

Ember

By Tess Williams

1. Stupid

“FOLLOW ME child, and stay quiet . . . I think we've had enough surprises for one day.”

Although the man spoke sternly to me, I could hear the weakness in his voice.

A small smile crossed my face. I had only just met Cornelius and I already felt close to him. My mother used to say that life-threatening situations bonded people quickly and if you ask me, today qualified.

But I can't think about today right now, I need to wait till I'm alone.

I followed Cornelius briskly down a long hall. So long in fact that, thinking back to when I was outside, I would not have believed it could fit in this building. Yesterday this thought might have held my attention, but in comparison with the rest of the house was utterly unremarkable, therefore quickly forgotten.

After passing a seemingly countless number of doors Cornelius pointed to one on my right. I turned the handle and entered a rather spacious, yet cozy, room. From floor to ceiling on most of the walls were row upon row of books. Old books. Brightly colored books. Some that seemed to even glow faintly.

“This is my personal study,” he said. “Most know better that to bother me here so you should go unnoticed.”

I nodded slightly. Since I was a young girl I had been obsessed with books and always dreamed of having a small library of my own. Now it seemed I would be staying in one, at least for a while.

As I ran my finger along the edge of one of the dusty tomes, an orange glow in the corner of the room caught my eye. It wasn't a flame so much as a small fire, but burning

on, well, on nothing, on . . . air.

When I went to question Cornelius I found I couldn't speak, in fact I couldn't even remove my eyes from the flickering light. I stood there, enthralled by its elegant and unpredictable movements. The flame glowed brighter and I moved closer. It was crackling louder now. I could almost touch it.

"Jaden! That will be quite enough."

In an instant the fire returned to its original state and I almost toppled onto the floor.

Regaining my senses, I looked around the room to see a boy leaning against the wall in the corner. The amused smirk on his face told me he was at least in some way responsible for the hypnotic flames. For a moment his gaze had the same effect, but *unlike* before I quickly regained composure, slightly irritated that I was allowing myself to be toyed with so easily.

Cornelius broke the silence.

"How many times have I told you to stay out of here?"

Jaden ignored him. "So this is the girl Ikovos has been spouting about? And here I thought he was letting his imagination get the better of him again."

I thought back to Ikovos fondly. He had been very friendly towards me . . . quite the opposite of this boy.

"Are you even listening to me, Jaden? You know how uneasy it makes me when you use your powers in here. Do you know what could happen if you lit one of these books?"

He moved his eyes off me to Cornelius. I couldn't help but let out a breath.

"Oh Corni, you know I would never let anything like that happen to your study. I love this place."

"Well, love it or not, you are to stay out of here until I can find a proper space for the girl."

He stood up straight. "Yeah, yeah. I figured you were gonna say that. I gotta go anyways. Master Thoran has me and Vos scouting early tomorrow. I think I have you two to thank for that." He let his eyes rest on me again.

"Heh, still on that wild goose chase is he? Pfft. Mad man." Cornelius's head shook with a sigh. "Before you go could you dampen the fire?"

With glance from the boy the flame dimmed to a deep maroon. He then gave me a patronizing bow and headed for the door.

"Wait," called Cornelius. "I must speak with you a moment."

Jaden nodded and they both moved towards the edge of the room, conveniently out of my earshot.

They spoke in hushed tones. After a while Jaden glanced up at me, back down, then nodded once to Cornelius before slipping out into the dark hallway.

One look at my face must have told Cornelius what I was thinking.

“He's really sweeter than he seems.”

“I get that a lot,” I muttered under my breath.

“What?” he allowed.

“Nothing.”

“Alright then. Let's get you to bed. You've had a long day.”

On this point, at least, I agreed, and after Cornelius laid a blanket and pillow out on the doughy couch I sunk down into it.

As he headed for the door I called after him. “Cornelius . . . ?” He looked back at me. “Thank you for . . . for giving me a chance.”

He smiled. “You're welcome, my dear. Now get some rest.”

And with that I was left alone in the small library.

God, what a day. Now that I have a while alone I should reprocess all that has happened.

Well, today started like any other day. I woke up only to wish that I could fall asleep again, maybe fall asleep forever. It wasn't that my life was bad, in fact there wasn't even anything I could consistently complain about. I just didn't belong in my world, and it didn't belong to me.

I mostly tried to pass the time, dreaming of an adventure I knew I'd never have. Sometimes I hated myself for it, not really understanding why everyone else was so content with life, while I was left wanting by it.

Still, every day I pushed myself forward trying to make the best of things.

I would be lying if I said this didn't cause me to acquire an . . . unusual personality. I had a family. When I saw them they called me by Evelyn Avest, my unfortunate name. I had always preferred Eve and, when given the chance, would pass it off as my full title.

My family was usually wrapped up in the happenings of the small town we lived in. Tiver. I on the other hand counted the moments until I could sneak away into quiet solitude. Inevitably this separated me from my family and as I grew older it was not uncommon for me to go whole days without seeing them.

“I wonder if they even know I'm gone,” I whispered, snapped back into the present. The flame still burned strong, but had become such a dark shade of red that it barely lit the room. “Wait a minute,” I considered, as I recalled a previous thought. “I guess today did start a little different than most.”

This morning I awoke outside, at the top of a hill where I spent most of my time. A giant, almost mountainous, rock that slanted up sharply to a flat plateau at its peak. A wonder in itself, but that is not what I loved about. It was the view that you see from the top of the ridge that made it irresistible for me to return. Below was the most brilliantly blue lake you could ever imagine. It reflected the sky above in a way that made you

forget what was up and what was down. The cliff hung over it thirty feet above the water, and beyond the lake laid a misty forest called Sharadeen.

This morning it was especially murky which only contrasted the lake further, making it shine as bright as ever. It might have been painful even to look at if not for the morning mist that still lingered across the water, peacefully following the winds chosen direction.

“Well,” I said to myself as I let out a big yawn. “I might as well test the water.” And with a bit of a sprint I propelled myself off the cliff into the cool lake.

“Okay, test complete, much to cold.” I squealed, then swam quickly back to the shore before ringing out my hair and glancing down at myself disapprovingly.

I realized now it wasn't such a good idea to jump in the water, considering what I was wearing.

My pants consisted mainly of two scraps of leather on each leg with string going down either side holding the pieces together. I had a plain blue shirt on that had suctioned itself to my skin and gone somewhat see-through, sleeves hanging well past my hands as usual.

I sighed.

You see I was always the person that girls pointed at giggling, asking their friends how I could possibly stand to look like that in public. It wasn't that I didn't care, it just seemed no matter what I did I never looked pulled together anyways. Every once in a while my sister would dress me up in her clothes and do my hair. I had to admit at these times I got my fair share of the good kind of attention. But for the most part I was the walking fashion faux pas of Tiver.

Spending the morning asleep in the sun hadn't darkened my unalterably pale skin a bit. I attempted to run a hand through my un-tamable hair, no such luck. I spun to look at it in the waters reflection. It was that exactly awkward color that couldn't be called brown, but didn't qualify as blonde either. I called it caramel to make myself feel better. As wavy, curly, and frizzy as ever, I quickly arranged it into a loose braid, tucking the leftover strands behind my ears.

“You come here often?” came a voice behind me.

I jumped.

“I'm sorry,” chimed the voice again as I turned towards it. “I didn't mean to frighten you.”

It was a man, a very tall and, honestly quite handsome man.

“No, that's alright. Yes. I do come here often.” I said it confidently. Something about the way he was looking at me made me uneasy. Something in his eyes.

“Well now, why haven't I noticed a young beauty such as you running around my lake?” he asked with a witty smile.

“*Your* lake?”

“Why yes, I am a wizard,” he boasted. “Shaper and controller of all things liquid.” He proceeded to juggle small balls of water playfully from hand to hand.

I looked on trying as best as I could to hide my fascination. “I’ve heard rumors of people like you, but I never believed they might be true.”

Still fumbling the water between his hands he spoke in a big voice: “Well then you shall come to see my home so that you will be the one with the stories.”

Not a good idea, said a little voice inside me. But there was something about him . . . like he was some dark mystery that I had to follow if I wanted to get anywhere, *ever*.

“How far away is it?” I asked. Why was I going along with this? I wanted to say no and run away.

“Just a short trek away from here that-a-way.” He pointed with his hand and the destination made my stomach squirm.

“The forest?” I exclaimed.

“Why yes,” he responded charismatically. “It’s really a beautiful place once you get inside. You just *have* to come.”

Again the longing to say no was overpowered inexplicably . . . though maybe not as much as I credited. *Finally* something new and unexpected had happened to me. I knew I would never forgive myself if I backed down now.

“Alright,” I said, subconsciously ignoring the fact that I was agreeing to follow a complete stranger into a dark forest.

He let out a wide grin. “I knew you would warm up to me. This way.”

I followed in step, wondering even as I worried about my fate what other great powers this man possessed.

It took less time than I thought it would to reach the forest. Now, when it comes to practical things, I’m not easily frightened, but there was something about this place. Something eerie, yet beautiful.

Magical.

I could hear all types of creatures scampering around us. The branches and vines were so thick that the sun was barely shining through the canopy, dropping rays of light here and there. Soon they disappeared altogether.

As we journeyed deeper, following a worn path, I found that my escort was starting to change. First his eyes turned from the vibrant blue they once were to a cold, steely, silver. Then his skin started to darken, and his hair grew long and stringy.

Part of me wanted to go desperately, but the further we went into the forest the more I was enthralled with the man. There was no doubt in my mind now that he truly was a wizard.

“Well, my dear, it seems we have reached our destination.” His voice had changed as

well, before charming and light, now cruel and slippery. Nonetheless I looked around for a building or entryway.

“I don't see anything.”

“Well, you must not be looking hard enough, hmm?” He knocked on a wall of stone beside him and it began to rumble, cracking down the middle and spreading until it had formed an entrance large enough to walk through.

We did.

As I followed the creature through the darkness, I began to regret my decision to follow him. I prayed under my breath that I was strong enough for whatever was coming.

“What are you doing?” screeched what was left of the once charming man. I could tell he had begun to hunch over considerably, but could see little else in the darkness.

“Nothing.” I said innocently. He had a pained look on his face.

Suddenly I realized I had the freedom to run. No longer did I feel tied to the creature. No longer did I find him irresistible. This seemed to dawn on him only moments later, but it was too late.

I ran, ran as fast as I could. I didn't know if I was going back towards the forest or deeper into the cavern, but that didn't stop me. I just kept going. I could hear the horrible creature off behind me. He was getting closer.

“A light!” I almost screamed the word through gasps of air.

I ran towards it, but as I got close I realized there was something wrong. For rather than any shade the sun might produce, the light shone an unnaturally bright red. When I turned the corner I realized why: there was nothing natural about the source. It almost looked like lightning had struck the air and, rather than vanish, had remained frozen in its position, growing wider along the seams until forming an elliptical shape. I stopped in front of it.

“You don't want to do that.”

I swung around. What I saw made me bring a hand up to my mouth with a gasp.

Silver eyes and common sense told me that it was the same man I had followed through the forest, but that was the only thing recognizable. He now looked almost bat-like. With metallic, purple, skin, and long-pointed ears. He was taller as well and although his appearance was frightening, there was something beautiful about him still.

“I said, you do not want to do that.” He repeated it slowly, sounding out each syllable.

“Do what?” I asked, shivering.

“Get any closer to that portal than you already are,” he hissed. “Now come back towards me.” He gestured, his voice becoming harsher with every word.

I had not considered this . . . *portal* could do anything, and although I had no clue as to what, something told me that I should do the exact opposite of whatever the man was telling me.

I took a step back.

“Do not move one more inch!” He screeched, and leapt forward in my direction.

This is your last chance, Evelyn.

With that I spun in place and jumped into the red sphere.

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“Remind me again why you needed me to come with you?” asked a stout man as he walked alongside his rather tall companion.

They were moving through a rock archway. Ice below them and a deep purple sky above. It was cold enough so their breaths could be easily seen.

“Because I need to see if Demian was bluffing about these new pack-beasts and it would be suicide to come here without a defense artisan.”

“I understand that, but why didn't you just bring Ikovos like you normally do?”

“*Because*, Ikovos is not old enough yet to come out this far. Besides he is not my partner, you are,” growled the silver-haired man.

“Yes, well . . . you know how much I hate being here. The smell alone is enough to make me faint.”

The taller man laughed at this and responded: “A Meoden fighter that doesn't like being in a Meoden dimension?”

The other replied unfazed. “Well isn't that the point of the whole thing?”

The tall man considered this, only to begin laughing again. “Cornelius, you have once again shredded my logic with your quizzically inarguable point of view. Where would I be without you?”

“Evidently not on a wild goose chase in the God-forsaken place,” grunted the other. “And I mean that literally.”

“Of course you do.”

Before Cornelius could protest, a muffled moan sounded to their right.

“A keeper,” said the tall man. “I could recognize the sound anywhere.”

“But why would he risk coming out into the open? He must have known we were near. . . .”

There was a pause.

“I don't know. Why don't we go ask him.”

And with that, both men crept towards the direction of the moans.

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“No!”

I could hear the man screaming as I jumped into the rift.

Then it was gone. So was the cave. And the red glow I had run through. With a jolt I was slammed down onto the ground: head thumping, heart racing, breaths coming in quick intervals, and my mind unsuccessfully attempting to wrap itself around what had just happened. I soon realized that there was no point to this and opened my eyes, determined to make the best of my situation, whatever that was.

“What is that smell? I groaned, preparing to rise to my feet. *It’s like something between lamp oil and my brother-in-law’s feet.*

After a few shaky attempts I managed to stand up, only to slip and fall back again.

“Nice one, Evelyn.”

When I planted my hands onto the ground, preparing to rise again, I felt an uncomfortable feeling on my fingertips.

“It’s cold,” I whispered.

It was then that I realized the cause of my fall.

Ice . . . *lots* of ice. My eyes studied the landscape as I rose to my feet.

A dry mist elevated off the ground, concealing much of the frozen surface. Here and there sharp rocks jabbed out above the fog. On either sides of me were two jagged walls of stone with about a three-hundred foot gap between them, forming a canyon. They narrowed at the top into sharp spikes that disappeared into the starless sky. Throughout the walls there were large crevices and holes that looked like they led to a maze of tunnels and caverns. As far as I could tell the rock was obsidian, the dark charcoal reflecting the purple sky.

“Where am I?” I muttered, realizing afterwards that I had just made the number one cliché statement for this type of situation.

“I must be outside in some mountains or something.”

Somehow talking to myself made me feel better.

Carefully considering my options, I decided that taking a look around was the best idea. I walked towards the large wall on my right and touched its surface.

“Ack!” I yelped, voice echoing through the canyon. Evidently the rock was sharper than it looked. It had given me a small cut in my finger. I rolled my eyes sarcastically. “Well, that was smar—”

Footsteps. There were footsteps coming from one of the caves in the wall.

I quickly surmised that whatever lived in a place like this was trouble. Besides I had always been pessimistic when it came to people and that wasn't about to change now. I searched for a place to hide.

Unable to find a spot in time, I was forced to duck behind a rock just as they turned the corner. Their skin was the same metallic purple as the man that had led me through Sharadeen. In a way they resembled him, only they lacked his inherit beauty. They were

also much shorter, less featured, and notably thinner.

Although I felt the need to get far away from them, I kept still, watching silently, knowing that any movement might draw attention.

They seemed to be conversing, but as they got closer I realized I didn't recognize the words. It sounded like an Elvin language from a book I'd read once, only darker and distorted.

My heart was pounding now, they weren't more than twenty feet away from me. Fortunately they seemed to be moving towards the other wall of the canyon.

I lowered my head and turned my back against the rock. Curiosity grabbed at me, but I didn't want to risk being discovered.

Soon the voices faded away. I sat there frozen in place. My breathing was heavy and I was unsure about what to do next.

“At least those monsters are go—” Before I could finish my sentence I heard two heavy wheezes coming from behind me. Instinctively I stood up and swung toward the noise.

Maybe part of me hoped that I was only imagining it, but I soon realized that it was unwise to check. It was all I could do to watch as they gaped; perusing through yellow eyes. One gestured towards me as he spoke again in the dark language. The other's response came in a disheartening moan.

I just stood, frozen.

As they wrapped around the rock, one reached out to touch me. My body forced backwards in disgust. He seemed not to care. Wearing a sickly smile he moved closer to me. His breath was hot and sticky. I turned away, sinking down in desperation as he rested his fingers against my cheek.

At that very moment a frightened yelp came from behind him. The closer one looked back just in time to see his friend's head flung from its body by a fiery green sword.

A tall man now stood where the monster had been. With the weapon in hand he turned to the purple figure. “You should have known better keeper.” He raised his sword as he spoke. “Now you'll pay.”

In vain the creature tried to put up a defense, but with a final screech and a blade through the gut it dropped lifelessly to the ice.

I stared on wide-eyed as my mind swirled with what had just happened. Cold sweat was sliding down my face and my entire body was shivering. I looked up at the man and he stared down at me, this time holding his gaze. He was rugged, with dark leather-made clothes and peppered hair. Something about his eyes made me want to break down and cry. There was safety there, like he was assuring me that everything was going to be okay.

Suddenly his gaze shifted above me. “You can come over here now Cornelius.”

“Oh really?” came a sarcastic reply. “Are you sure it's safe for an incompetent defense artisan like myself?” I could hear the voice getting closer. “You come out here waving your big sword like you own the dimension, I swear you all think we can't do anything just because we don't—” He cut off as he walked around the rock I was leaning against. He was much shorter than the other man, wearing a simple cloth robe that stretched to the ground. His features were soft, tender, I don't think he'd seen me yet.

“What?” he questioned the other man, shrugging.

“I think I know why the keepers took such a risk.” The rugged man moved his eyes to me.

The short man followed them.

He seemed to practically faint at the site of me. “Oh my,” he exclaimed, the humor now gone from his tone. “What . . . but . . . how could she have gotten all the way out here?”

The tall man inhaled deeply as he sheathed the green sword. “This is Sylvanus' doing if ever I saw it.” He swore an oath under his breath. “He won't get away with this. Not this time.”

The plump man suddenly adopted a drastically horrified expression. “Thorán! You know better than to use that language in front of a young lady. And frankly, I don't want to hear it either.”

As he rattled on, the other man, Thorán I guess, seemed to be deep in thought. “Where are you from, girl?” he asked me shortly.

I shivered under his hard stare, words eluding me.

“Kirne?” he pressed. “Rizenn? Tiver?”

My head bobbed to the last.

He took a breath, then turned to the other man. “We need to get her back as soon as possible. I'll walk with you till the gate, and you can take her on from there.”

What?! That was it. I had kept my mouth shut too long as these men conversed about me and my fate. The *last* thing I wanted to do after all that had happened was go back home. My mind was racing with a million questions, and I had a feeling that these two men could answer them.

“Wait,” I finally said, drawing expectant glances towards me. “I . . . I can't go back now. So much has happened that I don't understand, I mean, I don't even know what those things were. And I really don't think I'd be much good for a long journey.” I knew what I was saying was out of line and didn't make much sense, but I pushed the issue anyways. “If there was just somewhere close I could stay . . . please? I promise I won't be any trouble.”

I looked on pleadingly. The one called Thorán adopted a stone cold expression, but the stout one, Cornelius, his face softened. I knew I had found myself an ally.

He drummed his fingers together for a few moments before speaking.

“Thoran, I think she’s right. We can't just send her off after what she has seen, it wouldn't be fair . . . And no doubt she is frightened after her encounter with the keepers, not to mention Sylvanus,” he added quickly.

Thoran glowered at the man. “First of all, we don't even know if she came here with Sylvanus. And before I even question why her being scared should deter us from taking her home answer me this—” He paused for a brief moment. “Where else do you expect us to take her?”

Cornelius guffed. “Well to the lodge of course.”

Thoran nodded. “Ah, I see, the lodge full of what?” He obviously knew something Cornelius hadn't realized.

“Rooms?” he guessed, shrugging his shoulders.

“What else?” asked Thoran.

Cornelius scratched his head. “Well . . . there's the boys and . . . oh, *the boys.*”

“Ah-ha.” Thoran nodded. “And she is a . . .”

“Girl.” finished Cornelius flatly.

Now thoroughly confused, I decided I would have to make myself speak my mind if I didn't want to go home.

“Look,” I stated. “I really don't mind staying in the same building as a few boys if that's what you think. I live with my brother in law.” I finished with a smile, thinking that that should explain everything.

Cornelius’s face melted again and he turned to Thoran.

After a few brief moments of silent conversation, Thoran's face turned stern.

“Fine, Cornelius. But let it be on your head. And for the love of God *do not* let her near Ikovos. And this is only for tonight.”

Cornelius nodded repeatedly and my heart filled with anticipation. I had no idea why, but I knew that there was something important about these men. Something I wanted to be a part of.

“Well my dear,” said the kind man. “I am Cornelius, as I'm sure you've already gathered, and that is Thoran.” He gestured towards the other man, but Thoran had already started walking towards the dark wall.

“. . . He's really much sweeter than he seems.”

I hid my skepticism out of respect, but maybe Cornelius was right.

“We had better get moving,” declared Thoran. “I'm going to have to go out early to scout tomorrow.”

Cornelius helped me up and we started towards the wall.

As Thoran led us through a series of dark tunnels, Cornelius asked me questions about the events that led to our meeting. Thoran seemed hardly interested, although every

once in a while he would grunt or shake his head.

“And that's when Thoran came in with his sword.” I finished uncomfortably.

“Hmm, I see,” Cornelius murmured. “Well it seems it was indeed Sylvanus, Thoran, up to his usual tricks.”

Normally I was very quiet and reserved, especially around people I barely knew. But for some reason Cornelius made me feel comfortable. I made up my mind to ask him about one of the things I had been wondering about.

“Cornelius, when I first met . . . Sylvanus, he said he had control over water, or liquid rather, and then he juggled some around between his hands. I've heard stories of wizards such as this before. I was always very intrigued by it.” My voice gradually became more enthusiastic. “I guess what I was wondering. . . . It's real then, magic?”

I saw Thoran look back at Cornelius with a stern glare.

“Well, you see—” Cornelius started, but was quickly interrupted by a voice above us.

“Identify yourselves.”

I realized we were now at the edge of a very small opening. After the maze of tunnels we had traveled through, I was positive that there was no way I could find my way back outside.

Thoran replied to the voice soundly. “Master Thoran, order first-rank. And Master Cornelius, second-rank.”

“Proceed,” came the response.

It was now that I first realized just how important these men might be. But before my mind could consider what exactly I had gotten myself into, I saw a familiar light reflecting off the cavern walls. It was the same glow that I had seen earlier that day, in a different cave. The memories of my previous encounter made me shutter.

Sure enough, as we rounded the tight corner an orb-like portal hovered above the ground. It was at the back of a large cavern, the same black-metallic softly glowing orange from the light.

“No doubt this isn't the first one of these you've seen today,” said Thoran as he stared at the rift. Before I could respond he turned to me and started again. “This is a Meoden portal. It leads between the Meoden dimension, where we are now, and the other dimensions, in this case ours. Which is yours as well.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he interrupted.

“There is no point in trying to figure out how it works, just know that it does. Naturally if you jumped into one of these you could end up anywhere in the conjoining dimension, but we have altered ours to arrive at a specific point.

“So all you need to do is walk through. Understand?”

Oh yeah, sure, that makes complete sense, I thought to myself . . . but I did have the basic idea, and I could tell Thoran wasn't really asking.

“Yes sir.” I said, so officially that any fool could tell I was intimidated.

“Good,” he replied. “Cornelius you go first, followed by . . . hmm. Did you tell us your name?”

I bit my lip. “No . . . you never asked.”

“Well I'd say in this case shy is an understatement,” he grumbled. “Are you ready to tell us *now*?”

My eyes narrowed at him, squinting slightly. “Eve, Eve Avest.”

“Well, that's a beautiful name, such a curious last name to. You know I know someone that has a hobby of studying the origin of names, I'm sure he'd love to look that one up. His name is—”

Thoran stopped him with a side-ways glance. Evidently this man didn't want me to know about anything beyond what was necessary.

“*Anyways*. Eve, you'll go after Cornelius so he can meet you on the other side. Cornelius, I want to check on Boron, so I'll meet you back at the lodge in an hour or so.”

He turned towards me. “If everything goes as planned I probably won't see you again, so—” he held out a hand “—it was a pleasure meeting you.”

I shook it firmly, inexplicably disappointed by the thought of never seeing him again.

And then, as quickly as he had appeared, he vanished through one of the tunnel passages.

It wasn't long before I found myself with Cornelius on the other side of the portal. We came in amidst a clutter of trees: tall, rich green, much less foreboding than the last forest I had been in. The sky above was a deep blue, nearing dusk.

Has it been that long?

“Better than the last time I hope?” asked Cornelius.

Not much. I opted for courtesy. “Yes it was, thank you.”

“Good,” he said. “Now if I can figure out which portal we came in at, we can start heading for the—”

“Master Cornelius is that you?” came a shout from one of the trees above us, it was a boys' voice.

Cornelius started to look up then froze. “Oh no. Not good, what is he doing here?” He mumbled nervously as he started to pace. “Thoran is going to kill me, this is the first thing he told me not to let happen.” He turned his face upwards again and yelled. “Ah, no. It's not Cornelius just some, umm, other person. No need to come down Ikovos, I mean, person I don't know.”

Cornelius looked at me and gave a do-you-think-that-will-work shrug.

I sure didn't know what was happening, so I shrugged as well. Obviously Cornelius and I shared an inability to stay calm under pressure.

“Master I can tell by your voice,” said the boy again. “Besides I can see you, hey, who is that with you? I'm coming down okay.”

“Oh God, we're dead,” said Cornelius as he paced.

“We're dead?!” I started to pace myself.

“Yes, dead! What are we going to do?”

“What *can* we do?”

“He's going to kill us.”

“He is?”

“You've got to calm down.”

“You calm down, I don't even know what's happening.”

“I've got it!”

“What?”

“Hide!”

“Where?”

“There!” He pointed to a bush next to a tree and pushed me down behind it.

Seconds later I heard footsteps running towards Cornelius. I situated myself so I could see through the leaves. Cornelius moved himself in front of me, one hand leaning against the tree.

The boy came into view and I looked him over. He was average build if not a little thin. The mat of short blond hair on his head looked like it hadn't seen a comb in a while, his ears were a bit oversized, nothing spectacular, that is until he smiled. I was never one of those “omigod he has the most gorgeous smile” girls, but . . . this was something.

Cornelius had just called him Ikovos, but recognized the name like I'd heard it before.

Hmm . . . Oh, right, this was the person that Thoran had told Cornelius not to let me meet.

Well, that explains the pushing. I grunted. Cornelius covered the noise with a cough.

“Oh, hello Ikovos,” said Cornelius in a squeaky voice. “What are you doing out here this late?”

“I took over gate-watching for Luther,” he said. “But hey, why were you saying you were someone else?”

“Well, I um”

“A joke,” I whispered from the bush. “Tell him it was a joke.”

“Oh right, I was just playing a joke of course,” said Cornelius. He forced an uncomfortable laugh.

“A joke?” Ikovos said flatly. “Right . . . well, who was that with you? Where'd they go?”

“Oh that . . . that was a bird.”

“Huh?”

“Tell him it was *magic*,” I interjected.

“I mean it was magic,” said Cornelius.

Ikovos raised an eyebrow. “Since when can you make a fake person with magic?”

Cornelius backed towards me and whispered. “Why did you say magic? That doesn't even make sense.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know? I've never learned a thing about magic. Why did you listen to me if it didn't fit?”

“Because . . . because you tricked me!” he said.

“What?” I asked exasperatedly, jumping aggressively to my feet.

Ikovos, who had been watching as Cornelius argued, now stared at me wide-eyed, jaw to the floor.

When I saw him I screamed and ducked back behind the bush.

Cornelius fainted.

After a few seconds I poked my head out above the leaves. The boy forced a confused smile and waved. I dropped down again.

Come on Eve, pull it together. You are a confident and outgoing individual. You are a confident and outgoing individual. I repeated this a few times in my mind then took a deep breath. Before standing up to face the boy.

“Hi.” I smiled. “My name's Eve.” *Well, that was original.*

“Right, I'm Ikovos . . . sorry for scaring you,” he said as he scratched the back of his head thoughtlessly. “Ah, do you know Cornelius?”

“No, well, sort of I guess.”

“Cause you guys seemed to have something going.”

“Heh, it's been a long day. I got a little too excited. Sorry.”

“No, no it's okay. I just thought that you must have known each other pretty well. But I guess not.”

“Yeah . . . no.”

Silence followed, crickets chirped, I figured tumbleweed wouldn't show in the forest but kept an eye out anyways.

“Hmm, okay, I'm gonna try to wake him up now, cause I'm not doing a very good job talking,” said Ikovos, nodding at me repeatedly.

“Right, that makes sense,” I said, before realizing that I had just agreed he wasn't talking well. I did a mental head bang against the tree.

I am not outgoing and confident. I am not outgoing and confident . . .

I watched Ikovos move to Cornelius's side. He poked him in the chest a few times, then tried shaking him. I knelt cautiously beside the motionless body across from the boy.

“Ah, Master Cornelius?” tried Ikovos. Still nothing. “. . . Corni?”

Cornelius grimaced, and with eyes still closed he responded. “Please don't call me

that, Ikovos.”

“Ah-ha, you're awake. I thought that might work,” said Ikovos, sounding very pleased with himself.

Cornelius still lay there motionless. “I had the weirdest dream Ikovos, you would have liked it. Thoran and I were out scouting in the other dimension, looking for some new creature Demian mentioned, when we ran into a couple keepers. And you wouldn't believe what they were after.”

“I could take a guess,” drawled the boy.

Cornelius continued. “It was a girl, a girl of all things. Isn't that odd.”

Ikovos looked up at me and smiled apologetically. I raised an eyebrow.

Why was my sex such a big issue with these guys, did they have something against women? I've never considered myself a feminist but that sure as heck doesn't mean I'm tolerant of Chauvinists.

“Ah, Master, I think you should open your eyes now,” said Ikovos.

“Of course you're right, my boy.” He lifted his lids, squinting at Ikovos. “Hey, where are we anyway—AH!” As soon as he saw me he jumped onto his feet.

After a few uncomfortable seconds realization seemed to dawn on him.

“Hi.” I waved, adding a smile for his sake, but inwardly feeling very out of place. You know inside jokes? It was starting to feel like I *was* one that everybody but me knew about. I looked at Cornelius face again . . . apparently it wasn't a very funny joke.

“Oh, my dear, I am so sorry. Please ignore everything I said, just an old man's ramblings, and a half asleep one at that.” He paused. “How, um . . . how was it that I ended up on the ground, though?”

“Well,” began Ikovos. “First you came through the portal and started telling me that you weren't you. Then *I* came down to try and figure out what was going on. That's when you started talking to the bush . . . which ended up being a girl You then began arguing with said bush-girl, who proceeded to jump out from *behind* the bush. At that point I pretty much went into shock, she screamed, you fainted, it was all very confusing.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Bush-girl?”

“But what I don't understand is,” Ikovos took a breath. “Why you were trying to hide her from me?”

Cornelius threw his arms into the air. “Don't ask me to explain the logic of my lunatic of a partner. I'm just following orders.”

“Oh, so it was Master Thoran,” said Ikovos grudgingly. “I should have known, and I'll bet he didn't say anything about Jaden right?”

“If he didn't it would be for good reason, Jaden doesn't have half the fanciful ideas

you do on the subject. Nor is he as prone to unbridled, *unrelenting*, curiosity.”

“Oh, that's just what he wants you to think. I should know he's *my* best friend.” His face turned sour and he pointed a finger at Cornelius. “And you know what else? This is unfair and prejudicious treatment, I am personally offended.”

Cornelius rolled his eyes. “Oh, Ikovos, it doesn't matter anyways, Thoran didn't want *anyone* seeing her. She is just spending the night and in the morning I'm taking her back home.”

Home. At this point the word gave me mixed feelings. On one side I longed for the comfort and safety of the familiar. At the same time it was the *last* thing I wanted. And besides that: watching Cornelius and Ikovos talk had been the most entertaining experience I'd had in weeks.

Cornelius interrupted my thoughts. “Now if your *finished*,” he gave Ikovos an evil stare then turned to me. “Again, I am most sorry for the insensitive conversation. Between you and me this one doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut.”

“Hey, I resent that,” said Ikovos.

“Are you ready to continue our journey?” He paused. “No doubt you have even more questions now, but I would ask you to postpone them a while longer.”

I nodded. “I'm ready. I know you will answer my questions when you can.” I would have like them now, but I thought that a show of trust might compel him to honesty later on.

“Good,” he said smiling. My plan had definitely worked. “Let's get going then.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Ikovos interrupted. “Don't you think we should be properly introduced?”

Cornelius eyed him.

“Okay, okay, forget I asked.”

Ten minutes later we'd covered a good bit of ground through the forest. Actually it wasn't much of a forest, at least not the kind I was used to. Just a few trees scattered here and there in clumps, velvety green grass covered hills in every direction. I half expected to hear some creaks or rivers nearby, instead the only noise were the chirping crickets from before. Well, that and Ikovos, who had started whistling a while ago. Not long before that it had gotten dark. Stars were now glittering in the night sky, no clouds in sight, no sign of the moon, just stars.

I cocked my head up and exhaled, watching warm air escape my lips and dissipate into the night sky.

“How do you walk looking up like that?”

I had been so lost in my thoughts I hadn't noticed Ikovos walk up beside me.

I blinked at him. “Are you always so direct?”

“I don't know,” he said. “I guess I'm just curious.”

“Fair enough,” I replied. “I'm not sure how. I've never been very good at paying attention to what I'm doing, so I guess my feet just had to learn to walk on their own.”

“Hunh . . . weird.”

“Yeah, I know.” I chewed my lip and looked around noncommittally.

“Soooo . . . I never got your full name.”

I glanced ahead at Cornelius and lowered my voice. “It didn't seem like Cornelius wanted me giving it.”

Ikovos waved him off. “Oh, he doesn't really mind. He gets like that after being in the Meoden dimension to long. Plus he's worried about Master Thoran.”

That made sense enough to me. “Okay, I'll tell, but first . . .”

“Uh-oh, here it comes.”

I rolled my eyes. “It's not that bad, I just want to know what the big deal is with women around here.”

This caught Ikovos by surprise, I could tell because he started choking on nothing.

He cleared his throat. “You said *I'm* direct?”

“I guarantee you my curiosity rivals yours by a long-shot.” I checked ahead then, just to make sure Cornelius was still in front of us.

“Okay, it's probably not as weird as you think . . . potentially more so though.” He paused seemingly collecting his thoughts. “I'm going to give you the quick version with a promise to go in depth later.”

“Alright.”

“Here goes. We — that is . . . me, Master Cornelius, Master Thoran, pretty much anyone you've heard about since you've been here — are part of an order that fights bad guys. The Meoden in particular. Apart from a few of the masters, like Cornelius and Thoran, most of us aren't over twenty. All male.”

I considered it. “And?”

“And we're out in the middle of nowhere. Meaning we don't get a chance to see girls that often.”

I stared at him blankly.

What the heck type of boys give up girls to live out in the woods with some guys? None of the ones I'd met.

This was getting weird. . . .

“Okay, I can tell you're sort of freaking out. Let me ask you this.” For the first time his tone became serious. “If someone offered you the chance to help people, a chance to fight all the bad things that had ever happened to you, to wake up in the morning knowing you were changing things for the better: what *wouldn't* you give up to take it?”

Darn it. What he had just said was the reason I didn't want to go home.

I hadn't realized it till now, but they had something I'd waited my whole life to find.

A purpose.

I looked at Ikovos. He'd just made me, and worse still he knew it. *There isn't going to be anything I can do to protect myself from this guy.*

That thought left me two options. One: I could run away screaming as fast as possible or, two: I could live with vulnerability. . . . I glanced around for an open route then sighed.

"It's Avest, my name. Eve Avest."

He smiled from ear to ear and looked ahead. "Avest." He tested it. "Avest. Hunh, don't think I've ever heard that before."

Glad that the serious topics were closed for now I delved in. "Should you have?"

"Well, yeah. I sort of have this names slash meanings thing. Usually can't get a last name past me." He paused. "We'll just have to look it up tomorrow."

"If I'm still here," I said, letting a little more disappointment show through my voice than I would have liked.

"Hey, if I have anything to do with it, we'll figure out how to keep you around."

I smiled at him. "Sounds like you already have some ideas." Extending my hand I added. "Partners then?"

He took it. "Let's just go crazy call it friends."

I laughed. *Friends is good.*

And that's pretty much it.

I took a big yawn on the comfy couch of the study. I'd gone through my whole day in my mind and still, it didn't make much sense. The only difference was that now I'd lost an hour of sleep.

Ikovos and I had talked the rest of the journey. He left once the lodge was in sight. It was well hidden in a clump of trees, a few stories high and mostly wood. Looked like an average, if not oversized, cabin. Cornelius had led me through a small door, which I'd doubted was the main entrance, and a couple turns later we were in his study.

Okay, that's all the thinking I can do in one day. I prayed quietly for multiplied hours of sleep then passed out from exhaustion.

2. Jaden

I WOKE UP AND MY first thought was a big cup of coffee. My second thought was getting the loud knocking sound to go away. And before I got to the third I was back in sleepy-land.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Ugh. “Okay, mom. I'm getting up.” I yawned and gave my pillow a farewell squeeze. “Wait a minute . . . this isn't my pillow.”

All at once yesterdays' events crammed into my head. Most people might have closed their eyes, trying to imagine it all away. I, on the other hand, got a stomach twisting with excitement and a head swirling with silly thoughts of fate and such.

I figured Cornelius had been responsible for the knocking, so I ran to open the door. My stomach lurched.

Definitely not Cornelius.

It was Jaden, and, if possible, he looked even more intimidating than the night before. He was wearing a plain cloth t-shirt and dark leather pants. His arms were crossed and his breathing was slow. Obviously, he was less worried about the situation than I was . . . I doubted he worried about much of anything.

“You look like you're still asleep,” he said.

I fumbled for a response that made sense, but drew a blank. Mornings weren't my thing, neither are cocky boys who control fire . . . *Okay, at least the first part is true.*

“Where's Cornelius?” I asked.

The corners of his mouth lifted. “What, not happy to see me?—” silence “—He had

somewhere to be, asked me to see if you could hang out in here for a few hours.”

“Sure, that's fine.” I yawned. “Ugh, sorry. What time is it?”

“Early. How about some coffee?”

My caffeine addicted body did a mental tap dance. This overpowered my fear of inconveniencing. “Coffee . . . would be great actually.”

He nodded once. “I figured you for a coffee drinker. You'll need to wear this.” He handed me a pile of brown cloth.

I took it.

“It's so you won't be noticed. All the boys wear it,” he said. “I'll wait out here.” He leaned against the wall and re-crossed his arms, looking much too good for this early in the morning.

I closed the door, told myself I didn't have time to try and remember if I'd said something embarrassing, and examined my new outfit. It was a brown wool robe, and a white cloth shirt and pants, definitely no chance anyone would realize I'm a girl.

I slipped it on in the bathroom at the back of the study and looked at myself in the mirror. I put the hood up and narrowed my eyes, trying to look devious. In my mind I totally pulled it off. I gave myself a quick you-can-do-it smile, folded my blanket, and exited the room.

Jaden was in the same position I left him.

“Hmm. . . .” His eyes moved down my robe. “No good.”

I checked myself. “What's wrong?”

“You still look like a girl.”

I looked down again and then back at him.

“Trust me, you do.” He stood up straight. “We'll take the back way.”

I followed him down the hall, through a door, then down another hall. It looked like this might continue so I gave up hope of finding my way back, and stopped paying attention.

I heard some knocking sounds and decided it was a woodpecker. Made sense, everything in this place was wood. The rooms and hallways were well lit with large glass windows. It was still dark outside, but the stars had disappeared and there was a dim blue glow on the horizon signaling mornings' arrival. I could see little else besides the tree trunks.

Inside everything was swept and tidy. No dust, no cobwebs, much different than other cabins I'd been in. It smelt like a fountain and it had the same fresh breeze you get near a waterfall. I had no trouble seeing myself getting used to a place like this.

Next, we walked in a large stone room. It was narrow, but the ceiling was high, forty feet or so. On one side of the wall there were man-size niches with pillows in them. Pillows and, oh my goodness, people, *sleeping* people.

“Best to be quiet in here,” whispered Jaden.

No kidding. There were at least a hundred. The ones I could see were young, maybe not even in their teens. The boys in my town spent their days playing games and chasing girls . . . these guys looked like they'd seen harder times.

I stared for a moment longer, then tip-toed to catch up to Jaden.

We left the room and entered into what I assumed was a kitchen. It had a stone floor, stone counter tops, and wood cabinets. The cabinets wrapped around to my right into the wall across. The counters followed beneath them, but stretched further across the left side of the room like a bar. Behind this was a large cafeteria-like room with high rafters and lots of tables. The kitchen was small by comparison. Low ceiling, minimal workspace, kinda cozy.

Along with some other oddments, a coffee percolator sat on the counter near the bar. Jaden filled the bottom of the piece with water and the middle with grounds. The smell of it made my head buzz. Even though I spent nights away from home, which means nights away from coffee, I had successfully managed to develop a severe caffeine addiction.

Still handling the coffee pot, Jaden nodded to a bar stool. “You can sit down, if you want.”

I didn't know if I wanted to, but I did anyways.

The stools were on the other side of the counter. I looked out at the cafeteria, then turned and tried to inconspicuously watch Jaden. He opened up the bottom of the stove, there was wood but no fire. At least that's what I thought at first. In the next moment the entire stove was rolling with flames. I could feel the heat five feet away.

My breath caught, a heady shiver running through my body.

Jaden closed the oven door and set the coffee pot on top. I thought about asking him what the heck had just happened, but that was a bit vulnerable for my taste.

He leaned against the counter across from me.

Oh, who was I kidding? *Everything* sounds too vulnerable to me.

“Um . . . Jaden?” His name felt strange on my tongue.

No response. Just eyes.

Bad idea, Evelyn. I cleared my throat. “Did you light that fire? I mean, I saw what you did last night and I was just wondering what it was, or how, you know, you did it. . . .” *Oh God, that definitely didn't make any sense.*

Jaden smiled. Not a friendly smile, more of an amused one. “Yeah, it was me, both times, and it was magic.”

I waited for further explanation. None came, but he kept his gaze.

“So, how does it work? How did you learn it?” I asked.

He shrugged and rocked back. “Thorán taught me . . . when I came here. I had a knack for it, been using it ever since.”

So you can be trained. This is getting interesting. “Can everyone do it? I mean, is it very common?” I asked.

“Not at all. It's a rare ability, some say a natural one.”

“But you don't.”

He looked at the coffee pot, then back at me. “I'd compare it to any virtue: honesty, diligence . . . love. Nothing comes naturally.”

Makes sense enough. “So when did you start learning it?” I asked, then crossed my arms in front of me on the counter.

“Young. When I was just a boy.”

“How old are you now?”

He looked at me, then placed his palms down on the counter and leaned forward until he was over me.

I looked up and gulped.

“Why do you want to know?”

His eyes didn't move. Neither did mine. We were both locked in position, not a flinch . . . okay, maybe I was shrinking a little bit.

His eyes narrowed.

“Jaden?!” called a voice from the doorway.

My gaze broke and I tilted my head around the menacing boy to look towards the voice. It was Ikovos.

“I knew it,” he said, walking forward. “I knew they would put you in charge of her, I just knew it.” He waved. “Hi, Eve.”

I cleared my throat and waved back.

Jaden blew out some air then turned to Ikovos, back against the counter. “Good morning to you too, Ikovos.”

“Oh, come on Jaden, you can't think this is fair,” said Ikovos. He sat down on the stool next to me.

Jaden shrugged and set out three mugs. “It is what it is, I couldn't care less either way.”

Ikovos's brow furrowed. “Well, you're in a lovely mood this morning.”

Jaden smiled wickedly, then went over to the stove.

I got the feeling that these two knew each other better than they showed.

Ikovos turned to me. “So, how'd you sleep last night? Anything exciting happen?”

Besides everything? “Nothing to crazy. And I slept well . . . that study is beautiful.”

“Oh, Master Cornelius's? Yeah, he's got some great books in there.”

Jaden poured coffee into each of the mugs and pushed the sugar tray closer. I dumped milk and sweetener in mine, so did Ikovos. Jaden drank it black.

“We really should be heading out, Vos,” said Jaden, he took a gulp of coffee then

nodded to me. "Can you find your way back?"

Umm, no.

"I'll take her," said Ikovos. "I have to go back that way."

"*Right,*" said Jaden, he dropped his cup in the sink and went to the door. "Just make sure not to get lost. Meet me by the back door."

I was about to say thanks for the coffee, but before I could, he was gone. I pressed my lips together and did a mental wave. *Goodbye.*

"He didn't give you any trouble, did he?" asked Ikovos.

"I looked at him and shook my head. "No, he was fine . . . I don't think he liked babysitting though."

Ikovos laughed. "Trust me, you made his morning." He stood up and held out his hand. "Now, my lady, may I show you to your quarters?"

I laughed. He did too, then he helped me off the stool and we headed for the study, coffee still held firmly in my hand.

Ikovos had dropped me off a couple minutes ago and I was now on the couch, contemplating what to do next. Before he left he promised again that I would be staying. After all the sneaking around this morning I wasn't so sure.

I discovered that he and Jaden were off to finish the scouting begun by Cornelius and Thoran before they found me. I felt a little guilty over the fact but couldn't think of anything to do about it.

I sunk deeper into the couch.

Before me sat the task of deciding what to do next, not something I'm good at, especially when all the options are so exciting. Sort of like being at the bakery counter trying to figure out which pastry you want.

Ikovos had said I could read any of the books on the shelves, and that I was welcome to the shower. The book reading would've grabbed me immediately, only it meant more decision making and I had no idea where to start. Since I hadn't bathed in a couple days and I was still kind of icky from the lake, the shower held a practical appeal.

All the contemplating ending up being null-in-void. I couldn't stop staring at the red flame.

Magic. Real Magic.

I moved my hand closer and felt the heat pulsing out of it. The first time I'd heard of magic I became obsessed with it, it and everything I could learn about it. I read story after story, listened to anything anyone could tell me. My family told me I was silly. . . I was younger then, and when I got older I pushed down any thoughts of it.

And now I come to find it's real?

I supposed I should be calmly contemplating this fact, maybe even trying to deny it.

In books the main character gets whisked away from their lives to some grand adventure, all the while complaining of a desire to have an ordinary life.

I always wondered if I would be the same . . . now I knew the answer.

A swell of excitement rose in my stomach. I jumped off the couch and started pacing around, trying to keep from jumping up and down, or screaming, or crying. I probably looked silly, but I didn't care, I'd waited for something like this to happen my entire life.

Determination set in inside me. I knew now that Ikovos was right. There was no way I was walking away now.

“Okay, Evelyn, calm down,” I said to myself. “Let's try the shower thing.”

Thirty minutes later I was clean, dressed, and shaking out my wet hair. I was in desperate need of a comb and a hair-tie, but couldn't have cared less. Right now what I wanted to do was read.

I picked out a tome with a violet cover and plopped onto the couch.

What seemed like minutes later I heard a knock at the door. I looked down and realized that I had read through seventy pages. I closed the book and ran to open the door.

It was Ikovos.

He held his finger in the air. “I've got an idea.” Then walked in, closing the door behind him. “Oh, but first I brought you something to eat.”

He opened up a bag that held two croissants and a few strips of cheese. He set them on the coffee table and dropped into the couch. I did the same. I don't know what it was, but I felt comfortable around him, like I'd known him forever . . . maybe because that's how he treated me.

He grabbed one of the croissants and bit off half. “Right now, Cornelius is out at a meeting. When he gets back he'll probably be taking you home.”

I nodded and pulled a flaky layer off the pastry.

Ikovos started again. “So here's the plan.”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

We both craned our heads to the door. It opened an inch, then Cornelius stepped in. He looked a little disheveled. His hair was matted and he had dark lines under his eyes . . . probably both were my fault.

“Ikovos?” He shook his head. “I should have known better than to have Jaden handle it. You two are intolerable.”

I perceived this as a negative response, but when I looked over at Ikovos there was a wide grin on his face.

Cornelius rolled his eyes, then turned to me and smiled. “Did you have a good night? I trust that you were well treated by everyone.”

I nodded repeatedly. “Yes, very well.”

“Good, good. . . .” He looked uncomfortable. “Well, if you have everything we should be getting you back home.”

My heart sank. I knew this was coming, but I still didn't want to hear it. I bit down on my lip.

Cornelius frowned. “There really is nothing to be done, my dear. Thoran is adamant.”

I nodded. It was silly to have gotten my hopes up, what was I doing here anyways?

“Ikovos, would you go get two horses saddled for us,” said Cornelius.

Ikovos looked like he might object, but then smiled and walked towards the door. When he got behind Cornelius he turned around and started mouthing something.

I watched intently for a few seconds until he vanished. I figured he was relaying his plan to me, there was one problem, I couldn't read lips for the life of me. I'd wanted to tell him, but couldn't with Cornelius watching.

Come on, Evelyn. Suck it up. I resigned myself to the inevitable and stood up smiling.

“Thank you, Cornelius, for letting me stay here . . . I really enjoyed it.”

He looked a little sad. “Of course, my dear. It was my pleasure.”

Soon we were outside waiting for Ikovos. Wind blew heavily through the trees. The sky was white. No sun, but my internal clock told me it was near noon.

My thoughts soon drifted to home. I tried to understand what was so bad about it.

“Cornelius?” I asked, not sure what I was doing. “What do you live for?”

He looked a little stunned, then answered. “For a long time I didn't know . . . then I found out about the Meoden and the things they did, *horrible* things. . . .” His eyes turned up to the sky. “Something in me just knew that I was supposed to stop them.”

I looked out at the forest and thought on his words.

A twig snapped off a tree above me. I watched absently as a bird hopped about the branch, then flew off into the sky.

Wait a minute. What am I doing?

“Cornelius.” I said, my voice firm.

He looked at me.

“Give me one chance.”

Again I surprised him. “But—”

“Look, I'm not usually this direct. In fact I never am. I understand I don't really know what you guys do here, but I *do* know it's important . . . and I want to help.”

He looked at me hard for a moment. “You know, you remind me of myself when I was younger.” His face softened and he held up a finger. “You get one chance, *one*. And that's it.”

I yelped and jumped on the spot. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” I threw my arms around him, then went bright red and backed off.

“Sorry.”

He laughed. “You know what? I completely understand.”

I beamed a while, unable to keep a straight face. I couldn't believe I'd said, what I did, later I'd probably have a panic attack, but it didn't matter, I was happy now.

Cornelius dropped his face in his hands. “Thorán is going to kill me when he finds out.” He looked up “Wait a minute. He doesn't *really* need to find out right away.”

“He doesn't?” I asked.

“No.” He began pacing. “If we can take a few weeks to train you, get you caught up on the history and schematics of our operation, maybe even teach you some of the language. Well, you could become a valuable asset, which I think might make Thorán a bit more . . . agreeable about the situation.”

My stomach lurched with excitement. “Training! Really?”

“Oh, yes, but we'll need someone to do it, someone good.” He tapped on his lip. “I won't be able to. If I'm not around that often, Thorán will surely notice. The next best artisan is Ikovos. He also knows plenty of the language and history.”

“Artisan?”

“Oh, um . . . a magic user.”

My jaw dropped. “Ikovos can use magic?! He didn't tell me that. Does he control fire like Jaden?”

Cornelius shook his head quickly. “Oh, no, no, no. Ikovos is a defense artisan. He uses healing and protecting magics, disabling ones at times, but never anything like Jaden's.”

I cocked my head. “So what is Jaden?”

“Well, among other things—” he chuckled “—*he's* an offense artisan. They use fire, like you saw, to attack enemies or enchant weapons. Thorán's offensive too, but it is a rarer ability, only a few here have the makings of it. At any rate, you will be learning defense with Ikovos.”

There's no way he just said what I think he did.

“Wait a minute. I'm going to learn to use magic?”

I watched his head go up and down, but it wasn't quite computing.

“Well . . . “ He sucked in some air. “That's not completely accurate. You see most aren't even able to use it. You'll get the chance to though, it would certainly be a plus with Thorán, we have almost as few defense artisans as offense.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I'd gone from thinking magic was a myth, to seeing it for myself, then finally to finding out it was real in less than a day.

And now I am going to learn it? Stars danced in my eyes. I had to lean against the fence to keep from falling over.

“Whoa, what's wrong with her?”

My vision cleared and I saw Ikovos holding the reigns of two horses. One was black

and one was brown. They were lean, sleek, and looked like they could get anywhere fast.

I released the fence and glared at Ikovos. “Why didn't you tell me you could use magic?!”

A smile spread wide across his face, and he leaned back on his heels. “Well, I guess I just didn't think to bring it up.”

Cornelius rolled his eyes and held out his hand. “Reigns please.”

The smile vanished. “Oh, *come on*, Cornelius, the least you could do is let her stay a couple of days to rest up. I mean she obviously doesn't want to go home yet. You know just because Thoran says something, doesn't mean it's right . . . this just isn't fair.”

He finished with a huff. I was impressed if not a little embarrassed. Cornelius just looked at him.

“What's not fair? The fact that she's going to stay, or that I wanted the reigns?”

“Well the fact that . . . wait a minute.” He stared off for a moment then looked to Cornelius, then me, then back to Cornelius again. “She's staying.”

“Yes—” big grin “—but Ikovos, this is not a party, this is serious,” said Cornelius. “And you aren't to tell anyone, not even Jaden.”

Ikovos's smile grew. “Ah-ha! Who's in the know now Jaden?” We both stared at him and he cleared his throat. “Promise . . . how did you change his mind anyways?”

My mouth tipped. I tried to think of something witty to say. Only when I pictured myself saying them I almost laughed out loud. I just shrugged, smiling to the older man.

“Now, will you please give me the reigns?” asked Cornelius.

Ikovos handed them over.

“Good. I'm going to go tie these fellows up in the woods, if Thoran sees them back this soon he's sure to suspect something. Ikovos, you can take Eve back to the study and, if you would like my dear, begin training.”

My head bobbed up and down.

“Wait, I'm training her?” asked Ikovos.

Cornelius nodded. “All part of our master plan.”

“Sweet, I'm up for that,” said Ikovos.

He says sweet?

Cornelius started heading towards the woods with the two horses. He stopped short. “Oh, and can you get the horses in a few hours and bring them back to the stables?”

“Sure, but where are you gonna go?” asked Ikovos.

He started walking off again. “I have some errands. I'll leave them by the riverbank.”

“Okay then,” said Ikovos, he had to yell for Cornelius to hear it. He turned to me. “Well, he got in a weird mood all the sudden.”

“Yeah . . . kinda peppy,” I said.

“But serious.” We both nodded.

“I still can't believe you're staying.”

I met his smile. “Me neither . . . what was your plan anyway?” I asked.

He pursed his lips. “It was definitely a last resort option.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Let's just say it involved baggy clothes and a good pair of scissors.”

I winced and grabbed a strand of hair protectively.

Ikovos did a palms-up.

“Okay, so . . . I just realized Cornelius didn't tell me *what* to train you in,” said Ikovos.

We had just gotten back to the study. I had resumed nibbling on my croissant and Ikovos was standing in the middle of the room.

“Well, I know he mentioned history and also how you guys run things here,” I started. “And, you might not believe this, but, he actually said I should start learning magic.” Even as I spoke the words, they surprised me.

“Wow, really? He must really like you.”

I smiled.

“He's right though,” said Ikovos. “I get the feeling you'd be good at it, and Thoran won't be able to resist another artisan.” He scratched the back of his head for a moment. “I have to tell you though, I can't say I've ever heard of a girl being able to use magic.”

Once again, zeal for the defense of my sex rose up within me. “It might help if you knew some girls.”

Ikovos grinned. “Finally breaking through the wall, am I? You know you're kind of sassy when you're not being shy.”

I went a little red and bit off a piece of my pastry. His grin widened.

“In my defense I do know some girls, I'm just not around them that often . . . or ever. Except for Sophie.”

“Sophie? So there's another girl here?”

He shrugged. “Woman actually, she cooks, been here as long as I can remember. She's pretty old.”

“So, she just *cooks* for you guys?” I asked.

He nodded. “Most people think so. But it's just a front if you ask me.”

“For what?” This whole place was just one big mystery after another.

“I have no idea. It's just a feeling. She knows Thoran to well, they're almost always together.”

I considered this and, before I could stop myself, a series of possible explanations ran through my head, all extravagant and highly improbably, of course.

“Anyways,” he said. “Where were we?”

“Training.”

“Right. We have about two hours and then I'll need to get the horses. We should start with our operation. It'll be good for you to know what we're really doing here.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Two hours later my excitement over staying had doubled. I was on a bit of a talking overload though . . . I was used to being alone most of the time.

“You look like you could use a break,” said Ikovos.

I shook my head. “No, this whole thing is still so amazing to me, I want to know everything. That is, unless you're tired?” I waited expectantly.

He raised an eyebrow. “You're one of those kids that liked going to school, aren't you?”

I made an innocent face. “*Maybe.*”

He laughed. For a guy he had a pretty high voice, or at least a light one. When he laughed though, it was deep and throaty. It made me suspect he was a lot rougher than he might like me to believe.

“I've got an idea.” He stood up. “Why don't we grab some books and explore the area a little. We could even pick up the horses then too, if you like.”

In my town horses were few and far between. Sheep are the big thing there, and, don't get me wrong I love sheep, I just love horses too.

“You don't think Cornelius would mind if I left?”

Ikovos thought about it. “Probably, but as your trainer I can overrule him.”

I smiled. “Good enough for me.” I stood up and cringed when I felt my hair fall onto my neck. I quickly searched the room.

“What?” asked Ikovos.

I leaned to one side. “You don't happen to have a hair-tie do you?”

He looked at my hair, then to me. Narrowing like I was from another planet.

Outside it had gotten a little colder and the sun had moved closer to the horizon. We'd started walking in the same direction Cornelius had taken the horses, and were now in a denser part of the forest.

“So Thoran didn't start the group?” I asked Ikovos as we moseyed along the path.

“Right,” he said.

“But he does lead it now?”

“Yep, well, Cornelius too.”

Including the time spent in the study we'd been talking for over three hours about the um . . . group.

Actually I didn't really know what to call them.

“Ikovos, what do you guys call yourselves? Like do you have a special name or

something?”

“Officially we're called the Order Delavedis, but that's only when we're dealing with political junk. With just us it's usually either the order or the guild.”

That “political junk” was the most surprising thing I'd learned about so far. Thoran and the order didn't just fight the Meoden, but met with them as well. I had a hard time imagining one of those creatures in such a moderated arena . . . then again, Sylvanus, as I'd first seen him, would fit perfectly.

Ikovos hadn't told me much about how it all worked. I had a feeling I'd have to find out another way. I looked over at him. He was swinging a twig absently through the air as he walked. Since I'd met him he'd been brazenly honest with me on everything, but at times I could tell he held back. These political meetings with the Meoden were one of those times.

“Which do you use?” I asked him.

“Huh?” He asked, his features shifting. It seemed with everything he said there was a different, and quite exaggerated, face.

“Order or guild?”

“Oh,” he said. “Order usually. Guild sounds too stuffy. But honestly I've never given it much thought.”

A nice ability. People take it for granted. I give everything “much thought”, too much. Not by choice, but a fact all the same.

“So you got a good idea of how things run now?” he asked.

Thoran and Cornelius lead, men fight, boys train, Sophie cooks, and I don't exist. . . .

“You're wincing,” said Ikovos.

I looked at him. “Sorry. Yes, I think I've got it.”

“As unconvincing as that was, it'll have to do, the horses are just up ahead.”

My eyes veered forwards. I could see a clearing past the trees and in seconds we were through it. Sure enough, the horses stood tied to a wooden fence. Behind them was a pond fed by a slow, soft, waterfall that trickled down a high rock wall. On the left a cleft of rocks jutted out over the water. Ikovos pointed to this.

“Me and Jaden study a lot up there. It'll be a good spot for us to go over some basic spells.”

My attention instantly turned from my surroundings to Ikovos.

“Already?” I knew the answer. Cornelius had said as soon as possible.

“No time like the present,” he replied as he hopped up onto the rock and offered me a hand.

I don't get that saying. There are lots of times better than the present, for instance a day so far in the future you won't have to worry about it.

Luckily, this time, present was good. I grabbed his hand and followed him to the

middle of the platform. We sat down and he popped open a book.

“Okay,” he said. “You already know that not everyone can use magic. So don't worry if you can't do this stuff.”

I nodded. *Sure . . . I won't worry. . . .*

He looked up at me. “When you grow up being trained in magic, you learn to think a certain way. You learn to be aware and in control of your mind with every action you make. You study your motivations and thought patterns, until you actually *know* yourself better. Eventually you'll find a part of you that already knows magic, how to conjure it, and eventually control it.” He gave a lop-sided grin. “I don't know if that makes sense, but it's the best way I can think to explain it.”

“No, it makes sense,” I said. “I just wouldn't have thought it worked like that. So if you can't find the knowledge in yourself . . .”

“Then you're one of the ones that can never learn it.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Before, earlier this morning, Jaden told me he didn't think magic came naturally. It sounded like he was saying anyone could do it.”

Ikovos looked down and shook his head. “He would say that . . . you know why?”

My head went back and forth.

“Because . . . Ah, I can't tell you. It'd feel like I was breaking the man's code of secrecy or something.”

“There's a man's code of secrecy?”

“No, I just sort of made the name up on the fly. But it stands for something, you know?”

Boys, they always leave you hanging.

“Fine, but this will come back to haunt you. One of these days you're gonna want to know something from me and *bang*, up pops the woman's code of secrecy.” *Hey, I think that was pretty witty.*

He looked troubled, like he might actually be regretting not telling me.

I burst out laughing. *There goes my wittiness.*

Ikovos seemed to lighten a bit. “Okay, back to business. This book pretty much outlines the factual side of the process, but any artisan will tell it's more about instinct and practice. So . . .” He closed the book. “You can read this on your own if you want, but we'll just start with some exercises.”

For the next hour he walked me through a spell to conjure a light. So far I hadn't had any luck.

“Try again,” said Ikovos. “Focus on the nerves in your fingertips, then visualize the light growing out of them. It sounds corny, I know, but it works.”

I tried for the third time, concentrating on my fingers like he said . . .

Still nothing.

I looked up at him. “Is this bad? Does it mean I can't use magic?”

His eyes narrowed. “Do you feel anything?”

I shook my head.

He looked away. “This is odd, I thought for sure. . . .”

“Show me something,” I said.

“What?”

“I'm sorry, I mean . . . you're really good at magic right? Will you show me the spell? The one I've been trying?”

Big smile. “Sure,” he said, then held out his palm.

I thought it might take a little while, but instantly his hand lit a bluish-white. Almost like a glowing fog had caught onto it.

He waved it around.

“That's amazing,” I said as my eyes followed his hand. “How long did it take you to learn it?”

“This spell? I did it my second tr—”

I touched his hand. It felt cool. The mist crept unto my fingertip as I moved it across his palm. For a moment I forgot everything around me, completely focused on the light . . . and the tingling in my hand.

Ikovos coughed.

“Sorry,” I said, quickly moving my hand away.

Ugh, this was the second time I had lost control of myself around magic. *What am I doing? This isn't like me at all.* I bit down on my lip.

He looked like he was about to say something when a voice came from the woods. “Sil!”

“Who is that?” I asked as Ikovos stared off into the forest.

“Jaden. He's looking for the horses, his horse rather. He'll check here.” Ikovos kept his gaze turned.

“Look, Ikovos, about what just happened. I didn't mean to . . .”

He glanced at me and the corners of his mouth came up warmly. “Don't sweat it.”

I forced a mirror smile and nodded. “Should I hide?”

“Did it work last time?”

“Well no, but . . .”

“Jaden's smart and I'm a terrible liar . . . it's not just that though. I know I told Cornelius I wouldn't tell him, but he's my best friend,” Ikovos delivered this with a shrug. “We've never kept secrets.”

Everyone keeps secrets. I let the thought pass. From what I'd seen of Jaden, he wasn't a person I'd naturally put my fate in the hands of.

A wince crossed my face.

“Eve, trust me,” said Ikovos. “He’s a good guy.”

I forced another smile. “Alright.”

This got me an ear to ear grin.

“Sil, come on girl,” sang Jaden from the trees. “I’ve got a carrot.”

The black horse whinnied immediately, quickly followed by the other. Jaden’s voice was close enough that he had to of heard them.

Ikovos winked at me. “Let me do the talking.”

If I have to. I thought sarcastically to myself.

Seconds later the dark-haired, dark-eyed boy appeared through the trees. He hadn’t changed since this morning, same cloth shirt matched with leather pants. He looked up at us then turned to the horses and gave them their promised vegetables. After that he hopped up on the rock and sat down beside us.

A few seconds of awkward silence passed, until I was ready to blurt out something about the condition of the weather lately. Jaden saved me the embarrassment.

“Am I interrupting?” he asked, so nonchalantly it seemed he didn’t expect a response.

Ikovos narrowed his eyes. “Aren’t you gonna ask why Eve’s still here.”

Jaden glanced at me and gave a slight, possibly patronizing, smile, then turned back to Ikovos.

“Let me see. My wonderful, yet fancifully disposed, friend and the most tolerably sentimental person I know were put in charge of making a sweet—”

Sweet . . . ?

“—little—”

Little?!

“—doe-eyed—”

What!?!

“—girl—” my eyes narrowed “—go home when she obviously didn’t want to. . . . The only way I’d be asking questions is if she wasn’t here.”

Ikovos glowered. “Nice Jaden. Very subtle.”

Jaden lifted his shoulders as he leaned back. “The word isn’t in my dictionary.”

“How surprising,” said Ikovos, sarcasm thick.

I tried to hold back a laugh, resulting in a short, throaty sound.

Jaden looked at me. “You think that’s funny?”

I instantly adopted a straight face and shook my head.

“No, no, I see how it is. But you might want to remember that I could tell Thoran you’re here whenever I feel like it.”

My eyes veered to Ikovos, but he was just looking at Jaden. I watched him cross his arms and shake his head. Unless I was mistaken he thought this was *funny*.

I turned somewhat frantically back to Jaden.

“Don't worry,” he said. “I'm not gonna tell him . . .” I let out a breath “. . . *if* you can prove that you can take care of yourself.”

My eyes narrowed darkly, or maybe I just imagined they did.

I'm not outspoken about myself around many people. But if someone challenges me, about holding my own no less, I become something slightly beyond competitive.

I stood up and crossed my arms. This time I was sure I had.

“What did you have in mind?” I asked, sounding each syllable.

See, I can act confident!

But then Jaden stood up . . . he was taller than me, and definitely not acting. Almost instantly my position turned melty and my eyes started to wander.

He smiled knowingly, went to the edge of the forest, and came back with two long sticks.

“Lose the robe,” he said.

I obeyed. I didn't like taking orders, but . . . hmm . . . considering that I'd done it without question, maybe I *did* like taking orders.

To the right of the plateau there was a tall flat rock. I saw Ikovos move to sit on it, before Jaden threw one of the makeshift staves. I caught it in front of me with both hands and gave it a little spin, suddenly thankful for my one-month obsession with bojutsu.

Jaden stared hard. “If you leave the ledge, you're out. If I hit you in the head, chest, or stomach, you're out. If I hit you anywhere else, it'll just hurt. The same goes for me . . . except for maybe the last part.”

Nice.

He moved closer and started to circle. “Ready?”

I gave Ikovos a glance and got a palms-up response, then turned back to Jaden and nodded once.

Since meeting Cornelius and Thoran in the Meoden dimension yesterday, this was the first time I felt like I was on my own. Maybe even unwanted. . . . This used to be enough to send me running.

I started to circle.

Not this time.

Immediately I sprinted to Jaden, then hit right, left with the staff. He blocked both of these, before I spun myself around for a roundhouse kick. He ducked, and I was left open. I knew the risk, but the surprise on his face made the sharp jab to my leg worth it.

Darn, he wasn't lying. That hurt.

He lunged at me again, but I dropped down and side-stepped his staff then took a swing at his chest. The wood only whipped through the air as Jaden back-flipped out of the way.

Oh, give me a break!

I moved back to catch my breath while he leveled out.

After the acrobatics it crossed my mind that he could be holding back. I studied him. He was at least panting. This fact made me momentarily proud of myself . . . of course it was dwarfed by the knowledge of my inevitable defeat, but. . . .

He moved closer and I spared a glance behind me. Just a few yards to the edge over the water. When I turned back he was right on top of me, barreling in with his staff, right, left, right, left. His strength was too much. I quickly lost ground as I parried.

The last blow sent my staff flying, and me backwards, hands hitting the hard ground. I could feel the edge of the rock. As he lifted his staff in the air, I tried to steady my mind.

I don't think he planned on hitting me fully. But he obviously hadn't anticipated me dropping back over the edge like I did, and his mock strike was swift and hard enough to send him falling into the pool below as I hung from my hands off the ledge.

Ikovos was rolling on top of the high rock, laughing.

I smiled, feeling pretty good about my impromptu ingenious.

Just when I began to lift myself up onto the ledge, I felt a hand wrap around my foot. I realized too late what was happening and seconds plunged into the water.

When I came up for breath, Jaden was treading the water next to me, staring straight-faced. I waited warily for him to speak.

"Well?"

"Well, what?" he asked.

I continued to paddle. "Did I pass?"

A surprised smirk crossed his face. "Are you kidding me? I didn't even think you knew how to fight, I was never serious."

My jaw dropped and I stared at him incredulously.

"You guys okay?" yelled a half-cracking voice from above.

"We're fine," said Jaden, staring boldly at me.

You're intolerable, I fumed. Then gave him a face that let him know my feelings, before turning around and swimming back towards the shore.

3. Unexpected

THIRTY MINUTES LATER it was pitch dark and we were all sitting around an orange fire on the ledge. Of course it wasn't a real fire so I had a hard time *not* staring at it, trying instead to focus on the conversation. A while ago Ikovos had started telling Jaden about the circumstances resulting in my lack of departure. As far as I could tell Jaden didn't seem to care.

“So then we came here to practice,” said Ikovos, seemingly finished with his story. “I was showing her a spell when you arrived.”

Jaden made no response, but continued instead to gaze at the fire.

I looked behind me. As it had gotten darker the pool had grown an even brighter shade of purple, glimmers of pink reflecting at the edges. I stared at it a while, then turned to Ikovos.

“Should we be back at a certain time?”

Jaden responded first. “Did you do any spells?”

I cocked my head to him. “Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Umm . . . not yet.” My eyes dropped. *Great Evelyn, very impressive.* I looked back at him. He always looked so serious.

“Do something for me.” It wasn't a question, but I nodded anyways. “Blow. Right there.” He pointed at the fire.

I cleared my throat. “Blow?”

I got an almost imperceptible nod.

“You know, Jaden,” started Ikovos, “if you keep doing stuff like this, she's gonna think you're a serious weirdo.”

Jaden gave him a face and turned back to me, obviously awaiting my obedience.

Feeling enormously self-conscious. I leaned forward, pursed my lips, and blew softly into the fire.

Nothing seemed unusual about the flames, just a soft flutter before returning to normal.

I glanced up. Jaden was staring stern-faced into the fire.

“What is it?” asked Ikovos. No reply. “Jaden?”

Finally the boy looked up, meeting my eyes. “Be in the study, tomorrow, one o'clock.”

I shook my head a little dumbfounded, then nodded with shrugged shoulders. “Okay. . . .”

He jumped up and headed for the woods.

I turned to Ikovos for an explanation, but he appeared just as confused.

“Oh and Ikovos?” Jaden turned to look at him. “Don't waste time trying to teach her any spells.”

Ikovos stared hard for a second, then nodded before Jaden disappeared into the trees.

I tried to hide the disappointment from my face as I turned.

“I can't learn magic can I?”

His head was still facing the forest. He looked to me. “Honestly, I don't know the answer to that.” *Which means no.* “I do know Jaden though. He's got something going on.”

I flexed my eyebrows.

Yeah, some way to get rid of me . . . maybe. I guess I have no reason to doubt Ikovos. Anyways, Jaden isn't so bad. . . .

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Come on,” said Ikovos. “This fire won't last long now that Jaden's gone.” He stood up. “Besides, Cornelius is going to kill me for keeping you out so late.”

My eyebrows furrowed. “I asked you about that.”

He smiled and jumped down after the horses.

“Hey, don't just walk away. I could get in trouble for this.” I jumped up, racing after him.

‘The illumination spell is a base level conjuration used by defense artisans. It has long been considered the simplest of spells for either class, often used as a test to see if one is adept in magic.’

I closed the book and leaned back into the study couch.

When Ikovos had dropped me off earlier, I began reading one of the glowing tomes. So far I'd concluded that *this* illumination spell was the same one Ikovos had cast on his hand . . . the one I'd been attempting.

The easiest spell and I can't do it at all.

Ikovos and Jaden's earlier reactions all fit into place. I wasn't a magic user. I felt a tinge of sadness for a moment, but soon pushed it aside.

There are other things I can do. I'll just have to be better at them.

My head fell to the pillow.

Maybe tomorrow I'll start in combat training.

I fell asleep wondering if I'd wake up back in my bed at home, like the past two days had just been a dream . . . if I'd ever be able to go back to the way things were if it was.

I woke up and this time there was no one knocking at the door. As far as I could tell the room had been undisturbed through the night, so I tried to close my eyes and fall back asleep.

No luck.

I got up, got dressed, and tied my hair into a tight braid thingy. Destined to fall out due to a lack of hair-ties.

I went back into the main room and stood strumming my fingers together. *What to do, what to do. . . .*

Breakfast came to mind. Probably because I hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon. The only problem was breakfast was far away, most likely somewhere I wasn't supposed to go alone.

I strummed my fingers again and a picture of a steaming mug of coffee beside a hot muffin popped into my head.

Seconds later I was at the door, peering down the hall to make sure it was clear.

It was, so I tip-toed to my right towards what I remembered was the first doorway leading to the kitchen.

Everything was dead quiet. Outside it was bright, some time past dawn. I was choosing between two possible paths when suddenly I heard a door close ahead of me.

"I heard Demian got rid of another challenger," said a voice down the hall.

"Yeah, big surprise," came another. They were close. "The way he takes care of them, he'll wipe out the Meoden for us."

I backed against the wall and pulled my hood over my head.

They walked into the room without seeing me, and continued talking to the other end, I was too nervous to notice what about. When they disappeared out of view I let out a huge sigh and popped into the next hallway.

Uh oh. . . .

Groups of boys were moving up and down through the halls. I just stood there, frozen, as they brushed by, my panicked face hidden under my hood. It took me a while to realize no one was even noticing me. This made me think of my sister.

She always used to tell me that people didn't pay half as much attention to me as I worried they did. Whenever I doubted her she would do something crazy to prove herself right. Like break out into song with dozens of people around . . . it never worked, everyone *would* notice her.

I smiled inwardly at the memory, still more than subtly aware that I was surrounded by people.

In actuality I guess they didn't look too much different than me. Most were wearing robes. More than a couple at my same height. The ages seemed to range from about eight to twenty, with less on the higher end.

Taking a deep breath, I resumed walking down the hall, attempting to act casual until I found my way to the high-ceilinged, hundred cove, bed chamber. And on into the kitchen.

The large cafeteria was bustling with activity. The tables were dotted here and there with groups of boys. The middles of which held trays of pastries, fruit, and meat. I saw the coffeepot on top of the bar lined with people, no shot at a drink there.

I began to scan the crowd for a familiar face, when suddenly a tray was dropped into my hands. I looked up to see it had been given to me by a woman.

"Hi," she said in a pleasant voice. "You must be Eve."

She was beautiful. Curly, brunette, hair. Red-stained, though untreated, lips. Brown eyes. She wore a cloth-cut apron, with her hair pinned up in an elegant mess. All in all her appearance was quite awe-striking.

"Hello?" she repeated.

I blinked my eyes back into focus. "Yes, I'm Eve. Sorry."

She smiled again.

"How do you know who I am?"

"Well, my dear, it might get me in trouble . . . but I promise to tell you more if you take this tray to the bar for me and get yourself a nice cup of coffee."

I nodded once and couldn't help but smile at her warmness.

"Good! These boys should empty out of here in no time." She said and trotted off towards the stove.

I stood there for a few seconds, then shook my mind clear and headed for the counter.

After finding a seat off to the side I, waited for the room to clear. When it did I helped clean up a few things until finally I and the cooking lady were sitting with our muffins and coffee.

"I think you can take you hood down now," she said as she sipped her drink.

I did as she suggested before clearing my throat. "Are you Sophie?"

She nodded. "I see we have some mutual friends. One of which informed me of your position."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just smiled.

“You did a pretty good job this morning. I wouldn't mind the help if you wanted to stop by every once in a while.”

“I would love to,” I said excitedly, grateful to be included, though I did still have reservations about the only woman getting stuck with the cooking.

Her eyes sparkled. “Oh, and before you think otherwise I should let you know I chose to cook, it's my way of helping You see, I'm not much of a fighter and I haven't a speck of magic in me.”

Sounds familiar. I pictured myself in her position and my stomach dropped. *Come on Evelyn. You'd be lucky to stay around that long.*

“So where are you headed now?” asked Sophie.

I shrugged. “Well I'm supposed to meet Jaden at one o'clock . . . what time is it now?”

She swiveled her eyes to the top of her head. “I think it's just past nine.”

My muscles, which had been slowly tensing, now relaxed.

Three hours till one . . . not that I was scared or anything. My eyebrows raised in question against myself, then furrowed as I wondered if that was even possible.

“I suppose I don't have anything to do for a while,” I said. The thought came to mind that she might have been hinting for me to leave. “Why? Do I need to get out of here?”

She shook her head. “Oh no, my dear. I was just wondering if you wouldn't mind doing something for me.”

Ooh, like a quest? How exciting.

I nodded.

“It's nothing too interesting,” she paused. “There is a man that runs a small shop to the southwest of here. Not a very long ways off. I need you to go there and pick up an order for me.”

Sounds easy enough. “I can do that. What would you like me to pick up?”

“He should know what I need, just tell him Sophie sent you.” She stood up. “And don't worry about paying him. It's already taken care of.”

I stood up as well. “How exactly do I get there?”

“I'll show you to a side door; from there you'll see a dirt path. Just follow it a ways and you should be there in no time.” She nodded with a smile then turned toward the kitchen.

I followed behind her.

Well it's not the grandest of quests . . . but it beats waiting around till the doomsday meeting.

It didn't take long for Sophie to lead me outside the large cabin towards a barely visible path. Before she went inside, she'd warned me to be careful to stay near the road.

It sounded like something out of a scary story, only I wasn't stupid enough to go trotting off the path like people always did in those situations.

No. I kept to the path, humming as I walked. Soon my mind began to wander and eventually came to rest on Thoran.

The man had helped me, *saved* me actually, from those evil creatures in the other dimension. As soon as he had though, he'd seemed more upset at me than them.

I wonder what his life has been like. Leading this group. How did he start? When did he start?

I sighed. There was so much about so many people here I didn't know.

Give it up Evelyn. You don't have to have everything figured out. Just . . . go with the flow.

I smiled.

Like that'll ever happen.

“What the?—”

All of a sudden I felt a prick on my wrist. When I looked down I saw a tiny puff ball of fur with two eyes. I tried to get a better look, but before I could it scurried up my arm and down into my shirt.

The source of the creatures anxious behavior was evident moments later, as a heavy broom came swinging towards me. I jumped back and spared a glance at my attacker.

It was an old man, somewhat gangly, a crisp silver beard falling down his face. He wore a rich blue and purple satin robe with a pointy 'wizards' hat resting on his head.

None of this matched the half-crouched stance and cockeyed face he now held. He raised the bulky broom in the air once again and I put up both hands in surrender.

“Hold it,” I said. “Just, just wait a minute.”

He froze and stared at me, wide-eyed.

I cleared my throat. “Look, I don't want any trouble. I'm just trying to find my way to a shop around here.”

For a moment he looked surprised, but soon returned to his condescending glare. “Doubtful.” He said plainly. I waited for him to say more, when I was about to give up he continued. “*Very . . . doubtful.*” He nosed his broom towards my shirt. “Why would you be aiding and abetting such an unscrupulous creature if you were just looking for a shop?”

I tried to interrupt, but he cut me off.

“*Clearly . . . you are an evil Meodonic spy come to steal my powerful magics.*”

I shook my head repeatedly. “But I'm not. I'm looking for a shopkeeper. Sophie sent me to—”

“Sophie?” He repeated incredulously. “*Sophie* is not in the habit of sending girls to pick up anything. It's boys, boys, boys, boys, *always* boys! You expect me to believe

she's suddenly sending shady little girls?"

I searched my mind for an answer. "Umm . . . yes?"

He stared on hard with a disapproving face for a moment. Then, suddenly, it softened. "Oh. . . Well, okay then."

He threw the broom off into the trees and hobbled off into the direction he had appeared from.

I just stood there for a moment, slightly dumbfounded, then pulled my wits together and chased after the man.

"Excuse me," I said, now following the man at his heels.

"Yes?" he continued, moving quickly away from the path.

"Right. You mentioned something about Sophie, and I was wondering if you knew where the shop is."

He continued to look ahead. "Of course I know where it is. I own it after all."

I was a little surprised by this, though, now that I thought about it, I really shouldn't be.

After all, he is an old man . . . in the middle of the woods. . . How many of those could be running around?

I suddenly realized I had stopped moving and raced after the man once again. This time he led us over a bend where a smoking hut came into view, followed immediately by a potent wall of fragrance.

Standing on its own the building looked about as sprightly and eccentric as the old man. Dangling from all walls and ceiling were hundreds of different spices and herbs, vegetables, fruits, a bit of everything it seemed. Pots were piled in rows over a long line of fire. Each was producing its own distinct color and aroma. To the left I could see the familiar path meeting the front of the hut and to the right was a small, neatly kept, garden. Finally, and most curious of all, a small flock of pale blue and violet sheep grazed on the vibrant green grass next to the garden.

I took all this in with a gulp and watched as the man in the hat began pulling a variety of items from the walls and throwing them exuberantly into a pile. I stopped far enough away that I was sure nothing would be flying into my head and waited silently.

Maybe I was too hard on the old people back in Tiver . . . I had always thought they were strange but they didn't hold a candle to this guy.

Baa.

I turned around to follow the noise and caught site of the purple sheep again. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh, you think they're funny do you?"

I spun back around to the old man who had stopped his tossing.

"You just think everything here is a big joke? *My life's work* a laughing matter?"

Taking into the account my recent unsuccessful replies, I was a little afraid to answer. I shook my head. “No, not at all. I think it's brilliant and . . . and wonderfully magical.”

Okay, Evelyn, that was just corny.

“Wonderfully magical?” he repeated then put his fingers to his chin in consideration. Finally a wide smile crossed his face. “Wonderfully magical . . . I like that. Tell me your name strange and possible evil girl.”

I was kinda starting to get used to this guy. “Eve, it's Eve.”

“Pfft,” he laughed. “Ridiculous. Your name shall be Evangeline and I . . .” he cleared his throat. “. . . am Adzamaruha. Meaning: lord of wisdom . . . only backwards.”

“Huh?”

He threw out a hand. “Do not interrupt! People I like may call me Adzama. You, Evangeline, have not yet earned this privilege.”

With that he flung one last item onto the pile, knelt down, loaded it into a small pack, and handed it to me. “Off with you now, Evangeline. I have a long search ahead of me and can no longer be bothered.”

At a complete loss for words I nodded slowly, turned around, and started down the path. After a few seconds curiosity got the better of me. I turned around.

“What is it you have to search for, umm . . . Adzamaruha?”

He yelled back through the trees. “A broom, someone seems to have stolen mine . . . most likely an evil Meoden spy.”

For a moment I thought I'd remind him that he flung it out into the trees when we'd first met. But instead I thought better of it, turned around, and just kept walking.

○

Clash! Metal banged against metal as a Meoden scout tried to block an incoming blow. He was no match for his attacker's strength and the glowing green blade forced the Meoden's sword down into its own throat.

“Thorán, behind you!” yelled Cornelius.

Without thinking, Thorán flipped his sword around him, slicing through the gut of two oncoming Meoden. Huffing loudly he looked at Cornelius. “You see why I need you with me?”

Cornelius's brow furrowed. “Maybe, but I could think of a better time to argue this.”

At that he pointed to another Meoden soldier . . . this one wasn't alone. Following behind him was a heavy, four-legged, beast covered in the metallic skin native to the Meoden. Chains hung upon the animal like a cloak, linked at the top to two oversized horns. Its fiery eyes burned bright behind tufts of steam that rose out of the creatures

nostrils.

Thoran threw his weapon to Cornelius. "You get the little one, and I'll get the big one."

Cornelius caught the sword in one hand. "Next time we run into a campsite while scouting, let's stick to just that, *scouting!*" Almost robotically he held out his hand until it glowed with yellow wisps, then shot it out to his and Thoran's feet.

"Thank you," sang Thoran, before charging off toward the great beast. Cornelius was already heading in the direction of the Meoden soldier.

The two men were quick, and their movements were marked with an obvious agility. Cornelius reached his target first. With a cry he parried two blows then flipped the sword hilt around in his hand, bashing the Meoden duly on the top of its head.

Thorán leapt unnaturally high into the air and landed shakily on the large creature's back. Next he closed his eyes and, within a split second, flames sprouted from his hand and up his arm. He jabbed fiercely with his fist at the top of the beast's head.

Cornelius, who was still parrying off the soldier's attacks, quickly spun the sword around again, and knocked the Meoden unconscious.

Without exchanging words or even a look, Cornelius sent the sword flying into the air towards Thoran. The man caught it easily with his free hand.

By now the beast had built up speed, seemingly headed for a wall to brush Thoran off against. The moment Thoran caught the hilt of the sword though, he lifted his flaming arm off the creature's head and forced the sharp tip of the blade onto the same spot, down, and through the creature's skull.

Instantly the beast collapsed. The momentum kept him headed straight into a collision with the stone. Thoran jumped backwards before this, then flung his sword up and around to rest on his soldiers.

"What was that?" started Cornelius who was moving closer to Thoran. "You normally display a complex series of aerial acrobatics in such a situation . . . you're just jumping *backwards* now?"

Thorán waited for Cornelius to reach him then put a hand on his shoulder.

"My friend, there are some things I think I am ready to leave for the next generation."

"Yes, well . . . I know of a couple that do a fine job of it already."

Thorán half nodded in agreement, before they both turned to look at the dead beast.

After a moment a smirk crossed Thorán's face.

"Can you imagine what those two would had been like if that girl had stayed around?"

Cornelius's face contorted, but before Thorán could notice a silky voice drifted from on top of the wall.

"Well, look what we have here."

The two men turned up, all humor forgotten.

“Sylvanus.” Thoran uttered the name like a curse.

“Nice to see you too, Thoran. Cornelius.” He nodded to each in turn. “I’m going to have fun telling Demian about how I found you two standing over the corpses of an entire camp. And with a healthy young Kelkar as well.” He regarded the creature with a half-cocked frown, then began sauntering back and forth along the wall.

“You know bloody well we’re within our rights to attack a camp this far out, Sylvanus. And unless you want a sword through your gut, I suggest you get across the boundaries as fast as your decrepit legs will allow.”

Sylvanus stopped his pacing and leaned his head towards Thoran. “Is that supposed to scare me? You wouldn’t *dare!*”

Thoran’s voice grew louder. “Just get out of my sight, Sylvanus! I have enough of your exploits to bring up at the next meeting to get you expelled from the council as it is!”

Cornelius held out a staying hand to Thoran.

Sylvanus laughed wickedly. “Oh . . . you’re talking about that *girl!* I figured you’d found her after I came across the dead scouts near her scent. She was a pretty one, wasn’t she? In fact that’s why I’m out here. I couldn’t quite get her off my mind, so I went to Tiver to check in on her. Imagine my surprise when I found that she wasn’t there.”

“So, what? Are you guys just keeping her locked up in your little cabin for entertainment?”

Thoran’s eyes shifted to Cornelius for a moment then back to Sylvanus.

“Let’s go. This worm can stay here and rot.”

As they headed out of the camp, Sylvanus yelled after them.

“It’s a shame I lost the girl when I did. We would have had so much . . . *fun.*”

He didn’t stop laughing until the two men were out of sight.

ن

Somehow I found my way back to the lodge and delivered the package to Sophie, who in turn forced me to eat a small snack. It wasn’t until I was back in the secluded study that I remembered a certain creature had latched onto me back in the woods.

“Oh my God!”

I instantly jumped up and started checking my clothing for a smashed little ball of fur.

After a few seconds of searching I decided that he must have jumped off a while ago and plopped back onto the couch.

When I left Sophie it was twelve-thirty, just half an hour till one. I started twiddling my fingers nervously around each other.

I wonder if I could just hide for a while and pretend I forgo-

My body flinched. Something behind me had just made a chirping sound.

I turned my head around, expecting to see a stray bird. But the study was empty. Nothing could have escaped since the only entrance was the hall door which was currently closed.

I shook out my head to clear my mind and suddenly the chirping began again, this time it didn't stop.

I stood up and turned around a few times before I realized the squeaking was following behind me. I reached towards the back of my head and felt down into the hood of my robe. Sure enough my fingers grazed a patch of velvety hair that I knew belonged to the creature from the woods.

Before I could think of what to do the little guy went crawling up around my arm, onto my head, and soaring off in a gliding leap through the air. I barely saved him from hitting the ground before he went leaping off again, this time onto the bookcase.

He landed and, with what seemed like a last defiant action, turned his large eyes towards me, chirped loudly, and disappeared into the wall of books.

I just sat there, dumbfounded once again.

Between the old man and this crazy creature I was starting to look forward to seeing Jaden.

Darn it, I can't just leave it in there, it could wreck Cornelius books. . . . Then I'll be the one in trouble. They'll kick me out, never let me come back, and I'll end up dying an old, miserable, spinster.

I have to find that little fuzz ball!

With dire determination I began to stack the books onto the floor and hunt for the creature.

After clearing out the bottom shelf, I leaned into the floor and laid my head on the ground to see if I could spot my furry friend.

It was at this point, the worst of times, when I heard a forced cough behind me.

My eyes rolled into the back of my head as I remembered who I was meeting at one.

I instantly wanted to join the creature hidden safely in the bookcase. Instead, I cocked my head around and followed brown laced boots up to dark solid eyes hidden beneath a shroud of pieced hair.

. . . This position pretty much summed up how I felt around Jaden all the time.

“Having fun down there?” he asked coolly.

I smiled, mostly because that's what I do when I'm nervous.

With a smirk, he threw out a hand to help me up.

I studied it. I knew what was coming, a long chat about how I *wasn't* capable of doing

magic. He was starting to make me feel vulnerable, and I don't like feeling vulnerable.

I took his hand to lift myself up, but let go immediately.

He looked even more amused at this. "Why don't we go sit down."

I had no reason to argue and, tired or not, he still intimidated the heck out of me.

We both sat and his face became solemn.

"Look." He held out his hands. "I think we both know why I needed to talk to you." My eyes turned down. "The fact is, if you could use the magic that Ikovos was trying to teach you, you already would have."

Knowing hadn't helped, it hit me hard all the same.

"I . . . we only tried for a few hours yesterday. Maybe I just need more time." I looked into his eyes pleadingly, but found no condolence.

"No. If you can, you can and vice versa, that's how it works. You're just wasting Ikovos's time if you continue."

I pressed on. "Maybe it's different for me, maybe because I'm older or . . ."

"Or maybe because you're a girl you're incapable." He stared hard as he said this, only the slightest hint of humor left visible. My heart rose high in my chest.

"*Incapable?* I'd watch who you call incapable considering I just beat you yesterday at sparring!"

Oh, he didn't like that.

"*You, beat me?*" He leaned forward in his seat. "I wasn't even trying! . . . not to mention you shouldn't have even been sparring in the first place."

"Excuse me!? *You* were the one that asked!"

"Yeah, but I didn't think you would say yes. Why don't you act like a normal girl and go clean or something, or better yet go fix that crazy hair of yours!"

My eyes narrowed wildly. "You know I understand that you don't want me here, that you *haven't* wanted me here since the beginning. But that doesn't give you the right to say whatever you want to me!" I stood up till I was looking down at him. "And as for Ikovos, he seems plenty happy to be spending time teaching me!"

Jaden jumped up and pointed a finger. "I think I know my best friend a little better than *you* do!"

"Is that so? Well, then, maybe you should take some pointers from him! How about noticing that I'm in a new place, with a bunch of people I just met, trying something I've never done before, and possibly offering a little support?! *No!* Instead you just test me, ignore me, *insult* me, then tell me I can't do anything just because I'm a girl!"

He grabbed my shoulders. "Look! The only reason I had you meet me here in the first place was to tell you that I think you can use offensive magic!"

I opened my mouth to argue until I realized what he had just said. He just stood there staring at me, inches away from my face.

My chest was heaving drastically and my heart was racing, I could still feel his hands on my shoulders.

In that instant the door creaked and we both turned our heads to see it open.

I didn't get the chance. Jaden practically knocked me over letting go of my shoulders and widening the space between us. He adopted a cool face and cleared his throat as the door opened, when it did all signs of serenity left him. I looked over and saw why.

There in the doorway stood Thoran. A look of utter annoyance backed by determination resided on his face.

He turned first to Jaden. "Go get the horses and bring them to the side door."

Jaden gave a curt nod then walked out of the room past Cornelius, who was standing behind Thoran. It must have been because I yelled, but I felt upset when I saw him go . . .

Ugh. Focus, Evelyn.

"And now to you."

I turned my attention back to Thoran. The fight I'd just had with Jaden leading straight into this was all a bit much for me. I felt like I was in a daze, or maybe I was just trying to deny the inevitable.

"I am not going to play games with you, child. It is time for you to go home. "

My heart sank. "What am I doing wrong? Why do I have to leave?"

Thoran sighed. "This is no place for you. It should never have been an option." He spared a glance at Cornelius. "It was unfair for some to let you think that this was ever a possibility."

I looked down again, then quickly back up to search Cornelius's face for support.

There was nothing but sorrowed acceptance.

After all the fighting, all the close calls, it was over, I was going home.

Moments later I found myself outside with Thoran and Cornelius. I guessed we were waiting for Jaden to bring the horses. The weather was nice, contradicting my own condition. It was a few hours past midday and the wind was cool.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned around to see Cornelius.

"It will be alright, my dear, you will see. I know that there is a great destiny ahead of you."

I glanced back up at him and forced a smile. "I hope so. . . . Thank you, Cornelius, for everything." Before emotion could overtake me, I turned around to face the forest.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Jaden approaching with two horses. The smaller one was from the day before. The other was different, speckled with grey and silver. When they were close enough, Thoran hopped onto the latter.

Part of me didn't know why I was giving in so easily. Maybe because I didn't think I stood a chance with Thoran. Maybe after arguing with Jaden I felt that everything was

just too much. . . .

I walked over to the horse. Jaden offered a hand up. I took it, flipped onto the saddle, and grabbed the reigns. Thoran was talking quietly ahead with Cornelius.

“Well, it looks like you got what you wanted.” I glanced back at Jaden after I said this, but his face was expressionless, he wasn't even looking at me.

I heard Thoran clap his heels and, in that moment, was all the happy to follow.

I shouldn't have said that . . . I think I was being too hard on him.

We moved briskly into the forest. I didn't look back once, I just concentrated on keeping pace with Thoran.

Of course I was being too hard on him! I only said that to protect myself. I still couldn't believe he came today to tell me he thought I could use magic. . . .

Forget it. It doesn't matter now.

For the next couple of hours I tried to keep my mind clear, concentrating solely on following Thoran. But my thoughts started up again when Tiver came into view.

We were on a hill high above the little city, about half a mile away. The sun had set just moments ago and the warm lights of Tiver appeared welcoming against the cool blue landscape.

Thoran slowed his pace to a stop on the hilltop. I came up beside him.

“You know, there is a lot of good to be done down there, a lot of people that need help.”

I stared down absently as the wind blew my hair. “Maybe there are . . . but no one in Tiver wants help . . . especially not from me.”

Normally I would not be so honest with my feelings, but there was nothing to lose. I doubted I'd ever see this man again.

Thoran sighed heavily. “There just isn't a place for you in our world. I could never guarantee your safety.”

I looked back at him. “I don't want safety. I want a reason to live. Do you know what it's like not to have one? “

There was a pause. The man turned down. “You'd better get going before it gets dark. I'll watch from here.”

That's it. No more arguing, Evelyn. I leaned to get off the horse.

“No, you can take it. Just leave it in the stables.”

I nodded once then began the descent towards Tiver. It wasn't until I was lying in my own bed that I realized I never said goodbye.