.

In no time at all it was upon me. A little while after sunrise the day before my twentieth birthday and my wedding, I snuck away from the busy preparations for a solitary walk in the woods. It didn't seem fair somehow, to be expected to take the final step into adulthood and get married all in one day. Tomorrow everything would change, but at the same time, everything would stay the same. Before, I had focused on how my life would be different, but it really struck me for the first time that morning how much of it would stay the same. I would live in this village where I had been born and where I

would probably die. I would walk these same paths the rest of my life, and get my food and household goods from the same places. I would be friends with the same people I had always been friends with, nodding acquaintances with the same people I had always been nodding acquaintances with, and indifferent strangers with the rest.

I had never longed for adventure the same way Grehelda did, but that day, my life stretching before my eyes in an unending stream of commonplace sameness, I longed for some of the things she dreamed of. I wanted to see new people and new places. Visit the ocean, walk the goat paths in the mountains, see for myself the monsters that were supposed to live in the lakes to the north. I wondered what it would be like to explore a new land, to search for a hidden treasure, to be carried off by a dashing outlaw. I walked faster with a sense of urgency and a desire to run away and pursue one of these wild fancies, at the same time knowing I never would.

The urge to do something reckless and daring, a caper worthy of Grehelda's wild imaginings possessed me. I sensed that it was my last day to do something adventurous before the coming day sucked me into the monotonous drudgery of the rest of my life. I cast around me looking for something that would be appropriately daring. I thought briefly of the ruined castle, but it stood in the opposite direction from where I was walking, and I knew my solitude was short-lived. A bride doesn't have much peace the day before her wedding. I broke into a jog, thinking to head for the river where at the very least I could swim across it, something I'd never done although Grehelda had often dared me. A bright patch of sunlight glared in front of me, and I dashed around it without thinking, then ground to halt as a new, frightening, but compelling, thought crossed my mind.

I rotated to face the patch of light. Its soft beam beckoned to me, and I took a cautious step toward it. I hadn't thought about the prohibition to step in a sunbeam in some time. In fact, I wasn't sure I even believed in fairies anymore. I simply avoided the beams out of respect for my mother and habit. But it seemed the fitting test of my new found adventuresome spirit. After all, I was officially an adult the next day, and would be in no more danger of fairy abductions. It was my last chance to defy the revered rule. I stared at the light, so alluring yet somehow sinister to my mind after twenty years of avoidance. My adventuresome spirit quailed somewhat and I hesitated. *It would be silly, really.*

But as my taste for the undertaking waned, my conviction that it was truly the most appropriate thing for me to do grew. I took another step, my mother's warnings pounding in my ears along with my memories of Grehelda twirling in a similar patch of light over ten years ago. I stopped at the edge, my toes touching the line between the relative dark of the forest and the warmth of the sunbeam and remembered.

"Never stand in a beam of sunlight."

"There's no such thing as fairies."

"They will take you away forever."

"I told you, I told you! No fairies!"

I closed my eyes, held my breath and stepped into the patch. Just as on that fateful day when Grehelda had done the same thing, nothing happened. I opened my eyes. Off to my right I could see my shadow. I expelled my breath and waved a hand at it. The shadow waved back. I danced a little jig and watched the shadow dance with me. Then I was twirling around and around, a nine-year old once more. Grehelda was right; I should

make and follow my own course more often.

My heart pumped fast and I felt giddy. I knew I was being immature, but I didn't care. I twirled around once more and stopped. There wasn't anything else to do, I had done it already, so I sauntered out of the light and back into the gloom of the forest ready to take on the world, or a wedding at least. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, I blinked some more and then froze. A strange lady was watching me. She leaned sideways against the trunk of a tree, arms crossed, one eyebrow raised. My mind scrambled. *She must be one of Rolant's family from the city come to the wedding. She must have gone for a walk like me and had heard me. She must think I'm ridiculous.*

Even as my frantic brain supplied this possibility to me, I knew the truth. None of Rolant's family were rich enough to buy a dress like that. No one related to Rolant could have such delicate features and flawless complexion. Certainly, no one in his family could have the pointed ears that I could just see between the locks of long, luxurious hair that were an impossible shade of red. The rest of me stayed frozen but my eyes traveled the short distance to her back where, sure enough, two delicate gossamer wings folded gracefully in and out as I watched. I didn't want to believe it, but my eyes couldn't be denied.

“Well,” said the fairy.

Chapter II

A fly buzzed around my head and settled on my arm, but I didn't brush it off. I couldn't move, and I could hardly think, despite the many dizzy images swirling through my mind.

The fairy moved away from the tree and observed me with a critical eye, arms still folded. "Nearly grown, aren't you?" she mused to herself.

She moved as though to circle me, and I swiveled in place to keep her in sight. I've never been subject to faints, but I think any larger attempt at motion at that moment would have resulted in one. My clamoring thoughts were beginning to organize themselves and went something like this: *This is a fairy....Fairies are real....You just stood in a beam of sunlight....You need to get out of here.* Every fiber in my body was screaming "Run!" but I remained fixed in place. A part of me was intrigued by this so-called legendary creature in front of me. Another part of me knew that running wouldn't do any good.

The fairy took three brisk steps toward me and extended her arm. With one dainty finger she rapped me smartly on the shoulder. Not sparing me a further glance, she offered the careless instruction, "Follow me." Then she then glided into the woods in the direction away from the village.

Not likely. To my astonishment and consternation, my feet started off after her. This betrayal of my extremities finally knocked me out of my stupor, and I scrambled to stop my forward movement. At least, I tried to scramble. Even exerting every ounce of energy I possessed, I only succeeded in slowing my motion. It reminded me of those nightmares where no matter how hard you try, every motion is like moving through

molasses.

I tried to grab at a passing tree, but my hand wouldn't obey me. By the time I had managed to get it out from my side after strenuous effort, the tree was long past. I tried to grip at others as I walked mechanically past them, but couldn't get my fingers to close around them. Ahead of me, the fairy continued to walk without a single glance backward. In desperation I took the one avenue still left and began screaming for help. To my relief, I still had complete control over my voice. My screams rang loud and clear, startling the forest birds and insects to silence. We were still close to the village, and with all the extra people about for the wedding, surely someone would hear. I kept my eyes fastened on the fairy in front of me, apprehensive lest she realize this and come back to silence me. To all appearances, however, she didn't even hear me. Her stride didn't falter at my first earsplitting shriek, and she continued on at the same pace, her fluttery wings snapping together behind her back whenever she passed through a narrow space.

I don't know how long I yelled. Eventually I lost my voice. My hands dropped to my side and my head drooped down until all I could see were my treacherous feet, marching steadily on to a fate I didn't want to contemplate. I should have been terrified, but I was having a hard time mustering any kind of emotion over a sudden, incredible fatigue. Although my legs remained outside of my control, I still had sensation in them and became increasingly aware that my house shoes, never made for walking, were forming blisters on my already tired feet. Soon however, even that pain ceased to bother me. I struggled to keep my eyes open, unsure what would happen were I to fall asleep in my current state. The thought crossed my mind that I should not be so tired. I had

walked this far in the forest many times without even breaking a sweat. Now I was exhausted and drained, the way I had felt six years ago when I came down with the fever. My exhaustion didn't show in my step. My feet continued on at a normal pace. I felt a like a marionette, a sensation both ludicrous and horrible.

We were a stone's throw from the castle before I saw it. A tall wall of white, almost translucent stone reared up in front of us. The nearly invisible joins between the stones in the wall made it look as though it was one solid piece. The same white stone composed the whole castle and surrounding wall except for the roofs which were a copper color. Roughly rectangular in shape, the castle covered more than 10 acres of land. A large cobbled courtyard covered a quarter of this area in front of the main castle. Nine towers pointed toward the sky from the rest of the building, two in the corners of the wall at the end of the courtyard, and the other seven clustered in the main body of the castle. The towers were of varying heights; the tallest, in the center of the main building, sported a golden pennant with an oak tree on it. There was a single gate in the wall at the end of the courtyard equipped with a portcullis and a drawbridge over a moat. Several doors gave entrance to the castle proper, but the main one stood directly across from the outer gate and equaled it in size and sturdiness.

I give this description from later recollections. When I first entered it with the lady fairy I noticed nothing but my fatigue and the faint impression that we had reached our destination. But we hadn't quite yet.

Next followed stairs, lots of stairs. Sweeping marble staircases, spiraling iron staircases and finally uneven wooden staircases, until at last, when I felt that even under enchantment my legs couldn't continue any longer, we reached a large bedchamber with

an ornate bed. For the first time since we began our long journey, the fairy turned around and addressed me. “You may sleep now,” was all she said, brushing one hand against my arm and pointing with the other at the bed. The enchantment lifted, and it was under my own power that I stumbled towards the bed. I can’t say for sure whether I made it there or not before the world turned black, and I slipped into a deep sleep.

* * * *

White walls. My room doesn't have white walls. And there's too much light.

Where am I? And why is my bed bouncing?

Those were my first thoughts on waking the next morning. I gradually wrestled my mulish consciousness into order and everything that had happened came back to me: my walk, the sunbeam, the fairy. That explained where I was, but not why my bed was bouncing. I rolled over on my back then propped myself up on my elbows.

Someone sat at the foot of my bed, feet hanging over the edge, bouncing gently up and down. The curtains had been opened and the sun shone through my window and into my eyes which were already blurry from sleep, making it difficult to see the figure just a few feet away.

“Good, you’re finally awake,” said my visitor, a girl from her voice.

I raised my hand to shield my eyes, and the shape at the foot of my bed resolved into a more or less defined outline of a young woman with long flowing hair and wings, a fairy, although not the same one as yesterday. This one looked younger, maybe fifteen.

She stood up and scrutinized me from beneath long feathery eyelashes. “I’m Carnation,” she said and posed, one foot in front of the other, hands on hips, chin regally lifted. I think she expected oohs and aahs. She got a blank stare. She waited, but when

no response was forthcoming, she dropped her hands and leaned towards me, enunciating each word. “You’re to be my servant.” She wore a pasted on smile now and nodded with each word. Annoyance joined my confusion as my sleep befuddleness wore off further. I wasn’t a half wit and didn’t appreciate being treated like one. Everything about Carnation, though, indicated that that was exactly what she thought about me, from the tilt of her head to her words, spoken so a three year old could understand them.

I didn’t have a response to her announcement. The last bits of memory were still sorting themselves out in my mind, and I began the even more laborious process of figuring out what I should do about them.

Carnation took my silence for agreement. She straightened, tossing her hair as she did so, an action completely unnecessary since it wasn’t hanging in her face in the first place. “Mother says I mustn’t bother you too much today because you’ll be tired, but I can show you around, and tomorrow you can start working. There’s so much to do in the next few weeks.”

I didn’t have a response to this either, but stayed where I was and stared at her, then at the room around me. I’d been too tired the night before to notice much. The room encompassed a much larger area than my room at home, with enough space between the bed and window to play a game of circle chase. It had one door and one window. The window, taller than me, occupied a portion of the curved wall opposite the door. I was apparently lodged in one of the towers. The main feature of the room was the bed, twice as large as a sleeping person really needed, made up of a great deal of swirls and spikes in the woodwork and a ridiculously thick pallet. Besides the bed, a wardrobe, a dressing table, several candlestands and a bird cage stood against the walls,

which were composed of the same white stone that made up the rest of the castle. The floor and ceiling were a dark colored wood, although a thick rug with a pattern of red roses woven into it covered much of the floor.

The fairy moved from the foot of the bed to stand more to the side, out of the sun, and I was able to get a good look at her. I'd already guessed from her references to "mother" that she was the daughter of my captor. Seeing her fully confirmed my suspicion. She had a rounder and more youthful face, and her hair shone a more subdued shade of red, but she bore an unmistakable resemblance to her mother. Red veins trailed a delicate pattern over the surface of her light blue and nearly transparent wings. She folded and unfolded them without seeming to be aware of the action. "Aren't you going to get up and get dressed?"

I started and met her impatient gaze while I considered her question. *Am I going to get up and get dressed?* Something fantastic had happened to me yesterday and, provided this wasn't a dream, my life was changed, no destroyed. As soon as I left the bed my new strange life would begin. I didn't want to get up. I didn't want to be there. I wanted to pull the covers over my head, go back to sleep, and wake up safe and sound in my real bed.

Still, I couldn't stay in bed forever. Already a pain in my stomach reminded me that it had been almost 24 hours since I'd eaten. Also, I didn't think it wise to start the day by aggravating the first fairy I met. Tempting as it was to ignore her, I did the prudent thing and sat up. I immediately wished I hadn't. The room spun around me and the bed pulled at me, unwilling to relinquish me to the waking world. I resisted the pull and swung my legs over the side, twisting so I could still see the fairy. She was eyeing

me with pursed lips, almost identical to the way her mother had looked at me. “You’re very plain.”

I stopped mid-swing, taken aback by this patently rude comment. *What a charming girl. I wonder how she’d look after being kidnapped?* I knew my hair was a mess and I could see by the mirror on the dressing table that my eyes were bloodshot and a little puffy. She soon made it clear that she was criticizing my physical attributes, however, not how I looked at the moment. She pointed at each feature as she commented. “Your legs are thick, you’ve hardly any hips at all, your hair’s dull...” *Wait for it, ...and your nose is too long.*”

Luckily, years of listening to blunt, although never intentionally unkind, comments from Grehelda stood me in good stead, and instead of responding in kind, I bit my tongue and wobbled to my feet. Her comments did serve the purpose of adding some anger to my apprehensiveness. I noticed for the first time that someone had taken off my dress and replaced it with a plain but very comfortable nightgown. I pulled at the sleeve, a little confused, and Carnation answered my unspoken question. “Netta undressed you last night.” She waved her hand dismissively from which I gathered that Netta was someone of no importance in her eyes, perhaps another human?

I had a hundred questions buzzing around in my still foggy brain, but decided to start with the obvious one. “Where am I?” I looked the fairy in the eye and tried to sound as self-assured as Grehelda, although I didn’t yet know how questions from an inferior, ugly, half-wit would be received.

“Starstair,” she said.

I could have done with a little more explanation. “This castle is Starstair?”

“Yes.”

Am I going to have to get it out of her one syllable at a time?

Two questions appeared to be the limit to her patience though. Before I could frame my next one she put me off. “Why don’t you get dressed now? Then I can show you around.”

Get dressed, okay Alina, you can handle that. A dress with appropriate undergarments lay across the foot of my bed. It took an incredible amount of effort for me to walk the few short feet over to it and pick it up. Once I’d accomplished this I turned back around, expecting that the fairy would leave the room so I’d have some privacy. I expected wrong. Instead of leaving, she plopped down in the chair, cupped her face in her hands and gave me her undivided attention.

Dressing in front of a fairy was not an experience I care to remember. It was humiliating. Doubly so because I knew I couldn’t force her to leave me alone. I did take small consolation in the fact that at least she didn’t make any more comments about my figure. When it came time to put my stockings on, I noticed that whoever Netta was, she had taken the time to bandage my blistered feet. They barely hurt at all when I slipped on the provided shoes.

Carnation directed me to the dressing table where a piece of toast and cold ham served as my breakfast. While I ate she chattered about her plans, something about a new dress and a big party coming up. I stopped listening when I realized she wasn’t going to say anything that would tell me more about my situation. As near as I could tell, Carnation was too young to be betrothed, but a lot of her talk centered on a “Prince Hemlock.” The way she said his name reminded me uncannily of Corice sighing over

Elek.

Her chatter wound down soon and she began pacing instead, stopping every time she passed me and heaving a theatrical sigh at the amount of food still to finish. When I was down to half a piece of a toast she hurried me off on a whirlwind tour of the castle.

As we descended the staircase from my room she explained, “This tower is the Agate Tower.” She pointed out some agates in patterns on the walls. “The tower is part of my family’s section of the castle, although we have lots of other rooms, of course.”

As we went down and down and down, I wondered how big her family could possibly be to need this much space. Carnation’s narrative wound a path as circuitous and confusing as the route we took through the castle, and I was soon lost both physically and mentally. I paid less attention to Carnation and more attention to the rooms we passed through.

It was all very grand and beautiful. Delicately carved woodwork, as good as my father could carve and better, made up the hand rails on the staircases. Dainty sculptures of animals and fairies stood poised in corners or gamboled across alcoves. Floral green rugs covered the entire floor in some hallways and in every exterior wall, great tall windows, some with stained glass, allowed the sunshine to pour in. Everything was neat and clean too, to the extent that, after awhile, one began to long for the sight of the ordinary in a layer of dust over some furniture, a sculpture with a broken finger or a painting that didn’t quite capture its subject.

As interesting as the castle and its furnishings were, I was more interested in its inhabitants. We passed other fairies, male and female, young and old. They all moved with perfect grace, almost floating across the floor, and they all had the same fair

porcelain skin with a hint of rosiness in the cheeks. I saw no pimples, no bushy eyebrows, no, hmm, long noses, and there didn't seem to be such a thing as a fat fairy.

We were walking across a great hall large enough to fit my whole village inside, when Carnation was hailed by another girl fairy. They plunged into deep conversation as soon as they were close enough to talk without shouting. After hearing the first sentence which was, "What are you going to wear for the ball?" I stopped listening.

For such a large room, the gilt hall we were in looked barren. Intricate tapestries depicting pastoral and hunting scenes hung on the wall between the twenty foot windows. Chairs lined the walls, but aside from two small tables holding vases of flowers and the ubiquitous candlestands, there were no other furnishings.

Feeling tired, I ventured to sit in one of the chairs, hoping I wasn't breaking some fairy law about servants sitting while their betters stood. Carnation paid me no mind and I relaxed.

Relaxed. It was funny, really. I should be panicking, Corice would be by now. I should be in hysterics, or tears or wild denial, but what I felt more than anything was resignation. Somehow, I realized, as I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes, I had always expected something like this to happen. That was why I had wished at every well and on every birthday that it never would. A fine lot of good wishing had done me. *Although I don't suppose wishes are proof against stupidities such as standing in a sunbeam the day before you turn twenty.* I had lived my whole life with the premonition that this day would someday come. Perhaps that was why I had avoided sunbeams to the very last, long after my peers had given up going around them. Not that that was much consolation. *Stupid, stupid, stupid Alina!* With only hours remaining until I was forever

safe and I had to go and take risks for the first time in my life. Hours remaining...

With a jolt I realized that today I was traditionally and legally an adult. *Happy birthday, Alina.* Today I was supposed to marry Rolant. That thought gave me pause. Was it relief or regret I felt now that the wedding would not take place? Worried that on further reflection it might be relief, I skipped over that thought and moved on to something else. Rolant. My parents. Grehelda. How worried they must all be. I pictured my family and friends calling for me, searching for me, perhaps for weeks, before giving up and returning to everyday life. I found this train of thought far more distressing than dwelling on my own circumstances.

Something moved at the other end of long room. My eyesight is mediocre and at that distance, I could only make out that it was some kind of animal. The coal black quadruped progressed in an ambling sort of gait across the room towards me. A dog? It stood as tall as Corice's father's hunting dog yet moved with the slinking grace of a cat. In fact, it was a cat. I could make out the short ears, long tail and almond shaped eyes. I leaned against the back of the chair. This wasn't a housecat; the thing was big enough to eat a housecat.

I cleared my throat to say something to Carnation about the large carnivore approaching. It wasn't headed for Carnation and her friend however; it was headed for me in its lolling fashion and had been ever since I'd first sighted it. My words caught in my throat as it closed the remaining distance and stopped a scant two feet away from my bent knees. It raised its head and fixed me with a curious stare. "Good evening," it said.

I stared back. The thought crossed my mind that someone was playing a joke on me, except the voice, low and rolling, had a distinctly inhuman sound to it. The words

came out a little slurred, more like, “Guhevening,” but they definitely originated from the cat or panther as I guessed it to be. I even saw its mouth move, although not as much as a human’s does in normal conversation.

It waited, ears pointed at me, tailing swishing lazily back and forth. I cast a helpless glance at Carnation, but she faced the other way. The cat gazed steadily, expectantly.

“Er. Good evening?” I tried.

The panther closed its eyes in a long blink. I froze in place as it padded the last few steps. It walked to my side, inserted its head beneath my limp right hand and pushed up in a gesture familiar to anyone who’s spent time around a cat. Inch by inch I relaxed and stroked its head and back, as high as my lap. Carnation’s conversation droned on. I didn’t know if she’d seen the panther, but her friend had glanced at it without so much as a twitch. She moved on shortly afterward, and Carnation looked around for me, making a full circuit of the room with her eyes before she noticed me sitting down.

The panther moved out from under my hand, “Guhevening Carnaissun.”

“Go away Nageri.”

The panther did another one of its slow blinks before it padded away in the direction it’d come. I stayed seated. Carnation followed my astonished stare to the panther’s retreating form. “You’ll see lots of animals around here,” she said in the longest sentence of explanation she’d used so far. “It’s the fauna fairies bring them in.” She glowered at the now distant panther. “They’re all supposed to be housetrained, but I don’t believe that for a minute. They’re a nuisance, a dirty, smelly nuisance.”

The panther slunk out of sight, and Carnation roused herself from her short rant.

“I think I’ll show you the Tower of the Clouds now,” she decided and started off, not checking to see if I followed. I did anyway.

Shortly thereafter, the unnatural fatigue of the day before fell upon me. It took all my energy to put one foot in front of the other, no energy left for further thoughts of family and home. Carnation continued on, oblivious to my state. I plodded after, unsure whether I would have the energy to climb something called, “The Tower of the Clouds.”

I was about to interrupt her running commentary, she was pattering on about a dance step she’d just learned, when she was hailed a second time. We were in a doorway between two rooms and Carnation stopped to wait. I followed her example, although once stopped I wasn’t sure I would be able to go again. It took a second or two for me to realize that the woman approaching us was not a fairy but a human.

“Isn’t this the new servant?” came an anxious query. *A nice voice. Warm and caring.* The speaker, a slender, middle-aged woman with mousy brown hair tied in a knot at the back of her head stopped in front of Carnation.

“Oh. Netta.” Carnation didn’t look at her but glanced in the direction we’d been going instead. She didn’t look pleased at the interruption. “Yes, this is her. I’m showing her around the castle.”

The woman looked from Carnation to me, taking note of my drooping posture and red eyes, and back to Carnation. “You mean you’ve had her up and running about the castle all day? She looks exhausted.”

It was nice to have someone notice.

Carnation rolled her eyes. “Hardly all day, she slept almost until midday.”

“Of course she did,” the woman said. “Didn’t Lady Foxglove say to not work her

too hard?”

“I haven’t been working her. I’ve been showing her around.”

“Well, that’s enough for today at any rate,” said my savior and looped my arm through hers. “I’ll take her back to her room, now. She can hardly stand.”

Carnation took a good look at me for the first time since we started and didn’t argue. “I guess I can finish showing you around tomorrow.” After a final cool glance at the woman, she glided down the hallway back in the direction we’d come.

“I’m Netta, as you probably heard,” the woman said as she guided me, sometimes supporting me, back through the castle to my room. I wanted to ask her some of my questions, but my tongue was heavy and I could only stumble along beside her. She didn’t say anything else until we got back to my room where she asked if I was hungry. I shook my head and collapsed onto the bed once more.

“Yes, you should sleep. I’ll talk to Lady Foxglove tonight and try to arrange for you to be with me tomorrow. I’m sure you have questions and I can try to answer them.” I blinked, the closest to a nod I could manage.

“Good night,” she called over her shoulder as she walked out of my room. I didn’t hear her shut the door. I was already asleep.

* * * *

When I woke the next morning I knew where I was and instead of the confusion of the previous day, I experienced a knot in my stomach as I remembered. Before I could indulge in a long bout of self pity, I perceived that, once again, there was a fairy in my room. Was this going to be an everyday occurrence?

The fairy this morning, however, formed a marked contrast to Carnation. She

looked to be younger than Carnation, about eleven or twelve, and had fine blond hair that hung like a veil about her face. She stood at the window, bent over slightly and murmuring to a dove in the cage. I remembered noticing the cage yesterday but hadn't noticed that it actually contained a bird. The fairy seemed to be unaware that I was awake so I made a lot of noise as I tossed the covers off and sat up. She turned a pair of wide, pale green eyes toward me and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

I had some angry words on my tongue about having no privacy but stopped them when I got a closer look at her. Unlike Carnation, who swept through the world expecting everyone to admire her, this girl looked as though she would prefer no one noticed her at all. She stood very still, her head lowered to look at the bird. Her wings, light green with pale yellow veins, hung motionless and droopy behind her. I sensed that here was someone as unhappy as myself, though for some other reason I couldn't guess. I couldn't feel antagonistic toward her, even if she was a fairy.

After about a minute of silence I ventured to introduce myself. "Hello, my name is Alina."

On being addressed, her eyes got even wider. She darted a quick glance at me before returning her gaze to the dove. "I'm Buttercup," she said, barely above a whisper, and then hurried on as though anxious to get the spotlight off herself. "This is Ytrebil," she indicated the bird, who cooed and hopped a step sideways on the perch, tipping his head to look for possible treats.

"He's very pretty," I offered, for lack of something better to say. I really wanted to ask who she was and why she, and the dove for that matter, were in my room. I didn't have to ask, for a moment later Buttercup offered the information. "He belonged to

Chansy.” She still wasn’t looking at me, but had taken hold of the edge of the curtain and was winding it around her hand. “I thought I had better check on him. I wasn’t sure that anyone would remember to feed him,” she said by way of an apology, perhaps realizing I might resent an intrusion into my room.

“Good idea. I didn’t even know he was here.”

The door behind me opened, and Netta entered carrying a breakfast tray. “Oh good, you’re awake,” she said then stopped when she caught sight of my visitor. Her cheerful smile softened. “I see you’ve met Buttercup.”

“And Ytrebil,” I offered wryly.

“Poor Ytrebil. I had forgotten all about him. Was he alright, Buttercup?” Netta moved over to the table and set the tray down.

Almost, but not quite, Buttercup met Netta’s eyes. “He was very hungry and his cage is dirty but I think he’s fine. I thought I’d clean his cage.”

“Well, you can if you want to, dear, but I’d be happy to do it later today.”

“I don’t mind,” whispered Buttercup, looking at the floor.

She didn’t say another word while I got dressed. After finishing her task, she started to slip out of the room.

“Hey,” I called to her, “You forgot to close the cage door.” She tilted her head, rather like the dove, and gave me a quizzical look before slipping out the door.

“It’s okay.” Netta said, “Ytrebil’s cage is always open.”

Okay then. “She’s a different sort of fairy,” I remarked as I resumed my meal.

“Than Carnation?” Netta laughed. “Oh, Alina, you’ll find that fairies are just as variable as humans. They can be shy, outgoing, arrogant, humble, kind and cruel just like

us.”

I had my own opinion about fairies, but decided not to voice it until I knew Netta better. “Who’s Chansy?” I asked instead.

Netta’s smile disappeared. She had sat down on the bed and I had to turn in my chair to look at her.

“Chansy was your predecessor, lady’s maid to Carnation and Buttercup and my good friend. She died four days ago.”

This Lady Foxglove didn’t waste any time. “I’m sorry. What happened?”

Netta stared out the window. “The doctors think it was her heart. It was very sudden and unexpected. She’d never complained of any pain but, after all, she wasn’t young.”

“That’s horrible,” I said, swallowing my bite with difficulty. I couldn’t imagine staying here long enough to grow old and die. “How old was she?”

A peculiar expression that I couldn’t define spread over Netta’s face. For such a simple question, she spent a long time considering whether or not she should answer it. Finally she shrugged and said, “After all, why not? You have to start somewhere and it may as well be there.” She folded her hands in her lap and focused on me. I stopped chewing, a little apprehensive at her intense scrutiny.

“She was 231.”

Silence. *Did I hear her right? I couldn’t have.* I sat silent, a muffin halfway to my mouth. Netta continued to hold my gaze and gave no indication she had been anything but serious.

I said the first thing that came to mind. “That’s not possible.”

Netta chuckled and stood up. “That’s everyone’s reaction.” She walked over and began piling everything onto my breakfast tray in an orderly fashion. “But I assure you it’s the truth.” I gaped at her as she brushed a few crumbs off the table.

“I need to take this to the kitchen. Why don’t you come down with me and I’ll try to explain.”

“It’s living in the fairy world that does it,” she explained as we walked.

“Something about the air maybe. I don’t pretend to have all the answers.”

“The average fairy will live around 850 years. Humans that are brought here live about 400, give or take a hundred years depending on how old they were when they were taken.”

I still wondered if she was jesting with me. “Four hundred years. That’s an intriguing possibility under other circumstances.” Frankly, I found the prospect of 400 years of servitude to fairies appalling.

Netta must have caught my meaning because she smiled a sympathetic smile and said, “I know what you’re feeling right now, but it’s not that bad. The work is fairly easy, you make friends, some humans even get married and have children.”

Right. Bringing children into the world to be slaves was criminal.

Netta didn’t try to convince me all at once. We arrived at a cavernous kitchen somewhere in the bowels of the castle. There were no windows here which made me think we’d gone below ground. There were two other human girls working when we arrived, both of them younger than me. Netta introduced them as Haddah and Iriann. She then set me to shelling peas while she did odd jobs around the kitchen and tried to explain to me the structure of Starstair and its inhabitants.

While, if humans lived 850 years, they would have great-great-many great grandchildren before they died, fairies matured and aged at a rate consistent with their longevity. A fairy wasn't considered an adult until their 175th birthday. In practical terms, this meant that although Carnation looked about 15, she was actually 147, according to Netta. A typical fairy family didn't have very many children, only one or two. The family I was tied to, the Turquoise family, was unusual in that Lady Foxglove, the fairy who'd taken me, and her husband, Lord Mahogany, had three children, two older boys, Poplar and Ash, and Carnation. They also had charge of Buttercup, whose parents had died when she was just a baby. Her father had been Foxglove's brother and they had raised her like a second daughter. Netta gave a slight emphasis to the word second, which explained a thing or two about the demeanor of the two girls.

I found myself wondering about Netta as she talked. She had expressive eyes the color of mahogany that shone with good humor but that also contained a lingering sadness in their depths. How long had she been here? Ten years? 50 years? 200 years?

I concentrated much better than I had the day before. Netta gave me a map of the castle, explaining that it was easy to get lost at first and marking my family's wing on it for me. Each family had their own section of the castle but there were also common areas such as the stables, gardens, throne room, great hall and grand ballroom. I let Netta point out features of interest to me, particularly the grand ballroom as that was the location for the First Frost Ball. This was the ball that Carnation had been rattling on about the previous day. Held at the beginning of every winter, it celebrated the end of another growing season and the beginning of what was the restful time of year for fairies, who, as the traditional tales had correctly stated, were keepers of the wild plants and

animals.

“Some of us will have to help wait and fix the food,” Netta explained, “but most of the humans attend a second, more modest party for humans.”

There were about half again as many humans as fairies, but about a quarter of them were still children with minimal duties. This stemmed from the fact that fairies couldn't take adults and, while they would try to get older adolescents, sometimes, “they had to take what they could get.”

This last comment rankled and I blurted, “Isn't that a shame. Poor fairies. What about the children?” I lowered my voice when I saw Iriann staring at me. “Don't they care about how frightening and horrible this is for all the children? Not to mention their families?”

“Some of them care,” Netta answered as she swept around the oven. “It's like I told you earlier, fairies are as variable as humans, some are good, some are not so good. Some of them are very careful of the children they take and choose only children that are orphans with miserable prospects in life, or who are close to death in the human world. There is very little disease in the fairy world and crossing between the two can bring a child that's near death back to health again.”

“Many fairies treat their servants almost like part of the family; they give them lots of holidays, they celebrate their birthdays, occasionally a fairy will even marry a human.”

I was distracted for a moment by this last statement. And I had had second thoughts about *my* marriage. I recognized Netta's efforts to make me feel better by casting things in a positive light, but I wasn't exhausted for the first time since I had

arrived, and I had a dozen different emotions running through me: worry over my family, sorrow that I might not see them again, apprehension over what my future held, and anger that I was even in this situation. If Netta had been more authoritative and less sympathetic I probably wouldn't have had the courage to say anything but, as it was, the anger got the upper hand and I vented it on the only person I could. "Don't try to tell me they're all benevolent benefactors of the human race because that's just rubbish."

Netta stopped her work and came over to sit across from me. She clasped her hands on the table in front of her and took a deep breath. "I won't try to tell you that, but it's not as bad as you think."

I leaned back in my chair and wouldn't look at her.

"There are laws," she continued. "A fairy may not physically harm a human unless the human has physically harmed someone else. There are certain holidays that all humans must be given. There is a special officer of the court that humans can take complaints to without fear of reprisal where they will be evaluated and corrective action taken if necessary."

"Wonderful," I snapped. "I'm to be a slave, but I get holidays off, that makes all the difference."

I must have looked truly alarming because Haddah and Iriann moved to the other side of the kitchen, casting wary eyes in my direction. Netta didn't deign my outburst with so much as a twitch, but waited for me to finish with the air of one who'd seen that response many times before. I was tempted to throw the bowl of peas at her. Had she seen that before?

"Believe me." She moved to take my hand, but I jerked it away. "I understand

how you feel. I was seven when I was taken, and I was just as scared, upset and angry as you are.”

I opened my mouth, ready with more angry words, when a wave of dizziness washed over me, followed by the realization that fatigue had caught up to me again. I managed to keep a glower fixed on my face but was forced to adopt a quieter, civiler tone. “How does one get out of here and back home?” I expected her to dodge the question and drown me with more praise of life here.

She didn’t look happy at my question and chose her words carefully, but she did answer it. “There are two ways to get out of Starstair and return to your former life. One, if the fairy who took you gives you your freedom back.” She scooted the bowl of peas towards herself (perhaps she’d read my intention?) and beckoned Iriann to come take them.

“This sometimes happens if the human in question has rendered some great service to the fairy or if the fairy, for whatever reason, no longer needs or wants the human in their service. Oftentimes, a freed human chooses to remain in Starstair because they’ve come to love it as their home.”

I took a breath to start in on her again, but she hurried on before I could speak. “Two, if the fairy who took the human dies, the spell is broken and the human can do what they please. However, that rarely happens since fairies live so much longer than humans.”

I could think of ways that a fairy could live a considerably shorter life than a human but I didn’t voice my thoughts. My temper had deserted me faster than it had come. I never could hold a tantrum as long as Corice or Grehelda. “What about

escape?”

Netta reached across the table and pulled the hand that I'd been rubbing my eyes with away from my face. She leaned over the table and made direct eye contact as though she knew I wouldn't believe what she was going to say but she wished to impress me with its truthfulness anyway. "Escape is impossible."

I was impressed in spite of myself but not convinced. I forced myself to relax my clenched hands. After a short pause, Netta let go of my hand and shifted her gaze to the sink. "Would you help me with the dishes? It's time for Iriann and Haddah's break."

So my servitude starts. Iriann and Haddah had already left the kitchen unnoticed by me.

As we did the dishes and other mundane tasks about the kitchen, Netta continued to tell me about life at Starstair. She avoided any further allusions to human servitude, confining herself to chit chat about the castle and its inhabitants. I played my part by asking innocuous questions such as, "Where's your room?"

While I had been aware of fatigue since my burst of temper, it must have been midafternoon before the bone weary sensations of the previous day returned. I leaned against the sideboard and closed my eyes.

Netta noticed my action and inquired, "Tired?"

"More so than I should be," I replied, resisting the temptation to slide into the nearest chair. "I've worked much harder at home and not been nearly as tired as this."

"It happens to every human when they first come to Starstair." Netta motioned me aside and took up work where I had left it. I made a mild protest, but my heart wasn't in it. "In a few weeks you won't feel it anymore. Your body just needs time to adjust to

the fairy world.”

I didn't understand her but didn't have the energy to ask her what she meant.

“Sit down.” Netta pointed to the chair. “I'll finish this and then show you back to your room. It'll take you a few days before you can find your way around.” I collapsed into the chair and immediately regretted sitting down because I had to struggle to stay awake.

Less than an hour later, I crawled back in bed as Netta exited my room. Sunlight still filtered through the curtains, but it didn't stop me from falling asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

* * * *

I woke up alone and lay in bed watching the early morning sunbeam through the window. I sleepily reflected on the irony that I could now walk with no thought of the consequences through that beam. My reflections were short lived. Carnation burst through the door in a cascade of color and trailing silk and told me to: “Hurry up and get dressed can't you? We don't have a moment to lose.”

She hovered around me until she was satisfied I was getting ready, then hurried out of the room after a pause to check her reflection in the mirror.

I wondered what could be so urgent and considered ignoring her command but, as I finished dressing, I decided to humor her for the time being. I didn't think throwing a tantrum would do me any good and might cause me some harm. I knew Foxglove had cast some sort of spell on me in the woods and, until I found out the extent of a fairy's power over a human, I wanted to avoid provoking any fairy into placing another one on me.

Armed with my map, I wound my way down to Carnation's own sitting room where she sat surrounded by material, ribbons and thread all tangled together in a hopeless mess. I could just discern what might be the bodice of a dress peeking out of the jumble to her left. She was threading a needle when I entered, her dainty features scrunched as she tried to see the eye. "Oh, Alina, you're finally here." She tossed the needle aside, paying no attention to where it fell. "Look at this!" She threw her hands up at the mess around her.

This then, was Carnation's emergency. I regretted hurrying.

In a few words she made me to understand that she was endeavoring to make a new gown for the ball in less than a week away, but Chansy had always done her sewing before.

"I'm sure it's ruined now, and I'll never get it done."

I couldn't muster much sympathy. "Why don't you wear one of your other dresses?" I suggested, picking my way through the carnage towards her. Who knew how many other needles were lying about?

Carnation jerked her head up and fixed me with an indignant glare. "How can you even suggest that? I'd be the laughingstock of the ball. I'd die of humiliation!"

An intriguing, however unlikely, possibility. "What exactly do you want me to do?" I asked as civilly as I could manage.

"Fix it of course!" She began fussing through the material around her. After sorting through most of the fifty plus yards of fabric, some pieces getting tossed multiple times, she came up again triumphantly clutching what I'd thought looked like a dress's bodice.

“I need this.” She pointed at the drooping pink material. “To look like this.” She rummaged around in the mess about her feet again and emerged with a sketch of a dress. “In five days,” she finished and held both bodice and sketch out to me.

I looked at the sketch first. It detailed an ornate gown with easily twelve yards of fabric in the skirt alone, long drooping sleeves and extensive embroidery along the hem, cuffs and bodice. An impractical waste of fabric, my mother would have called it.

Next, I considered the bodice. The lining had been sewed together with some skill, possibly by Chansy? However, the side seams were lumpy and uneven, evidently the work of Carnation. I filed away the fact that fairies aren’t infallible in all areas, handiwork being one of them.

“Five days?” I let my skepticism show.

Carnation shrugged. “There would have been plenty of time if Chansy hadn’t died.”

At my shocked silence Carnation blushed and had the good grace to look ashamed. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, “but she’s dead and there’s no bringing her back and the festival is soon and she wanted me to look beautiful just as much as I do.” She thrust her chin in the air, daring me to take her to task.

I declined to do so and deliberately turned my attention back to the sketch. “I can finish the sewing in three days, but unless you’re remarkably clever with an embroidery needle, some of this embroidery will have to be left off.”

If I’d told her she had to spend the rest of her life locked in her room she couldn’t have looked more devastated. Her shoulders dropped and her face crumpled into an expression more appropriate for a sulking four year old than a young lady. “But

everyone will have lots of embroidery. It's the latest fashion."

I shrugged. "You don't have time to be fashionable." I handed the sketch back to her. "I suggest you put ribbon around the sleeves and concentrate on the bodice embroidery."

Carnation looked like a thundercloud, rosebud mouth pursed and delicate brows contracted.

I hunted about through the debris on the floor and found a reel of patterned silver ribbon. "This would look very nice."

Carnation glowered at the ribbon. After a few seconds of silent fuming she heaved a great sigh, and gave one tiny jerk of her head to signify her acceptance of my alternative.

I commandeered a chair and got right to work tearing out the side seams. Fairy world or no, sewing was something I knew about. My stomach grumbled but I was enjoying my small triumph over Carnation and didn't want to spoil it by asking for some breakfast.

Carnation's bad mood didn't last long. Soon she was chattering away about the ball and her favorite topic, Prince Hemlock. She made no effort to help but flitted about the room between the window, her mirror, and me with the dress. I tried to tune her out as I worked.

Was I as empty-headed, inane and inconsiderate as she was when I was her age? Age being relative, I suppose, since in years she was much older than me. Thinking back, I could remember frivolous arguments over clothing between Corice and I (Grehelda had never cared much about the sort of clothes she wore), but I hoped that I

hadn't ever been so self-centered.

The rest of the day dragged by, I was still fighting fatigue and the material Carnation had chosen for her dress was horrible to sew. Carnation made the experience worse by her constant monologue. She only stopped talking long enough to eat her midday meal, which she didn't offer to share, and paced, promenaded and danced around the room nonstop.

The sun dropped below the hills. I was starving and about to lose my mind when Netta rescued me once more when she stuck her head in the door and announced it was time for me to be finished. She had Lady Foxglove's backing on this, and though Carnation protested that we, meaning me, really ought to at least finish sewing the skirt, Netta paid her no mind. I followed her example, dumping the half-finished dress onto an empty table and getting to my feet, an undertaking that took far more energy than it should have. Carnation mumbled something more about how she had told and told her mother she needed at least two servants to help with the dress and how parents never understood etc. As I trudged out of the room I conceded that Netta had made one valid point: fairies did have a lot in common with humans.

* * * *

The next few days were similar in character. I would wake up or be woken up at about dawn. I'd eat breakfast, and then I'd go down to Carnation's rooms and work on the dress for the entire day. I'd get a little to eat when Carnation's midday meal was served but never enough to fill my stomach, and I was always starving by the time Carnation let me go well after dark. I'd then go to the kitchen for some supper before stumbling upstairs to bed, exhausted. By the third day I no longer needed the map to

navigate my way to Carnation's rooms and the kitchen.

I didn't see hardly anyone besides Carnation. Netta would make an appearance now and again, but I got the impression that Lady Foxglove was keeping her busy with her own preparations for the ball. I would usually see Haddah or Iriann in the kitchen, and one of them would bring Carnation's meals. Either they were both very shy or I'd frightened them that first day in the kitchen, because they wouldn't talk to me unless I asked a direct question and then would answer it with as few words as possible before escaping from the room. I didn't see Buttercup either, although Ytrebil's full food dish and clean cage testified to her continued presence in my room. Nor did I see any more of the panther. I did see a wide variety of other animals when I traveled between my room, Carnation's room and the kitchen. The birds had the unsettling habit of flying at breakneck speed through the castle. It paid to be cautious when approaching corners, I learned my second day, after a flock of four or five sparrows burst around one, and two of them smacked into me. The birds twittered and sang regular birdsong but would also burst out into sorrowful ballads or working songs, on occasion with recognizable words. A raven followed me to Carnation's room one morning singing a sad ditty about a sailor who returns from sea to find his sweetheart has drowned. "With not a soul to see this cruel tragedy." Good thing I'm not very superstitious.

There were other animals besides birds. Dogs and cats I expected, but I also saw rabbits, foxes, squirrels, goats, lizards, frogs, bats, deer, a wolf, a bear, and a monkey. I gave these last plenty of room, although all the animals seemed tame enough. None of them talked to me but I had a hunch if they did it would be more interesting than Carnation's speech. Her conversation didn't vary much, being 50 percent about the ball,

25 percent about Prince Hemlock and another 25 percent for all other subjects. I tried to draw her into topics of interest to me, such as instances of humans leaving Starstair. I'm not sure if Carnation saw through my attempts to lead the conversation in that direction and determined to have none of it, or if she was so fixated on the ball that she had no room in her head for anything else, but my efforts went unrewarded. Sometimes she would leave me while she went out with her friends or family to do who knows what, and I welcomed the silence that these absences gave me. For the most part though, Carnation seemed to want to be in the same room as the dress.

During her absences and sometimes when she was there, my mind would wander and I found it would inevitably follow the same paths, either futile speculation about my future prospects or wishful remembrances of life back at the village. I remember one day, just to break this train of thought, I tried to picture the responses of my friends should they have been placed in my situation.

Grehelda was easy. She would have come kicking and screaming the whole way. She would have probably attacked Carnation that first morning and refused to do any work. By now, I mused, she would have made at least three escape attempts.

Corice would probably have gone into hysterics. She would have cried all through that first day. As she came to realize her situation, she would have tried to make friends with any and everyone with her boundless, irresistible charm.

And Rolant? It was a little harder for me to say how Rolant would act which was embarrassing since of the three I should know him the best. I thought he might take it much like I did, a little calmer even. I'd rarely seen Rolant get ruffled. He'd be quiet, respectful and compliant all the time watching, watching and waiting...waiting.

Waiting for what, Alina? You may be living among fairies but this is no fairy tale, and no fairy prince is coming to rescue you.

So while these speculations on my friends' behavior were amusing for a while, all too soon I found myself back in melancholy.

On the fifth day of my captivity, I spent another weary day working on Carnation's dress. I had long since finished the sewing and put the ribbon on but there was still a lot of embroidery to do. I had always enjoyed embroidery but doing it all day long was tedious, and doing it for Carnation's use was distasteful.

After dinner, I began the trek back to my rooms. I paused at the bottom of the last staircase to my room, wondering whether I had the energy to mount the stairs.

"Alina!" The unfamiliar voice belonged to a young woman jogging up the passage towards me. "Wait a minute!" She held up a hand as she jogged.

Aside from Netta, (and a few monosyllabic interchanges with Haddah and Iriann) I hadn't spoken to any other humans since my arrival, and I felt my spirits lift. The girl approaching me now looked to be about my age. A little shorter and stouter than me, she had curly chocolate hair that didn't even reach her shoulders. She stumbled to a halt a few feet away from me and bent down to rest her hands on her knees, breathing hard. "I had to run all the way from the kitchen," she explained between puffs.

"Oh." *Brilliant piece of conversation, Alina.*

She caught her breath soon and straightened up, brushing her hair back from her face as she did so. "I've wanted to talk to you ever since you arrived. Name's Shelaine."

"I'm Alina."

"Yes, I know. Netta told me. I've wanted to welcome you, but every night

you're already gone by the time I get down to the kitchen."

"I'm always very tired." I felt some explanation was expected for my inconvenient absence.

"Flutterflies working you too hard already are they?" she asked with a sly wink and an impudence I was sure no fairy would appreciate.

"Uh, you could say that." I looked down the hall to make sure no fairies had heard her remark.

"You bet I can." She bounced on her toes, chin out, then ruined the effect with a wide grin and a snort of laughter.

"Do you work here?" I asked.

"Yup. Cleaning mostly. I get the honor of waiting on her magnificence sometimes."

"Lady Foxglove?"

"The one and only, though I wouldn't bother with her title if I were you unless one of our pointy-eared friends is present. I don't."

I liked her, I decided, but just at the moment had to stifle a yawn.

"Look," she said. "I know you're tired. I just wanted to invite you, because I bet Netta didn't, to our gatherings."

"Gatherings?"

"I didn't think she'd tell you. Anyway, we humans hold weekly gatherings midweek for anyone human that can get away. A chance to relax among friends, talk about normal, human things, let our hair down so to speak." She tugged on one of her locks. "Without worrying about any of our winged jailers bothering us."

An evening in human company sounded lovely and I said as much but had to add that I didn't think I'd be able to attend any time soon with the way Carnation was working me.

"Oh, we aren't meeting until after the ball anyway. We're all busy right now. If you can come sometime though, come find me and I'll take you. We change locations sometimes so it's better if you go with me rather than try to find it on your own."

"Thank you." It was the first time I'd said those words since coming to Starstair and I meant them.

"Don't mention it." She started back down the hall walking backwards. "Good night. Sweet dreams. Like one with a pimply Carnation, that would make for a good night's sleep."

I grinned at the mental picture and turned to the stairway, feeling the most energized I had since coming to Starstair.

Perhaps it was my conversation with Shelaine or perhaps it was just the fatigue finally wearing off, but that night I didn't immediately fall asleep upon going to bed. As a full moon shined in on me, I found myself wide awake and nothing to do but think. All too soon my thoughts turned toward home. Everyone would probably be asleep by now. I looked around at my still strange surroundings and thought forlornly of home, my sturdy wooden bed with its lumpy tick a definite contrast to the luxury I slept in now. I sniffed and tried to focus on the moon. Everyone at home can see the same moon, I told myself, but it only made me sadder and my vision blurred. I fought the tears for a little while but with no one to see or care I soon succumbed.

* * * *

A glance in the mirror the next morning showed that the effects of my cry the night before remained visible. I kept my head lowered on the way to Carnation's rooms so no one would see. Somehow I didn't think Carnation would notice, or bother herself if she did, about my sorrows. I was right. When I reached her rooms Carnation was sulking, and I do mean sulking, with pouty lips and crossed arms all slouched in a cushy chair, absorbed in some problem of her own.

She looked up when I entered but didn't greet me. I returned the favor and went straight to work. The embroidery was coming together nicely, but I still had a full day's work to do with just that amount of time to do it. I decided to be grateful that Carnation wasn't talking, and determined to ignore her. Carnation didn't take being ignored well, however, and soon she was compelled to break the silence. "The most horrid thing has happened," she declared from the depths of the chair.

Prince Hemlock is courting someone else? I confined my response to a grunt.

Carnation fidgeted and refolded her arms. "Marigold has gotten a fever and won't be able to attend the ball tomorrow."

"That's too bad." I didn't bother infusing my voice with any sympathy.

Carnation noticed. "Easy for you," she grumbled. "You won't be going by yourself and looking like a complete idiot. It's bad enough Mother says I'm not old enough to have an escort, but now I won't even have Marigold."

Boo hoo. Try being kidnapped and enslaved, flutterfly. Shelaine's nickname for fairies seemed especially appropriate for Carnation.

With a sigh, Carnation heaved herself up from her chair and began to wander about the room picking up random objects and turning them over in her hands only to put

them back where they'd been. I waited for the endless litany about Prince Hemlock and the ball to begin anew, but she was silent for quite some time.

I looked up from my work after awhile to rest my eyes. Carnation had stopped her wandering and was eyeing me with an expression I didn't altogether like. It was reminiscent of her mother's calculating look when she had been considering whether to take me or not. I decided my eyes didn't need a rest after all and returned to my stitching. Avoiding eye contact in this instance didn't help me. Steps filled with purpose, Carnation strode across the room and stopped in front of me, all signs of her previous bad mood gone. "Marigold may not be able to come," she said, eyes bright with inspiration, "but you could accompany me."

This unexpected development startled me enough that I pricked my finger. I used the excuse of looking for a cloth to stop the bleeding to avoid answering right away.

Carnation paid no heed to my bleeding finger. "It's perfect. You can wear one of my dresses that I haven't worn for ages and no one will recognize you. Hardly anyone has seen you anyway."

"I thought humans weren't allowed to attend the ball."

Carnation waved her hand, "Don't be dumb. You'd go as a fairy of course."

Of course. Tread carefully, Alina. I didn't want to aggravate any fairies, Carnation included, but I certainly didn't want to get tangled up in any crazy ideas either.

"I think your mother might object." Actually I knew her mother would more than object.

Carnation hurried into her bedchamber which was separate from her sitting room. Her disembodied voice answered me. "So we don't tell her. Mother practically never

goes to the ball because of the last of the apple harvest.” I heard a scraping sound like a piece of furniture was being pulled away from the wall. “She left the day after you came for the southern orchards and I heard her tell father she doesn’t plan to be back until the day after the ball.”

So much for that argument. I tried again. “I don’t have wings.” Stating the obvious had always been a good tactic with Grehelda.

I hadn’t closed my mouth from speaking when Carnation was back and, after a quick scan of the room to make sure no one else had entered, she produced a pair of wings from behind her back. “I have a fake pair you can wear. They look very realistic when they’re on a human.”

I didn’t doubt it. I wondered who had worn them last, and decided I didn’t want to know.

“Absolutely not.” I tried to strike a tone that was both firm and non-confrontational. Later, I realized I should have gone for more firmness and forgotten the non-confrontational part. Carnation’s brow darkened and I hastened to add. “They’re very pretty. But I’m not your size and we don’t have time to alter a dress for me and get yours finished.” *If I can just get her attention back on her obsession with her dress.*

“You can wear one of mother’s old dresses then, she’s about your size, and I have some of her old gowns right here. I used to play dress up in them.” She pointed toward one of her six wardrobes and I had an unpleasant vision of that same finger descending on me and forcing my compliance with her wishes. I had yet to see Carnation use any magic but was very aware that that didn’t mean she couldn’t.

“It won’t work.” I made one last effort, “I don’t know any of your customs, your

history, anything. Everyone would know I was a fake immediately. I don't even look like a fairy." On the off chance she actually cared what happened to me I added, "And I'm sure there would be some unpleasant consequences if I was found out."

Carnation brushed aside my objections with another wave, "Nonsense. Don't be such a timid goose." She threw the wardrobe open and disappeared into it from the waist up. Her voice came out muffled and distant. "Besides, no one will guess. I'll fix you up so that even you will think you're a fairy." She pulled a crumpled dress out and dragged me toward the large mirrors that covered nearly one whole wall. She held the dress in front of me and wings behind then maneuvered herself so her head was next to mine and she had the same view. "See?"

I swallowed and saved my breath by not protesting further. Maybe it would turn out alright. Ha.

Chapter III

The next evening I stood in front of those same mirrors and had to admit a grudging admiration for Carnation's work. She had trimmed my nails, smothered my skin with some ointment, doused my hair with some other ointment and then worked it into the most elaborate hairstyle I'd ever worn. A section of my hair was pinned on top of my head, while a few saucy tendrils hung down on the sides, showing more life than I'd ever been able to coax out of them. To complete the deception, Carnation had molded some waxy substance onto the tops of my ears to make them pointed, and had arranged my hair to partially cover them. The fact that my hair didn't hang down far enough to cover the joints of the wings had given her pause, and me hope that that I might get out of going after all. She walked around me a couple of times, chewing her lip.

"Hold still." She set her hand on my head, and narrowed her eyes in concentration. The roots of my hair tingled under her hand. Her face relaxed. "There."

I felt behind my back. My hair hung six inches lower than it had a minute ago. I grabbed a fistful and pulled it front of me to take a closer look. "What did you do?"

She pulled the hair out of my hand and brushed it back to hide the wing attachment. "Isn't it obvious?"

"But..."

"Will you hold still? And stop wadding your skirt in your hand; you're going to wrinkle the dress."

The dress was spectacular, sinfully spectacular. The fabric and accessories in it would have cost my father a good year's wages back in the village. The filmy sea green material had dark green embroidery across the neckline and gauzy imitations of sleeves

that reached only to my elbows. Like most fairy ball gowns, the back of it cut very low to allow free movement of the wings. Very practical I'm sure, but it resulted in far more exposed skin than I was comfortable with.

All day visions of possible punishments if some fairy caught me in this masquerade had been parading across my mind, everything from being confined to my room for the rest of my life, to death by a hundred different horrible methods.

After she fixed my hair to her satisfaction, Carnation fluttered around in front of the mirrors making unnecessary adjustments to her own dress and hair.

I tried one last time to avoid the coming ordeal. "This will never work." I held my skirts out and then dropped them again. "I don't know anything about being a fairy, how to act. I won't even know what to tell them if they ask what my name is."

Carnation rolled her eyes. She liked to do that. If I looked good in the borrowed dress, Carnation's beauty was unearthly. The dress had turned out better than the picture, in my opinion, and Carnation looked like a queen in it. She wore several glittering gold rings and a circlet on her head to complete the royal effect.

"Honestly Alina. Stop fussing about yourself for one minute can't you." She tipped her head to one side and batted her eyes at her reflection. "We'll just tell them you're visiting me from another castle and your name is..." She tapped her chin, then the side of her face, with a dainty finger, observing the effect in the mirror. "Primrose."

Primrose? I would have laughed if I hadn't been sick to my stomach. Not ten minutes later, I followed Carnation out of her room and began the long walk that would take us to the grand ballroom.

We joined the stream of fairies headed for the ballroom, and I turned my face

away from them. I walked nearly on top of Carnation who snapped at me to keep my distance and “show some backbone.” I caught several curious glances at my drooping posture, nervous hand wringing, and suspiciously unanimated wings. As we approached the ballroom, Carnation nudged me and hissed, “Straighten up. You look like you’re about to faint.”

A group of us were swept into the ballroom in a glittering cascade of rich gowns and brocade suits. The great ballroom opened in front of us in a mass of color. The last blooms of the year must have been gathered from all over the country to provide the flowers that decked the walls, tables, and freestanding arches that adorned the room. The room had been decorated to look like a forest, complete with full-size trees, not potted, but growing straight out of the stone floor. Eight enormous chandeliers, each with hundreds of candles, illuminated the room well, but with a soft light. The tables were piled with all sorts of food, from roasted pigeon to baked apples, all arranged in ramrod straight lines and perfect circles that suggested their primary purpose was to be admired, rather than to be eaten. Everywhere there were fairies, eating, laughing, some dancing already. A small orchestra played in one corner. They had all the usual instruments, and were joined by a trio of golden plumed birds, which sang melody and counterpoint in time. I could see other animals, sitting, flying, and dashing about between the fairies.

I began to back out of the room. Enchantments or no enchantments, I couldn’t, I wouldn’t do this.

Carnation realized I wasn’t behind her, came back, grabbed my hand and pulled me into the room. Since I couldn’t very well make a scene, I was forced to follow her.

The next half-hour passed in a blur of strange faces and unfamiliar sights and

sounds. Carnation dragged me all over. She introduced me to an endless stream of fairies as, “My good friend, Primrose, visiting for the ball.” The conversation never got much further than that before she’d whisk me off to another group. I suppose the fairies must have accepted my slack jawed silence as awe of the ball, because my introduction met with some raised eyebrows but no open suspicion. Carnation would always pull me off to another part of the room before detailed questions about my background arose.

Carnation seemed to be having the time of her life. Fairy after fairy stopped her and commented on how lovely and grown up she looked, and she seemed to glow brighter and brighter with each compliment. She also seemed to delight in making up little facts about my fictional past life. “Why she won a horse race just last week, didn’t you Primrose?” *A horse race?* Gradually she lost interest in this fiction. Soon the thing I’d feared happened.

“Oh look! There’s Morning Glory. Wait here, Alina. I’m just going to run over and say hello.” Before I could more than gasp a protest she’d gone, leaving me adrift. I watched her go, panicky, took a couple steps after her, and paused. An older fairy who Carnation had just introduced to me smiled in my direction. I twitched my lips up in response then dived into a drink line to avoid a conversation. A human girl stood behind the table and would hand a glass of one of a variety of beverages to each fairy as they requested. As I got closer to the table I realized I had no idea of what to do when I reached it and listened to the two female fairies in front of me for some clue.

“I told her it would look bad to miss it two years in a row, but I don’t see her here, so I don’t think she listened.”

“That’s Tiger Lily for you. I can’t help but think if she’d *try* a little harder to fit

in....”

“If you want my opinion, I think she’s tired of trying. And I can’t say I blame her.” They reached the front of the line. The second speaker smiled at the girl. “I’d like....”

But the rest of their orders were drowned out by gales of laughter from a nearby group of young fairies after one of them spilled his drink. Biting my lip in vexation, I had to improvise when it came my turn, and said I would have the same as the fairy before me. The servant took a second look at me, but handed me a glass without comment.

Glass in hand, I searched the crowd for Carnation, and spotted her halfway across the room, chatting and laughing. I was pondering the best way to get to her when a better idea struck me. Scarcely a hundred feet away from me, the ballroom door stood open and inviting. I might have some trouble finding my way back to my room, but I would take an hour of wandering through the castle over another minute spent in the ballroom.

I began to work my way through the crowd, avoiding eye contact when I could, and waving periodically at a fictitious friend by the door to explain my purposeful march across the room. I had plowed my way to a scarce twenty feet from the door when it began to swing shut. I ground to a halt, occasioning more stares then beat a hasty retreat toward the wall of the room, scanning it as I went for other exits. All the doors I could see were shut and I didn’t want to attract undue attention by opening one. I noticed a young dark haired fairy watching my movements with undisguised curiosity, so I stopped my frantic search, took a casual sip of my drink, and gave her a weak smile. She nodded, eyebrows lifted, and turned her attention back to her companions. I gained the wall, and

tried to gather my wits, taking another sip of my drink so as to appear occupied.

“Is that any good?”

I choked on the punch, and coughed as I spun to face the grinning fairy that had asked the question.

“Pardon?” I sputtered.

“I think your reaction gives me my answer,” he said. “I asked about the drink. You know sometimes these experimental blends they dream up are sheer paradise and other times....” He made a face and pantomimed gagging.

“Oh. No, no. It’s really quite good. I just swallowed wrong. Really. You should try some. Right over there.” I pointed in the direction of the table.

“I think I will.” He gave a short bow and wandered off towards the table.

Heaven help me. How am I going to get out of this? I worked my way over to a less crowded corner of the room, where several large trees stood. I found an empty chair and maneuvered it halfway behind a tree. I then sat carefully on the edge so as not to disarrange my wings. Every time someone passed anywhere close I would become absorbed in my drink, even though, after the first quarter hour, there was nothing left in my glass. Obscured by feathery leaves, I could watch the goings-on of the ball in relative safety.

Shortly after I found my seat, the official festivities began with the entrance of the royal family. Here, my curiosity proved strong enough that I ventured to lean around my tree to get a glimpse of the legendary Prince Hemlock. I couldn’t see well enough to tell if he was as good looking as Carnation vowed or not. He certainly swaggered enough for five handsome men. The king gave a short speech, there was some ceremony involving a

white tree branch that I didn't understand, and then a series of ritual dances began. When I'd entered the ballroom, the dancing fairies had been dancing steps unfamiliar to me, but that bore a resemblance to the types of dances I knew from Riverbank. After the ceremony, it changed. At first, everyone danced as they had before, then the king and queen took flight and, after a polite pause, about half the fairies joined them in the air. They twirled and soared in a cacophony of color and flashing wings. I watched them until my neck began to crick.

The night progressed and I remained ensconced behind my tree, drawing the occasional puzzled glance from a passing fairy. No one spoke to me. I stopped pretending to drink when fairies passed, and sagged lower and lower in my chair.

I caught sight of Carnation several times, always in close proximity to Hemlock, but never actually dancing with him. I don't know if she thought I'd left or if she'd just forgotten me entirely, which seemed more likely, but halfway across a sea of fairies all waiting to catch me in my imposture, she remained as unreachable as the flickering chandeliers that hung above my head. She didn't come looking for me, and a certain amount of resentment mingled with my anxiety.

"You don't look as though you're having fun." The voice off to the left and a little behind me made me jump. Standing in the doorway of a balcony I hadn't noticed before, stood a male fairy in full ball regalia, ruffles and lace almost obscuring the blue of his coat, and tall black boots and a sword to complete the picture.

I opened my mouth and shut it again.

"I'm sorry." He moved out of the doorway to stand more in front of me. "I must have startled you."

I continued to stare wide-eyed at him, afraid any word I uttered would betray me. Maybe if I didn't say anything he'd go away.

The fairy cocked his head, waiting for a response. "I, uh, haven't seen you before. Are you visiting?" He scanned the surrounding area for a companion then returned his gaze expectantly to me.

If I didn't say something he was going to get suspicious anyway, so I forced my numb tongue into action. "Oh, yes. I'm just here for a few days." I smiled a wide smile then focused my gaze on the dancing, as though it was the most engrossing sight I'd ever seen. Rather than being put off by my rudeness, he seemed to take my answer as an invitation to conversation. He pulled a nearby chair over and sat down in it, only to stand up again to introduce himself with a bow. "My name is Ash."

"How do you do," I answered automatically and immediately realized that probably wasn't the proper thing to say. "I mean," I forced myself to look at him. He was standing with furrowed brow, probably trying to decide if my type of insanity was dangerous. "Very nice to meet you. I'm...um...Primrose." His forehead relaxed and he bowed a second time before sitting down again. "Primrose. Charming name. Where are you from?"

"Um. A long way from here. Little place. I doubt you've heard of it. In the north." "Icehaven?" asked my new friend.

"What?"

He shifted in his seat and repeated patiently, "Icehaven. Is that where you're from?"

Oh. It's a place. I took a chance. "Yes." I smiled so wide my face hurt. "Fancy

you having heard of it.”

He shrugged. “It’s not that small. I’ve even been there. I don’t recall seeing you though.”

Think fast. “When did you visit?”

He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. “Let’s see, that would have been about ten summers ago.”

Really? Going by his appearance, he looked as though he would have been a child ten years ago. A happy thought struck me. “That explains it.” I responded with false gaiety. “I was away for a couple of years about that time. Um, traveling.” *I need to stop saying um.*

“You must like traveling a lot.”

I couldn’t tell if he believed any of this. He seemed curious but not suspicious yet. How was I going to get rid of him? Another foray to the punch bowl?

“What brings you to Starstair?” He gestured toward the dancers with his own punch glass.

At least I had an answer for that one. “I’m visiting an old friend, Carnation.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Carnation. The daughter of Poplar and Foxglove?”

Now what? I ventured a timid, drawn out yes.

He noticed my hesitation and explained, “I’m her brother. She’s never mentioned you.” He was frowning again.

“Funny.” I giggled, although it sounded forced even to me. “I don’t recall her ever mentioning you either.”

He expelled his breath in a puff. “Well, I can’t say that surprises me, since this is

Carnation we're talking about." He smiled and I smiled back, tremendously relieved.

Carnation's frivolous nature had saved me, but I couldn't keep this up much longer.

The music on the dance floor changed. Previously it had been a slow waltz and now it brightened and quickened into something much faster. My companion perked up. "I love this piece. Shall we?" He extended a manicured hand.

"Shall we what?" I played dumb while I scrambled for a plausible reason to avoid dancing. He gave me the look that my comment deserved and pulled his hand back.

"Shall we dance," he said, as though speaking to an idiot, which is likely what he thought I was.

"Oh, I don't dance."

His hand dropped to his side and he stared at me.

Dear, oh dear. Do all fairies dance then? I scrambled to correct my mistake.

"This dance. I don't dance this dance. I don't know this dance."

"Is that all? It's easy enough, I'll show you." He extended his hand again.

I bolted to my feet. "You know, I'm really thirsty. I think I'll get some more punch." I rushed past him and scurried off toward the punch table. He didn't follow and when I chanced a look over my shoulder, he was standing where I left him, openmouthed. I didn't care if he thought I was crazy, better that than he find out the truth.

I had almost made the punch table when something else caught my attention. An older couple was saying goodnight at the great door. To my intense delight, the door opened for them and even better, it stayed open. I changed course and headed for the door at full speed, my fake wings flapping behind me. The hairs on the back of my neck stood out, waiting any second for someone to block my exit or grab me from behind, but

I gained the door without incident. With a last polite smile for the doorman and a last glance at the throng of celebrating fairies I hurried out of the room and down the hall.

About sixty feet from the door however, I stopped, uncertain as to which direction led back to my room.

“Primrose!”

I nearly jumped out of my skin and cast a horrified look behind me. My insistent dancing friend had exited the ballroom behind me and was headed my way. No time for indecision, I plunged down the left hand hallway and broke into a jog.

“Where are you going? Wait!” The sound of running footsteps echoed behind me and I moved faster, turning as many corners as I could and, in the process, getting myself hopelessly lost. I was almost sprinting by the time I rounded a last corner into another long hallway. He was right behind me though, and an unmistakable witness to what happened next.

I looked over my shoulder as I rounded the corner and didn't see the candlestand until too late. My feet got tangled on its base and down I went, twisting as I fell to end up on my back. I felt a pull on my back and heard a tearing sound. I struggled to my feet, but one of my delicate wings remained on the floor under the candlestand, crumpled and unmistakably fake.

I stood frozen in horror as did my pursuer, who must have thought at first I'd lost a real wing. I could see the play of emotions across his face. Wide eyes fixed on the wing, then narrowed in confusion, and finally his mouth and jaw tightened as he realized I was no more a fairy than I was a frog. One of the candles toppled out of the fallen stand and thudded to the floor, the sound of its impact ringing in the silent corridor.

Get out, Alina. I turned to run again, but he moved too fast for me, rushing forward and grabbing my shoulder.

“Stay where you are.”

And I was stuck to the ground, helpless to escape. Not that I didn't try. As soon as he let go, I fought to lift first my right, then my left foot, but both were stuck tight. Satisfied that I wasn't going anywhere, the fairy turned away from my wild gyrations and bent to pick up the detached wing. He flipped it over and examined the edge where it had been attached. All traces of joviality were gone. The eyes that contemplated me over the wing were cold, inflexible, dangerous. *Not good.* He had one hand resting on the hilt of his sword. *Really not good.*

“What,” he demanded in frigid tones as he held out the wing, “is the meaning of this?”

A thousand words of explanation crowded into my head, and I sorted through them desperately searching for one that I could use, while my eyes remained fixed to the sword.

The fairy closed his fist about the wing, crumpling it further, and started towards me. I leaned away, overbalanced, and fell on my rear. He reached down, and jerked me to my feet by one arm.

“I can explain.” I gasped, braced for a sword thrust. None came. Instead he grabbed my ear and tugged. I bit back a yelp of pain as the waxy tip tore away. He backed off again, scrutinizing the tip in one hand, still clutching the wing in the other. I put a hand to my throbbing ear and waited.

He finished his inspection and turned forbidding gray eyes back to me. “So

explain.”

I marshaled my words, very conscious that I was facing one of those nightmarish fates I'd contemplated before the ball. The sound of laughing voices shattered the hitherto tomblike atmosphere of the hallway, doubtless some more fairies returning from the ball. The fairy tensed as the voices headed in our direction.

“Quickly.” He ran to the closest door, yanked it open, and shoved me into it. He followed and closed the door, then pressed his ear against it as the partygoers passed. A little light shone under the door, but the room was dark. I reached out a hand to steady myself and felt a wall at my side. It was a small room then. *A closet maybe? A faint odor assailed my nostrils. A lavatory?*

With only a fallen candlestand to testify to my predicament, the fairies passed on unheeding. Once their voices had faded away, he straightened and fumbled about in the room until his hand found what he was looking for. I heard him snap his fingers and a candle flared to life, illuminating the room in a flickering half-light. It was a lavatory.

I used my newly recovered power of motion to back to the farthest wall. The fairy didn't look at me, but at the candle, forehead knotted. He stayed like this for a minute or so, during which time I didn't move a muscle, and tried to blend into my surroundings. Then he raised his eyes to me. “Carnation.”

I started and took a breath to speak in my defense again. He held up his hand, indicating that I was to remain silent. Some of the tenseness had left his features, but he still frowned. He looked at the wing, then at me in dawning comprehension. “You said you were a friend of Carnation's.”

Not allowed to speak, I nodded my head a fraction of an inch.

“You’re her new maid?”

I nodded again.

“This was Carnation’s idea wasn’t it?”

A third, more vigorous nod; I had no qualms about telling on Carnation.

Was it my imagination or did he relax further? His shoulders dipped briefly before his mouth set in a firm line. “Wait here.” He brushed the ends of his fingers across my arm as he gave the command. He slipped out of the lavatory and shut the door behind him, leaving me to contemplate my bleak future.

I leaned back against the wall and slid down it. There was just enough room for me to sit with my back to it, one foot resting against the commode, the other against the stand holding the washbasin, on which the candle still beamed. I didn’t even try to see if I could leave.

I hugged my knees to my chest. He hadn’t given me a chance to explain, though I wasn’t sure what I’d have said. I wracked my brain to recall the last few minutes and come up with some clue about my fate. *Angry, he was definitely angry. Angry enough to have me executed? Come to think of it, he probably wouldn’t want it known that his sister had engineered something like this. He might kill me just so I couldn’t tell anyone.* I had only a nodding acquaintance with swords. How long did it take to die if you were run through? My ears strained for the sounds of returning footsteps.

I actually heard voices before I heard footsteps, one of them very familiar to me. Carnation’s voice rang loud and strident through the castle. As she got closer, I could make out her words. “How many times do I have to tell you? Mother said I could stay as late as I liked.” Judging by her shrill tones, she was close to a high tantrum. I couldn’t

hear a response.

“Ash. You. Let. Me. Go.”

I heard a masculine grunt of pain. Light footsteps ran away, followed by heavier ones. Then...“Oww! Ash, you lout, look what you did! You’ve torn it. Let go. I said, let go!”

Carnation’s squeals of outrage approached the door. I stood up, my spirits had elevated on hearing Carnation. I’d been expecting some deep voiced, hatchet faced guard, or maybe just a silent approach by the fairy, an opening of the door, and a quick flash of steel to end it all.

The door swung open, and my captor pushed his way inside, dragging an indignant Carnation with him. He was flushed and limping. Carnation, also flushed, did indeed have a three inch tear in the sleeve of her dress. She stopped her squalling as soon as she saw me. Her eyes widened then dropped to the floor. I suspected more than ever that she’d forgotten about me back in the ballroom. I pressed against the wall as much as I could, since three was two more than the room was ever meant to hold. With smoldering eyes, Carnation’s brother fastened the door shut again. I swallowed hard, but he addressed Carnation. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Carnation twiddled with her torn sleeve, folding the edge back in place. “I don’t know what you mean.” The shrillness and temper had vanished to be replaced by an air of studied, but unconvincing, innocence.

“You know exactly what I mean.” He pulled the, by now barely recognizable, wing from his waist coat and thrust it under her nose.

Carnation leaned away from it. “Why, I don’t know anything about that thing.”

She gazed up with wide eyes at her brother. “Why is Alina here and all dressed up?”

“Don’t bother lying Carnation. I recognize the dress. How could you be so immature and stupid as to pull a trick like this?”

“Immature and stupid?” Carnation forgot to deny his charge. “How dare you.”

“What else do you call dressing up a human as a fairy and taking her to the ball, especially now.”

Their glares could both have charred bacon, but Ash’s was more impressive, since he glowered down at Carnation from almost a foot’s height advantage.

“Especially now? What’s that supposed to mean?” Carnation made to leave, but Ash blocked her path.

“If you’d spend less time swooning over Hemlock and more time listening to him, you’d know what that means. Did you even think about the consequences for this girl?”

While Carnation’s voice had been steadily rising since she entered the lavatory, Ash’s voice had gotten lower and quieter.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” Carnation stopped trying to get past him, and stood with her arms folded, one hand beating quick time against her arm. She darted a glance at me and bit her lip. “Are you going to tell mother?” Her tone remained belligerent, but apprehension now tempered it. When Ash didn’t respond, she stopped tapping time and peered anxiously around at him.

Ash stuffed the wing back in his pocket. “No, I’m not going to tell mother.” Carnation straightened, and a little smile crept onto her face. “I’m not going to tell mother because, unlike you, I think through the consequences of my actions for others. But I swear Carnation, if you ever do anything like this again, I’ll not only tell mother,

I'll tell Hemlock too. Somehow I don't think he'd appreciate your actions tonight either."

Carnation's mouth opened and her arms dropped to her sides. "Ash!"

Ash didn't respond to her slack jawed horror. Leaning over her, he reached out and worked the wax off my other ear, more carefully this time, then motioned for me to turn around. I felt the second wing being torn from my back. He pushed both items into Carnation's hands. "Remember that, Carnation." He opened the door behind him and stepped out into the corridor.

"Good going, Alina." Carnation shot a contemptuous glare at me before marching out of the lavatory and past her brother. I hoped that Ash would go with her and leave me alone, but when Carnation's steps had receded, his tall form filled the doorway. He beckoned for me to come out. Blocked at the doorway by the spell, I had to wait until he touched my shoulder again. I strained my ears for the welcome sounds of more passing fairies but heard nothing besides my own breathing.

He spoke first. "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume that this was all Carnation's doing, and you went along with it because you had to."

I cleared my throat and managed a small, "Thank you."

"None the less." His voice, although no longer dark with temper, remained solemn. "You need to understand that impersonating a fairy is a grave and dangerous action."

He didn't have to tell me.

"I don't care what circumstances may arise, you must never do it again. Do you understand me?"

“Yes.” *Can it be I’m only going to get a lecture?*

“If you do, I won’t be responsible for what happens.”

I nodded again, arranging my face to be the very picture of innocent intentions.

He held my gaze for a moment longer then raised his head, satisfied he’d made his point. “Of course, you must not tell anyone about this.” His hand moved fast, but I saw it coming and danced out of reach. He paused, and so did I, though I remained poised to take off if he tried to put another spell on me.

My voice shook a little, but it wasn’t without a certain amount of pride that I said, “I think my word should be sufficient.”

He rocked back and lowered his hand, eyeing me speculatively. After a moment’s inspection he gave a distinct downward jerk with his head. “Very well. Do I have your word to not tell anyone about this?” A ghost of a smile flitted across his face, reminiscent of the fairy that had asked me to dance.

“You have my word.”

“Good night then.”

I considered myself dismissed. I raised my chin with the little dignity I had left and headed towards the closest doorway, not counting the lavatory; I never wanted to go in there again. I stopped in my chosen doorway though, uncertain of my path. I looked cautiously back. He was watching me with a bemused expression. “That way leads back to Carnation’s rooms.” He pointed to a door opposite from me.

Dignity is overrated anyway.

A few strides past the indicated doorway, a staircase appeared on my left. I knew Carnation and I had gone down some stairs to get to the ballroom, so I hazarded a guess

that the way back to Carnation's rooms might be up. The curved handrails of the staircase funneled me into a long corridor with no doors or windows. Faint music drifted toward me from behind the double doors that stood open at the end of the corridor. I slowed and rubbed a sweaty palm on my skirt. *Perhaps this is where the human party that Netta was talking about is.* I wasn't anxious to come in contact with anyone else that evening, but the farther I went down the corridor, the more certain I was that it was the way we'd come. I approached the door, hugging the wall, and peered around the doorframe into the room. White, sheer curtains fluttered into the room from tall windows looking into a black night. Music followed the trailing edges of the curtains from the windows, and I realized that the music I heard was coming from the fairy ball, which must be right below. Satisfied on that point, I scanned the rest of the room, which was dark compared to the candlelit corridor, the sole illumination inside coming from the moon. When I chanced to look up, the reason for the room's dimness became clear. The ceiling was dotted with sparkling specks meant to simulate the starry sky. I searched my memory for a recollection of this room and came up empty. A second set of double doors across the room opened into another lit corridor. Half of a statue of a horse was visible from my viewpoint. The horse I recognized. I was reasonably certain I could find my way to Carnation's rooms from it. Seconds before I was going to sally into the room, voices from the shadowy end away from the windows stopped me. A man and woman swirled into view, dancing. I ducked behind the door, only to cautiously peek one eye around the edge again.

My curious eyes met with a surprise. The male partner was a fairy, a leggy fellow with long, dark hair tied back and silver wings veined with black. His female counterpart

was human, though dressed in an extravagant fairy gown like my own and wearing her hair, also dark, in loose waves down her back. I slid back behind the door. *What have I stumbled on now?* Before I could get too caught up in wondering what a fairy and human were doing dancing together, I brushed my musings aside. It was better than halfway to morning. I was tired, cross, and worn through from the nervous dread of the last several hours. *I don't care what I've stumbled on. They could be secret lovers or the king and queen themselves.* Whoever they were, they were in my way. I wanted to get to that horse statue. And I wasn't going to try to find another way through the labyrinthine halls of the castle.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I dropped to my knees and crawled around the door into the room. The room was very dark, and if I skirted the edge away from the window and kept behind furniture when I could, there was no reason they need ever see me. My poor nerves which hadn't gotten a proper rest after the fiasco with Carnation's brother leapt back into a state of high tension as I dived for the shadow of a long white garden bench with a back. I paused as the couple danced past. The fairy was telling a story in between bursts of laughter from the woman.

"And then..." He snorted. "he wiped his nose with that hand." The woman convulsed in laughter, and their dance faltered.

"It left a smudge as wide as my thumb, I tell you the truth." He raised his right hand. She leaned into him for support as her whole body shook with gales of laughter. The fairy joined her, wiping his eyes with his hand. "And the worst..." he had to stop for laughing. "The worst of it was, none of us could laugh, because we needed his vote."

I'm glad someone is enjoying the evening. I thought darkly. I took advantage of

the fact that they were hanging onto each while they laughed to make a break for the shadowy shape of a flowering bush some twenty feet farther down the wall. I kept going and made it to the first corner of the rectangular room before they started dancing again. I stopped to wait for a good chance to move again. I eavesdropped on the conversation, hoping he'd say something funny again, but they danced in silence for awhile, and I didn't dare move.

The woman spoke. "Tell me this isn't fun?"

"You know that would be a lie. I'm having a marvelous time. And I certainly couldn't have been able to tell that story downstairs." This got them both laughing again. The fairy produced a handkerchief, and I crawled down the short side of the room to the other corner while he wiped the tears of laughter from his partner's eyes. I spied on them from between the legs of a marble wolf.

"Then you don't regret this evening?" The woman's back was to me, but I could hear a measure of anxiety in her voice. Anxiety I understood, I was experiencing a fair measure of it right then. I stood to inch against the wall outside the reach of a shaft of moonlight coming in the window.

"I regret nothing where you're concerned." The fairy's soft answer barely reached me. I chanced another look as I dropped behind the counterpart to the white bench on this side of the room. That look assured me that they wouldn't be looking anywhere but at each other in the near future. I sidled in good time the rest of the way to the door and dashed into the corridor with a surge of relief. My sudden exit startled a large cat in the corridor beside the horse statue. It leaped onto the statue and crouched, surprised eyes turned toward me. My heart slammed into my throat until I recognized it as the panther

from my tour of the castle. It kept its eyes fixed on me.

“Nice kitty?” I whispered as I sidled past it, pressed against the opposite wall. Its tail lashed. *I hope that’s not a prelude to attack.*

The cat was content to just watch me until I was past it with nothing more than a huff of breath. Once I was past, it leapt off the statue and began to clean itself next to the door. As soon as I was far enough away that I didn’t think I’d invite an attack by running, I did so.

Two wrong turns later, I found Carnation’s rooms. From there I made my way back to my room.

I found a note on my bed from Netta in which she wondered where I was and invited me to the human party for which she included directions.

I eyed my wrinkled, but still resplendent dress and shook my head. As nice as it would be to see other humans, I had no intention of leaving my room again that evening. What if someone besides Carnation’s brother had caught me? I shuddered as I slipped the dress over my head.

Chapter IV

I overslept the next morning, but anxiety about repercussions from the night before kept me from hurrying my routine. I dawdled as much as I could on the way to Carnation's room, and braced myself before walking into it.

Carnation's temper hit me like a physical blow. She hadn't gotten out of bed but railed at me from a prone position. I gathered from her words that she had not only gotten a second tongue lashing from Ash later that night, but that she had not gotten to dance a single dance with Prince Hemlock. The blame for both of these unhappy events she laid squarely at my feet. Relieved that nothing further had come of my misadventure last night, I stood her harangue with an even temper, and even politely inquired when she was finished what she would like me to do for the day. I was told in no uncertain terms that she didn't care what I did so long as I did it out of her sight. Scarcely ten minutes after coming in the door, I stood outside it again unable to believe my luck. I hurried away from her room in case she changed her mind.

Once out of calling range, I realized I had no idea what to do with my unexpected free day. An unpleasant noise from the region of my midriff decided my first action. I went to the kitchen and had a nice, big breakfast. Iriann and an older girl were there working. I managed to get out of Iriann that she thought Netta was busy, but didn't know where. I had thought to find Netta, thank her for her invitation, and spend the day helping her out to make up for missing the party. *Though how would I have explained my inability to come?* I made a valiant attempt at conversation with Iriann but gave it up when she started answering my questions with a single nod or shake of her head.

At home, when I had free time, I would work on some sewing project or find one

of my friends and go for a walk. What would the fairies do if I walked out of the castle, through the gate and kept going all the way home? I hadn't the courage to try the experiment. However, it was a nice, sunny day, a little brisk, but probably one of the last nice days of fall, so I decided to at least go outside and look around. I trotted back to my room and grabbed my cloak and map. I used the map to navigate to the closest exterior door and stepped out into the fresh air for the first time since I'd come to Starstair.

A slight breeze rustled through the red and brown leaves of the trees in the courtyard, and the sun shone bright but with little heat. Ahead of me lay the wide expanse of the courtyard, a well, some wagons and other equipment scattered around it. A couple of humans were working on one of the carts, and three fairies sat on the edge of the wall by the gate playing some throwing game. Straight across from me towered the gate, wide enough for two carts to go through abreast. Heavy iron bars as thick as my arm bolted it, putting a definite end to my fantasy of walking home. Of the world outside the Starstair wall I could see nothing but the tops of two trees on the south side. Several buildings stood next to, and adjoining the wall along its south and north sides, including a smithy and a tanner's shop. In one of the other buildings I could see horses' heads sticking out. I've always had a soft spot for horses. My family had never had one, but I'd spent many a pleasant half-hour bumping up and down on Rolant's family's gray mare.

The humans working on the cart were the first human men I'd seen in Starstair. I raised my arm to greet them but lowered it when I saw they were busy lifting one end of the cart. I could introduce myself later.

The first horse I came to was still occupied eating his morning hay. Even with his

head down, I could still see enough over his half-door to tell that he was nothing like Rolant's gray. His palomino coat gleamed with the shine that comes only from frequent grooming, and his knot-free mane and tail hung long and luxurious. He wasn't tall, but had a wide chest, crested neck and strong legs. I spent a few unsuccessful minutes trying to get him to come over to the door, but the most I got him to do was to lift his head with ears pricked forward and look at me while he chewed a mouthful.

I gave up on him and moved down the row. Like their owners, all the horses looked flawless; no swaybacks or cow hocks. I passed by some empty stalls, and soon came to the last horse on the row, a big black mare that tried to eat my hair. Here a large opening led into the stable. The munching and snorting coming from the dark interior indicated more horses inside. I could also hear someone singing.

As I moved into the stable, the singing became clearer. The baritone voice carried the tune but had a rough edge to it. I listened a little to the song about the joys of a soldier's life. Curiosity drove me to walk down the aisle until I came to an empty stall, where the singer was tossing pitchforks of dirty straw into a push cart with gusto.

He broke off in the middle of the chorus when he saw me, and leaned against his pitchfork. "Hello there." His speaking voice had a pleasanter sound than his singing voice, mellow and measured in cadence. A question lay behind his words and I hastened to introduce myself with a curtsy. "My name is Alina. I'm new here."

"Alina, Alina." He tried the name out, rocking back and forth against the pitchfork. "A very pleasant name. Wasn't there a queen named that?"

"Not that I know of."

"Ah well, there should have been. One moment." He stooped in the back corner

of the stall where a pile of hay sat and plucked something out of it. He carried it over to me and went into a deep bow, handing me the erstwhile piece of fodder which turned out to be a dried daisy.

“Allow me to present this token of my admiration and introduce myself as Kester, stablehand of extraordinary talent and your most humble servant.” He remained bent over waiting for me to take the flower.

I eyed him uncertainly until he tipped his head up enough that I could catch the twinkle in his eye. I felt my lips twitch upward in an involuntary grin. “Thank you, kind sir. It is a rare present indeed.” I tried to match his semi-serious decorum as I relieved him of the present.

“Indeed.” He straightened. “And it’s my fondest hope you will treasure it forever.” This with so solemn a face that I was unsure whether to take him seriously or not. After an awkward pause, his face twisted into a grin and he laughed. “No need to look so somber, my dear, you can toss it in the garbage pile if you like.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” I tucked it in my cloak pocket so the flower just showed.

He picked the fork up and went back to cleaning. “Let’s see. You’re Carnation’s new servant. Yes?”

“That’s right.”

“I thought so. Shelaine told me about you.”

I brightened at the mention of Shelaine. “Yes, she invited me to some meeting but I haven’t been able to get away until today.”

He was shaking his head. “No need to explain. Every human here knows what

it's like to be worked dawn to dusk to dawn.”

Kester had the same saucy bravado, which contrasted so much with the demeanor of the other servants, as Shelaine. In appearance he puzzled me. His hair was all white, but his face looked like that of a man in his twenties, as did the energy with which he tossed the straw in the cart. He stood only a little taller than me and had blue eyes the color of frosted water.

In between a couple of tosses he caught my eye and asked with a sly grin, “What do you think of Starstair?”

I pulled the daisy out of my pocket and twiddled with it while I considered the motive behind his question. “Honestly?”

“How else?”

“Then I think it's horrible.”

He laughed then. “Glad to hear you say so. If you'd told me some tripe about how amazing everything was I would have had to take strong action, maybe take your present back.”

“Heaven forbid.” I clutched it close. His response encouraged me to continue my train of thought. “I don't know how you can stand it.”

He shrugged. “A little drink, a little laughter, a pretty girl with a queenly name to talk to.” He winked. “We don't have much choice after all.” He paused his cleaning to shake the pitchfork at me. “But don't let that depress you, Alina. You shouldn't give up hope. One never knows what opportunities may arise.” A hint of something fiery sparkled in his eyes.

Okay. I moved off a couple of paces to pet a nearby horse. He went back to

cleaning. “So tell me,” he called, “Do you have any burning questions about fairies I can answer for you. Questions you’re embarrassed to ask anyone else?”

I thought back to my conversation with Netta. Now that he mentioned it, there were a few things I was curious about that she hadn’t covered. “Okay, here’s one for you. And you can’t laugh.”

He raised his right hand. “I’ll be the very soul of solemnity.”

Somehow I doubted that. “Why don’t they fly more?” Kester kept his word and didn’t laugh, although he did grin so wide it must have hurt.

“I mean, they have wings, but except for....” I caught myself before I mentioned seeing the dancers at the ball. “I mean. They’re always walking that I can see.”

“Well, of course they do. Have you had a good look at their wings?”

He didn’t want to know how well I was acquainted with fairy wings. “Passably good.”

“Then you’ve noticed how insubstantial they are. Completely inadequate to carry anything of that size. So they don’t fly very well. It’s only with magic that they’re able to fly at all. They prefer to walk or ride.” He pushed the cart to the next stall.

I followed. “Hmm. Alright. Question two. Tell me about the animals.”

He didn’t respond.

“Kester?”

“I’m still waiting for the question.”

“Ha ha.” I held out the daisy to the horse.

“Alright, alright. No need to be so touchy.” He raised his hands in mock surrender. “There’s two kinds of fairies, flora fairies and fauna fairies. Flora fairies work

with plants, fauna fairies work with the wild animals. The ones you see running all about Starstair are their special charges, pets, you could say. Most of them are orphans that the fairies raised from babies.”

I shook my head. “I understand pets, but talking ones?”

“What? They don’t talk where you come from?” He stepped away from the cart to eye me askance.

“Only the lizards, and they never say anything interesting.”

This time it was Kester who looked unsure whether he should take me seriously. He paused with the pitchfork halfway to the cart.

“Joking.”

His grin returned. “Lizards, eh? Well it’s mostly the birds that talk around here. A bit of magic, a bit of patience, and the fairies teach them. Very few of the mammals speak. It’s tricky magic because mammals simply don’t have the vocal cords and mouth for speaking. A couple of the horses can say ‘hay’ ...” He leaned out of stall and pointed at a brown and white horse two stalls down. “...and some of the dogs know a few words, but the only one I know that can actually string a sentence together is Nageri.”

“The panther.” I swept a piece of hay from the manger and started to chew on the end.

“Ah, you’ve met him. Charming fellow, really. Even if he does get the time of day confused. Tiger Lily’s had him more than 30 years and she’s done wonders with him.”

“Tell me more about their magic.”

“What about it?” He scooped the last of the manure into the cart and pushed it

into the aisle. He leaned up against the door and regarded me. “An exhaustive summary of fairy magic would take more time than either of us have.”

“I’m mostly interested in what they can and can’t do, their limitations.”

“Right, well fairies’ magic only extends to living things; that’s plants, animals and humans. They don’t have any control over each other or inanimate objects. A fairy can order a pitchfork to clean a stall until they’re blue in the face and nothing will happen.”

That explained Carnation’s inability to handle a needle and thread. “That’s why they need slaves.”

Kester jabbed a finger at my nose. “Right. You can’t picture a fairy out here marinating in the sweet smell of horse manure, can you?”

“You said only living things, but I saw one light a candle the other day by snapping his fingers.” I illustrated the action.

Kester shrugged. “There are a few exceptions. Fire is one of them. Water is another. And there are a very few fairies that have a special gift for other things: metal and stone for example.”

I looked down at my hands. “How much can they make a human do?”

“Ah.” He folded his own calloused hands together over the end of the pitchfork and rested his chin on them. “Now we’re getting into deep waters.”

“How so?”

“Well it depends, you see. First, a fairy has to be touching whatever or whoever he or she wants to bewitch.”

“I figured that one out.”

“Right. Keep that in mind, Alina.” He touched the side of his nose with his

finger, “If they can’t touch you, they can’t make you do anything.”

I touched my finger to the side of my own nose. “Second?”

“Second, it depends on the fairy. Children can’t do much more than turn a green caterpillar orange, but the ones that have been around awhile...let’s just say you don’t want to cross them.”

“I don’t suppose you could point those out for me.”

Kester peered down the aisle both ways and beckoned me closer. I leaned toward him, and he whispered with all the mystery of a conjurer, “They’re all around you.”

I shot him a dubious glance. “Lucky me.”

“Luck changes, Alina, luck changes.” He stirred himself. “Now if you want to see fairies flying, go around the north side of the castle. There’s a training ground there where the fancy young bumblebees train for combat.”

Combat? “Is there a war going on?”

“Not a war exactly, they train to fight the trolls.”

My stomach dropped a couple of inches. “Trolls? Real trolls?”

Kester looked at me and burst out laughing. “Dancing dragons! Don’t you know about trolls?”

“I thought they weren’t real.”

“Oh, they’re real enough. What did you think Starstair has a wall for? There hasn’t been a fairy war in a thousand years, and they certainly don’t need to worry about an outside attack from humans, being as they don’t even know about the castle. Which reminds me.” He grabbed a bunch of straw and began to spread it in the stall.

“Something else you should know. If you ever go outside the walls, make sure you’re

back inside them before dark, alright?”

I pictured dark hungry forms lurking in the darkness outside of the gate. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Kester was pushing the cart on to the next stall. “I need to finish these stalls now, before old Willow gets back and turns me into a grasshopper for being tardy. We’re having Gathering tonight. Will you be coming?”

I had no plans to return to Carnation that day. “I think so.”

“Good. I’ll tell Shelaine to meet you in the Turquoise kitchen at dusk?”

“I’ll be there,” I called as he disappeared into the next stall.

“Until then, sweet lady.” He leaned out of the stall to blow me a kiss.

I shook my head, and with a last pat on a friendly sorrel’s nose, left the stable.

I was curious to see the fairies fly and took Kester’s advice, proceeding toward the north of the courtyard.

A partitioning wall with an unguarded gateway ran between the castle and the north wall. The curve of one of the towers hid them from my sight at first, but as soon as I passed through the gate I could make out the sounds of clanking metal and shouting.

Sand covered the training ground instead of the cobbles that paved the main courtyard. It was only about 20 paces wide, although it ran the full length of the castle. Archery targets lined the west side and a row of dummies stood at attention parallel to the outer wall, two of which were missing heads. A second smithy with an array of swords and battle axes in various states of preparedness stood in the corner of the tower I’d just come around.

The closest I’d ever come to any organized fighting force was when a company of

soldiers had gotten lost and wandered into Riverbank. They didn't stay long and, to all the children's disappointment, never so much as unsheathed a sword. I watched the fairies with some interest as they ran through various exercises and drills. Most of them looked like they were in their late teens or early 20's, in fairy years anyway. A smattering of older fairies also sweated and fought, some of them snapping out orders and yelling advice to the younger ones.

Small groups of six to eight fairies divided the training ground into orderly sections. One group shot at the archery targets. Two groups clustered around a couple of the older fairies, who lectured in between brief bouts of hand-to-hand combat demonstration. One group was mounted and charging the targets. I looked away from this group then looked back. They rode without bridles and only rudimentary saddles, yet the horses moved with a precision that I wouldn't have thought possible, wheeling in unison and sliding to stops. I could see no visible cues or hear any verbal ones. At one point, one of the riders dropped his wooden sword. He leaned over the horse's neck and said something, whereupon the horse grabbed the sword in its teeth and flipped its head up and back, releasing the sword to fly over its neck and into the waiting hand of the fairy.

I tore my gaze away to the last group of fairies which, as Kester had promised, was flying. Or at least they were flying some of the time. This group wore helmets and a simple breastplate and carried long, thin swords and small, round shields. They worked in pairs, each pair staying within a circle marked by a line on the ground and flagged stakes around its perimeter. At times, they would both be fighting on the ground, then one of them would gain a temporary advantage and use it to get airborne. One pair

fought entirely off the ground. Like the aerial dancers at the ball, they flew mostly in an upright position and faced each other much as two men standing on the ground would. They also took advantage of their increased mobility and would kick out with their feet or zoom up or down, as well as left and right, in an effort to get the better of their opponent. I even saw a few somersaults. I thought I recognized Prince Hemlock in the pair closest to me. He had a certain dash and grace in his movements that his opponent lacked, a pointed toe here, a flourish with his sword there. He seemed to be the better of the two also; at least his sword clanged on the other's shield more frequently. I couldn't be sure, but his opponent looked like the young fairy that had asked about the punch the previous night.

I watched the flyers in fascination for a little while, until the thought occurred to me that if Hemlock was there, Ash might be too. I scanned the fairies and, sure enough, I spotted him in the archery group. He loosed an arrow just as I spotted him. He grimaced at the result and turned to speak to the archer next to him, pointing at the target.

The one he spoke to bore a resemblance to him, except with darker hair and more hawk-like features. His brother perhaps? While shooting, Ash's back had been to me, but now, speaking to his companion, he would only have to turn his head a little to see me. I beat a quick retreat back to the main courtyard and breathed a sigh of relief when no one followed. The main gate remained solid and closed. I decided to check out the south side of the castle. The wall and gateway looked identical to those on the north, but what lay beyond the gate was in complete contrast to the training ground.

I had entered paradise or a fairy replica of it at least. The southern courtyard of the castle contained a garden. Thick hedges ten feet tall or rock walls overhung with

flowering vines separated different sections. Trees, shrubs, and ground covers blended together in perfect harmony, while a trickling brook ran the length of the garden and ended in a pond on the east side. Cleverly constructed paths of pebbles and bark wound back and forth with just enough shrubbery in between that you couldn't see any other path. This made the entire garden seem larger than it really was. In addition, hand crafted statues, benches, swings and fountains littered the open ground. Bend over to sniff a flower and you were likely to come eye to eye with some stone squirrel. Follow a trace of a path that looked as though it would dead end against a hedge, and find yourself in a hidden hollow with a two person swing overlooking a reflecting pool.

I walked through the garden, enchanted by the loveliness around me. It was almost winter, but one would never know based on the garden. Here trees retained all their leaves as green as when they'd first grown. Flowers that I associated with spring still bloomed, and even the temperature was noticeably warmer than the courtyard I'd just come from.

The sound of laughing voices shook me from my reverie. I dived into the heart of an elephant sized rhododendron bush. Peeking out from between the legs of a carved deer I saw a trio of adolescent fairy girls. They passed by, giggling and chatting as they wound clusters of flowers into bouquets. I met the downward gaze of the stone deer and asked myself why I was hiding, but I waited until the girls passed out of earshot before I ventured out.

I wandered another hour at least, returning unintentionally to the rhododendron bush twice more, only to try different paths, ducking out of the way of passing fairies a half dozen more times. I followed the brook on one trip. Something didn't seem quite

right, but it took me a good five minutes to figure out that what bothered me was that I was walking uphill, but in the same direction as the stream. Every now and then, a bird would appear in front of me and beg for treats. It disconcerted me at first to hear “Bread please” or “Do you have any berries for me?” interspersed with the usual chirping. I made a mental note to bring food with me the next time I came to the garden.

On my third try away from the bush, I managed to find the source of the rushing water I’d been trying to track down. It proved to be a mossy rock feature, as tall as the hedges with a cascade of water trickling down it on three sides. I moved around to the fourth side to see if I could figure out how the water got back to the top. At a little distance from the fourth side, a fairy came into view. She sat with her back to me on a stone bench fashioned to look like a tiger. Confident the fountain would mask my retreat, I began to back away when the fairy lifted a hand to smooth some of her hair and I recognized Buttercup.

I stopped my backward motion. Maybe it was her age, maybe it was her shy and downtrodden demeanor, but whatever the cause, I didn’t feel threatened by Buttercup. I altered my path and walked up a small rise to where she sat. She didn’t hear me coming, and I observed that she was occupied in throwing tiny pieces of bread to Ytrebil, who hopped around on the ground in front of the bench. A book lay open on the bench next to her that she was perusing between throws.

“Hello Buttercup.”

She jumped to her feet like she’d been shot, slamming the book shut and dropping the bag of crumbs in her haste. Her face, as she whirled around, paled as if I’d been a ghost. “Oh, Alina.” A little color came back into her cheeks as she recognized me.

I looked from Buttercup's eyes, unusually wide even for her, to the spilled bag of crumbs that Ytrebil happily pecked away at. Maybe approaching Buttercup hadn't been a good idea; she was jumpier than a rabbit.

I canted my head to get a look at the book's title then reached for it with a cry of delight. "Florio's Fantastic Fairy Tales! Why this was my favorite book growing up. Well," I amended, "we only had three books so that's not saying much, but still."

I thumbed through the pages to my favorite picture of Ansel and the fiery dragon. The illustrator had painted the dragon in vivid reds and golds. Ansel, with teeth bared and blond hair flying from the blast of the dragon's breath, stood braced, his shield raised to defend himself from the flames issuing from the dragon's mouth.

The dreamy memories evoked by the picture came to a clattering halt as Buttercup yanked the book out of my hand and shoved it into a pocket in her skirt.

I stared first at my empty hands then back at Buttercup, who was taking great pains to ignore me. She scooped the spilled crumbs back into the bag, away from the indignant Ytrebil, who showed some signs of hopping into the bag with them. I watched this procedure blankly. *What did I say?*

Buttercup finished with her crumbs and, one inch at a time, stood back up. Even more slowly, she raised a pair of anguished eyes to me. "You won't tell her will you?"

My first impulse was to say, "Of course not," she looked so miserable, but I figured I'd better have a little more information before I promised anything. "Tell who what?"

Buttercup heaved a sigh from the bottom of her shoes to the roots of her hair. "Lady Foxglove, about this." She pulled the book back out and handed it to me.

I turned it over and flipped through the pages. I couldn't see anything scandalous about it and I said so.

The corner of Buttercup's mouth twisted. "It's a human book."

A ray of light illuminated my confusion. "And Lady Foxglove doesn't want you reading human books." I guessed.

Buttercup moved her head in a barely perceptible nod.

"Well what she doesn't know can't hurt her." I handed the book back to Buttercup. She replaced it in her pocket and slumped back on the bench in relief. She began throwing crumbs to Ytrebil again.

"May I join you?"

She shrugged and I sat down beside her. "Although why you would want to read a book of fairy tales when you are one is beyond me."

No response.

"The pictures?" I suggested, "They were always my favorite part."

Buttercup threw more crumbs silently. It was like having a conversation with the bench. I was about to give up and leave when she answered me softly, "My parents gave it to me."

Ah. It was my turn to be speechless. I recovered by holding out my hand. "Do you mind?"

Buttercup dumped a few crumbs into my open palm, and I amused myself in silence for a little while. Ytrebil hopped back and forth in frantic haste to keep up with both of us throwing. "Do you bring him out here often?" I asked after my last crumb had been tossed.

“Almost every day.” Buttercup smiled as he flapped a few inches off the ground to grab a crumb she’d thrown high.

I looked around the garden. The wall reared high, but Ytrebil was, after all, a bird.

“Don’t you worry that he’ll fly away?”

She looked sideways at me. “Why would he do that?”

“Because living things generally prefer to be free?” The phrase popped into my head and out of my mouth before I could stop it.

She darted a glance at me, like she knew we were no longer talking solely about Ytrebil. I felt bad for mentioning my problems. She had enough of her own, considering her family.

She didn’t respond to my comment, but set Ytrebil back down, stood, and emptied the last crumbs out of the bag over his head.

I stood too. *Maybe I should go.* Buttercup was ignoring me again. As I shifted my weight to walk away though, she asked, “You made Carnation’s dress didn’t you?”

“Most of it. Chansy had a good start on it.”

Buttercup’s eyes flickered when I mentioned Chansy and I remembered that Chansy had been her maid as well as Carnation’s. I could easily imagine my predecessor liking Buttercup as I found myself doing, and Buttercup returning her affection and mourning her loss.

“I like her dress,” she mumbled. “It’s better than the picture. She showed me.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t suppose...you probably wouldn’t...it’d be too much trouble...too much

time.” She lapsed into silence.

“You know the worst that will happen is I’ll say no.” I’d already decided to say yes.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath and focused on my stomach. “Would you teach me to sew?”

That I hadn’t expected. Buttercup took my mute astonishment for a refusal and hurried on. “I wouldn’t tell anyone. And I’d hide the stuff I worked on.”

“Why would you hide it?” I guessed the answer before Buttercup spoke it.

“Because Lady Foxglove says it’s servants’ work and it’s below me.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Buttercup brightened. “I’d like to learn.”

I sat back down on the bench and considered her request. I could get in trouble with Foxglove if I taught Buttercup, and I was trying extra hard to avoid trouble after the disaster of the ball. On the other hand, how bad could sewing lessons be? Nothing like impersonating a fairy. I could gain a friend in Buttercup, and who knew but that a fairy friend might prove useful. Most of all, though, it would make Buttercup happy, and I felt sorry for her. Foxglove, Shmoxglove. It would serve the old tyrant right to have her wishes thwarted.

Buttercup watched me intently, hope pouring out of her eyes.

“Young lady,” I pronounced. “You’ve got yourself a sewing instructor.”

Buttercup grinned and clapped her hands. Her normally droopy wings lifted and clapped too.

We spent the next hour plotting. Buttercup would sneak the necessary materials

up to my room where we'd meet every other evening, after I finished with Carnation. Buttercup would work in one of her apparently numerous hiding places and keep the unfinished products out of her family's wing, except for when she brought them to my room.

When our plans were complete, a transformed Buttercup led me all over the gardens, showing me her favorite spots while Ytrebil rode on her shoulder. These included the living sculptures section, where plants grew in the shapes of animals, and the colored fountain, which shot out streams of water from hundreds of holes in patterns that Buttercup told me never repeated. Most astonishing to me were the singing trees. They didn't sing exactly, but somehow the branches rubbed together in even the slightest of breezes to create a hum that sounded like someone singing very far away, a song that you felt you ought to know, but couldn't place. Around midday we went back to her room. I hid in the wardrobe while Iriann served her midday meal. As soon as Iriann left, I came out, and we split the meal, a scrumptious affair of fish, fruit and biscuits that made me realize how scanty I'd been eating to date.

I then allowed myself to be guided on a second tour of the castle and managed to make the appropriate sounds of awe when Buttercup led me into the great ballroom. When she showed me the star room, I thought about mentioning the couple I'd seen there the previous night. However, I had enough secrets of my own to respect the privacy of others, and enough problems of my own to not want to go sticking my nose where it might not be wanted. My feet, sore after doing more walking than I'd done in my entire stay, forced me to turn down my second opportunity to climb the Tower of the Clouds, this time with Buttercup. Instead, I returned to my room to rest a little before meeting

Shelaine in the kitchen.

Shelaine was late. The last rays of sunlight had disappeared, and the stars had taken their place before she jogged into sight.

“Sorry I’m late,” she called between breaths as she approached. “I don’t have a good excuse, so I won’t waste my breath inventing one. Let’s go.” She grabbed my hand and took off again, dragging me behind her, my tired feet aching in protest. She pulled me down a couple of corridors and up one flight of stairs before grinding to a halt. She looked both ways down the passage, then reached up and cranked one of the candle holders a quarter turn. A five foot square section of the wall slid back a few feet revealing a dark, wooden passage. I gaped.

She drew herself up in mock astonishment. “What! You’ve never seen a secret passage?” She bent over and stepped partially into the hole beckoning me to follow. “Better get used to it.” Her voice fell flat in the confined space. “This castle has more secret passages than a princess has mirrors.” She groped around on the wall and pulled a lever. The section of the wall slid back into place, leaving us in darkness. Not quite total darkness. A hint of candlelight glimmered to our left. Shelaine grabbed my hand again and started down the gentle slope toward the light, brushing away cobwebs with her free hand. I began to get a funny feeling about this “Gathering.”

The passage went about a hundred feet and, as we progressed, I made out the murmuring sounds of a number of people in low conversation ahead of us. We came to the end, and I followed Shelaine’s example of hopping down a three foot drop to stand in a cellar. Conversations lagged, as those already present peered at me through the gloomy candlelight before resuming their chatter.

“We’re in the Silver family’s wine cellar,” offered Shelaine, speaking in the same quiet tones that everyone was using. She steered me to an unoccupied barrel and we shared it. The cellar smelled dank, and its temperature was noticeably cooler than the corridor we’d left to enter the secret passage. The smell, I suspected, owed its existence more to the number and state of the occupants than to its regular contents. The two cart repairers I’d seen in the courtyard sat a few barrels away. I didn’t recognize anyone else except Kester, who sat on the stairs leading out of the cellar, one leg dangling off the edge. He waved to us. The room, half full with the barrels, wasn’t large, about the size of our village meeting hall. The space not occupied by barrels rapidly filled with humans as they entered either by the stairs, or the majority through the passage we had used. When the inflow of people slowed to a trickle, Kester stood up and motioned for silence.

“This is a fine turnout for so soon after the festival. Triss, good to see you. Ranessa, it’s been awhile, and Alina. Everyone meet Alina, newly arrived via Foxglove and assigned to Carnation.”

A murmur of sympathy went through those assembled. “My condolences,” shouted a young man. Numerous hisses rose telling him to not be so loud.

“Condolences indeed.” Kester shot a chastening look at the noisy one, but tempered it with a smile. “Although there’s probably some consolation in that being in the Turquoise wing puts her far removed from your melodious tones, Shad.”

Shad good naturedly joined in the chuckles that went around the room.

Kester’s expression turned grave. “Not to belittle your feelings right now, Alina. We all know what it’s like to be torn from our homes and families and forced to serve

those we hate.” He looked at me and most of the others followed his example.

“Foxglove and her ilk show no respect for the ties of love and responsibility that they rip apart when they take us. Ties with friends, ties with family, even ties with sweethearts.”

I felt my cheeks turn red. How did he know? I hadn’t told anyone at Starstair about Rolant.

“And as if that isn’t enough, they force us to do all their dirty jobs while they live like kings.” As Kester continued, focus shifted away from me and back to him, and I realized, while his comments had been originally addressed to me, he was speaking to everyone present. His denunciation of the fairies met with low murmurs of agreement and pensive nods. As he catalogued the fairies’ offenses, there were audible affirmations from different corners of the room. I was surprised by the vehemence with which Kester spat out some of his words, his hands gesturing wildly at times, his voice dropping to an angry whisper at others, a different person from the playful stablehand I’d met that morning.

I was shivering by the time he finished his impromptu speech, about a quarter hour later, having not dressed for the chill of the cellar. Somehow when Shelaine had first invited me, this wasn’t how I’d pictured it. I’d been thinking more of a hot drink and biscuits while chatting about old times somewhere in a well lit room.

Shelaine focused on Kester the whole time. She sat on the edge of the barrel, her hands clasped around one knee, and would nod when Kester nodded, and frown when he frowned. I suspected her rapt attention and obvious devotion weren’t entirely due to her respect for his oratory skills. Wouldn’t they make an interesting couple?

I jumped when Kester clapped his hands. “But we can do all the talking we like

when we're old and gray and sitting on a riverbank catching big fat fish, can't we? Progress reports."

Everyone sat up a little straighter, like soldiers called to attention.

"Traven?"

A slender black haired woman who had been sitting straight as a board the whole evening answered him. "Storage area number seven is almost completed, but we're having trouble disposing of the dirt from number eight."

"Storage for what?" I whispered to Shelaine.

"Later," she answered, and joined the heated discussion about what to do with the dirt.

I mentally detached myself from the conversation and wondered what I had gotten myself into, the wine cellar, the change of location and time, the...weapons? My unease blossomed into full blown anxiety as a young man enthusiastically detailed in his "progress report" the acquisition of four brand new swords. I had landed right in the middle of some kind of rebellion.

I leaned over to Shelaine again, this time to suggest I really ought to be going, but she brushed me off. The situation reminded me of the previous night. Odds were I wouldn't be so lucky this time if caught. I mentally urged each speaker to hurry up and joined the chorus of "Shhs" anytime someone spoke too loud. While before, I had been too cold, now I began to sweat.

After all the reports finished, Kester gave an unnecessarily long exhortation to keep up our courage and the good work. Everyone stood, then began moving off in small groups. One older man, who Shelaine introduced to me as Makov, directed the flow of

traffic out of the cellar so as to not create suspicious clumps of people emerging. To my chagrin, Shelaine lingered, casting impatient glances toward the people still surrounding Kester.

Makov, Shelaine, Kester and I, were the last ones in the room. Makov and Kester poked around the corners of the room, picking up or wiping out all traces of the meeting. “Well, and what did you think Alina?” Kester asked.

I thought they were all crazy, especially after Kester’s ominous hints of fairy power earlier that day. “You’re certainly organized.”

He chuckled, not fooled by my polite answer. “I see you’re not entirely comfortable with our little plans. Give it time, give it time. You’ll come to realize, as we have, that the only way to deal with flying pests is with a flyswatter.” He slapped his hand against a barrel. The sound echoed in the cellar. “We’d be delighted for you to join us. I know Shelaine could use a little help with her assignment.”

“Someone to talk to while I’m searching, anyway,” said Shelaine. “I’m about to go batty down there by myself.”

“And here I was thinking you already were.”

“That’s just your influence rubbing off. Time to go, Alina.”

I practically bolted to the entrance to the secret passage. Kester followed, and before I’d realized his intention had a hold of my hand and kissed it. “It’s my fervent hope to see you here again,” he said with a gallant sweep of his cap. “But until then, good night.”

“Don’t I get one?” asked Shelaine.

“Not one of those, but you can have one of these.” He bent to close the

substantial difference in their heights and planted a kiss squarely on her mouth. Shelaine uttered a half-hearted squawk of protest that ended in a giggle, then grabbed my hand once more and hurried away down the passage.

After we popped out the other end of the passage and Shelaine closed it, she turned to face me in her favorite hands on hips pose. “So are you going to help?” Shelaine wasn’t much for easing into her main point.

I restrained my annoyance at not being told up front what sort of meeting it was but, too tired to be anything but candid, I matched her plain speaking. “It seems dangerous to me.”

“Dangerous.” Shelaine tasted the word on her tongue as though she’d never encountered it before. “I suppose it is, but it’ll be worth it.”

“Even if you’re caught?”

“We won’t get caught. Kester has it all figured out. You worry too much.”

I rubbed my temples. This had been a long day. Maybe I did worry too much but I had no intention of getting involved in another subversive action so soon after the ball. Sewing lessons was one thing. I wasn’t likely to get more than a slap on the wrist for that, and I could always plead ignorance of Foxglove’s wishes. There’d be no pretending I didn’t know what I was involved in here.

“Don’t you want out?” Shelaine persisted.

“Of course I want out. I’ve thought of little else ever since I’ve come.” I searched the ceiling for the right words to make her understand. “But you people aren’t planning a simple escape; you’re practically planning a war. People could get hurt, even killed. It’s all fine and good to stockpile weapons, but are you really prepared to face

weapons like those and use one yourself? Could you take one of those shining new swords and run a fairy through?”

Shelaine’s smile faded as I spoke to be replaced with frowning eyes and a rigid mouth. “Yes, I could.”

After a pause of a few breaths, “You could?” came my surprised squawk.

Shelaine sagged a little and ran a hand through her short hair. “Understand Alina, I’ve been here for 37 years. By now my parents are dead, my little brother probably doesn’t even remember me, and my friends all have children of their own that are practically grown. If I don’t get out soon all my family and my friends will be dead.”

“I’m sorry Shelaine. But surely there’s a better way?”

“A better way? A better way?!” Her voice rose. “What do you want me to do? Wait until there’s nothing to go back to like Netta? Until I’m too old to do anything about it and I die here like Chansy? I don’t want to have to kill anyone, but I’m getting desperate, and if I have to, I will.” We looked at each other for a minute. Shelaine’s eyes snapping sparks.

“I’m sorry.”

We both let it go there and walked in silence back to the kitchen where we parted ways and I headed for my room. *What a night.*

Chapter V

I stopped in the doorway of my room when I saw Netta inside pacing. She heard my footsteps and rushed toward me, every line in her body tense. “Where have you been?” She didn’t wait for my answer but grabbed my arm and yanked me all the way into the room. Between her and Shelaine I was going to have a bruise on that arm. Her jaw was set and she looked almost angry. I wasn’t sure Netta had the capacity to be completely angry.

“I’ve been trying to find you all evening. Listen close, this is important.”

Other footsteps sounded outside the door. Her eyes flew in that direction, and I followed her example, looking over my shoulder at the latest arrival.

“Finally decide to come back did we?”

Seeing Lady Foxglove was like getting hit in the stomach. I think I may have even stopped breathing for a couple of seconds. She wore the same outfit she’d worn to kidnap me, but had her fire-red hair drawn back in a high bun, making her look even more austere.

Netta let go of my arm and took a few steps away from me, reminiscent of a guilty child easing her hand out of the pastry tin.

“I hope you’ve been having a pleasant evening.” A phrase that is usually meant courteously, but Foxglove’s clipped words and icy voice along with tapping fingers against her crossed arm, a habit Carnation shared, warned me that she was seriously angry about something. My heart sped up at the thought that maybe Ash had told her after all.

“And while you’ve been out enjoying yourself, Carnation’s rooms lie in

shambles. Wardrobe disorganized, dirty clothes on the chairs, bolts of fabric and accessories lying all over the floor?”

She's angry about cleaning?

Netta cleared her throat, the tiniest of “ahems.” “In all fairness to Alina, my lady, I don’t think she understood that cleaning was part of her responsibilities.”

Foxglove raised one hand in an imperious gesture to Netta. “I don’t care to hear excuses. I spoke with Carnation, and she informs me that she was quite clear about Alina’s responsibilities including cleaning.”

In a pig's eye she did. “I’ve been working all day every day on her dress for the ball.” I couldn’t exactly call Carnation a liar to her mother’s face, but I had to respond to the unjust accusations of slothfulness somehow.

Foxglove narrowed her eyes at me. “Including today?”

“Well no, Carnation said...” I trailed off at Foxglove’s thunderous look. It wouldn’t matter what Carnation had said to me earlier, only what she’d told her mother that afternoon.

When Foxglove spoke again some of the rigidity had left her voice. I had difficulty hearing her in the soft voice she now employed.

“My expectations are not extravagant. Simple orders of which I require simple execution. I cannot let infractions like this go unnoticed or unpunished, especially coming so soon after your arrival.”

I looked to Netta for help, but she stood silent, her head bowed. After escaping punishment for dressing like a fairy, agreeing to give forbidden sewing lessons, and attending a rebellious meeting I was going to get punished for not cleaning?

“One night in the dungeons.” Foxglove pronounced.

“What?”

“See to it, Netta.” Foxglove turned on her heel and disappeared down the stairway.

I pivoted back to face Netta. “Was she serious?”

Netta sighed. “I’m sorry, but I’m afraid she is.” She walked to the door and waited for me to precede her.

The dungeons. Perfect ending to a perfect day. I cast a regretful glance at my bed and then marched dutifully out into the stairway in front of Netta, a chill of apprehension running down my spine. It could be worse, I tried to tell myself, she could have had you whipped, or raked over coals, or chopped off your hand....That line of thought was getting me nowhere.

Netta took the lead once out of the tower and broke the silence. “She went to see Carnation first thing when she got back this afternoon. She was irritated but willing to be reasonable, but you weren’t to be found anywhere. As the hours passed she got more and more upset. Where were you Alina?”

“Carnation gave me the day off.” I felt I could justify myself to Netta at least. “I walked around the courtyard some, saw the stable and the training ground then, visited the garden and walked around with Buttercup. This evening I was with Shelaine.” I thought it prudent to not mention who else I had been with. From the stiffening of Netta’s back I gathered that she guessed what I had left out.

“You should be careful.”

I’ve been trying to! I wanted to scream. “Careful about what?”

“Careful who you spend time with. Consorting with the likes of Shelaine and Kester,” (how had she known about Kester?) “will lead to worse things than a night in the dungeons.” We walked down all the usual staircases, and then a couple more that I hadn’t been down before. The last one had the same dank odor as the wine cellar, and even more moisture in the air. It terminated in an iron gate.

Netta took out a ring of keys and selected the proper one. She unlocked the gate which squealed as she pushed it open. A table and two chairs, both covered in cobwebs, waited forlornly by the gate. One wall held a row of shackles, while the other contained small doorways with barred windows at regular intervals. It was quiet except for the dripping of water off the moist walls and the sound of our footsteps. She opened the first door and stepped inside. I followed, dragging my feet. Inside lay a stool, a three legged table with a candle, a woolen pallet that stank of mold, and a bucket which also stank, though not of mold. Netta used her candle to light the one on the table, gave the entire cell a cursory inspection and moved back to the door.

“You’re really going to lock me in here.”

Netta rubbed one hand against her temples. She looked as tired as me, and I felt a guilty pang for accusing her like that when she’d been up well past her normal bedtime looking to warn me.

“I don’t really have a choice.” In the feeble candlelight, and with the circles under her eyes occasioned by the late night, she looked ten years older. “If I don’t, someone else will. Would it really make a difference if it was someone else?”

“I understand,” I said, but couldn’t muster a smile.

Netta nodded once and started to leave, but it was her turn to drag her feet. She

turned back to me on the threshold. “It could have been much worse, you know. As it is, you’re only here for the night, which is almost half over anyway.” She searched my face, back to the mothering Netta I was used to.

I waved a hand at her and summoned all my fortitude to give her a weak smile. “It’s okay, Netta. I’ll be fine. I appreciate your efforts trying to find me this evening. Now go on and get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning. You are coming to let me out in the morning?” Despite my best efforts, some anxiety crept into my voice at the end.

“Of course I will.” She lingered a moment longer then stepped out and shut the door. I winced at the finality of its bang.

Her “good night” was so soft I almost missed it. Once again, I had to marshal my courage to keep from yelling at her to come back. I heard the iron gate squeak open and shut, followed by Netta’s footsteps receding to be gradually drowned out by the drip, drip of the water.

Alone. I allowed my shoulders to slump and sat down on the pallet. Upon closer inspection of the ratty, stained cover however, I got back up and opted for the stool instead. One leg was shorter than the others and I slowly rocked forward and back on it.

I was locked in a dungeon. Thunk went the short leg of the stool.

A very smelly dungeon. Thunk.

A very smelly and dark dungeon. Thunk.

It was very small. Three large steps would take me from one end to the other. Through the low window on the low door I could see a pair of empty shackles hanging on the opposite wall. In the dim light my heart jumped at what looked like a human bone

still inside the band. My second glance revealed that it was only a broom handle, but my imagination had sparked a new line of thought.

If ever a place was haunted this would be it. Thunk.

There is no way that candle is going to last the whole night. Double thunk.

Careful to not turn my back to the door, I began a frantic hunt for another candle. My search didn't take very long. I looked under the table and the pallet, and in every corner except the one with the bucket. Nothing. I did notice, however, that my cell had a second window on the wall opposite the door. It didn't look big enough to even stick my head through but, to distract myself, I decided to see if I could look out this unusual dungeon feature. Candle held carefully in hand, I pushed the table over, and then climbed onto it. This put my head nearly to the ceiling, and I had to duck to see out.

The builders hadn't taken any chances on prisoners escaping; sturdy bars kept everything but air from entering or exiting. Outside I could just make out in the cloud covered moonlight a grassy patch and trees in the distance. Putting my ear to the window, I could hear the lapping of water. The dungeon, then, was situated along the outside wall, and the moat lay just outside. This did not make me feel any better, but I knew why it was so wet.

My attention focused on the cell behind me when I heard a soft scraping sound from outside the door, a sound that definitely didn't come from the gate. The hairs on the back of my neck stood out. Silence. *You're imagining things*, I tried to tell myself, until I heard it again. I was breathing hard. I realized it and tried to breath quieter. I crouched on the table, frozen, one hand shielding the candle to hide its light from whomever, or more likely, whatever was making that sound. I thought of rats, but couldn't convince

myself of that possibility, especially when stealthy footsteps followed the scraping sound. Footsteps I wouldn't have even heard if every nerve in my body hadn't been tensed for any noise. They appeared to be coming from the opposite end of the dungeon from the iron gate, what had looked like a dead end when Netta had brought me in.

Step. Pause. Step. Step. Pause. And then a sibilant whisper, "Alina?"

I slid partway off the table with a yelp of fear.

"Alina?" The voice spoke louder, and the footsteps hurried forward. Shelaine appeared outside the cell door window. "What are you doing on the table?"

I could have cried with relief. I almost did. "What are you doing here?"

Shelaine pushed an unruly lock out of her face. "I heard you were down here and thought you might need some cheering up."

"My, news travels fast." Her visit touched me. This after we hadn't exactly parted on friendly terms. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." She ducked out of sight. "I brought you a blanket, an extra candle, and some food."

I seized the candle with delight. "How did you get in here?"

"Guess." She puffed as she struggled to stuff the bulky blanket through the narrow confines of the bars.

"Secret passage?"

"You're catching on."

The blanket cascaded the rest of the way through and onto me.

"I brought the thickest one I could find so you won't have to sleep on the pallet. There's a loose brick three up and four to the right of that corner." As short as the door

was, Shelaine still had to stand on her toes to get an arm through the bars and point.

“Behind it is a small cavity. Just stuff everything in there before they come to get you in the morning. It wouldn’t do to have an extra unexplained candle after all. I’ll come back for it sometime tomorrow or the next day.”

It looked like Shelaine had experience with this sort of thing.

“What did you do to get her highness so fired up on her first day back?”

I explained. Shelaine contributed some appropriately scathing comments on Carnation’s conduct. “This reminds me, though,” she said. “I wanted to warn you about Foxglove.”

“Warn me about what?”

“You’ve probably noticed that some fairies are nicer than others.” *Interesting that she’s echoing Netta now.* “Well Foxglove’s not one of the nicer ones.”

“Meaning?”

“She’s hard. Hard as stone. She had a rival, you know, for Mahogany.”

“I didn’t know.”

Shelaine nodded. “I guess you wouldn’t. Petite blond from the Gold family, decent for a flutterfly. Mahogany was favoring her for awhile until she died unexpectedly.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying nothing except to watch your step. There are rumors about Foxglove.”

This from the girl familiar enough with the dungeon to know where the loose stones were.

“Who locked you in anyway?”

“Netta.”

Some of my resentment must have shown because Shelaine said, “Don’t be too hard on her. If she hadn’t, someone else would have. Besides she gave you the royal suite.”

“The what?”

“The cell with a window.” She pointed again.

“I didn’t think that was a usual feature.”

“There was a failure in the wall some twenty years ago and the moat flooded the lower levels. They were having a terrible time, even with all their magic, getting the water out, so they decided to punch a hole in one of the cells to pump it out. Had to get a special stone fairy all the way from Briarcourt to do it. They never bothered holing it up afterward.”

“You seem to be well informed about the dungeons.”

“I expect I spend a larger percentage of my time here than anyone else,” she answered without the least trace of embarrassment. “Have you carved your name yet?”

“No.”

“On the wall with the window there’s a whole list and room for a tally of the number of days you’re here.”

I followed her pointing finger to the spot on the wall where, sure enough, there were three columns of small unevenly scratched names with tallies after them. I found Shelaine’s easily. There were only two names that had more marks.

Shelaine continued speaking. “In the poet cell next door it’s tradition to write a

proverb or poetry verse. I've never been able to come up with anything original, but Kyrie writes really funny poems and there's a whole half wall done by somebody who just signed their name H that's so good it almost makes you cry."

I hadn't gotten past her first sentence. "You have names for the cells?"

That did make her a little embarrassed. "Only the first four. The last two have standing water most of the time, so nobody much gets put there. If there are more than four prisoners needing a cell they just ask to use the main dungeon or one of the other family's. Let me tell you, you do not want to be put in the Jade family's dungeon. That place is seriously scary."

What was she, some kind of dungeon connoisseur?

"I'll take your word for it. This place is bad enough. The smell is awful."

"You would be the one to notice that."

I grimaced. "If that's some kind of comment about my nose..."

Shelaine giggled. *Right.* She was starting to wear out her welcome. "I guess we should both get some sleep." I dropped a hint and faked a yawn. *No wait, that was a real yawn.*

"For what's left of the night. I can stay down here if you like. I know it can get kind of spooky by yourself."

"Thanks Shelaine. I appreciate it, but you've done enough. I think I'll survive."

"Alright, good night then. Remind me to tell you about the haunted cell two doors down tomorrow."

I listened to her walk away and the scraping of the stone of the secret passage. *Did she say haunted? Wonderful.*

I considered the extra candle in my hand. My imagination got the better of my good sense. I lighted it and placed it on the stool so I had light at both ends of the cell. I rolled up in the blanket and tried to sleep. I already regretted my bravado in telling Shelaine to leave. The creaks and drips returned, and a couple of times I convinced myself that I heard movement a couple cells down. It was well after midnight of a very long day however, and even a potential specter couldn't keep my eyes from drifting shut.

* * * *

It took the space of a few breaths before I recollected my location upon waking, and a few more to realize it wasn't dawn that had disturbed my sleep, but the rocking motion of my cell. I squinted through the darkness. One of the candles had gone out and the other still wobbled on its stand from whatever had caused the motion. If the rocking of something as substantial as a dungeon wasn't enough to tell me that something was wrong, the shouting did. I could see some light coming through the window, red light from fire though, not sunlight.

Another tremor rocked the cell accompanied by a crashing sound. Something was hitting the wall. More shouting. I couldn't make out the words, but the voices were urgent and all masculine.

Who needs sleep? I groaned, muscles stiff from sleeping on a stone floor making themselves known. I dragged myself and the stool over to the window. I couldn't see very well. Some of the firelight reflected off of the moat, which was gently undulating and washing against the sides of the castle. When I'd looked out earlier it had lain flat and still. The light emanated from somewhere above me on the castle walls, and I could see the dim outline of shadows on the moat and the grass beyond. Watching those

shadows I thought I could see other shadows moving just behind the trees that formed a semi-solid wall some three hundred feet beyond the moat. I placed my hands on either side of the window and pushed my head as far in the window as I could. Something was definitely moving in the trees. A loud crack sounded as a small tree broke off and tumbled into the open area. *Something big.*

A shape detached from the trees and came hurtling toward the castle. I ducked beneath the window as a boulder the size of a large dog crashed into the wall above and to the left of me. The wall shook with the impact and I had to wedge my hands into the window to keep from falling off the stool. Once steady, I peered out again. My heart had gone from peaceful sleeping rate to adrenaline fueled pounding in the time it takes to say hello. Nothing else moved. Whatever had thrown that boulder remained hidden back in the trees. I could only think of one thing that had that kind of strength.

The shouting above my head doubled in volume and a horn began blowing as two giant figures with spears in hand loped into my narrow view, headed toward the wall. Two more followed. More boulders, shot like pebbles from a giant's slingshot accompanied them. Two of the boulders struck the walls in quick succession. I didn't duck but stayed stuck to the window, transfixed by the figures rapidly approaching the wall. Even crouched over, they were taller than a man. They had long thick arms and eyes that glowed a burning orange, even in the darkest shadows surrounding the castle. Two of them carried bows and fired arrows as thick and long as a staff at the castle defenders. The first two had approached to less than fifty feet away when a ball of fire shot towards the trolls and hit the foremost one in the leg. It stumbled and fell down. The other rushed past, pausing just long enough to throw its sapling sized spear at the

wall. Fire rained down on it as it reached the moat and plunged in. I lost sight of it as it passed to the left of me, though I strained my head as far right as I could. It waded back into sight, moving away from the castle, one large ear torn and bleeding dark green drops on its fawn colored clothing. Although the trolls were leaving, the shouting on the wall had not diminished, but had reached a new pitch of excitement.

Boom. I was thrown from the stool onto the ground. My candle fell off the table and extinguished itself on the floor. The cell rocked and particles of rock rained down from the ceiling accompanied by cries of pain and fear. Lying on my back I could see pieces of the wall fly past my window. What curiosity I had about trolls evaporated. I wanted out.

I picked myself up and rushed to the cell door where I began yelling my head off. "Help! Someone let me out!" I shook the door. It didn't so much as wiggle. I heard a bellow behind me and whirled to face the window, my back pressed against the door. In the dim, dusty light I saw trolls approaching again, only this time at least twenty of them surged toward the castle in my limited view alone. They carried clubs and spears while a new barrage of stones pummeled the walls. From above me, a score of fairies flew out from the remnants of the wall, some in arrow shaped formations, others singly. They carried bows and swords, but the weapons they used the most were the fireballs. The trolls snarled and dodged and shot arrows at the fairies, which most of them easily avoided. A few fairies flew too low, and a couple of trolls jumped and grabbed them out of the air. I closed my eyes to avoid seeing what happened next. I couldn't keep them closed though.

Amidst the brawny forms of the trolls, animals darted and dashed. At first, I

mistook the screeching and growling for the trolls. Then a hawk sped past my window and, once I was looking for them, I could see other animals, raptors striking the trolls faces, dogs and large cats nipping at their heels. Soon the smoke hung so dense that I couldn't see farther than the moat.

I took a few steps toward the window, squinting in an effort to make sense of the shadowy figures. A troll's hand thrust up in front of the window. I stumbled backward and landed on my tailbone. I watched in mute horror as large, blackened fingers closed about the bars and wrenched them free. The hand stretched clear through the wall into my cell and long iron nails clacked against the stone as the six fingered hand pressed against the window edge. The muscles tensed and applied pressure to the rock edges around the window. Tighter and tighter, and the rock began to give. I couldn't scream. My tongue froze in my mouth, and my legs shook. Small particles of rock crumbled beneath the troll's hand and fell to the floor covering the pallet. It bellowed, either from pain or rage and, with a mighty wrench, the hand pulled away, taking a barrel sized chunk of the wall with it. A gust of wind blew smoke and the smell of battle into my cell.

I got only a brief glance before my view was blocked again, this time by the head of the troll. My tongue found itself and I screamed. I screamed like I never had before, like I'd never known I could. The troll grunted in surprise at my scream and drew back, only to shove a torch through the window, behind which it eyed the unexpectedly noisy contents of the cell. I had a brief glimpse of fiery eyes squinting behind flame, of black, coarse hair hanging in multiple braids over a low forehead and of a long hooked nose. The eyes widened slightly when they encountered me and the torch dropped to the ground. It rolled over to the pallet, which burst into flames. My screams dissolved into

coughing as smoke began to fill the cell. Then the troll reappeared. It locked one eye on me and a row of rotting teeth appeared in a grisly smile. It pushed a long spear with a bent and bloody tip through the hole and jabbed at me.

Without thinking, I dropped to the ground. The force of the thrust buried the entire spear head in the door behind me. I crawled as fast as I could over to the table and crouched under it while the snarling troll yanked at the spear. The door gave before the spear did. Its hinges bent and broke, and the whole door plunged towards the window, catching a corner of the table. One of the table legs caught me around the middle, and I screamed again as I was pulled with the table toward the outer wall and the waiting troll. I felt the air leave me as I struck the wall hard, pinned there by the table leg. A hairy hand reached for me and I twisted away, frantically trying to push the table out. It wasn't enough. Cold fingers snatched at my hair and began to pull.

Abruptly the hand that held me relaxed. I pushed away from the wall, taking the table with me, and looked back to see the orange eyes of the troll glazing over, skull crushed by a boulder. The body fell back into the moat. I scrambled to extricate myself from the table and door as a wave of foul smelling, dirty water cascaded into the cell. It soaked me, the table and the fire on the pallet. I slipped twice on the wet floor trying to get up, and half crawled to the now open door. There I regained my footing and ran to the iron gate.

Here I recommenced my shouting and yanked on the gate until I felt a muscle give in my left shoulder. The gate resisted all my efforts, and I slid to the ground clutching my shoulder as I watched the continued dance of firelight from my cell.

The roaring and shouting subsided. No more nightmarish creatures invaded the

cell, only more smoke and dust, and cries of wounded fairies and trolls. Soon, all I could hear was the crackle of fire above me and voices of those trying to put it out.

I remained crouched by the gate, wide awake for the rest of the night, and it was there that Netta found me when she came a little after dawn.

* * * *

“Alina, what happened?” Netta fumbled with the lock in her haste, alarm painted on her face. “Are you hurt?” She held her torch over my arm and winced at the cut. “How did you get out here?”

“I want to see Foxglove.”

Netta raised the torch to my face; a furrow appeared in her brow. “Wait here a minute.” She strode over to the cell and peered inside, taking in the splintered door, the hole in the wall and the water. She hurried back to me. “The trolls. Oh Alina, I heard about the attack, but didn’t even think that it might be where you were.” Netta peered into my face. “I think we’d better get you back to your room.”

I forced my eyes to focus on her face. “No. I need to see Foxglove.”

“Why on earth do you want to see her now?” She asked, perplexed.

“It’s important.” Netta’s presence had helped calm me to the point that my hands had finally stopped trembling. I knew how I looked to Netta: dirty, wet, and disheveled with an ugly clot forming on my arm where a splinter from the table had gouged me.

“Let’s at least take care of that cut. And why are you holding your shoulder?”

“Netta!”

She winced at my shout. “I’ll take you to see her if you insist, but I don’t think it’s wise for you to go now. My advice is for you to wait.”

“Take me.”

Netta shook her head, but beckoned me to follow her.

As we walked, I tried to pull myself out of my stupor and purge my mind of visions of demonic eyes and blood stained steel. I needed to prepare myself to speak to Foxglove. I had already thought my words out, but this was so important. *I have to make her understand.* She'd made a terrible mistake. I couldn't live in this world, a world where trolls weren't just legends, but real creatures that could eat you.

Through the windows we passed I saw evidence of the attack. Large chunks had been broken off the wall, and what remained was darkened from the fire. A long line of men hauled new stones to the top and cemented them in place. We stopped in front of two carved double doors. Netta placed one hand on the handle. “You're sure?”

I nodded. Netta slipped into the room after telling me to wait. I quickly finger combed my hair as I mouthed the words I hoped would get me out of Starstair and back home. I wanted her to see me in my state of dishevelment, to see what last night had done, but I needed to make a good impression too.

What if she wouldn't see me? I stopped my combing and leaned into the door. They were very thick doors. I couldn't hear anything. The doors opened and I jerked to attention.

Netta stepped outside. “Please be careful what you say.” She moved aside and motioned for me to enter. I bolted inside and sighted my target. She sat alone at a writing desk, glancing over a paper at her left hand while she wrote with her right.

“Netta says you wish to speak to me.” She didn't look up, or even stop her writing when I entered, but spoke when I reached a spot on the carpet in front of the desk.

I took a breath and prepared to launch my speech but nothing came out. My eyes fixed on her right hand trailing loopy writing across the page. What was it about her that made me unable to speak?

“Well?”

Spit it out, Alina. Maybe I should have taken Netta’s advice and waited.

“If you’ve nothing to say.”

“There’s been a mistake.”

“What sort of mistake?” The pen scratched across the paper.

“With me. I mean when you took me.”

“That wasn’t a mistake.” No change in tone, no change in writing speed.

“Well it was the day before my wedding. I was getting married.” I launched into my speech.

Foxglove raised her hand to stop me. “I don’t need to hear anymore.” She took her eyes off the paper and my heart rose, but she only reached over and dipped her pen in the ink bowl before resuming her scratching. “I have no interest in your personal life prior to coming to Starstair. In fact, I don’t care about your personal life here either. I am not going to release you, which is doubtless the point you were working up to. I will make allowances for the fact that you had an unpleasant experience last night, and allow you the morning off to rest. But, in the future, do not disturb me for trivialities. Dismissed.”

“But...”

The quill stilled. She raised cold jade eyes to me. “Dismissed.”

The rest of my planned speech shriveled and died in my mouth. I walked numbly

out of the door. Netta hadn't waited. I didn't see a soul as I trudged back to my room. I left my wet and dirty clothes on the floor and forced myself to wash my face and hands before I collapsed on my bed. And cried.

Chapter VI

I couldn't have woken up more on schedule if I'd tried. The sun had just gone out of sight from my window which meant it was midday exactly. My mouth felt like wool and my cheeks were crusted over from crying. I had to stop that. Which was easier said than done. As I remembered Foxglove's dismissal of my plea, fresh hotness welled up behind my eyes. I blinked the tears back. *Don't think about it, just don't think about it.* I thought instead about my night in the dungeon and the reason for it. By the time I arrived at Carnation's rooms a considerable dose of indignation had been added to my self-pity.

Carnation's eyes flew to the door when I entered. She didn't say anything. I didn't either but went straight to work folding up the cloth and accessories that still littered the floor. Supposed to clean her room was I? I stabbed a pin into a pincushion with zest, picturing it as Carnation's self-serving, cowardly backside. Before long she stood and prepared to leave the room. Too bad, I had been looking forward to making the bed with her on it.

"Alina?" She sounded hesitant. I stuffed a bolt of leftover cloth in a chest and slammed the lid.

"If you see anything you like in there. I'm done with it. I doubt Chansy's clothes fit you very well. You're welcome to take any of the calico to make some new dresses for yourself."

Trying to assuage your guilty conscience? I wrapped a couple rounds of ribbon around my hand and jerked the crinkled end tight with the other like some midnight garrotter. I looked at Carnation over the taut ribbon. She fled. Not too fast to be undignified, but she fled.

As silence descended upon the room, I found myself sniffing back some more tears. What was wrong with me? Grehelda was the one who stormed. Corice was the one who bawled over every little disappointment. I was the one who sat back calmly and let the world fight with itself.

I developed a headache halfway through the afternoon, but I pushed through it and cleaned until the room shone, no sparkled, with cleanliness. I focused on the cleaning. Ribbon-right bottom drawer, teacup-there on the tray to go down to the kitchen, pins-in with the underclothes. The last was a deliciously tempting inspiration, but I put the pins in their proper place in the drawer above the ribbon. Laundry room, kitchen, my room, just in time to light some candles before darkness fell.

“Alina, I’m here.” Buttercup scurried into the room looking cheerful and a little lumpy around the middle. I’d forgotten about Buttercup and the sewing lessons. Yesterday in the garden seemed like a year ago.

“Did you hear about the troll attack?” Buttercup hiked up her skirt and removed a satchel she’d secured around her waist. “They blew a hole clear through the wall this time. Nobody’s dead, but Walnut and Elm both were hurt bad. I heard Lord Mahogany and Poplar talking and they’re worried. It’s not even winter yet, earlier than they’ve ever attacked before.” She held the satchel out and hesitated when she got a good look at me. “Are you alright?”

“Honestly, Buttercup, I’ve had a very long day. Could we start your lessons tomorrow?”

Buttercup’s previously animated features drooped. She looked down at the satchel and ran a finger around the cord. “Oh. That would be okay.” She slid toward the

door, and I scolded myself for being selfish. “Wait. I’m not that tired. Let’s just not go too late, okay?”

“Oh, grand!” Buttercup tripped back to me and dumped the satchel on the bed. “I’ve got needles and thread, scissors, a pattern book and lots of scraps. I tried to get some real material, but I couldn’t sneak it out of the sewing room, and Kalleen kept asking what I wanted it for.”

I recalled Carnation’s offer. “I think I know where we can get fabric.” Since we didn’t have any that evening, though, I started her out on buttons. A quick learner, she soon mastered threading the needle and making knots. After five buttons, all of different sizes and shapes were on a scrap, along with a couple drops of blood from pricked fingers, I called it well done. I sent her off with the admonition to do at least ten more before we met again. She actually used her wings, two vigorous flaps, to speed herself on her way. I got ready for bed, my heart lighter than it had been all day.

Sleep eluded me, however. I’d avoided thinking about my non-conversation with Foxglove all day, but now it kept running over and over in my mind.

“That was no mistake.” Easy for her to say. She wasn’t the slave.

“I have no interest in your personal life.” How about if a troll ate me, and I couldn’t clean anymore? Would that aspect of my personal life interest her?

“I understand you had an unpleasant experience last night.” No. Really?

I threw myself with a humph onto my back and shoved another pillow under my head. I should have listened to Netta. I should have known she wouldn’t just let me waltz out of Starstair for something as mundane as a waiting fiancé. *Bye, bye, nice try.* It hadn’t worked. What else could I do?

You could escape.

I caught my breath and pushed myself to a sitting position in the bed. The thought had come from my head but it had Grehelda's voice. Escape. I folded my hands in front in my lap and stared out the window. The idea had been hovering at the edges of my mind ever since my first morning at Starstair, but I had ignored it as too risky. But if Foxglove refused to let me go, what other option was there? *Because staying is not an option.* I forced myself to face it head on, to examine it carefully. Could I do it? Did I dare try it? My stomach knotted at the very possibility. I wasn't adventuresome. I wasn't the sneaking, daring, risk-taking type. If I was caught...

I shuddered, flung myself back down on the bed, and pulled one of the pillows over my head.

When I woke up, the idea came back. Escape with a capital E. It danced across my vision while I ate breakfast; it shone threw the stained glass windows as I walked to Carnation's rooms. It confronted me in every mirror and piece of furniture I cleaned that day. Escape. I found myself strategizing. Netta had said it was impossible. Why? There were guards at the gates, yes, but only two and there were sections of the wall that I had never seen anyone on. Beyond the wall was the forest, the fairies' domain to be sure, but a thick, tangled forest all the same in which I knew from experience it was easy to get lost. Once back at the village, what could they do? My twentieth birthday had passed. I'd never heard a story of an adult being harmed by a fairy.

Netta sought me out at midday. She expressed sympathy over the whole situation and won my gratitude by not asking what exactly had happened in Foxglove's rooms or what had me so excited.

I fluttered about with nervous energy the whole day. By the time Buttercup had left from her second lesson, and I was in bed again. I had made up mind. I was going to Escape.

Easy to say, but the actual undertaking would take careful planning. Should I take anyone into my confidences? Netta? No, she'd tell me not to. Shelaine? I hesitated longer over Shelaine but something, a gut feeling, made me unwilling to confide in her. She'd want to come too and bring Kester and the rest. I'd be happy to see all the humans get away but I didn't see a mass breakout working. If it was possible, surely Shelaine and the others would have done it already. The fact that they hadn't escaped individually gave me some pause. Perhaps they didn't know the forest as well as I did. Starstair was less than a day's walk from Riverbank, and I knew the forest around Riverbank very well. So I'd keep my own counsel.

Shelaine tested this resolution the next day when she hunted me down in the evening, full of excited exclamations over my narrow escape, apologies for not being able to console me before, and a burning desire to hear all the gory details. I told all over dinner in her room. After eating, we spent a delightful half-hour heartily abusing everything fairy. Shelaine did a humorous pantomime of Carnation discovering mismatched hair accessories. I almost confided in her. I was sounding her out on other instances of escape when she bolted up from the bed. "Gathering! I'll be late!" She dashed out the door, leaving me alone. I contemplated the dinner scraps for a couple of minutes when heavy breathing announced her return to the room. "You're sure you don't want to come? You're welcome anytime."

"Thank you, but no." That was the last thing I needed. Shelaine shrugged and

ran off.

Supplies would be important for escape. Food and water, dark, warm clothing, some kind of weapon. A map would be useful too. Every evening meal I'd store away some suitable foods in my pocket. I started a stash behind the wardrobe in case someone came snooping in my room.

I humbled myself enough to ask Carnation's permission to take short breaks during the day during which I'd prowl around the exterior of the castle inspecting the exits and the guard situation. On my third venture, I had to reluctantly conclude that an escape during the daylight hours wasn't practical. Too many people milled about outside, and I'd be missed sooner. I did discover on that trip that several of the trees in the garden grew up against the wall. A short rope, a little scrambling; it would be easy.

On my fourth scouting expedition, I selected my tree, a good sized oak that in the enchanted garden still had its leaves. They would provide good cover while I climbed it in case anyone was watching. Luckily, I'd mastered the skill of tree climbing long ago, helping Corice to her imaginary imprisonments in "the tower."

A sortie to the stable unveiled enough rope to circle the castle. *Good. Clothes, food, rope, I still need a plan to deal with the trolls.* But that was a big problem. Ever since I'd realized that too many fairies hung about in the courtyard to try an escape during the day, I'd been breaking out in a cold sweat periodically remembering orange eyes and a long hairy arm reaching into my cell. What kind of weapon could help me against that? Since I'd decided to not confide in either Netta or Shelaine, I had only fairy sources to get the answers. Carnation was gradually returning to her talkative, presumptuous ways but still evidenced some discomfort around me. Trying to turn

Carnation's conversation to anything but her own fixations was as hard as turning a charging bull anyway. I turned to Buttercup instead. I dropped a casual hint during one of our lessons about being at the front of the action when the trolls attacked and Buttercup seized on it.

“Oh, that must have been exciting. What did you do?”

I reflected back to my screaming and door banging. “Um, I didn't really do anything.”

Buttercup proved she shared blood with Carnation by then going on about trolls and her experiences with them for the rest of the lesson. These experiences were limited to occasional glimpses over the wall, but Buttercup relished them as well as if they'd been bloodthirsty battles fought by her alone against an army of trolls. Unfortunately, none of Buttercup's stories featured portable, easy-to-use weaponry. More like, gigantic crossbows attached with bolts to the wall or broadswords taller than herself, or most often, some kind of magic like the fireballs I'd witnessed during the attack. I did find out that there actually weren't any more trolls than fairies and that, while encountering one at night happened, it was not inevitable. Fairies that traveled at night took extra precautions, but they did travel. I would just have to take my chances. I meant to go through with my escape but it lost some of its appeal

“How's this?” Buttercup held up a wrinkled apron for my inspection.

“Very nice. But your stitches are getting too far apart again. Remember they...” My eye caught movement. The door to my room was swinging open. I made a wild grab for the sewing box and stuffed it beneath the pillows. Buttercup realized the danger and wadded the apron behind her back. We both held our breath as the door opened more. A

black, whiskered nose pushed its way in, and two brown eyes somberly regarded the two of us.

“Oh Nageri!” Buttercup flopped backwards on the bed in relief. I relaxed, but not completely. Who could with a panther in her bedroom?

He padded over to the bed. Ytrebil gave a warning squawk and flew to the top of the wardrobe where he crouched, ready for further flight.

“Guhevening Asturrr.”

“Good evening, you silly beast.” She reached down and scratched his chin. “You nearly scared us to death. What are you doing up here anyway?”

“Mouse.” Came the throaty answer

“I don’t think you’ll find any mice up here. Better luck in the kitchen. Oh, but you don’t like the dogs.”

His tail whipped at the word dogs, and he turned away from Buttercup to face me.

“This is Alina.”

It felt decidedly odd to be introduced to a cat.

“Can you say Alina?”

Nageri ignored her.

“He’s alright you know,” Buttercup offered. “He’s friendly most of the time. I don’t know how much he actually understands, but sometimes you can almost have a conversation with him.”

A nervous flutter from the wardrobe drew Nageri’s attention, and he paced over to it. Buttercup watched him walk. “I wish I could get Ytrebil to talk to me.” She sighed. “I’ve tried and tried but I just don’t have any talent with animals.” She picked the apron

back up and started sewing again. I kept one eye on her progress and the other on Nageri. He watched Ytrebil a little then sniffed around the wardrobe, under it, behind it. I stiffened when he batted a paw behind the wardrobe. I'd hidden some dried meat back there.

“Alina.”

“Hmm?” I wrenched my gaze back to Buttercup.

“Is this better?”

“Oh much,” I answered distractedly.

Nageri left off batting and paced back around the bed, headed for the door.

“Good night Nageri! Say good night, Alina.” Buttercup urged.

I felt silly. “Good night, Nageri.”

“Guh nigh....Aleena.”

I made sure to latch the door that night.

* * * *

I'm a coward.

I came to this reluctant conclusion a full month after I first decided to escape. On that particular day, darkness had fallen early, and rain pattered at my window. I'd spread my escape supplies out on the bed to perform an inventory for the fifth time that week. Two dark, wool cloaks, a pair of boots, three kitchen knives, two satchels, a compass, four water skins, a hat, a blanket, two flints, a large lantern, a dozen candles, and enough food to feed three people for a week. I had all I needed, more than I needed to escape, yet there I stood with another lantern I'd pilfered that evening.

The garbage heap had proven to be a veritable gold mine for my newly discovered

foraging and hoarding talents. Blocked by wooden walls on three sides, it backed up against the east side of the stable. Twice a week, some of the humans had the not-so-pleasant task of removing the contents, one part food, one part discarded junk, to some place outside the castle.

Fairies had different ideas about when things reached the end of their lives than the people in my village. I'd found both knives with only tiny chips in the blades, both lanterns with cracked glass on just one pane, and the hat had nothing wrong with it that I could see, all sitting half-buried by kitchen scraps in the garbage heap. The satchels and clothing I'd retrieved from the rag bin in the first floor cleaning closet. Again, with only three small holes among the lot of them, they scarcely qualified as rags to my mind.

Yes, getting it all had been easy. Carrying out my plan had not. My strategy required a series of test runs. Could I get from my room to the castle door unnoticed? Could I get to the garden unnoticed? On the night of my first run, it had taken me three hours to work up the nerve to sally out of my room. I had an excuse ready if anyone saw me: I wasn't feeling well and needed something from the kitchen. That excuse wouldn't be very plausible if they found me halfway up the oak tree loaded down with my escape paraphernalia. Holding a single candle in clammy hands, stopping every few steps to flatten myself against a wall, and jumping at every creak of the stairs, I'd made it to the bottom of the tower staircase. One step from the bottom, a loud chittering pierced the night. I didn't wait to see what upset that squirrel, but pounded back to my room faster than you can say "acorn." It took me the better part of an hour to get to sleep after that.

Another four days had passed before I'd gathered the courage to try again. I made it clear to the outer door that time, my heart pounding as loud as my footsteps the whole

way. I'd made four trips to the door since then, but the most I'd managed was to crack the outer door open, before swiftly shutting it and rushing back to my room. Each trip should have gone easier. Instead my fear of discovery increased with each foray. The way I was going, a few more trips and I'd be reduced to stepping out on the landing outside my room, and stopping at that.

I sighed, placed the lantern next to the other and straightened the candles into an even line. While I certainly didn't relish the idea of getting thrown in the dungeon again, I wasn't all that concerned with what the fairies would do to me. So the mind numbing fear that accompanied my feeble attempts didn't really make much sense. I thought again about confiding in Shelaine and trying to talk her into going with me. As the thought passed, I realized that was part of the problem; despite being an only child, I wasn't used to doing things on my own. I felt the familiar longing for home and friends. *Grehelda wouldn't have been scared by a squirrel.*

The candle I held wavered in my hand, nearly spent. To save lighting another one, I began to stuff everything away back in its hiding place. I'd run out of room behind the wardrobe and had resorted to storing some of it inside the wardrobe behind my regular clothes. Feeling cranky, I shoved it in hard, haphazard.

After I'd put everything back, I couldn't shut the wardrobe. I pushed at the door. *There should be plenty of room.* I pushed harder. *Maybe something's fallen in the back?* I reached past the lanterns until I touched the back of the wardrobe. Funny. I withdrew my hand and inspected the outside of the wardrobe. It looked deeper from the outside. Pushing the left hand door of the wardrobe all the way back so it rested against the side of the wardrobe, I curled my left hand around the back corner of the wardrobe and thrust my

right inside until I could feel the back. My left arm definitely stretched further. The candle sputtered before reluctantly returning to life.

I considered the wardrobe. Too curious to leave it alone and go to bed, I retrieved another candle from my bedside and lit it. I pulled everything back out and crawled half inside the wardrobe for a careful inspection of the back wall. A foot off the ground on the right side I found a knot, just big enough to fit a finger through. Without stopping to think what might be in the hole, I shoved a finger into it and pulled. The back of the wardrobe creaked open on hidden hinges to reveal a cobwebbed space a hand's breadth deep.

A forlorn pile of folded papers leaned against the back wall, the sole occupants of the compartment. I eagerly pulled them out and began to peruse the yellowed, brittle sheets. Nothing as exciting as a murder confession or recipe for eternal life, they appeared to be letters, written in a feminine hand with poor spelling. The first one read:

Dear Chansy,
 We arrived at Stormtower yesterday evening. I didn't get to see anything because I had to help Foxglove unpack, but today Lenn and me got to go out and walk along the beach. I can hardly describe it! The ocean just goes and goes and goes with no end. There's strange birds and all kinds of odd shells and sea things get washed up by the waves. I wish you were here. Lenn is trying to sketch a picture so you can have some idea what it looks like. There's the cutest boy about my age here. He has perfect curly blond hair and eyes the color of the sea-poetic, aren't I? I think he works for the stone mason. I'm going to try to get introduced tomorrow. I don't know when you'll get this letter. Foxglove said I could send letters anytime she has something, but I don't know how often that will be. Write back if you can. How is Poppy doing with Foxglove gone? I miss you!
 Netta

I read the letter through twice. Some guilt mixed in with my curiosity when I saw the signature. *I probably shouldn't be reading these.*

I couldn't just stop there though. Anyone that hides letters in a secret

compartment is begging for them to be read. I put the first letter down and read the next. All of the letters were from Netta to Chansy, most of them written on the trip to Stormtower (wherever that was). I judged from the letters the trip must have lasted over a year. After the letters were a few pictures. I found the one of the ocean that Lenn had drawn. I'd never seen the sea myself, so I found it particularly interesting. Lenn looked to have some talent. Another, less talented sketch by Netta, depicted the cute blond boy, Coren, I learned from later letters. I turned it over on the pile and picked up the last sheet of paper. It wasn't a letter or a sketch. My breath caught as I read the title.

Chansy and Netta's Escape Plan

I stared at the title then dragged my eyes down the page. "Useful items" headed a list on the left side that included a lantern, warm clothing...it looked a lot like a list of my hoard would. Some of the items had check marks beside them. Underneath the list, someone had fastened a table of the guard shifts, the third watch circled in red. A crude map of Starstair adorned the right side of the map with a shaky dotted line indicating the planned escape route from the kitchen. Skinny trees scattered about outside the wall. The dotted line wound artistically through them to terminate at a square with a door, window and curlicues of smoke drifting up. The label read "Home."

I traced the outline of the house with my index finger. So Chansy had dreamed of escape too. And Netta. *What happened?*

Shelaine's words came back to me. "*What do you want me to do? Wait until I've nothing to go back too like Netta? Wait until I grow old and die like Chansy?*" But that hadn't been how they'd planned it. They two of them had probably sat in this very room and plotted their grand exit from a life of slavery. I tried to picture a girlish Netta,

sprawled on the bed while Chansy drew the dotted line and added the house. Yet they had never gone. Why hadn't they gone?

I sat on the floor by the wardrobe until my fresh candle had burned half down, pondering the map. Forty years from now, would some young girl, my successor, find a pile of moldering cloth and food and wonder, "Why didn't she go?"

I lowered the map to rest on the stack of letters, then leaned them back into their hiding place and closed the secret panel. I put my own supplies back into the wardrobe, properly this time, and closed the door with no difficulty. The rain continued to beat against the window. I couldn't escape that night, but the next I would. I wouldn't be Chansy.

* * * *

"Green or yellow?"

I started. It was the morning after my discovery of the secret compartment in the wardrobe. My mind had been a thousand miles away from my current occupation, sewing yet another gown for Carnation, the third since I'd arrived. I looked down at the skirt. At least this one had been designed with practicality in mind. The sky blue dress had a split skirt for riding, long sleeves that fit the arm snugly and no embroidery.

Carnation was "organizing" her scarves. This consisted of her spreading them all out on the floor and sorting them by color. She would try them all on, and then pile them together for me to put back in the wardrobe. I eyed the pile gloomily. No early finish for me that day.

"Alina."

"Sorry. What?"

I didn't have to look at Carnation to know she was giving me her classic eye roll. "I asked if you thought I should wear the green or the yellow scarf for riding with that dress."

"Green."

"Hmm. I was actually thinking the dark red one would look nice."

I suppressed a sigh.

"Oh well. I hope you finish it soon. It looks to snow tonight and that means winter patrol. I figure I can come up with excuses to not go for two, maybe three weeks. Do you think you'll have the dress ready by then?"

"Probably."

"Oh good."

No. Not good. It didn't take a hunting expert to realize that an escape with snow on the ground would leave a trail as easy to follow as a road. I groused to myself the rest of the afternoon, peering out the windows every chance I got. No snow. I didn't stay and talk after dinner but hurried back to my room. I wanted to get Buttercup through her lesson as quickly as possible.

I charged up the tower steps. Since I'd come to Starstair, I'd lost a good ten pounds just from climbing all the stairs. The door to my room hung open, which meant Buttercup was already inside. "Hello," I called as I breezed in. "How are..." I skidded to a halt.

Something was wrong. Buttercup sat on the floor, shoulders slumped, head bowed, wings hung so low they brushed the ground. She cradled something in her arms, something white and feathered. *Oh no.* "Buttercup?"

She didn't look up, didn't move except for the gentle stroking of her right hand over the stiff white form. Stroke back, lift the hand forward, stroke back.

With a hesitating step I crossed the room, escape forgotten, and folded into a kneeling position in front of her. Two dried tear tracks traced their way down her pale cheeks. A balled up handkerchief lay beside her right knee.

I tried to think of comforting words. My mind blanked, so we sat in silence. The room started to grow dark as the sun moved behind the tower to begin its descent behind the hills.

"Everything dies," Buttercup whispered. She sniffed and fresh tears welled in her eyes.

I leaned forward to close both her and Ytrebil in a tight embrace. "I'm sorry."

She sobbed. I looked out the window at the fading sunlight. I didn't want to be insensitive, but it would be dark in less than an hour. I waited for her tears to subside again then asked if she'd like my assistance burying him. That started the tears all over. She managed to nod through the convulsions that shook her whole body.

I grabbed a cloak for each of us. Buttercup wouldn't put Ytrebil down even to put it on, so I draped it over her back and we went to the garden. The air already had a chill to it and most of the fairies had gone inside. I had to ask Buttercup where I could find a shovel.

We buried Ytrebil beside the tiger bench, underneath a rose bush. I stole a flagging stone from a pile by the tool shed to place on top. The sun had dipped behind the hill by the time we finished. Buttercup shook from tears and cold until I began to worry for her health. "We should go back inside."

She didn't respond. I was debating whether I should repeat my statement, when she dropped to her knees beside the stone and traced on it with her finger. Next, she pulled a bloom off the rose bush and lowered it to rest on the stone. She stood up, and I could see what she'd done. Fresh black grooves, carved by her finger spelled out Ytrebil's name on the stone.

I ought to say something. Something comforting, something profound. "He had a good life." It was a trite and useless thing to say.

"Buttercup?" A voice sounded somewhere over by the entrance of the garden. Buttercup showed no sign of hearing the call.

"Over here." I answered for her.

The light crunch of gravel proceeded Ash around the corner of a hedge. His step faltered ever so slightly on seeing me, then his eyes slid past to Buttercup and he sped up. "I just heard. Netta saw you leave the castle."

Buttercup reached her arms up when he got close, and he wrapped his around her. "I'm so sorry Buttercup. I know he meant the world to you."

Much better than what I'd said.

"Let's get you inside. Tomorrow we'll see about enchanting that rose bush to bloom all year for him, shall we?" He scooped her up and carried her back toward the castle. A few paces away he swiveled back and spoke to me over Buttercup's head.

"Thank you."

I nodded. He kept walking. I plucked my own bloom from the bush and placed it on the stone above the E. I hadn't seen Ytrebil's name spelled out before. It looked funny. I thought back to the Grehelda's secret message period, when she'd insisted we

all send coded notes to each other. The simplest code involved reversing the letters in all words. I bent down and scratched the letters in the dirt next to the stone. LIBERTY. Liberty. A cloud passed in front of the newly risen moon as I stared down at the letters. I reached out the toe of my boot and scratched them out. Then I made my own way back to the castle, thoughtful. Two flakes of snow settled on my arm when I reached to open the castle door. By the time I returned to my room, the sky sparkled white outside my window.

Chapter VII

It appeared I had made up my mind to escape too late. It snowed off and on for the next ten days, letting up occasionally, but never long enough or warm enough for the snow to melt. In a way, I didn't mind because Buttercup needed me. Leaving her had been my one regret when planning my escape. Now it (and the snow) was my reason for staying.

Ash spent a large portion of the days with her, but he had other occupations. When I finished with Carnation, I would find her waiting outside the door for me. We'd go to the kitchen where Netta and I would practically force food down her. Then we'd go sit in her room or mine. A couple of times, Carnation sat with us. She didn't help much. She'd dart uncomfortable glances at Buttercup and try to initiate conversation on topics in which Buttercup had no interest. I gave her credit for trying though. It was more than I'd expected from her, and more than Foxglove did. As far as I could see, no one else from the family knew or cared about Buttercup's loss.

We continued the sewing lessons. Buttercup had lost much of her enthusiasm, but wanted to continue. She did brighten when I mentioned I thought she was ready to try sewing a garment. I regretted the sewing lessons now. My leaving would be one more let down in a life that'd been filled with them for Buttercup. One evening, after a particularly tearful lesson, I almost decided to not leave after all. I pulled Chansy's map out to stiffen my resolve and walked my fingers down the dotted line to the house. My heart broke for Buttercup, but I couldn't stay.

A break finally came in the snow. One day, two, three days, and only isolated pools of slush littered the ground. I woke up the next morning with a heavy feeling in my

stomach. *Tonight.* I worked extra diligently for Carnation, and dropped more than one hint that she might want to keep an eye out for her cousin. I let Buttercup stay longer than usual in my room, trying to impart as much sewing knowledge as possible our last night together. She still had dark circles under her eyes but no longer had the limp and listless posture that she'd carried the few days after Ytrebil's death. She'd be fine, I half-convinced myself.

Buttercup left. After checking the weather one last time, I blew out the candle and lay in bed. Not to sleep, I couldn't sleep, but to wait until the second watch when the castle was sleeping.

My stomach cramped and uncramped from nerves as I watched the moon make its slow progress past my window. I got up and paced in the thin patch of moonlight between the window and my bed. *Surely they should have called for the watch change by now? It was practically morning.* I eyed the moon's position. No. It just felt like it must be near morning.

Finally, the faint ringing of the watch bell reached my ears. *Time to go.* I opened the wardrobe and pulled out the already packed satchel. It contained only about half the items I'd collected; there simply wasn't room.

I crept down the staircase and through the silent halls by feel, fighting down wave after wave of panicked thoughts. *This won't work. You'll get caught. You'll get punished.* I didn't plan to light my lantern until well away from the castle walls. Just like my trial runs, no one stopped me, and just like my trial runs, I could barely force one foot down on the carpet after the other. A cat scampered by me in the dark, causing my already racing heart to jump to new levels of exertion.

I'd tested the outer doors, to see which ones squeaked and which ones opened quietest. Conveniently, the one closest to my tower made the least noise. I cracked it open and eased out into the night, staying in the shadows of the castle. A light breeze accosted me as soon as I stepped outside. *Probably bringing more snow. Maybe I should go back and wait for a better time.* I teetered on the edge of turning back, took a deep breath and pressed on. I reached the castle corner and stopped. This would be the worst part. I would have to dash across part of the courtyard to get to the archway to the garden. A coil of rope from the stable, hidden during my break, waited for me there. Three seconds. That's all it would take. I bent over, hands on my knees and scanned the courtyard and wall for the third time. No one in sight.

You can do this. I gritted my teeth and ran. One second. *Mother and Father.* Two seconds. *Grehelda and Corice.* Three seconds. *Rolant.* I plunged through the arch and veered left into the bushes with much snapping of twigs, sure to alert anyone that might be listening. Crouching down, I tried to quiet my breathing and listened for an alarm. Nothing but the quiet trickling of the brook. The rope sat where I'd left it, under a pile of leaves. My breath fogged in quick bursts as I picked my way toward the oak tree, my planned escape route over the wall. Checking my satchel strap before grabbing the lowest branch, I hoisted myself up. Halfway up the tree, I straddled a thick branch. There I would have to wait until the guard passed. Then wait another three minutes after that for him to round the corner out of sight. Then, I figured I would have about six minutes to get up the rest of the way, secure the rope, get onto and off of the wall, through the moat, and into the trees on the other side of the open area, before the second guard would come in sight. It would be close.

Ducking my head so nothing but my dark hair faced the wall, I waited. I pressed my face closer into the wet bark of the branch as the guard passed by, whistling. The seconds ticked by.

And 180. I looked sideways along the wall just as the guard's back foot disappeared behind the castle. *Go.* I flew up the tree to a sturdy horizontal limb that bent parallel to the wall then ran one end of the rope under the limb and checked the wall one last time before I jumped. Despite efforts to land soft, the slap of my feet hitting the stone sounded like a crack of thunder. I listened for sounds of an alarm. Still nothing. *Hurry.* I tossed both ends of the rope over the wall. The moat glistened below me, still and murky. Shaking with nervous tension, I swung a leg over the wall, grabbed the rope and lowered myself down. *No going back now.* The rope slid through my hands, burning my palms. A few feet above the moat, I managed to stop my descent at the expense of some skin. Easing myself into the moat to avoid a splash, I grimaced and tried not to think about what might be lurking in the black water that weighed down my clothing. With the satchel held out of the water in one hand and the two ends of the rope in the other, I swam toward the bank in an uneven paddle. No sound from the walls. I hauled myself onto the bank and started shivering as the breeze cut through my wet clothing. How much time had passed? The glowing torches on the wall revealed no guards, but I imagined I could hear footsteps on the west side of the wall. Panting, I hauled at one end of the rope. *Please don't catch, please don't catch.*

I felt the resistance in the rope disappear as the other end slid around the branch. The end flopped into sight as it slipped off the wall to land with a soft splash. I started moving toward the trees and continued to play the rope in, casting worried glances at the

wall. I gathered the last loop of rope and took off toward the trees. They looked farther than I'd thought. Whatever had made me think I could do this? *There won't be enough time.* 200 feet to go, 100 feet, 50 feet. The dark branches of the trees enfolded me in safe darkness. I whirled back to the castle, my breath coming in great gasps. The second guard rounded the corner. He looked towards the trees. I pressed farther back into the shadows. He kept walking.

I sank onto my knees on the half frozen forest floor, shivering, and watched the guard until he was out of sight. *I made it.* Relief and disbelief vied for control of my emotions.

I buried the rope under a pile of leaves. They'd find it easy enough, but I'd be long gone by then. Despite my efforts to wring as much water as possible out of my clothing, my dress still hung heavy with water. I wished I'd decided to bring a change of clothes after all. Why *had* I decided not to bring a change of clothes? I couldn't remember. I took my cloak out of the satchel and put it on. It only helped with the cold a little. *Better get moving before my blood freezes.* Shouldering the satchel once more, I pushed into the trees.

I proceeded as fast as I could go in the dark, stopping at every opening to check the stars, to make sure my course was staying more or less east. My biggest concern was to get as far away from the castle by dawn as I could, but I didn't want to go in the opposite direction from Riverbank either.

I crawled over fallen logs and under drooping, ice laden branches. As the trees behind me absorbed the last hint of light from Starstair, I realized how dark the forest was. Visibility was limited to a few feet in front of me, maybe fifteen feet in openings.

Anything could be lurking beyond that distance and I wouldn't know until it attacked. My exultation at getting out of the castle disappeared beneath a fresh assault of nerves. I groped for the lantern in my satchel. Should I light it? I'd be able to see better, but everything else would be able to see me better too. Rather than light it, I chose to slow my pace, listening for any sounds of danger. The rustling of stiff branches in the wind was all I heard. At times, the stillness was broken by the occasional squawk or whistle of some night bird or animal, and sometimes, a rustling in the brush. This last never failed to set my nerves on edge.

Then, what felt like some hours after leaving the castle, I heard a muffled crash in front of me, much louder than any previous noise. I stopped, lifted the knife, and listened. Rustling, followed by the crack of a good sized limb breaking. I swallowed hard. Whatever was making the noise sounded bigger than a small mammal. It sounded bigger than a deer. I'd stopped next to a towering fir with several low branches. It took me all of a minute to get over and into the tree. I climbed steadily, testing each branch before I trusted my weight to it and didn't stop until I was a good forty feet above the ground. There, I wrapped both arms around the trunk, and waited.

The rustling and cracking came closer. I eased a few branches higher. My perch provided a view over the smaller trees. Movement caught my eye. A slender hardwood swayed, not in time to the wind. I tracked the progress of whatever was moving through the motion of the smaller trees. A large tree had fallen in the recent past and left an opening in the canopy. A dark form moved into it that I recognized with a sick feeling. A troll.

I pressed against the tree, wishing I'd climbed higher. I didn't dare at that point,

for fear it would hear me. It swung a long leg over the fallen tree's trunk and moved out of the opening, passing within a spear's throw of my tree. Another troll emerged into the opening and followed the other. And another. I counted five total, moving as quietly as things that large could, in the direction of Starstair. If any one of them had looked up, it might have seen a peculiar human-shaped bulge halfway up the tree. None of them looked up. Scared to let them leave my sight, I craned my neck to watch their progress behind me. After the trees in sight stopped swaying, I stayed in the tree another half-hour or so before beginning my descent. Some fifteen feet from the ground, I stopped to listen, fearful one of them had caught sight of my tracks and was even now waiting for me to leave the safety of the tree to fall into its eager arms. I hit the ground running. After the adrenaline wore off, I slowed to a pace even more steady and stealthy than before the troll sighting, pausing every hundred feet or so to listen for more of them.

It felt as though dawn would never come. I thought it was just my mind playing tricks on me when I noticed the stars were fading and the shadows were lightening. A few early birds began to greet the new day with song, and I knew day had arrived. I reoriented myself to east with the rising sun and pushed my tired, cold muscles to renewed efforts.

My spirits lifted with the daylight, but I didn't throw caution away. True, the trolls wouldn't be out in the day, but the fairies would soon discover my absence, if they hadn't already. I kept to the larger evergreen trees and avoided obvious trails, choosing game paths instead, which slowed my progress. Still, I took heart that smoke from the village should be visible anytime. I took only short breaks for food and water, and to rest for a few minutes before tackling a hill.

The sun passed its zenith. No village. In fact, nothing looked familiar. I filled my water skins at a small stream, the seventh? Eighth? I'd crossed so far.

Disappointment took over my weary frame, along with anxiety. Suppose Foxglove had used some kind of magic on our walk? Suppose Starstair wasn't the day's walk from Riverbank I'd thought, but was instead on the other side of the world?

Either way, I couldn't go much longer without some rest. With no sleep for the last 30 hours, my body begged for a nap. I chewed my lip, debating whether to press on, or to hide somewhere for some much needed sleep. A jaw wrenching yawn decided me. I wriggled my way into a bramble patch, obtaining numerous small scratches for my troubles. *Just a short nap. That's all I need.*

A drop of water falling on my face woke me. I groaned. *Please not rain.* I sat up and groaned again. My rope burnt hands throbbed, my legs and feet hurt, my shoulder ached from where the satchel strap had bitten into it, and I had a crick in my neck from sleeping curled up. And I was still cold. Several more drops fell on me. Definitely rain.

I plowed back out of the bramble bush and tried to get my bearings. The sun hesitated over the western horizon, obscured by thick gray clouds. *Only a couple of hours before it will be dark.* The thought of spending another night in the woods spurred me to climbing another tree. This time I climbed as high as I could. I squinted in all directions, looking for some kind of familiar landmark. Was that cloudbank over the Trefella Mountains? Which one of the valleys was carved by the Numic River? I couldn't tell. The forest spread out on all sides, humps here, dips there, but all green. There was no blue ribbon of river, no brown thread of road or clearing large enough to hold a village or even a house, not so much as a wisp of gray smoke to indicate human

presence.

I climbed back down and started east again. The ground became rockier and hillier, and it took more energy to climb up and down the rising number of hills. I tried to tell myself this was a good sign; the woods around Riverbank were hilly. I tried to convince myself that the rain was a good thing too; it would wash away my tracks. I didn't succeed on either count.

The sun departed for the night in a glorious blaze of red and pink that I couldn't appreciate. What little romance there'd been in escaping had long since deserted me. What good was escape if I couldn't get back to the village? Discouraged, I slumped against a tree. A questing hand in my satchel produced a partial loaf of bread that hadn't weathered the trip well. As it partially disintegrated on its way to my mouth, I consoled myself that at least I wouldn't starve. A second night in the woods hadn't been part of the plan, but I'd packed enough food for three. After considering my options, I opted to climb a tree yet again. This time I picked a hardwood with large forked branches. I worked my way up to where two waist thick branches covered in spongy moss made an almost comfortable sitting spot, even though the moss was wet. It hadn't stopped raining. I got as comfortable as possible and tried to sleep.

I must have dozed off a few times, but I spent the majority of the night tensed for any sinister noises. The soggy morning wasn't hailed as cheerfully as the previous one had been. It had gotten colder over night, and my wool cloak, almost soaked through, no longer sufficed to keep out the chill.

My cold hands slipped on the wet bark climbing down and I fell the last few feet out of the tree. *Add one large bruise on the posterior to my list of aches and pains.* I got

up and continued, pushing my way through the endless thick brush that blanketed that part of the forest. Getting over any kind of log became an ordeal, and a new hill to climb would bring me close to tears. When I crested a particularly daunting hill that had required using my hands in places to climb, only to see another one on the other side of a steep valley, I did cry. I flopped down on a rotten log and sniffed in misery, my tears joining the freezing rain water filtering down the hill.

The rustling of something large in the nearby bushes put a stop to the tears. I scrambled for my knife and berated myself for stopping in a place with no climbable trees close. I found the knife and brandished it at the bushes. A long, white nose parted the brush. I raised the knife higher and gasped. Two large black eyes observed me from either side of a silver tinted horn in the middle of a horse face.

The unicorn halted, only its head and neck out of the brush, and raised its head as high as it could, both ears pointed at me. It blew out a snort of caution. I could sympathize. Fairies, trolls, now a unicorn. What else lived in these woods that I'd thought was imaginary?

Unicorns hadn't figured prominently in Florio's Tales. There was one story, the "Unicorn and the Princess," in which the unicorn had helped the princess flee the evil sorcerer and reunite with her true love. In any event, I was fairly certain unicorns were friendly creatures. Not certain enough to lower the knife just yet, though.

The unicorn ducked its head and blew at the knife.

I didn't intend to drop it, I just did. The unicorn's eyes followed the knife to the ground. It blew out another snort and shook its head, not in a threatening way, more of a shaking-off-water kind of action.

I felt in my satchel, figuring I might as well see just how friendly unicorns were. Locating one of the carrots I'd packed, a little wrinkled and dry, but still edible, I held it out to the unicorn. I didn't look anything like the princess in the book, especially after two nights in the woods, but maybe...

The unicorn focused on the carrot. Its lips began to twitch. It took a tentative step toward me, then another. I could see its whole body now. It looked most like a small, pony-sized horse, but its legs had a definite goatish look to them, particularly in the fetlocks and cloven hoofs. It had a long rope-like tail that ended in a tuft of hair, a short mane, and a short beard like a goat's under its chin. Its coat shone a dazzling white, including its legs, remarkable considering all the mud on the ground from the recent rain and snow. Step by cautious step, it approached me. Pearly teeth clamped down on the end of the carrot and tugged it out of my hand. A few munches later and the carrot was no more. The unicorn nosed about on the ground for more, giving the knife a good sniff. I looked through my satchel. No more carrots. *Do unicorns like bread crumbs?* "That's all I have," I apologized.

The unicorn swished its tail and moved closer to inspect the satchel for itself. I reached out a tentative hand to stroke the hair of its neck. My hand sank into the satin hair and warmed immediately. In addition to being warm the hair also was dry.

"Can you help me?" I whispered, leaning toward it and basking in the warmth radiating from its body.

The bush end of the tail flicked in my face as the unicorn exhausted the possibilities of my satchel and settled on a clump of brown grass instead. I felt myself relaxing as the unicorn moseyed around, nibbling at tufts of grass and weed. My worries

faded to the status of irritating trifles. Why bother about where the village was? What really mattered was that I was warm and safe, here with the unicorn. I could just stay where I was the rest of my life and be happy.

The unicorn had other things on its mind. After a few minutes of peaceful grazing, it picked up its head and headed down the hill at a brisk walk, leaving me standing alone. I felt the rain patter down on me again. The cold returned and with it my depression. I watched the unicorn head off in a southerly direction. Then I looked east, at the near precipice I'd have to climb down before going up a near precipice on the other side. Or...the thought popped into my head, I could follow the unicorn. This idea, ludicrous to a clear mind, took root and held. Before disappearing into the bushes, the unicorn turned its head around to peer at me over its back. It gave a soft snort. That decided me.

I caught up to the unicorn by jogging and followed an arm's length behind it as it picked its way down the hill. Once, I lost my footing and slid into its hind legs. Worried I'd spook it away, I scrambled to my feet, but the unicorn only flicked its ears back reproachfully. At the bottom of the hill, we followed a creek down its valley for a ways. I worked up the nerve to walk beside the unicorn and wove one hand into its silky mane. The unicorn didn't object, and I felt better.

We traveled for what must have been about two hours. I say two hours from later calculations because, while walking beside the unicorn, I lost all track of time, or rather, paid no heed to it. I did notice when we reached the bank of a river, though not until we stopped at its very edge, and the unicorn plunged its nose in for a long drink. Noticing the dryness of my own throat, I followed its example, letting go of its mane to do so.

When I raised my head after a satisfying drought, my eyes encountered the base of a large rock across the river. The top surface sloped downward from both ends of the rock to form a wide U shape, almost like a giant's saddle.

“Saddle rock?” I traced it with my eyes to make sure as I wiped my wet face with my sleeve. If it was Saddle rock, there should be another, flat rock a hop from the riverbank, the top of which just stuck up above the water. I looked, and there was the flat rock, though only half of it remained above water. A flicker of the previous day's elation returned. I knew where I was. I'd gone too far north. This was the Numic River, a half days walk upstream from Riverbank. I could make it home from there.

The unicorn. “Thank you, oh, thank you.” I turned, intending to hug it. It wasn't beside me any longer. My eyes zigzagged about until I saw it ambling back the way we'd come. It paused to scratch its side with its horn. A mad urge seized me to run after it and follow its shining coat back to wherever it came from. I caught myself two steps into the brush after it. What was I thinking? I wanted to go home. A last flick of the tail, and it left my sight. I shook myself as a fat drop of water dripped down my neck.

Steps filled with renewed vigor, I headed for home. *I am not going to spend another night in the forest.* The closer I got to the village, the more familiar landmarks I saw. The well-used fire ring where I'd camped with my parents and Corice three summers ago. Even the ruined castle evoking the memory of the terrified moments I'd spent with my friends in its dungeon failed to dampen my mood. Already, my life at Starstair the last few months faded to the back of my mind to be replaced with fond memories and happy thoughts of reunion. Wouldn't they all be surprised? I skipped a step. It didn't even occur to me to watch for fairies anymore.

Finally the curve of the path wound around the last bend in the river, and I could see the village. Lazy smoke drifted upwards from sturdy brick chimneys. The houses themselves were small, dirty...and wonderful to behold after months at Starstair. I broke into a jog.

My first thought had been to run yelling into the center of town. I could picture the astonished faces, the welcoming smiles, the exclamations of admiration at my cleverness in escaping. Then again, a flamboyant entry wouldn't really be fair to my family. I directed my steps toward my home instead. It had never looked so good. The dirty thatch forming a contrast to the gleaming walls and the clean, glass windows with lamplight already glowing behind them, beckoned me home.

I'd stepped onto the threshold when a banging off to my right, behind the house told me that my father must still be working in his shop. *I'll surprise him first, and then he can help break the news to my mother.* I pushed open the shop door. My father didn't look up, absorbed in the table top he was planing. I stood for a moment, just looking at him. Did his hair have more gray in it? The lines around his eyes had certainly gotten deeper, but his hands remained the same, strong and sure, molding and cajoling the wood into the shape he wanted. I closed the door and waited for him to look up. He didn't. I cleared my throat. He set the planer aside and picked up some sandpaper.

"Father?"

He rubbed the sandpaper over the surface.

"Father." Louder this time.

He kept working.

A tingle of apprehension touched my spine. His hearing wasn't the best, but he

should have heard that. Something was wrong.

I walked toward him. Were the gray hairs due to something besides my disappearance? Had he lost his hearing in some accident?

“Father.” I shouted across the table and waved my arms, only three feet away from him. He set the sandpaper down and picked up the table to set it against the wall. His eyes slid right past me.

I let my hands fall to my side. “You can’t see me.” *What did Foxglove do?* I lunged toward him and grabbed at his arm. Reassurance flooded me, as I felt his strong muscles beneath his woolen shirt. I squeezed. My hand flew up as he reached for his hat. I let go and grabbed his other hand. This time I was none too gentle when I squeezed. He didn’t wince or pull his arm away. He leaned over the workbench and extinguished the lantern. He headed for the door, dragging me behind him, since I refused to let go.

The door frame barked the skin on my knuckle as he walked out of the shed. I let go and squeezed out the door after him, just avoiding getting a door slammed in my face. I followed a pace behind him up the well worn path to the house, mind scrambling. This wasn’t the homecoming I’d pictured. It had to be some kind of spell. That was the only explanation. I stopped just inside the threshold of the house and let my father move away from me while I breathed in my surroundings, the beautiful oak table, a wedding present from my father to my mother, the carved cupboards, one with a glass door to display mother’s best dishes, the stone fireplace, a fire blazing away as usual on a winter night. Two chairs sat at angles to each other, the fireplace and a pile of cushions in between them, my favorite spot to sit and watch the fire. The two other doors led to the small

kitchen and my parents' bedroom, closet sized by Starstair standards.

My mother's voice floated towards me from the kitchen. "Edrian? Supper's ready. Did you finish the table?"

I went over to the kitchen door. My mother was buttering the toast, the rest of the meal already laid out on a tray to carry into the main room. Only two servings.

"Mother?" I didn't expect an answer. She brushed by me, unseeing. New tears flowed down my face as I trudged back to the main room. I sat in my usual place on the long side of the table facing the window. The sun had gone down. I'd just made it back before dark, but back to what?

"No, I didn't finish it. There's still some sanding to do."

My stomach rumbled at the sight of the wholesome fare my mother had cooked, yet I didn't feel like eating. I watched them instead, trying to pretend that everything was the way it should be, that I'd never left, and we were eating dinner together as usual, chatting about our days as families do.

"You'll finish it tomorrow then?" My mother cut her potato into even slices.

My father shifted in his seat. "Actually." He looked down at his plate. "I talked to Rolant today. He's going searching again tomorrow."

"We've been over every inch of that forest, Edrian." Mother looked down at her own plate. "She's not there."

Father shrugged. "Not the forest. Rolant heard there's some band of shady characters over in Whistler's Hollow. Petty thieves mostly, but rumor has it they've been known to kidnap people. He's going to have a look. I didn't think it was a good idea for him to go by himself, so I offered to go too."

“Grehelda would go.”

He shook his head. “Now, you and I both know that wouldn’t be proper.” He considered a moment and added, “or very smart.”

“Whistler’s Hollow is a long ways.” My mother set her knife down, only to pick it up again, and cut her potatoes into even smaller pieces. She had yet to eat anything.

“You know I don’t like to be by myself.”

“I’ll be gone two days. Three at most.”

My mother stared at the fire, which was crackling away, indecently merry.

“Villon called this afternoon.”

“You can tell him I’ll have the table finished before the week is over.”

“He says he’s waited...”

“I don’t care what he says.”

Silence reigned to be broken by a sniff from my mother.

“Sorry.” He reached across the table to grab both her hands.

She sniffed again. “I don’t know whether to hope you find her or to hope you don’t. Whistler’s Hollow...”

“Hope that I do. Anything’s better than dead.”

“I’m not dead!” I shoved away from the table. The force of my standing overturned my chair.

Both my parents started.

“I’m not dead.” I grabbed my mother’s hand. “I’m not dead.”

She looked through me to the fallen chair. “Now what do you suppose caused it to fall over like that?”

“You must’ve bumped it.”

“I didn’t.”

“You must have.”

I vented my frustration in a shriek and paced away from the table to frown into the fire, one hand on the mantle. I heard the chair being righted. *Wait a minute.* They couldn’t see, hear, or feel me, but they could see the chair. They could see the effects of my actions.

Something to write on, I need something to write on. I walked around the room and into the kitchen, then into their room. What did they do with all the paper? I spied a couple of sheets on the stand next to the bed, and with them a quill and ink bottle. I grabbed all three and rushed back into the main room.

“I wouldn’t do that.” Foxglove’s icy voice knifed through me.

I slid to a stop.

She was sitting halfway up the steep staircase to my attic room, half obscured by the shadows. How long she’d been there I had no idea. I clutched the ink bottle tighter.

“Use your mind.” She leaned back on one elbow on the stair above her, and spoke in the drawling tone of someone who’s just woken up. “A sheet of paper and ink bottle transport themselves from the bedroom to the kitchen table. An invisible hand writes on it, claiming to be their invisible daughter.” She arched an eyebrow. “You’ll just frighten them.”

I looked over at my parents, who were continuing their conversation, oblivious to the fact that their daughter stood a few feet away.

“What did you do to me?”

She drummed her fingers against her leg. “It’s the basic servitude spell. I simply transferred you from your world to ours.”

“It’s the same world. I can see them. Why can’t they see me?”

“Enough questions.” She sat up. “If it’s not inconveniencing you too much, I’d like to get back to Starstair”

At her sarcasm, something fractured deep inside me. The quill broke under the pressure of my fingers. My feverish mind sorted through my options. 1. Snatch the fire poker, hold it to her throat and demand she unspell me. 2. Throw something at her and make a run for it. 3. Admit I was beat and return to Starstair and whatever punishment she had waiting for me. I didn’t like option three, and the dagger I could see tied to Foxglove’s waist made me think my chances of success with number one weren’t good. Number two it was.

I flung my arm back and hurled the ink bottle at her. I heard it shatter on the stairway and exclamations from my parents as I whirled and dashed for the front door. I yanked it open and charged into the street. Without thinking, I turned right out of habit toward Grehelda’s house.

A sharp call from the door of the house followed me. “Alina.”

Foxglove didn’t sound happy.

I sprinted down the dark, empty street. *Why is there never anyone around when you need them?* I chanced a look over my shoulder. Foxglove stood framed by the light from the open doorway, both hands on hips. She started toward me at a brisk walk. I ran faster. Which way to go? Back to the woods?

Grehelda’s house was right next to me. On impulse, I ran to it. I opened the door,

dashed inside, slammed it shut, and flung the bolt. That probably wouldn't stop her for long.

I spun away from the door to meet the astonished stares of Grehelda's family sitting at their table. Except they were looking at the door, not me. Grehelda wasn't there. I ran for the stairs, screaming her name. As I passed the fireplace, I scooped up a piece of charcoaled wood. It burned my hand, but I gritted my teeth and hung on anyway. I took the stairs two at a time and burst into Grehelda's room. She was lying on her bed, reading a book by lantern light. She frowned at the door in puzzlement. She was about to get a lot more puzzled. I shut and bolted her door also. "Grehelda."

She eyed the door.

"It's me." I ran across the room, and swept my arm across her vanity, pushing everything on the floor. That should get her attention.

She sat bolt upright. Her book dropped to the floor. Squinting against the pain in my hand, I clutched the burnt wood and began scraping letters on the wood surface of the vanity. A...L...I...the charcoal smudged the N. Someone rattled the door. *Come on.* I managed to get the A recognizable.

"Alina. Open the door."

I looked back at the door. It shook harder. Lucky for me, fairy magic didn't extend to door opening.

Grehelda looked from her vanity to the door and back again. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her stoop and reach for something under the bed. I concentrated on my writing. The charcoal wasn't scraping off as easily. I turned the stick over and wrote with the other end. A scraping sound came from the door.

“Who’s there?”

I shot a glance at Grehelda then looked again. *Where did she get a sword?* She stood irresolute between the vanity and the door. At least she had the sword pointed at the door.

The wood brushed against the vanity without leaving any more writing; I’d run out of charcoal. The words: *ALINA KIDNAPPD B FAIR* scrawled across the surface.

The door shot open, the bolt splintered by Foxglove’s dagger. She stalked toward me. “What are you doing?” She stopped, confronted by the erratic waving of the sword. Grehelda had started to swing it around when the door opened.

I took advantage of Foxglove’s pause to get behind Grehelda.

“Father!” Grehelda jabbed in the direction of the door, just missing Foxglove. She addressed the air around her. “Whoever or whatever you are. You’d better leave me alone.” She swung the sword in an arc. I crouched to avoid it. She finished her swing and, incredibly, ended up with her sword pointed at Foxglove again.

Foxglove glared at me over the sword. “Stop this foolishness and come with me now.”

“Get her, Grehelda.”

Foxglove’s eyes narrowed. I probably shouldn’t have said that out loud. Then again, I was beyond caring. *Let her do her worst*, I thought with a touch of hysteria. The sounds of a commotion downstairs and pounding footsteps coming up the stairs reached my ears.

Grehelda moved over to the vanity, sword still pointed at the door, and looked down at the writing. “Alina,” she gasped and lowered the sword. Foxglove immediately

started for me again.

I already had my hand on the latch to Grehelda's window. I flung it open and, without looking, leaned back out of it. *I hope the hay pile is still there.*

I fell halfway through the haystack, legs above my head. Pandemonium erupted behind me. Grehelda shouted. "Alina. It's Alina." Her father yelled something else and someone, it sounded like her little brother, was crying. I struggled out of the stack and took off running again. I ducked into the woods behind her house and kept running, no clear destination in mind.

Hard fingers closed on my hair and yanked me to a stop. "That's enough of this." Foxglove hissed. "You will be quiet and come with me now." She landed behind me, breathing hard from her flight from Grehelda's window.

"I won't..." the rest of my sentence caught in my throat as the spell took hold.

Foxglove kept one hand in my hair to pull me after her. Sharp pain assaulted my scalp as she half dragged me through the forest; an action completely unnecessary since my enchanted feet kept an even pace with her.

"You've seen there is no life for you back there. Show some sense, girl." She put her fingers in her mouth and whistled. "I'll have no more of this." Two horses trotted out of the trees. The first one whickered a greeting. I looked back, hoping to see Grehelda charging after us, sword waving.

"Get on the horse." Foxglove shoved me toward it.

I stumbled over to the horse. My hand reach out without my bidding and grabbed the stirrup to guide my foot in, before catching hold of the pommel and swinging my body up onto the horse. The bridle didn't have any reins; I wouldn't have been able to

keep the horse from following Foxglove's even if I hadn't been enchanted.

The shouting from Grehelda's house faded behind us as the horses moved deeper into the forest. I started to shiver, now that I wasn't running around or sitting in a warm house anymore. I held the pommel numbly in one hand and swayed to the horse's motion. No tears, no outburst of emotion. I felt nothing but my shivering and the rocking of the horse. I saw nothing but Foxglove's mesmeric, waving wings on the horse in front of me.

It seemed as though only a few minutes had passed when Foxglove hailed the guards at the Starstair gate. I dismounted and marched after her to the castle while stable hands took the horses. I felt a brief touch on my shoulder and a whispered, "Courage" from Kester before he faded into the shadows with my horse.

Courage? The word echoed in my mind, mocking me. *Why?*

We entered the receiving room of the Turquoise wing. I had no memory of the walk from the stable. A shadow dozing in a chair by the fireplace stirred as Foxglove's sharp, tapping footsteps echoed on the stone floor. The figure leaned over the arm of the chair and jabbed at the fire with his finger. It flared to new life, revealing Ash's face.

"You found her."

"Of course. What are you still doing up?" Foxglove stopped.

My enchanted feet carried me to her side, and I stopped too.

Ash addressed his mother, but his gaze kept sliding back to me. "I wanted to talk to you about Buttercup."

"Still moping in her room because her pet human ran off?" Foxglove sighed.

"You should leave her alone and stop encouraging that behavior."

Ash just looked at her.

She rubbed her temple. “Fine. We’ll talk. I want to change clothes first though. Why don’t you take Alina down to the dungeon? By the time you get back I’ll be changed.”

Ash hesitated.

“Oh come, Ash. She deserves it after the trouble she’s put me through tonight. She even urged her little friend to stab me.”

His eyes widened.

Foxglove brushed my arm. “Do what Ash tells you.”

I didn’t watch her go. My eyes were drawn instead to the flickering fireplace, so like the fire at home.

“Nobody told you, did they?” Ash kicked a wayward coal back into the fire with the side of his foot. “That you can’t go back to your world?”

I shook my head once. I didn’t care if I ever talked again. Silence enfolded us.

“I’m sorry.”

He meant it too. *Don’t be nice to me. I’ll cry if you’re nice to me and I’m so tired of crying. I’m tired of everything.*

“Look.” He shifted his weight. “If you won’t tell anyone, I’ll take you to your room instead of the dungeon. I think you’ve had enough trouble for tonight, yes?”

I lifted my shoulders and dropped them. I felt that if I tried to speak I wouldn’t be able to keep the tears at bay any longer.

“Agate tower, right?” I trailed behind him on the familiar path to my room. He kept looking over his shoulder to see if I was following. I looked down at my feet every

time he looked back.

Halfway up the tower he said, "Buttercup has sorely missed her sewing instructor. She hasn't left her room since she found out you were gone." There was rebuke in his tone.

Poor Buttercup. The tears brimmed closer to the surface. I fought them down by focusing on his first sentence until I figured out what was wrong with it. *He knows about the sewing.*

"Oh don't worry about the sewing lessons." He added as my step slowed. "I won't tell anyone. I think it's a good idea actually. It gives her something else to think about besides Ytrebil."

He stepped aside so I could get into my room. "Good night." He started down the steps.

"Is she okay?"

He paused mid step and turned surprised eyes toward me. He considered before answering. "She was very hurt that you left."

I fixed vacant eyes on the stone wall beyond him. "It wasn't her I was leaving."

"I know. I think she does too."

I nodded and kept nodding, realizing after a few seconds that my head had continued the motion. I arrested it with an effort, and started to shut the door.

"Alina."

I stopped with the door open a crack.

"I really am sorry."

"Me too." I said and closed the door.

Chapter VIII

Carnation didn't say a word about my absence. I should have been grateful for that. I wasn't. I wasn't...anything. I went through the motions of sewing without being conscious of the fabric beneath my hands or the seams I produced.

At midday, Netta brought Carnation word that she was to eat with Foxglove. She also brought me my meal. After Carnation had breezed out of the room, she sat down at the table with a second tray of food for herself and picked at it.

I pushed some peas around on my plate, not interested in eating them, though they did remind me of another significant conversation that had taken place between me and Netta. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Netta herded her peas into a corner of her plate. "I told you escape was impossible. Would you have believed me if I'd said why?"

I didn't say anything. We both knew the answer to that.

Netta nodded. "I didn't think so. Most people have to find out for themselves."

"Is that how you and Chansy found out?"

Her hand stilled. "What do you mean?"

I pushed my plate away. "I found the secret compartment in the wardrobe, the letters, and your escape plan."

"Ah." She looked out the window. "I didn't know Chansy had even kept that."

"Did you try to escape?"

"I don't see that that's really your business."

"You're right. It's not." *Enough of this.* I returned to my chair in the corner and my sewing, surprised to see that I'd nearly finished hemming the skirt that morning.

Netta nibbled through the rest of her meal. In the end, she only ate half of it. She didn't try to initiate any conversation except to say when she was done, "Are you going to eat your food?"

I shook my head. She took it with her when she left, without saying goodbye.

I skipped dinner and went straight up to my room as soon as Carnation said I could. I lay facedown on the bed, wondering if Buttercup would come, wondering if I wanted her to come.

She did. A soft knock on my door after dusk announced her. I called for her to enter, smoothing my dress as I stood. I found that I was, after all, glad that she came.

Buttercup peered around the door at me first, before sliding into the room. Instead of coming straight over to the bed, like she usually did, she stopped on the rug in the middle of the room, and flicked her wings, a sign of nerves for Buttercup.

"Ash asked me to bring you these." She reached into her sewing bag and produced a worn doll, a wooden hairbrush, and a folded shawl. I reached out a trembling hand to take the doll.

"Lady." I caressed the doll's yarn hair. "How....?"

Buttercup regained some of her animation. "Ash thought you might like some of your old things. He asked Foxglove first thing this morning where your house was. He went and brought this stuff back for you. Is that really your doll?" She pointed at the faded cloth dress and chipped china face.

"Yes. She is. Her name is Lady, and she's a princess." I smiled at memories Buttercup wouldn't understand. "Please tell your cousin thank you for me."

"Mm hmm." She bobbed her head. The wing flickering increased in tempo. The

diversion of the doll had been a reprieve, not a pardon. Buttercup wouldn't ignore the issue like Carnation. I took a breath to try to explain. I owed her that much.

“Do you mind being a slave so much?” Her wings stilled to rigid walls framing her questioning face. She didn't give me time to answer. “Foxglove says it's better for humans in a lot of ways. They live longer, are safer, healthier,” one word tripped over the next, “and you have nicer things.” She eyed the doll again.

“If Foxglove thinks it's so wonderful she should try it herself.”

“So you really do mind?”

I blew my air out in exasperation, forgetting my intention to explain as gently as I could. “Yes, I mind, Buttercup. Why do you think I tried to escape?”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault.” I held out my hand for her sewing. It peaked out of a pocket, half hidden, but ready to leap to hand depending on my mood. I made a great show of concentrating on it to avoid any more questions about my best-forgotten escape. “I think we'll need to tear this side seam out and try again. See how it doesn't lie flat?” I started at the top, Buttercup at the bottom, and we worked towards each other, ripping out the seam.

Buttercup worked in silence. I watched her from the corner of my eye. I could pretend nothing had changed, but it had, and I didn't want my failed escape attempt to ruin the one good thing about my life at Starstair. I searched for the best words. “Do you know the one thing I regretted when I thought I was leaving Starstair?”

She shook her head.

“I would've missed you.”

Her sudden hug took me by surprise. “I would’ve missed you too,” she said.

I gasped for air beneath her exuberant embrace. “I saw trolls.”

The statement had the desired effect. Buttercup released her strangle hold, so she could sit back and look at me. “Really?”

Nothing would do after that, but that I give a full recital of my adventures.

“Unicorns are lucky.” She informed me at that point in my recitation. “You were lucky too.”

Could have fooled me.

“Unicorns are magic. People will follow them for days sometimes, kind of enchanted. It isn’t that the unicorns are malicious, they just have that effect, especially on girls.”

We chatted, much as we had before my escape, for the rest of the lesson. Buttercup gave me another hug before leaving. She whistled on her way out, and I was comforted to know that our relationship wasn’t irreparably damaged.

As the door slapped shut behind her though, I felt the weight of my disappointment and hopelessness descend anew. I flopped back on the bed. *Why do people undress for bed?* I didn’t have any desire too.

“What was she doing here?”

I bolted upright on the bed and faced the door. Seeing who was there, I lay back again. “I wish you wouldn’t sneak up on me like that, Shelaine.”

“Who’s sneaking?” She walked over to my dressing table and examined the items on its surface. “Your many appendaged friend didn’t shut it properly. What was she doing here, and where were you last night?” She set my doll down and glared at me.

“I had this great huge package of food and stuff to comfort you in the dungeon, and you weren’t there.”

“Thank you anyway.”

“You’re welcome.” She sniffed. “But you didn’t answer my questions.”

“No offense, but the answers are both kind of secrets.”

Shelaine shrugged. “Secrets, huh? Fine. I’ll find out sooner or later.” She walked to the wardrobe and opened it. “Did you find the secret compartment yet?” She poked in the back of the wardrobe. “Whoa. You were serious about escaping weren’t you?” She pulled out my two spare lanterns and stuck her head inside again. “Where did you even get these?” She held out the butcher knives. “Nobody mentioned they were missing from the kitchen.”

I obviously wasn’t going to get to indulge in a self pity fest just yet. I left the bed to walk over to Shelaine. I removed the knives and lanterns from her hands, and put them back in the wardrobe. “Do you mind? This is my wardrobe.”

“Grumpy tonight, aren’t you?” She plopped down on the bed and bounced up and down on it. “Hmm. You’ve got a soft bed. Of course, I expect I’d be grumpy too if I’d gone through all the planning you’ve obviously done and then found out it was all no good.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it.”

She moved a couple of feet down the mattress and bounced on a new section. “That’s your problem you know. Not wanting to talk. If you’d told me what you were going to do, I could have told you that it wouldn’t work.”

My temper rose. She was right, but it didn’t seem nice to rub it in like that. I

stalked to the chair by the window and looked determinedly out at the rain. I heard the bouncing stop. Shelaine walked up and stood behind me.

“Sorry. My mouth gets away with me,” she offered in a quiet voice. “I just wish you hadn’t had to find out the hard way. I thought Netta told you, or I would’ve mentioned it.”

Mollified, I consented to half turn from the window. “She said she figured I wouldn’t believe her.”

Shelaine snorted. “That’s probably because I didn’t. I thought she was just trying to scare me.” She lowered herself to the floor in front of my chair and sat cross legged. “I escaped the third week I was here.”

“And?”

“And, I wandered around in the bushes for close to two weeks before I happened across a road. I followed two travelers, yelling at them until I was hoarse, before I figured out that they couldn’t hear me, see me, or feel me. That was after I stole a day’s worth of food from them, when I thought they were ignoring me.”

“Who brought you back to Starstair?”

“Mahogany. But I had already started back on my own. I didn’t want to go on to my home just to have my family ignore me like those travelers. I figured there had to be some way to get the spell lifted. A week later I met Kester. He encouraged me to not ever give up, and now, we’ve finally got a real chance at freedom.” Outside rain started to fall, beating on the roof of the tower. She raised her voice over it. “That’s mainly why I’m here tonight, actually. I thought you might have reconsidered joining us. Our next gathering is tomorrow night, in Triss’s room.”

I should have known she'd bring that up again. I didn't answer immediately, choosing instead to watch the rain pouring down outside. The weather, at least, matched my mood. "I don't think so, Shelaine." All the objections I'd had to the rebellion still remained, to be joined by the conviction that it wouldn't work anyway. I might as well admit I was stuck at Starstair the rest of my life. My very long life. *Sigh.*

Long faced, Shelaine levered herself up with an "oomph." "I guess I'll leave then. You looked all set to have a good cry. I'm not the crying sort myself, I prefer to do things rather than cry about them, but I suppose it must help some people." She lingered.

I watched rivulets of rain water slide down the outside of the window. Shelaine had a point. I didn't feel like crying. A drop of water fell on the window and hung to the glass. Could anything be worse than living a slave the rest of my life? Wasn't the hope, however slim, of a successful rebellion reuniting me with my family and friends worth the unpleasantness and risk I'd be running? A drop above the first traced down the glass, colliding with it. For a brief moment they both sat there. *My family, my freedom. What else do I have to lose?* Both drops plummeted down the surface of the window and disappeared beneath the sill.

"Shelaine?"

"Yes?"

"Where did you say the gathering will be?"

* * * *

The next evening found me on the floor of Triss's room, sandwiched between Shelaine and an older human named Jens, or something like that. His mouth was full when he introduced himself, so I couldn't be sure. The same fellow as before, Makov,

who seemed to be something of a second of command to Kester wandered around the corridor outside, and would rap a warning on the door anytime someone came near the room.

At my insistence, Shelaine spent the time between our arrival at Triss's room and the beginning of the gathering explaining a little more about fairy magic. The gist of it was that while everyone talked about the fairy "world," it was in fact the same world as the human's, like I'd commented to Foxglove. The fairy's magic, however, gave them a special place in that world along with the other magical creatures, like the trolls, so that they and everyone they enchanted were invisible, untouchable, and otherwise unknown to human senses. If a fairy wanted a plant or animal to be invisible to humans, they needed a sunbeam to work the spell, just like when they took humans. Inanimate objects like cloth, glass, and the stone that comprised Starstair became invisible on their own after extended contact with the magical "world" or if they were in contact solely with magical objects or creatures. Thus, my parents couldn't see the paper and ink bottle when I was carrying them because the only thing they were touching was me and I was enchanted, but once I threw the ink bottle, they were able to see it. The door, chair and other objects I touched remained visible because they were in contact with the ground. But if, for example, I were to take the chair back to Starstair with me, it would transfer to the fairy world in a few days and be lost to my parents. Shelaine's explanations and my reflections on those explanations during the meeting kept me absorbed enough that I didn't worry as much about being caught as I had at the last gathering. I listened without fear to Kester, who stood on a chair by the wall and held forth on the evils of all fairykind. Progress reports were shorter than the first gathering I'd attended, and the

whole meeting had a more subdued tone to it.

One of the women got irritated after Kester kept asking her questions. “We’re doing all we can, you know. But until Shelaine accomplishes her part, there’s only so much to do.”

Shelaine shot to her feet. “I suppose you think you could do better?”

Kester held up both hands in a quelling gesture. “Shelaine, no one is insinuating that you’re not doing as well as could possibly be expected under the circumstances. Kalli, I realize you’ve done as much as you can for the time being.”

Shelaine settled back to the floor, and the other woman returned to her spot on the windowsill.

Kester beamed at the room. “I think that’s enough for tonight. I’ll let you know when we’ll be meeting again.” Muted conversation broke out around the room as people waited their turn to be dismissed. Several of them shook my hand and expressed their delight that I’d be helping Shelaine. *But helping with what?*

Kester waded through the crowd to me and Shelaine. “Alina. Delighted to see you again. Tell me, what did you do with my rope?”

“Your ro...oh. I left it in a bramble patch in the woods. You didn’t get in trouble for that did you?”

He waved the question away. “No. No. Aside from the fifty lashes and being hung by my toes.”

Shelaine shoved him on the shoulder. “Kester.”

He grinned and rubbed his shoulder. “A minor inconvenience is all.”

“Because I’d feel very bad...”

“Forget it. I’m just sorry you went through all that trouble.”

Sorry, sorry, sorry, everyone’s sorry. A person can only take so much sympathy.

I was saved from responding to Kester by a young man who pulled him aside to a corner to talk. The young man’s eyes were blood shot and his gestures excited.

Shelaine leaned over and spoke in my ear. “That’s Venard. He’s engaged to Riona.” She jerked her chin in the direction of a pretty, black haired girl standing a little ways off, watching Kester and Venard talk. “She’s been having...trouble...recently with one of the younger fairies in her family, Cypress.” Shelaine spat the name out. “She’s gone to the human affairs court and they did a whole lot of nothing. ‘Fairy justice’ at work. Venard’s about to go off the edge worrying.”

In the corner, Kester placed his hands on Venard’s shoulders and spoke in his face. Venard nodded, and nodded again. Kester let go, and Venard held out a hand for Riona. They left the room together.

Kester walked slowly back to us, brooding. “Nothing good will come of that situation,” he said to Shelaine, then dismissed the subject with a shake. Smile back in place, he draped one arm over each of our shoulders. “Shall I escort the two prettiest maidens in the castle back to their wing now?”

“Since it’s on your way to the stable you might as well,” said Shelaine.

“Are you insinuating that I’d let the two of you walk back alone and defenseless if it was out of my way?”

I stifled a laugh.

Kester looked at me with an air of injured pride.

I apologized for laughing. “It’s just ‘defenseless’ and ‘Shelaine’ don’t seem to

me to belong in the same sentence with each other.”

“Nonetheless.” He held the door for us with a flourish of his cloak. “I’ll have you know I’d go clear to the Gold wing to see you safely to your rooms.” He nodded to the sentry at the door. “Keep an eye on Venard, Makov, I’m worried.” He returned his smile to Shelaine and me, “...Perhaps not to the Amethyst wing, that would double my travel time.” Shelaine chased him down the corridor for that. I followed at a more leisurely pace. Out of the meeting, the two of them made no effort to be quiet but laughed and joked clear back to the corridor that separated the Jade wing from the Turquoise wing. Shelaine, who was in front, almost ran into Netta going around a corner.

“Excuse me.” Shelaine backed up to a painting of four sad-faced fairies bending over a sick child to let Netta pass.

Netta looked from Shelaine, to me, to Kester. “I wonder if I might have a word with you, Kester.” Her formal voice held no warmth.

Kester’s smile faded. He dropped his gaze to his hands, which he clasped in front of him. “Well, Netta. I imagine I already know what you want to say to me. And I imagine you already know what my response will be.”

“I’m not interested in your imagination.” Netta raised a hand. “You can imagine yourself on the moon for all I care. But when you reach the end of this path you seem bent on taking and find your own destruction, it would be my wish that you didn’t destroy others with yourself.”

Shelaine started an angry retort. Kester put a hand on her arm and shook his head. “Your problem, Netta, is not realizing that all of us slaves are being destroyed, one piece at a time, whatever path we’ve chosen.” He sauntered past her, his hand still on

Shelaine's arm. I trailed behind. Netta sought my eyes with her sad ones as I walked by. I thought for a moment she would say something to me. She started forward as though to block my path, but subsided back to the wall where Shelaine had stood, her face an echo of the faces in the portrait. I threw her a look of apology then quickened my pace.

Apology? What am I apologizing for?

Kester left us at the bottom of the Agate tower. Shelaine started to follow him, but I blocked her. "I'd like to know what it is everyone assumes I'll be helping with."

Shelaine stood on tiptoe to wave at Kester over my shoulder. "Of course. Meet me tomorrow night in the kitchen and I'll tell you."

"The kitchen?"

"The kitchen," she repeated firmly and scurried away.

I spoke to the empty air. "I was hoping for an explanation now." I disturbed a sleeping pigeon on one of the tower windowsills on my way up.

"Intolerable," it twittered at me.

"You have no idea," I muttered.

* * * *

Although it was tempting to make Shelaine come to me the next evening, I made my way to the kitchen after Buttercup left. Darkness welcomed me on opening the door. I groped around on the shelves in the half light from the open door until my hand encountered a candle. A few embers still glowed in the fire with which I lighted the candle. Someone had left out a couple of carrots. I sat down at the long table and snacked on them while waiting for Shelaine. Experience suggested I might be waiting awhile.

She breezed in a few minutes after me, and slid across the bench on the other side of the table. “Apples, pears, oranges, shares.” She snatched one of the carrots and settled down on the bench.

I looked from my carrotless hands to Shelaine’s busy mouth. “What was that about?”

“Didn’t you ever play ‘Apples, Pears’ growing up? You have to say ‘keep’ before I get to ‘shares,’ or you have to share.”

I gave her a blank look.

“Oh never mind. You can have it back.” She held what was left of the carrot, chewed end first, to me.

I eyed the mangled end. “That’s okay. You can keep it. I’m more interested in why I’m here.”

“Just a minute,” she mumbled around the carrot in her mouth. She finished chewing, and grabbed a couple of buckets that were sitting next to the table. She walked back to the kitchen door, where she stacked them next to it. “This way if someone comes in the door we’ll have some warning.” She opened the door a crack to make sure it bumped into the buckets, before returning to her seat. “So you probably want to know how we plan on getting out of this bug house.”

“If you don’t mind.” My irony was lost on Shelaine.

“It started ten years ago.” She picked the carrot back up and took another bite. “Up until then, everyone thought that escape was, like Netta told you, impossible. Oh, you could get away. Live in the forest somewhere for the rest of your life with other escaped slaves, a band of recluses, unable to rejoin the real world, hiding from fairies the

rest of their lives. But get back to your own life? Nobody thought it could be done.”

I had the feeling she’d told this story before. She looked around the kitchen as she spoke, and only took a breath every other sentence or so.

“Then, ten years ago, a score of slaves in Snowgate, led by a fellow named Dom, kidnapped the king. They held him in a cave in the forest and swore they’d kill him unless their masters took the slave spell off of them. We kept expecting to hear that they’d been overcome or recaptured, but at the end of the month, the king himself sent a note to the fairies telling them to comply, and they did. The humans walked away from the cave and back to their lives and, as far as anyone knows, they’re living there happily still.”

“Please tell me you’re not planning on kidnapping the king.”

Shelaine swallowed the last of the carrot and shook her head hard enough to bounce her curls. “Not likely. After that incident, all the fairies tightened their guard around the king, including here. It’d be stupider to try than jumping off the Tower of the Clouds.”

I really am going to have to climb that tower sometime.

She leaned across the table with both elbows resting on it, and lowered her voice.

“No, our plan is to kidnap the children.”

When I didn’t jump up and start applauding, she sat up again, and returned to a normal speaking voice. “See, they’ll be much easier to capture than an adult butterfly. The trick with an adult is you have to stay out of reach. If they can get as much as a finger on you, that’s the end of that. Better not be any animals around either because a lot of animals will come to their aid without them even putting on a spell. The younger

ones can't do as much."

"Kidnapping children is your plan?" I stood. "No thank you."

Shelaine lunged across the table to grasp my wrist. "Sit down and let me finish, will you?"

I sat down, not from a desire to hear more of her lunacy, but because I figured I'd have to drag her clear back to my room hanging onto my ankle if I didn't.

"We kidnap a close relative of every fairy that's taken each of us in the rebellion. We hide them someplace secure, than demand the fairies give us our freedom."

"Or?"

She tilted her head to the side. "What do you mean, 'or'?"

"'Give us our freedom' or you'll do what?"

She let go of my wrist. "Nothing. That's the problem with it. If they don't believe our bluff, we're done for." She frowned at me. "They'll be as safe and snug as hibernating rabbits. You don't really think we'd actually hurt children, even fairy brats? That would make us as bad as them."

I could see a similarity to the fairies kidnapping human children but decided it would be wiser not to voice that thought. "You're sure there's only one problem with it? Because I can think of several more. Starting with, where are you going to keep them?"

"That's why we're here." She beamed and waved an arm around the kitchen, encompassing the counters, wash basins and the door to the root cellar.

"You're going to keep them in the kitchen."

She dropped her shoulders. "No. Alina. Focus."

"I'm trying, but you don't make it easy."

She grimaced. “We can’t keep them in the castle. It wouldn’t take more than a few hours for the flutterflies to search every corner of this place. We’ve got to keep them outside. For that matter, we’ve got to keep ourselves outside. It’s getting harder and harder to meet without attracting suspicion and store our supplies. We need some way to get in and out of the castle without any fairies noticing.”

“I’m still not seeing the kitchen connection.”

“You remember Makov?”

“Was he the one...?”

She was already talking, “He overheard two old fairies talking one day about secret passages out of the castle. One of them mentioned one in this very kitchen and asked if anyone still used it. The other said no one used it anymore, and he didn’t think anyone but the two of them even knew about it. Well they’ve both died since then, and as near as we can tell, no one else does know about it.”

“You and your secret passages.” I eyed my surroundings with renewed interest. *A hidden panel in one of the cupboards maybe? A loose tile on the floor?*

“I’ve been looking for the last six months most every night.” Shelaine dropped back onto the bench with a discouraged shrug. “It has to be servants from the Turquoise family doing the searching because it’s the Turquoise kitchen. Anyone else would have no excuse if they got caught. And until you came, that’s just me. Kellany has to sleep with the younger girls so she can never get away and Tarl had an...hmm...unpleasant encounter with a fairy about the time we found out about the passage and he’s been under special scrutiny since.”

I rubbed the dust off a patch of the floor beneath the table. So many things might

go wrong with this “plan,” if you could even call it that. Wishful thinking might better describe it. And even if, by some bizarre twist, it actually worked, I balked at the thought of kidnapping children, fairy or otherwise. But did I have any better ideas? No. Did I want out of Starstair? Yes. So for the time being, until I did have a better idea...“Alright, I’ll help you find your secret passage, but only if you promise me you’ve told me the truth tonight, and the lot of you aren’t planning on using that arsenal you’ve got stored up unless it’s absolutely necessary, and then only on adults.”

She bounced to her feet and placed her hand on her heart. “I promise.”

I got up, dumped the carrot ends in the compost basket, and walked over to the closest wall.

“I’ve tried that wall already.”

I arrested my hand, inches from pushing on the wall. “What walls haven’t you tried?”

Shelaine scratched her head and squinted her eyes. “Actually, I’ve tried them all. I’ve poked all along the floor too and parts of the ceiling. Whoever made this passage hid it well.”

I ran my hand along the wall above the counter, past the cutting boards. A sack of potatoes slumped in the northeast corner of the kitchen. I walked to the corner where I squatted, pushing the sack out of the way so I could inspect the join where the walls met. I rapped on the wood. It sounded like...well, like wood. *What does a secret passage sound like?* I looked under my arm for Shelaine. All I could see was one foot. The rest of her was sandwiched between the oven and the spice cupboard. I poked hopefully at a couple of knots. Nothing happened.

Any delusion I might have entertained about finding the passage that evening when Shelaine had been searching for six months faded within the first hour. So did my energy. “I think I’m going to have to stop, Shelaine. I need to get some sleep.”

Shelaine was enthusiastically poking the ceiling with a metal rod of some kind. “It can’t even be midnight yet.”

She’ll have me here all night if she can. “Good night, Shelaine.”

Chapter IX

In the next few days, I fell back into much the same routine as before. Work for Carnation all day, mostly sewing and some cleaning, and teach sewing to Buttercup in the evenings. Then I'd sneak down to the kitchen and continue the, what I increasingly considered hopeless, search for the secret passage.

Carnation never did allude to my escape. I caught her watching me sometimes, the way one watches a wild animal, not sure what it will do next. Sometimes, when I saw her doing that, I'd act accordingly just for the fun of it: Stand, turn around once and sit down, shout "aha" when I threaded a needle, that sort of thing. I had to entertain myself somehow. I'd lost interest in sewing at Carnation's fifth dress.

One morning, about a month after my ill-fated escape attempt, I arrived at Carnation's rooms to find her wearing a hole in the thick rug between the window that overlooked the courtyard and the door. "Where have you been? Oh never mind." She hurried over to her window. "Good, they haven't left yet. Run back to your room and get your boots and cloak. No wait." She fluttered her hand at me, looking down at something in the courtyard. "No time. You can wear some of my clothes."

I stood in the center of the room while she yanked open one of the wardrobes and rooted through its contents. A scarf sailed through the air to land on the floor followed by two pairs of shoes.

Perfect, more work for me. I stooped to pick up the scarf, and a pair of boots hit me in the face.

"Wear those."

I rubbed the bridge of my nose.

Carnation dashed to the wardrobe containing the cloaks, oblivious to the damage she'd done to my face.

"Dare I ask where we're going?" I found a chair and took off my house shoes.

"Winter patrol." She flung a cloak at me on her way back to the window.

"Hurry."

Winter patrol. Isn't that what she's been trying to avoid? While tying my laces, I stole a good look at Carnation. She wore her new riding dress. Not surprising, but she also wore diamond earrings, several gold bracelets, and she had rouged her cheeks.

"That wouldn't be Prince Hemlock down in the courtyard, would it?"

She tore her gaze away from the view out the window to fix me with a curious look. "How did you know that?"

"Just a guess."

"The guard is running winter maneuvers today," she said, rubbing a hole in the fog her breath had made on the glass. "I only just found out yesterday, but I talked to grandfather last night and volunteered for winter patrol. If we're lucky, we'll be able to see the whole thing."

If we're lucky?

"Oh! We have to go now." She checked her reflection in the mirror as she dashed past it to the door.

The courtyard reverberated with the snorting of horses, creaking of leather, and clanking of metal. A group of fairies, all younger males, sat on horses, rubbing their hands together and eyeing the snow heavy sky gloomily. Hemlock stood out in a bright red cloak and hat on a palomino stallion. Ash crouched over his black mare a few horses

down. When he spotted Carnation, he directed his horse over to us. “What are you doing out here?”

“None of your business.” Carnation lifted her chin, looked over at Hemlock, and turned so her profile was to the prince. He was talking with the rider next to him, so the gesture was lost.

“If you think you’re coming along on maneuvers....”

“I’m on winter patrol, alright?”

He fiddled with the strap that went around his horse’s neck. “I thought Violet was going today.”

“I switched. Where is that stablehand? He should have our horses ready by now.” She started to run into the stable, checked herself, and shot a glance at Hemlock. She continued at a more sedate pace, swinging her hips to the point that it looked like she’d injured something.

Seeing Ash up close reminded me that I owed him. “I’ve been wanting to thank you for bringing me my things.”

“What?” Ash was looking at Carnation’s retreating back. “Oh, your doll and such. Don’t think anything about it.” He shifted in the saddle with a leathery creak and looked down at me. “Look. I know this is asking a lot, but please try to keep her out of our way. For her sake, as well as mine. Hemlock’s got a temper and doesn’t appreciate distractions on maneuvers.”

I wanted to say, “You’re right, that is asking a lot.” I did owe him though, several times over, so I just said, “I’ll do what I can. I can’t promise anything.”

Carnation emerged from the stable, towing a short sorrel by the mane. Kester

followed, leading a second horse, also brown.

“I know.” Ash wrapped his cloak tighter as a gust of icy wind blew through the gate. “Thank you. I feel better knowing someone responsible is going with her.”

Hemlock shouted out something, and Ash wheeled his horse around to join the column filing out the gate at a trot. I spent the time between his leaving and Carnation’s arrival at my side trying to figure out which of my escapades since my arrival at Starstair had convinced him I was responsible.

A few stray snow flakes drifted into my vision as Kester arrived at my side. He cupped his hands to give me a boost into the saddle. “Going for a little country jaunt?” In an undertone he added, “You know it’ll be snowing up a blizzard before the morning’s through.”

I slid into position in the saddle. “Thanks for the information. Do you have any other happy news to impart before we leave?”

He grinned and patted the horse’s neck. “Take good care of Kill here.”

I shot him a suspicious look. “Kill?”

“Short for Killdeer.”

Carnation trotted away as soon as her seat touched the saddle. Unsure how to get my horse to follow without any reins, I was relieved when he trotted after her without me doing a thing. Once outside the gate, Carnation urged her horse into a canter to close the gap between her and the riders ahead.

The snow stood over two feet in places, and even though we followed the path plowed by the riders in front of us, Killdeer began to sweat before we were out of sight of the castle. I struggled to find my balance in the saddle. It was only my second time in a

fairy saddle, and the first one didn't count because Foxglove had had me enchanted. "Saddle," I decided was too generous a word for the contraption. "Flat piece of leather with nothing to hold onto," would have been a more descriptive, albeit cumbersome name for it. I jostled side to side and forward to back, one hand wrapped in Killdeer's mane.

A half hour later, the snow began to fall in earnest. Hemlock's band stopped in a meadow and began running through drills similar to the ones I'd seen in the training ground, only on a larger scale. The two of us sat on our horses on a little rise a quarter mile distant from the others. I pulled my already soggy cloak close about me and tried to think warm thoughts. Finally, it was snowing so hard we couldn't see more than shadowy outlines of the guard. Carnation slumped in her saddle, looking almost as miserable as her sopping wet horse.

"Shall we go back?" I tried not to sound too eager.

"We haven't patrolled yet." She watched a fat snowflake drift onto her horse's mane. "I'll get in trouble if I don't go round."

I stifled a groan. I didn't know what winter patrol was, but the word "patrol" didn't suggest an activity of short duration. With a last wistful glance at the meadow, Carnation turned her horse back the way we'd come. Killdeer took off after hers eagerly, probably figuring we were headed back for the stable. About halfway back, Carnation veered off into the woods on a less worn path. Killdeer hesitated before plunging into the deeper snow after hers. I patted his neck. "I know how you feel," I murmured, then to Carnation: "What is winter patrol anyway?"

Her voice drifted back to me, difficult to make out because she continued to face

forward in the saddle. “Every winter the king and queen divide up the land around Starstair among the families. We’re each responsible to do at least a cursory patrol of some part of our section every day to make sure everything’s fine.”

“How do you tell if everything’s fine?”

“Oh, different things.”

Fine. I hunched lower in the saddle. Unfortunately, my posterior was getting as sore as my hands were cold. I’d been in the saddle over half the day with only infrequent rests while watching the maneuvers. Furthermore, Carnation had, in typical Carnation fashion, not thought to bring any food. All in all, my misery had been doubling every hour we spent in the saddle.

The path Carnation led us down wound through a sort of open wood with large openings between great tall trees whose tops were not visible above the falling snow. The snow swirled around us with increasing intensity making it difficult to see very far. *Some patrol.* About all we were patrolling was the path right in front of us and even that was hard to see.

We’d been riding for over an hour when Carnation pulled her horse to a halt. Anxious to keep moving and get back to the castle, I asked, “Why are you stopping?”

“I’m looking for the halfway point. We should have passed it by now. It’s a red flag on a long pole. You don’t see it by any chance?” She stood in her stirrups and swiveled in the saddle to look back at me.

An unpleasant suspicion hit me. “Wait. Should have passed it by now? Are you saying we’re *lost*?”

“Of course not.” She plopped back in the saddle but kept scanning the forest

instead of walking on. "I think it might be this way." She finally nudged her horse forward and guided to the left.

We are lost.

The forest thickened about us, and the light faded to almost night darkness as the trees grew closer together. True night couldn't be far away either. We came to what might have been a fork in the trail. *If we're even still on a trail.* The snow made it difficult to tell what were paths, what were game trails, and what were just brushless areas covered by snow. At the fork, Carnation paused and looked down one path, then the other, then the first again. She pivoted in the saddle again. "What do you think?"

"You're asking me?" I was so cold I wasn't even shaking anymore.

She slumped in the saddle and mumbled something.

"What?"

"You were right. We're lost." She didn't say anything else or try to move her horse. After a few minutes I realized she was waiting for me to do something.

I sighed. "I'll climb a tree." *I really need a new way to find my way around the forest.*

The view from the top of the tree was uninspiring. Lots of white. Once, through a break in the clouds, I thought I saw some light at a distance. *Might be Starstair.*

Ten feet from the bottom of the tree on my way down, the branch I was standing on broke. I hung by one hand from a limb for a few seconds trying to find another branch with my feet, but my cold fingers couldn't hang on. I fell feet first. My hand hit one branch, my knee hit another then my head hit one. Pain exploded in my skull so that I didn't even notice when I hit the ground. I must not have actually lost consciousness,

because I was aware of Carnation screaming. At some point she realized that wasn't helping, got off her horse, and started trying to pull me to my feet. The shaking didn't help anymore than the screaming had. I used her arm to get to my feet, one hand on the back of my head. Carnation dragged me back to the horses. "Don't scare me like that. Did you see it?"

Oh it hurts a lot, but I think I'll be alright. "I saw something in that direction." I pointed to my left, considered the tree and my position, and changed the direction I was pointing to behind me.

"Let's go then."

It was a good thing Killdeer was well mannered because my mounting procedure was more reminiscent of scrambling over a sand dune than getting on a horse. Soon afterwards, Carnation reached into a pocket of her riding skirt and pulled out something I couldn't see. A spurt of fire came to life in her cupped hand almost simultaneous with the disappearance of all daylight from the forest. Unpleasant memories of the nights spent in the forest during my escape...and what else had been in the forest at night crowded my mind.

Shouldn't someone be looking for us? That might not have been Starstair I saw at all. We could be going in completely the wrong direction. The snow crunched beneath the horses' hooves. If anything was hunting, we were making plenty of noise. Just as that unpleasant thought occurred to me, Carnation's horse jerked to a halt and blew out a snort of air, head up, eyes focused on something on the path in front of it. Killdeer followed suit. I wished desperately for reins. If he was going to bolt, I wanted some way to guide him away from low hanging branches. Because I definitely didn't want to fall

off to be left to the mercy of whatever was coming down the path and causing the horses to spook.

“What’s there?” Carnation’s voice contained a quiver. I noted her use of “what” rather than “who.” I tensed as tight as Killdeer. I had a good idea what was there. If I hadn’t been mounted, I would have been running already.

Something slunk down the shadowy path, a dark patch against the white patches of snow. Killdeer quivered under me. I readied for flight.

A large black cat padded into sight.

“Nageri,” Carnation rapped out. “I could kill you, you nasty, sly beast. Creeping up on us like that.”

“Kerrnaissun. Is late.” The panther’s guttural tones caused both horses to lift their heads even higher. Carnation kept one hand running ceaselessly down her horse’s neck which I suspected was why we weren’t both riding runaways back the way we’d come.

“I know it’s late. Tiger Lily or whoever it was that sent you certainly took their time. We’re half frozen.”

Nageri turned his head away from Carnation to gaze at me. He slowly blinked. “Mus hurry.”

Carnation slapped the front of her saddle. “I know!” A clump of snow fell off a branch to our left. Carnation whipped her head around at the noise and only partly relaxed when she realized it was only snow. “Just lead us back to the castle Nageri.”

Nageri paced back in the direction he’d come. I felt a surge of satisfaction. *I had us going in the right direction.* My satisfaction fled when Killdeer stumbled, jarring me

and causing my head to hurt even more.

An owl swooped over our heads. It squawked and flew off in the general direction we were going.

“Is that...?”

“One of our owls,” Carnation agreed. “We should see help soon.”

Sure enough, torch light appeared in front of us. Welcome shouts broke the silence as three fairies headed by Ash flew toward us, torches in one hand and swords in the other. Ash dropped to the ground in front of Carnation’s horse. The other two flew past us and scouted the surrounding shadows.

“Carnation. Are you alright?” Ash stepped to her horse’s side, and raised his torch to see her face.

“No. I’m not alright.” Her voice was high and tight with strain. “Where have you been? We were wandering around out there for ages. Why weren’t you looking for us?”

Ash took her overemotional diatribe without flinching. “It’s over now. We’re only a short distance from the castle.”

Oh rapture! Carnation and Ash slid out of focus. I shook my head and whispered. “Almost there.” Partly to Killdeer whose head hung so low his nose brushed the snow, mostly to myself.

Ash heard my whispered words and turned his attention to me, taking in my wet and torn clothing. “Are you okay, Alina? What happened to your head?”

I felt the side of my head and found blood. That figured. “An ugly encounter with a tree branch. The tree branch won.”

A corner of his mouth tweaked up. “Must have been a tough branch.”

I didn’t feel the situation really called for humor.

He waded through the snow to me. *Where did he get the second torch?* I focused on it, and the double image resolved back into one. I blinked hard. *That won’t do.* He held up his torch and squinted at my wound. “I’m not much of a healer but if you’ll bend over...”

I did and the motion made my head whirl even more. He placed his fingertips on the wound. A sharp pain shot through my head followed by a slowly fading ache until, by the time he removed his hand, the pain was down to a barely noticeable throb.”

“Can we go now?” Carnation asked.

As Ash had said, we were little more than an arrow shot from the edge of the trees around the castle. With the pain lessened, I noticed my dizziness more. I got off Killdeer and walked the poor beast the rest of the way to the castle, hoping to clear my head as well as give him a rest. The walking had the added bonus of returning some of the circulation to my frozen legs.

Guards watching on the walls hailed us as we approached. Two figures appeared in the gate and jogged to meet us, Kester and another stablehand.

“Alina, are you okay? Let me take your horse.” Kester reached my side. “Poor Kill.” He rubbed the lethargic horse’s neck. “What’s she had you doing?”

“He was excellent, Kester.” We passed under the torchlit gateway to the safety of Starstair.

“Sounds like the both of you have had a long day. You can relax now, though.”

A flock of fairies descended on Carnation, Mahogany and Foxglove in the

forefront. Their bright colored fur capes faded in and out of focus.

“Alina,” I heard Kester exclaim as my knees sagged. I felt an arm slide around my waist and heard a grunt as Kester absorbed my full weight with one arm.

“Deo. Come take Kill. Quickly boy.”

“I’m okay.” I tried to mumble. Nobody seemed to hear. Or had I even said it? My head rolled back. Movement on one of the balconies on one of the towers snagged the edge of my narrowing vision. I tried to focus blurry eyes on Nageri and the cloaked figure standing beside him.

“I’ve got her.” I fought to regain full consciousness as I felt myself passed from Kester’s arm to both of Ash’s.

It was no good. All faded to black.

* * * *

“I think I should take her back to her room and send for the healer. That wound could be serious.”

“Wait until she regains consciousness.”

“You’re sure she will? Perhaps I should bring the healer out here.”

“Not into my room, you won’t. Hand me another blanket, Shelaine. We’ve got to get her out of those wet clothes”

That last jolted me back into consciousness. “Don’t you dare, Kester.” I glared at him from half open eyes. I was lying on a pile of furs. A snort nearby suggested it was somewhere in or by the stable. I couldn’t see much due to the three faces crowding around me.

“I knew she was faking.”

I managed a weak smile. “Hello to you too, Shelaine.”

“Can you drink this?” Kester stuck a cup of something hot under my nose. I focused cross-eyed on it as he proceeded to tip it into my mouth. I sputtered and coughed but managed to get it down.

“Now up you get.” He slipped a hand around me, ignoring my wet back, and lifted me into a sitting position. I met the downward gaze of Ash, who stood with crossed arms a couple of steps back. Kester dabbed at my wet chin with a cloth that smelled strongly of horse. “You know, when I said you could relax collapsing wasn’t what I had in mind.”

I smiled again, stronger this time. My eyes flitted back to Ash, wondering absurdly if he still thought I was someone responsible. Kester followed my eyes and his smile wavered. He shifted me over to Shelaine. “I think the two of us should leave the room so Alina can get changed.” He marched away with a pointed look at Ash as he passed him on the way to the door. Ash raised an eyebrow at me, the expression on his face somewhere between a frown and a bemused smile. Kester cleared his throat in the doorway. Ash left.

Shelaine shoved a bundle of fabric at me. “Here, I grabbed some of your clothes and brought them down here.” She bent, slid a shoulder under my arm, and lifted me to my feet. The room spun, and I had to lean hard on her.

The room came to rest with the fireplace directly in front of me. A homemade chair and table sat in one corner. I had just risen from what must have been Kester’s bed, a mound of furs and blankets with no bedstead. The walls were wood and decorated with bridles, halters, and other horsey looking items I couldn’t identify. “Kester’s room?”

“Shh.” Shelaine pointed at the door. She pulled me closer to it and pantomimed listening by cupping a hand to her ear. Together we started the laborious process of removing my frozen clothing.

Quiet voices filtered through the thin wood of the door. “We should get her back inside the castle as soon as possible.” Ash said.

“Patience. Let her warm up a little out here before she crosses that courtyard.”

Shelaine gave a ferocious tug on my dress and it swept clear of my head. She held it between her thumb and forefinger and dropped it in the corner. A slight draft brushed my bare arm and I shivered. *I’ll never, ever be warm again.*

“Tell me, what exactly is your interest in Alina?” Kester asked.

I paused, a dry dress halfway over my head. Shelaine tugged it down. I started to speak.

She waved a hand at me. “I want to hear his answer.”

“What sort of question is that?” Ash’s voice contained a hint of displeasure and discomfort. “She’s obviously ill from the cold. Someone needs to look after her.”

The sound of a chair sliding across the floor. “You’ll pardon my saying so, but your kind doesn’t typically bother themselves about the welfare of humans.”

Footsteps crossed the room outside. Ash’s grave voice answered. “You do us an injustice.”

“I speak from experience. So, what’s your interest in Alina?”

Silence both inside and outside the room, as all three of us held our breaths to hear Ash’s answer.

He chuckled dryly. “You’re very plainspoken. Kester, isn’t it?”

“Aye.”

A thoughtful pause. “Alright. I told her to watch out for Carnation when I should have tied Carnation to a post in the stable. Then this wouldn’t have happened. They were lucky nothing worse than getting lost happened.”

I slipped on a pair of dry stockings, warmed by Ash’s concern.

“So it’s only guilt you’re feeling?” Kester sounded skeptical.

“Tell me why you wouldn’t let me send for the healer?”

“Because that old bat would scare her into deeper sickness.”

Ear to the door, Shelaine pushed another pair of stockings at me.

“Shelaine, you already gave me a pair...” I wiggled my still cold toes. *Hmm.* I took the socks and pulled them on over the other pair while wordlessly agreeing with Kester. I’d seen the fairy assigned to taking care of humans’ illnesses and injuries.

“Now if you’d let a real fairy healer tend to our illnesses, that’d be a different cart of canaries altogether.” Kester’s voice approached the door. “And now we should talk about the weather or something equally mundane. Otherwise those two are bound to spend the whole night eavesdropping. Hear me, Shelaine?”

“Bother.” Shelaine wrinkled her nose. “Oh well.” She settled me into a thick cloak that dragged the ground and pulled the hood over my head. It hung over the top half of my face. Between the hood and my cold, white skin, I could play the part of the castle ghost.

“Think you can make it back to your room?”

I suppressed a groan at the thought of all those stairs. “Yes.”

Kester and Ash turned to meet us as we exited Kester’s room into the aisle of the

stable, Kester saying, “Well and you look better already. Time to be getting back, I suppose.”

“Thank you, Kester.”

He ducked his head. “Nothing at all, my dear. Now I’ll let your gentleman friend and Shelaine see you back. There’s a couple of horses in the stable over there that are sorely in need of some loving care. Goodnight. Shelaine. Milord.” He went into an exaggerated bow to Ash.

Shelaine watched him saunter toward the other end of the stable. “I wonder if I should help him. The fellow that usually helps him is ill, and Deo is new to horses.” She rocked back and forth on her feet, torn.

“You can if you like. I’ll see Alina gets back to her room safely,” Ash offered.

Shelaine looked him up and down. “You will, huh?” She looked between me, Ash, and the departing Kester, weighing her options. “Alright. I’ll check on her when I get back to the castle so you’d better see she gets back safe and sound.”

Ash worked his mouth, fighting a smile. “You have my word.”

Nobody asked me who I’d rather have escort me back to my room.

“Ready?” Ash had one hand on the iron handle of the heavy sliding door to the stable.

I pulled my hood tighter around my face. “Ready.”

Ash pulled the door open, and we both rushed through it. After closing it, he took my arm, and we scurried across the courtyard. Snow was falling again. The crowd that had gathered around me and Carnation had dispersed. The only living souls I saw were two guards on the walls, huddled next to torches, looking perfectly miserable.

We made the castle in excellent time but not so fast that I didn't feel the cold seeping into my bones again. It warmed only a little inside the castle. Being made of stone, Starstair couldn't be called warm at anytime. Thick wall hangings and rugs helped, but my little attic room at my parents' house was warmer than my room at Starstair.

I stopped at the bottom of the first set of stairs. "You know what I associate with Starstair more than anything else?"

Ash smiled uncertainly. "I'm afraid to ask."

"Fatigue. Absolute, bone weary, mind numbing fatigue."

He glanced up the staircase. "It is a long walk up to your room." He shot me a thoughtful look. "If you like, I could put a spell on you to get up the stairs."

"No." *Too abrupt. Be polite Alina.* "...Thank you."

My slow progress up the stairs and Ash's determination to see me clear to the door of my room, despite me repeatedly telling him it wasn't necessary, gave us plenty of time to talk. I asked if Carnation was alright. He said that she was shaken but fine. I asked if the maneuvers had gone well. He replied that it was the first snow maneuver they'd been on that year, and it had showed. We reached the top of the second staircase and made faster progress down a short hall before starting up the third.

"How long have you known Shelaine and Kester?" he asked.

I glanced sideways at him, trying to divine the motive behind his question. "I met Shelaine the first week I was here and Kester a little after." Emboldened by his good natured response to Kester's queries I added, "Why?"

"Oh. No reason." He scuffed one foot in the carpet while he waited for me to

catch my air. “He’s an interesting fellow. Saucy. I’ve heard about him, but I don’t believe I’ve ever talked with him before.”

I motioned with my head, indicating I was ready to keep going. “Heard what?”

He shrugged evasively. “This and that.”

A different day I might have tried to get more out of him. As it was, I filed away the fact that the fairies talked about Kester among themselves, and let it go.

“They both seem very fond of you. Kester in particular.” He dropped eye contact.

“They’re good friends.”

Ash’s mouth tightened and he nodded.

“They’re not as attached to me as they are to each other though. I think they’ll get married one of these days, if they can stop poking fun at each other long enough to say the vows.”

We reached the bottom of the tower staircase and I leaned against the wall.

Ash eyed the staircase and me. “With all due respect, Alina, at the rate you’re going it will take all night to climb these stairs.”

Not true. It would only take...half the night. I stood silent for close to a minute under the pretense of catching my breath, arguing with myself. “Oh. Alright.” I had to fight the impulse to step away from him as he brushed his hand across my forehead.

“Follow me, please.”

The “please” was a nice touch.

He took off, taking the stairs two at a time and I raced after him, my enchanted legs heedless of my fatigue. I was alternately laughing and gasping for air by the time we

reached my door, the mad sprint up those stairs taking less than a quarter of the time it had taken to climb the rest.

He took the spell off, and his laughing face grew somber. “Thank you. For staying with Carnation. I know she’s a stuck up, aggravating prig most of the time, but she’s my sister and tonight could have gone very badly.”

“You’re welcome.”

He looked like he wanted to say something more. I swayed on my feet.

“I won’t keep you,” he said. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

Chapter X

Since the onset of winter, the fairies had increased guards at night to watch for trolls. The precautions were proved prudent when three times in as many months, trolls attacked the walls. High in my tower, I blessedly slept through the first attack. Subsequent attacks found me wide awake with the covers pulled childishly over my head, while angry firelight reached as high as my window. A few fairies were injured, and the wall was damaged again.

“Why do they always attack at night?” I asked Shelaine the night after the third troll attack as we searched for loose tiles on the kitchen floor for what must have been the twentieth time.

Shelaine paused her searching long enough to shoot me an incredulous look. “This from the girl that was quoting Florio to me the other night?”

I thought hard and soon remembered the story she must be referring to. “You mean they really do turn to stone in the sun?”

“Crazy, isn’t it?”

I resumed examining the tiles. “Then why don’t the fairies hunt down the trolls during the daylight?”

“Ha. Because they value their pretty hides too much. So long as they stay inside the walls and let the trolls attack them, hardly anyone gets killed. If they venture into those caves where the trolls live, and where there’s not enough room to fly above them, it’d be a fair fight.” She pondered a stain on the tile she was inspecting. “Maybe even a fight in favor of the trolls.”

“You sound like you’re on the trolls’ side.” I raised my eyebrows in question.

“Do I?” She pried at the edge of the tile. When it wouldn’t budge, she pounded her fist on it in frustration. She sat back on her heels and rubbed her back. “Well I’m not. In fact, I figure a troll’s about the only thing worse than a fairy. They eat you.”

“Yes, I don’t imagine it gets much worse than that.” I followed Shelaine’s example and straightened, forgetting I was halfway under the table and banging my head. “Oww.”

“It would be nice if they’d just get serious about fighting each other and finish each other off, though.” Shelaine added.

I probed the tender spot on my head. “Why do the trolls attack the castle, anyway?”

With a heavy sigh, Shelaine scooted over to the next tile. “They’re trolls. Who knows why they do what they do?” She glowered at the inoffensive tile. “I suppose at some point a fairy killed one of them and they’ve never gotten over it or something like that. I don’t think they eat fairies.” She mused. “Wings probably tickle their throats too much.”

“You do know you’re barbaric sometimes.”

“Right. I forget you’ve got flutterfly friends.”

I didn’t answer her. My association with Buttercup had been the source of several arguments between the two of us. Shelaine admitted that Buttercup was decent, “for a flutterfly,” but couldn’t fathom my sympathy and friendship for her. “If you must teach someone lessons in order to feel useful, why not one of the human girls?” she pestered. “They need it as much as her, more so even.” I’d tried to explain that Buttercup needed the attention just as much as the teenage girls that thrived as well as slaves could under

Netta's care. Any mention of Netta was likely to spark another argument however. Remaining friends with both Shelaine and Netta had proved an exercise in tact and frustration. Both of them wanted me to break contact with the other. Shelaine waxed louder and more insistent, but Netta's subtle hints and well thought arguments proved a greater challenge to rebut.

On this occasion, I decided not to discuss Buttercup or Netta with Shelaine and kept my mouth shut.

"Look! It's moving." Shelaine let out a muted shriek.

I crawled over to her on hands and knees.

"Do you suppose this is really it?" Together we pried at the tile to reveal...stone.

It was a loose tile, nothing more.

"Oh!" Shelaine jumped to her feet and kicked it. "Right. I'm going to bed." She marched out of the kitchen.

I replaced the tile and followed, my frustration mirroring hers. Our hunt for a secret passage had become more urgent, at least to Shelaine's mind, in the last two weeks. News had come from a neighboring castle of an unsuccessful human rebellion. Even though the leaders had been executed, and the violence quashed handily by the fairies, it made all the Starstair fairies nervous. Kester, Makov and a couple of others thought they were being watched. Kester had called off the gatherings for the time being, warning everyone to limit their contact with him. From Shelaine's reaction, one would have thought he'd called off the rebellion altogether.

The next time Carnation went on winter patrol, I joined Shelaine to visit Kester in his self-imposed solitude. We found him oiling tack in his room, humming to himself, oil

smears across one temple and hair standing on end, an unlikely looking rabble rouser. Shelaine spent a full five minutes bemoaning our failure to find the passage, during which Kester and I exchanged bemused glances over her curly head. He stopped her complaints by tossing an oiled rag at her.

“Well that’s it,” he said in mock sternness. “I hereby demote you from secret passage finding to saddle cleaning. Get to it.”

Shelaine wasn’t in the mood to be teased. She stamped her foot. “I’ll have you know I’ve found more secret passages in my 37 years here than you have your whole stay, Kester of Tollbridge. And you can oil your own smelly saddles.” She threw the rag back at him.

An angry command at the entrance of the stable cut short Kester’s rejoinder. “Stable boy! I want a word with you.”

“So long as it’s only one,” Kester muttered. He draped the rag over Shelaine’s head on his way to the door between the workshop and the main stable. The owner of the voice got there first.

“There you are.” The sharp faced fairy had to bend his head to come in under the low doorway. “Lazing about inside, I see.”

“Actually, he was cleaning saddles after a bunch of fairies got them disgusting dirty.” Shelaine slid into place next to Kester, arms folded, her annoyance forgotten in the face of a common foe.

“Shelaine,” Kester warned with a small shake of his head.

The fairy frowned at Shelaine. “What are you doing here?”

I tried to place the fairy. He looked familiar. *I ought to know who he is.* Two

more fairies squeezed into the room behind him that I knew for sure, Ash and Hemlock.

I looked from Ash to the speaker and back, the resemblance jolted my memory. *Yes.*

This is his older brother, Poplar.

Ash saw me and started. He jerked his head at his brother's back and frowned, an expression filled with meaning. Whatever was coming, it wasn't good. Hemlock looked bored. His eyes roved over the room, and finding nothing of interest in the odd bits of leather and metal strewn about, fixed on his coat sleeve. He began to pick bits of leaf and straw off it.

"I'm helping." Shelaine answered Poplar, in a tone that clearly stated that he was not.

Kester moved in front of Shelaine. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Look at this." In one swift motion, Poplar raised his right hand and tossed something at Kester's head. Kester ducked and caught it in one hand, eyebrows raised.

Shelaine and I crowded close to get a look at it.

"A cinch strap," Shelaine said. "Fascinating."

"Either hold your tongue or leave, Shelaine," Kester said in an undertone. I had to agree. She was going to get all three of us thrown in the dungeon.

"How did it break?" asked Kester.

"What does it matter how it broke?" snarled Poplar. "The important thing is that it did break. At an inconvenient time."

Hemlock turned what might have been a snicker into a delicate cough. I noticed that Poplar's cloak was smudged with dirt in the vicinity of his backside.

"You mean you fell..."

“I wonder if you’d fetch some hot water from the kitchen, Shelaine.” Kester talked over her. “I need to make a mash for Badger.”

Shelaine opened her mouth, mutiny glaring from her face.

“Now, Shelaine, if you please.”

She shot a dirty look at him before reluctantly heading out the door past the fairies, giving Poplar an even dirtier look on her way out.

Kester rocked back on his heels and smiled, an expression that didn’t reach his eyes. “Now. I expect you’re wanting a replacement for this cinch.”

“What I want!” Poplar slammed the workbench with his palm, “is to inform you that I won’t stand for this inexcusable laziness anymore.” His voice rose in pitch.

Hemlock watched him from under downcast eyes, leaving off his inspection of his cloak.

Ash remained close to the doorway, rigid as a board.

Poplar drew his sword.

“Poplar,” said Ash.

“Perhaps you’d best go help Shelaine, Alina.” Kester said softly, the cinch dangling limply in one hand. I stepped closer to him, unable to look away from the sword, but determined to see this through.

Voice calm, Kester addressed Poplar. “Can you explain what you mean?”

Poplar crossed the short distance between them in short, brittle steps, each one punctuated with a jab of the sword. “It’s your job to care for the tack, isn’t it? Your job to inspect it and make sure it’s all working, isn’t it? What do you really do here?” He moved directly in front of Kester, and looked down at him, sword held loosely in hand. “Play with that dark haired serving wench all day while mice eat at the saddles? Sit by

the fire in your little den and drink while mold grows on the cleaning rags? Put your feet up on the table and have a secret laugh at the stupid fairies who don't know what really goes on out here?" He stepped back again, and raised the tip of the sword, level to Kester's chest.

Kester refused to cower. His pasted smile had disappeared. His jaw set, and his hands clenched. *Nothing good can of this.* But what could I do? I looked over at Ash. His frown had deepened, but he made no move to stop his brother's diatribe.

Hemlock slid over to the table and sat on the edge, one boot resting on the bench that ran the table's length. No one spoke for a moment. The tip of Poplar's sword hovered inches from Kester's jacket.

It was Hemlock who spoke, addressing Kester, although he watched Poplar with a slight frown. "Well. What do you have to say for yourself, fellow?"

Kester didn't look away from Poplar. "Which question did you want me to answer?"

They glared at each other for a couple of breaths, and then, with an effort of will, Kester lowered his gaze. He took a step back from the livid fairy and set the broken cinch on the table. He picked up the fire poker and prodded the dying fire in the hearth.

"Don't turn your back on me."

The fairies couldn't see Kester's face the way he was turned to the fire, but I could. It had gone from flushed to snowy pale. His lower lip had gone bloodless from where he was biting it. The hand holding the poker tightened. He saw me looking at him. I think he read the panic in my eyes because he loosened his posture and nodded reassurance. I wasn't reassured.

“As I recall,” he said, slowly pivoting away from the fire, poker still in hand. “I warned you when you insisted upon that particular saddle this morning that it was not in its usual place because it was in for repairs. But you said something about the substitute saddle not having enough padding for a long ride?”

Hemlock snorted again, this time not bothering to turn it into a cough.

“You insolent, lying...” Poplar raised his sword and started for Kester. I shouted, “Kester!” at the same time Ash shouted “Poplar!”

I don’t think Poplar would have killed him. I hope he wouldn’t have killed him. He rushed at Kester with the hilt of the sword raised as though to club him with it. Kester ducked at the last second and raised the poker over his head. The hilt of the sword met the iron poker just where the guard connected to the blade with a jarring clank of metal upon metal. Frustrated, Poplar stepped back and slashed with all his strength at the poker protecting Kester’s head. A sharp crack sounded. The upper half of the sword broke off and clattered into the fire.

Everyone stared at the fireplace, Ash, halfway across the room to Poplar, Hemlock, alert and upright on the table, Poplar arm still raised, looking stunned. I was also halfway to Kester and Poplar, though with no clear idea what I would do when I got there. Kester stepped to the side, out of sword reach.

“Poplar,” protested Ash.

Can’t he say anything else?

Poplar lowered his arm, as if coming out of a trance. “My new blade,” he whispered. His gaze shifted to Kester and hardened. “Get it out of the fire.”

Kester crouched on the other side of the fire, poker held defensively in front of

him. "Certainly," he said and warily sidestepped toward the wall.

"First, give me that poker."

Kester's eyes darted left and right, considering. I started toward him again to be stopped by a hand on my arm. Ash shook his head. I tried to shake away his hand. He wouldn't let go.

Kester had no choice. Staying out of reach, he extended the poker, handle first to Poplar.

Poplar snatched it, and Kester took a quick step back. No blow followed, though.

Still in a sideways gait, one eye on Poplar, Kester started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Poplar pointed the remnant of the sword at him.

Kester straightened a little. "To get some water to put the fire out."

"Oh no you don't." Poplar dropped his sword and rushed at Kester. Kester, in turn, lunged for the wall. A long pair of hoof clippers hung there. He reached for them, but not fast enough. Poplar reached him before he could grab them to defend himself. I cried a warning. Ash left my side and ran after Poplar, half vaulting over the table. Instead of striking Kester, Poplar closed his hand around Kester's wrist. Ash stopped.

"Get it now," Poplar whispered harshly, pulling Kester to him. He gave him a little shove, and stepped back. I didn't understand for a moment. Then Kester took two wooden steps toward the hearth, perspiration standing out on his forehead. Two more steps. His right hand left his side and reached mechanically towards the fire.

No! I could see him fighting the spell, his entire body rigid, strain showing on his face. Two more tiny steps closer to the fire which was only a couple paces away.

"Stop it!" I cried, glancing at the stony faced Poplar. I ran to Kester and grabbed

at his arm, trying to force it down. It was as immovable as a stone pillar.

“Leave the room, Alina.” Kester hissed through clenched teeth. He stumbled closer to the fire, knocking into me.

I looked to Ash for help, but he was gone from where he’d been standing. I felt the breeze of someone passing behind me, and he appeared beside the fire. He thrust his hand palm downward into the flames. The fire flickered and went out. He pushed aside a couple of dead coals and grabbed the end of the sword blade. He held the blade out to Poplar. “That’s enough.”

“Stay out of this, little brother.” Poplar’s face had taken on a purplish hue.

“Hemlock?” Ash looked over at the prince, who was semi-reclined on the table, twirling the end of a golden cord tied about his waist in an affectation of unconcern. He swung his legs over onto the bench and sat up. “Ash is right. That’s enough.” He spoke lightly, the way one might tell a server when to stop pouring a drink.

“Fine.” Poplar ignored the sword blade in Ash’s hand and stalked from the room. Ash looked at Kester, who stood immobile three steps from the fireplace.

“Coming, Ash?” Hemlock slid off the table and moseyed to the door with a feline grace. Ash hesitated. He opened his mouth, shut it, and whirled about to follow Hemlock.

With the fairies gone, I turned my attention to Kester. The pallor of his face worried me. “You should sit down.”

He looked down at his right hand. It was shaking, and he took hold of it with his other hand to still its movement. He didn’t sit down. “I’m sorry you had to see that, Alina.” His grip on his own wrist tightened until his hand turned pale. He held it out in

front of him then, critically examining it. The shaking had stopped. “Then again, maybe it’s good you saw what they can be like. Spending all your time with Carnation, you’ve been a trifle sheltered.”

Well, I’m going to sit down. I folded onto the bench, almost sitting in a patch of dark mud left by Hemlock’s boots. “I can’t believe he was going to make you put your hand in the fire.”

Kester stooped by the dead fire and pushed the timbers into line to start a new one. Without it, the room already had started to slip towards freezing.

“At least Ash...”

“Is a fairy like the rest of them.” Kester’s sharp retort surprised me with its vehemence. “Don’t forget that, Alina. Oh, he’s better than most, but when the real conflict comes, and it will come.” He recovered the poker, which Poplar had flung on the floor, and stabbed at a log. “He’ll fight on their side.”

I felt sick to my stomach, both from what had just happened, and from Kester’s avowal that “conflict” would come.

Under Kester’s coaxing, a small flame wheezed to life in the hearth. Kester stacked kindling around it and blew. In no time, he had a fire crackling away. Then, finally, he moved over to the bench on the other side of the table and sat. He had relaxed some, but a small furrow still crossed his forehead. “Thank you for trying to help.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Kester,” someone called from outside. “Patrol’s back.”

Kester pushed to his feet. “That’ll be your lovely little charge.”

I shook my head at his calmness. If it had been me, I’d have been hiding in my

bed, with no desire to see a fairy ever again.

“Oh, Alina.” He rubbed the side of his nose. “Don’t tell Shelaine about today, alright?”

I could imagine Shelaine storming over to Poplar’s room and punching him.

“Good thinking.”

“I have my moments of brilliance.” He winked.

It didn’t keep me from a somber frame of mind as I hurried across the cold courtyard back into the castle.

I could hear raised voices as I entered the Turquoise wing. I started to go back, but it was twice as far to get back to my room via the parlor and north stair. Whoever it was sounded fairly agitated. *Maybe I can slip by without them noticing or caring.* I eased into the alcove adjacent to the Turquoise receiving room and peaked around the door frame. The lack of lighting in the alcove meant I could see the occupants of the room, but they would have to come much closer before they could see me in the gloom.

I groaned when I saw that the loudest voice belonged to Poplar. He was still accompanied by Ash and Hemlock. Hemlock was draped artistically over a divan in the corner. Ash stood next to him, while Poplar paced back and forth in front of them.

“You just shouldn’t have interfered, Ash.” Poplar said, fixing his brother with a glare.

“Oh really, Poplar.” Hemlock sighed. “That’s got to be the tenth time you’ve said that.”

“Well he shouldn’t have.”

“Make that eleven times.”

Neither Poplar nor Ash smiled.

“I’m glad you think this is funny, Hemlock.” Poplar stopped his pacing to transfer his glare to Hemlock. “It’s not just about pride, you know.”

Hemlock arched his eyebrows eloquently.

Poplar swiped self consciously at the dirt on his cloak. “It’s about keeping them in their place. You know what happened in Snowgate.”

Hemlock shrugged.

“And in Highmoat.”

The smile disappeared from Hemlock’s face. “This isn’t Highmoat.”

Poplar waved a hand at him. “But it could be. The signs are all there. And don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. That stablehand is right in the middle of it too.” He resumed his pacing.

Hemlock took his gold cord between his fingers and began twirling it again in a lazy loop. “And your solution is to cripple them all? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of having slaves at all?”

Poplar rolled his eyes. “Alright, I overreacted. But we’ve got to take a firm hand. Show them the consequences will be serious for any and all insubordination.”

“That will hasten a rebellion. Not end it.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to Ash. He was sandwiched between the wall and the divan, with the darting eyes and fidgeting hands that told of someone who would rather be somewhere else. I’d forgotten he was there until he spoke.

When he had their attention, he continued, looking down at his hands rather than at his companions. “It will just give them more reason to hate us.”

Hemlock considered him. “What’s your solution, then?”

Ash moved away from the wall. Poplar started to speak, but Hemlock cut him off with a raised hand. He nodded for Ash to speak.

“Treat them justly and with the consideration due to sentient beings. Don’t task them from dawn to dusk with the worst chores the castle has to offer, but give them cause to think of Starstair as their home, not their prison.”

“I suppose you think we should set them all free to come and go as they please,” scoffed Poplar, one eye on Hemlock.

“You wouldn’t have a rebellion then, would you?”

Poplar huffed in breathless disbelief. I suppressed a cheer. *Tell him, Ash.*

“But we wouldn’t have to go that far.” Ash ignored Poplar and spoke to Hemlock. “We could institute policies like Meadowhall has. They haven’t had a murmur of discontent in 700 years.”

Poplar found his tongue. “Those policies would never work at Starstair. We’re twice as big as Meadowhall.”

“Some of them would.”

Hemlock frowned. “Enough.” He pulled himself to his feet with a stretch. “I have to say, Ash makes sense, but I agree with you.” He nodded to Poplar. “That a lot of Meadowhall’s practices wouldn’t work here.”

Poplar opened his mouth to reply, but Hemlock raised a dainty hand for silence. “There’s no point arguing about it further. We can all have our own opinion. None of us will be setting policy anytime soon, so it doesn’t much matter if Ash wants to let all the humans go and Poplar wants to cripple them all.”

They both began protesting his characterization of them, but he raised both hands and shook his head as he walked between them and headed for the door. “Let’s get something to eat, shall we? I’m famished.” Neither of them followed him which was good because the pause gave me time to slip out of the alcove and pretend I was just entering the wing.

“Call a truce you two and come on,” Hemlock said impatiently over his shoulder. “I made arrangements to meet Teak and Cypress later on for a game of knobs.”

Whatever that is. I nodded politely to the three of them as they passed me in the alcove. Hemlock breezed past with a brief nod in my direction. Poplar didn’t look at me. Ash alone seemed to find my presence just then suspicious. “Alina.” He paused. “How long..”

“Oh, come on, Ash.” Hemlock said.

Ash jerked into a quick walk to catch up to the other two. I heard Poplar start in on him again.

Poor Ash. A wicked thought struck me. I trotted back to the door of the castle closest to the stable and waited for Carnation to enter. When she came in a few minutes later, I let slip that Hemlock was going to be eating and then would be playing knobs with some friends.

“Oh that would perfect. I’m good at knobs.” Carnation clapped her hands. “Thank you for telling me, Alina. You’re really sweet sometimes.”

I felt a moment’s pity for Hemlock but was pleased with my ingenuity. Poplar would have to watch his words with his sister present.

Chapter XI

I evaded Shelaine's queries about what had happened in the stable by refusing to say anything except, "You'll have to ask Kester about it." Her insistent questioning, coupled with a stressful day, left me with less energy than usual. My secret passage "searching" for the night was soon reduced to sitting at the long kitchen table, one elbow resting on it, hand supporting my head, while my eyes traveled back and forth on the wall. Shelaine wasn't doing much better. She kicked dispiritedly at the bricks lining the cooking fireplace, having finally given up the Kester questions.

"There must be something we're missing," I mused out loud.

"Maybe like the fact that there isn't any secret passage?" Shelaine gave an extra hard kick to a corner brick, and winced. "If there is, it's beyond secret." She hobbled over to the table and sat down. "Far, far past it, into the realm-of-unspeakable-taboos secret."

I had to agree with her, but everyone else was counting on us, and I didn't feel we could quit until we'd exhausted every possibility. Which we very nearly had. "Okay. Think. Where haven't we looked?"

Shelaine rolled her head over to look at me. "Nowhere, Alina. We've been over every single miserable inch of this place. You know, I even dream about the kitchen?"

"We've looked every place we think it could be. What about places we don't think are possible?"

"If you mean the ceiling, I've tried that a dozen times."

I shifted my head to my other hand, and continued my perusal. "Not the ceiling, no."

“The pantry? Looked there. The fireplace? I can tell you where every brick is. The water trough? Done.”

She had a point. I’d been helping her search for close to four months. She’d been searching by herself for much longer, and we had yet to find so much as a secret mouse hole.

I tried to see the kitchen with new eyes, tried to pick out those places where there couldn’t be a secret passage, the places we might have skipped over before. My restless gaze moved along the wall, pantry, cutting boards, knife rack, oven, cupboards...oven.

“Shelaine.” I set both my hands on the table and sat up straight.

“What?” Shelaine followed my gaze unseeing.

“Have you ever looked in the oven?”

“*In* the oven?” She snorted then stared at the oven with me. “Actually...no.”

“Neither have I.”

“But it couldn’t...really...the oven?” Shelaine looked away from it then her gaze was dragged back. “I think you’re getting desperate.”

“To paraphrase yourself.” I reminded. “I’m beyond desperate. Far, far past it into the realm-of-impossible trapdoors.”

“It would have to be a side door.”

We’d both risen and moved around the table to stand in front of the oven. It squatted on four brick legs between the cupboards that housed the serving platters and the knife rack. The fire-hardened, spherical shaped clay structure had two racks inside and a half-foot space between its bottom and the stone floor to slide hot coals under to bake whatever was inside. The legs were bolted to the floor so that the entire structure

couldn't be moved. The interior could hold as many as 50 loaves of bread at a time, which made it large enough for a person to sit comfortably inside. Though I didn't suppose anyone ever had. The top was at a level with my chin.

Shelaine pushed some of the knives aside and examined the back of the oven and the wall. "There's a tiny, finger sized space between the back of the oven and the wall," she reported, sliding her finger into the gap to illustrate. "They don't actually touch. So if there's a door, it has to open both the back of the oven and the wall."

"Unless the door was built before the oven."

Shelaine grimaced. "In which case it won't do us any good. Not without a way to get through the oven back."

"One way to find out."

The two of us looked at the oven, then at each other.

"Go ahead," Shelaine said, at the same time I said, "After you."

She finished, "It was your idea." She opened the oven door with a flourish of her wrist and bowed.

This should be fun. I snatched one of the candles off the table and held it inside. "You'd better not let that door shut."

"As if I would."

The inside of the oven was dirty and black. I eased one foot in and leaned over to get in. My hair brushed the top of the oven as I entered. I'd have to remember to wash it before I saw Carnation tomorrow. *How did you hair get sooty, Alina? Oh, you know, Carnation. Just climbing around in the oven. I do it at least twice a week.*

I kept one foot outside. I trusted Shelaine...mostly. I brushed my fingers across

the grime that covered the back of the oven. *Good grief, somebody needs to clean this thing.* I had Shelaine fetch a wet rag, which I used to wipe off the worst of it. I couldn't see any obvious seams, and there were no helpful knots like in my wardrobe.

"Well?" Shelaine blinked at me from the door.

"I think I might have gotten filthy for nothing." My leg started to cramp from my crouched position, and I shuffled it a little to relieve the tension. Something chinked. I lowered the candle to look at the floor of the oven by my foot. It looked as black as everything else. I felt around and discovered a black chain, twice as long as my hand and as wide as my thumb. The end disappeared in the corner of the oven, over one of the legs. "I found a chain. I'm going to pull it. See if anything happens."

Shelaine scurried to the side of the oven. "Okay."

I took a deep breath and tugged on the chain. It didn't move. I leaned back and put my full weight behind my efforts. My hands slipped on it. I took hold again and yanked.

"Nothing's happening," Shelaine said.

"That's because it's not moving." I grunted and ceased my efforts for a moment to think. It could be the chain had some other long forgotten use, or it could be I just didn't have the strength for it. There was one more thing I could try. With a resigned sigh, I pulled my other leg inside the oven. The door swung shut. The air immediately felt staler. I put both feet on the wall above the chain, wrapped the chain around my hand, and braced against the wall.

Just when I was sure my back would strain before ever the chain would budge, a horrible screeching sound filled the oven. The chain inched back in my hands. One extra

inch, two. I felt the oven door at my back.

“Something’s happening,” shrieked Shelaine.

“I know. Open the door.” *I’ll be doing some shrieking of my own if you don’t.*

The door banged open. I backed out of it as fast as I could manage while keeping a tight grip on the chain. It showed signs of wanting to slide back down the hole at any release of pressure. I kept pulling until I was all the way out of the oven. Shelaine had a hold of it before I had both feet on the floor. Together we tugged on it until it wouldn’t move anymore.

“Can you see?” Shelaine had set her candle down to help me with the chain.

“No. Let’s anchor this and...aah!” Something large and hairy brushed against my legs. Heart thumping I looked down. “Nageri!”

“Oh no. No. Get him out of here!” Still braced back to hold the chain, Shelaine swatted at him with her free hand. “Here. I’ll hold the chain, you get him out.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Do it, Alina!”

“Alright.” I released the tension on the chain until I was sure Shelaine had a good hold. “Come on Nageri.”

“Aleena,” he purred. Then he reared up on his hind legs, set his front legs on the edge of the oven door, and sniffed inside.

“Alina!”

“Nageri.” I hesitated before wrapping my arms around his substantial middle and tugging.

Nageri rumbled in protest then vocalized, “Ssee in.”

“No. Nageri.” I tugged and cajoled him to the door, worried that at any moment he would get annoyed and claw me. He dug his claws into the stone floor a couple of times, making a highly unpleasant noise, but didn’t offer any other violence. Back hurting after hauling a hundred pound cat across the floor, I shut the kitchen door with him on the outside and leaned against it. “Now. Do you mind telling me what all that was for?”

“I don’t trust that four legged spy, that’s what that’s for.” Shelaine wrapped the chain around one of the oven legs. “Usually the dogs keep him away from the kitchen while I’m here, but with the weather so cold, some of the girls have been keeping them in their rooms overnight. I wonder where this goes.” She stuck her head in the oven.

“He’s a cat. Not an infiltrator.” I heard Nageri scratching at the door.

“He’s a fairy pet. And not just any fairy pet. He’s the king of fairy pets, the most enchanted, the wiliest, the ...”

“You’re being paranoid.” I joined her at the oven. A dark hole had opened in the back, large enough for a person to crawl through. I could hear the drip drop of water somewhere in the gloom.

“Maybe I am.” Shelaine admitted. “But it’s better to be cautious than to be caught. Who knows how much that cat tells Tiger Lily?” She crawled into the oven. “Let’s go.”

“Down there? You’re not serious.” Getting in the oven was bad enough; I had no desire to climb down the black hole to nowhere.

“It looks like it goes down a little and curves left.” Shelaine held her candle inside it. “Of course I’m serious. We need to know if this passage is going to do us any

good.”

I stuck my head in the oven and tried to see around Shelaine. “Just the two of us? Tonight?”

“Why not?”

I could think of several reasons, the most prominent being that I didn’t want to.

“Don’t you think we should tell Kester?”

“We can’t go out to the stable in the middle of the night.” Shelaine was halfway through the hole already, crawling slowly.

Of course not. But we can go traipsing down a black tunnel with who knows what in it going who knows where in the middle of the night. It reminded me of one of Grehelda’s ideas. One of Grehelda’s bad ideas.

“Stick the broom handle in the oven door so it can’t close and come on.”

Shelaine’s feet slipped out of sight over the slight lip between the oven and wall. All I could see was the glow of her candle.

I’m going to regret this. I stuck the broom in the door and added a spit for good measure. I took two spare candles and climbed into the oven again. “At least promise me we won’t go far.”

Shelaine didn’t answer. By the time I slipped through the hole, she had already crawled around the corner. I crawled after her on my knees and one hand, the other hand clenching one of the candles.

The surface under my knees was hard rock at first, sloping gradually down. I only had a few inches of space between my shoulders and the walls. The air smelled stale and musty, a little like the dungeon, but earthier. A number of spiders and other

crawling things scuttled out of my way. I tried not to think about their brothers dropping on my head. “Shelaine, wait for me.”

A few paces from the oven, the ceiling began to rise, or rather, it remained constant while the floor continued to drop until I could walk hunched over. I caught up to Shelaine around the bend. She proceeded with caution, brushing cobwebs away with her free hand, stopping to inspect the walls every few steps. The passage had turned to dirt. Splintered, decaying beams drove into the ceiling at intervals. One of them groaned as I passed.

“We’ll need to shore these up somehow,” Shelaine muttered, talking to herself more than me. She had sections of cobwebs hanging in her hair and dirty knees from crawling. “This way.”

Where did she think I was going to go? Through the wall? The passage continued to slope down. The walls were unchanged except more moisture clung to them and small puddles of water blocked our path.

“Something up ahead.” Shelaine quickened her pace. I slowed mine.

The tunnel branched. One branch curved gently to the left. The other went straight for a few paces before crooking to the right.

We looked for marks on the walls or some other indication of what lay down each passage. If there had been anything, it had long since disappeared. *Nothing as simple as a sign, “exit this way.”*

“I’ll take the one on the left. You go right.” Shelaine struck off down the left passage.

“Not a chance.” I followed her.

“Oh have it your way.” She shrugged. “It’ll take us twice as long.” She ground to a halt.

“What? What is it?” I pictured a giant spider crouched in the passage in front of us.

“A drop.” Shelaine got down on her knees and held her candle over the edge of a stone cliff, not quite vertical, but close to it. The light from her candle illuminated the floor seven or so feet below us. The ground at the base of the drop belonged to a cavern the size of the stable. A small trickle of water ran past our feet and over the edge to join other trickles, all ending in a pool on the left side of the cavern room. Weird looking pointed rocks hung from the ceilings and stood up from the ground. Entire wet pillars of rock joined the floor to the ceiling in places, and wet, rounded boulders with slick surfaces lay strewn about on the floor.

“This would be a perfect storeroom. Hold this.” Shelaine shoved the candle in my hand and slid over the edge before I could protest the action as foolhardy. She landed at the bottom with an “oomph.” She stretched a hand up for the candle. “Your turn.”

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Shelaine.”

She pretended not to hear me. “I’m going to see what’s over here.” She picked her way over the loose rock on the floor of the cavern toward where it looked like the cavern narrowed into another passage at its other end.

I stood on the edge of the drop, debating. Loyalty won over fear, and I sat down on the edge, muttering over friends that didn’t have enough sense to stay away from danger. It looked farther to the floor of the cavern, once I was poised to jump.

I ended up sliding more than jumping, hitting several hard rocky bumps on the

way down. “You do realize,” I said as I slipped over the smooth wet rocks, “that it’s going to be a fine trick getting back up that.”

“Oh, we can pile up rocks or something.” Shelaine had reached the continuing passage at the other end of the cavern. It looked much like the one we had left, absent the rotten timbers. The regularity of the walls and floor led me to believe that it was fairy or human made while the cavern we were exiting had to be natural. My candle began to sputter and I lit one of my spares.

“How far do you plan on going?”

“Not much further,” conceded Shelaine, as her own candle had already burned down past the halfway point. The second passage proved shorter than the first. After a hundred feet or so, it began to open up again. The walls became more jagged and the floor uneven heralding the transition to another natural section. How many caves were down here? With how many possible exits? I held my candle up and peered through the gloom at the walls, checking to make sure we weren’t passing any more branches as the passage walls folded away from us into a second cavern. Something long and white appeared in my ring of candlelight. I caught my breath and snatched at Shelaine’s sleeve. “Please tell me that’s not what I think it is.”

“What?” Shelaine swiveled back to me.

I pointed. She left the worn center of the passage to investigate, me hanging onto her sleeve. She stooped and picked up the stick-like object. “Yep. That’s a bone.” She tried to sound nonchalant, but her swift glance around the cavern revealed her unease. “Probably some poor fellow that wandered down here at some point and got trapped. Oh.”

I'd already seen. In between two boulder sized rocks lay the skull and ribcage of a human or fairy. Other bones lay in piles or separately as far as our candles' light reached.

"But got so hungry he tried to eat himself first? Those are teeth marks on the bones, Shelaine." Something broke under my foot and I leaped back, suppressing a shudder at the gruesome sight of a broken rib where my foot had been. "Besides, there are bones from more than one person here."

Shelaine turned a couple of bones over with her toe. "You're right. This one's a fairy and that one's human."

"How can you tell?" I started to edge back the way we'd come.

"The spine's different. Fairies have more bone where the wings attach."

I continued my retreat across the room. "I'm not even going to ask how you know that."

Shelaine thrust the candle behind her, unaware I had moved. "Hold this a second." She looked around when I didn't take it. "Where are you going?"

"Back, Shelaine, I'm going back."

She placed her hand on her hip. "Don't be so squeamish. I'm sure there aren't any trolls about now."

"So you admit it's probably trolls."

Almost as if she'd conjured them with her words, the sound of coarse, guttural laughter echoed through the passage in front of us. The way it echoed the trolls could have been miles away or only one cavern away.

Please not again. "Shelaine. Come on." I gauged the distance back to the second

passage. *Had we really walked that far?* I broke into a jog and in my haste forgot to shield my candle with my hand. It blew out in the first ten steps. I pulled to a halt in the darkness, Shelaine's light hadn't followed. Looking back, I saw her standing frozen.

"Shelaine!" I hissed with a frantic waving motion. Shelaine's wide eyes fixed ahead of her, where I could now discern torch light in addition to her candlelight. It grew stronger. More laughter. Shelaine didn't move.

Come on, Shelaine. I didn't stop to ponder whether I was being heroic or stupid but sprinted back to Shelaine, loose rocks clattering and skidding under my feet. The laughter stopped. I grabbed her arm. "Run." Even then I don't know if she would have, except my yank pulled her off balance and she had to take a few steps to keep from falling. A look over my shoulder showed two misshapen shadows preceding their owners into the cavern.

A rock slid out from under me and I fell hard. Shelaine tripped over me and went down too. Her candle went out. A startled shout echoed behind us. We'd been sighted. Shelaine got to her feet first and pulled me to mine. I clattered after her through the narrowing passage, trying to estimate its size as we ran, arms extended, against the possibility of another fall. Could a troll fit through there? If they could we were in deep trouble indeed. I had to bite my lip to keep from yelling every time I came down on my freshly sprained ankle. *Why did I let Shelaine talk me into this? Why?*

With all the noise I was making, I couldn't tell how close the trolls were. The light about us didn't seem to be getting any stronger though. This was good if it meant the trolls were stopped at the narrower passage, bad because we were navigating in almost pitch darkness.

Shelaine was a full thirty feet in front of me by the time I raced into the first cavern, or so I gauged from the sound of her feet on the rock. She had slowed to a walk, which I was forced to do also. Shouts echoed behind me, but I couldn't tell from them if the trolls were inside the narrower passage and pursuing, or not. Shelaine leapt for the edge of the drop and slid back down. I hobbled over just in time to catch her when she fell on her second attempt.

"Boost me, quick," she panted, casting terrified glances behind her.

I started to argue that she'd do better to boost me since my ankle was sprained, then realized arguing would be wasting precious time. I cupped both hands under one of her knees and thrust. We timed our effort poorly, and she fell back on top of me. A look back revealed a sinister glow emanating from the passage on the other side of the cavern.

"Okay. Ready?" This time I counted. "One, two, three." I heaved upward. Bolts of pain shot up from my ankle. Shelaine wiggled above my head, clutching at the smooth rock.

"I can't pull myself up." The toe of her boot scraped down the face of the rock. *Is the firelight growing brighter or is that my imagination?* Finally, her foot found purchase, and the weight from the leg I held lightened. "Got it." She pulled herself up and out of my hands.

Something dislodged a clattering shower of rocks in the passage behind me.

"Shelaine," I yelled, not caring about staying quiet at that point. "Give me your hand. I need help getting up." I reached up the rock face, searching for some tiny hole for purchase. My searching hand encountered Shelaine's. We grabbed hold of each other and Shelaine pulled. I followed her earlier example and scrambled about with my

feet. My hand started to slip from her grasp. “Hang on.”

Somehow, she pulled me up until my head was even with the edge, then my chest. With a wild swing, I got my good leg over the edge and clawed my way into the passage. Shelaine fell back on the ground, panting. “I don’t think they can get us here.”

“Let’s not find out.” I winced as I put weight on my ankle again. I hobbled past Shelaine, one hand stretched out in the darkness in front of me, the other trailing along the wall. Shelaine got to her feet, and I felt her hand fasten on my shoulder.

We half shuffled, half ran uphill toward the kitchen. The troll’s light behind us faded into total darkness. The echoes stopped once we were well into the earthen passage. My outstretched hand didn’t stop me from hitting my head as the roof of the passage lowered. After that, I switched to crawling, Shelaine hanging onto my ankles. My searching hand encountered an insect skittering away from me. The incident reawakened my earlier fear of giant insects. I slowed, peering futilely into the black ahead. *I might as well be stone blind.*

Shelaine squeezed my bad ankle.

“Ouch.”

“Hurry up.”

A few more crawling steps and I found the small lip into the oven. I crawled into it and bumped the oven door with my hand. It didn’t move. I pressed my palm against it and pushed hard, unwilling to believe that somehow the oven had shut. We were trapped. I pounded both fists on the door, then sat down and kicked it.

“What’s taking so long?”

The unseen walls were closing on me. I could feel a scream building.

“Alina? Let’s get out of here, why don’t we?”

“The door’s shut.”

Shelaine bumped me as she wiggled into the oven. “What do you mean the door’s shut?”

“THE DOOR’S SHUT.” My voice roared in the confined space.

I heard Shelaine pushing and striking at the door. I could hear some of my own fear in her voice. “Didn’t you prop it open?”

I found the taut chain that controlled the secret panel and traced it to the door. Not only had the door shut despite the broom and spit, it had managed to latch with the chain still through it.

We alternated pushing, hitting, kicking the door, together and in turns. Whether the broom and spit had fallen, allowing it to close, or whether someone else had shut it, we couldn’t know, but shut it was, firm and unbending under our repeated blows. The oven began to warm with our body heat. The heat increased my feeling of claustrophobia. I slithered out of the oven into the cooler passage and forced myself to take deep breaths. I closed my eyes and pictured a wide open field. *Breathe in, hold, and breathe out.*

The furious banging in the oven ceased, Shelaine climbed through the hole. I felt her settle into a sitting position next to me.

“Well, it won’t open.” I felt a slight breeze as she fanned herself with her hand.

“Good thinking coming back out here. Kind of getting hot in there.”

Good thinking would have been never coming in here in the first place. “How are we going to get out?”

“Wait for someone to let us out, I guess. We’ve until morning to think of a plausible excuse for why the two of us are in the oven.”

I gasped a desperate snort of laughter. “There is no possible excuse for being in the oven, Shelaine. Not even the real reason is plausible.”

“True.” Her leg bumped mine as she stretched it out. “I suppose we could try the other passage.”

“I’d rather you focused on coming up with an excuse.”

“Alright.”

We sat there, brushing off the occasional insect, waiting for morning and the cook to come. *If I’m not raving mad by morning.*

Shelaine’s “excuse” thinking didn’t last long. When her breathing deepened, I thought at first she was trying to calm herself like I had. Then I heard a soft snore.

Sleeping! How can you possibly sleep? I drew back my arm to hit her shoulder. It was her fault we were even in here. She could very well wake up and be miserable with me.

Clink.

I arrested my arm. The sound had come from the oven. Visions of the gigantic spider popped into my overworked mind. *There can’t be anything in the oven, we were just in there.* I stared unseeing in the direction of the oven. Except...I *could* see. A faint sliver of light beckoned.

Drawing the rags of my courage together, I slid over Shelaine. I peered through the back of the oven, sure that any second giant hairy legs were going to reach out and encircle me. A crack of light shone around the edge of the oven door.

Fears of spiders discarded, I launched through the oven at the door. It swung open without a hint of resistance, and my rush carried me headfirst through the door to land on my hands on the kitchen floor.

The light I'd seen came from a lone candle on the table. Shelaine and I hadn't left a candle burning, of that I was sure. The broom and spit were back in their respective places. Otherwise, I saw no sign of human or fairy presence. The kitchen door was closed.

I hissed Shelaine's name from the oven door. *Hopefully you're a light sleeper because I'm not going back in there to wake you up.*

I had to almost shout, but Shelaine finally came out, rubbing her eyes. "How did you get the door open?" She yawned.

"I didn't." I explained what had happened as we untied the chain and let the secret door slide shut. Shelaine didn't have an explanation any more than I did, either for how the oven door got shut or who opened it again. She shrugged the whole matter off easier than I did.

"Well we owe them, whoever did it. Regardless, we should check out that other passage."

I bent to brush as much dirt off my dress as I could. "Go ahead. I'm going to bed. In the morning I'm going to tell Kester, and let him deal with it."

Shelaine pulled a cobweb from her hair and laughed at the size of it. "Good idea."

I think so. I opened the kitchen door and almost tripped over Nageri, who lay just outside. "What are you doing still here?"

“Iss safe?” He stretched and sniffed at my skirt. His ears flattened. “Trolls.”

“Why didn’t we take him?” I pointed at him and raised my eyebrows at Shelaine.

“Might have saved us some trouble.”

“Or caused us more.” Shelaine hopped over Nageri and headed for her room.

“See you tomorrow.” She swung away down the hall. Getting chased by trolls and locked in an oven: a typical day in the life of Shelaine.

You’re welcome for saving your life. I pulled up my skirt and examined my ankle. Swollen. It would be a long walk up those stupid stairs. Nageri slunk into the kitchen. I saw him nosing around the oven as I left. It almost looked as though he were trying to open it with his nose. Maybe Shelaine was closer to the truth than I’d thought.

Chapter XII

Kester greeted the news of our discovery with delight. At least that's what Shelaine told me when I snuck away from Carnation for a few minutes to meet her the next day. He was going down to the kitchen that evening with Makov to check out the second passage and see about making the first cavern a storage area.

"I had to tell him we don't really know if the trolls can get in there or not." Shelaine had conveniently forgotten her own paralysis of the previous night in favor of playfully accusing me of sabotaging our exploration. "I didn't tell him about how we had to run. He'd just be upset we took chances." She cocked her head to the side. "Don't tell him, will you Alina?"

It was becoming difficult to remember who I couldn't tell what.

From visits with Shelaine over the next two weeks, I found out that the two of us were heroes for the rebellion. The right hand passage, partially blocked at a couple of places, did go well outside the castle walls, coming out half submerged on the edge of stream to the north of the castle. Every midnight, the Turquoise kitchen swarmed with more activity than anyplace within a hundred miles. Just to be safe, the passage past the first cavern was blocked off and, piece by piece, the supplies that everyone had been hoarding were moved to the cavern. I went to see it with Shelaine one night despite my earlier conviction that I'd never set foot in the oven again.

From the drop off, which now had a ladder, to the blocked off passage, the cavern overflowed with weapons, long lasting food stuffs, and other essentials, some places piled as high as my head.

Some of the conspirators worked to clear the right hand passage and shore it up

with fresh timbers cut from the forest during the dead of night. Free to roam outside the walls, others scouted about for the best spot to base the outdoor operations. To my relief, Kester didn't ask me to do anything further, just "keep your eyes and ears open."

The first shoots and flowers of spring appeared while snow was still on the ground, inviting a burst of homesickness. Soon, my village would be holding the Riverside Festival. People would come from as far away as the city to enjoy the food, booths, dancing, and entertainment. I'd never missed it.

Being cooped up in the castle sewing for Carnation only aggravated my melancholy. Sometimes, I would even have volunteered to go on another passage exploring expedition to get away from her rooms. A better alternative presented itself in the form of a dinner party, hosted by the royal family. I started working on Carnation the day before and by mid-afternoon the day of the party, I had her convinced that she really ought to have a corsage. I looked forward to a crisp walk in the garden while Carnation dithered over the perfect flower.

The enchanted garden already had a large selection of flowers. We strolled through the carved gateway to be greeted by a rainbow of colors and a pleasant mixture of scents, converging on us from all sides. Enjoying the fresh air, I was disappointed when Carnation went straight to the carnations, selected a pink and white one, and stated that it should do nicely.

"Are you sure?" I stalled.

"It's my flower, after all." She swept some of her hair over her shoulder and checked the colors of the flower against it.

"Yes, but a *striped* carnation." I shook my head, thinking fast.

She turned the flower over. “What’s wrong with a striped carnation?”

I mentally thanked Grehelda for her insistence that we learn the meanings of all flowers in order to send secret messages to each other. “It stands for refusal.”

“It does?” She eyed the flower as if it had sprouted teeth.

“Of course, maybe it’s not the same in the fairy world.” I bent to sniff a flower with an air of supreme indifference. “I just wouldn’t want Prince Hemlock to get the wrong impression.”

She dropped the flower. “No. I think I remember Mother telling me about flower meanings.” She returned to the carnation bed. “What does a pink carnation mean?”

“Um. Gratitude.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That won’t do. Grateful for what?” She went back to the flowerbed and perused it with new eyes. “What about Marigold?”

“Desire for riches,” I recited.

“Desire for riches?” She tossed it over her shoulder in disgust. “Who made up these meanings?”

An hour later, we’d looked at nearly every bloom and Carnation was debating between the Ivy (fidelity) and the pansy (loving thoughts). She wanted the red rose (passionate love), but I convinced her it was too bold. *Though, really, what are the odds that Hemlock knows any of this?*

“There you are, Carnation.”

Ash walked around a hedge, dressed all in green. His clothing matched his surroundings so well, he could have stepped out of the hedge. Like a sprite, like a...fairy. *Intelligent, Alina.*

“Mother wants to know what you’re wearing tonight, so your outfits don’t disharmonize.”

Carnation stared at her brother. “And she sent you?”

“I volunteered, since I was coming out here anyway.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “I’m wearing my new yellow dress with the green sash and voile sleeves, my tiered jade necklace and earrings, my dancing slippers with the yellow satin ribbon, and a...pansy,” she decided, handing the ivy to me. “Let’s hear you repeat that.”

Ash sighed. “Your yellow dress with the green sash, jade necklace and earrings, dancing slippers with the satin ribbon, and a pansy.”

“Yellow satin ribbon,” Carnation corrected with an eye roll for the complete inability of males to understand fashion. “I have a half-dozen dancing slippers with satin ribbons you know.”

“No. I didn’t.”

She rolled her eyes again. “I’d better tell her myself. You’ll just mess it up. Pick out a flower while you’re here.”

“You mean I have to wear one too?”

“Of course.”

He leaned over the flowerbed with pursed lips. “How about this one?” He pointed to a delicate, small sunflower that had just opened.

“Well. It will my match my dress.” Carnation eyed it critically. “Okay.”

Ash plucked it and held it against his chest. “What do you think, Alina?”

I turned red, and mumbled something about it being fine.

Carnation put a finger to her chin. “What was sunflower? Success, wasn’t it? That should be fine. Come on, Alina.”

I turned my back to Ash with relief. What was wrong with me? Turning into a red rose myself, just because Ash picked a particular flower and asked my opinion. Even if that particular flower did stand for adoration, not success. *Maybe I’m getting a little too much fresh air.*

* * * *

Loud knocking on my door interrupted my sleep sometime after midnight.

“Alina...Alina.”

I rolled over and tried to focus groggy eyes on the door. “Who is it?”

“Ash.”

My fuzzy brain couldn’t come up with a single good reason for him to be knocking on my door.

“What is it?” *Where is it? Why is it? Wake up, Alina.*

“Buttercup.”

“Is something wrong with her?”

A pause. “This conversation would be easier if you’d open the door.”

I haven’t heard a good reason to get out of bed yet, much less open the door.

“What’s the matter with Buttercup?”

“She’s been sobbing for a half hour straight. I can’t get her to stop.”

“Why’s she crying?” With a resigned sigh, I pulled my robe on and approached the door to ease communication.

“Something about a dress.”

Oh no. She didn't. I gnawed my lip. *Did Foxglove find out about the sewing lessons?* Buttercup had put a lot of work into her latest project, a party dress. In hindsight, I should have realized her eagerness to get it finished had a purpose...the dinner party. The dress, her best effort yet, was still unmistakably the work of a beginner. If she'd worn it, Foxglove might very well have noticed and gotten the truth out of her. I closed my eyes. The weather had warmed in preparation for spring, but a night in the dungeon and I wouldn't thaw until summer solstice.

At the door: "Alina? Oh this is ridiculous. I'm coming in."

The locked door swung open to reveal Ash, still in his party going splendor, a funny golden half cape draped over one shoulder, the wilting sunflower still in place.

I took a half step back. "Do you mind?"

Ash blinked at me, then flushed. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking. Sorry." He backed out of the room and out of sight down the stairs.

I had to poke my head out the door to see him. "Now, what's this about Buttercup and a dress?"

He looked up at me, then back down at his shoes. "That's just it. I don't know. I thought you might come. I can try Netta if you'd rather not."

First me, then Netta, you'd think her "mother" would be the logical choice. I struggled to find my shoes through sleepy, half open eyes. "I'll come." I slipped on another shawl, and we walked through the dark castle to Buttercup's room. Every fifty paces or so, Ash would apologize for pushing into my room. I got tired of telling him not to worry about it and told him to stop it.

I'd only been to Buttercup's room a handful of times. It didn't look anything like

Carnation's room. In fact, it bore similarities to my own. It had one window, a bed, table and rug, all about the same size as mine, though made of finer materials. Her room did have its own fireplace and a good view of the garden. The cheery fire we found burning on our arrival contrasted with the wracking sobs coming from the four poster bed in the corner. Buttercup lay crumpled up on her stomach, her pale wings hanging over her like lifeless drapery.

"I'm worried she's going to make herself sick," Ash whispered.

I nodded. She looked well on her way to it. Even her sobs lacked energy, more rasping spasms than real tears.

"Buttercup?" I stood over her and touched her shoulder.

The sobs paused. She rolled onto her side so she could see me, and I could see her red, inflamed eyes and pasty complexion. *Oh dear.*

"Alina." Sniff. "What are you doing," Sniff. "Here?"

I pulled out my handkerchief. The thin white square looked woefully inadequate for the task at hand. "Ash thought you might need some cheering up."

It took the better part of a half-hour and three handkerchiefs, mine and two that Ash provided, to get the whole story from Buttercup. In brief, Foxglove had made her change out of her dress. Buttercup hiccupped. "She said it looked like a human dress, and I was to get rid of it and never wear it again."

Oh relief. Foxglove hadn't found out about the sewing lessons. But why...? I turned to Ash in mystification.

He coughed. "Well, I'm no expert in dresses, of course." He picked up the dress, made of light blue, lined voile with short sleeves that had been draped over the foot of the

bed. “But I don’t think I’ve ever seen a fairy wear a dress with a neckline like this.” He pointed to the jewel neckline of the dress, a style I’d chosen because of its simplicity for sewing.

Oh, for goodness sake. I turned back to Buttercup, who blew into the third handkerchief and made a valiant effort to stop the tears. I knew how much time and effort she’d poured into that dress and how proud she’d been of it. Would it have hurt Foxglove to set aside her prejudices for one evening?

As Buttercup’s tears subsided, due more to exhaustion than anything else, I tried to console her with praise for the dress, that it was all my fault for choosing a poor design, and if Foxglove had known how much it meant to her she would’ve never made her change. I didn’t know if that last statement was true or not. Buttercup looked at me doubtfully underneath soggy eyelashes, and Ash cleared his throat. Next, I promised that the next day we’d start reworking the dress to the latest fairy fashion, and she’d be the envy of all the other girls at the next party. I sat on Buttercup’s bed until she dropped asleep. Once her breathing slowed, I picked up the dress while Ash stoked the fire for the night, and we snuck out of her room.

“Thank you,” Ash breathed, once we were out of hearing of her room. “I knew something was wrong during the party. She picked at her food and wouldn’t laugh at my jokes.” He gave me a wry smile. “I followed her back afterward and she just dissolved on me. Wouldn’t say what the problem was.” He ran a hand through his hair.

There shouldn’t have been a problem. I smoothed the dress hanging over my arm, wondering if I dared ask the question that burned my mind. Perhaps in the daylight I wouldn’t have, but the late hour, coupled with the fact that he owed me after waking me

up in the middle of the night gave me unusual courage, or maybe unusual recklessness.

“Can I ask you something? You won’t be offended?”

“Yes, you may ask me something, and I’ll try to not get offended.” I could hear his smile although I couldn’t see it in the darkness between lit candles on the stairwell.

“What does Lady Foxglove have against humans?” The fairy tale book, the dress, her demeanor and treatment of me and other humans communicated nothing if not total disdain. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to,” I offered when his step slowed.

“No.” He blew out a sigh. “I don’t mind. It’s simple really. She blames humans for her brother and sister-in-law’s deaths.”

My own step slowed. “Humans killed Buttercup’s parents?”

“Oh no. Trolls killed them. But the reason they were outside the castle after dark was to look for two runaway humans. Mother told them not to go, to wait until morning, but they were worried. They asked her to come and help them look, but she stayed in Starstair. Until it was obvious something was wrong. She found their bodies.”

I digested this news. I thought of the mangled skeletons in the troll cave and shuddered. “So she blames the runaways.” We passed Carnation’s rooms. Light shone under the door. A late night for Carnation too. I wouldn’t need to rush in the morning.

“It’s that or blame herself for not going with them.” Ash sounded weary.

“Neither my aunt nor uncle were very good fighters. Mother, on the other hand, is death with a bow.”

Why does that not surprise me? The light in Carnation’s room vanished.

“Sometimes I think she believes she could have saved them.” Pause. “Perhaps I

shouldn't be talking to you about this."

Put in my place just like that. After leaving my warm bed in the first part of the morning to help him, I wasn't in the mood for it. "That's still no reason to treat Buttercup that way."

We'd reached the doorway of my tower staircase.

"No. It's no reason to treat Buttercup that way," Ash agreed, taking the wind out of my indignant sails. "Good night."

"Good night," I said, clipped enough to be just short of rude.

I dreamed of trolls that night. Gigantic trolls as tall as trees, with long nails that grabbed and tore at me. Nageri was there, and I kept calling him to save me, but he just blinked.

* * * *

Shelaine breezed into my room and flopped onto the bed.

"Please come in and make yourself at home, Shelaine."

She propped herself up on her elbows. "Thank you. I will. They found it."

"Who found what?"

Shelaine made a show of checking the wardrobe, under the bed, and peering out into the stairwell before she returned to my side and cupped her hands to my ear. "They found the perfect place to keep the you-know-whats."

My stomach flip flopped. No matter how often I told myself that it was the only way, that it was the best chance for no one to get hurt, the idea of kidnapping fairies Buttercup's age and younger still left a rotten taste in my mouth. Restless, I pulled my hair out of its braid and started finger combing it. "Where?"

Shelaine dropped her secrecy act. “Out east of Starstair, not more than two miles, there’s a dense thicket of brambles, and I do mean dense.” She cross hatched her fingers together, and put them in front of her eyes. “They’ve cleared a path through them to the center where there’s a bit of a depression. We’ll be able to cover it over, so they won’t be able to see it from the sky.” She scooted to the edge of the bed and bounced up and down, deranging my hair untangling efforts.

“What about the animals? Won’t they be able to trace the smells?”

Shelaine clapped her hands. “That’s the beauty of this spot. It’s on a peninsula of sorts, just upstream from where two streams intersect. The water will throw them off the scent on three sides. We only have to worry about one.”

I fiddled with my blanket. It was actually happening. Kester’s crazy plan was coming together.

“Are you sure the children won’t be hurt?”

Shelaine shoved to her feet and paced around to the other side of the bed. “You ask me that every day, Alina. And every day I tell you that no one is planning on hurting anyone.”

“Ah, yes. And every day you can’t explain why Kester’s stockpiled all those weapons.”

“Those are only for if things go wrong.” Shelaine folded her arms and fixed me with a level stare. “For self-defense. But nothing will go wrong. We’ve been planning this for seven years.” She sat back down and resumed bouncing. “Maybe it seems all rushed and poorly thought out to you, but you’ve got to remember, you’re new here. We spent months dreaming up one plan after another, discarding those that wouldn’t work,

refining others, narrowing the selection, until we decided on this one. Then we spent years refining it, figuring out every contingency.”

I gave up combing with my fingers and reached for my brush. I definitely wouldn't be sleeping anymore.

Shelaine leaned against one of the posts of my bed. “I can see you're not convinced. Okay. Try me.” She re-crossed her arms. “Go ahead. Give me a possible scenario.”

Why not? “A fairy finds the secret passage.”

She shot back, “When? Before or after we've kidnapped the children?”

“Before?”

“That's an easy one. We call it off. We all deny knowledge of the existence of the passage. How will they know who opened it? And we look for a different way to get them out of the castle.”

“How about if you're caught kidnapping one of the children?”

She didn't hesitate. “How much time do you have Alina? Because depending on a variety of circumstances, we have several plans tailor made to the situation. The simplest is that we wait for the fairies to haul whoever is caught off to the dungeon. So long as it's not the Silver or Jade family's dungeon, we'll be able to rescue them using one of the secret passages. If it's one of those two, we'll just demand their freedom along with our own, when we've got the rest of them.”

I tugged at the brush, stuck in a knot. “You make it sound so simple and straightforward.”

“Well I don't know about that. But it'll work. Wait and see. It'll work.”

I didn't know if Shelaine truly believed that, or if she just wanted to believe it.

* * * *

I was relieved that despite his continued assurances that everything was “nearly ready,” Kester waited to put his plan into action, and waited, and waited. I helped Buttercup re-sew her dress. I borrowed some of Carnation's pattern books to help us. My new interest in fashion delighted Carnation, and she wasted no time in educating me in nauseating detail. Any other free time I had, I spent helping Netta plan a coming of age party for Iriann, one of the kitchen girls. Netta had wheedled permission from Foxglove to use the Turquoise ballroom, a smaller version of the grand ballroom. She was working on the party a month in advance to make it a real event for the Turquoise humans, even unbending toward Kester enough to ask his help with some horse themed decorations. All told, the rebellion was pushed to the back of my mind, though never entirely forgotten.

Spring announced its arrival with a fierce thunderstorm that lasted a whole night. The next day, I listened with some trepidation to Carnation's announcement that I would accompany her and her family “to work” the following day. I didn't want to spend any more time with Foxglove than I had to, or Poplar for that matter. I hadn't forgiven him for what he'd almost done to Kester.

We left a little after dawn, probably the first sunrise Carnation had seen all year. Fairies and horses crowded the courtyard even at that early hour, many of the fairies sleepy eyed and taciturn. The gate swung open, and the fairies that were already mounted streamed out in groups, fanning out like water freed from a pipe as soon as they cleared the gate.

Kester tapped my shoulder. "I saved this one for you."

I recognized the bald face and blue eye. "Killdeer!" I rubbed his forehead. "He looks good."

Kester handed me the reins. "And it's your job to see he stays that way." He shook a finger at me. "No wild flights from trolls today. Though..." he glanced at Foxglove and lowered his voice. "A troll would have to be out of his mind to come within a mile of this bunch." He gave me a leg up. "So I guess it's only the crazy ones you have to look out for."

I shook my head and directed Killdeer to follow Carnation's palomino. Alright, Killdeer directed himself to follow Carnation's horse. I satisfied myself with a little nudge of my heels.

Foxglove, Mahogany, Buttercup, Poplar, Ash and four other members of the Turquoise family, whose names I'd been told, then promptly forgotten, joined us. One of them had a human teenager with her, a lanky blond who I recognized from Gathering. We were the only two humans. One of the fairies was a fauna fairy, and had two dogs and a goat that frisked about around him and cut in front of the horses to be the first out of the gate.

Mahogany led the way out of the castle, mounted on a tall bay mare. The rest of us lined up behind him and rode into the forest. The trees had new fresh leaves, still wet with dew, and dozens of birds chirped and swirled in and out of them, seemingly determined to make up for the silence of winter all in one day. Some of the tamer ones would land on the horses and chirp bits and pieces of songs and rhymes to the riders. Carnation would shoo off any that landed on her horse for fear of droppings, but I

enjoyed a chorus of “Spinner’s Thread,” and snatches of “My Love has Flaxen Hair,” as well as several songs I’d never heard.

Our column threaded through the trees behind Mahogany. I didn’t know what to expect for the fairy “work.” *Surely not anything strenuous?* I couldn’t picture Poplar chopping firewood, or Carnation raking leaves.

Killdeer plowed to a halt. “I wish you’d wait for me to tell you when to stop and start,” I muttered to the horse.

“What was that, Alina?” Carnation asked.

“Nothing.”

“We’re here.”

“Here” looked like the rest of the forest to me, one or two trees with trunks wide as a six men, numerous smaller trees with foliage in different shades of green, a scattering of brush and grasses, and a few decaying logs and rocks.

Carnation swung a leg over and slid to the ground. “Hawthorn will watch the horses.”

The fauna fairy looked as though his own animals were keeping him busy enough. The goat was butting the dogs every chance it got, and the larger of the two dogs thought it great fun to run barking at the horses’ heels, causing much nervous eye rolling and sideways motion.

I left Hawthorn to deal with it as best he could and followed Carnation. The fairies gathered in a loose circle while Mahogany issued instructions. I didn’t understand half the directions he gave the other fairies, but my own were painfully clear. My job would be to rotate from fairy to fairy and perform any menial task they wished

completed. I exchanged doleful smiles with the blond boy, who received similar instructions.

The fairies spread out, each one taking a different tree. First, they would inspect the trunk, filling in any holes in the bark, or fixing rotten sections. Then they'd move to the tree crowns, inspecting the new leaves, trimming branches with a sharp finger tap, coaxing reluctant buds to open, removing harmful insects, and other actions that served purposes I could only guess. Sometimes, rather than fly into the tree themselves, they would put the spell on one of the birds that had followed us from the castle. The bird would fly to the applicable branch, and the spell would be transferred to the tree. Buttercup worked with Foxglove, and looked none too happy about it.

My first task was issued by, (*surprise, surprise*) Carnation, to fetch her some water from the water skins we'd left with the horses. I found Hawthorn seated on the ground, the horses all grazing around him, a half circle of small woodland animals waiting their turn to be picked up and examined with expert, gentle hands. The goat and one of the dogs were lying down, the other dog sat at attention, fixated on a couple of rabbits and whining. While I was fetching the water skin, he inched toward the rabbit but bolted back to place at a sharp word from Hawthorn.

I carried the water to Carnation, only to be called over by Mahogany to haul away a dead branch he'd pruned to a burn pile the fairies were forming in the center of their work area. From then on, I only had brief breaks. I didn't even get to sit more than a few minutes over luncheon, but was set to hauling food and dishes to and from the horses.

The day dragged. My feet started to ache, followed by my back, since part of my job involved digging holes, so the fairies could check tree roots. Foxglove and Poplar

seldom asked for my help, for which I was grateful. Mahogany and Ash would call me over on some occasions. More often, though, they would assist each other. Carnation eliminated any relaxation time I might have had by sending me on a variety of errands, some of them senseless as near as I could tell. For example, she twice had me climb a tree she was working on to pick off some dead leaves she couldn't reach from her position, only to declare I was doing it all wrong and moving the branches away with a wave of her hand to do it herself. I banged my shin coming down the second time and hobbled over to Ash, who'd called me.

“Alina, I have something important I need you to do.”

“Please tell me it doesn't involve walking.” I rubbed my leg.

He shook his head, a twinkle in his eye. “I need you to hold this branch out of my face.”

“This one?” I closed my hands around a branch the thickness of a bow above my head.

“No. This one.” He pointed to a branch the width of a writing quill in front of him at chest level. I frowned a question at him. He winked and then proceeded to heal a seam in the bark well below the branch in question. I dutifully held the branch and shifted my weight to my uninjured foot. Carnation tried to call me over, but Ash declared he “couldn't spare me” just then. For the rest of the afternoon I rotated between Carnation, Ash and Mahogany. Sometimes Ash would have a real task for me, other times he'd have me perform some meaningless, but restful activity. “Stand here and tell me if you see any ants come out while I work this section.”

Carnation showed some temper one of those times. “What do you mean she's

helping you? She's just standing there." Whereupon Ash replied solemnly that I was performing a task of vital importance, and Carnation could just wait her turn. An argument ensued that didn't end until Mahogany rendered it moot by calling me over to help him.

As the sun started to dip below the trees, Mahogany called a halt to the work, and we all walked back to the horses on the trail nearby.

On the ride back, our party joined with the Jade family's, and Carnation worked her way over to ride beside Hemlock. Experimenting with Killdeer, I discovered a combination of mane pulling and leg pressure that allowed me to semi-direct him. I used my new power to move up the line to where Buttercup rode. Ash dropped back to join us, and the three of us slowed a little to create space between ourselves and the rest of the group.

"Do you do this every day?" I asked Buttercup. She sat slumped in her saddle, yawning and struggling to keep her eyes open.

"Only at the first of spring," she murmured. "Once all of the trees have been inspected, we check the underbrush, but that doesn't take near as long."

I stifled my own yawn. "Will I come out here from now on?"

Ash answered. "We rotate the humans through. As you've seen, it's harder work than the sort of thing you'd do around the castle, so we try not to make one person do too much. You'll probably come out once a week or so."

I patted Killdeer's neck, surprised to realize I'd managed to spend a whole day outside of Starstair with no disaster. Amazing.

* * * *

I was about to slip into bed that evening, having spent a fruitless hour in the laundry trying to remove the dirt from my dress. My dress would never recover, and I wasn't sure my stiff muscles would either. A knock on the door startled me as I was pulling back the covers to get in. *What now?*

It was Netta. She hesitated outside the door, even after I'd called her in.

"Netta." My voice conveyed my pleased surprise. I hadn't talked to her in quite awhile with everything else that had been going on. In her arms she carried some fabric. "I found some spare fabric I thought you might like."

"Thank you. I don't have much time for sewing, but I could use some new dresses."

A corner of her mouth tweaked up. "Well, you could always use it for Buttercup."

I groaned and covered my eyes with my hands. "Does everyone know about that?"

Netta smiled wider. She set the cloth on my dressing table. "Not everyone. I was curious about the dress she wore to the dinner party the other day. She's not a good liar. It took me all of five minutes to get the truth out of her. I think it's very nice what you're doing with her."

"That's me," I said absently, as I sank down on the bed. "Flaming revolutionary one minute, virtuous do gooder the next."

Netta's smile faded.

"Forget I said that," I added, giving myself a mental flogging for bringing up the rebellion when Netta was making a friendly gesture.

Netta sat down in the other chair, one Buttercup had helped me smuggle from one of the dining room, so we'd both have somewhere to sit for her lessons. "I'm not angry with you. Nor with Kester, truth be told. I understand the longing for home, and another time I might have joined you."

"But now?"

She sighed. "Now, this is my home. Believe it or not, I feel more useful here, needed here, than I ever did carting water from the stream, or cleaning house at home. I have charge of all the young children the Turquoise fairies bring, some of whom, despite your experience, are truly better off here, with full stomachs, warm bodies, and people who care for them. Then there are the fairies like Buttercup. Fairies pride themselves on being serene, wise and majestic, sometimes to the detriment of loving, affectionate relationships." She offered a smile. "I find joy in bringing the simplicity of plain love into their lives, Buttercup, Carnation, even Foxglove. I think you do too."

I had already acknowledged that I would miss Buttercup when I left. Not Carnation. *Alright, Carnation's bubbly enthusiasm for all things feminine and Prince Hemlock has provided the majority of my humor in Starstair.* Maybe I would miss her a little. As for Foxglove, she could break her neck tomorrow, and I wouldn't care.

"I'm happy for you, Netta, really. But I miss my family and friends."

"I know. I know." Netta waved her hand. We spent a few minutes taking the measure of the fabric. Netta took a deep breath.

Here it comes, the real reason for her visit.

"I worry, Alina. I know your view of Starstair isn't that bright, but things could be much worse. Whatever Kester's plan is, for you to be free, you'll have to confront

Foxglove in some fashion. She's the one who put the spell on you; she's the only one who can take it off. I don't want to see anyone get hurt, human or fairy."

"I don't..."

"After Foxglove brought you back after your escape, you asked me if I had ever tried to escape."

I looked up from the fabric. She had my complete attention. I sat very still for fear that she'd change her mind. Since I'd discovered the secret compartment, every time I'd looked at the wardrobe, I had thought of Chansy and wondered what had happened to her and Netta's planned escape.

"Over a hundred years ago...I was younger than you are at the time...my best friend and I made up our minds to escape."

"Chansy."

"Chansy." She nodded. "We had a foolproof plan, or so we told ourselves. Hide in the woods, and when Foxglove came looking for us, we'd ambush her, make her take the spell off."

Sounds like a plan for disaster to me. I held my tongue.

"Except Foxglove didn't come." We used the rope in Chansy's room to leave the castle, went over the wall in the garden, made it to the woods without any problem, and waited. But it started to snow, and we got lost for two miserable days. In the end, we tried to find our way back to the castle rather than freeze to death. When Foxglove finally found us, we were half frozen, and couldn't put up more than a weak fight. And when we got back to the castle we found out..."

Pieces clicked together in my mind. I'd heard this story before. "Foxglove's

brother and sister-in-law went looking for you. Trolls killed them.”

Netta leaned forward to look in my face. “How did you know?”

“Ash told me. He didn’t say who the children were though.”

“Foxglove was near crazy with anger and grief. It was a very...unpleasant...time for me and Chansy. When we were finally released from the dungeon, Chansy wanted to escape again. She replaced the rope in her room that the fairies had removed and revised our plan, but I wouldn’t do it. Never again. Foxglove’s brother and sister-in-law were two of the nicest fairies I’ve ever known. They taught us to read and sew, and took us on outings. It wasn’t right that they died. And it was because of me and Chansy.” Her hands knotted the length of material she was holding. “I know how desperately you want to go home. Truly I do. But please promise me you’ll be careful. Having an innocent’s death on your conscience, even a fairy, is a terrible thing.”

I placed my hand over hers. “I promise I’ll be careful.”

She left shortly afterward. I climbed into bed, but lay awake for some time.

Chapter XIII

Tension ran high among the humans involved in the rebellion that first month of spring. If the fairies were going to discover the newly opened outlet of the secret passage, this would be the time, as they slowly progressed on their spring rounds of the forest. Terse, whispered conversations took place in shadowed corners, and traffic through the Turquoise kitchen increased to the extent that Kester had to assign two people just to keep it clean enough to avoid suspicion. Tempers were becoming so frayed that Kester ordered a full gathering, something that hadn't happened since the fairies tightened security.

We met in the storage cave, the passage between it and the second cave now blocked off from the trolls' by large boulders. Kester lectured on the importance of keeping our heads, and not betraying ourselves through guilty looks, or suspicious actions. After the gathering, Kester wound around the boxes and piles of supplies to me and Shelaine.

"Where's Riona?" he asked Shelaine.

"She's staying in her room," she said. "I'm going there next. The Arbiter denied her request to be moved to a different family. Says 'it's all in her mind.'"

We stepped aside to let a group of chattering teenagers pass.

Kester jerked his head toward a sullen faced young man at the other side of the storage room. "I don't know how much more Venard will take. He's as tight as a bow string."

Shelaine watched Venard, who'd stopped one of the exiting humans. He began an animated conversation with him, although it looked like Venard was doing most of the

talking, while the other shook his head with increasing firmness. Shelaine fingered one of her curls. “Maybe I should speak to the Arbiter? Tell him that it’s not all in her mind?”

The two of them debated the merits of Shelaine’s suggestion while I continued to watch Venard. His unwilling conversant escaped, leaving Venard standing alone next to a pile of shovels, looking as though he were tempted to grab one and go on a smashing spree. I knew the feeling well.

I didn’t go out with the fairies again for close to two weeks. The fairies no longer devoted their time solely to trees. They walked through the forest spread out in a loose line, each within sight distance of two others. Some of them only looked at the trees. Others would stop to encourage a flower struggling through a weed bed or straighten a bush that had been crushed by a falling tree limb. The fauna fairy, Hawthorn, ranged all around, playing with his animals. He’d left the dogs at the castle and had brought a raven as well as the goat. Work ceased mid morning when a quartet of unicorns pushed through the brush to cluster around him. The fairies, in their turn, clustered around the unicorns. Carnation got close enough to pull out a few tail hairs. “Unicorn hair is lucky for love,” she explained to me, tying it around her finger.

Not so lucky for the unicorn. I saw one of the other fairies making unsuccessful snatches at the closest tail. When the unicorns wearied of the attention, they wandered away. Carnation and two other fairies started to follow, to be dragged back to the group by the laughing fauna fairy.

The walking tired the fairies more than the tree inspection had. After the unicorns left, they sat down on logs and rocks to rest, talking softly. I sat with the other humans to

be polite, although I didn't know either of them very well as they were both servants of Carnation's grandparents. The raven stole someone's cap and three fairies took off after it. I laughed with everyone else as they pursued it around and above the trees. My eye fell on Buttercup. She'd wandered a little ways off and had kneeled amidst some early flowers. I watched her unsuccessful attempts to open a bud.

"Poor Buttercup." Ash sat down on the log next to me. The other humans scooted away and looked askance at him. He ignored them. "She loves the flowers, but she just doesn't have a gift for them." He nodded at Buttercup, whose wings were drooping lower and lower in dejection. "It wouldn't be so bad, except none of us can figure out what her gift is."

"Does every fairy have a gift then?"

"Everyone but Buttercup." He contemplated her with sad eyes. "The fauna fairies are good with animals, of course. Mother is a wonder with fruit trees. Fairies as far away as Stormtower call her to help with the harvest." He looked around at the other fairies, nodding at them as he said, "Father and Poplar are both good with grasses. My grandfather is gifted for aquatic plants, my grandmother for wildflowers. Iris and Hyacinth are good with conifers and Aspen...I think his gift is wildflowers also. Carnation's is vines, especially flowering ones, although it could just be that the flowery ones are the only ones she wants to work with."

"What's your gift?"

"Ferns."

"Pardon?"

He shifted on the log to look at me. "Mine is ferns."

I laughed. “No, really, what is it? I’d like to know.”

He smiled with me. “It really is ferns. Why are you laughing?”

Really? I swallowed my laughter and tried to look serious. “Nothing.”

An uncertain grin wavered on his lips. “Why are grasses not funny, but ferns are?”

“I don’t think ferns are funny.” I tried, but barely finished the sentence without snorting at the image of oh-so-dignified Ash bent over and poking at a sword fern, while the other fairies labored amidst stately trees or bright colored flowers.

“Yes you do. You’re turning red from trying not to laugh.”

Oh dear. I’m offending him. If I’d been making fun of Foxglove’s fruit trees, I would probably already have been headed for the dungeon. I made a serious effort to rein in my mirth.

Buttercup saved me by giving up on the flowers, and trudging over to the log to plop down on the other side of Ash. At least I thought I was saved, until she asked, “What’s so funny?”

I bit my lip hard. Ash looked at me with raised eyebrow. “Your peculiar human friend here seems to think it’s hilarious that my gift is for ferns.”

Buttercup smirked. “Well...compared to flowers.”

“You too?” Ash looked from one to the other of us, trying to look stern, a twitch on the side of his mouth giving him away. “I see a demonstration is in order.” He stomped to his feet with purpose, and doffed his cap to the two of us. “If you two unbelievers will follow me.”

“Where are you going?” Carnation called as we filed past her.

“We’ll be back.” Ash waved a hand over his shoulder. “Lucky for you two, I know just the place close by here.”

A few minutes of hiking later, I could hear the rush of water ahead of us, like rapids on a stream. No, louder than rapids, like a waterfall. We walked out of the trees on the log of what had been a giant tree that now spanned a stream. The waterfall gushed ten yards or so upstream of us. The cliff it fell from reared a full 40 feet above our heads, the water rushing down in one great flume a third of the way where it struck a large outcropping and burst into three separate streams that sluiced and foamed down the rest of the rock face to crash into a pool. The cliff bent around to our right so that we were half enclosed in a rocky grotto with the forest on the third side, and the stream cascading down a steep grade strewn with mossy boulders behind us.

“Ah. Just like I remembered.” Anticipation glittered in Ash’s eyes. “Sit here.” He gestured to the mossy log under his feet. “Sit, and prepare to be astonished.” He crouched and leaped into the air, headed for the cliff. Buttercup and I sat on the log, legs dangling off the side facing the falls.

At that moment, I didn’t care a bit about Ash’s ferns. I had only ever seen two waterfalls the size of the one in front of us in my life, and the water pouring endlessly off the cliff mesmerized me. Dimly, I noticed Ash flying along the cliff wall on either side of the falls. I forced my stare away from the falls to watch him. Everywhere his fingers trailed on the cliff, delicate feathery ferns appeared, falling gently out of crevices in the rock. Next, he moved to the trees lining the stream on the side opposite the cliff. Bright green ferns sprouted off the trees’ mossy branches like ornaments. He landed on the ground, stooped, and touched something then bounced to his feet, sweeping his hands

upward to finish with palms up above his head. Great bracken ferns shot out of the ground, followed his hands upwards, and in the space of seconds stood taller than his head. He danced closer to the stream, eyes glowing, cheeks flushed. Everywhere his feet touched, a clump of lush ferns sprang up, until the previously empty dirt next to the creek was covered in a mantle of lacy greenery. Thin, whip-like ferns, long, pointed ferns, branching ferns the size of bushes, all transformed the flat space below the falls into a verdant paradise.

Panting, he flew back to the log and landed, feet spread. “Now what do you think?”

I answered truthfully, “It’s beautiful.”

Buttercup didn’t share my wonder. “Wildflowers would improve it,” she said with a glint in her eye.

“Impudent little know-it-all.” Ash gave her a playful shove off the log. She righted herself in the air and settled onto the ground eight feet below us.

“Go try to grow some ferns,” Ash shouted down at her over the rush of water. “It would serve you right if that turns out to be your gift.”

Buttercup stuck her tongue out at him. She flew over the stream and waded into the ferns. Ash sat down and began to tease little curled ferns out of the log.

Conversation was made difficult by the proximity of the falls, so we didn’t speak. I drank in the beauty of the place, letting my legs swing. *I wish my friends could see this.*

Buttercup flew back to the log. “It’s no good. They don’t like me any better than the flowers.” She settled between us.

“If it’s any consolation, flowers never would grow for me either,” I offered.

Buttercup's look said it wasn't any consolation.

I tried again. "Don't fret about it. What this place really needs is a name. In big script letters. Just to the right of the falls I think." I framed the spot with my hands.

Over Buttercup's head, Ash frowned at me and shook his head. I frowned back at him. *We're not going to desecrate your little haven.* "Maybe 'Fern Vale' or 'Fern Haven' or..." Ash was making funny little circular waving motions at me. "or Ash's folly." He dropped his hands to his sides and furrowed his brow.

"I'll try." Buttercup pushed off the log and flew towards the cliff.

"What are you doing?" Ash pushed to his feet and towered over me as soon as she left.

"Trying to help her get some self-esteem back. What are you doing with all your faces and hand waving?"

Buttercup hovered next to the cliff wall, head tilted to the side, hands exploring the natural crevices. Ash watched her. "I was trying to get you to stop. I suppose you didn't know, but this is just going to make her feel worse."

Buttercup scraped moss off of a square area to the right of the falls.

"How could it make her feel worse?" I felt bad already, although I couldn't see the problem.

"Because she's not going to be able to do it. Fairies can't work with stone, Alina."

"Oh." I sighed. *Good going, Alina. Why didn't you just ask her to... wait....*

"But fairies can work with stone." I turned on the log, pulled my knees to my chest, and looked up at him.

“Yes.” He sighed. “But only very few, very rare individuals.”

I pictured Ytrebil’s gravestone. “Ash. I’ve seen her work with stone.”

He frowned. “You must be mistaken.” The slightest hint of condescension had crept into his voice. It irritated me. I got to my feet and pointed. “See for yourself.” We glared at each for a moment, then his eyes cut away to Buttercup. I watched with satisfaction as they widened.

One careful stroke at a time, finger pressed against the stone of the cliff, Buttercup traced out letters on the wall. I congratulated myself on not saying, “I told you.” He wasn’t paying attention to me anyway.

He snapped his wings together and flew to join Buttercup over by the cliff. I couldn’t hear what they were saying over the roar of the waterfall. Ash pointed to the writing and spread his hands. Buttercup shook her head. She stopped writing and listened to Ash. I walked down the log, pausing to enjoy the view of the fern vale a final time before hopping off it. They joined me soon afterwards.

“Let’s go back.” Ash said, all seriousness. Buttercup, on the other hand, glowed as bright as when I’d agreed to teach her to sew. The two of them half flew back to where the other fairies were waiting, and I had to jog to stay with them.

We met Carnation first, coming in search of me. “Oh, there you are, Alina. I need your help.” She took my arm and pulled me toward a clump of blackberries.

I twisted to watch Buttercup and Ash approach Mahogany, who was sitting halfway up a tree working over its bark with his fingers.

“Now. I’ve got to remove some of these vines or the wild rose bush underneath will die,” Carnation chattered. “I want to leave some of them though for the fruit. So tell

me what you think. Should I take this one or this one? Alina?” Ash had flown up to Mahogany, and was speaking rapidly. Buttercup stood under the tree, looking up at them, rocking forward and back on her toes.

“What’s wrong with Buttercup?” Carnation frowned. “She looks like she’s found a pot of gold.”

“Oh. Nothing much.” I turned loftily to the brambles. “She’s just discovered her gift.”

“Huh. About time.” Carnation let the blackberry vine drop. She watched as Mahogany was joined by Foxglove. “What is it?”

I made her wait while I pulled at a couple of vines. “Stonework. She can work with stone.”

Carnation’s incredulous expression was priceless. “I don’t believe it.” She hurried to the ever increasing group of fairies around Buttercup. I hummed a tune to myself as I sauntered after her.

* * * *

“You should have seen them all. I think Carnation was actually jealous.” I laughed as I related the story to Shelaine. The two of us had kitchen duty that night. This meant we had to keep the floor clean enough, and the oven dirty enough, to avoid any suspicion on the part of the kitchen staff. We also had the responsibility to check the corridor outside the kitchen from time to time and regulate the workers coming in and out of the passage. With the initial spring inspection completed by the fairies, some of the humans had started working on the thicket by the streams. They rooted vines and fast growing brush in the spots around the thicket that weren’t already dense to make it

impenetrable.

I continued, “Then Foxglove wanted a demonstration, and poor Buttercup had to spend the rest of the afternoon carving out different words and shapes for everyone there. Mahogany sent a bird back to the castle to order a party in celebration. By the time we got there, three fairies were already waiting for her, wanting to know if she’d mind carving this or that inscription for them. Foxglove gave them one of her ice cold glares, and they hurried away. She didn’t smile once that I saw. I don’t think she even cares that Buttercup finally has...is something wrong, Shelaine?” I looked across the table at my friend. She hadn’t joined in my merriment but had been playing with a carrot end, rolling it about on the table.

“Not exactly,” she said, sending the carrot end skittering towards me.

“You don’t seem very interested.” I swiped at it. It sailed past Shelaine and fell to the floor.

She shifted in her seat. “Well. Honestly. I’m not.” She poked under the table with her foot, searching for the carrot end. “Really, Alina, you’re talking about this like it happened in your own family. These are fairies.” She bent to retrieve the carrot top, leaving me gazing at the empty space where her head had been.

I know they’re fairies. That means I can’t talk about them? I should have just let it go, but Shelaine’s disinterest of late in everything besides the escape had been getting on my nerves.

“Come on, Shelaine. You know as well as I do that Buttercup deserves this.” I caught what might have been an eye roll as Shelaine returned to vertical. With some heat, I added, “I’m sorry you don’t find it interesting. There’s just only so much to talk about a

tunnel and a bramble patch.”

“It’s not that.” She gave up toying with the carrot end, and closed her hand around it.

“What is it then?”

“I’m just afraid you’re getting too...involved.” She made it sound like I was coming down with some kind of disease.

“Involved?” I stomped to my feet, picked up the broom, and vigorously swept at a patch of tile that was already spotless. *She would put it like that, like becoming friends with Buttercup was a bad thing.* “Goodness, Shelaine. I’m not adopting her. What are you so worried about? That I’m going to fall in love with fairies and quit the rebellion?”

She muttered something that sounded like, “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“What?”

She sighed, and leaned her head on one hand. “Forget I said anything. I’m worried about Kester.”

“What about Kester?” I set the broom on the rack and checked the oven to see if anyone was coming back yet.

“He thinks he’s being watched.”

I digested this for a moment. “Watched by whom?”

“He wouldn’t say. I don’t think he meant to tell me at all, and then he tried to laugh it off.” She clenched her hand around the carrot end. “I know I said that we’ve planned for everything. But, so many things could go wrong.”

I came around the table, already forgiving her accusation and wrapped my arms around her shoulders. “It’ll be alright,” I said with false confidence. “We’ll get out. All

of us. Including Kester. He could probably talk his way out of here if he wanted to.”

She laughed a shaky laugh. “You’re probably right.”

The stomping of feet in the oven heralded the return of the work party for the night. Shelaine threw open the oven door and greeted Kester, who had a dirt smudge on his cheek and mud all over his clothing. “He doesn’t look done to me,” she said over her shoulder to me.

I grinned. “Oh I don’t know. He looks like he’s browning nicely.”

“Right, just a few more minutes then.” She placed a hand on his face and pushed him back into the oven. His hand shot out and pulled her in after him.

A touch on my shoulder made me jump. I whirled around, hands raised to defend myself.

The crow that had landed on my shoulder fluttered off and landed on the table, where it ruffled all its feathers at me.

“Shelaine, Kester.” *There’s a crow in the kitchen.* Two dirty faces appeared at the door of the oven. Shelaine clambered out, followed by Kester.

The crow started speaking before he had both feet on the table. “Fairies are coming to the kitchen.”

Traces of laughter drained from all of our faces.

“Say that again.” Kester stepped towards the crow, who hopped back out of reach. It repeated. “Fairies are coming to the kitchen.” As an afterthought it added, “Soon.”

“Who sent you?”

The crow fixed him with a beady eye. Kester made a grab for it. It took off with

a raucous call and flew out of the kitchen through the door we'd left cracked open to better hear any possible snoopers.

Fairies coming to the kitchen? Coming to the kitchen?! “What do we do?” I clutched at Kester's sleeve.

“Stay calm,” he soothed, as he backed toward the oven. “Follow Shelaine's lead. She knows what to do.” He folded himself into the oven, and I heard the soft grating sound that indicated the secret panel was closing.

“Shelaine?”

“Get a hold of yourself, Alina. You stayed calm enough when those trolls were coming after us. What's a few flutterflies after that?” She shut and latched the oven, speaking rapidly. “Our story is I came down for a late snack. You couldn't sleep and came down around midnight. We got to talking and lost track of time.”

She pulled several more carrot ends out of her pocket and spread them on the table. Either Shelaine was a voracious carrot eater, or she carried those things for just such a purpose. She slid onto the bench and smoothed her hair. “We've as much right to be in the kitchen as anyone else.”

I sat on the edge of the bench. I'd have rather ran out of the door and back to my room, screaming my innocence to the world. *If there even are fairies coming.* My galloping heart slowed a little. *After all, we're taking the word of a bird here.*

The kitchen door banged all the way open, crushing any hope for the bird's untruthfulness. “Well, well. If it isn't little Miss Trouble herself.” A lanky, dark haired fairy wearing a helmet and breastplate pushed into the kitchen. He tugged on the chin strap of his helmet. “Late for doing dishes, isn't it?”

“Who’s doing dishes?” Shelaine arched an eyebrow at him. Her voice didn’t quiver and neither did the hand that was pushing carrot ends around.

Two more fairies entered behind the first, also wearing armor and carrying swords.

The eyes of the first one flicked to me. “Who’s your friend, Shelly?” he queried.

“Who’re yours, Tupelo?”

“Uh, uh.” He shook a finger at her. “I asked first.” His gaze roved over the kitchen in quick, darting glances that took in every utensil and cranny.

“My name is Alina.” I couldn’t make myself sound as innocuous as Shelaine, but at least my voice didn’t shake.

“What family?”

I tried Shelaine’s arched eyebrow. “Turquoise, of course, why do you think I’m in this kitchen?”

“Why indeed?” He sat on the corner of the table closest to the door, pulled his helmet off, and raked his hair back. A single streak of gray ran down one side of his head.

His two companions took different sides of the room and began examining the walls, utensils, and opening all the cupboards. I purposefully looked at everything but the oven and discovered I was drumming my fingers on the table. I forced myself to stop.

“Maybe you’d care to tell me what you two are doing down here this close to morning,” he said, continuing to glance around the kitchen. Then his eyes swung back to me and bored into my own.

I swallowed. Shelaine had told me the story so fast...*I'll have to do my best.* “I couldn’t sleep. I came down here for a bite to eat and found Shelaine already here. We fell to talking. Is it really almost morning?” I hoped that sounded more innocent to his ears than it did to mine.

He didn’t answer my question. “And I suppose you were hungry too?” He fixed his gaze on Shelaine, who rubbed her stomach. “Famished.” She pointed to the carrot ends.

“I see.” The other two fairies finished their round of the kitchen without hardly looking at the oven. Our interrogator made eye contact with first one, then the other. They both gave tiny shakes of their heads. He slapped his leg and stood up. “Well, girls, this is how it is. Somebody noticed that there have been an awful lot of people coming in and out of this section of the Turquoise wing at night. Thought we ought to take a look. So we have. Have you seen Kester recently?” His narrowed eyes focused on Shelaine’s face, so he missed my stiffening at the sudden change in topic.

Shelaine didn’t so much as blink. “Just this afternoon.”

“Mm hmm.” He took two quick steps to the oven, threw the latch, and opened it. He nodded to one of the others, who snapped a ball of fire to life in his palm and stuck his head inside. It happened too fast for us to do anything to stop him. Shelaine’s hand crept toward her pocket where I knew she kept a knife.

The silver streaked fairy ran a hand down the inside of the oven, examining the ash by his subordinate’s light. He jerked his head toward the kitchen door. The fairy with the fire withdrew it and shut the oven door. The leader wiped his finger on his sleeve. “We’re leaving now, but I’ve got three pieces of advice for you two.” He strapped his

helmet on. “One.” He leveled his gaze at us. “Get some sleep girls, or you’ll not be fit to do a thing tomorrow. Two.” He motioned the others to exit. “Remember that you’re allowed to get snacks from the kitchen, but not...” he held up a warning finger, “to take away more than you can eat in one sitting. Wouldn’t want any hoarding to go on, would we?”

I shook my head dutifully. Shelaine just grinned.

“Three.” He had one foot out the door, one hand on the doorpost. “Remember that under certain circumstances, the law does allow us to get the truth by whatever means necessary.” He held Shelaine’s gaze for a couple of seconds. “Good night.” The gold of his wings reflected candlelight back at us before they followed him around the corner of the door frame.

I sat motionless at the table, unable to believe our luck. Shelaine eased to her feet and crept over to the door to check. “I don’t see him,” she whispered. “You know I can’t believe it.” She placed her hands on her hips and turned to me. “We spend months, *months*, looking for that secret passage before we think to look in the oven. He waltzes in here and practically goes straight to it. Are we just stupid?”

A nervous laugh bubbled out of my throat. “What was that about getting the truth by whatever means necessary?”

Shelaine raised a finger, put her ear to the closed door, then flung it open. “Nope. Nobody listening.” She sat back down. I wasn’t sure she’d heard my question until she offered, “He means if they think one of us is hiding important information about the rebellion, they might put a spell on us to find out what it is.”

“They can do that?”

She shrugged. "It's supposed to be illegal under the 'Harsh and Brutal Treatment of Humans' Law,' but, yes, they can do that. Old Tupe's letting us know that they're worried enough about a rebellion that they might be willing to bend some of the rules. Right." She stood up again, a regular jack-in-the-box. Just watching her kept my nerves on edge. "I think that's given them enough time," she said. "I'm going to go check things out. I don't think they really know anything. At most, they probably suspect us of raiding the kitchen." She peered out into the passage again. "You stay here, and if I don't come back don't let Kester or any of the rest come out. We'll have to get them out before morning of course, but we'll worry about that if and when we find out they're out there waiting for us."

I stood too, not at all liking my role. "What if they come back?"

"Don't worry about it. Tell them you fell asleep. Make something up. You'll be fine." She left.

I sagged back onto the bench with a groan. *Make something up. Right.* Would Tupelo interpret incomprehensible stuttering as guilty fear or not enough sleep?

Shelaine returned a half hour later to report that all looked clear. We opened the secret panel and called for Kester and the rest.

"We'll have to be extra careful from now on." Kester stood at the kitchen door and monitored the exit of the work party. "Use fewer people. The work will go slower, but that's the way life goes."

Makov emerged last from the oven, brushing soot off his clothing. "You know what worries me more than those guards coming here?" he said to Kester. "The fact that some fairy knew they were coming and knew that we were doing something they

wouldn't like."

I thought back to the crow. "Couldn't a human, someone like Netta, who wishes us no harm but doesn't want to join us have sent it?"

Kester shook his head. "Only the fairies have the magic to send a bird with a verbal message, at night, I might add, when birds are generally asleep. There's only one human in Starstair who could..." His brows knit in thought.

"Surely not," said Makov.

"I don't know." Kester stared at the wall, shoulders stooped with fatigue. Skin black from oven soot, he could have passed for some kind of hobgoblin. "I don't know. Could be a kind hearted fairy that just thinks we're pilfering food. But I don't like it."

I didn't like it either.

"Maybe it was a ghost," suggested Shelaine, wiggling her fingers in the air in front of her.

Everyone looked at her.

"The fairy was right," I said. "You need to get some sleep."

Chapter XIV

Kester suspended all operations for two weeks to be safe, a decision that was met with much grumbling by those most dedicated to escape. I welcomed the reprieve from late nights in the kitchen but felt that two weeks was a little longer than necessary. I wanted to be home before another winter came and went.

I'd finally reached Carnation's saturation point for new dresses. She had three party dresses and two gowns that she'd no occasion to wear yet, so I got a reprieve from sewing. When she was working in the forest, I cleaned. When she wasn't working, we spent most of the day in the garden. Entranced at the idea of flowers as messages, Carnation made me teach her all the meanings I knew. When she'd wrung all scraps of flowery knowledge from me, she took me to the library (which I hadn't even known existed) and found three books with additional meanings as well as book that gave meanings for combinations of flowers. *What wouldn't Grehelda have given to have a look at that book?* If Hemlock only knew the agonizing Carnation went through every day she thought she might see him, as she arranged complicated patterns of flowers and read meaning into his own apparel, down to the floral designs on his saddle blanket.

On my next trip out with the fairies, Carnation wheedled my service away from the rest of the fairies, ostensibly to help carry wild rose vines for the garden. Once out of sight, however, she pulled out her flower meanings book, well worn about the edges by then, and set me to looking for some of the wildflowers in the book that the garden didn't have. All in all, it was easy work, so I didn't complain.

We found buttercups (humility) and clover (good luck) but couldn't find the blue violets (faithfulness) that Carnation was so anxious to find. Clutching a bouquet of small

yellow flowers that we couldn't find in her book, Carnation sprawled on the grass under a spreading maple, still growing in its velvety, bright green spring leaves. She looked up through its branches with a dreamy sigh, and I braced myself for another soliloquy on the charms of Hemlock.

I sat down with my back to the trunk. *Might as well get comfortable.* Somewhere close by, a trickle of a stream made pleasant bubbling noises accompanied by birdsong in the trees. A light breeze blew across my face, but the day was warm enough that we'd only worn light riding cloaks. Killdeer and Carnation's horse grazed on the other side of the tree. I kept an eye on them, still not at ease with the idea that fairy horses wouldn't wander off if left to their own devices.

Carnation sighed again. "Have you ever had a beau?"

I looked down at her supine form. In the six and a half months I'd been in Starstair, Carnation had never evidenced the least interest in my prior life. For all she knew, I could be a princess, a gypsy, the daughter of a brigand chieftain, a lunatic....

Carnation swung onto her stomach so she could look at me. "You can tell me," she coaxed.

I needed something to play with in my hands. I found an old brittle stick and proceeded to break it into inch long pieces. My silence only served to increase Carnation's curiosity. She wiggled closer on the ground. I winced. *There'll be grass stains to take off that dress tonight.*

"How many beaus?" she persisted, eyes dancing.

Goodness. I toyed with making up some wild tale with multiple, ardent suitors vying for my hand. *I wouldn't be able to sustain a fiction of that magnitude.* I could

refuse to talk about it, but...why not tell her the truth? Here was the perfect opportunity to unburden myself on my almost-marriage without the pity, the shoulder patting, the endless questions, I'd get from Shelaine or Netta, especially Netta. So I did. I told her the whole sad tale in all its pathetic shortness: my friendship growing up with Grehelda, Corice and Rolant, my parents' announcement after Corice's marriage, my ambiguous feelings about it, going for a walk the day before my wedding and standing in the sunbeam, and what I'd heard about Rolant looking for me when I'd escaped.

Carnation lay propped up on her elbows and gave me her undivided attention for the whole story. I felt I ought to say "and they lived happily ever after" at the end, but that would've been both juvenile and untrue. I settled for the less inspiring, "and that's it."

Carnation rotated to lie on her back again. She placed her hands beneath her head, and sighed. "That is so romantic."

"Roman...you think it's romantic?" My incredulity made my voice come out in a squawk.

"Oh yes." Carnation's eyes widened at my near sightedness. "Just think." She arced her hand in a slow circle in the air above her. "The handsome young man." Pause. "He is handsome?"

I nodded, bemused.

She started her arc over. "The handsome, young man, secretly in love with you since his boyhood, yet too shy to speak his feelings. He convinces his parents to arrange the marriage. Then he waits in eager anticipation for two, never ending years, every breath in your presence both torture and delight."

“Now, wait a minute...”

“Shh.” Carnation closed her eyes and pointed a finger at me. “Let me finish. Then. The day before his dreams come true, the day he thought would never come, the culmination of years of desire and longing.”

I felt my face turning red.

“But his bride disappears. Without so much as a note. With no one to tell whether she’s been carried off against her will or whether she’s spurned his love and ran away of her own accord. Either option wrenches his heart. If taken against her will, what tortures? What horrors might his beloved be facing far from his protecting arm?”

“Carnation.”

“Shh. If she has run away of her own accord then she is safe yet, oh the anguish that is his if she does not return his love. He must know. He spends his days searching for her. Eating becomes a chore, sleep an unbearable hindrance to his quest. Day after day, month after month. His love burns as true as its first delicate whisper so many years before.” Carnation opened her eyes and smiled up at the sky. “I can see why you tried to escape.”

The stick lay forgotten in my lap. *Every breath in your presence both torture and delight?* I shivered. Oh, Carnation had embellished the tale as only she could, yet...he had waited for two years, he had built that house, he was still searching for me as of a couple of months ago.

We remained there, each lost in her own thoughts for some time before Carnation recalled us to the original mission, and we looked for good rose vines for clippings.

With two cut vines and plans to cut two more, we were crossing a small brook

when Carnation stood in her stirrups and pointed. “Look. A unicorn.” Sure enough, not 100 feet upstream, a unicorn stood with its front feet in the stream, water dripping off its silvery muzzle, watching us.

“Let’s follow it,” Carnation said in a quiet voice. I started to protest that we still had vines to find. The unicorn shook its head and picked its way across the stream to the opposing side where it ambled into the trees. My protests died, and I even encouraged Killdeer on with one of my unneeded heel jabs. When the unicorn scampered up a steep bank, too steep for the horses, I dismounted and scrambled up the short rock face after Carnation without a second thought. We left the horses happily munching and followed the unicorn deeper into the woods.

This is ridiculous. Why are we following a unicorn? I winced as a branch thwacked me in the face after Carnation released it. And still I followed. Proving it is possible to make the same mistake twice (following Carnation), *or was that three times? Come to think of it, how many times did I follow Grehelda on some mad caper? It seems I never learn.*

I could see the four of us in my mind’s eye: Grehelda in the lead, waving a wooden sword, the rest of us following in a line, obedient sheep that we were. I could almost hear Grehelda exhorting us on to new heights of folly with the promise of excitement and reward. And we followed. Baa.

I stopped and shook my head to clear it. I *could* hear Grehelda. I shook my head harder.

“Do you hear someone?” Carnation had stopped too, a few feet in front of me, one hand out to push away a branch that would surely come back and whack me in

another step or two.

The unicorn pricked its ears at whatever noise we were both hallucinating. Because it was impossible that Grehelda would be this deep in the forest, doubly impossible that she'd be this deep in the forest at the exact same time as Carnation and me. The unicorn stood motionless for an instant then pivoted on its hind legs, bounded over a fallen log, and took off at a canter.

"Bother," Carnation said with feeling as it raced out of sight. I was more interested in what was happening on our other side. Voices approached, along with the occasional crack as someone stopped on a brittle stick. Although I remained half convinced I was imagining things, there was no denying the familiarity of the voices.

Three figures straggled into view from behind a gigantic maple, a memory come to life. Grehelda in front, carrying something long and thin, Corice following, Rolant at the back.

Carnation glared at them. "Noisy oafs."

"Those are my friends," I defended.

Carnation's glare turned to sharp curiosity. "Really? Rolant, Corice and Grehoody?"

"Yes."

She started toward them. "Let's get closer." Distracted, I didn't dodge in time. The branch she'd been holding bounced back and raked my arm.

Since they couldn't see us, I'm not sure what the point of the next couple of minutes of dodging from tree to tree and crouching in the bushes was all about. I went along with it because Carnation was enjoying the drama, and it got me closer to my

friends. She angled us toward the trail they were on, arriving at a large stump next to it before they did. We crouched behind the stump as soft foot falls approached. I peeked around it and saw Grehelda, not ten paces away.

“I’ll be right back.” Carnation burst from behind the stump and crawled in the direction Grehelda was going. *That fairy needs more excitement in her life.* I only watched her for a few crawling steps before I turned hungry eyes to my friends. The thin object Grehelda held turned out to be the same sword she’d been waving around when I’d last seen her. She had her hair pulled back in a black scarf and wore men’s trousers, the overall effect rather piratish. Corice had both hands rubbing her back when my gaze traveled to her. As usual, she’d thought more about appearances than practicality when she’d chosen the outfit she was wearing. The hem dragged the ground and the bottom three inches were more of a mud brown than the original green. Eyes traveling up from the hem, I noticed a rounded bulge around her waist. *Pregnant again?* She and Elek must be trying to start a whole village on their own. I studied her for a full minute before I gathered the courage to look at Rolant. When I finally did, I relaxed. He looked the same. Same length of brown hair, same sharp discerning eyes, I even recognized the shirt he wore. Yet something was different about his posture, more halting and stooped than I remembered. Looking closer, his eyes lacked the luster that I remembered from those days when we’d make eye contact around Grehelda and share a smile at her latest folly.

“Come on.”

I started at the voice in my ear. Carnation was back. I felt ridiculous jogging bent over next to her on a line parallel to my friends. “Where are we going?” I whispered. I hadn’t had near enough of seeing my friends yet.

“Right here. Help me up.”

Why argue? I cupped my hands, wondering as I did, why someone that could fly needed a boost. Wouldn't it make more sense for her to give me a boost then flutter into the tree under her own power? But no, I was left to scramble as best I could into the spreading branches after her with no idea as to the why.

“Why are we up here?” I panted as I straddled a branch and scooted closer to the trunk. Carnation perched on a branch above me.

“They'll stop down there, and we'll be able to hear everything they say.” She pointed to a log lying slantwise across the game trail they were following.

“How do you know?”

She rolled her eyes. “Humans are so predictable. I put that log there. Wait and see.”

Grehelda swaggered around a bend in the trail.

“How much farther are we going?” Corice called behind her. She was still rubbing her back.

Grehelda cast her eyes up in a “give me patience” expression. Her eyes glided right past me and Carnation which didn't stop either of us from crouching lower in the tree. “We can rest a little on this log,” she called back to Corice.

What do you know? I guess humans are predictable.

“That's Rolant?” Carnation's breath tickled my ear.

“Yes.”

“Oh.” She squinted at him. “I thought you said he was handsome.”

“He is.” I raised my voice, clapped a hand over my mouth, and looked down.

No one took any notice of us. Grehelda hoisted one black booted foot onto the log and leaned over her knee to peer down the trail, sword point planted in the ground. *The courageous explorer planning her next daring move.*

Corice collapsed on the log next to Grehelda. She picked up her hem and groaned at the sight. “Why did I let you talk me into this?”

“Because you want to find Alina too.”

“Why would Alina be way out here?” She slid sideways to make room for Rolant on the log.

“If the fairies took her out here,” Grehelda explained.

Corice exchanged glances with Rolant, eyebrows raised in a look that said they’d covered this topic before.

I shifted on my branch. *What’s so hard to believe about being kidnapped by fairies?*

Grehelda caught the exchange too. “You two still don’t believe me about Alina being in my room do you?”

Another exchange of glances. I could guess what was running through their minds. Tell the truth? Or go along with Grehelda to keep the peace? Too many times I’d faced the same dilemma. Except this time, Grehelda was on my side.

“You never actually saw her,” Corice ventured.

Grehelda jabbed the sword at something on the ground. “I never saw the fairy either.” As though that proved her point.

Corice’s eyebrows indicated she thought it proved her point too.

“It can’t hurt to look.” Rolant had his elbows on his knees, head bent down.

Now it was Corice and Grehelda's turn to exchange significant looks. Corice laid a hand on his shoulder and used what Grehelda called her mothering voice.

"Of course not. It's just...." She looked up to Grehelda for help. I could have told her not to bother. Grehelda's brows were already knitting together, anticipating her next words. Corice gathered her courage and plunged on. "It's just that I'm not sure it's healthy to keep up this endless traipsing through the forest when, for all we know, Alina is living in the city somewhere."

Rolant stiffened. Grehelda's boot slid off the log and hit the ground with an ominous thump. "I thought." She leaned over Corice. "That we agreed that Alina would never run away like that."

My heart swelled at her loyalty.

Corice was made of stiffer stuff than she used to be, maybe from the responsibility of having a family, because she didn't back down. "I know it's hard to believe." She matched Grehelda stare for stare. "But it makes more sense than this fairy nonsense."

Grehelda sucked in a breath.

Probably thinking she had nothing more to lose, Corice recklessly added, "And you should put that sword away. You don't even know how to use it."

Grehelda's eyes sparked. She paced two quick steps away from the log, whirled around and plunged the sword point first into a knot in the log beside Corice's hand. "So go back then." Her eyes fixed the tip, buried in the knot, and brightened in pleasure at her accuracy. Corice and Rolant looked more alarmed than impressed.

"I can't believe you just did that," Corice finally sputtered, jerking her hand back

to her body and shooting to her feet. “That’s so...so... immature.”

“That’s better than rude, which is what you were when you called me a liar.”

Grehelda leaned on the sword hilt. She was tall enough that, even with a slight lean, she was still looking down at Corice. “Not to mention insulting.”

Rolant stood up. “I’m going to keep looking.” He pushed in between Corice and Grehelda, and walked briskly down the path.

“Now see what you did.” Grehelda swiveled to watch his back.

“What I did?”

“Suggesting that Alina ran away from him. Why don’t you just borrow my sword and run him through?”

“I’m sure I didn’t mean...Oh!” Corice threw up her hands. “Fine. You’re right. You’re always right. Happy?”

“Rolant!” Grehelda leaned back and wiggled the sword, trying to dislodge it.

“Wait for us.”

Corice lifted her skirt over her knees and grunted her way over the log. “Rolant. Don’t you leave us out here.” She broke into a shuffling trot after him. Grehelda planted one foot on the log, pulling. The sword came loose and she fell backwards. Up in a flash, she leaped over the log and passed Corice.

Wait! I added my own silent plea. I skinned my arm sliding down the trunk of the tree. “Hurry.”

Carnation hadn’t moved.

“We’ll lose them!” I hissed at her.

“So?” Carnation stepped off her branch and floated to the ground.

Now she flies. “I need to let them know I’m okay. Leave a message to let them know I didn’t run away.” I didn’t have any paper or anything to write with. I hurried after them, keeping Grehelda in sight. Maybe I could find some dirt and write out a message. *Wait. Carnation’s a fairy.* I spun back to Carnation, whose only movement after dropping out of the tree had been to sit on the log.

“Carnation. Can’t you use magic or something to let me talk to them?”

She started shaking her head before I’d finished the sentence. Corice’s muddy skirt was getting farther and farther away. “Come on, Carnation. Just a couple of minutes. One minute.”

She shook her head harder. Her wings started to flutter in agitation. “I don’t think I could, Alina, and I know Mother wouldn’t like it.”

At this point, I matched Grehelda’s immaturity by stamping my foot. “They’re leaving!”

Carnation darted a glance after them.

“What about Rolant?” I tried to remember Carnation’s earlier words. ““Spending his days searching for me?””

That gave her pause. Her wings slowed. Some of the earlier dreaminess seeped back onto her face.

“Carnation. Please. If you never do anything else for me.”

She sighed. “I can’t let you write anything. I’m sorry. But I’d get in big trouble.”

I thought about forgetting Carnation and just running after my friends. *How long until she’d catch up?* It would be worth a night in the dungeon.

“I’ll help you leave a flower message for them,” she offered, extending her flower basket to me. In the haze of following the unicorn she had brought it with her.

I couldn’t see them anymore. Warmth threatened at the back of my eyes. I didn’t trust my voice. I squeezed my eyes shut and nodded. “Okay.” The basket contained flowers from the garden that Carnation had wanted to match with wildflowers we might find. It would have to be simple because my friends didn’t have the complicated explanations of bouquets that fairies did. I chose a pink rose for friendship, and wisteria for steadfastness. Carnation wanted to add forget-me-not, but ‘remember me forever’ sounded too final, like I’d never see them again. I chose a geranium, for comfort, instead. The three flowers lying on the ground looked lonely, and completely inadequate to express my longing for home and my love for my friends.

We left the flowers on the trail in the hopes that they would come back the same way. We couldn’t be sure though. They might never get the message. Carnation relented enough to let me scrawl a large “A” next to the flowers. *They’re smart. They’ll figure it out.* Yet my heart was heavy as we walked back to the horses.

I know I helped Carnation cut her vines because I had cuts on my hands from the thorns when we got back to the castle. I don’t remember helping, though.

* * * *

Not feeling very social, I tried to get Buttercup to cancel that evening’s sewing lessons when she showed up on the doorstep to my room. Finding her gift however, had given Buttercup a new confidence and boldness. And while I was delighted for the most part, in this instance it worked against me as she pleaded and wheedled until I gave in and agreed to a lesson. Her sewing had progressed to the point that she didn’t really need

that much help anymore, but she enjoyed coming to my rooms most evenings. We'd talk while she worked on her latest project. I mended my own clothes with the occasional snippet of advice for her latest efforts.

We sat in companionable silence for some time when Buttercup hit me with her surprise. "I'm leaving Starstair."

I looked up from my sewing. She was solemn faced. The new Buttercup wasn't as hesitant to joke, even play practical jokes, but one look convinced me she was serious. *Leaving Starstair*. I went back to my sewing, thoughtful. Then I said, "For a vacation?" Though I already knew the answer.

"I think it will be for a long time."

I put my sewing down and stopped her hand, which was busy hemming. "Okay. Tell me what's going on."

She flitted her wings once and laid down her own sewing. "I have a distant cousin in Meadowhall who has the same gift. I'm to go live with his family so he can teach me."

My mood, already depressed from seeing my friends, dropped a few notches lower. "You can't learn here?"

Buttercup fiddled with the handle of her sewing basket. "I could. But no one here works with stone, and it's quite a bit different from working with plants and animals." She leaned closer to me even though Nageri, sitting on the rug, was the only other one in the room. "Honestly, I think Foxglove and Mahogany jumped at the chance to get rid of me," she added.

I winced at this brutal assessment. Yet Buttercup didn't look too upset; uncertain,

a little apprehensive, but more excited than upset. Her wings, always an excellent indicator of her mood, were up and perky, not stiff as when she was worried or limp as when she was upset.

“He only has one daughter. She’s about my age too.” She stared at the candle. “I’m kind of glad to be going.” She turned back to me. “Except I wish you could go too.”

Like Foxglove would ever let that happen. And I didn’t want it to, anyway, did I? “I’ll miss you.” The three word statement seemed wholly inadequate to express the ache in my heart that had already started to form. Starstair with Buttercup in it had been almost enjoyable at times. Starstair without Buttercup would be lonelier than ever.

“I’ll miss you too,” Buttercup said. “And Ash.” She grinned. “And maybe Carnation a tiny, tiny....”

“Tiny, tiny, tiny bit?” I finished.

“Maybe.”

“When are you going?”

She picked her sewing back up. “Day after tomorrow.”

I didn’t feel like sewing anymore. “So soon?”

“Yes, it’s soon.” She sighed but again didn’t seem depressed at the thought.

“Ash is going to come visit me next summer. Maybe you could come with him.”

“Maybe.” *No promises.* If by some miracle Kester’s plan worked, I’d be back home the next summer.

“Thank you for teaching me to sew. We can keep doing lessons until I leave, right?”

“Sure.”

Her wings dropped questioningly. I prodded myself into showing more enthusiasm. *Of course this is a good thing for Buttercup. You can't accuse Shelaine of selfishness then wish Buttercup to stay just because you'll miss her.* To make up for my lackluster response, I suggested something I was sure she hadn't thought of yet. “You know, your cousin might not mind you learning to sew.”

Buttercup paused her needle. “You're right. He might not.” She started humming.

Chapter XV

The next day, the day before Buttercup's departure, found Buttercup, Ash, and myself seated on a blanket in a meadow, an hour's walk from Starstair. Her formal dinner would be that evening, full of flowers and sparkling lights, swirling gowns and meaningless chatter; an excuse for a party more than a real tribute to Buttercup who didn't mingle in Starstair society much. She had wanted a smaller, friendlier party before she left.

I laughed at Buttercup's jelly smeared face. I'd discovered she had a weakness for jelly pastries and had conspired with Netta to make a dozen as a going away present. At her current rate, there wouldn't be any left for her actual going away. "I still don't know how you got Carnation to agree to me being gone almost the whole day, especially with the party tonight," I said.

"It was easy." Ash made a playful swipe at his cousin's face with a napkin. He grinned at me. "I invited *her* to come with me and Buttercup. You should have seen her struggling for a good reason to decline without being outright rude. She almost embraced me when I suggested you could come in her stead."

"Devious." I shook my head.

He swallowed a bite of pastry. "Not me." He pointed to Buttercup who'd selected another pastry herself. "It was Buttercup's idea."

Buttercup smiled slyly at me over her pastry.

I pursed my lips in mock disapproval. "I hope her cousin knows what he's getting."

"Poor fellow hasn't a clue," Ash said. Buttercup threw her jelly smeared napkin

at him. It hit him square in the face. I scrambled out of the way as he launched at Buttercup, tossed her in the air, and hung her by her heels. “Shake some of that jelly out,” he said to me while Buttercup’s wings beat the air in an effort to right herself. He set her down before she could become sick. Deeming it safe to return to the blanket, I started to collect the leftover items and put them back in the basket.

“Now. Now.” Ash took the basket from me. “You’re not working today. Buttercup and I are perfectly capable of helping clean up.”

“I shouldn’t have to clean up at my own party.” Buttercup tapped one hand over her folded arms and rolled her eyes in a perfect imitation of Carnation. Ash took a threatening step toward her. She squealed and raced for the trees only to come back and help us clean by shaking out the blanket and eating another jelly pastry, “so you don’t have to pack that too.”

With everything packed away, there was nothing to keep us from going back. Buttercup meandered around the meadow, looking at flowers. Ash and I chatted about the weather. *Of all things.*

“Alina. Watch this.” Buttercup jumped into the air and executed a graceful pirouette, one knee up, the other foot pointed.

We both clapped. “You’ve been practicing, haven’t you?” Ash called.

For answer, Buttercup performed the maneuver a second time, this time adding a flip.

“Twirling in flight is difficult with our wings,” Ash explained. “We’re built for straight flights.” He pointed over his shoulder at his own pair that he beat hard a couple of times. “We can fly flips alright but twirling without losing significant altitude takes a

lot of strength and balance.”

I watched Buttercup try for a double turn that ended with her on the ground, rubbing one knee. “It looks like such fun,” I sighed.

I wasn’t aware that I’d spoken the thought aloud until Ash asked, “Falling?”

I went as though to punch his shoulder but remembered in time it was Ash not one of my human friends. “Not falling. Flying.”

“Would you like to?” He kept watching Buttercup who was back in the air, trying again.

“Fly? How?”

He smiled. “Answer the question.”

I debated. If there was one thing I envied the fairies, it was this ability to fly, even if not very well. Some of my favorite dreams growing up had included soaring above the ground, dipping and looping with the birds. I repeated, “How? You’d put a spell on me?”

He chuckled. “You give us credit for too much. Enchanting flight for something or someone not equipped for it is far beyond what even the most skilled fairy can do.”

Buttercup flew over to us with another loop. “What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Alina would like to fly.”

“Oh.” She fluttered to the ground, landing on one foot. “That would be fun. You’d carry her?”

“Unless you’d rather.”

When we were both standing on the ground, Buttercup only came up to my

shoulder. She scanned me from my feet up. “I don’t think I could.” She took the basket from my hand. “Let’s climb up Cherry Hill and go from there.”

Ash carry me. There were so many problems with the idea that I couldn’t even focus on a specific one. But as a breeze blew through the meadow and riffled through my hair, I closed my eyes and imagined myself above the trees. *Maybe it wouldn’t hurt. Just one flight.* “I warn you. I’m no featherweight.”

Ash laughed. “Let’s go then.” He raced after Buttercup, who’d taken the opportunity of holding the basket to extract another jelly pastry. “You’re not going to be flying anywhere if you keep eating those things,” he called as he chased her.

I followed at a more sedate pace, already feeling my decision to fly might have been a little rash. Two thirds of the way up Cherry Hill, it definitely didn’t seem like such a good idea anymore. I had to call a stop to rest. “You’re sure this is a hill and not a mountain?”

“No mountains this close to Starstair,” Ash replied. He and Buttercup amused themselves growing ferns on a tree until I declared I was ready to continue. Almost to the top of the hill, the trees spaced out then stopped altogether. Charred wood littered the ground and blackened snags indicated that a fire had burnt there not so long ago.

Buttercup flew to the crown of the hill and started down the other side, wind whipping her hair. I put a hand to my own to stop it from flying in my face. Now that we were out of the trees, the wind was strong enough I fancied I could lean into it and fly on my own.

I reached the top of the hill and spotted Buttercup some thirty feet away, standing on a rock and looking down. I joined her.

All desire to fly ebbed away. We were looking down what couldn’t quite be

called a cliff, yet it did drop steep enough I wouldn't want to try climbing down it. A few stubby bushes grew on the flatter portions, but I had to shade my eyes from the sun to see the trees bending in the breeze far below and beyond us. "We're flying off this?"

Buttercup noticed the lack of enthusiasm and tried to get it back. "It's lots more fun this way. You can go higher and fly longer than if you take off on the flat."

If you don't fall farther and harder. I got another jolt when I turned around and saw Ash had removed his shirt. He stretched his wings and did a series of small hops, spreading them to test the wind. "We'll have a good tailwind," he called down to us, before jumping from his position to land with a whoosh in between me and Buttercup. I didn't realize I was staring until he looked down at his bare chest then smiled quizzically at me. "If I'm carrying you, it'll be easier without the shirt interfering with my wings."

I flushed, and looked away. "Of course." I tried to make it sound like it was the most natural thing in the world...which, I suppose it was. "Will I...hmm...ride on your back?"

"Flaming dragons! That would never do." He chuckled, and brushed a light, windblown strand of hair out of his eyes. "I wouldn't be able to get off the ground."

I was afraid of that.

"I'll carry you."

Time to retreat. "You know. I'm not so sure...."

"Oh no. No backing down after we climbed all the way up here." Ash advanced toward me.

"It'll be fun," Buttercup encouraged. "Like this." Basket in one hand, Ash's shirt in the other, she jumped backwards off the rock and hovered at a level with us.

I looked down at the shale slope beneath us then at Buttercup. She looked precarious out there. “I think I’d rather nooooooooooooooot!”

Ash had run up behind me and swung me into his arms with a grunt before leaping off the rock into the empty air.

The wind whistled past my face, twice as hard as when I’d been standing still. We angled down, but the ground fell away below us faster than we dropped. I heard Buttercup laughing hard behind us and Ash laughing in my ear. My fear and discomfort fled in the face of the sheer thrill of being airborne. It wasn’t as smooth as I’d imagined. Every pulse of Ash’s wings brought us up, followed by a slight drop when he raised them. A gust of wind hit us, and we dropped ten feet in a heartbeat. I flung my arms around Ash’s neck and held tight. His blue eyes smiled into mine. “Not so tight, Alina. This isn’t as easy as you might think.”

I loosened my grip and self-consciously looked away from him to watch the ground sail past. Already, the hillside had begun to level out and trees reappeared. Buttercup darted ahead of us, slapping at the top of a fir tree and making it bend. Ash’s breathing increased in tempo and volume. Each time he beat his wings they raised us a little lower than the previous beat, until I could’ve reached out and touched the tree tops too.

“Ready for landing?” I could feel the strain of carrying both of us in his muscles and hear it in his voice.

“Ready.”

“Here we go.” With an extra grunt, he propelled us over a scraggly oak. A meadow, smaller than the one where we’d eaten, lay beyond it. Ash stopped our forward

motion and started a controlled descent. His face reddened with exertion as he endeavored to keep us from freefalling the rest of the way.

“And...we’re back,” he said, as we dropped the remaining foot or two to the ground. Whether he misjudged the distance, my weight, or if his foot caught on something, I couldn’t tell. I felt his knees buckle when he hit the ground. He beat his wings to keep his balance, but my weight pulled him forward. I felt myself falling and tightened my grip about his neck without thinking, insuring that he fell with me.

My air left me with a grunt as I hit the ground on my back, and Ash crashed on top of me. I struggled to get my air back.

He rolled off me. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Alina. Are you alright?”

I raised a hand but still couldn’t speak. He grabbed my hand and yanked me into a sitting position, his other hand behind my neck. That didn’t help at all.

“Alina? Are you alright? Talk to me.” His tone changed to one of command. “Talk to me.” I felt the spell fill my lungs with air.

“You fell on me.” I started giggling. Then I couldn’t stop, the giddy rush of having just flown still pumping blood through my heart at twice the normal rate.”

He sat back on his heels. “I guess that means you’re alright.”

“What kind of landing was that?” Buttercup coasted into the meadow and landed next to me. I was still giggling. Buttercup joined me in laughter. Ash shook his head and pushed to his feet, stretching his wings. He got his shirt from Buttercup and put it on, still shaking his head at the two of us.

“It’s fun isn’t it?” Buttercup laughed, trying to pull me to my feet. My legs wobbled and collapsed halfway up, pulling Buttercup down with me, which was cause

for a fresh round of giggles.

“Up you come.” Ash grabbed one hand of each of us and yanked up. “I take it you enjoyed yourself after all?”

I composed myself. “Thank you very much, Ash. That was delightful.” I bobbed a curtsy.

“You’re very welcome.” His bemused expression said he didn’t know what to make of us. “We need to get Buttercup back now, or she won’t have sufficient time to squeeze into that new dress I hear is being made.”

Buttercup and I exchanged glances. I didn’t really mind that she’d told Ash. We’d taken her old party dress, modified the offending neckline, and made it better than before. Buttercup had been determined to get it right, and the finished product was almost as good as one of the dresses I’d made for Carnation. I’d taken all of Carnation’s fashion advice to heart and was confident that this dress wouldn’t catch Foxglove’s eye, unless it was to commend Buttercup on her choice.

We strolled back to Starstair, arm in arm, with Buttercup in the middle. In sight of the castle, I tried to pull away, thinking that it would be better if I didn’t appear so familiar with fairies on entering the castle. Buttercup wouldn’t let go of my arm. Several fairies looked up at us as we breezed through the gate. I saw Kester standing in the door of the stable and, in a bold moment, waved to him. He nodded back. Ash’s smile faded when he saw the recipient of my wave. His eyes cut to the right of the stable. I followed his gaze to see one of the fairies that had searched the kitchen seated on the steps leading to the top of the wall, facing the stable.

So Kester is being watched.

We separated at the castle door, Ash to take the basket back to the kitchen, Buttercup and I to her room to get her ready. One of the other girls would be doing her hair, but Buttercup had asked that I help her with the dress and accessories. Buttercup preceded me into her room. I heard a slight intake of breath. “Lady Foxglove.”

A part of me, the cowardly part, considered fleeing down the hall rather than entering the room. I couldn’t just leave Buttercup though, so I squared my shoulders, pasted an expression of subservient innocence on my face, and entered.

Foxglove stood in the middle of the room, arms crossed, fingers tapping. Her eyes narrowed on seeing me. She spoke to Buttercup, “Is this the dress you’re planning on wearing tonight?” She pointed a ring bedecked finger to Buttercup’s dress which hung over the front of her wardrobe.

“Well...I...”

“Yes or no, Buttercup.”

Buttercup’s buoyant air deflated. “Yes, Lady Foxglove.”

“Good. I’m glad to see your tastes have improved.”

Buttercup relaxed. I let out my breath.

“You’ll wear your hair up?”

“Yes, Lady Foxglove.”

“Good. Meet me in the red room no later than dusk.” She swished past us in a rustle of silk skirts. “You.” She skewered me with an icy stare. “Follow me. I wish to speak to you.”

I winced. *What now?*

Buttercup threw me a disappointed look.

“I’ll be back,” I mouthed, hoping it was the truth.

I trailed behind Foxglove to the end of the hall where her rooms lay.

She swept in the door. Two maids labored with arms full of linens. “Out,” she said. They left, not even taking time to grab a last pillowcase that sat lonely in the middle of the gargantuan bed.

“Shut the door.”

I did so, full of misgivings. None of my encounters with Foxglove to date had been pleasant. The carved oak door slid shut with a finality equal to that of a cell door.

“Why weren’t you with Carnation today?” She pulled her riding cloak off and tossed it over her desk. A full length mirror with golden vines framing it stood on one wall. She walked over to it and deftly repinned some strands of hair that had come loose.

A suspicion entered my mind. *She already knows where I was today.* I explained about Buttercup’s going away picnic while she pinned her hair, leaving out Buttercup’s manipulations to assure my attendance.

Foxglove spoke to the mirror. “It is not proper for my niece to be so familiar with you. From now on, you will limit your contact with her.” She turned her head to check the pins in the mirror then made eye contact with my reflection. “A simple enough instruction that even you ought to be able to manage, since she is leaving tomorrow.”

“Yes, Lady Foxglove.” Buttercup and I made a fine pair. Yes, Lady Foxglove, No Lady Foxglove. Whatever your twisted heart desires, Lady Foxglove. *Regular parrots, the both of us.* The image of parrots brought with it a new urge to giggle. Horrified, I quelled it by biting my tongue.

“It will, of course, apply to any visits she might make.” She gave a last pat to her

hair, turned around, and crossed her arms. “I also want you to limit your contact with Ash.”

“Yes, Lady....” I stopped, puzzled. *Ash?* I waited for some kind of explanation.

One hand started tapping on her arm. “Is that a problem?” Her tone warned that it had better not be.

I shook my head. Eyebrows knitted, she considered me for an uncomfortable minute. “Good.” She redirected her eyes to some papers on her desk. “Dismissed.”

I knew I should just walk away. But an inexplicable command like that really ought to come with an explanation, I felt. Buttercup was young, and to a certain extent impressionable, so I could understand why Foxglove would want to limit the ‘corrupting’ human influence on her. But Ash was an adult, perfectly capable of making up his own mind. Keeping my voice as polite as I could manage, I addressed her back, “I just wonder why you’re afraid of my having more contact with Ash.”

Almost to her desk, Foxglove came to a rigid stop. Her wings stilled, and she turned back. Slow and deliberate, she lifted her gaze back to me. Before her eyes had been careless, dismissive; when she turned back to me, I saw something dark and frightening in their depths. Words dropping like molten lead, she said, “Afraid? I am not afraid of anything. Certainly not anything a human can do.”

Looking into those dark pits, I believed her. “Sorry,” I croaked and whirled to leave. *Stupid, stupid. Why couldn’t you keep your mouth shut? But who knew she would take it like that?*

“Stop.”

I cringed and reluctantly turned around.

She closed the distance between us. “You asked a question. Here’s my answer.” I stepped backward and raised my hands instinctively. She swatted them aside to grab the hair at the back of my head. She pulled my head back and made me look up at her. “If I ever catch you making eyes at my son again in an effort to worm your way into his affections.” Her lip curled. “As fruitless as it might be, since I control your freedom, not Ash.”

It felt like my hair would pull free from its roots any second, and my eyes watered.

“I will make sure you regret it.” She wrenched my head back harder. “And I don’t mean a night in the dungeon. Do you understand me?”

“Yes,” I whispered through clenched teeth.

“Good. See to it you don’t forget.”

She let go.

I fled. I didn’t stop to shut the door to her chambers but ran all the way back to my room, where I paced back and forth on the rug. Anger soon replaced the pain in my head.

How dare she? How dare she suggest I’d try to use Ash to escape? I looked around for something to throw. I felt a sense of shame at her insinuation then berated myself for letting her make me feel like that. Let her ask Ash. He’d set her straight. I allowed a brief fiercely tender thought for Ash. He’d never been anything but polite and proper. *And neither have I. Oh, I could scream!* Let her ask Buttercup.

Buttercup. I jerked my pacing to a halt. I’d promised I’d be back. I ran the whole way.

Not used to that much running, the effort helped to dissipate some of my anger so I at least presented a calm face to Buttercup after knocking on her door and entering.

Buttercup sat at her dressing table, a human girl carefully winding her hair into a semi-round bun at the back of her head. Buttercup spotted me in the mirror.

“Alina.”

The girl gave a little warning cry, and Buttercup stopped her turn before the girl lost her grip on her hair. “Is everything alright? Are you in trouble?”

“Fine. I’m fine.” I didn’t trust myself with long sentences. I let Buttercup do most of the talking. Everything was packed. Two trunks sat by the door, a sad comment on Buttercup’s life in Starstair. I pictured Carnation reducing her belongings to fit in two trunks and shook my head at the impossibility.

To meet Foxglove’s deadline of dusk, we had to rush through dressing. I helped her ease the gown over her finished hairdo, jeweled pins keeping it in place. With matching jewelry and shoes on, Buttercup stood in front of the mirror, and I congratulated her on looking quite grown up. She did too.

I looked out her window. It was getting dangerously close to dusk. “Better go. And Buttercup.” I hugged her, careful not to disarrange the gown. “Remember that this is your party. Go show everyone what they’ll be missing when you leave.”

She struck a graceful pose, one hand lifted, and grinned sideways at me.

“That’s right. Have fun.”

It was too early to go back to my own room. With Buttercup gone, my thoughts reverted to Foxglove’s accusation. My blood began to boil all over again, and I went in search of the one person I knew would share my outrage.

I found Shelaine dusting statues in the Turquoise receiving room. Actually, she was wiping the dust off of select portions of the statues, leaving one fairy with a dust moustache, a stone horse with a dust saddle, and most impressive, a stone cat with dust tiger stripes.

I hadn't got more than three sentences into my tirade when she held up a hand. "I know just the activity this calls for. It's overdue anyway. Come on."

She directed me to take two corners of the large rug that covered the entryway, and with much sweat and effort we wrestled it outside. She called over a couple of men to help hoist it on an oversized clothesline then handed me a paddle. I took it and slammed the rug with all my strength. The rug rocked a little on the line and a cloud of dust poofed off and floated away in the last streams of sunlight.

"Oh you are in a fine mood," approved Shelaine at the result. "Now tell me all about it."

It didn't take very long. It would have taken even less time, except I punctuated my narrative with frequent bats at the rug, some of which required a pause to catch my breath before I continued my recital.

I expected Shelaine to interject with exclamations of outrage against Foxglove. She listened but didn't say anything even when I'd finished. A little let down at her lack of response, I said, "Well?"

She shrugged. "It's just Foxglove. It's a waste of energy to get upset about what she thinks." She hit the rug for the first time.

"Is that all you have to say?"

Whack. "Well, I did warn you about making friends with fairies."

A sudden urge to divert my next strike from the rug to Shelaine's backside hit me. "Thank you for the sympathy."

"Oh, I sympathize." She grinned at me. "If it had been me, I probably would have said something truly regrettable." She considered, paddle in mid-air. "Like, if her son was dumb enough to fall for the 'Oh, you're so strong and handsome, help me escape,' routine, she has bigger problems than anything I might do." Whack.

"He's not dumb." Whack. The whole rug wavered.

Shelaine looked sideways at me. "Truth be told. I might have thought the same thing as Foxglove, except I know *you* know that sugaring up Ash won't get you any closer to getting freedom from Foxglove."

WHACK. The handle of my paddle broke, and the end skittered across the courtyard. Shelaine eyed the broken handle still clenched in my hands. She put one hand on her hip. "Just what are you doing with Ash?"

I hurled the broken end of the paddle against the rug. Shelaine took a step back.

My teeth hurt from being clenched tight. I clenched them harder to keep from saying something I'd regret. Instead, I turned on my heel and ran, not to my room, but to the garden. I heard Shelaine calling my name.

Let her yell. I burrowed into the same rhododendron bush I'd hidden in my first time in the garden. Then I bawled. Quietly. Shelaine passed my bush twice, so I had to keep the noise down. I was overdue for a good cry. The rhododendron felt like an old friend, encircling me with protective branched arms. The stone deer with its head bent down seemed to cry with me. *What am I crying about?* Foxglove's hurtful comments? Shelaine's distrust of my motives? Buttercup's leaving? My being still stuck in

Starstair? Ash? Ash who was every inch a fairy. Ash with his kind heart, his good nature, his impeccable manners, his perfect wardrobe, his hair that always laid right, his nose that was the perfect size, his spectacular blue eyes that were set just the right distance apart.... In the next bush over a cricket started to sing. I dried my eyes and curled closer to the stone deer. I stayed in the bushes long after Shelaine stopped looking for me. I might have stayed there all night, except it started to rain. I was feeling miserable and sorry for myself, but I didn't want to be miserable and wet.

* * * *

The following day, I pulled myself together enough to present a bright face to Carnation. I straightened up her rooms a little, then it was time to see Buttercup off to her new home. Mahogany was taking her to Meadowhall and would return in a few days. The whole family, as well as most of the Turquoise servants, met in the courtyard to say goodbye as a soft rain drizzled. I hung back as far away from Foxglove as I could manage and still see Buttercup. Buttercup went down the line of well wishers, exchanging hugs and final goodbyes. When it was my turn, I leaned over and held her tight. "Keep up the sewing, Buttercup. You have more talent than you know." I kept my voice low enough that those around us couldn't hear. "It's been a delight working with you."

She pulled away to look in my face. I could tell from her shiny eyes she was fighting tears. A flicker of understanding passed between us, as she gave my arm one last squeeze. I wouldn't be coming to visit her at Meadowhall. This was truly goodbye.

"Goodbye." *Wonderful, now I'm fighting tears.* Was there no limit to how much one person could cry?

Her hug for Foxglove was a one armed, two second affair that wouldn't have passed for real affection, even to a stranger. Ash picked her up, swirled her around once, and presented her with a dove in a cage.

I waved my arm sore as she rode out of Starstair. I kept waving until she bobbed out of sight and the sound of hoofbeats on the drawbridge ended.

"Alina." Ash touched my arm. I did a quick about face and felt the blood rushing to my cheeks. *Where is Foxglove?* I saw her talking to Netta, turned away from me.

"I can't talk now, Ash." I sidled away, looking for Shelaine, Carnation, any excuse to get away from him before Foxglove saw us.

"I promised Buttercup I'd wave her out of sight from the Tower of the Clouds." He pulled his cloak tighter as the intensity of the rain increased. "A promise I'm probably going to regret. Care to join me?"

Foxglove was turning.

"I can't." I pulled up my hood and dashed after Carnation who was walking toward the castle door with her own cloak pulled as tight as though she feared a single drop of rain might be fatal.

"Afraid of a little rain?" Shelaine caught up with me and jogged alongside. She hadn't been attached to Buttercup but had used the excuse of saying goodbye to get out of a few minutes' work. She'd spent more time whispering to Kester and making faces at his fairy watcher than saying goodbye to Buttercup.

I didn't slow down.

"Look. I shouldn't have said what I said yesterday."

"No, you shouldn't have." I wasn't going to let her off easily this time.

We reached the castle and shed our cloaks just as the rain decided to turn serious and drummed down on the roof in a percussive roar.

“So you’re still mad?”

“A little.”

A loud scratching sounded at the door. I opened it to admit a drenched Nageri. He padded inside and proceeded to shake, spattering both Shelaine and me with cat smelling water drops. “And you ask why I don’t like him,” Shelaine muttered, trying to shake the extra moisture off her skirt.

“He’s holding something.” I knelt next to Nageri. He pushed his face into my hands and deposited a soggy rag in it.

“That’s disgusting.” Shelaine wrinkled her nose.

“Frum Butturrcu,” Nageri said, and shook himself again.

Holding the edges only, I unfolded the cloth. The pattern looked familiar...yes, it was the decorative pillow cover I’d helped her sew and embroider, one of her earliest projects.

“Your little fairy is one strange bird.” Shelaine took hold of one edge of the cover and turned it around. “This is the oddest going away present I’ve ever seen. And why give it to you now, via Nageri, instead of last night or this morning?”

“Because she didn’t know last night.”

“Know what?” Shelaine redirected her gaze, tinged with suspicion, from the cloth to my face.

I closed my eyes. “When we were saying goodbye just now. She thought before that she’d see me again, but with the escape...”

A hand planted in my chest, shoved me hard backward, and kept shoving. Shelaine's narrowed eyes filled my vision as she pushed me out of the entryway into a broom closet. She squeezed in after me, and slammed the door.

"Shelaine!"

"What are you trying to do?" Although her face was hidden in the darkness of the closet, her clipped words left no doubt about her anger. "I've told you not to breathe a word about our plans around that cat. And your fairy pet that just left knows you're leaving Starstair? What kind of game are you playing, Alina?"

She groped around until she found me to give me another push, this time into the brooms that lined the back of the closet. My temper flared. "Now look here. You can't..."

"Oh yes I can." She opened the closet door. Her outline bent over me one last time. "If you mess this up, Alina, so help me...." Words failed her. She stomped out of the closet and slammed the door. I started to get up, changed my mind, and slumped against the wall instead.

I could see why Shelaine might be upset. Consider how desperate I was to get out, add 30 years, and I'd probably be as wild as her. The whole situation at Starstair was unraveling fast. Not only was escape with the rebellion the best looking option, it was fast becoming the only bearable option. Foxglove...the trolls...*now Shelaine is mad at me*, Buttercup was gone, and Ash was off limits. That left Netta, who tried to talk me out of escaping every chance she got.

"Alina." Carnation's voice called from somewhere. I placed my hands on the floor and pushed up. One of them knocked into a broom which fell over and hit me on

the head before clattering to the floor. The closet door opened.

“Why are you in the closet?” Carnation’s open mouthed puzzlement was almost comical.

“Checking for mice,” I muttered.

Chapter XVI

Standing in front of my mirror, I tried one last time to get a stubborn strand of hair to lie flat. For a short minute, I almost wished for Carnation. She'd have it straight in no time. Even without fairy magic, the girl had a genius for hair. With a puff of annoyance, I gave it up and checked the pins holding the lining to the skirt. Two days earlier, while altering one of Carnation's party dresses, I'd realized that I had nothing to wear to Iriann's coming of age party. I'd been up late the past two nights altering one of Carnation's old dresses to fit me. Even with the late nights, I hadn't had time to sew the lining to the skirt. It was one of her simpler gowns, nothing like the monstrosity she'd stuffed me in for the First Frost Ball. A close fitting rose satin with short, off the shoulder sleeves and a V waist, it suited me better too. A row of satin roses along the neckline were the only adornment, probably why Carnation hadn't cared when I'd asked if I could have it.

Sparing a last regretful glance for my hair, I hurried out of the room. I felt a twinge of sadness as I closed the door. Shelaine and I had planned to get ready together and do each other's hair. That was before Buttercup's goodbye and the broom closet incident. Shelaine hadn't spoken to me in the four days since then. Netta tried to sound sympathetic over our estrangement but couldn't quite conceal her pleasure at the split. I didn't tell her that I still intended to escape with Kester and the rest. *Whether Shelaine ever chooses to acknowledge my existence again or not.*

The Turquoise ball room, about half the size of the grand ballroom, sported fluted columns around its edge and shone with bright yellow and green decorations, Iriann's favorite colors. Streamers trailed from the chandeliers and the walls, and painted horse

heads decorated everything from the napkins to the wall hangings, a testimony to the honoree's fascination with horses. The room already bustled with chatter and movement when I arrived. Every Turquoise servant was there, even the children, along with a healthy portion of humans from the other families. Some of the people present probably didn't even know Iriann except by sight. It was momentarily unsettling to see so many people together and not a flash of wings anywhere. Which showed how accustomed I'd become to Starstair and the sight of fairies. But tonight, fairy castle or not, it was all humans. I wouldn't have been at all surprised to have found a sign on the door declaring, "No fairies welcome."

There were two distinct groups I noticed on entering: a noisy, laughing group surrounding a radiant Iriann and the refreshment table, and a quiet, tight lipped group surrounding Kester on the other side of the room between the wall and the columns. When the musicians set up their stands next to this group, they moved even farther into the corner.

Ignoring them for the moment, I pushed through the crowd around Iriann to give her my congratulations. It was very odd giving coming of age congratulations to someone that didn't look a day over thirteen. Netta had explained to me that Iriann wouldn't come of age under fairy law until closer to her fiftieth birthday, but it gave everyone a sense of continuity with their old lives to continue to celebrate twentieth birthdays. Or maybe it was just that the humans at Starstair welcomed any excuse to celebrate. Netta had told me that Iriann's fairy coming of age would be accompanied by a whole day's celebration that would include a party put on by her fairy family. I had a hard time picturing Foxglove putting on a party for any human. *Carnation probably*

would though. “And for the rare wedding...” Netta had lifted her hands to the sky. “No matter how many of the humans here protest that they’d take their simple lives back home to life at Starstair, most of them have taken to the pomp and glitter of the fairy life as though they were born to it.”

Looking around at the buffet table, platters piled high with finger cakes and dainty sandwiches, the decorations, and the army of plants that had been borrowed from the garden, I had to agree. The party had all the trappings of the fairy ball I’d attended, just on a smaller scale.

I found Netta changing an empty platter of rolls for a full one. “Don’t you even get to rest for the party, Netta?”

She picked a crumb off the empty platter and stuck it in her mouth. “A couple of the girls offered to stock the tables. I just saw this one was empty and couldn’t help myself.”

I shook my head and took the platter away from her. I steered her around the table to where people were pairing up for dancing as the musicians, also all human, tuned. Once I had her safely settled on the arm of an older man, name unknown, I went back to the table and secured a glass of punch for myself. It brought back memories of the fairy ball. Looking around the room, I thought I recognized the very tree I’d hidden behind for most of that night. I should know too, I’d had nearly every leaf memorized. All the evening needed to complete the comparison was Ash and that heart stopping request for a dance.

They’re even playing dances I know this time. I recognized my feeling for wistfulness and took a long swallow of punch, concentrating on the tangy flavor to dispel

the sensation. I couldn't have danced with Ash even if he had been there; Kester would probably throw me out of the rebellion, and Shelaine might just murder me.

The crowd around the tables dissipated to the dance floor. The group around Kester's failure to do so caught my attention. Instead, they huddled closer, presumably to be able to hear each other over the sound of the music. While I didn't feel like listening to yet another debate over the merits of enlarging the secret passage, I felt ridiculous standing alone by the table. Since I'd been shortsighted enough to send Netta twirling off, leaving me without a conversant, I decided to try my luck in Kester's group. I spotted Shelaine breaking away from the group on a line for the food and moved to intercept her. It was as good a time as any to try for reconciliation.

She pretended not to see me but her change of course to evade mine told me that she had. I slowed and considered giving up. *This is so stupid, though.* I changed my own course, angling in so she was pinned by the wall on her other side. *She'll have to do something really obvious to avoid me now.* Which, knowing Shelaine, wasn't entirely out of the question.

"You look nice, Shelaine." The high waisted, red gown she wore wasn't the most flattering, but she'd gotten matching jewelry somewhere that complemented both the dress and her complexion very well. She'd obviously found someone else to do her hair too, because it looked much better than mine.

She didn't answer me. She snatched a plate off the table and squeezed past me to start piling food on it.

"So you're still mad?" I echoed her words from the week before, as I trailed down the table after her. That earned me a dirty look. She slammed a tart onto the plate.

“Alina! Haven’t seen you in awhile.” Kester swept up to the table and scooped a plate into his hand. He perused the platters with hungry eyes. “Delightful party, isn’t it?”

When I didn’t answer he looked up just in time to see Shelaine give me another dirty look. “Ah, I see.” He set the plate down and came around to our side of the table. “You two haven’t reconciled yet?” He reached me first and flung an arm over my shoulder, reaching the other hand for Shelaine. She tried to dodge, but he caught her arm and pulled her in close too.

“Let go,” Shelaine hissed through smiling teeth.

Kester pulled us around so we were facing each other. I tried a rueful, “Well?” sort of smile at Shelaine. She looked down at her plate.

“I don’t know what has happened between the two of you.” He moved away from the table, pulling us with him to let another man by to fill his plate. “But this is not the time for us to be disunited over trifles. I think you should apologize, Shelaine.”

“I should apologize?” Shelaine burst out. Her outburst garnered a few stares and she quieted, although her voice kept all of its outrage. “Why should it be me to apologize? You don’t even know what happened.”

“Ah, but I know you, and I know Alina, so it’s a good guess that you have something to apologize for.”

“You...” She made a bid for freedom, but Kester pulled her back. “Now it’s far too lovely a party to ruin with faces like that, my dear, so why don’t you smile, say you’re sorry, and we can get down to the business of enjoying ourselves.”

This is embarrassing. I looked around the room to see if anyone was watching.

Quite a few were, though thankfully, not Netta. She was deep in conversation with her dance partner, a brilliant smile erasing some of the lines I normally saw on her face. Not eager to continue as the center of attention, I said, “Look Shelaine, I’m sorry about the misunderstanding. You know I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize the plan.”

“Certainly she wouldn’t,” Kester heartily agreed and turned his head to Shelaine. “Anytime, love, my arm’s getting tired.”

Shelaine glowered at the floor. “Sorry.”

“Excellent.” Kester lifted his arms off our shoulders. “Care to dance, Alina?”

My suspicion was that Kester would be the sort that steps on his partner’s toes, but I was pleasantly surprised by his dancing ability. What he lacked in grace, he made up for in enthusiasm, and he knew the steps better than I did.

Noticing that the group in the corner had dispersed, I asked, “What was that conference in the corner all about?”

“What conference?” he asked, all wide-eyed innocence. I left him in order to file down the line of dancers with the other women. When the dance brought me back, I leveled my gaze at him. “‘What conference?’ Please.”

“I suppose we were kind of obvious.” He danced away with the other men and back.

“Just a little.”

The dance music ended, and partners shuffled around. “One more?” asked Kester.

“Only if you tell me what the conference was about.”

He grinned. “You’ve been spending too much time around Shelaine.” The

musicians started the intro to a waltz. Kester directed us to the edge of the dance floor, out of hearing range of most of the couples. “It’s been a bit of a problem coordinating our...grand plan...with my fairy shadow following me everywhere. This party was the perfect, perhaps the only, opportunity to really compare progress in relative safety. It’s also an excellent recruiting opportunity.” He nodded to a couple of young men in earnest conversation. One of them was Makov, the other unfamiliar. Another couple danced close by us, and he lightened his voice. “A splendid evening, all and all, but we’re done with business for now. Time to enjoy ourselves. But first it’s your turn.”

“My turn?”

He swirled us to the other end of the floor where Shelaine sat brooding in a chair against the wall. He nodded his head at her. “What’s going on with the two of you?”

I shrugged.

“Alina,” he warned, a twinkle in his eye. “I’ll keep you dancing until you tell me.”

He would too, so I related the incident. He listened attentively to my narrative, which I finished as the musicians struck the final chords of the waltz. He offered his arm to lead me off the dance floor. “It was an overreaction to be sure. But, Alina, you really ought to be more....”

“Don’t you tell me to be careful, Kester of Tollbridge. I’m sick of people telling me to be careful.”

He laughed loud. “My, but you *have* been spending too much time around Shelaine.” He swiped a rose from one of the vases that adorned the table as we passed it. “For you.” He offered with a bow. “And now.” He straightened his jacket with purpose

and inhaled deeply. “I go to try to turn yon thundercloud into a sunny day.” He tipped his head toward Shelaine.

I handed him the rose back. “You need this more than me.”

“Thank you.” He marched toward Shelaine. I intended to watch the drama but was whisked away for another dance by Makov, who did step on my toes. When finished, I limped over to a chair and searched the crowd for Kester and Shelaine. I found them on the dance floor. Shelaine was smiling again, the rose skewering her hairdo at a wild angle.

A half hour later, I decided balls weren’t all everyone pretended them to be. The first one I’d ever attended had been far too exciting, this one was rather boring. Netta had disappeared, probably to the kitchen to get more food. *That woman doesn’t know when to stop.* Shelaine and Kester were happily entertaining each other, and the other girls sitting around me talked of nothing but which man they hoped would ask them to dance, a subject I had about as much interest in as the secret passage enlarging debate.

I refilled my punch glass, ate a plate full of delectables and, as the hour headed for midnight, decided I’d had enough. I waved goodbye to Iriann, who had been dancing the whole night as near as I could tell. Outside the door, I reached up and pulled out a poorly placed hair pin that had been poking my head all night.

“Psst. Alina.”

I arrested my hand and looked around the hallway. There was no one there.

“Alina.”

I peeked behind a column. No one. *Fairies, unicorns, maybe there are such things as ghosts too.*

I heard a swoosh of air behind me. “Hello, Alina.”

I wheeled, a shriek half formed on my lips. Ash placed a hand over my mouth.

“Shh.”

The shriek died. I swallowed and took a breath. “What are you doing here?”

“Dying of thirst mostly.”

I tipped my head in question.

“I have sentry duty watching Kester.” He pointed upward. A narrow ledge ran above the door. “There’s a hole in the wall. I can see everything in the room.”

“Everything?” I bit my lip. That meant he had seen Kester’s conference.

“Should you be telling me this?”

He shrugged. “Probably not.” He ran his hand through his hair. “But it’s not exactly a secret that we’re watching Kester. I know it, you know it, and he knows it.” He gave me a sad smile as we both considered the ramifications of his words. “And anyway, I’m really, really thirsty, but I don’t dare take time to go get a drink. Could you...?”

“Of course I can. How do you feel about punch?”

He clasped his hands in front of him. “I *love* punch. Please hurry.”

He stepped behind the door as I re-entered the ballroom and made the decision to not try to analyze where the new spring in my step had come from. Kester and Shelaine danced past me. They both smiled at me. Shelaine waved. I waved back, feeling guilty. If she knew who I’d just been talking too...our reconciliation might not last long enough for me to even talk to her.

I secured two glasses of punch and slunk back to the door, trying to look innocent.

I had certainly had a lot of practice at that since coming to Starstair. The practice must have helped, because no one gave me more than a passing glance.

I opened the door just wide enough for me to slip through the crack. I spotted Ash back on his ledge. “Here’s your punch.”

He jumped down, landing soft as a cat next to me. He downed the first glass in one gulp and eyed the second glass hopefully. “Is that mine, too?” He made the second glass last for three or four swallows. When he finished, he set the glass on the floor and wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. “I am forever in your debt.”

“You’re welcome.” I stooped to pick up the glasses, expecting him to return to his ledge. When I stood up though, he was still standing there watching me. “You look very lovely, Alina. Even without wings and wax ear tips.”

“Well. Thank you?” I grinned at the awkward compliment. But, like a bucket of water over a fire, Foxglove’s words came back to me in force. I couldn’t imagine that she’d be anywhere near a human party, but there were any number of ways she could find out I’d been talking to her son. I didn’t need the trouble.

“You missed a lovely time waving goodbye to Buttercup from the Tower of the Clouds. Torrential rains, freezing temperatures, hurricane winds. It was truly an experience,” he said.

I looked around the hall. Still empty except for the two of us, but all it would take was one talkative bird carrying the tale back to Foxglove. For all I knew, she could even be having me watched. A shiver ran up my spine. Reluctantly, I did the prudent thing. “Some other time. I should probably be getting to bed now. Good night.” With heavy heart, I started down the hall.

“My mother said something to you, didn’t she?”

I turned back. He watched me under long golden eyelashes. “I thought so. I’ve noticed you’ve been avoiding me the last few days.”

And here I’d thought he hadn’t seen me duck around the corner the other day. I didn’t want to talk to him about Foxglove. She’d already spoiled the evening with her order, why make it worse by talking about her? “I really ought to get some sleep.”

He nodded, accepting my wishes to not discuss the subject. “Alright, but I have a question for you first.”

I braced myself. “What?”

The corners of his mouth tweaked upward. “Do you know this dance?” He nodded toward the closed door.

Through the door, I could make out the lively strains of “Around the Wishing Stump.” “Yes.”

“Good. Shall we?” And he held out his hand.

He couldn’t be serious. I looked around the hall again. Still no one, but how long could we assume that would last? “I don’t think...”

“Oh come,” he tempted. “You still owe me a dance from the First Frost Ball, remember?”

I chuckled in spite of myself. “I try to forget that night.”

“Well, I don’t. You know when I first saw you I thought there was something odd about you.”

I laughed in earnest then. “That wouldn’t have been because I was hiding behind a tree, jumping at every sound, would it?”

His grin broadened. Voices passed close to the door. We both stiffened, but they moved back into the center of the room. “No, it was your appearance. Something about, about....”

“My nose?” I guessed.

He laughed, a deep, pleasant rumble. “I did notice that of course. But no. I was going to say there was something natural about you, unaffected.”

I considered this for a moment and decided to take it as a compliment. I caught movement with the corner of my eye. By the time I turned my head to focus on it, whatever it was had disappeared, possibly into an open doorway halfway down the hall. *Nageri?* It reminded me that standing out in the open really wasn’t a good idea. “It’s nice to talk to you, Ash, but I must say good night.”

He crossed his arms. “What about my dance?”

“They’re playing a different one now.” *Why am I having so much trouble walking away?*

“Don’t you know this one?”

I took a step back. He took one too. I stopped. “Yes I do, but....”

“You’d get back to your room faster if you just danced with me instead of arguing about it.”

He had a point there. I considered the open door while caution and impetuosity struggled for supremacy. Ash held out his hands. *Oh, forget Nageri, forget Shelaine. And forget Foxglove.*

I walked back to him. “It’s not that kind of dance.” I took his hands and placed them on his hips then took a step back and faced him. “Is this what you call watching

Kester?”

“I’m tired of watching Kester. All he’s done since the start of my watch is dance. And dance more. Where he gets that energy after cleaning all those stalls is beyond me.”

When the music cycled back around to the beginning of the chorus, I started the steps, exaggerating my movement. The first time Ash just watched. The second cycle, he tried to join in but only managed a few seconds of dancing. “It’s too fast.”

“A human dance? Too much for a fairy?” I teased.

A glint appeared in his eye. “Ha. You just watch and see.” He made a gallant attempt at it but couldn’t keep up. In the end, I had to stop from laughing at his uncoordinated hopping and jerky motions. I couldn’t help it, always before he’d been so graceful. As the music ended, he bent over with his hands on his knees to catch his breath. “Finally.”

The tired refrain in my head suggested, *you really ought to go back now*, but the music in the next room drowned it out as the musicians started the introduction to “Fox Chase.”

I pulled him upright despite his protesting groan. “Here. This one is perfect for beginners. It starts slow and gets faster.” Arm in arm we promenaded around an imaginary dance circle, then I guided him through the set of the dance. Able to take his time the first couple of rounds, he picked up the steps easily except for one turn where he always tried to go left instead of the proper right. The tempo increased and we had to jog for the promenade. I was having more fun than I’d had since...since the picnic. Ash had been there too. I considered his flushed face, bobbing next to me. I’d had more fun with Ash than anyone else at Starstair. *Right now, for instance, I don’t even care if Foxglove*

sees me. I could keep dancing for hours more with Ash. Distracted by this self destructive thought, I almost noticed too late that he'd turned the wrong direction again, and we were on a collision course. "Other way!"

"Oh," he cried and turned back. The next round was so fast, even I didn't have time to do the steps properly. As the cycle ended, Ash grabbed my arm and took off running for the promenade only to slow the final chords sounded. "That's it?" He looked over his shoulder at the closed door and flicked his wings. His eyes glowed as he addressed the musicians through the door. "Oh come now, one more, faster!" He performed a couple of bouncy hops.

I laughed at his excitement. "You enjoyed that one?"

He hopped higher, spreading his wings wide. "Delightful. I may have to introduce it to fairy society. Wouldn't that make Mother madder than..." he trailed off, but the damage was done. I felt my giddiness drain away. "I really should go now," I said, although I wanted to even less than before.

He sighed and looked at the floor. "Yes, and I should be getting back to my ledge. He fixed it with a baleful stare. I took one step.

"There is one other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

I was all too happy to stop and listen. "What is that?"

"Having to do with Kester."

"Oh."

"I was hoping you could talk some sense to him. He seems like a pleasant fellow and I'd hate for something to happen to him."

"Maybe you should talk to Kester." *Because I don't want to be caught in the*

middle of this. I never have.

He shook his head. “He wouldn’t listen to me. I just wanted to warn you.” He took a step closer and sought my eyes. “Rebellions are a nasty business, Alina. Someone always gets hurt. And it’s usually not the fairies. For every successful rebellion you’ve heard of, there have been tens, even hundreds of unsuccessful ones. I don’t pretend to have an attractive alternative, but I just want....” He broke eye contact to look at the ceiling. “I want Kester to be careful. Oh hang all.” He looked back at me. “I want you to be careful.”

I was simultaneously touched by his concern, wary that he seemed to know so much about the rebellion, and irritated that someone was once again telling me to be careful. “You really ought to talk to Kester.”

“Perhaps I will.”

Loud voices sounded next to the ballroom door. The handle turned. Like an arrow, Ash leaped off the ground and back to his ledge. This left me standing in the hall, facing the door by myself, looking a complete idiot as four girls left the ballroom, chattering to each other gaily. Their conversation died down on seeing me.

I improvised, “Did I miss much?” I took three large steps to stand in front of the punch glasses to shield them from their view. “Had to go back to my room for another pair of shoes.” I stuck out a foot.

The youngest of the girls returned my smile. “You missed ‘Fox chase’, but they’re still playing.”

“Too bad. That’s one of my favorites.” I kept my voice light and fought the impulse to look up at Ash.

The girls chorused good night at me and resumed their chatter as they continued. I waited for them to start down the staircase before I looked up to the ledge. Ash winked at me. I winked back then followed the girls down the hall. The close call had brought me to my senses. It was past time to leave. Ash would have to deal with the punch glasses himself.

Chapter XVII

A few steps up the staircase to my tower, a call arrested my motion. “Alina!”

I started. For a terrible second, the voice sounded like Foxglove’s.

“Alina!” The voice ended in a sob. *Definitely not Foxglove.* A young woman ran toward me, with ragged, stumbling steps that indicated a long run.

Rina...Rona...no...Riona, that’s right. The one engaged to the young man in the rebellion whose name started with a V.

I waited for her. As she got nearer, a slow dread crept over me. Her hair was disarranged, her cheeks red and tear stained. *Oh no.* “What’s wrong?” I caught her by the arm, as she caught up to me, gasping. I could feel her quivering. “Riona, what’s wrong?”

“Kester. Where is he?” She grabbed my sleeve with both of her hands. “I need Kester. I don’t know what to do.” She stared wildly down the hall she’d come from and whispered, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do.”

I followed her gaze down the hall. Was someone chasing her? *Guess what, Riona? I don’t know what to do either. I don’t even know what’s wrong.* “Riona, you need to calm down and tell me what’s going on.”

Without warning, she crumpled into a ball on the floor, almost dragging me with her, and started sobbing. “He’s dead.”

“Who’s dead?” My pulse sped up as her panic infected me. I shot a glance in the direction she’d come again. I couldn’t see anyone, but there were a half dozen doors someone could burst out of at any moment. The part of me that was still rational after her announcement realized that whatever had happened, it couldn’t be a good idea to discuss

it in the middle of the hallway. I tugged her to her feet and pushed her toward a closet. Handy that Starstair had so many of those. *Perfect for storing brooms, coats...distraught girls.*

Getting shoved in the closet returned Riona's voice to her. "Venard," she said. My heart stilled. *Not her fiancé.* "Venard said to get Kester." She latched onto my sleeve again. "You have to help me get Kester."

More information would have been useful. However, I didn't want to take the time to pull the story out of her. I was more interested in finding Kester like she suggested, handing her off to him, and trying not to get involved in anything more.

"I'll get him." I reassured. "You stay here." She didn't agree out loud but neither did she protest when I shut the closet door with her on the inside.

Of all the people she could have run into, it had to be me. I ran as fast as I thought I could in the dancing shoes which turned out to be too fast, because I slipped going around a corner. I remembered in time that Ash was at the main door. Instinct said that, friendly as Ash might be, this situation called for human, not fairy, intervention. I detoured through the small kitchen that adjoined the ballroom and came in the serving entrance instead. I found an apron discarded on the counter in the kitchen and tied it over my dress in case Ash happened to be looking my way when I entered the ballroom. I also picked up an empty pitcher and held it by my head to shield it from the view by the main door. Once inside the ballroom, I scurried to the wall on the same side as the main door, where I hoped Ash couldn't see me. Lowering the pitcher, I scanned the room for Kester. He was still dancing. I started a dance of my own, consisting of hopping up and down and waving my arms. It attracted plenty of eyes but not Kester's, and I muted my actions

for fear that Ash would wonder what was causing the stir and move to someplace where he could see me. I waited until the dance brought Kester around so he was facing me and tried again.

Shelaine craned her head around to see me in response to something Kester said. Their waltz slowed and faltered. The other dancers sailed past them. I waved harder. *Get over here.*

Kester and Shelaine waltzed over to me. “Decided it was too early to go to bed after all?” Kester asked with a grin. His grin disappeared when he saw my face. “Alina?”

With an anxious glance at the door, I took hold of his arm with one hand and Shelaine’s with the other. “Quick, this way.” I pulled them across the room and out the service entrance. In the time I had, I couldn’t think of any way to get Kester out without Ash seeing us. *We’ll just have to hurry and get to Riona before he can get around the ballroom to follow us.* We hurried past the untidy stacks of empty platters in the kitchen. “Something’s happened to Riona.”

“What? What happened? Where are we going?” Shelaine yanked her hand, trying to get it out of mine.

“Be quiet and listen.” I charged out the kitchen door, towing the two of them behind me like trailing streamers. I told them about Riona as we went.

“But she didn’t say what happened?” Shelaine succeeded in getting her hand free and charged ahead of me, headed in the wrong direction.

“This way.” I pulled her half off her feet to keep her with me. Kester hadn’t said a word since we left the ballroom. He had picked up speed too though, and the gaiety

that had relaxed his features while dancing had left.

We reached the closet, and I yanked it open. Kester pushed past me. “Riona.” He sounded startled even though I’d told him what to expect. *At least she stayed in the closet. Part of her brain must still be working.* “Riona, what’s going on?” he asked.

Shelaine and I peered into the closet, blocking what little light would otherwise have entered. Kester half pivoted toward us. “Better get in here, you two. Let’s try to avoid attracting attention.” We piled into the closet and sat hunched in the dark, knee to knee.

“You’ve got to help me,” Riona repeated. She started crying again, gasping great breaths of air. I began to be annoyed. *Enough with the heart wrenching sobs. Get a hold of yourself.* I silently thanked Shelaine for her bluntness when she said, “Either you stop that bawling and tell us what’s going on, or we’re going back to the party.”

Riona’s sobs ceased into shocked silence. But, after a steadying breath, she finally told us, “Venard shot Teak just outside my room. We put him in there, but he looks bad, and you know what will happen if they find him.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “Shot? As in, with an arrow?” *No human could be so stupid as to shoot a fairy in Starstair, could they?*

Shelaine spoke. “You’re not making any sense. Why would Venard shoot Teak? He’s never given you any trouble.”

Riona folded onto my shoulder and bawled, “Because he thought he was Cypress.”

Kester drew in a breath. “Let’s go, then.” His voice came out quiet and resigned, almost old.

But I still don't understand!

Shelaine cracked the door then led the way out. She had abandoned her usual smirk and was looking at Kester like a drowning woman looks at her rope. Kester looked like he wished someone would throw him a rope. I was still hoping that it was all a mistake somehow.

Kester and Riona led the way. I paused in the doorway of the closet, recalling my earlier plan to let Kester deal with Riona and not get involved. Kester looked over his shoulder. "We may need your help, Alina."

I was afraid of that. I followed, muttering as I went, "Why me? Why is it always me?"

Being on the move seemed to calm Riona. She stopped crying and, in between crouching dashes and peering around corners to check that rooms were clear, she whispered the whole story to us.

Riona served the Silver family. For some time, she'd been receiving unwanted attentions from one of the younger fairies, a self-fancied romancer named Cypress. Riona's fiancé, Venard, had taken to sleeping outside her room, armed. After a late night working, righteous rage and love had overtaken good sense, and he'd shot what he assumed was Cypress trying to force the door to Riona's room. Though wearing Cypress's armor, the fairy was actually his cousin, Teak, an amiable young fairy well liked by both fairies and humans. Riona didn't know why he'd been trying to get into her room but guessed it was in the nature of a warning, since Teak too had been aware of the Cypress problem. Appalled on discovering his victim's identity, Venard and Riona had pulled Teak into her room, and Riona had gone looking for Kester.

Somewhere between the statue of the Mermaid in the Gold receiving room and the spiral staircase to the second floor of the Silver wing, the full import of what Riona was telling us struck me. I remembered Kester's encounter with Poplar over a broken girth and realized what this meant for Venard. None of the fairies would care; none of them would even ask if it had been an accident.

Riona stopped at a green door and knocked five times. Venard cracked it open. "Kester." He looked almost as weepy as Riona as he motioned us in, with the unsettling addition of blood on his hands and all over the front of his shirt. All hope of a mistake fled when I saw the blood, and I decided I didn't want to see what was in the room. I halted outside, forgetting Shelaine was behind me. She bumped into me when I stopped, and I stumbled into the room. I closed my eyes immediately, but I had already seen.

A big framed, brown haired fairy lay unconscious on the floor, face drained of all color, a dark red stain spreading from his side and flowing into another stain on the floor. One wing was outstretched beside him, the other crumpled underneath him.

Shelaine gasped. "Is he..."

"He's still alive," Venard whispered. "I've tried to stop the bleeding, but I've only slowed it. I don't know what to do."

Riona sank to her knees on the floor next to the fairy. She smoothed back his hair, and whispered over and over, "I'm so sorry Teak, I'm so sorry."

"Keep a look out, Shelaine." Kester knelt on his other side and lifted one edge of the cloth that Venard had pressed against the wound. "I thought Riona said he was wearing armor." He tried to keep his face impassive, but I had my eyes fixed on him to avoid looking at the fairy and caught a slight wince when he saw the wound. Venard saw

too. He closed his eyes and put his hands to his face. “He was. But I’m a good shot, curse me for a fool. I hit him just where the armor joins.”

A fresh wail from Riona.

“I took the armor off. It’s over there.” He lifted a lifeless hand toward the wall. The armor, just a breastplate, back, and helmet sat there, tinted with the same red brown that colored the floor around the fairy. Without intending to, I sank to the floor with the rest of them, knees weak. I took deep breaths through my mouth and willed myself not to lose the sugar cakes I’d eaten at the party.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kester replace the cloth, nearly soaked through with blood. The windowless room felt airless. I wanted to join Shelaine at the door but was afraid I’d throw up if I tried to move.

“Well?” A mixture of despair and hope filled Venard’s voice. I didn’t have any medical knowledge, but even I could have told him there was little hope. Not with that much blood.

Kester looked over the fairy at Venard. “He’s dying.”

“Can’t you...?”

“Can’t I what?” Kester stomped to his feet and began pacing beside the fairy. “You shot him in the side at close range. It’s a wonder he’s not dead already.” He gestured toward the rough bandage. “As near as I can tell you only just missed his heart.”

Shelaine had left her post at the door and was listening to Kester, one fist at her mouth.

Venard opened his mouth but Kester cut him off. “And I’m not a healer. Tending

a colicking horse does not qualify me to fix arrow wounds.” He stopped pacing and looked down at the fairy. “If we get him to a fairy healer within the hour, I’d say he has about an even chance to recover.”

“But they’ll know I shot him. They’ll....” Venard stumbled to his feet, eyes panicky.

“Well you should have thought of that before you shot him.” Kester stopped pacing in order to better glare at Venard. “SHELAINÉ. I said to keep watch.”

Shelaine’s eyes widened and she scurried back to the door. Riona stared at Kester through tear blurred eyes. I had never seen him so agitated. Every hint of his usual good humor now lay hidden behind a mask of angry anxiety. He tilted his head to the ceiling, closed his eyes, and placed his hands behind his back. He stayed like that for nearly a minute. No one else dared speak or move. Then, eyes still closed, he asked in a quiet, level voice. “Have you seen anyone since this happened?”

“No.”

Kester chewed his cheek, head still tilted back. “Any animal? Is there any way someone might know about this? Be very sure before you answer.”

Venard checked his response and dipped his head as though to think hard. I suspected this was more for show than anything else because he didn’t stay in that position long. “No.”

“Where’s the closest healer?”

“Gold wing. Five minutes if you walk fast.”

All eyes turned to the floor as the fairy took a quick gasping breath. Riona placed an excited, trembling hand on his shoulder. “Teak?” One of his eyes opened, then shut

almost immediately. His breathing subsided back to the ragged rhythm that had characterized it earlier.

Venard's shoulders slumped in resignation. "You're right." His face was haggard, his eyes tormented as they traveled from the fairy's face to his side. "We have to take him to the healer. Even if they kill me for it."

"Venard, no." Riona stood and hurried to his side. What little respect I had left for her evaporated. *You'd just let him bleed to death?* "Surely if you explain it was a mistake...?" I suggested.

Kester's eyes snapped open and fastened on me. "This is not the time for your fairy loving fantasies, Alina."

I flinched beneath his glare. He turned away from me to where Riona hung on Venard, as if the fairies were coming right then to tear him from her grasp. "This is what we're going to do. We're taking him to the healer, but we're doing it anonymously."

I only half listened as Kester rattled off a quick plan, amazed at how fast his mind worked. I couldn't have planned a picnic under the same circumstances. Despite my determination, my eyes kept drifting to the face of the fairy, white, as if the first blood to drain away had come from his face. A picture rose in my mind of a merry, pleasant fairy, laughing and making a face as he asked me about the punch at the fairy ball. Fighting nausea, I leaned forward to get a closer look at his face in the dimly lit room. I checked it against my memory, and my stomach sank lower. It was the same fairy.

Kester finished his plan. In short, he and Venard would carry Teak. Shelaine would go in front as a look out. Riona would follow and make sure nothing (he meant blood, even if he didn't say it) was getting left behind to give their trail away. They'd

leave Teak at the healer's door. Kester would give the other three five minutes to get back to their rooms before throwing Teak's dagger at the door to waken the healer. Then he'd dodge into the secret passage that Shelaine would show them. Shelaine immediately protested that this plan put him in all kinds of danger.

I wanted to yell at her to be quiet. I hadn't taken my eyes off Teak. *Can't you see that his breathing has slowed and gotten more ragged already?* Fairy or not, he didn't deserve to die. Not when his only crime had been to be wearing the wrong armor while trying to warn Riona. "Stop arguing! I'll stay and throw the dagger." I blinked, surprised I'd actually spoken.

They stopped arguing. Shelaine stared at me. Kester looked down at me and actually smiled. "I'm touched, Alina, especially since I seriously doubt you've ever thrown a dagger. But it's too dangerous."

"Exactly my point," Shelaine began.

"Maybe I should," Venard suggested.

"You can't!" Riona held him tighter.

A fresh trail of blood trickled out from under the cloth that covered Teak's wound.

"Stop it!" I walked on my knees over to Teak, and stood. "Can't you see he's getting worse while you argue about who's going to be noble?" I bent from my new position behind Teak's head and slid my hands under his arms. "You're going to live to taste many more glasses of punch if I have anything to say about it." I muttered, as I strained to pull him toward the door. He was lighter than I expected, and the blood created a slick surface that made dragging him easier. Thinking about the blood made

my head spin. I wavered, only to be steadied by Kester, who'd come around behind me.

“Good girl, Alina. I'll take it from here.” He gently pushed me out of the way to take my place. “Venard, his heels. Riona, get his armor. Shelaine, the door.” Together he and Venard carried Teak to the door. Riona hovered beside Teak.

Kester stopped while Shelaine checked the hall. “Alina, see how much of this blood you can clean up then take anything that has blood on it and dump it out of a high window somewhere. Then go to your room and stay there. Pretend you know nothing.”

“All clear, Kester.”

“Let's go.”

I spoke to the empty room. “But I *can't* clean up the blood.”

To my imagination, the pool of blood behind me was on fire, burning my back. As the sound of their hurried footsteps faded though, I realized that I had limited time to fulfill Kester's orders and get to my room before bedlam would break loose. Praying for strength, I plugged my nose with one hand while I swiped madly at the floor with rags I moistened in the wash basin on Riona's dressing table.

It quickly became apparent that there would be a stain no matter how much time I spent on it, and I already felt like I was out of time. Having used three rags to their capacity, I found a tattered rug under the bed and spread it over the stain. Next, I swiped the path from where Teak had lain to the door. Holding the rags away from me like a dead rat, I snuck out the door. Once outside the room, I rethought that posture and placed the rags behind me instead. I couldn't think as fast as Kester, there was no way I could explain bloody rags to any curious fairy I might meet, and I didn't have anyone to be my lookout. All it took was one fairy...one unsympathetic human...one animal that was too

enchanted. The whole time I walked, the vision of Teak lying pale and lifeless faded in and out in front of me. At first, I walked slowly, one hesitating step at a time, peering around corners before I'd scuttle around them. As I felt the time slipping away, I walked faster then broke into a run. Gowned, hair done up, running through a seemingly empty castle with bloody rags well after midnight, it could have been a nightmare. If only it *had* been a nightmare.

The wind completed the picture by tearing my hair out of its pins as I ran through the breezeway on the third floor between the Gold wing and the Turquoise wing. I leaned out into the wind. Moonlight illuminated the garden below me which was as silent as the castle, as silent as a grave...I could almost imagine Teak's ghost gliding through the bushes below me, a punch glass in one blood stained hand. I stifled a hysterical sob and threw the rag as far and as hard as I could. Then I ran the rest of the way to my room, closed the door, and leaned against it, welcoming the protective darkness inside.

Snap. A flame sparked to light, illuminating a shadowed figure sitting in Buttercup's chair. I cried out. The fairy leaned forward in the chair, holding the candle in front of his face, so all I could see was the candle. When he spoke, I didn't recognize his voice for a moment. "Where is he, Alina?"

"Ash?" Relief poured into my veins only to be washed away by apprehension. *Remember he's a fairy.* I put my arms behind my back in case some blood still remained on them. "What are you doing here?" The question came out as a frightened squeak, not the nonchalant, strong query I'd intended. The candlelight seemed unnaturally red, red like blood.

Ash pulled his legs under him. “I saw you slip out to the kitchen with Kester and Shelaine. By the time I got around to the kitchen, you were all gone. Kester’s not in the stable. Tell me what’s going on.”

My heart, already beating fast from my run, didn’t slow. It would be so easy to tell him, so easy to trust him. After all, he hadn’t told anyone I was human at the fairy ball...yet he’d stood by while Poplar threatened Kester. He had kept quiet about Buttercup’s sewing lessons...but he was watching Kester. *Kester*. I remembered his angry words, “*this is not the time for your fairy-loving fantasies.*”

“Alina?” Ash stood and walked toward me, frowning. I stayed pressed against the door. “Answer me.”

“I can’t,” I whispered.

He kept walking toward me. “What did you say?”

“Ash. Please. You’ve got to trust me.” I swallowed, willing him to keep his distance, to stay quiet one more time. “I haven’t done anything wrong. Neither has Kester.”

“But someone has.” He stopped a step away from me and bent to look in my face. “Haven’t they?”

I wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Tell me, Alina.”

Maybe it was a nightmare, after all. It felt like one. My downcast eyes followed his hand as he lifted it and extended it toward me. He raised it to an inch away from my shoulder.

“Please. Can’t you trust me?” I felt hot ears threatening to fall. I let them, too

tired and upset to care.

Ash leaned closer. “Can’t you trust *me*?”

I looked at my shoes.

He sighed. His hand dropped to his side. “Well then.”

My breathing relaxed, but my heart was heavy. *Oh Ash*. I stepped to the side to allow him to get out the door. He hadn’t gone three steps out my door, when a distant shout rang through the castle. He stiffened and started to run.

I should have told him. The certainty burst on me as soon as I heard the shout. I dashed onto the staircase. “Ash,” I yelled after him. “It was an accident!” He slowed for a moment, but I couldn’t be sure he heard me.

I stayed in the doorway long after he’d gone. Then I slowly closed the door. Just before it shut all the way, I saw a sinewy black form slink by. *Nageri*. I didn’t even feel curious. Teak was probably dead, Kester probably captured, and Ash would never trust me again. Who cared about *Nageri*?

* * * *

In keeping with Kester’s demand that I pretend I knew nothing, what I felt was a wasted effort since Ash obviously knew that I knew something, I undressed and crawled in bed. Ash hadn’t left a light, and though I now wished for one to drive back the darkness I’d welcomed a few minutes earlier, I didn’t dare light one. I didn’t sleep but watched the patch of moonlight move across the floor and listened for sounds from the other end of the castle. I could hear some commotion at times, but it was all muffled and far away so I couldn’t tell what was happening. When morning arrived, I was puffy eyed, exhausted, but still free.

It could have been my imagination, but the hallways seemed abnormally empty as I made my way to Carnation's rooms. *Just as well.* Anyone who saw me would be sure to know I was guilty of something. I couldn't seem to stop casting furtive looks about me and flinching at any unexpected noise.

Carnation wasn't in her room. I unearthed a feather duster from beneath a pile of shoes in what was supposed to be the cleaning corner of one of the wardrobes and swiped it over the tables. Time crawled. I sat down at one of the tables, went over to the window and looked out, dusted the window ledge, sat back down at the table. I vacillated in thought from one extreme to the other: *Teak is fine. Teak is dead. We got away with it. The whole castle knows. Kester's escaped. Kester's dead.*

I jumped to my feet when Carnation burst through the door. "Oh, Alina, have you heard?" She clasped her hands in front of her in a manner befitting a stage actress. My face froze with an expression that would have telegraphed my guilt to anyone more perceptive, but Carnation was too busy relishing her dramatics. I shook my head mutely.

"Someone shot Teak," she said in a hushed voice.

I tried for an expression of shocked horror. I'm fairly certain I managed the horror part. "Is he okay?"

Carnation straightened and stared uncomprehending at me.

Obviously not the response she expected. "That's horrible." I tried again.

"Isn't it though?" Satisfied, Carnation flopped into a chair. "They found him in the garden, under the haunted oak."

What?! "The haunted oak?"

"Yes. Three arrows sticking out of his side and blood all over the place. I got all

the details from Marigold. She talked with Petunia this morning. It was Petunia's cousin that found him."

I was definitely confused. No one had gone anywhere near the garden last night and certainly not anywhere by a haunted oak.

Carnation chattered on, "I heard they found a jeweled brooch beside him with an inscription, so there's probably a woman involved. Maybe a tragic romance of some kind." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "As soon as they find out who it belongs to, we'll know who was responsible."

I didn't know whether to laugh or scream at the absurdity of the rumors. I furiously dusted the sparkly clean table with my back to Carnation so she couldn't see either response. "So they don't know?"

"Not yet. But they will. Until then, the whole castle's in an uproar. No one's safe." Carnation clutched at her heart. She glanced over at the nearest wardrobe. "Why, the murderer could be hiding in this very room."

I winced. *No, but his accomplice is.*

Carnation made me check all the wardrobes, under the bed, and every other place someone might have been able to hide, as well as a few, such as behind the bookcase, where no one would have been able to hide. Head under the bed, I repeated my earlier question. "So, is he okay?" I waited with bated breath for her answer.

Carnation seemed put out at the repetition. Mostly, I suspected, because she didn't know. She muttered something about all the healers working on him and repeated her earlier statement about their being, "blood all over the place." I took heart that Teak was, at least, still alive.

Carnation flitted in and out throughout the day, picking up tidbits of gossip all over the castle. Foiled in her attempt to actually see Teak, she still managed to gather the information that he was stable, though still unconscious, and the healers were optimistic that he would recover.

Relieved on account of Teak's condition, I found a new worry. When he regained consciousness, we were all in a lot of trouble. He may not have seen who shot him, but he certainly knew that he was outside Riona's door at the time. Every time the door opened when Carnation came back, I hoped it would be Shelaine, telling me that all was well, that they'd covered their tracks and arranged alibis, and nothing more would come of it.

I cleaned up the remnants of Carnation's midday meal, making myself eat some of the leftovers despite my knotted stomach. Carnation had just left again. When I heard slow, thoughtful footsteps approaching the door, unlike Carnation's fast, tripping step, I thought at last Shelaine had come. I set the meal tray on the table and walked to meet her at the door. Except it wasn't Shelaine. It was Carnation again, but since she'd left a few minutes earlier something had happened to change her demeanor from one of delicious excitement to somber reflection. My heart seized. "Is Teak...?" I couldn't finish the sentence.

"I just met my brother. All the humans are to assemble in the courtyard. Now." She gave me one of her sidelong glances, something she hadn't done in recent weeks. "Poplar says I'm to make sure you're there."

Well. There it is. An iron weight settled in my belly. "What's happened?" *I might as well keep pretending to be innocent.*

“We’d better go,” was all the answer she would give.

As I closed her door behind me, I wondered if it was the last time I’d ever see the room.

I saw Carnation’s mood mirrored on every face we met, all of them streaming towards the castle doors and out into the courtyard. Some of the humans had guard escorts; some of the escorts had drawn swords. I passed through the outer door at the same time as a teenaged boy accompanied by a burly black haired guard. Our gazes met and I saw my own fear reflected in his eyes. I wanted to whisper that it would be alright. But I didn’t know that. In fact, I had a strong feeling that nothing was going to be alright.

The courtyard was half filled when we arrived. Fairy guards ringed the courtyard on the wall, facing inward instead of out. Humans stood in clusters in the center of the courtyard, mostly silent except for a few murmured conversations. Some of them watched the fairies on the wall with curious faces, some of them huddled close together and whispered in scared voices, some of them gestured and frowned, angry. Carnation moved toward the stairs leading up to the wall. I started to follow.

Something hard jabbed me in the shoulder. “Ow. Watch what you’re doing.” I turned to glare at whoever had bumped me and turned right into the burly, black haired guard. *Never mind.* I started after Carnation again. A hand closed on my shoulder, rotated me a quick quarter turn, and gave me a shove, not hard, but definitely a shove, before I realized what was happening.

“Down there with the rest of them,” the guard commanded.

Carnation looked back at me then lowered her gaze. She kept walking toward the fairies that were standing on the stairs and wall. Scanning the courtyard with new eyes, I

realized that there were no fairies down in the courtyard, just humans. Feeling very much like a pig must just before it's slaughtered, I descended the steps to join my fellows. On a hunch, I made my way to the largest cluster of people, and pushed into it. Sure enough, Kester and Shelaine were at the center, so was Venard. "Where's Riona?" I asked.

Kester rubbed a hand across stubble on his chin. He looked like he hadn't slept the whole night either. His eyes were bloodshot, and he shifted wearily back and forth on his feet. "That's the question, isn't it? Venard here was sent on an errand that took him away from Riona. By the time he got back, she was gone. And not 15 minutes later they started rounding us all up." If Kester looked fatigued, Venard looked half-dead, like he had not only not slept last night but the night before, the night before that, and the night before that.

"Teak woke up?" I suggested.

Kester shook his head. "Revi was assisting the healers." He nodded to a skinny, older man, who belonged to the angry portion of the crowd judging by his red face and tight lips. Kester continued, "They hauled him out of the room and straight here. Teak was breathing better when he left but was still unconscious."

I rubbed my hands on my arms. The sun was out, and in the unshaded courtyard, I should have been warm. Instead, I felt chilled. "What are we doing out here?"

"Ah. Looks like we're about to find out." Kester lifted his hand to waist height and casually pointed. As one, we all turned to face the stairs to the wall. Three more fairy guards had emerged from the castle. Behind them came a sharp faced, grey haired fairy, wearing a long, grey robe. Two other fairies followed, wearing crowns. *The king and queen.* The other fairies moved out of their way as they ascended the steps.

“Riona.” Venard’s voice came out in a gasp.

Two more guards exited, holding Riona between them, dragging her actually. Venard groaned and made to push past Kester to the stairs. Kester took a fistful of his shirt and yanked him backwards as the others closed ranks in front so the little drama was hidden from the fairies.

They pulled Riona up the stairs to the top of the wall. The grey fairy stepped to the edge of the wall and looked down at the humans below. He raised his hands for silence. Everyone obeyed, a testament to the tension we all felt.

I searched the wall until I saw him. Ash stood at the far end of the line of fairies on the wall that extended almost to the gate. He was too far away for me to read his expression, but he was facing the grey fairy along with everyone else. *Is this your doing, Ash?*

When the courtyard was completely silent, the grey fairy lowered his hands. “Last night, one of you shot Teak.” His voice easily carried to the center of the courtyard where I stood.

You could tell who among the humans had and hadn’t heard about this already by their reaction. Murmurs broke out among those that didn’t. One bold young man shouted at the wall. “How do you know it was one of us?”

The fairy lifted his chin and smiled, not at all a pleasant expression and not at all appropriate to the situation. “Because another of you came to us this morning and told us.”

But who...?

The grey fairy perused the shocked faces of the crowd below him with the same

satisfied smile. Then he launched into a long winded eulogy of sorts for Teak, praising his character and portraying whoever shot him as a monster. By all accounts, Teak had been a nice enough fairy, but to hear the gray fairy talk, he had been one step below divine. After the first few sentences the humans stopped listening in favor of speculating among themselves. Many of the fairies weren't listening either but were instead scanning the crowd below them or shifting their weight back and forth with impatient glances at the grey fairy. Riona stood between the two guards with her head down.

“...But justice will prevail,” intoned the gray fairy. “And though we regret any unpleasantness, what we do now is necessary for that justice.” He looked across the humans one last time and pivoted to face Riona. He pointed a condemning finger at her. “The truth will come out.” By unspoken consent, the humans bunched closer together. The grey fairy addressed Riona. He spoke quieter, but still loud enough for everyone to hear. “Who shot Teak?”

I heard a strangled cry behind me.

“Hold your tongue, Venard. There's nothing you can do,” Kester hissed to him.

Riona didn't look up or give any indication that she'd heard the fairy. Stupid, selfish coward that she was, I felt sorry for her.

The grey fairy frowned when Riona didn't acknowledge his question. “Come, come. There's no use pretending, anymore. We will have the truth.” He smiled down at his captive audience. “Who shot Teak?”

Riona glanced quickly up and back down.

The grey fairy raised an eyebrow and gave up his parody of a smile. He turned to the king. “Your majesty?”

Grim faced, the king nodded. I saw several of the fairies suck in their breath. The grey fairy stepped closer to Riona. She shrank away from him. The fairy put a hand on her head. "Tell me who shot Teak."

"No!" The anguish in her voice nearly stopped my heart. She pulled away from the fairy, struggling against the guards that held her for the first time. Angry cries broke out among the humans and swelled to shouts. Shelaine and I were borne forward as several of the humans behind us made as though to rush the wall. They stopped when a score of fairies on the steps and the wall raised bows and pointed them at us. In my efforts to scramble out of the way and avoid becoming an archery target, I took my eyes off Riona for a minute. A heartrending cry wrenched my attention back to her. She was twisting in the arms of the fairy soldiers as though in the throes of mortal agony.

"Stop it," I cried. No one heard me; there were too many other voices clamoring. I scanned the fairies for a sympathetic face. Some of them looked down at their shoes, ashamed perhaps, but no one moved to stop the spell. I looked back to Riona. Even from where I was, I could see the sweat pouring down her face. Her wild eyes searched the humans below her frantically for some kind of relief. "Keep him down!" I heard somebody shout behind me and knew that Venard must be trying to reach her.

Riona's eyes fastened on someone to my left, pleading for help. "Kester!" Her half-scream was audible even over the hubbub in the courtyard. Only a few of us knew it was a plea for help. All anyone else knew was that she had spoken Kester's name after being told to name Teak's assailant. The shouts trailed off, and silence reigned except for the continuing sobs of Riona. The grey fairy touched her shoulder and she stopped too.

All the fairies were looking at the crowd now, searching for a familiar

stablehand's face. In the unnatural stillness, a clear voice spoke. "Well, I guess that's it then." Kester took two steps forward to separate himself from the cluster of humans. A dozen bows shifted to point at him. He scratched his head as he looked up at the grey fairy. "Though I'd like to say in my defense that it was a complete accident. I thought I was shooting Cypress. And I might add, since we've been treated to all this fine talk of justice." Kester worked his mouth as though the word tasted bad, "that if true justice had been done." He nailed Cypress, who stood three fairies down from Riona with an icy stare. "This would have never happened."

And still no one moved. Until.... "No," Shelaine yelled. "You can't!"

Pandemonium broke loose. Cypress yelled something that was distorted into incoherence by his rage. Shelaine dropped my arm and led the charge of humans to encircle Kester, and protect him from any fairy that might get too excited and shoot.

The next half-hour was a riot of pushing bodies, screaming, and shouting. Kester raised his hands and tried to restore calm, but a determined group of humans kept him from leaving the shelter of the cluster to give himself up for Venard. From the wall, Riona screamed and screamed that it wasn't Kester. No one listened. The grey fairy roared for silence but no one, fairy or human, heeded him. A troop of armored fairies descended and advanced on the group around Kester. All the humans not rallying around Kester pushed and shoved to get out of their way. One by one, the humans were caught and enspelled. With three fairies headed my direction, I turned on my heel and ran too.

What's happening?

I slammed into an invisible wall and my air left me. Someone ran into me and knocked me over. I rolled to my side and caught sight of the fairy that had touched me

and put on the spell. Narrow green eyes were already moving past me in search of another target. *Foxglove*. Unable to move more than a foot or so in any direction, I lay on the hard cobbled ground and listened to the sounds of resistance fading to nothing. Feet marched past me toward the castle. As through a fog, I heard the grey fairy ordering that everyone be locked in their rooms. And then I was jerked to my feet by a touch from an unseen hand on my arm. The last sound I heard as I marched through the castle door was Shelaine yelling Kester's name over and over again, only to be cut off at "Kes...."

I felt the spell lift like a weight from my shoulders as a hand pushed me through the door into my room. The door slammed. I whirled about immediately and tried it. Locked. With that avenue closed, I raced to the window to see what I could. The part of the courtyard I could see was empty of life. "No." I returned to the door and thumped my fists against it. It was worse than being locked in the dungeon, because this time others were in peril beside me, and I had no way of knowing what was happening to them. I closed my eyes then opened them, unable to bear the images that presented themselves behind my dark eyelids. I paced back to the window.

As the day dragged towards its gloomy end, my pacing subsided to walking between the window and the door. Then I put the chair by the window and sat on it, stood by it, dragged it over to the door, sat briefly, decided that listening by the door was even more frustrating than sitting by the window, pulled it back to the window...and so on. I was sitting at the window when the sun passed around the tower, hunger gnawing at my stomach, a sensation that seemed indecent, considering the situation. I kept hoping Ash would come. Then I'd wish he'd stay away. While my rational side admitted that there was really nothing he could have done in the courtyard, my irrational side wished

he had at least tried. But he never appeared to receive a glad welcome or a scathing denunciation.

The light faded, and I realized that not only was I alone without food, I also had no means to light a lamp or candle. The thought of sitting in the dark roused me to use the last of the light to check the remnants of my stash in the secret panel of the wardrobe. I'd had a spare flint at one point, but I couldn't remember if it was still in there or if I'd taken it out. A hasty scramble through the back of the wardrobe turned over some stale...very, very stale bread, but no flints. I wasn't quite hungry enough to eat the bread. I closed the wardrobe and reached behind it in a vain hope. My ears which had been peeled all afternoon for clues of what was going on almost missed the sound of the door opening. I pulled away from the wardrobe with the cry of "Ash," on my lips. But it wasn't Ash, and when I saw who it was, I was glad his name never made it past my mouth. "Shelaine! How did you get here?" I rushed across the room and grabbed her by the shoulders.

Her eyes were red rimmed and desperate. "We have to get him out. You have to help me get him out." Her face crumpled, and she leaned into me. I held her sobbing body, unable to think of any words of comfort. I didn't see how we could get Kester out. But then, I wouldn't have thought Shelaine could have gotten herself out. "How did you get here?" I repeated when her crying had subsided to a lower volume. She pulled away from me, brushed her eyes, and swiped her sleeve under her nose with a very unladylike sound. "Oh, Kester taught me to pick a lock ages ago." She sniffed with an attempt at her usual saucy smile. "Eluding the guards that are all over the castle was harder, but you know me and secret passages." She walked to the window and looked out. "I went broke

Makov out first, he's getting everyone organized. We're putting the plan into action tonight. But there's no one I trust more than you, Alina. And I need your help to get Kester out of the dungeon."

"Shelaine." I placed my hands on her shoulder again and twirled her about to face me. "You can't be serious. You can't start the rebellion tonight."

She folded her arms. "Why not?"

"Why not?" I wanted to shake her but limited myself to squeezing hard. "Are you serious? With every fairy in Starstair looking at every human as a murderer? All of us supposed to be confined to our rooms? Could you pick a worse night?"

She shrugged free of my hands. "The fairies have no idea. They've never had an inkling of what we're capable of. Before dawn comes, we'll be tucked away in the thicket with our little packages and a ransom demand will be on the way."

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. Madness. Complete madness.

"But we can't leave Kester," she continued. "We could demand his release along with our freedom, but after all this they'd probably kill him anyway."

I looked up sharply. "Who said anything about killing him?"

Shelaine's lips tightened. "Makov heard the guards talking about it."

I raised my hands to my head in frustration. "That's just talk, Shelaine. They're upset about Teak. Can you blame them?"

Shelaine's look said she could and she did. "Are you going to help me or not?"

Don't do this Shelaine. Don't put me in this position.

I searched the ceiling for inspiration. All I saw was stone. Not inspiring. I heard Shelaine walk to the door. Patience was not one of her virtues. She opened the door.

“Fine.” She stepped out.

“Aah.” I threw up my hands. “Shelaine. Wait.” *Madness. And I’m as mad as she is.*

Chapter XVIII

Maybe you can get used to mind numbing terror. Or maybe I was too tired. Either way, though it was arguably the most foolish stunt I'd pulled yet, I wasn't scared as I slunk after Shelaine. Resigned would be a better description of my mood. She led me up the stairs instead of down. On the first landing upstairs from my room, she kicked at a stone in the tower wall. A hole large enough to crawl through opened next to the steps. *A staircase within a staircase, who designs these things?* "Where does this go?" I asked, after the false stone door had shut behind us.

"Shh," she warned. "Many of these passages are known to the fairies. They may be guarding them tonight."

This just gets better and better. I stumbled down the steep stairs behind Shelaine, wondering if she had a plan for how we were going to rescue Kester and get to the Turquoise kitchen unseen. Once we left the relative safety of the secret passage in order to get to another one that led to the dungeon. Proceeding without any light, I had to trust that Shelaine knew where she was going. I kept one hand on her arm, and she led me through the environs of the castle like a blind beggar.

"We're almost there," Shelaine said. "For my plan to work we're going to need a diversion."

Shelaine's plan turned out to be painfully simple. Simple for her, painful for me. Kester was in the Jade dungeon which had no secret passage into it as far as Shelaine knew. Furthermore, she expected at least one guard, probably two, to be guarding his cell. I was supposed to "catch their eye." They would see a human when all humans were supposed to be in their rooms and give chase. Shelaine would pick the lock while

they were gone and free Kester. We'd meet in the secret passage off the Hall of Portraits which Shelaine had shown me some weeks previously.

Needless to say, I didn't like her plan. "How in the wide world am I supposed to get away from two fairies?" I asked, as we crouched by the lower exit of the secret passage.

"We'll leave the door to this passage open. All you'll have to do is catch their attention, run up the stairs, around the fountain room, back down the stairs, and stay ahead of them until you can duck back into this passage. You can run fast. I've seen you."

"Won't they see me go into the passage?"

"So what if they do? It can't be opened from outside at this end. It's been very aggravating for me in the past but will work for us tonight. You'll be safe inside, and there won't be anything they can do about it." She put her eye to a tiny crack between the door and the wall.

So it all depends on my ability to run faster than the fairies. I liked her plan even less. "But what if they know about the passage? What if they're waiting for me at the other end?"

"I thought you wanted to help." She cracked the door. A sliver of torch light shone into the passage.

"I do want to help," I whispered and sidled closer to the crack in a show of solidarity.

"Then go!" For such a small girl, Shelaine's push contained a lot of force. It was hard enough to propel me out of the passage and past the corner into the dungeon

anteroom. I stumbled to regain my balance. When I looked up, I met the startled gaze of two fairy guards, one of them in the middle of lifting a cup to his lips. Luckily, I recovered first and took to my heels up the stairs. *I'm going to strangle her, I truly am.*

“You. Stop!” A startled shout followed me, soon accompanied by pounding feet. I hiked my skirt higher and took the stairs two at a time.

“Stop!”

His voice certainly carries. I hope there isn't anyone in front of me who can hear him. Candles in the niches of the stairwell flashed past me. Having never been in the Silver dungeon, I had no idea how many stairs I had to climb before reaching the fountain room. Some fifty steps later, the fairies sounded dangerously close. I struggled to maintain my speed. Thigh muscles burning, I spied the top of the stairs. I pushed to the top and galloped down the short passage to the fountain room, a large ground floor room that opened to the courtyard and contained an enormous fountain in the center. Lungs starting to hurt, I reached the fountain and started around it. The sounds of pursuit changed from two pairs of feet to one. Relief that one of them had dropped back changed to dismay when I caught a flicker of motion above and to my left. In the open air of the fountain room, one had taken to the air where he could go much faster than I could run. Fear gave my legs new strength, and I raced past the halfway point around the fountain. I could see the one fairy a quarter of the circle behind me. The other...where was the other?

A whoosh of air was all the warning I had. A split second before the fairy could touch me, I dropped to the floor. I felt a rush of air as the fairy passed over me, his extended hand grabbing only air where I had been a moment before. I turned the

momentum of my fall into a roll and came up on my feet running.

Three hard backward thrusts of his wings stopped the fairy's forward movement. He turned in the air in one smooth motion that would have made Buttercup jealous and headed for me again. Though the fairy behind me had gained ground too, I focused on the more immediate danger of the one in front. He flew lower this time, anticipating that I would try to drop under him again. I waited until his outstretched hand was only a yard away, drove my right foot into the ground, and pushed off it to go left. The fairy tried to match my motion but slid past my right shoulder as, with a clear view of the stairs, I increased my speed.

“Look out!”

I heard a satisfying splash as the fairy behind me stumbled into the fountain to avoid colliding with his partner. I slowed as I plunged into the stairwell. My nerves were screaming at me to go faster, not slower, but there was no point in escaping the fairies only to break my neck falling down the stairs. I went as fast as I dared, but it wasn't fast enough. I could hear the fairies soft footsteps gaining on me. They wouldn't catch me before I reached the secret passage, but they would get there before I'd be able to get the door shut. *So much for your plan, Shelaine.* And I had none of my own. Concentrating hard on my lightning steps, I didn't see Nageri sitting on the steps until there wasn't time to stop. He turned curious yellow eyes toward me as I barreled toward him.

“Aah!” Two steps above him, I took the only option available to me and jumped. I cleared his back easily but the steep stairs fell away from me. My forward foot caught the edge of a step and I grabbed at the wall in an effort to stay on my feet. My other foot

came down two steps lower on my recently sprained ankle and miraculously held.

The opening to the secret passage yawned to my left. I heard a strangled yell as my fingers found the edge of the entrance. I caught a glimpse of one of the fairies tumbling down the stairs, having tripped over Nageri who had risen from his prone position to his full height. The other fairy was gingerly stepping around him. I pulled myself into the cool darkness of the passage, found the edge of the door, and struggled to move the heavy stone back into place. One of the guards yelled at the other, his voice only a few stairs away. The door inched along the floor. It ground into place with a loud click of the locking mechanism. Even so, I felt it shudder as the foremost guard slammed into it. I leaned my full weight against it and prayed fervently that Shelaine had been right that it couldn't be opened from the outside.

“Blast.” The guard's voice was muffled through the stone. “She's gone into the passage. Get around to the other end to cut her off. I'll stay and make sure she doesn't come out here.”

Other end. They know where it comes out. Move, move, move Alina! The fairy would have to go farther through the traditional passages to reach the other end, but he had light to see by and wings to go faster. I started running. In two strides, my toes met the first step and I fell on the staircase. I pushed myself up with a grunt, thought better of it, and took the stairs on my hands and feet. *Must go faster.*

I reached the top of the stairs, stood, and continued my flight up the passage. How much time had passed? I tried to picture where the guard might be in his pursuit. Had he reached the second staircase yet? The mirror hall? I sprinted up what I hoped was the last set of stairs. Slimy grime from the floor covered my hands. I swiped both

palms across my skirt so that I could get a solid grip on the handle of the secret door. My feet slipped on the wet floor of the passage as I put my shoulder to the door and pushed. As soon as the opening was wide enough for me to slip through, I squeezed into the hall. *I'll run back to my room, change clothes, and wait until they stop looking for me. Then I'll sneak away to meet Kester and....*

“Got you.”

My scalp screamed as fingers knotted around my hair and pulled me to a stop.

“Stop right where you are.”

After a brief struggle, I gave in to the spell. *Well, that's that. No rebellion, no escape for me or anyone. Just a trip to see the grey fairy, and a pleasant little interrogation.* That thought was enough to make my try to move my foot. No good.

“Turn around.”

I didn't wait for the spell to work but turned of my own volition to face the fairy guard, the one that had fallen over Nageri. A bruise purpled on his forehead, and his shirt sleeve was torn. I winced. I'd been toying with the thought of begging for mercy but decided to save my breath. He didn't look to be in the mood for clemency.

A flicker of movement over his shoulder caught my eye. A silent figure crept toward us, carrying something flat with a handle. I squinted. The carried object looked like a frying pan.

Something in my demeanor alerted the fairy. “What...?” He frowned at me and started to turn his head. The figure swung the object with both hands to connect with the side of the fairy's head. He moaned and fell forward into me, his eyes rolling back. I felt his spell lift even as I held out my hands to catch him. “Netta, what...what...?” Words

failed me at the sight of Netta, Madam “Starstair is my home,” bashing a fairy with a pan.

Netta’s wide eyes watched the fairy’s journey to the floor as I lowered him. One trembling hand traveled the short distance to her mouth. “I hit him. I really hit him.” She transferred her horrified gaze to the pan, as though expecting it to be covered in gore. She dropped it, and the echo of its contact with the floor reverberated in the corridor.

The clatter of the pan roused me to action. I slid my arms around the fairy again. “Help me move him.” I hoisted his upper body and backed down the hallway toward the pillar that marked the entrance to the secret passage that led to my tower. Netta made no move to follow.

“Come on, Netta,” I coaxed. “It’s alright. You didn’t kill him.” *I don’t think.* The thought that I might be holding a corpse gave me pause. I transferred his weight to one arm, and held a hand in front of his face. I felt a faint breath against my head. *Sweet relief.* I smiled encouragement at Netta. “He’s fine. We just need to get him out of sight so no one finds him right away.” I didn’t add that he probably had compatriots on the way as I spoke.

“Out of sight,” she repeated. She shuddered and pulled herself straight. “Of course.” Her previously unfocused eyes fastened on my face. “Let’s go.” She picked up the pan as she passed it and helped me wrestle the fairy the rest of the way to the second secret passage.

I felt bad for the fairy. He’d only been doing his job. Sympathy inspired me to prop him against the wall and straighten his legs. We left him inside the entrance of the passage, looking like he’d fallen asleep. I wanted to question Netta about why she’d helped me, but she puffed and panted her way up the stairs, and I didn’t want to slow our

progress by using up her air in explanations. We reached the end of the passage, popped out on the landing, and fled down the tower stairs as fast as I thought Netta could go. In my mind, I tried different approaches to Kester to convince him we had to take Netta with us. Shelaine would fight me every step of the way, but we couldn't leave her to face the wrath of the fairies alone.

"I'll check the tower." The voice sounded only two turns of the staircase below us.

"Back," I hissed. I almost tread on her heels as we hurried back up the stairs, and I wished for Shelaine. I didn't know any secret passages in the tower besides the one we'd recently left. There were two rooms between mine and the top of the tower which didn't leave many options for hiding. Netta startled me by turning into my room instead of continuing up the stairs.

"Where are you going?" I kept my voice low, as I dashed into the room after her. "They'll find us in here."

She ran to the window where she dropped to her knees and felt under the ledge. I reviewed our hiding place options: under the bed or in the wardrobe. I stifled a moan of distress. *They'll find us for sure.* "Come on, Netta." I ran to the wardrobe. "Get behind the wardrobe. It's our only chance."

At the wardrobe, I turned to urge Netta to hurry, only to freeze in my tracks. She was halfway out the window. "Netta!" I squawked and raced to catch her before she jumped to her death. Except when I reached the window I realized she wasn't committing suicide. She had a firm grasp of a rope, anchored to a bolt in a hidden cavity under the window ledge. "Where did you get a rope?" I found this new, woman-of-

danger side to Netta overwhelming.

She pulled her other leg out the window. Her face tight with physical exertion, she leaned back from the tower and walked her feet down a couple of steps. “Do you mind if I don’t answer right now?” She didn’t wait for my reply but walked down a couple more steps, sliding her hands down at the same time. Her eyes were just level with the window’s edge.

My tower was on the southeastern edge of the castle. My window looked out on a small patch of courtyard between the castle and the southern wall, the garden less than a hundred feet to the right of the window. The curve of the tower made it so most of the courtyard was blocked from view and it was dark outside, but anyone looking in the right spot would be able to see us. Besides, my only rope climbing experience had been my escape attempt. I wavered and looked back toward the wardrobe. Footsteps outside my door decided me. I didn’t have time to get back to the wardrobe.

I grabbed the rope and threw myself out the window, grunting as my arms absorbed my full weight. I got my feet out in time to stop my body from slamming into the tower. As soon as I had the soles of both feet firmly on the wall, I slid below the level of the window. The wall of the tower was too smooth for my feet to find easy purchase, and several times they slid off the wall, leaving me dangling by my arms. I alternated between looking down and looking up, expecting to see guards below pointing at Netta and me, or to see a fairy leaning out my window...cutting the rope. *Hurry, Netta.* I didn’t dare go any faster. I’d already caught up to Netta and bumped her head once.

“Careful,” she warned through clenched teeth.

Careful. Right. Careful.

Still two stories from the ground, Netta stopped.

“What’s wrong?” *We need to keep going.*

“Hang on.” The rope started to swing.

My feet lost contact with the tower again and I slid down the rope. Netta’s hand grasped my ankle and pulled me into a window in the tower. There was a tense moment when I lost my balance going through it and started to fall back. I still had one hand on the rope though and hung on until Netta could pull me in the rest of the way.

The room we’d entered was dark except for little bit of moonlight coming in two windows, the one we’d just come through and another a few feet farther down the wall.

“Where are we?” I whispered.

“Turquoise music room.” Netta put one hand against the wall and slid to a kneeling position. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Don’t you dare.” I braved the risk of being seen to stick my head out the window to look for activity. “We need to get to the secret passage off the Hall of Portraits.”

“I can’t.” Netta settled with a bump and leaned her head back against the wall. “I need to rest a minute.”

I didn’t see or hear any activity, but I’d already pushed the limits of luck that evening. “We don’t have a minute.” I crawled under the window ledge to crouch in front of her. “That fairy has already seen I’m not in my room and is probably organizing a search right now.”

Netta shook her head. “That was Redwood, Jade family. He’d have no way of

knowing a human was supposed to be locked in that room. So long as he doesn't find Tanoak...."

"The fairy you bashed?" *Bad choice of words.* I closed my mouth.

Netta took a deep breath. "Yes. So long as he doesn't find him, we should be alright."

"That's taking quite a chance."

She sighed. "Perhaps. But there are some things I need to tell you."

I peeked out the window again. "I don't think this is the best time for a heart to heart talk, Netta." *And I don't know how long Shelaine and Kester will wait for me.*

"It's important."

So like Netta. She didn't cajole. She didn't offer a dozen arguments for why I ought to sit calmly in the music room while Starstair came down about our ears, and listen to whatever she had to tell me. No. Just, "it's important."

I ran a frustrated hand over my hair. I caught a finger in a snarl and winced. "Can we at least get out of sight?" I crawled across the floor after her, narrowly avoiding knocking a harp over and settled into a cross legged position in between a divan and the wall. Netta sat against the wall, her arms around her knees. I couldn't see her face. "Are you going to tell me how you came to be on that staircase and what possessed you to hit that guard?" I asked. She shifted uncomfortably so I hastened to add, "I'm glad you did, of course."

"I saw you in the fountain room. I followed and heard the guard yelling about cutting you off. I knew you must have gone into the secret passage. I ran ahead of him, and got there first."

“But what...” My voice came out louder than I’d intended. After a hasty glance at the window, I lowered it. “What were you doing in the fountain room? Everyone was supposed to be locked in their rooms.”

“Not everyone. There are advantages to being considered one of the most trustworthy servants in the castle.” She said the word “trustworthy” with a quiet snort of mirthless laughter.

“Trustworthy,” she repeated, this time in almost a sob, her head hanging down on her chest.

I couldn’t let her dwell on the events in the staircase. “But why the fountain room?”

“I was coming to rescue Kester.”

“You were *what?*” I couldn’t keep my voice from rising, and for the moment, I’d stopped worrying about who might hear.

Now she sniffled in earnest. “They were going to kill him.”

That stunned me into silence. Netta buried her face in her hands. Feeling her distress, I tentatively placed a hand on her knee. I gave her a few seconds to cry, but only a few, before asking, “Are you sure?”

She covered my hand with hers and held on tight. “I was serving the midday meal to Foxglove and the queen. Foxglove invites her over often.”

I’ll just bet she does.

“And Foxglove talked about how she didn’t feel safe with a murderer in the castle, about how they needed to set a strong example with Kester or they’d be another Highmoat. Three fairies died there. She said that while she hated the very idea, she

really thought execution was the only practical option. By the end of the meal, she had the queen convinced. And if the queen's convinced, I knew the king soon would be. And it takes seven of the ten Heads of Family to overrule the Royals which won't happen. Not for a stablehand."

And I'd belittled Shelaine's fears. "They'd really kill him?" I didn't want to believe it, not even of Foxglove.

"They really would. And I knew he hadn't even done it."

"What were you going to do?"

"There were only three or four of us in the whole castle allowed out of our rooms. I volunteered to bring the evening meal to the guards. I fried some eggs and laced them with sleeping powder."

Thus the pan. Who would have known sweet, mousy Netta possessed such a devious mind? Something she'd said earlier niggled at me. "How did you know Kester was innocent?"

She let go of my hand, and folded both her hands in her lap. "Ah...I'm afraid I have a confession to make. Several actually."

Footsteps pounded past the music room door. We both tensed, but they didn't even slow. Netta waited for them to fade then continued with a heavy voice. "I was in the kitchen off the ballroom when you came to get Kester last night. I'd just stepped into the pantry to see if there were any strawberries left before the three of you came in and out." She twisted her hands together. "I heard you tell Kester something had happened with Riona. Then this morning, when I heard Teak had been shot last night...."

"Oh Netta." I slumped and stared at her, willing it to not be so. "You didn't."

“I did.” She started crying again. “I went to Riona’s room and found bloodstains under her rug. I knew she couldn’t have shot him, but I felt duty bound to tell someone what I knew. I didn’t want to be involved in a fairy’s death, not again.”

“You told Foxglove.” A wave of revulsion hit me. I took my hand off her shoulder, and backed away from her.

“No. Mahogany. There’s more.” Netta talked faster. “It was me that shut the oven door with you and Shelaine inside. I’d been watching. I knew you’d found something. I thought if I trapped you in there, you’d be found the next day and whatever crazy plan Kester had would have to be abandoned before anyone got hurt. You must have got out somehow. Then, when I started noticing more people coming in and out of the kitchen, I told Tupelo, one of the guards, that I thought pilfering might be going on so they’d go to the kitchen and find you. I know you won’t believe me, but I had your good in mind.”

“I know you did,” I said automatically then realized I meant it. Misguided Netta might be, but malicious...never. “Oh Netta.” I walked on my knees back to her. “I understand. Kester will too. We’ll explain everything. You can join the rebellion and get out, like Chansy dreamed.” She was shaking her head. “What?”

“I’m not going with you.” She smoothed her hair and wiped her face with a handkerchief, resolve straightening her posture.

“Netta, you can’t stay. They’ll know you helped me tonight.”

“They’ll know no such thing. Tanoak didn’t see my face and Redwood didn’t see me at all. If I’m back in my room by the time anyone thinks to look there, I’ll be fine.”

“What if they’ve already looked there?”

She stilled and tilted her head to the window. I could see her face for the first time since we'd entered the room. In the moonlight, she looked gray and old. She closed her eyes. "I'll have to take that chance."

"No. Netta." I shook her. "This is about Buttercup's parents being killed, isn't it? You've spent your life slaving for Foxglove because you feel guilty about something that happened over a hundred years ago? Something you had no control over? This is your chance."

"I meant what I told you before." Netta gently removed my hands from her shoulders. "About being needed here. I want to stay."

"Stop being so stubborn!"

"Who's stubborn?" She gave a smile, a peaceful smile. "Go Alina. Kester and Shelaine are waiting." She smiled wider. "Give that reprobate my regards."

I knew then that I wasn't going to be able to convince her. Maybe if I had more time. But she was right, Kester and Shelaine were waiting. They'd been waiting for more than a quarter of an hour now and they wouldn't wait forever. "I'll miss you." I pulled her in for a last fierce hug.

"Be careful." She squeezed my shoulder. "Now go."

I slipped out from behind the divan. My eyes were better adjusted then when we'd come in the window, and I could make out the shadowy forms of the musical instruments as well as a path to the door.

I cracked the music room door. *Music room, music room.* I flipped pages in my mind, searching for the layout of the castle. *The Hall of Portraits separates the Jade wing from the Turquoise wing. I need to get to the first floor.* I plotted my route as I

skittered out of the room, keeping close to the wall. I tried to be vigilant, but kept getting distracted by thoughts of Netta's confession. I came around the corner to the Hall of Portraits, and immediately jumped behind it again. Two unfamiliar fairies stood in the middle of the hall conversing. *Be careful, remember? Or you're going to be caught. You'll have plenty of time to ponder Netta's revelations later.*

I chaffed with impatience as one minute stretched into five which stretched into ten. I knew because I was counting the seconds. *Couldn't they pick someplace else to have their conversation?*

They finally left. Proceeding more cautiously, I tiptoed into the Hall of Portraits. Twelve foot high images of famous fairies glared down at me. I ignored their disapproving stares and jogged down the line, counting. When I reached the fifth portrait on the right, Cherry the peacemaker, a stern looking fellow with a dove on his shoulder and a staff in his hand, I felt along the edge of the portrait until I found the spring at waist height. With a soft click, the portrait moved an inch away from the wall, providing enough space to get my fingers around the edge and pull it all the way open.

Inside the passage, one of the roomier ones Shelaine had shown me, wide enough for two people to walk abreast, I felt for the handle at the back of the portrait and pulled it into place. Mindful of Shelaine's warning that some of the fairies knew about some of the passages, I didn't call out to her. I walked along the smooth floor, one hand trailing the wall until I reached the end, where one either had to go down a ladder to a similar passage that ran underground the length of the Jade wing or through a panel into a cubicle that viewed the Turquoise drawing room.

One hand on the rung of the ladder, I leaned over the hole. "Shelaine?" *Please*

be here. No answer. I fumbled in the darkness until I got both feet steady on the rung then stopped. I didn't want to climb down without a light. "Shelaine?" I whispered a little louder.

"Bout time you got here."

I breathed a sigh of relief. I heard flint striking iron and saw a spark. A torch flared to life below me. I descended the ladder, skipping the last step to jump to the ground.

"Where have you been?" Shelaine handed the torch to me so she could pick up a satchel lying next to the wall. "You had me scared to death. I thought you'd been captured or turned into a rat, or..."

"Thank you for waiting. Did you get Kester alright?"

"Barely had enough time but yes. He's got a lot more bruises and scrapes than he had this morning," she said darkly and motioned for me to move on down the passage. "He couldn't wait for you, had to get to the kitchen. We should hurry too. Besides Kester, Motty and Makov are the only two still in the castle. Everyone else has their hostages and is on their way to the thicket.

"Really?" I couldn't believe that no one had given an alarm.

Shelaine grinned at my look of disbelief. "I told you, didn't I? They haven't even mobilized everyone to look for Kester yet, much less thought to make sure everyone else is present and accounted for."

We slipped out of the secret passage in between the two Turquoise wine cellars. From there, it was a brief jog to the kitchen. Kester was inside, holding a broom. His features relaxed when we charged into the room. "Good. You're alright. You had us

worried there, Alina.” He put a hand on my shoulder. A distant shout from one of the towers reached us.

“Sounds like they’re finally waking up.” Kester opened the oven door and ushered us in. “Motty and Makov came in five minutes before you. I’ll just give things a final sweep and follow you.”

I only had time for a last hurried glance at the kitchen, my last look at the inside of Starstair, before I crawled into the oven. *On my way to freedom. So why do I feel like crying?*

Chapter XIX

The rebellion had been more successful than anyone had dreamed, Kester included. One of the humans who worked with the fairy healers had secreted away enough sleeping powders to drug all the children. When Shelaine, Kester, and I had arrived at the thicket, it was to find rows of sleeping fairy children. It might have been a camping outing except the older fairy children were chained to stakes by one wrist, an unpleasant reminder of the true status of things. The next morning when the children woke up, a couple of the women who had cared for them back in Starstair convinced most of them to treat the whole affair as an adventure. This meant that we didn't have to keep sedating them or keep more than two or three of the obstinate ones chained. One of them even volunteered to carry our demands to Starstair.

It wasn't two hours after the volunteer's return that the first falcon arrived. The birds had been Kester's idea. The biggest difficulty with getting the slave spell removed was that the fairy had to be touching you. And if they were touching you, what was to prevent them from putting some other spell on you? We had all seen fairies use birds to transfer spells to plants when they worked in the forest. Kester had figured if it worked for a tree, it ought to work for a human. I wasn't sure his logic held together, but that was the demand he sent. Any fairy wishing to ransom a hostage was to put the spell on a falcon then set it loose. The spell acted as a homing beacon to the bird, and they'd fly straight to the designated human. Kester specified falcons because they would fly much faster than a fairy could, making it difficult to impossible for the fairies to follow. This didn't mean we felt safe. On the contrary, Kester kept a watch going all day and night. We were under orders to not talk except in whispers, and campfires were limited to tiny,

smokeless fires that were hardly worth the effort to build them.

The first falcon had flown straight for a girl from the Silver family. She'd dodged the first few times. No one knew if the fairies would actually remove the spell. Some feared we'd be killed or maimed if we touched the birds. The falcon succeeded in grazing her head with a wing on its third pass. We all watched with bated breath as she froze. She opened her mouth as though to scream but all she said was, "Oh!" Those of us closest to her could see a slight change of color in her complexion and clothing which started at her hair and traveled down her body. Like the difference between seeing someone in the full sun and when a cloud passes in front of the sun. She stared with wide, unseeing eyes around the thicket. "Kester?" She turned in a slow circle. "Shelaine? I can't see you. I can't see any of you." Her voice rose in volume.

Worried she might start screaming after all, Shelaine hurried over to her with a stick in hand and quickly scratched in the dirt. "Congratulations! It worked! Be quiet."

She settled down but a huge smile grew on her face and stayed there. Deeming it wise to show good faith, Kester immediately sent a party to release her hostage well away from the thicket. Six more birds flew in that day. We took the precaution of capturing them in cages. That way we could wait to undo the spell until the selected person was ready to leave, since it took a lot of patience to communicate via stick in the sand. Riona and Venard left together the second morning.

It was Makov who noticed that the falcons were arriving at regular intervals. He called a whispered conference that I wasn't invited to and, a few minutes later, two of the men snuck out of the thicket. They returned less buoyant than they'd left. Another whispered conference took place while conversation lagged around the thicket, and all

eyes watched.

Not content to just watch, Shelaine levered herself off the ground where she'd been helping me peel apples and sauntered over to the conference. I continued peeling, knowing that Shelaine would tell me anything she discovered. I had an apple for myself and one for Shelaine prepared when she returned.

"Bad news." She slumped to the ground and held out her hand for the apple. "There's a party of fairies headed this way. They're releasing the falcons one at a time, following each one as far as they can then releasing another. They have scouting parties and animals combing the forest too.

I took a slow bite of the apple. "So we'd better hope they run out of birds before they get here."

"Better hope, yes."

The falcons stopped coming during the night. We took turns sleeping and guarding. The second day brought sixteen more falcons and the fairies within two miles of the thicket by the end of the day.

The morning of the third day, light on my face woke me. *Surely it's not morning already?* I rolled over onto my stomach and took a deep breath, willing myself back to sleep. Instead, I inhaled a pine needle. I sat up sneezing, accompanied by gales of laughter from somewhere beyond my feet. My sleepy eyes hadn't cleared enough to see who it was, but as soon as I could see, they were going to regret laughing.

I tossed off my blanket and experimented with sliding a leg off my pine bough bed. My mood improved on finding I could accomplish this without every muscle in my body protesting, like they had the last two mornings. Only half of them protested.

A fresh chorus of laughter returned my attention to its earlier subject. Shelaine sat cross legged on a mat of pine boughs like my own. Two fairy girls lay on the ground on either side of her. The laughter was coming from them. Every now and then, one of them would look at me and point then collapse into spasms of mirth.

“Good morning, sleepy.” Shelaine waved to me. She looked disgustingly awake, hair combed, face bathed, pine branches all straightened.

“Hmph,” was all the response I deigned to give her. I patted the ground next to me, searching for my shoes. A quick trip to the stream to wash my face ought to help.

A shadow fell across me. I squinted up to see Shelaine standing over me. “Here are your shoes. They were playing with them.” She jerked her head toward the two girls, who were no longer laughing but were whispering to each other behind their hands.

“So my belongings are toys now?” I took the shoes.

“Don’t be cross.” Shelaine settled onto my bed, keeping a close eye on the girls. “They were bored. I didn’t know what to do with them. I’ve never watched fairy children.”

That didn’t surprise me. I couldn’t imagine a human mother entrusting her children to Shelaine’s care, much less a fairy mother.

Shelaine bounced up to help me to my feet. *Too cheerful and she has too much energy this early in the morning.* She nudged a branch back into place with her toe.

“Larinda needed to sleep, so I offered to watch them for awhile. Mischievous little bugs, both of them. Cute though.”

The older of the two girls skipped over to us and inserted her hand in Shelaine’s, looking at me all the while with round eyes. When I made eye contact, she giggled.

“Your hair looks like a bird’s nest.”

Cute is in the eye of the beholder.

While Shelaine squired her charge away from an early death, I sat back down, pulled a comb out of my borrowed satchel and set to work getting my hair in order in lieu of a trip to the stream. I looked around the thicket as I combed to see who else was still asleep. Of the 33 members of the rebellion, there were only seven of us left. Kester and Nicia hovered over a couple tongues of flame that didn’t really deserve the title of fire. Larinda lay on her back, two bough beds away from me, mouth open, enjoying the sleep of the exhausted. Soft snoring on the other side, the “men’s side,” of the stack of supplies piled in a row told me that Motty was still asleep too. Which meant Makov must be taking watch duty. The thicket felt spacious after so many hours of being confined with the original 33 members. The thicket was only about 100 feet square and the overarching, interlaced branches that protected us from prying, airborne eyes made it seem even more confining than it really was. The only hole in the thick brush that surrounded us was on the east side, next to the eastern creek to allow passage in and out and a place to get water.

Nicia waved to me and pointed at the fire, indicating that breakfast was ready. At the miniscule fire, I ate slowly, savoring one mouthful at a time. Nicia pried a hot cake out of the cooking pan and put it on a plate that already held an apple and a cup of water. “Who wants to feed our lovely prisoner?” She held the plate out to me. I glanced around the circle. Everyone looked away. “Don’t everyone volunteer all together,” I muttered, swallowing the last of my water.

I balanced the plate on one hand and held the cup of water in the other as I walked

the short distance to where our last hostage, besides the two girls, sat chained to a stake, brooding. Carnation didn't look anything like the prim darling of fairy society anymore. Her clothes were smudged with dirt, her hair hadn't been combed in the last two days, and she had a bruise on her forehead from when the man who'd been carrying her unconscious from the castle had accidentally dropped her.

I had been shocked on my arrival in the thicket to find Carnation among the hostages. I turned to Kester and demanded to know what she was doing there. Kester, incredibly weary after a day in the dungeon and the long walk from Starstair, snapped at me. "Who did you think we'd take for you and Shelaine?" He sat heavily on one of the pine bough beds. "We didn't want to take Carnation, believe me. She's likely to cause us more trouble than the rest of them combined, but Foxglove's not likely to let the two of you loose for anyone else."

As I approached Carnation with her breakfast, I reflected that, on this third day, with only three hostages left, the question was fast becoming, *would Foxglove let loose of us even for Carnation?*

"Breakfast," I sang softly. *Who am I fooling?* The others fed Carnation like a keeper feeds a dangerous wild animal. They'd set the plate barely into her circle of reach at the far extent of the chain then back up quickly. I approached her where she sat and handed the plate to her. I was fairly confident that the most she could do to me was break my face out in pimples, but then I didn't want that to happen either. So I kept a wary eye on her the whole time I was within her reach.

She made no move to take the plate. "I'm not hungry."

I set it beside her. "Course you are. Your figure's never going to develop if you

don't feed it properly." Carnation turned a distasteful look at the plate. She took it, and picked up the hotcake by the corner. *Poor Carnation, she's probably never eaten campfire food in her life.* I felt sorry for her and not because of the food. Unlike most of the hostages, she was old enough to understand exactly what was happening and old enough to worry about what might happen to her if her mother didn't accede to Kester's demands. From the way she cringed away from him anytime he walked by, I knew she had been worrying. I'd already apologized to her several times for the inconvenience, reassured her that she was perfectly safe, and done everything in my power to make the whole experience as painless as possible. It hadn't worked.

She picked at her food, drank a little water, picked a little more, and shoved her plate aside. She didn't grimace as much as usual; rather she seemed to be genuinely not hungry.

"Done?" I queried

"Told you I'm not hungry."

I picked up her breakfast. My own sat heavy in my stomach and I paused, considering whether I should try to reassure her one more time.

"Falcon," Makov sang out, louder than Kester would have approved. I shaded my eyes and scanned the skies. The falcon flew in low and perched on one of the overhanging branches, bobbing its head to see through the latticed branches. It dropped through them and headed for Larinda, only to be tackled by Kester and stuck in a cage. I looked back at Carnation in time to see her wings droop.

"The next one will probably be your mother's," I offered.

She started, unaware I'd been watching her and tried to hide her disappointment

beneath a careless shrug. “Probably.”

Shelaine was trying to get the younger fairy girl settled down and ready to go, without much success. *I should help her.*

Carnation spoke to my retreating back. “She probably couldn’t find a falcon right away.” I turned back to her. Her hands twisted in her lap even as her face adopted an expression of supreme unconcern. “We don’t have one. She would’ve had to borrow one or find a wild one. That’s why one hasn’t come for me yet. Don’t you think?” Her voice quavered a little.

I didn’t think a lack of falcons had anything to do with it. “Probably.”

The falcon for Nicia came an hour later. The two fairy girls left at the same time, growing tearful at the end to be parted from Larinda. Kester made the eldest repeat the directions back to the castle four times to make sure she knew how. There was a good chance the fairies could use that information to find us when the girls got back, but no one wanted to take a chance that they get lost. And no matter what we did, we were running out of time anyway.

Carnation watched the departure of the fairy girls with hungry eyes. When the last foot cleared the brambles on the hedge side, she sat on the rock next to her stake and didn’t move the rest of the day.

As soon as the girls left, Nicia hemmed and hawed her way to Kester and said, if it was just the same to him, she thought it would be wise for those who had falcons to use them while they could. Makov refused to leave before Kester, and Kester wouldn’t leave without Shelaine, but after saying goodbye to the four of us that remained Nicia, Larinda and Motty all touched their falcons and squeezed out the opening by the stream.

Shelaine had done an admirable job of hiding her anxiety while the fairy girls were there, but after they left she took to pacing and watching the sky constantly. As midday passed, she lost her patience. “We have to do something.” She kicked a rock across the thicket. “They could find us anytime.”

“Shh.” Makov glared from his watch post in a tree.

Shelaine glared right back. “It’s obvious Foxglove isn’t sending a falcon.”

“Keep your voice down,” I said too late. Carnation had stiffened at Shelaine’s words.

Shelaine continued at the same volume. “She’s calling our bluff, pure and simple. She’s biding her time and waiting until they find us without ever sending a falcon. Makov and Kester might get away, but you and I will be stuck.

She was right, of course. Despite the euphoria of those first few hours away from Starstair, I’d always felt that Kester’s plan was too good to be true. Foxglove would cut off her right hand before she’d let us go. “What do you suggest?”

Shelaine drew her knife. “We could cut off a finger and send it to her.”

I grabbed her hand and wrested the knife away before she could react. “Are you crazy?” It was a serious question. There was something feverish in her eyes, something unnatural about the way she’d brandished the knife.

“Keep quiet you two,” Kester ordered from his perch in another lookout.

Shelaine didn’t try to take the knife back, but from the way she continued to look at Carnation the rest of the day, I knew she hadn’t discarded her idea. Even though by midafternoon I was drowsy from three nights of spotty sleep, I didn’t allow myself to doze off but kept one eye on Carnation, one on Shelaine, and one on the skies for

approaching fairies which I know is not physically possible. At the same time, I tried to come up with an idea that would serve the same purpose as Shelaine's without hurting Carnation. The very thought of being recaptured by Foxglove chilled me to the bone. Whenever I looked at Kester, he had on a calculating look that told me he was running through options too. That night fell without him offering any suggestions spoke volumes about our predicament. *It's bad when even Kester can't come up with anything.*

At dusk, the fairies still hadn't descended on us though it felt like they must be waiting just out of sight. Shelaine and I switched places with Makov and Kester to keep watch. Makov was taciturn and scowling when I climbed the tree to relieve him. *He'll probably leave tomorrow morning.* Kester wouldn't leave Shelaine, but I wasn't sure how strong his conviction to keep Carnation all in one piece was. And if it was two against one...I didn't like the way the situation was headed at all. Wrack my mind as I could, I didn't see any way for it to end happily. The sand in our figurative hourglass was running out.

I ate some more bread while I waited. The tree I perched in was in the canopy of the forest. If I stood on my branch and held onto the trunk, I could see over most of the tree tops until a hill on the Starstair side of the thicket blocked my view. Mostly, we sat on sentry duty though, which gave a limited view of the forest floor a few hundred feet in any direction. Kester felt the fairies were more likely to come on foot than to fly over the trees since they would be trying to track us. We wouldn't have much warning even if we spotted them the moment they came in sight. *And if we do see them, then what? Run away and live a half life, unable to live among humans? Stay and fight? Surrender?*

The branch, while broad, was just uncomfortable enough that falling asleep was

not easy. Tired as I was, I did catch my head dropping down every few minutes, and I'd have to shift around to get myself alert again.

A hoarse shout from Makov startled me out of one such head nod. When he kept yelling, despite our orders to be quiet, and even though I couldn't make out the words, I knew something was wrong.

Here we go. I had no real plan as I scrambled down the tree in the dark. Help Makov if I could, stay as far away from Foxglove as possible, run, that was about it. I hit the ground and broke into a run toward Makov whom I could barely see in the light of the one candle Kester allowed us. I kept my eyes peeled on either side of me as I ran, my dagger out, though I didn't know how to use it and probably wouldn't even if I did.

Makov saw me and waved, pointing with both his hands to his left. There was something funny about the way he stood, one foot a pace behind the other, neither leg moving despite the gyrations of his upper body. It was as though he'd been walking when someone had put a holding spell...*Oh no.* My eyes flew to the stake, visible behind Makov. Carnation was gone.

"That way, she went that way!" I finally was able to make out his words. I slowed to a jog, uncertain whether I should go after her or see if I could help Makov.

"Go. Go!" He waved furiously. I could hear someone thrashing through the thicket in the direction he pointed. I didn't see Kester or Shelaine. Had they gone after her already? I ran toward the noise. Someone had torn through the hedge. Prickly branches poked into a narrow passage between two plants. I threw one arm in front of my face and blazed through it, making enough noise doing so that I lost track of the sounds in front of me. Once through the hedge, I stopped and listened. *There.* Crashing

to my left. I hurried after it, deciding there was no point in being quiet. Between Makov's shouts and all the crashing, any nearby fairy was sure to know we were there. "Carnation! Please don't run! You'll get lost!" I yelled. *Or eaten.* There were things besides fairies out there that might have heard all the noise we were making. I stopped again. This time all I heard was a faint rustling back in the direction I'd come. I wavered. Could she have gotten around behind me? Or was it some animal I heard?

"Alina?" Kester called from somewhere ahead of me. I stumbled through the bushes in the direction of his voice, realizing as I did so that there was a real possibility Carnation wasn't the only one who might get lost blundering around in the dark like this. A spark of light caught my eye next to a tree twenty feet away. Kester bent over it and nursed a candle to life. He stood, slid one hand inside his vest, and pulled out another candle.

"What happened?" I asked, as he lit the candle and handed it to me.

"She was waiting when Makov went to give her supper. She'd worked the chain off of the stake somehow. She put the holding spell on him then took off. We've got to find her. Stay quiet." He listened. "This way."

I hadn't heard anything, but I trusted Kester. We walked through the forest for several minutes, Kester pausing every few strides to listen. It seemed hopeless to me. The forest was huge. If the fairies hadn't found our little group in three days, what chance did we have to find one fairy? A wave of anger washed over me at Shelaine's foolish words earlier in the day. *If she'd kept her mouth shut about cutting off fingers this afternoon, maybe Carnation wouldn't have run.*

Then I heard something. A crash. Much louder than the noise we'd made getting

through the hedge, the noise of something very large approaching us. Kester stopped. I heard him curse under his breath, followed by, “Blow out your candle.”

I blew it out and took hold of his hand. He pulled us down a steep bank to jump into an ankle deep creek. The creek’s gurgle masked the sound of our splashing up it. Though it was doubtful the...*trolls, admit it Alina, they’re trolls*...could hear anything above their own crashing. Kester stopped where a bend in the creek had caused the bank to be undercut. He pulled me under the overhang beside him and we waited. The crashing grew closer. A loud splash upstream of us made me press closer to the bank. Disturbed water splashed our feet. The crashing resumed on the other side of the creek, and I let out my breath. As it receded, I made to step back into the creek. Kester caught my arm and pulled me back. “Wait,” he whispered in my ear.

While Carnation gets farther away? I bit back a moan of frustration.

Kester proved the wiser of the two of us. We hadn’t sat more than a minute in silence, when the crashing returned, closer. “They’re making a search grid,” Kester whispered. “We may need to move.” I squeezed his hand, indicating I understood. Listening closely, I could make out three distinct sets of crashing. At least three trolls were combing this section of the forest, all headed in our general direction, but only one would cross the creek anywhere near us. As it approached, I tensed, ready for Kester’s signal to run, hoping it wouldn’t come. I didn’t think we could outrun trolls.

The troll passed a good forty feet downstream of us and the crashing receded once more. “Should we try to make it back to the thicket?” I whispered. Sentries had reported troll sightings the first night, but none had come near our refuge yet.

A scream rose above the crashing of the trolls. Too high pitched to be Shelaine.

“Carnation!” I jumped into the stream and ran down it, searching for a place to get up the bank. Another scream. “Run Carnation!”

Kester passed me and leaped to grab a branch overhanging the creek. I jumped but couldn’t reach the branch. I had to go farther down before the bank became gradual enough that I could climb out. I couldn’t see where Kester had gone. More screaming guided my path and gave speed to my feet.

“Alina!” Carnation’s terrified wail was drowned out by roaring from the trolls. I pulled out my pitiful dagger as I ran, my thoughts consisting solely of “*no, please no.*”

The crashing and screams moved away from me. I ran faster, jumping downed logs and pushing through scratchy underbrush with complete abandon, yelling Carnation’s name. I thought the trolls would hear me and come back, but they didn’t. The crashing kept getting farther and farther away. I kept running and almost ran over Kester, standing with his hands on his knees on a game trail.

“This way,” I cried as I ran past him. His hand snaked out and caught my skirt. “Alina. Stop.”

“Let go!” I waved the dagger at him. He let go, and I continued. Except I couldn’t hear Carnation or the trolls anymore. I headed in the direction I’d last heard them.

Kester tackled me about the middle and I fell, dropping the dagger. “Let me up.” I elbowed him in the ribs.

He grunted but didn’t let go. “We’ll never catch them.”

I groped on the ground for my dagger, a rock, anything to hit Kester with so I could continue the chase. *I have to help her!*

“There’s nothing we could do even if we did catch them,” Kester pleaded.

“Let me go.” I found his knee with my foot and kicked it.

He let go. I got to my knees and scrambled around in the forest detritus for the dagger. Kester sat on the ground and watched me. I found it and bolted to my feet, only to realize I’d gotten turned around during our scuffle and didn’t know which way to go.

“Which way?” I asked Kester frantically. He sat hunched over on the ground. “It’s no good.” Anguish rippled in his voice.

I turned in a circle, listening. *They can’t be gone.* All I could hear were the regular sounds of night in the forest, crickets, frogs, wind rushing through the trees. I circled once more then collapsed next to Kester.

“Kester!” Shelaine’s cry wasn’t quite a scream. It was too far away to tell for sure whether it was a cry of fear or something else. Kester vaulted to his feet and raced back toward the thicket.

Not Shelaine too. I started after Kester. A sound in the other direction stopped me. I looked back, fancying I had heard a cry. *Oh, Carnation.*

“Kester! Alina!”

I ran after Kester. Shelaine’s periodic yells kept me going in the right direction. Once I got closer, it didn’t sound like she was hurt after all. There was something almost gleeful in her shouts.

I waded through the creek and pushed through the hedge. Kester, Makov and Shelaine stood on the other side of the thicket, Kester still breathing hard. Makov was no longer stuck to the ground. A fist closed around my heart. *Does that mean Carnation’s dead?*

Kester must have told Shelaine and Makov because they both wore identical expressions of horror. Shelaine held a birdcage in one hand. It took a moment for me to realize it was a new falcon.

“Oh, Alina,” Shelaine whispered. She noticed the direction of my look. She held up the cage. Her voice was more subdued than I’d ever heard it. “This bird just arrived from Foxglove.” Her eyes filled with tears. “We’re free.” She set the cage down and reached for me. “That poor girl. I’m so sorry...I never meant...”

I couldn’t say anything. I felt if I tried, I might fall to pieces.

Makov cleared his throat. We pulled apart and looked at him. “I’m very sorry, of course.” Makov snuck a look at me but mostly addressed himself to Kester. “But there’s nothing we can do and when the fairies find out...” He gulped. “It would be better if we’re all gone.”

I stared at him, disbelieving.

He shifted uncomfortably. “There’s nothing we can do. Kester?”

“You’re right, Makov.” Kester looked at the ground. I couldn’t read his expression. “You should go.” He stepped forward and clasped forearms with Makov. “Thank you for all your help, my friend.”

Shelaine watched them with teary eyes, and when Kester stepped back, she went to Makov and pulled him down for a kiss on the cheek. “Good luck. I hope our paths cross again someday.”

Makov nodded to me then took off at a lope to where the other bird cages sat and opened his. Immediately, the falcon hopped out and onto his wrist. A smile transformed Makov’s features as his eyes took on an unseeing glint when they turned to us. He

waved, in a direction off Kester's right shoulder. "Good bye," he called and slipped through the hole in the hedge.

I sat on a rock. I couldn't believe what had happened. I kept hearing Carnation's scream my name over and over in my mind. *Surely there's something I could have done.* My insides roiled. I wouldn't accept that she was dead.

Shelaine sat down too. She interrupted my thoughts with, "Makov's right. It's no good staying here. We should go."

I stared at the stake where Carnation had been tied. She didn't deserve that. Empty-headed, selfish, but nobody deserved that.

"Alina?" Kester touched my shoulder.

I shook my head. "Is she still alive, Kester?"

"Alina...there's nothing we can do."

"IS SHE STILL ALIVE?" I stood and whirled to face him, knocking his hand off my shoulder, welcoming the burning behind my eyes.

Kester looked old, weary and old. "It won't help."

I glared. "Tell me."

He rubbed his face and nodded in acquiescence. "Trolls hunt at night. They have their main meal in the morning, like our evening meal. They like their food fresh."

"Kester, stop." Shelaine stepped between us.

"She wanted to know."

"So she's still alive?" The sense of horror remained, but a small ember of an idea took form in my tumultuous mind.

"Probably. There's no way to know for sure."

I looked at the stake again. “And they’re holding her in the cave? The one off our storeroom.”

“What are you thinking?” Shelaine peered into my face.

Kester answered, “Trolls don’t like to range far from their caves because they don’t want to be caught outside when the sun comes up. Neither do different troll clans like to live close to each other. So, considering our location and the location of the storeroom cave, I’d say yes. Probably in that cave.”

Shelaine was still looking at me. And not liking what she saw. “No way, Alina.”

I waved her off. “We have to do something. We can’t just walk away, say ‘that’s too bad’ and go on with life. Not if there’s still a chance.”

“Three humans against a clan of trolls? In their cave? That’s not a chance, that’s suicide. Be reasonable.” She looked at Kester. “Tell her.”

“It can’t be done.” Kester stared at his boot. “I’m sorry, Alina, we’d be killed before we even found her.”

“Not us. The fairies.”

Shelaine stilled. “You can’t.”

“We can’t just let her die.”

Kester put his hand on my shoulder again, voice filled with concern. “You know what Foxglove could do to you if you go back.”

“I know.”

Shelaine looked between us. Her eyes brightened. “Wait. You don’t have to go. We can tie a note to the falcon to take back to Starstair.”

Momentary hope flared inside me then died. I shook my head. “Can you enchant

it to fly at night? Because it will be too late by the time it gets to Starstair if it leaves in the morning.”

“It may be too late by the time you get there. It’s a four hour walk back to Starstair. Less time if you run, but the night’s half over.”

“Then I’d better go now.”

“We.” Kester looked up. “We had better go now. It was my plan. She was my responsibility.”

“Oh, Kester.” Shelaine wilted back onto her rock. “Go back? After all these years of planning? When we’re so close?” A hint of fire returned to her voice. “We don’t know that we could save her. It might be for nothing.”

Kester knelt in front of her. He put one hand on her shoulder and tilted her chin up. “Perhaps, but she’s right. We have to at least try,” he said gently. “Could you live with yourself, if we left?”

“There’s no reason the two of you need to....”

“Oh stop it.” Shelaine pulled herself up, using Kester’s hand. She brushed tears off her face. “We’re coming with you.” She pulled me into another embrace.

“Thank you. But you were right the first time. The two of you should go. Go and be happy,” I whispered in her ear. I smiled at Kester over her shoulder. “Good bye.” And I sprinted, not for the hole in the hedge, for the cages.

“Alina! Don’t!”

I opened the cage door. The falcon inside blinked at the open door. Then, propelled by the spell, it fluttered out of the cage and flew a wobbly path toward Kester.

Kester ducked but he couldn’t evade the bird. It landed on his shoulder. Kester

swatted it and it fluttered away to land in the closest tree.

“Alina!” Kester shouted. He looked at me...yet not at me...through me. He started to walk toward me then stopped, blinking. “Alina, you little devil.” He blundered forward, and stopped again. A smile crept onto his face. He slapped his thigh and laughed. “Clever girl. Forget the fairies, maybe you could take on the trolls by yourself.” He held out a hand to the empty air. “Coming, Shelaine?”

Shelaine stood where I’d left her.

“Go with him, Shelaine.” I nodded encouragement.

She turned to me, “But what about you?”

“I’ll be okay. Thanks to someone special, I know everything there is to know about how to make a stay in the dungeon comfortable.” I offered a smile. Worry still creased her face, but she managed a smile in return. “Good luck, Alina.”

“You too.”

I stood well back as she knelt beside the last cage. She didn’t open the door wide enough for the falcon to escape, only enough to allow her hand inside. She stroked its breast once, withdrew her hand, and shut the door. Her smile widened. “I can’t see you.” She spoke louder, like I might have gone deaf as well as invisible. She picked up the cage, still talking loudly. “We’ll take the bird with us and let it go tomorrow. Maybe it will find you at Starstair.” She hurried over to join Kester, who had gathered her satchel and his. “If you’re still here.” Shelaine raised her voice. “Good bye. Good luck. I’ll miss you.”

I raised a hand in farewell. They ducked through the hedge. I took a deep breath, followed them out, and turned toward Starstair. *Time to run.*

Chapter XX

The journey back to the castle stretched on without end. So many of the trees looked alike that several times I feared I had gone in a circle. Countless times I found myself on the ground, having tripped over a log hidden by the darkness. I didn't need to see my lower legs to know they were a mass of purple and black before I'd gone more than a mile. Or at least I thought it was a mile. My speed, the darkness, and my state of mind all combined to make an accurate judging of the distance I'd traveled impossible. Sometimes, after falling, I'd give into fatigue and rest, though never for long. The memory of Carnation's terror-filled cry got me on my feet and running again. I kept my ears open for sounds of anything large and, as much as I could see, I kept my eyes peeled for other motion in the forest, fairy or troll.

I reached the exit of the secret passage an eternity later, twice the distance I'd remembered. The branches we'd piled over the two and half foot tall slit in the rock above the stream to disguise it were still there. I slid my head and torso into the slit and wiggled up on the rock. I had to crawl a body's length to get to where the passage proper began and the ceiling rose to standing height. I found the spare torches and flints easily, but it took five tries for me to light one, my conscience screaming "hurry" while I fumbled with the flint and iron.

I passed the turn to the storage cavern and jogged up the steeper incline to where the passage contracted. I rubbed the torch into the dirt to extinguish it then got down on all fours to make the crawl to the oven. For a few horrible seconds, I couldn't get the latch at the back of the oven to work, then it gave. I clambered into the oven...and realized that I might very well be trapped. In the three days since we'd left, it was

ludicrous to suppose that no one had used the oven *and extremely unlikely that they would have left it...*the door swung away from me at the slight pressure of my uncertain fingertips...*open.*

I flopped out of the oven onto the cool stone floor of the kitchen. I nudged the door to an almost closed position, straightened, and discovered another problem with my plan for rescuing Carnation: I didn't have one. My whole focus while running through the woods had been a panicked "I have to get to the castle now." No thought for what I'd do when I got to the castle, though I would have had plenty of time to think it out. Now I didn't have time, or a plan. I groped my way up the steps to the door, and listened. The castle was quiet.

It would be only a matter of time before someone found me. Time was not something I had a lot of though. Another thing that worried me was, would I have a chance to explain Carnation's predicament before I had a spell slapped on me? And, if I got a chance to speak, who could I count on to believe me? Only two people came to mind, Netta and Ash. Of those two, only one of them was a fairy and had the power to do anything about Carnation's plight. I gulped and leaned against the door. I wasn't sure I could face him. After being friends, laughing...dancing together, I'd taken part in kidnapping his sister who was now in mortal danger. But I knew, as surely as I knew I didn't want to have to look in his face and see the betrayal there, I knew he would listen and he would act.

Silence deeper than the silence of the forest enfolded me as I exited the kitchen and hurried the short distance to the cellars where I slipped into the secret passage that would take me up. Ash's room was on the floor above Carnation's, in between the

reading room and Poplar's room. I could only hope he was inside.

A peephole in the secret passage wall on the ground floor gave me an unobstructed view of the Turquoise receiving room and its windows. I checked for a sign of coming dawn. The windows were dark. I had no clear idea of the amount of time that it had taken me to run to the castle. It could be several hours until dawn or only minutes. The dark windows partly allayed my fears, but a continued sense of urgency propelled me up the ladder to come out in the third floor hall of the Turquoise wing.

I rushed down the hall, treading quickly but carefully to avoid attracting the attention of anyone who might be awake. My skirt caught on something as I passed an open door. Impatient, I reached back, intending to yank the cloth free of the nail or whatever it was. Instead, my hand encountered a soft, furry face. I gasped and withdrew it, realizing it was a cat that had reached out and grabbed my skirt with its teeth.

“Is that you, Nageri?”

A deep throated rumble answered me, but he couldn't speak without letting go of my skirt. Relieved, I took hold of my skirt with both hands and tugged. “Let go. I'm in a hurry.”

Nageri planted his feet and pulled.

“This isn't a game,” I said in a fierce whisper and leaned away from him, hoping to rip the fabric. No luck, the cloth was too good and Nageri's grip too tight. “Nageri,” I whispered, infusing my voice with as much authority as I could and enunciating the words. “Let. Go.”

Nageri's answer was to keep pulling, away from Ash's room, away from any hope of rescue for Carnation. I continued to fight him. I even considered a scream to

attract attention. The thought that it might be Poplar, not Ash that would respond to my scream kept me quiet. Nageri proceeded with purpose down his chosen path, though I could only guess what that purpose was. Had he been called into service to police the castle and take any wayward humans to the guard? To Foxglove? I shuddered and tried one last time to free my skirt. I earned a growl for my efforts.

Nageri led me through the Gold wing and into the Silver wing, a part of the castle I'd only been in twice, one of those times being my trip to Riona's room on the fateful night Teak was shot. When we started to ascend a spiral staircase, I realized we'd entered one of the towers. Nageri stopped on the second landing. Faint light shone under the crack of a door. The door wasn't latched and slid open with a soft creak at a nudge from Nageri's paw. We entered a sitting room of some kind. Bookshelves on the walls turned the semi-circle of the tower room into a six-sided figure. A divan and matching chair faced each other in the center of the room with a tea table to the right of the chair. Odds and ends interspersed with the books on the shelves or leaned against the bookcases: a stringed instrument sat in one corner, a chess set poked out from a shelf, and a covered bird cage hung from the ceiling. A plush window seat ran under the only window and extended on either side far enough that a person could lay on it. In fact, a person was lying on it, propped against cushions on one side, reading by the light of a lone candle.

The creaking of the door alerted her to our presence. "Good. You're back. Tell me what..." She saw me. "Alina." She set the book down. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be well away." I looked closer. She knew my name, but I had never seen her before, although there was something slightly familiar about her. In the low

light, all I could see was a female fairy of medium weight with way dark hair and a thin face. Nageri dropped my skirt, but moved to sit between me and the door, in case I had any ideas of leaving without his consent. I knew better than to try.

The fairy swung her legs off the seat and moved to the closest bookcase where she stood on tiptoe and pulled down a lantern. “Where did you find her, Nageri?” She held her candle to the lantern’s wick.

“Turquoss three.”

“Turquoise three? Third floor of the Turquoise wing?” The lantern glowed to life and she set it on the tea table. When she straightened, I realized with a start that she had no wings. In the dim light of the room, I’d seen her fairy dress and fairy hairstyle, coupled it with her apparent freedom to do what she pleased and assumed she was a fairy. But she was human. In a flash, I realized why she looked familiar. I *had* seen her before. Dancing with a fairy in the star room after I’d left the First Frost Ball.

“You look confused,” she stated perceptively. “I probably ought to introduce myself. I’m Tiger Lily. Or just Lily if you prefer.”

Carnation’s plight still foremost in my mind, I still couldn’t help a start of recognition, “Tiger...you’re Nageri’s owner. But I thought...You’re not a fairy?”

She smiled at my confusion and gave a small shake of her head. “No, no. I’m not a fairy. Just married to one.” Her smile turned to a frown. “But why aren’t you gone? I saw Foxglove release the falcon myself.” She half turned and pointed to the window, as though one might still be able to see the bird winging away.

Carnation. I’m losing precious time. Whoever she was and whatever she wanted with me could wait. I needed her to call off Nageri so I could get help. “Something’s

happened to Carnation. You have to call off Nageri so I can get help.”

“Something’s happened to Carnation? What?” She sank gracefully onto the divan and motioned for me to sit. “Tell me about it.”

“No. No. We have to go now.” I stopped when I encountered Nageri standing in the doorway. *Stop it. You’re doing the same thing as Riona-running off without explaining.* I took a deep breath, felt for the edge of the chair, and sat down. Tiger Lily watched me with knitted brow. As quickly and succinctly as I could, and it was very succinct because I was worried about Carnation, I told her about Carnation escaping and being taken by the trolls.

Tiger Lily only sat through the first two or three sentences before she got up and started pacing, fingertips steepled together and tapping her chin. Her eyebrows drew closer and closer together until they nearly met.

“...So I need to get together as many warriors as I can and rescue her,” I finished.

“Unfortunately, that’s not as easy as it might be.” She stopped her pacing and contemplated Nageri. “Most of them are still out looking for you and Carnation in the forest.”

Then why didn’t they hear us with all the noise we were making? “We can’t wait.” I stood again, swaying a little on my feet.

“No, of course not,” she agreed, eyeing me with concern. “I know Ash is here. Redwood, Willow, Aspen. I thought I heard Hemlock coming back too.” She ticked them off on her fingers. “And Sequoia of course.” She looked from her fingers to me and explained. “My husband.” She resumed pacing. “I don’t think Iris, Calla Lily or Snapdragon went on the search either, and all three of them can fight as well as the

fellows. That's still not very many."

It wasn't. There were at least twice that many trolls, and in the caves the trolls would have an advantage.

"Well." She eyed her splayed fingers, as though hoping one of them would turn into a warrior. "It is what it is." She dropped her hand. "I'll rouse Sequoia to give the alarm. Explain again about where the troll cavern connects to your secret passage."

She never once questioned my story. "I'll show you." I stepped toward the door. I expected her to argue that I should stay there and was prepared to be mulish, but she accepted my statement with a shrug.

"Let's go then. Move, Nageri."

We stopped at the first door after exiting the tower. I paced beside it, chaffing with impatience while Tiger Lily held a hurried conversation inside with a drowsy male voice. "We have to hurry," she said when she returned to me. "It's only an hour until dawn." She didn't need to tell me to hurry. It was only exhaustion that kept me from racing ahead of her down the stairs. A bell began to toll from one of the towers, and I heard running feet headed to assemble in the courtyard at the call. We exited the breezeway into the Turquoise wing, Nageri close on my heels.

"The entrance is in the kitchen," I said between breaths.

Tiger Lily gave me a half smile over her shoulder. "I know."

Any other time that statement would have given me pause. All I cared about then was the slight hint of pink now visible on the horizon out the windows on the first floor. We tore into the kitchen, and Tiger Lily went straight to the oven and opened the door. Without any regard to her fine dress, she crawled inside. I followed.

Where the passage widened, she handed the lantern to me. “You’d best lead from here.” I charged down the left fork when we reached it. I climbed down the ladder into the storage cavern, still littered with boxes and equipment that hadn’t been needed. Tiger Lily scrambled down after me, and Nageri leapt from the edge to the floor in a soundless bound. I led the way to the pile of boulders that blocked the narrower passage that connected to the troll cavern.

“Behind these.” My heart sank as I regarded the wall of piled stones facing me. I didn’t remember there being so many. *It will take us all the time we have just to clear these.* I climbed to the top of the unstable pile, found a rock that didn’t have any others on top of it, and rolled it down the pile. Nageri leaped out of the way as it rolled and bounced along the ground to come to rest against a crate of potatoes. Tiger Lily climbed up the other side, using the wall of the cavern for support, and started throwing stones off that side. We worked fast and in silence, except for the cracking and rumbling the stones made as they slid down the pile to the ground.

Echoing voices and the light of a half dozen torches announced the approach of the fairies. They streamed into the cavern, ignoring the ladder to fly straight to the pile of rocks.

“Alina.”

I stilled, watermelon-sized rock in my hands.

Ash landed on the pile a few feet below me.

Reluctantly, I met his eyes. I saw the hurt betrayal I’d been expecting, but I saw other things too, concern and...relief? Even delight? It was almost enough to make me forget Carnation. Almost. “I’m very sorry about this, Ash.”

“We’ll get her. It will be alright.” He swallowed and held out his hands.

I gave him the rock.

Gradually I found myself shouldered off the pile, as the more agile fairies attacked it as ferociously as if it was the enemy, not the trolls. I received passing glances from them and a searching stare from Hemlock, but no one offered to put a spell on me or take me off to the dungeon. That might have been because, at an order from Tiger Lily, Nageri kept close to my side and showed his teeth to any fairy that got too close. I wasn’t sure why Tiger Lily was so willing to trust and help me. I was going to have a lot of questions for her when it was all over. In the meantime, I was grateful for the assistance. I was also grateful that neither Foxglove nor Poplar were there. They were still out looking for our thicket and Carnation, along with the majority of the fairies.

In less time than I would have imagined possible, the passage was cleared to the extent that a fairy could pass with only a slight stoop. The fairy on top of the heap announced this moments before another returned from the castle with a whole menagerie of animals and the news that dawn was breaking. Everyone but me and Tiger Lily gathered in a circle around a hard bitten, tanned fairy with the air of a commander, an impression he substantiated by laying out a quickly contrived plan of attack. I counted nine fairies in all. Three dogs and one other big cat beside Nageri prowled around the circle. Joining the animal contingent were two weasels and a stoat. The fairy’s plan was to send those three in to ascertain Carnation’s location, “if she’s even in there.” I bristled, but didn’t try to defend myself. *They’ll know soon enough.*

Leaving tactical details out, the rest of the plan was for Ash and Hemlock to get to Carnation as fast as they could and get her out while the rest distracted, fought, and

generally did as much damage as they could to the trolls.

Tiger Lily raised her hand. “What should we do?”

The commander gave her a piercing stare, before his gaze slid over to me. “I’d appreciate the loan of Nageri. Otherwise, I think you’ll be more use here than in there.”

In other words, you’ll just be in the way. I recognized the mutiny in Tiger Lily’s features. With an effort, she relaxed her face. “Of course Nageri will go.” She bent and spoke to the cat who flicked his ears back then prowled over to join the other feline.

“Any other questions?” The fairy’s eyes darted over his small army. “Then let’s go.” One by one, the fairies and animals disappeared behind the rock pile.

Ash hung back, casting uncertain looks over his shoulder at me.

“Be careful,” I mouthed, the irony of uttering the hated phrase to someone else not lost on me. But when it came down to it, I couldn’t think of anything else that was appropriate. At least not in two words, I would need many, many more.

When the last stone dislodged by the last dog clattered to a stop on the floor, I turned to Tiger Lily. “You’re not planning on staying here, are you?”

“No. You’re not either?”

“No.”

We shared a rebellious smile.

She folded her arms. “I think we can be just as distracting as a dog.”

“Oh, I think we can be more than distracting.” I beckoned her over to the crate I was standing next to. Eyes questioning, Tiger Lily joined me as I pulled the top off the crate to reveal a stack of swords.

“My, my.” She fingered the hilts of a couple of swords. “A wonder nobody

missed these.” She pulled one out, held it up, and examined the edge. “Have you ever used a sword?”

I shook my head. Facing what we were now, it seemed like a tremendous shortcoming in my education.

Tiger Lily leaned into the crate and shifted swords. She came out holding a long thin sword with a silver hilt. She looked it over, touched a finger to the tip, and passed it to me. “This is a rapier. You put enough force behind it and it will stab through a troll’s hide. It’s not a slashing weapon though, you try to cut a troll and the blade will break.”

I held the sword. It felt heavy and awkward in my hand. “I’ll try to remember that.”

Tiger Lily pulled a similar looking sword out of the crate, and nodded in satisfaction. “Ready?”

“Ready.” *I’ll never be ready.* But still I led the way over the remaining rubble. My pulse was pounding again, and I had a headache. I shook my head to clear it and concentrated on my steps. Like the party of fairies in front of us, we went without torches to avoid alerting the trolls in the cavern beyond. At first we tried to go quietly, not eager to let the fairies know we were following only to have them send us back like truant school children. The sound of yelling, and more chilling than the yelling, the bellowing of trolls, spurred us into a run the rest of the way to the troll cavern.

Flashes of flame and sparks of metal on metal served as the only illumination, creating a patchwork effect of illuminated scenes every time a fireball was hurled. Unseen figures bumped into each other. Then a stray fireball landed on a pile of something, I never knew what, that exploded into flame that shot ten feet into the air.

Smoke burned my eyes and throat. Heat from the fire filled the cavern in a suffocating blanket. The fighting around us intensified since the assailants could now see each other. Whatever advantage the fairies had gained by surprise they were quickly losing. I counted eight trolls by the light of the bonfire and, judging by their cries for assistance, more would soon be on their way from other parts of the cave system.

“There.” Tiger Lily grabbed my arm to get my attention and pointed. Hemlock and Ash ducked past a short troll on the other side of the cavern while two more fairies engaged it at eye height. Tiger Lily and I ran from boulder to boulder across the cavern in pursuit. One of the trolls saw us and gave chase only to be met by three arrows shot in quick succession by two of the archers. They’d found a perch in one corner of the cavern and were taking advantage of the firelight to shoot as many trolls as they could. Two of the arrows struck its arm and one pricked its chest, falling to the ground without doing any real damage. Snarling, the troll left off chasing us and charged the archers. Distracted by the drama behind me, I almost ran straight into another troll entering the cavern. I ducked out of its way as it rushed to join the battle.

I half ran, half crawled past a natural column of stone wide as a tree trunk and slid down a short slope into an adjacent cavern. Enough firelight spilled out of the other cavern room for me to make out Tiger Lily running across a flat cathedral-like cavern. Firelight flickered off two sets of wings as Hemlock and Ash passed into shadow. There were no trolls, but the walls were adorned with hideous carved and painted depictions of them, mostly in the act of decapitating a fairy or dismembering one of their own. I flattened myself against the wall and held my breath as another troll thundered out of a side cavern and past me to join the fray. I raced to catch up with Tiger Lily. A silent

black shadow passed me halfway across the cavern. Nageri had rejoined us.

An enormous fire pit, as large as my room, dominated the third cavern which itself was larger than the previous two put together. There was a hole in the ceiling above the fire pit that allowed light in and smoke out. Three large spits lay across the pit, and bones lay scattered all around, some of them piled in gruesome heaps. I stopped, nauseous, afraid that some of those bones might be Carnation's. *Are we too late?*

The bellow of a troll drew my attention to the wall of the cavern. Mats of furs and pine boughs lined the walls of the cave. A troll was rising, spear in hand, off of one of them. Two other matted heads rose from rough beds at the bellow. A fourth head, a red head belonging to a fairy shackled to the wall by a thick black rope about the neck, also sat up at the noise. *She's alive!*

Carnation spotted Ash and Hemlock and started screaming something that could have been a cry for help or a cry of warning. Hemlock yelled something that was lost to me between trolls' bellows and Carnation's screams. Ash veered toward Carnation. Hemlock flew over the fire pit with a battle cry straight at the first troll. Fop he might be, but coward he was not. In the middle of revising my previously poor opinion of Hemlock, a hulking shape lumbered between me and the fire pit, carrying a spiked club, fast overtaking Tiger Lily who was skirting the edge of the pit.

"Look out!"

Tiger Lily ducked, and the swing of the club missed her head by inches. I concentrated on getting more speed out of my weary legs. A snarling cry issued from Nageri as he leaped for the troll's back. At the same time I dashed up behind it and stabbed the back of its knee, remembering Tiger Lily's instruction and using all the force

my arm possessed. The sword slid through the troll's leg and hit bone. As I pulled out the blade, dark green blood spilled out the wound, and the troll collapsed on that leg, causing Nageri to fall. On one knee, the troll pivoted, and swiped at me with his club. I dodged under the club and met up with Tiger Lily on the other side.

“Thanks for the warning,” she breathed to me, before barking a command at Nageri. To me, she said, “He'll see that this one doesn't give us anymore trouble. Come on.” I looked up and saw what Tiger Lily had noticed. Hemlock was keeping his troll busy, flying about his head and taking quick jabs like a pesky insect. Ash, on the other hand, was facing off with the last and largest of the trolls and getting the worst of the encounter, hampered by his determination to stay between the still-shackled Carnation and the troll. As I watched, he flew backward to avoid a vicious swipe of the club and hit the wall. Faltering from the collision, he dropped a couple of feet. The troll swung the club again, and he couldn't recover in time to get out of the way. The club struck his legs with a sickening crack and sent him spinning. He hit the ground on his back, and his sword slid from his grasp. The troll raised the club above its head again. Ash rolled out of the way, but the club caught his shoulder and he cried out.

Tiger Lily ran for one of the troll's legs and I for the other. A shout from the troll I'd crippled warned our target, and it whirled around without striking at Ash again. Small, yellow eyes darted between me and Tiger Lily. I fainted right and dodged left. The ground beneath me shook as the club impacted behind me. I dashed to the right of the troll, hoping to get around it in order to help Ash, who was crawling unsteadily toward the wall and Carnation, blood dripping from his shoulder.

“Ha.” Tiger Lily's yell of triumph was followed by a snort of pain from the troll.

It reared to its full height, holding the club limply in its freshly injured hand. I took advantage of the pause to dash all the way around it to Carnation and started sawing at the rope with my sword. Unfortunately, Tiger Lily was right; my sword was not meant for cutting.

“Hurry,” Carnation urged, but the dull edge of my rapier was having no effect on the rope that I could see.

“Alina,” Ash shouted from his position, leaning against the wall some thirty feet away. He had no weight in one leg and clutched his shoulder. “My sword.” He pointed to where he’d fallen.

I handed my sword to Carnation to keep sawing and ran for his sword. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the troll transfer his club to his uninjured hand. Tiger Lily dodged. The club cracked a boulder behind her, and fragments of rock went flying. I scooped up the sword and started back to Carnation. Tiger Lily fainted and tried to dash between the troll and a pile of furs next to the wall. The troll wasn’t fooled by her feint, and I could see she wasn’t going to make it. I ran toward the troll, yelling but didn’t reach it in time to stop its blow. The club caught Tiger Lily from behind and lifted her over the pile of furs to land beyond Carnation in a heap. She didn’t move after she landed.

The troll turned and locked malevolent eyes on me. I raised Ash’s sword; it was heavier than the one I’d been using, and the blade looked sharp. *I hope this is a slashing sword.* I was about to find out. *But first, I’ve got to draw it away from Carnation.* I turned tail and ran, first toward Hemlock’s fight then veering left toward the fire pit. The troll followed, its heavy feet pounding the ground behind me. At the edge of the fire pit,

I turned and faced my enemy.

The sounds of fighting, interspersed with coughing met my ears as the battle in the other cavern spilled into the main cavern, the fighters driven out by smoke. A fireball whizzed past the troll's head, distracting it for an instant. I dashed at it and landed a quick cut to the troll's leg. The sword nicked its flesh but didn't penetrate deep enough to do anything more than return the troll's attention to me. I ran in a circle around it, trying to keep behind it, slashing at the other leg as I did. I missed and the troll kicked out and caught me a glancing blow. I stumbled, and teetered on the edge of the fire pit. Digging the sword's tip into the ground kept me from falling in, but in the time it took me to regain my balance, the troll had turned to face me and stepped close enough that I couldn't run around it. Trapped with the fire pit at my back, I had nowhere to go, and little chance of dodging the next blow. As the troll raised its club, I flung the sword at it in a tired arc that only glanced off its arm. I turned to the fire pit and leaped for the closest spit, suspended on either side by wooden rods. Luckily, the fire was low, but even then the iron of the spit scalded my hand. Fighting to hold on despite the pain, I swung my legs up and looped them around the spit, the fabric in my skirt helping to alleviate the burning. I craned my head around to look at the troll. It wore a confident leer as it raised the club. I eyed the length of the club and the distance from the spit to the edge of the pit, realizing the same thing the troll had. I was still in reach. I swung by my legs and tried to grab the second spit. I touched it, but my burned hands refused to hold on. I fell back and looked back at the troll in time to see it drop its club. The leer turned to a look of surprise. It toppled forward into the pit. As it tumbled, I saw a spear imbedded in its back. My eyes traveled from the end of the spear to the swaying figure

standing on one leg that had wielded it. As I stared, Ash collapsed.

Fighting tears of pain and fear, I scooted down the length of the spit and swung to the ground. I could feel welts rising on my legs, and I didn't dare look at my hands for fear of what I'd see. Despite the pain, I forced my legs to carry me to Ash. The battle still raged, mostly at the other end of the cavern but no telling how long it would stay that way. When I reached Ash, I was relieved to see he was still conscious. Holding onto my arm, he was able to get to his feet and hobble next to me until we reached the wall and Carnation.

I assisted Ash to the ground and handed Carnation my dagger to cut the rope. *Why didn't I think of that before?* I hurried to Tiger Lily's still form. I flipped her over on her back using the backs of my hands and felt for a pulse. It was there, strong and even. A fireball shot past my ear. The fighting was getting closer. I left Tiger Lily where she was and ran back to the other two. Carnation had succeeded in severing the rope that held her. I helped her to her feet but when she tried to walk, she only managed two steps before her legs gave out and she was on the ground too.

Ahh! I can't carry three people! I looped one arm around Carnation's waist as I knelt and dipped my opposite shoulder under Ash's. I looked behind us at the battle. We were easy targets for any unoccupied troll, and I couldn't carry my sword and Ash and Carnation. Staggering under their weight, I made for Tiger Lily. Light shone into the cavern from somewhere ahead, and I figured I had a better chance of getting them outside than getting them back to the storage cavern. I leaned Carnation against a rock and tried to get an arm around Tiger Lily without further injuring my hands. She was too heavy. I couldn't lift her without letting go of Ash, and forget about supporting Carnation too.

Ready to cry with frustration, I lowered Tiger Lily back to the ground.

Then, as if he really were the dashing, heroic prince Carnation imagined him to be, Hemlock appeared. He landed in front of me, sword in hand, face streaked with sweat and smoke. He ignored me and knelt beside Tiger Lily, placing a hand on her forehead. From that position, he looked past me at the battle and his face creased in worry. He leapt to his feet and laid the back of his hand against Ash's cheek. I continued to support Ash as some of the color returned to that part of his cheek and spread across his face.

"Can you walk?" Hemlock shouted to be heard over the roar of the trolls and fairies. Ash dipped his head once. Hemlock shouldered me out of the way and supported his friend a few steps. Ash waved him off. Then, and only then, did Hemlock look at me, face expressionless. "Get Tiger Lily."

I obeyed. Tiger Lily had regained consciousness from Hemlock's spell and had pushed herself up on one hand. I slipped a shoulder under her arm and helped her up. Hemlock passed me, Carnation slung over one shoulder, headed for the daylight. I quick marched with Tiger Lily in the same direction, Ash limping a little behind us. We passed through another cavern, empty except for weapons and animal carcasses and rushed into a final cavern where daylight streamed through an opening as large as the Starstair gate. Hemlock reached it first with Carnation. He deposited her in the dirt outside, ran back in and started blowing a horn. After five long blasts, he dropped the horn, ran to Ash's side and helped him, while I dragged Tiger Lily out into the morning sun. *Oh blessed sunshine!* The ground around the entrance to the cavern was brushy and rocky. I found a patch of thin brown grass and assisted Tiger Lily to a seated position on it. *I ought to go*

back and help finish the fight. But I didn't. I flopped to the ground next to Tiger Lily. She eyed me sleepily, one arm supporting her head. "We did it."

"We certainly did."

* * * *

A half hour later and about a thousand feet away from the cave, I sat in a different grassy patch, fabric torn from my skirt and moistened in creek water wrapping both legs and hands. Tiger Lily half reclined next to me, and Nageri lay on her other side, eyes closed in rapture as she trailed a hand down his back. All the wounded fairies, including Ash and Carnation, sat or lay in the shade of a grove of maples a little downhill from us while a healer bustled among them.

Before leaving on the rescue mission, Sequoia had sent out a whole flock of pigeons to find the other fairies still looking for Carnation and bring them back. They'd been trickling in steadily since our exit from the troll cavern. The healer had arrived with a party of three other fairies just as the last of the warriors exited the troll caverns.

Miraculously, no fairies had been killed. The worst injury was to one of the archers whose hand and arm had been crushed almost to a pulp by a club. Two others had been grazed by troll spears and lost a lot of blood. Ash had a fractured leg, torn shoulder, and had also lost some blood. Tiger Lily had a concussion and a broken wrist. The only damage to Hemlock was a torn sleeve which he fussed enough about that it might have been a torn tendon. I was feeling generous toward Hemlock after the troll attack however. Carnation had a few bruises, but mostly she was stiff and terrified from her recent ordeal. The healer had placed a sleeping spell on her as one of her first acts.

Not a minute after Hemlock had blown the horn, the other fairies had exited the

cavern in various stages of injury and smoke damage, trolls at their heels. The trolls had stopped at the edge of the light that entered the cave. There they stayed, shouting and gesturing in impotent rage, until the archers scared them deeper into the caverns with a volley of arrows. The noise, not any danger, was the reason we'd moved farther away from the cave. During the move and the interval that had passed since then, the fairies had been, if not friendly, at least not openly hostile toward me. I hadn't tried to mix with them but had tended to my own wounds in a nearby creek and settled in a spot a little way from the maple grove where the sun shone bright. I couldn't get enough of the sun. I held no illusions about any escape. Since I'd sat down, one of the fairies had taken up position nearby, far enough away to be polite but much too close for me to get away. Tiger Lily joined me as soon as the healer pronounced her injuries not requiring immediate attention.

For the thousandth time I sought out Ash with my eyes. He was still asleep. He'd fallen asleep propped against a tree without the aid of a healer within five minutes of exiting the cave. As I watched, the healer bent over him. When she straightened, she glanced over at me then looked quickly away.

“They can't decide if you're a heroine or a villain.”

I leaned on my elbow and met Tiger Lily's amused smile. “I don't feel like either one.”

“If it comes to a vote. I'll vote for heroine.”

“It might come to vote?”

“Well, no. And I'm not a Head of Family, so I wouldn't get a say anyway.”

I gave her a wry grin. “Thank you, regardless.” I left my inspection of Ash and

looked up at the sky. It was empty except for a few clouds. Tiger Lily returned her attention to Nageri, brushing off bits of rock and detritus. Too tired to worry about my own situation, I allowed myself to speculate about my mysterious comrade. *What's her story?* She had brown hair, a few shades darker than mine, and hazel eyes. In build, she was a little shorter and lighter than me which had contributed to my first mistaken conclusion that she was a fairy. If I had to guess her age, I would have put her around 35 in human years.

Tiger Lily looked around and caught me watching her. "I suppose I have some explaining to do." She gave a final stroke to Nageri's back and sat all the way up, holding her injured hand close to her body.

"I admit I am curious."

"Let me start by saying I have a bad habit," she confessed, staring at the sky.

I followed her gaze, but there was nothing there.

"I like to spy on people." She cast me a sidelong glance. "Myself sometimes but more often through Nageri." She wrinkled her nose. "That sounds terrible. Let me explain, and pardon me if I ramble a little. I did hit my head pretty hard." She tilted her head, stuck out her tongue, and made a funny face.

"See, I'm a bit of an outcast in Starstair. Only a few of the fairies are outright hostile, your friend, Foxglove, for instance. Most of them are polite, but they make it clear I don't belong. I knew it would be that way when I accepted Sequoia's proposal. It was one of the reasons I thought so long and hard about it. I thought I'd keep my human friends though.

"Then about a year after I got married, my friends started acting different around

me, treating me more like a fairy than their friend. When I confronted one of them about it, she said I was getting ‘fairyish around the edges’ and it made them all uncomfortable.” She folded her hands in her lap.

Movement in the sky caught my eye. I looked up quickly, but it was only a couple more fairies from the search party joining the others in the maple grove.

She continued, “Sequoia, dear that he is, tried to make up for it, but he has other things to do besides keep me entertained. He did help me train my first cat.”

I nodded politely, one eye on the blue expanse above us.

“That was Bristle, a wildcat. He’s what started them calling me Tiger Lily. It was just Lila originally. When I married Sequoia, I took the fairy name, Lily.” She patted the panther’s side. “Nageri’s the third cat I’ve had, and he’s by far the cleverest. Aren’t you?” She leaned over him and ruffled his ears.

“Clevurr, yes.”

“Nageri’s my eyes and ears, my loyal companion...my secret weapon. Kind of an equalizer, you know? The fairies have their magic, and I have Nageri.”

She saw I was watching the sky instead of her. “Sorry, I am rambling and boring you.” She cleared her throat. “To continue: I like to keep a finger in the affairs of the humans in Starstair. I’ve been keeping an eye on the rebellion through Nageri for some time. The night of the First Frost Ball, Nageri told me that you’d snuck by me and Sequoia in the star room. Since then, I’ve sent him to follow you several times. I’ve wanted to introduce myself to you for some time. I think we may have some things in common.” She casually glanced over at Ash. I ignored the hint, gazed steadfastly at the sky, and decided a change in subject was in order. “Did you train Nageri?”

Her sly smile told me she wasn't in the least put off. "Sequoia helped with the magic bits of course, but most of the training was my work. We've learned to understand each other quite well over the years. Though I have to confess, last winter when he came to me in the middle of the night to say that you and Shelaine had gone in the 'warrm box', I hadn't a clue what he meant. I had to go down to the Turquoise kitchen with him to find out that it was the oven he was talking about. I heard the two of you banging away in there and surmised that the door must have shut on you somehow."

"I couldn't just open it then and have you see me. If you think Kester and his bunch mistrust Netta, you should hear how they feel about me. So I waited until I thought you'd fallen asleep, then opened the door and beat a hasty retreat."

"So, we have you to thank for that," I mused. "Was it you that sent that crow warning us the guards were coming?"

She grinned. "Guilty. Nageri heard the guards talking about the raid that morning. I was afraid you wouldn't believe Nageri."

"Kester said only a fairy could have sent that bird."

"The crow was already enchanted by Sequoia in case I needed to send him a message. He was away for a few nights. All I had to do was tell it the message and the recipient."

"Does Sequoia know you've been helping the rebellion?" I contemplated a fluffy cloud as I tried to make sense of her. A human not just living in the fairy world but who had embraced it, become an actual part of it, yet, still willing to help other humans escape it.

"Dear Sequoia." She cast a fond look in the direction where he was helping the

healer with the fairy with the smashed hand. While she smiled at him, I took the opportunity to search the sky some more. Still empty. “He purposefully tries to stay out of my affairs with Nageri. Two days ago, when he came back after searching for the kidnapped children, he asked me if I was having Nageri help the rebellion. I said I was. He said ‘good’ and went to sleep.” She chuckled.

“Wait. You had Nageri help us?”

“Oh.” She rolled her eyes. “You have no idea. You probably would have been discovered on the second day if it hadn’t been for us. Poor Nageri was run ragged: stampeding the horses so their riders would lose sight of the falcons, dragging smelly deer carcasses all around the forest to confuse the scent for the other animals, dropping false clues, swatches of cloth, cooking utensils...that sort of thing, in every direction but the right one.”

“That seems an awful lot of trouble to go through for people that don’t want to associate with you.” I stole another look at the sky. A dark speck appeared above the trees.

“Remember. It was Nageri that went through the most trouble. You shouldn’t be surprised though. Just because I’ve joined the fairies doesn’t mean I approve of everything they do. For example, I don’t approve of slavery.”

I kept my eyes fastened on the dark speck. It grew closer and resolved into the shape of a bird. I stood. “But why have you been so interested in me?”

Tiger Lily spoke to my back, “Because you remind me of myself.”

I stretched out my hand to meet the falcon as it descended, wings beating the air in a steady rhythm.

A sharp whistle cut through the air and my heart. Inches from my outstretched fingers, the falcon veered away in the direction of the whistle. It flew to the edge of the trees where a party of fairies was just emerging and lighted on the gloved hand of the foremost fairy. Morning sun shone off impossibly red hair as the fairy led the party into the clearing.

“Oh dear,” said Tiger Lily.

Chapter XXI

My return to Starstair under guard caused a furor in the castle that I wouldn't have thought possible. One of the guards stationed in the dungeon outside my cell told me that being put in the dungeon was as much for my own safety as anything else. I believed him. Some of the glares I received between the troll caverns and Starstair could have left a physical mark. Many of the fairies felt I ought to be executed for my part in Teak's injuries, the kidnappings, and the mass escape of the humans. The rest agreed that what I'd done was unconscionable, but my subsequent actions in returning to Starstair to mount a rescue for Carnation, and my participation in that rescue to my own peril more than made up for my earlier crimes. The first group responded that, were it not for me, Carnation wouldn't have needed rescue. It didn't seem to occur to them that Carnation would have been kidnapped to secure Shelaine's release even if I'd stayed in Starstair like a good little human. I would have pointed this out but never got an opportunity to do so. While the debate over my future raged in the halls of Starstair, I remained in the dungeon, out of sight and unheard. Just like Kester's situation, it mattered little to the fairies on either side what I might have to say for myself. I kept myself busy during those long hours in the dungeon by structuring persuasive arguments on my own behalf anyway, in the idle hope that I might be given a chance to use them.

If there was one bright spot in the overwhelming despair of being returned to Starstair, it was that I could put my mind to rest on Netta's account. Her part in my escape had gone completely undetected, and she'd retained her position of trust in the Turquoise household. She brought all my meals, and though we never dared talk long for fear of arousing the suspicion of the guards, she managed to keep me informed of the

goings on of the castle. This included the welcome news that Ash and Carnation were well on their way to a full recovery, and that Tiger Lily had left her semi-seclusion to start a determined defense for me.

This state of waiting continued for five days. Deposited in the same cell, freshly repaired, that I had occupied before, I ruined the smooth surface of the new stone by continuing the tradition Shelaine had told me about of writing my name and tallying the number of days of my confinement. The morning of the sixth day, Netta showed up without my meal, looking haggard. I pressed my face to the bars of the door and watched her slow progress from the dungeon gate to my cell. I had tried to convince myself that I was prepared for whatever decision the fairies came to, but when Netta pulled out her key ring and unlocked the door, I was overtaken by a strong desire to stay in the cell and put off the moment of discovery.

I stepped back from the door as she opened it. “Well?” I moistened my lips. I already knew it wasn’t good news. She’d have been hurrying to let me out if it was.

She didn’t even try to ease into it. “As a body, the fairies have decided to do nothing. You’ll return to your previous life, as it were.” She waited for me to understand without her explaining it.

“Under Foxglove.” I closed my eyes.

“That’s right. As your mistress, she’ll be the one to decide what happens.”

“Why don’t they just kill me?”

I could see her trying to think of something positive to say as she opened the iron gate for our exit. The guards had gathered their stuff and left already. “You needn’t worry about that. No mistress has the power of life or death over her servant.”

“But she can do just about anything else.”

She didn't offer any meaningless comfort. She did walk with me part of the way to Foxglove's rooms and my sentencing which was of more use to me than a thousand words. I asked to walk the rest of the way by myself. I'd had plenty of time to think in the dungeon and had concocted a half dozen fantasies with happy endings, everything from a second escape with the help of Tiger Lily, to the king being amazed at my self sacrifice and demanding that Foxglove free me. But I wanted, one more time, before Foxglove sent me to the dungeon for the rest of my life or decreed whatever other horrible fate she had in mind, to relive one of those fantasies, to imagine one last time that I was going home to my friends and family. So I did.

I steeled myself at the door to her rooms and knocked, firmly and decisively. Whatever Foxglove had in mind, I was determined to show a brave face. A maid opened the door. She held it for me, face expressionless, and when I'd walked in, closed it with her on the outside.

Foxglove stood by one of the ceiling high windows. Based on the room's situation, it probably had a good view of the garden. Whatever view it was, she seemed to find it more interesting than me because she didn't turn around for a full minute. We faced each other, fairy and human. I kept my chin up.

“Well,” said the fairy. After that one word, she turned part way back to the window so her shoulder was to me, one hand resting on the edge of the window. “Do you know what I'd like to do to you for all the trouble you've caused me?”

I thought it was a rhetorical question. Then she turned her head, and her sharp green eyes penetrated to my bones.

I stirred. “No.” I left off the “Lady Foxglove.” It couldn’t make things any worse, and I wanted for once to show her that I considered myself her equal.

She continued to look at me. “I’d like to throw you in the deepest, wettest dungeon cell, and let you live by eating the rats and drinking the fetid water that drips off the walls until you waste away from the cold and the dankness.”

Despite my courageous intentions, I quailed.

Still, her green eyes bored into me. “Do you know why I’m not going to do that?”

I couldn’t mask my surprise. I met her burning eyes for the barest instant in confusion then quickly lowered them. “No.”

“Because my daughter doesn’t want me to.” Her gaze wavered even as her lip curled. “You seem to have a talent for influencing those you come in contact with. She was waiting for me when I returned from the deliberations late last night.”

Carnation? She’d never given the slightest hint that she thought more of me than her mother did.

“So the problem that has occupied me since dawn is, what am I to do with you?”

I held my breath. This time it was definitely a rhetorical question. And my fate rode on the answer.

She continued looking at the window, her attitude of careless superiority firmly back in place. “I’ve decided to release you.”

The air was hot and heavy. I felt lightheaded. *I must still be in one of my fantasies.*

“You’ve been nothing but trouble. I don’t want you around my family any

longer, and since I'm not allowed to kill you, well shall we say, this is the next best solution." Her voice never lost its frigid quality, and her rigid fingers tapped on her crossed arms. She knew she was giving me what I wanted more than anything, and she wasn't happy about it. My head swam.

She was still talking. I snapped back to attention.

"...spell is still on it. Take the cage with you." She waved at the falcon's cage standing in one corner. "I imagine you have some things to take care of before you leave, but you will be gone by sundown. Understand?" She lifted her chin and looked me straight in the eye.

I understood. I still couldn't believe it, but I understood. "Yes."

"Dismissed."

I was so flustered I almost forgot the falcon's cage on my way out which would never have done. I wouldn't have dared returned to Foxglove to ask for it. Cage in hand, I left the room, setting it down to swing the carved doors shut. The last I saw of Foxglove, she was still looking out the window, erect, beautiful, and alone.

"What did she say?"

I started. Netta stood in a doorway across and a little down the hall. Her face was pinched with worry, and the handkerchief she held in her hands showed signs of having been wrung numerous times.

Starting somewhere around my feet, a great feeling of joy bubbled inside of me. When it reached my face, I allowed it to spill into a wide grin. I held out my arms.

"She's letting me go."

"She's what?" she gasped.

Laughing uncontrollably, I grabbed Netta's hands, complete with knotted handkerchief, and spun her around in a circle. "I'm free!" I spun her around twice more, until she begged she was getting dizzy and would I please explain myself. I did, relating the conversation word for word. Then I asked, "Where is Carnation?"

* * * *

I found Carnation seated on a wooden swing next to the bed of carnations in the garden, twirling one of the flowers in her hand. She still looked pale, and the very fact that she had chosen to come out to the garden by herself said something about the lingering effects of her brief imprisonment. She stopped twirling the flower when she saw me, and her eyes flew to the cage (I wasn't letting that falcon out of my sight). She began to rock the swing in an easy, small arc.

I had come down the garden intending to reenact the scene with Netta or at the very least to give her a heartfelt hug. Seeing her sitting there, wings flattened against the back of the swing, beautiful and poised as always, reminded me that I'd never been so familiar with her before. I tried to match her decorum but couldn't keep the grin off my face. "I understand I have you to thank for this." I raised the cage.

Carnation dropped her eyes to the flower. "Not really. If I got to pick you wouldn't go. I knew she'd choose that over letting you stay though." She set the flower on her lap and crossed her arms. I sat down on the swing beside her and helped push it back and forth with the toes of one foot. I didn't know quite how to proceed. "I didn't know you cared," I said finally.

"I don't," she said a little too quickly. She folded her arms tighter. "It'll be a bother to train someone else, of course, and I probably won't get someone as good with a

needle.”

“You’re making me blush.” I tried some humor. It fell flat. We swung together some more while I waited for Carnation to say something else, knowing she couldn’t be quiet for long.

“I thought I was going to die, you know.” She stopped rocking, her eyes fixed on the flower in her lap. “I would have, except for you. They try to tell me that it was your fault, but I know.”

I couldn’t think of a single thing to say that didn’t sound like false modesty. I cleared my throat. “Well....”

“I got you something.” She jumped to her feet and leaned over the back of the swing to reach behind it. She pulled out a pot with a blue flowered plant and thrust it at me.

“Forget-me-not? Oh, Carnation.” I set the pot down and gave her a hug. *Whether you want one or not.* I thought I heard a snuffle, and when I pulled back out of the embrace, her eyes were suspiciously blurry. “I would never forget you, Carnation.” And I made an inward promise right then to think of that moment when I remembered Carnation, instead of all the senseless tasks and mind numbing chatter I’d endured in her company. But to see her smile again before I left, I’d put up with the chatter one more time. “Now, before I go.” I settled back on the swing and patted the empty spot beside me. “I want to hear everything that happened between you and Prince Hemlock when he carried you out of that cavern.”

My question had the desired result. In fact, we were on that swing for another hour before we said goodbye with a final hug, initiated tentatively by Carnation.

I returned to my room to find Netta there, holding a satchel. “I packed some food for you. It’s a long walk home.”

I thanked her, and she helped me pack a second satchel with clothing and other belongings. I packed the items Ash had brought from home, Buttercup’s pillow cover, and two of my dresses, including the one I’d worn to Iriann’s coming of age party, *though I’ll probably never have occasion to wear it at home.* My goodbye to Netta was much shorter than with Carnation, since we’d already said everything that was to be said on the night I escaped.

Laden with two satchels, the bird cage, and Carnation’s plant, I was puffing by the time I reached the Silver wing. I came upon Tiger Lily seated in a window seat, Nageri lying with his front paws and head over her legs. She was reading, and the light flowing through the curved panes of the window framed her figure, making her look like an illustration from one of Florio’s Fantastic Tales. I said as much as I lumbered up to her with my paraphernalia. She laughed and pulled her knees in to make room for me. “I’d forgotten about Florio.”

“If I had a fairy godmother, I hope she’d be like you.”

She laughed again and closed her book. “I don’t know what fairy tales you read growing up, but in all of mine, the fairy godmothers were fairies.”

I shrugged. “Fairyish around the edges is good enough for me.”

She patted Nageri’s head and nodded to the cage. “I hear you’re leaving us.”

“Word travels fast.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” She put on a mock frown. “Just when we’re getting to know each other. Sure you won’t reconsider? I could talk Sequoia into training a cat for

you too.” She peered hopefully at me over the spine of her book.

I patted his head. “Tempting, but no. Besides, Foxglove has ordered me out of the castle by sundown.”

“How dramatic of her.”

“Yes, we know where Carnation gets it from.” I shifted the satchel on my shoulder. “I don’t think I ever thanked you properly for helping me, both before and during Carnation’s rescue.”

“Thank me for the before part,” she considered. “As I recall, I was unconscious for the important parts in her rescue. I think when the dust clears you’ll be labeled as a heroine after all. It mightn’t be as bad as you think. Staying, I mean. You wouldn’t have to stay at Starstair either, if being around Foxglove is what’s chasing you away.”

“You’re wasting your breath. There is no way, after everything I’ve been through that I’m not going to grab this opportunity.” I said firmly and stood.

“Alright. Alright, I won’t nag. I’ll even offer to watch your things while you go make one more goodbye.”

“To who?”

She swatted me with the book. “Don’t play games with your fairy godmother. He said he’d be waiting for you in the Tower of the Clouds. Something about you owe him that much?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Don’t let Nageri eat the falcon.”

It was fitting, I decided, as I labored up the steps of the Tower of the Clouds that the last place I visited in Starstair contained more stairs than any structure I’d been in before, or was likely to be in again. I was puffing by the fifth landing and dragging my

feet by the eighth. By the time I reached the twelfth landing, I was debating whether saying goodbye to Ash meant that much to me. I panted my way up the last turn of the spiral staircase to come out the trapdoor on the top of the tower. The tower was only about ten feet wide at the top and was surrounded by chest high stonework. I put a hand to my hair to keep it from whipping in my face when my head cleared the edge of the stonework and the wind assaulted me.

Ash was the only other one on top. My heavy breathing prevented me from making any kind of a surprise approach. He glanced at me over his still bandaged shoulder and beckoned me over. I dragged myself to his side and looked out over the edge of the tower. My breath caught. The country around Starstair was visible for miles on every side, like we were standing on top of the world. One could see the meadow that surrounded Starstair, the forest beyond that, the mountains beyond the forest on the one side, and beyond the forest on the other...I squinted at the blue expanse that a wide band of river snaked toward. "Is that the sea?"

"Yes. See what you missed not coming up here before?"

I tore my gaze from the marvels of the ocean to look at the faraway mountains, wreathed in clouds that were on a level with us. A flock of birds passed between us and the clouds, too distant to make out what species. I searched the forest south of the mountains for signs of my village. That bit of smoke might come from there, but I couldn't be sure. Ash touched my arm and directed me to the other side of the tower. "See that glint there to the south." He pointed. "That's the lake beside Meadowhall."

He leaned his back against the parapet to look at me. He looked like his old self except for the bandage and a slight limp I'd noticed as we walked to the other side of the

tower. “You’re really going?”

I nodded.

“I had hoped after everything, you might consider staying.”

“What is it with you people?” I exclaimed, throwing my hands up which allowed my hair to billow around my head. “It’s do this and do that, Alina, the whole time I’m here, but I suggest leaving and suddenly I’m everyone’s best friend.”

“I never ordered you around.”

I bobbed my head to concede his point.

“We’ve become attached to you. Is that so hard to believe? And they say that you only know what you truly love when you’re about to lose it.”

I squirmed. “I’ve become attached to you too.” At the glint in his eye I hastened to add, “And Carnation and Netta of course.”

His eyes flickered. “Of course.” He looked down. “Of course. But not enough to stay?”

“I’ve only been here a year. I had twenty years to become attached to my old home.” I didn’t know why I felt the need to explain. I just started talking, about home, about my father’s wood carving, about Grehelda’s wild adventures, about Rolant and the impending wedding, including the little I’d seen when they were searching for me. Ash listened without interruption. When I finished he honed in on Rolant.

“This Rolant. You love him then?” I couldn’t decipher his expression.

I could have told him it was none of his business, but I wanted our last conversation to be open and honest. “I’ve pondered that question many times since I stood in that stupid sunbeam. I could be happy, I think, with Rolant, but no, I don’t love

him.”

“But you return anyway?”

“I owe him that much. I think he truly loves me. And it’s not just Rolant I’m returning to.”

Ash nodded. “I see.” He looked toward the ocean. “I suppose you have to,” he said after a minute. “Tell me. If someone here loved you would you still leave?”

“If someone here loved me.” I measured my words. “It would be more difficult to leave but I still would. Besides, no one here does love me.” We were treading dangerous ground. I concentrated hard on the far off blue of the ocean as I spoke, waiting with pounding heart for his answer.

“No, no one does.” He reached up one hand and smoothed my wild hair into place, then held it there. I clutched the stonework as though I were in danger of falling. “But they might, if they had time.”

I swallowed. “And I might come to love them too. But this isn’t the time.”

A heavy gust of wind buffeted us. I felt it, but couldn’t hear anything but the pounding of my own pulse.

“No, I suppose it isn’t.” He let his hand drop. “I’ll see you home.”

I relaxed my hold on the edge of the tower with a conscious effort. “That’s really not necessary. And in your condition, you probably shouldn’t...”

He waved an irritated hand. “I’m perfectly capable of sitting on a horse for a few hours. And with your penchant for getting into trouble, I think it’s a good precaution.”

I retrieved my belongings from Tiger Lily, who winked at me when Ash insisted on carrying a satchel despite his injury.

The lone, overworked stablehand in the stable was piteously grateful when I told him I knew how to saddle a horse, and he didn't need to bother. I saddled Killdeer and helped Ash with his horse since he still had limited use of the one arm. Nageri loped out of the castle to join us just before we left. "Tigurr Lil says just in case," was his explanation. By the time the three of us actually set out, it was well past midday. I stopped Killdeer at the edge of the forest and looked back at Starstair. It made the third time I was leaving the castle expecting to never come back. This time it was for good. I couldn't help an unexplainable feeling of loss, as I took in the towers and shining moat one last time. Carnation waved from the top of the wall. I held up the pot to show her.

The journey home was quiet and uneventful. No trolls or wild creatures disturbed us. Ash and I talked most of the way. About my family, his family, the places he hoped to see someday, the different reactions I expected from my friends and family on my return, and a host of other topics. By mutual consent, we didn't discuss Foxglove or Rolant.

It got dark before we reached the village. I felt a rising excitement as we started to pass familiar landmarks. I pointed them out to Ash with the enthusiasm of a child: the tree I fell out of when I was eight, the large boulder we'd called "the fortress" growing up, the creek that Corice had nearly drowned in when Grehelda had dared her to swim it at the tender age of five.

When the lights of my village came in sight, Ash stopped his horse. He stayed mounted as I got off Killdeer, collected my belongings from the saddle bags, and kissed Killdeer a final time on the nose. I walked to Ash's horse and stood by his knee.

He held out his hand. I took it, and he leaned out of the saddle to kiss it. The

back of my hand tingled. "I'm sorry we didn't have more time," he said.

"Me too." I felt my throat tighten.

He continued to hold my hand. "I wish you the best, Alina."

Nageri rubbed against my legs, almost knocking me over. "See again," he said.

It sounded more like a statement than a question. I took my hand out of Ash's and stroked the panther's back. Ash turned his horse and walked away, Killdeer and Nageri trailing. I took a deep breath and opened the door of the falcon's cage. The falcon stepped out onto my waiting hand. I kept my eyes on Ash and watched as he faded, getting lighter in color until he was translucent like a ghost, then he disappeared altogether. The falcon jumped off my arm and flew up into a tree. I shouldered my satchels and turned toward the village.

Chapter XXII

I left the woods behind Grehelda's house. After her performance that day I saw her and the others in the woods, I felt she deserved the opportunity to welcome me first. As I'd suspected, there was still a light in her window. I picked up a few pebbles and threw them at the window. When I didn't get a response, I threw some more. *Come on, I know you're not asleep.* On my third pebble toss, the window opened. Grehelda stuck her head out, holding a paper weight in one hand. "If you do that one more time, Leetor, I swear I'll throw you in the miller's pond again."

Leetor was her youngest brother. "It's not Leetor," I called.

She froze and lowered the paper weight.

I stepped into the moonlight so she could see me.

"Alina!" she squealed. "Don't go anywhere. Wait there. I'll be right down."

True to her word, she immediately climbed out the window to tumble onto the haystack. She rolled down the haystack and barreled at me. She ran into me and clasped me in an enthusiastic embrace that carried both of us to the ground.

"You're back. You're okay. Where have you been?"

I managed to extricate myself and sat up. "Slow down."

"Slow down? Are you crazy?" She grabbed my hands and shook them up and down in excitement. "Where were you? How did you get away from the fairies? It was fairies wasn't it?"

Laughter bubbled up inside of me, and I gave into it.

Grehelda sat back on her heels. "You are crazy."

"No. no." I grabbed her arm and hugged her again. "Just glad to see you."

“Who’s making all that noise?” A tousled head poked out the other upstairs window. “Who you talking to, Gee?”

Before I could stop her and suggest I’d intended my arrival to be quiet, Grehelda bellowed out to her brother. “It’s Alina. She’s back.”

“Alina?” came the incredulous reply.

I got used to that tone of incredulity. It was the tone that Grehelda’s parents used when she brought me into the house. When my parents arrived, informed by one of Grehelda’s brothers, and then Corice and Rolant, it was the same with all of them.

“Alina?” “Alina?” The astonished verbalization of my name would be followed with the inevitable question, “Where have you been?” with the exception of my mother, who was incoherent after the first incredulous cry, and Rolant, who didn’t say a word.

I was proud of myself for not crying once. Not when my parents burst through the door. Not when I saw Corice and Rolant for the first time. Not when several of the fellows got together and roasted a pig in the middle of night and half the village showed up in the square to celebrate. Though there was open air instead of a ballroom, work clothing instead of party finery, and no punch, the air of celebration reminded me of Iriann’s going away party, especially when someone brought out a fiddle and an impromptu dance started in the middle of the square. I was pulled from person to person, everyone wanting to welcome me back. I was in the middle of complimenting Corice’s oldest boy on his increased height when I was arrested by the familiar strains of “Fox Chase.” I looked up at the dancers, expecting for one brief moment to see Ash standing in the circle holding his hands out, but all I saw were the villagers.

“Are you alright?” Corice asked, bringing me back to the present.

“I’m fine,” I said, though I was irritated at myself for letting thoughts of Starstair intrude on my happy homecoming.

The celebration faltered when I refused to get up in front of everyone and tell my tale, and folks began returning to bed when they saw I wouldn’t be satisfying their curiosity on my absence just yet. Still, it was closer to dawn than dusk when I retreated with my family and friends to the privacy of my parents’ house, and it was past feeding time in the morning by the time I finished my story. It would have taken less time, except Grehelda kept interrupting with questions. When I got to the part about returning to the village and fleeing Foxglove from Grehelda’s room, she crowed in triumph that she’d been right after all about there being a fairy and forced everyone in the room to admit it before she’d let me continue. I graciously didn’t point out that she’d been wrong about sunbeams all those years. And lucky too, that she hadn’t been taken. *Though maybe it’s the fairies who were lucky.*

The reaction to my story was mixed. Grehelda embraced it as enthusiastically as she had me, wanting all the details and decrying some of the choices I made. “What do you mean you never shot one of the bows?” Corice tried to keep her expression neutral, but I could see the skepticism in her face and hear it in her questions. “So the whole time you were gone you were at this fairy castle?” Rolant was the hardest to read. Sometimes I thought he believed every word, then I’d catch a shadow of doubt flash across his face.

I finally got to bed well after daybreak. My parents hadn’t changed anything in my room, and my old bed was waiting for me. I fell into it, not minding in the least that it wasn’t half as comfortable as my Starstair bed. Thinking of my bed at Starstair made me think of the first few sewing lessons with Buttercup, when we both sat on the bed for

lack of two chairs. *I wonder what she's doing tonight*, was my last conscious thought before I drifted off to sleep.

I slept through the day, got up at supper time, nodded groggily at the questions my parents asked, and stumbled back to bed. Early the next morning I woke up refreshed. No one else was up yet, so I took the opportunity of unpacking. I carefully hung the two dresses, set Buttercup's cover on my dresser, and put Carnation's forget-me-not in the window. The forget-me-not and Buttercup's brightly colored pillow cover looked out of place in my plain brown room. *This room could really use more color.* Holding one of my fairy dresses up to the window to see how the color would look, I came to my senses. The decorations had always been fine for me when I lived there before. Why this sudden urge to make my room look like...like a room at Starstair? When I heard sounds in the house below, I welcomed the distraction and hurried down the stairs, only to find it wasn't my parents moving about, but a strange boy. He was rustling around in the kitchen, cutting a couple of slices of day old bread while snacking on some fruit.

"Who are you?" I asked, coming to a startled halt in the kitchen doorway.

He looked me up and down. Finally, he said, "I'm Vaul. You must be Alina."

"And you're in our kitchen because...?"

He smirked. "I live here."

I was inching toward the poker to chase this intruder out of the house when my father emerged from the other room, sensed a tense situation, and hurried to explain. "Alina, this is Vaul. He's apprenticed to me for woodworking. He doesn't have any family so he's been staying here in a room we built off the workshop."

“Nice to meet you.” I grudgingly observed the niceties.

“Sure.” He took a bite out of an apple and sauntered out the kitchen door. “I’ll be out working on the bench.”

My mother appeared and started getting breakfast ready while my father apologized for Vault. “He’s had a rough life. Tends to be suspicious of strangers but he’s a hard worker. I’m not getting any younger, and I’ve been thinking for some time that I ought to take an apprentice. He’s becoming a part of the family really. I’m sure I couldn’t do without him, what with all the new orders I’m getting from the city now.”

I expressed delight that the world was finally recognizing his talent and the opinion that Vault and I would probably get along fine, though that “part of the family” unsettled me a little. Grehelda showed up a few minutes later and ferried me all around the village to meet everyone I hadn’t seen my first night back. Word of my return and the reason I’d given for my absence had obviously gotten around. I was surprised at the number of faces that mirrored Corice’s skepticism. That smiled at my story then turned sly smiles to their neighbors when they thought I didn’t notice. I finally managed to untangle myself from Grehelda at midday and wandered over to find Rolant. The reception I got from his parents was the coolest yet. He didn’t live there anymore, they informed me, but in the house he’d built, but it wouldn’t do me any good to go over there because he was out cutting wood with his brother. I left their house little irritated. Apparently it was fine and good to believe in legends about fairies, but when it happened to someone you knew, that was another matter altogether. On the way, I passed a clump of young, green ferns. I stopped and contemplated them for a few minutes. Ferns. How had I just walked by them all these years, never really seeing them for the beautiful

marvels they were? I touched the tallest of them, and my thoughts drifted to Ash, comparing his trust to the reaction of Rolant's parents. *Some people don't find me too difficult to believe.* I bent to touch the unfurling curl of a pale green fern with dark green veins. *Wouldn't this look perfect next to Ash's waterfall?* I jumped to my feet, resolutely banishing all thoughts of Ash. *Rolant, you're supposed to be looking for Rolant.*

I was unsuccessful in locating Rolant in the woods, however, and returned home feeling a little depressed. When I walked back into my parents' house, it was to come see another unfamiliar face. Unfamiliar that is, until she exclaimed "Alina," and I recognized Corice's youngest sister. My mother poked her head out of the kitchen. "Oh good, you're back." At my questioning look toward the girl, my mother explained, "Ginelle has been coming in a couple of hours every day to help with the house and yard work."

The girl waved her cleaning rag with a cheerful smile.

"Today we're finally going to scrub the floor from wall to wall."

"I'll help with that," I offered.

My mother ushered me to the table. "No, no, you should rest after everything you've been through. Besides," she whispered, "her parents haven't been well. She needs the money."

Relegated to the position of table ornament, I watched the cleaning proceedings with a sense of detachment. Obviously, my family had gotten on fine without me. Oh they missed me to be sure. The cleaning was slowed by my mother's continual checks to make sure I hadn't disappeared into the air from the table. But they'd survived. *And I'm glad. I wouldn't want them to have wasted away.* I admitted to myself, though, that a part of me wished my absence had left a bigger hole. Was that how things at Starstair

would soon be? In a year's time they would all be content without me? Buttercup would become absorbed in her new friends, Carnation would forget her former servant in a flurry of balls and dresses, Tiger Lily would find a new protégé, and Ash would find someone else to spend time with. I frowned and picked up a rag over my mother's protests. I sloshed it in the bucket hard enough to splash a wide circle around it and scrubbed the floor vigorously.

Grehelda showed up at supper time and informed me that she had a special surprise planned for the next day in celebration of my return, and I was to meet at her house first thing in the morning. My mother didn't want me to go, but after five minutes of Grehelda's persuasive nagging, she said she supposed it would be alright, but I should be careful. I almost laughed when she said to be careful and choked on my potatoes. Everyone looked at me like they thought my time with the fairies might have done something to my mind. The sun had just dipped below the horizon when I slipped back to my room. My eyes lighted on the forget-me-not, as I went to pull the curtains shut. I let go of the curtains.

The blue flowers hung shriveled and brown on jaundiced foliage. I touched a trembling hand to one of the leaves. *It's the wrong season for forget-me-nots. The spells on the plants in the enchanted garden must not last if the plant is removed.* The sight of the forlorn, wilted flower, one of the few links to my life the past year, did what not even seeing my family again had. I cried as the last orange light from the sun faded to black and the stars appeared.

The plant looked even worse the next morning, but I refused to let melancholy disturb my first outing in over a year with my friends. Corice and Rolant were already at

Grehelda's house when I arrived. Corice was protesting to Grehelda that she hoped it wasn't going to take very long because she couldn't leave her children with her mother "forever."

"You come with me." Grehelda pulled her away. "We'll meet you two at the sandbar," she called to me and Rolant. I caught a quick wink of her eye. I think Rolant saw it too. I gave him a sheepish smile and initiated the conversation as we walked toward the river. "Why do you suppose so many of Grehelda's plans revolve around the river?"

He shrugged. "Because she likes defying death? You do know it's going to be another boat."

"I figured." We walked a little farther. Rolant had always been comfortable with silence. I usually was too, but today there was too much unsaid between us to allow it to continue. "I looked for you yesterday."

"Mother told me. I'm sorry I missed you, but I had to get away. Do some thinking." He snuck a look at me. "Everyone was asking if we're still getting married now that you're back."

I held my breath. "What did you say?"

"That I don't know. But I got tired of saying that, so I went out to chop some wood."

Also very like Rolant. Avoid the question and retreat to some quiet place. Then he did something uncharacteristic. He stopped, looked me in the face, and asked directly. "Why did you stand in the sunbeam?"

Relief flooded me. *He does believe me.* I resisted the urge to skip down the path,

smiled at him, and realized he was waiting anxiously for an answer. “It was a stupid, impulsive thing to do. I was under so much pressure over the wedding. I wanted to do something for myself for a change without someone telling me what to do. It was stupid,” I repeated. “I certainly never expected to actually be kidnapped by a fairy.”

He resumed walking. “So it wasn’t anything to do with me?”

My turn to stop. “Of course not.”

He walked faster, and I scurried to catch up.

“I felt so guilty you know,” he said. “We didn’t know what had happened. A lot of people thought you were running away from the wedding and had gone to the city or something. I felt horrible. I didn’t want to believe it. I hoped that you would have felt comfortable enough with me to tell me if you’d wanted to cancel it, but I didn’t know for sure. I looked all over for you, in case you’d run away, to tell you it was alright, that we didn’t have to get married. That, in fact, I was glad the wedding wasn’t happening. And then I felt bad about that. Because what if you hadn’t run off, but were hurt somewhere, even dead, and there I was actually happy that you’d gone.” There he finally had to take a breath.

I stared at him in astonishment. Because of what he was saying but also because it was more than I’d ever heard him say at once.

He hurried on, “Not that I don’t want to marry you. If that’s what you want. I mean, you know I’d never, ever hurt you, and if you still want to get married....”

“Shh.” I placed a hand on his arm to stop him and a finger on his lips. “Let me make sure I understand this. Just nod your head yes or no.”

“I....”

“Yes or no.”

He quieted.

“You had doubts about the wedding.”

Nod.

“You like me as a friend, but don’t love me.”

He hesitated. “Well...”

“Uh uh. Nod your head.”

He nodded.

I absorbed this, putting the past two years in a new light. It would be so like Rolant, if he thought I loved him, to go along with the wedding just to avoid hurting my feelings and to please his parents. It would also be like him to be wracked with guilt to the extent that he’d search the world over for me if he thought he was responsible for my disappearance. To the extent, that someone might mistake it for a passionate love. Rolant, who always tried to keep everyone safe, everyone happy, even at his own expense. If I’d paid more attention to him and less to my own agonizing and Carnation’s romantic fancies, I might have seen it before. Instead I’d been worried that he was pining away for me. I shook my head at my own blindness.

He couldn’t stand it any longer. “But like I said, if you still want to get married, we can. I’m sure we’ll be happy.” He looked miserable.

I planted a kiss on his cheek. “I absolutely forbid you to marry me if you don’t love me.”

“But...”

“Because it would be just silly for two people who don’t love each other to get

married.”

Comprehension lightened his face. “You mean you don’t love me?”

“You’ll always be one of my best friends, Rolant. But no.”

“You really don’t.”

“No.”

His face relaxed. He ducked his head, and the odd, crooked smile I’d always adored appeared on his mouth.

“Well, that’s okay then.”

“It certainly is.”

And like that, the barrier between us that had been in place ever since we agreed to the marriage fell. We talked and laughed just like old times all the way to the river where Grehelda and Corice had already arrived, seated in a long, skinny boat.

“What is that?” I asked suspiciously.

“Isn’t it grand?” Grehelda exulted. “It’s a canoe. You know how we can’t take goods down the river past Ironville because of the rapids? The man who sold me this canoe says he’s been down the rapids several times with it. It can’t carry as much as a raft or barge, but it’s a lot more maneuverable so you can get down without any trouble. Hop in.” We did, but the three of us steadfastly refused to take the canoe all the way to Ironville and try to run the rapids.

Once, on the run down the river, I fancied I saw a large black cat on the bank of the river. Nageri’s name was on my lips when the current carried us closer to the bank, and I saw that it was only a mixture of shadows and driftwood. The excitement that had rushed into me died. *Of course Nageri wouldn’t be there. That’s over now, remember?*

* * * *

And now precious little remains of my tale to be told. Vaul turned out to be a reasonable fellow after all, and my father's business continued to prosper. My mother, with Ginelle's help, enjoyed refurbishing the house using their new wealth. With Corice's parents in ill health, she took on the role of a surrogate grandmother to Corice's children, a role she was born for.

Corice had her baby (her third) that winter. Though we had several arguments because I wouldn't tell her where I'd "really been," we remained friends, and I watched her children for her on several occasions.

Rolant started courting a young lady from a neighboring village that he'd met while searching for me, and who was, in numerous ways, a much better match for him. His father took him on as a partner in his business when his older brother expressed a desire to move to the city, and Rolant with his ever present calm and implacable good sense soon caused an increase in profits.

Grehelda surprised us all by going to the city on business with her father one day and coming back married to a sea captain. They stayed in Riverbank for their honeymoon. I'd never seen Grehelda so happy as when, upon learning about the haunted cabin near the village, her new husband suggested they spend the night there. They left after a stay of two weeks to return to his ship. I fondly imagined Grehelda riding out storms and battling mythical sea monsters.

I never saw Kester, Shelaine, or any of the other members of the rebellion again. I heard rumors of a group of people emerging from the woods farther north but never met anyone that knew any names. I'm sure they're happy wherever they are and have made a

wonderful new life for themselves.

And me? In a perverse twist of spirit, I soon found myself missing my life at Starstair. With all my friends moving on with their lives, and my parents safe and settled without me, I found myself with little to do besides straighten my room. I couldn't say I was unhappy. In fact, I repeatedly told myself until it became a sort of creed, that I was happy, because after all, returning home had been my only wish the whole time I was at Starstair, hadn't it? No, I wasn't unhappy, but I was vaguely unsatisfied. Ever since I thought I saw Nageri by the river, I kept my eyes open, hoping to see him for real in the shadows of the village houses or on one of my walks in the woods. In some of my spare time, I worked the garden in the back of the house but was constantly disappointed that the plants never grew to their full potential in our poor soil. Even though they were respectable flowers and vegetables by village standards, they looked practically dead to my eyes after the garden at Starstair. I avoided any and all dances because they brought a barrage of bittersweet memories that I wasn't disposed to deal with, and I lost interest in my sewing.

In the middle of winter, I was driven inside earlier than usual by a snowstorm. I went upstairs to change out of my wet clothes. My room had never been more organized since I'd had so much time to straighten it, and I noticed the letter as soon as I stepped inside. I looked around the room to see if anything was out of place then approached the note on the dresser, curious. I'd been in the front yard most of the day and knew no one had been in the house except my mother. I picked it up and held it to the window to see the signature at the bottom. "Ash?" I squealed, and quickly put a hand to my mouth. I waited to make sure no one had heard my outburst, then I hurried to read the rest of the

note.

Alina,

I know I'm probably the last one you expected to hear from. Let me start by saying you've been sorely missed. I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that your absence has left a sizable hole here. Carnation mopes around her room. Tiger Lily mopes around her room. I would mope around, but I can't do it as prettily as either of them. Would you consider coming back for a visit?

I received a letter from Buttercup yesterday. It's funny, but her letter conveyed the impression that she didn't expect you would be here any longer. Apparently, Buttercup knew more than she told? She said, if you were still here, to tell you that she's made many friends, mostly because all the girls are clamoring to have her show them how to embroider. It seems no one at Meadowhall, human or fairy, has a good grasp of that fine art. She hinted that they might welcome a teacher with a little more expertise.

I'm still planning on visiting her this summer. Carnation is coming with me. Tiger Lily, Sequoia (and Nageri of course) are thinking of joining us for a vacation. I will not beg, but we would all appreciate your company, myself especially. It would give us more time.

If you decide to come, walk into the forest by your village and step into a sunbeam on the day of the summer solstice.

Ash

P.S. I know you will wonder, so let me add. While its only children we can take from sunbeams by force, if the person is willing, anyone can be brought to and from the fairy world in a sunbeam. Don't be surprised. We don't let everything get into the fairy tales.

My immediate response was. *Of course not. How ridiculous.* On its heels came, why not? Ash had worded his invitation in the very form most likely to appeal to me. Come for a visit. Not "forsake your other life and live with us forever." *Just for a visit, surely that wouldn't hurt anything?* I kept the letter under my pillow and referred to it at least once a day. I sounded out my parents on the idea and got predictable responses. "Jumping between two worlds. Who ever heard of it?" grumbled my mother. My father said he supposed I was old enough to know my own mind.

As much as I told and told myself that I had just escaped Starstair to come home, the idea wouldn't leave me alone. I took up my needle again and embroidered bright

flowers on the hems of two of my dresses, giving imaginary lessons to an imaginary class while I did so. I walked in the woods more, sure that Nageri must be there watching me after all. When people from all over the country arrived for the Riverside festival, I memorized all the costumes and imagined myself describing them to Carnation. I even danced a few dances at the festival and let the memories come. One week from the summer solstice, I realized I'd made my decision without consciously deciding on it.

I kept my decision quiet, only telling my parents and Rolant, all of whom, while not delighted, didn't protest over much or try to stop me so long as I promised it wouldn't be forever. I had misgivings and a lot of unanswered questions, the most prominent being: What would happen at the end of the summer? But, where before, that uncertainty might have kept me home, after everything I'd been through, it seemed like something ridiculous to get worried about. Sooner or later I would have to decide once and for all whether I was meant to live in the fairy or the human world. But I had a chance, a chance I hadn't thought I would have once I touched the falcon, to return to Starstair and the fairy world on my own terms and see what might come of it. I was more than ready to find out.

On the day of the summer solstice, I said goodbye to my parents, Rolant, and Corice. I walked into the woods until I came to the approximate place where Ash had left me. I looked around, wondering as I did how I would know where he was and whether I would end up going back to the house at the end of the day looking a complete fool because he hadn't come at all. Then I found the ferns, delicate, new curling ferns in a circle around a patch of sunlight. I saw a shadowy form move with feline grace through the patch, accompanied with a rumble of welcome. I smiled, and stepped into the

sunbeam.

THE END