

Ella Eris and the Pirates of Redemption

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By Albert Berg

Prologue

The thief stumbled across the rough ground gasping for breath. He knew now that he had made a mistake, a horrible deadly mistake. He risked a glance behind him, but he saw only darkness. How much longer did he have before the thing caught up with him? He knew he had to keep moving. If he could make it till dawn he might still have a chance. How long had he been running? How long till that pink glow filled the sky in the east?

His thoughts ran together, melted themselves into a stream of pure fear. *Make it till sunrise, run from the darkness, the darkness within darkness.* The thief ran.

He found himself stumbling down a steep incline, gaining speed with every step. He dug his feet into the loose soil to slow his descent, but he felt himself falling, tumbling forward, crashing headlong down the hill, finally skidding to a stop. He struggled to stand, but the effort sent a bolt of pain shooting through his left arm. He fell back to the ground screaming in agony, but his fear overcame the pain and he pushed himself up with his good arm and staggered forward again. His left arm hung useless by his side, twisted and hanging at an impossible angle. He turned his gaze away from the shattered limb, and pushed himself forward into the darkness. Every step created a new world of exquisite agony that shot up his arm and exploded in his head, but he pressed on fueled by fear, the fear of the darkness...the fear of death.

He looked back again, expecting to see those glowing red eyes looming over him at any moment. Then the earth disappeared from beneath his feet, and the thief fell, careening through open space, tumbling through the cool night air. For a long moment he felt free, falling, flying through the darkness with the cool night air rushing past him in a torrent, until at last it all ended with a sickening thump.

Chapter One

The sunlight trickled down through the leaves and branches of the trees, landing in spots and splotches on the leafy forest floor. A young girl sat in the subdued light with her back against a spreading oak, her eyes almost closed. A faint wind toyed with the folds of her dress, but beyond that she sat completely motionless.

She willed her racing heart to slow, measuring her breaths, filling her lungs as slowly as possible, exhaling so gently that her breath would not have disturbed a feather, she made herself as still and silent as a stone. The rough texture of the tree's bark bit into her back, and the root filled ground beneath her felt lumpy and uncomfortable, but these things mattered little to her.

The only thing that mattered was the raven. It stood less than three feet away from her pecking at the seed she had scattered on the ground. She had visited this spot every day for a week now, and each day the bird ventured a little closer. She knew it was the same bird by the distinctive scar over its left eye. The thought flitted through her mind that the raven might be toying with her, that it knew what she intended all along, but was drawing out the process as long as possible for inscrutable reasons of its own. Yesterday it had come close enough for her to reach out and touch it before it exploded into flight, leaving behind a single slender black feather that drifted erratically to the ground in front of her.

The bird hopped a few inches closer. She dared not even move her eyes in their sockets fearful they might make some sound and frighten the bird into flight. The bird hopped again. So close. Ella dared to look down at her hand lying limp and still on the forest floor, the palm pointed upward filled with seed. The raven hopped forward again, cocked its head to one side, then tentatively pecked at the seed in her hand.

Her hand twitched upward with the speed of a striking snake and grabbed the bird around the neck. The terrified animal squawked and flailed its wings, trying to twist its head and catch one of her fingers in its snapping beak, but Ella held firm.

She closed her eyes and saw the bird through the eyes in her hand. The hand saw so much more clearly. It saw the bird soaring in the morning air, and felt the rush of wind through its feathers. It saw beyond the body of the raven and saw its

Form. Black and majestic. Made for the skies. The Form. It filled her mind like water filling a hollow in the ground, seeping into every crack and crevice until her Form and the Form of the raven were one.

Then she opened her hand and released the bird. Its wings blurred into a flurry of black that lifted it into the air as it screeched back at her for the indignity it had suffered.

She watched until the bird was lost from sight, not knowing what to feel. She knew the step she was about to take could be dangerous. Her mother had warned her again and again. “People don’t understand, Ella,” she had said. “And they’re afraid of things they don’t understand. If people found out it could be... dangerous.”

And over the years Ella had respected her mother’s wishes. But in the past few months something had changed. She had always had the ability to Change, but now it was becoming something more, a desire, no, a need to use her talent that grew with each passing day. *This is what I am*, she thought. *I can’t go through life hiding from it.*

So she closed her eyes and focused on the Form of the bird. It was more than a shape. It was the essence of what the raven was. She opened her mind and let herself flow into it. It wasn’t something anyone had ever taught her. It couldn’t be taught, any more than a corpse could be taught to breathe, or a stone could learn to fly.

Ella opened her eyes and looked out through the eyes of the raven. The animal’s instincts meshed with her own thoughts as naturally as if she had been born in this body. She launched herself upwards, her wings beating hard against the air. She climbed through the porous canopy of leaves and branches and soared up into the sunlight. She flew higher and higher, far above the forest that grew up the side of the mountain. Below her the valley stretched out small and delicate, like a map brought to life. She saw wisps of smoke curling from the chimney of the blacksmith, and just up the road she saw Mr. Bartlett’s general store, an ugly brown building which always seemed to have everything they needed and nothing she wanted. And there on the outskirts of town stood the inn that she and her mother had called home for as long as she could remember. It had once seemed to her that the world could not extend far beyond the borders of the valley, but now she realized what a tiny piece of the world Caelum truly was.

The mountains went on and on like a rumpled blanket made of earth and stone, and far beyond that she saw the beginnings of a great plain.

She felt nearly intoxicated by the experience but, she knew she couldn't stay out too long without her mother suspecting the truth. But she couldn't bring herself to come down, not now, not yet, not while the unseen parts of the world were calling to her. She turned on the breeze and let it carry her down the valley away from Caelum, following the road that cut through the valley, and led to the outside world. It looked small and inconsequential winding through the vast expanse of mountains.

When she was younger she had spent countless hours watching the road for travelers, but they were rare and never stayed for very long. During the winter when the mountain passes filled with snow, there were no travelers at all, but now the warmth of spring had melted the sparkling drifts into icy water that fed down into the rushing mountain streams. But even with the snow gone the passes could be dangerous. She had heard that in some places the road was barely navigable in the best conditions.

Ella had never ventured down the path that connected the tiny town to the outside world, but looking down from her elevated vantage point Ella could see that the road was as dangerous as she had heard. Barely a mile outside of town the path took a sharp turn high up on the side of the mountain. Ella glided closer to the treacherous turn amazed at the gaping chasm that yawned below the rough road.

Then something caught her eye. From this distance it was hard to see, but there was something at the bottom of the cliff, a shape that didn't seem quite right. She glided in for a closer look, curious to find out what it was. Her curiosity turned to panic when she saw that the odd shape was the body of a man, crumpled and broken on the rocks. Ella flew faster now, beating her wings hard against the wind, pushing herself forward with every ounce of strength she had.

Even as she flew towards the body, part of her wanted to turn back. The man was almost certainly dead, and probably had been for some time.

Ella had only seen a dead body once before. When she was eight her mother had sent her to bring some supplies to an old man who lived like a hermit in a secluded stone cottage up the far side of the valley. It had been summer time and

by the time Ella found the body the stench was overwhelming. She hadn't stuck around for long, but the image of the old man sitting in his rocking chair, his eyes staring at nothing while flies swarmed over his pale skin had branded itself into her memory.

But as much as she wanted to turn back she knew she had to at least check, to be sure there was nothing she could do to help. And there was something else too - a kind of morbid curiosity lurking behind her other emotions, excited at the idea of seeing the touch of death again.

She swooped lower and lower until her flight brought her to the bottom of the cliff. Even before she changed back into herself she knew the man was dead. His limbs were twisted beneath him with angles in places that no joint existed and the ground beneath his head was stained with the rust brown of dried blood. Ella crept closer, swallowing the fear creeping up in her throat and reminding herself that there was nothing less dangerous than a dead body.

Then she noticed the man's clothes for the first time. They were unlike anything she had ever seen before. The material, if it could be called that, was black. Ella had a black dress that she hardly ever wore because it was a bit too small for her now, but that kind of black was only pretending to be the black that the dead man's clothes were made of. It was a magical color, as if someone had captured the essence of midnight and spun cloth from it. Ella reached out and brushed her fingers against it, to assure herself it was real, then quickly withdrew her hand horrified at having touched the corpse.

She sat there for a moment, not moving, barely breathing, just looking at the dead man. She knew he could not have been dead for very long. The body hadn't started to stink yet, and only a smattering of flies flitted around the corpse, feasting on the clotted blood and clustering around the unblinking eyes, eyes that stared out at nothing, frozen in an eternal expression of terror. Ella looked up at the cliff above and imagined the fall, the sickening feeling of rushing air and the ground coming up beneath you.

Who are you? she thought, *and how did you get here?* The nearest town was more than twenty miles down the road, too far for anyone travel on foot in the dead of night.

Ella pushed the questions to the back of her mind. She couldn't stay here much

longer. She had already been gone for nearly an hour and the return trip would take several minutes at the least. Still, she couldn't leave the body to rot and dry in the sun, exposed to the vultures and other scavengers that would pick the bones clean in a matter of weeks. She fought back her revulsion, grabbed the dead man by his cloak, and dragged the body against the cliff wall. Then she started to cover the mangled form with the loose rocks that littered the ground at the base of the cliff.

She was almost finished when she noticed that the dead man was clutching something in his hand. She looked closer and saw a small loop of silver chain emerging from between the fingers of the dead man's fist. She tugged at it experimentally but the dead man's grasp had tightened in death and she couldn't budge the chain. Even as she pried the stiff cold fingers open she told herself that this was none of her business, that she should just leave it alone.

Then the chain fell to the ground with a musical tinkling sound, and Ella saw what the man had been clutching. It was a small black ring. She grasped the it between her fingers and held the it up to the light.

She was immediately struck by how heavy it felt, almost impossibly heavy for an object so small. As first she thought it might be made from obsidian or some strange black metal but she quickly realized that the ring was something far stranger. It hung in the air as black as a slice of pure darkness. If Ella had thought the man's robes were black, then this was something different entirely. She reached out brushing the ring with her fingers and watched it swing back and forth. It was odd how the ring seemed not to reflect the light as if it were less than solid, less than real.

In the distance she heard the clop-clop of horse hooves coming up the path above her, and the groaning of a wagon's wheels rolling along behind. Ella pressed herself against the cliff wall and waited for the sound to pass overhead. When it was silent again, she hurriedly worked to finish covering the body, the ring still hanging from the chain in her left hand.

She had to hurry back. She had already been gone too long. She looked at the ring again.

What are you doing Ella? she asked herself. *It doesn't belong to you.*

It belongs to me as much as anybody, she countered. *W_hy shouldn't I take it?_*

It looks dangerous. Leave it here.

But she didn't. She slipped the chain over her head and tucked the ring into the collar of her dress. Again she was stuck by how heavy the thing seemed hanging there, pulling the chain so that the fine links bit into her neck.

She turned back to her task and continued piling stones over the body until she was sure it was safe from scavengers. When she had finished she looked down at the pile of rocks and bid a silent farewell to a man she had never known.

Chapter Two

Ella let her mind rest on the Form of the bird, and felt herself flow into it. She took off and flew as fast as she could.

Within fifteen minutes she touched down in the clearing, and changed back into herself. She sprinted down the path towards the town, slowing down only to wobble her way over the log that bridged the swollen brook. When she came in sight of the inn she slowed to a walk, and tried to affect an expression of nonchalance that she hoped would deflect any suspicions her mother might have. When she reached the inn she paused then opened the back door door and stepped into the dining hall. The room was empty, but that was hardly unusual.

She poked her head into the adjoining kitchen expecting to find her mother nursing a pot of stew, but was surprised to find that it was empty as well. Then she heard the sound of muffled voices and footsteps floating down from above her. She climbed the creaky wooden stairway up to the second floor of the inn where three thinly furnished rooms usually sat empty waiting for some rare traveler in need of shelter to occupy them. She found her mother in the hallway talking to a man Ella had never seen before.

“Oh there you are dear. I was just telling our guest that I was starting to wonder where you’d got to.”

“I must have lost track of time,” Ella replied, smiling in what she hoped was a disarming way. “The weather’s so beautiful this time of year.”

“Aye, the spring air in these mountains is as sweet as honey,” said the newcomer. “Somethin’ about things growing after the winter gives things a different feel. Like the whole world walkin’ with a spring in its step.”

“This is Julius, Ella,” her mother said. “He’ll be staying the night with us. Julius, this is my daughter Ella.”

Julius extended his hand and Ella shook it. He was a large man, but perhaps not big enough to be called fat. He had dark blue eyes, a nose several sizes too large for his face and a shiny bald head with a single wisp of white hair at the very top.

“Pleased to meet you Mr. Julius.”

Julius leaned down and whispered in her ear, but loud enough her mother to hear, “I’d prefer you skip the ‘mister’ part. Makes me feel old you know.”

Ella smiled, although in that moment she found herself trying to determine how old he really was with little success.

“Okay then. Julius. How long will you be staying here in Caelum?”

“I’m just passing through on my way to the coast. The next town is almost a whole day’s journey down the road, so I thought I’d stop here and save myself the trouble of bedding down under the stars.”

“It’s a good thing you did,” said Ella’s mother. “That road is dangerous even during the day and at nighttime it can be deadly.”

Ella caught herself nodding, thinking of the dead man. Her mother went on talking without taking notice.

“You’ll be sure to take extra care when you leave tomorrow Mr. Julius -Oh I’m sorry, I mean just Julius.”

“It’s okay ma’am,” Julius said. “I appreciate the concern. I’ll be sure and keep an eye out for trouble.”

“Well, come along Ella,” her mother said. “We should be getting lunch ready,” she turned back to Julius. “Will you be joining us?”

Julius grinned. “Never say no to food ma’am. I’ll be there.”

Ella followed her mother downstairs, where she spent the next few minutes helping her mother get things ready. The inn’s primary purpose was to provide a place for the people of the town to meet and eat. Although they did have rooms to accommodate travelers, they were rarely used, even in the spring and summer months. Caelum was a fairly obscure town, and most travelers followed the northern roads, which took the long way around the mountains but were far easier to navigate.

Ella’s thoughts wandered again to the dead man. He might have stayed at the inn

if things had been different. She tried to imagine him as he might have been when he was alive. That face, smiling and laughing as he ate at the table. The image suddenly made his death seem more real and tragic, like she imagined death was supposed to feel. Her mother's voice interrupted her reverie.

"What's wrong dear? You look worried."

Ella put on a smile and shook her head. "No I'm not worried. I guess I was just thinking."

"Oh? About what?"

Ella paused then answered, "I was thinking about death."

"Oh," her mother said, looking a bit surprised. "Well that is serious. May I ask what could have brought on such a morbid train of thought?"

Ella shrugged. "I don't know," she lied.

"Thinking of anyone's death in particular?"

"Not really. I guess it's just a scary thought. That one day your life ends and there's nothing left."

"Well don't let it bother you too much dear. Hopefully you won't have to worry about it for a good long while."

"Some of us will have to worry about starving to death if we don't get some lunch soon," said a gruff voice from the kitchen doorway.

Ella's mother turned from her cooking to face the voice's owner. "If you don't have enough manners to know not to listen at my kitchen door, I have half a mind not to serve you Zebadiah." The words were harsh, but the tone was not. Ella doubted her mother could ever be really angry with the man who had spoken. Even before she turned Ella had his face in her mind. It was an old face with more wrinkles than the mountains had valleys and it belonged to Zebadiah Jones.

"No harm meant, Miss Eris," Zebadiah said quickly. "I was just hungry, and I s'pose my curiosity got the better of me."

“Well go and sit down, and Ella will bring your food out directly,” said Ella’s mother.

Zebadiah nodded quickly and disappeared around the door. Ella knew without being told what the old man would have: a pot of stew and some water. Elle dished the stew into a bowl, and filled a wooden goblet with water. She brought them both out and put them in front of the old man.

“Thankee,” he said. “Thankee very much.”

Zebadiah dipped his spoon into the bowl of steaming stew and stuffed it into his mouth. “So what’s got yer mind thinking on the Specter Miss Ella?” he mumbled, his mouth opening slightly to reveal the half chewed food inside.

“The Specter?” Ella asked confused. “What’s that?”

Zebadiah washed down the mouthful of stew with a gulp of water and said, “You know. The Specter, the Ferryman, the Reaper of Souls. Death.”

Ella shook her head. “I don’t understand. You’re saying death is a person?”

“Well not a person as such. I guess its just superstition. Not much worth talking about really,” he said, taking another bite of stew.

But by now Ella was intrigued, and she wasn’t about to be put off that easily. “Tell me about it,” she insisted, sitting with her back to the table on the bench next to the old man.

And Zebadiah, whom Ella had never known to pass up the opportunity to tell a story, smiled and said, “Well if you insist. Though truly there’s not much to tell. Its more of an idea than anything else, the Specter is. A very old idea.”

“How old?”

“Older than anyone could ever know. As old as death I reckon. But the old ideas have power and this one goes a ways back. Back to the beginning maybe. You see, every living thing has a soul. It’s like the thing inside you that’s really you, that makes you alive. But the thing about the soul is that it don’t die when the body dies. It sort of hangs around with nothin’ to do. And that’s where the Specter comes in. The old legends say that he collects the souls of the dead and

takes them far over the sea to the Island of the Dead.”

“And what happens then?” Ella asked.

Zebadiah shrugged. “Dunno. I reckon I’ll have to die to find out. I don’t s’pose it’ll be too much longer, for an old codger like me eh?” he said laughing.

“That’s not funny,” Ella said.

“No, maybe not. But it don’t do to worry too much about it before it happens. Besides Ella, none of us lives forever in this world and nothing’s gonna change that. Best do the most you can with the life you have.”

“Ella,” her mother’s called from the kitchen, “Can you come in here and peel these potatoes for me?”

“Yes, ma’am. Coming,” Ella replied. She left Zebadiah with his stew and went back into the kitchen where a pile of potatoes sat on the table. Ella picked up a knife and started peeling the dry brown skin off the potatoes all the while thinking about what Zebadiah had said. Was it true? Was there really someone or something that came for you after you were dead? What happened after that? And then she thought of the old man’s words. “*I reckon I’ll have to die to find out.*”

She finished peeling the potatoes and gave them to her mother who was just pulling a loaf of bread out of the oven.

“Thank you, Ella. I think I heard our new guest come down. Would you go and see what he’d like to eat?”

Ella looked into the dining room and saw that Julius *was* there, sitting across the table from Zebadiah, talking with the old man as if he had known him for years.

“I didn’t know there was any kind of mining operation in these parts,” Julius was saying.

“Well, there was,” Zebadiah answered. “That’s how this town, if you can call it that, came to be out here in the middle of nowhere. Some old prospector discovered gold in these parts and next thing you know this lot sprang up.”

“And then?”

“Gold ran out,” Zebadiah explained. “And everyone left. Well most everyone anyway.”

“And the rest?”

Zebadiah shrugged. “There’s always a few folks that like to be away from civilization for one reason or another. I’m the only one still left that fools with the mine at all.”

“Ever find anything?”

“Oh, the odd nugget here and there. Mostly I just do it to keep myself occupied.”

“Excuse me,” Ella said, “I don’t mean to interrupt, but mother wanted me to find out what you wanted to eat Mr. Julius.”

” I’ll have some of that stew,” Julius said pointing to the wooden bowl in front of Zebadiah, “If there’s any left, that is.”

” I’m sure there is,” Ella said. The pot of stew was still warming on the stove, and Ella ladled it into another bowl and brought it out.

“Thank you Ella,” Julius said when she set it in front of him. “I hadn’t realized how hungry I was until I smelled that home cookin’.”

“Best chow for miles,” Zebadiah said.

“Care to join us Miss Ella?” Julius said.

Ella shrugged. “I guess I can.”. She went into the kitchen and poured a bowl of stew for herself, then joined Julius and Zebadiah at the table. When she returned, Zebadiah was asking Julius where he was from.

“Well I was born in Riparia,” Julius said, “but these days I don’t claim any land as my home. Most of my time is spent travelin’.”

” But what do you do?” Ella asked.

Julius shrugged. “Odds and ends,” he said. “At the moment I’m in the transport

business. There's always someone who needs somethin' moved from here to there."

"Sound's interesting," said Zebadiah.

"Can be," Julius agreed, "but it can also be risky. There's thieves, bandits, the odd goblin, here and there. Some of 'em want your cargo and some just want trouble."

"You've fought a goblin?" Zebadiah asked with an incredulous edge in his voice.

"Well to tell you the truth I ran away from him," Julius admitted. "But I didn't lose the load, my horses, or most importantly, my life."

"What's a goblin?" Ella asked.

"Nasty buggers," Zebadiah said. "Green skin, sharp claws, lotsa teeth, and generally ugly as sin."

"Seen one?" Julius asked.

"Only once, but that was plenty let me tell you."

"Tell us about it," Ella pleaded, but Zebadiah pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Not today lass. I've got to get back to the mine. At my age if I don't keep movin' my body might forget it's not dead yet."

Zebadiah said his goodbyes and shuffled out of the room. Just after he left Ella's mother came in from the kitchen. "I trust my daughter isn't boring you Mr. Julius," she said.

"No, no, Mrs. Eris, not at all"

"It's 'Miss'," Ella's mother corrected.

"Oh, I beg your pardon ma'am." Julius began to apologize, but Ella's mother dismissed it with a wave of her hand, and a polite smile.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “Did you find the room to your liking?”

Ella picked up her empty bowl and left the two adults to their discussion. She knew how these conversations went. It amazed her how people could talk and not really say anything. She washed her bowl out in the kitchen and climbed to the inn’s attic. This was Ella’s territory, a world apart where she could look down on things from a disaffected vantage point. She had always loved the attic. It had a spacious feel to it though the slanting ceiling could make things seem cramped at times.

There were only a few pieces of simple furniture in the room. Her bed was pushed close to the slanting ceiling, and near the mouth of the stairs, a simple writing desk sat in front of the attic window that looked out over the town. At the far end of the room a simple wooden box which served as a wardrobe stood against the wall.

She shut the door behind her and sat down at her desk feeling excited and a little anxious. She reached for the chain around her neck, pulled it up over her head and stared at the ring dangling at the end. She paused for a moment then unclasped the chain and slipped the ring off into her palm. She turned it over and over in her fingers feeling the improbable weight of the thing. This was no ordinary ring. From the very moment she had seen it Ella had known that. Was it magic? Did it have something to do with how the man in black had died?

It must have been very important, Ella thought remembering how tightly the dead fingers had been clenched around the ring.

Yes, important, a second thought echoed back *and probably dangerous too*.

But what’s an adventure without danger?

The thought had been growing in Ella’s mind like a cloud changing in the sky. It could have been forming since she first saw the ring, or it might have only popped up in that instant, but once it had lodged in her mind there was no denying it. The ring was an adventure waiting to happen. She had to know where it would take her. For a moment she wavered, but only for a moment, and then, with trembling hands, she slipped the ring onto her finger.

Chapter Three

A moment passed, then another. Nothing. Ella felt a twinge of disappointment, although she wasn't sure what she had expected to happen. A bright flash of light perhaps? No, of course not. Nevertheless, she had expected something to be different. And then slowly, she realized something was different. It was like a word that she knew but couldn't quite remember scratching at the back of her mind trying to get in.

It's coming.

Ella started. The words had not been spoken. They hadn't even been words exactly, just an idea formed in her mind, but not by her mind. *It's coming? What is it?* A nameless feeling of apprehension formed in her mind. Whatever it was she was certain she didn't want to be around when it got here.

She shivered involuntarily although the air was far from cold. Suddenly she didn't want adventure any more. She grasped the ring on her finger and pulled. But her fingers slipped on the black surface as if it were covered in oil. She tried again, gripping the ring tighter this time with no success. She fought down a wave of panic rising in her throat as she tried a third time.

What's happening. Why won't it come off?

It's not so bad, she tried to reason with herself, it's just a ring.

But she knew that she was lying to herself. She tried again and again to remove the ring but it staid on her finger as firmly as if it had grown roots into her skin. Frustrated she got up from the desk, went over to her bed and lay down. She closed her eyes, and forced herself to breath slowly and stay calm. Breath in, breath out, slow. Calm.

It's coming.

Panic washed over her again. She had to get it off. It was coming for her, coming for the ring. What was coming? She sat up resting her head on her hands, trying to make sense of her thoughts.

“Ella?” she heard her mothers voice through the door. “Are you okay?”

No I'm not okay. I've put on this ring and I can't get it off and now there's something in my head and I don't know what it is, but I'm afraid and something's coming for me! “I'm fine.”

“Can I come in?”

Ella thought of saying no but then rejected that idea. It would only arouse her mother's suspicions. “Sure.”

The door swung open with a quiet creak and Ella looked up at her mother. The look on her face was difficult to read. A quiet sadness mixed with concern and possibly something else.

There was a long moment when neither of them said anything. “Did you need me for something?” Ella finally asked.

“No, not really.” Her mother sighed and crossed the room and sat beside Ella on the bed. “I just wanted to talk to you.”

“What about?”

“You changed today didn't you?”

Ella was shocked. How could she know? She considered denying the charge but decided against it. Her mother didn't look angry and to be honest she really wanted to talk to someone about it. She nodded.

Her mother closed her eyes tightly and Ella saw tears welling up in the corners. “I'm sorry mom-”

“Don't be sorry sweetheart,” her mother put her arm around Ella's shoulder's pulling her closer. “Maybe I'm the one who should be sorry.”

“What do you mean?”

“I've tried to protect you from what you are. I thought if I could convince you to ignore your nature that maybe it wouldn't matter. I was just afraid of...”

“Afraid of what?”

Her mother paused for a moment before answering. “You know I’ve never told you before how much you remind me of my sister.”

“Your sister?” Ella was listening intently now. Her mother never spoke of her family. The few times Ella had tried to bring it up, her mother had quickly changed the subject.

“Yes. I’ve never told you about her, but she was a special person, just like you.”

” Was she a changeling too?”

Her mother shook her head. “No, she had other...talents.”

” Like what?”

” She could see things. Things that hadn’t happened yet.”

” You mean like a fortune teller?”

“Not exactly. Most of them are frauds anyway, and the even the real ones don’t see the future in the same way that my sister did.”

“What do you mean?”

“Her visions had a grander scope than simply being able to tell someone who they would marry or when they would die. She could see...everything. She said that the world would soon change, that a great battle was coming. But much of what she said was vague at best, and it was easy enough for people to ignore as the ramblings of an imaginative child. Even I was unsure of whether she could really know the things she said she knew. But there was something about her that made it difficult not to believe her, a look in her eyes that said ‘I have seen the ending’. It made her seem old, far older than she was.”

“And what happened?”

“Gradually, her prophecies became more and more specific. She began to speak against the king’s son. She said he would bring darkness to the world. Of course most people continued to ignore her, but the king wasn’t amused. He sent

emissaries demanding that my sister cease her prophecies.”

“Did she?”

“If anything their threats made her more fervent in her pronouncements. Then when she was seventeen it happened.”

“What?” asked Ella, dreading the answer she could feel was coming.

“The king brought charges of sedition against her. They found her guilty and carried out her execution. She was burned alive.”

Ella heard her mother’s voice crack, looked over and saw tears welling up in her eyes. Ella put her arms around her mother, unsure of what to say, but her mother went on speaking, her voice strained but steady.

“That wasn’t the end of it. Once the king had a taste of blood he wanted more. There was no real legal ground on which to punish my parents but he worked through one of the prominent men of the town to stir up the people against our family.”

“Who would do something like that?”

“His name was Vilas Cole. He sat on the council of elders, and he was all too happy to help the king strike out against us.”

“Why? What did he have against you?” Ella asked.

Her mother shook her head. “Father never spoke of it, but I got the sense of an old feud between the two of them. Whatever it was, Vilas never forgot it.”

“How did it end?”

“Since Vilas Cole wasn’t able to bring any legal charges against my parents, he resorted to stirring up the people. He made speeches in the town square, accusing my family of all sorts of unbelievable things, and people started to believe him. It got so that almost no one would speak to us, and some merchants even refused to sell to us. Then one night Vilas Cole stirred up a mob against my family, and they decided to take justice into their own hands.”

“What happened?”

“They came to the street where we lived, and surrounded the house. They dragged my mother and father out and hanged them from the branches of the tree that grew in our yard.” Her voice cracked, and she started crying. Ella remained silent, partly out of respect for her mother’s grief but mostly because she didn’t know what to say. For several minutes Ella just held her mother close, and tried to comfort her. Finally her mother stopped crying, and after several minutes of silence Ella asked, “What happened to you?”

Her mother wiped the tears from her eyes and spoke slowly, haltingly, as if she might break down again at any moment. “Mother had sent me away to live with her family in the country. I didn’t hear about what had happened until several days later.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing at first. I was too devastated to even move for a few days. But gradually I began to see that I had to leave. I was safe enough with the people I was staying with but I wanted a fresh start, away from the people who had killed my sister and my parents. You were on the way then, and I decided I wanted you to have a chance at a different life. I didn’t want you to have to grow up in a place where anyone had any reason to hate you.”

“So you came here.”

“Yes. I didn’t tell anyone, just left in the middle of the night. I left money for the horse that I took and a note telling them not to worry, and since that day I haven’t looked back. I came here, to the farthest place the roads would take me. I suppose I was trying to hide, although I didn’t think of it that way at the time. Then when you were born I saw that you had the mark of Change, and I worried that I might have to lose you too, and I couldn’t bear it. That’s why I made you promise me not to change. But now I think I was wrong. You can only deny who you are for so long Ella, before it eats you from the inside. You’ve been given a gift. Use it wisely.”

Ella nodded although she wasn’t entirely sure she knew what her mother meant.

“I’m sorry I got so emotional. I haven’t really thought of it for years. I didn’t know it would still affect me so much.”

Ella squeezed her mother tighter trying to offer as much sympathy as possible. “I don’t mind. I never realized your life was so bad before you came here.”

“There were good times too,” her mother said with a smile. “Sometimes it’s just easier to remember the bad ones.”

Ella paused then asked the question that had been nagging at the back of her mind. “How did you know? About my changing I mean?”

“Sweetheart I’m your mother. Mothers know.”

Ella smiled, but in the back of her mind the voice from the ring was still speaking to her of approaching danger. *Do you know what’s in my head?* She was tempted to tell her mother about the ring but something held her back. She realized her mind was wandering and brought herself back to the present.

“I guess I’m just saying be careful,” her mother was saying, “but don’t be afraid to be who you are. You can only hurt yourself by hiding it inside for too long.”

“I’ll be careful,” Ella said. “Besides I’m not sure you could manage here without me,” she teased.

“I’m not sure I could either,” her mother answered in a more serious tone. “I have to get back to my cooking.”

“Unless you need my help, I think I’ll take a nap for a while,” Ella said.

“Alright dear. I’ll call you if I need you. Sweet dreams.” her mother said and softly left the room.

The Umbrali awakened. The darkness of night was not yet full, but it was enough that the burning sun had set. The Umbrali stepped out of the cave into the night air. A handful of stars glowed faintly over head but it had no need of their light. It was a creature born of darkness sewn together out of the fabric of midnight. The Umbrali raised its head, feeling the shape of the cool night air. The ring was out there...waiting. The hunt was on.

Ella woke up in her bed, shaking. For a moment she just lay there, unsure of what had disturbed her sleep. Then she remembered.

It's coming.

The thought was louder now, more insistent. It was getting closer. It wanted the ring. She tried again to remove the black band from her finger, knowing even as she did so that her efforts were futile. She sat up in bed and rubbed her head. This couldn't be happening. She tried in vain to convince herself that her mind was playing tricks on her.

It's coming.

She threw back the covers and got out of bed.

I'll never be able to get to sleep at this rate, she thought.

She lit the candle that stood on her desk, and its warm light flickered dimly against the attic walls. She went over to her bureau and put on a simple gray dress, ran her fingers through her hair to work out the snarls and tiptoed quietly downstairs. She wasn't sure where she was going but she thought that the night air might help to clear her thoughts. Outside the night sky was a clear, and a hint of chill hung in the air. Ella stood in the darkness for a moment, motionless, feeling as if she had heard someone far away speak in a voice that was barely a whisper, but it was nothing but the wind. She let her mind rest on the Form of the raven, felt herself fall into it as gently as a feather, and when the transformation was complete she launched herself into the sky.

The Umbrali moved through the forest subtle and shapeless as the wind. It sensed a slight shift in the feel of the prey, but such a thing made little difference. There could be no escape from its searching eyes. It would find the ring and destroy anything that stood in the way.

Ella beat her wings hard against the air to lift herself high above the valley. The lack of wind made her ascent all the more difficult. The raven's eyes were not well suited for night vision, but the cloud shrouded moon offered light enough to illuminate the shape of the land below her. She idly wondered what it would be like to fly in total darkness, suspended in the air with no frame of reference to tell her where she was or how high up. It was an unnerving idea, and she didn't dwell on it long. She looked down at the dim outline of the town below her. Despite the distraction of the air in her feathers the steady buildup of apprehension had not diminished. Rather, it had grown, and matured into fear. Part of her was screaming, *Why am I afraid? What is there to be afraid of?* But

something deeper wasn't listening. The fear seemed to be almost a physical thing now, something she could reach out and touch if she tried.

It's coming.

There was no silencing the fear, no way to rationalize it into submission. She let herself glide down in great swooping circles until she felt her clawed feet settle against the dusty ground. It was only after she changed back to herself, that she realized she was a good way down the street from the inn. She started down the street heading back towards the inn. The clouds drifting over the face of the moon blocked out what little light it had provided, so that the buildings around her were indistinct shapes, little more than shadows on a canvas of black velvet. She walked slowly shuffling her feet to avoid tripping over some stray stone. She had had her hand on the handle of the door when she saw the flare of a match illuminate Julius's face. He stood leaned against the wall of the inn with a battered wooden pipe in one hand and a flickering match in the other.

"Evenin' Miss Ella."

"Good Evening Julius," Ella said. Her heart skipped in her chest.

"You're up a bit late."

So are you. "I couldn't sleep."

Julius nodded his face barely lit by the dim glow of the pipe. "I know the feeling. Still, things ain't always safe after dark."

"I'll be careful," Elle said softly.

The Umbrali tore down the narrow trail, relishing the thrill of the hunt. It could feel itself becoming more and more solid its form more defined with every step that brought it closer to the ring. The prey was close now. The Umbrali could taste the fear growing in the fragile human mind. Soon now. Very soon. The monster howled into the night.

Ella started as the unearthly sound cut through the air. Julius looked toward the direction of the scream, eyes narrowing.

"What was that?" Ella said, trying to keep her voice from shaking with terror.

“I’m not sure,” Julius said. “Maybe some animal. It might be best if you went back inside.”

Ella nodded and pulled the door open. The throbbing warning in her head was overwhelming now. It screamed at her to run as far as she could from that terrible sound. She stumbled through the doorway holding her head in her hands trying to force herself to gain control.

“Ella dear, what’s the matter?”

Ella looked up to see her mother standing there in her nightshirt with a candle in one hand. It took her a few moments to form the words in reply. “I don’t know. Something’s coming.”

“What? What’s coming?”

Ella shook her head. “I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know! I can feel it in my head and I don’t know what it is and it’s coming for me!” She could hear herself screaming the words but it felt as if they were coming from someone else’s mouth. Nothing was real anymore. Nothing but the fear.

The urge to run became too great to deny any longer and she bolted for the back door. She heard the howl cut through the air again, just outside the inn. Ella burst through the door, just as she heard the front door shatter under the force of a tremendous blow. Then she heard the sound of another scream, different, human. *Mother!* It didn’t last long.

She wanted to turn back, to do something, anything to help, but the fear in her head forced her onward stumbling past the barn and into the forest. She ran up the side of the mountain scraping against tree trunks, branches clawing at her face. She tripped and fell more than once but it barely slowed her headlong flight. Her breath came in short ragged gasps, but she ignored the burning in her lungs.

Despite her breakneck pace Ella could feel her pursuer gaining. Her legs pumped beneath her, muscles throbbing in pain, but the fear overpowered all thoughts of stopping. In fact she hadn’t really thought at all when she had started up the mountain, but now through the pounding fear crept a small voice reminding her that the other side of the mountain was a straight drop for thousands of feet. There was no turning back. She wasn’t sure how long she had been running but

she knew she must be getting close to the top. The trees were thinning now the higher she climbed. Soon she would have no where left to run.

The Umbrali could feel its quarry slowing ever so slightly. You will grow tired, it thought, I will not. Daybreak is yet a long way off. You will die in the darkness. Ahead the prey slowed again and then stopped. The Umbrali moved in for the kill.

Ella stood at the mountain's peak, looking down at the unbelievable expanse of air at her feet. The clouds moved away from the moon again, and let the pale light illuminate the cliff face and the ground far below. There was nowhere left to run. She looked back and saw the shape of her pursuer emerge from the trees. It looked like a man, or rather, like the outline of a man. Even in the moonlight she could see no features save the two glowing red eyes that burned in the black face. The dark thing slowed when it saw her, walking with no sign of fatigue towards where she stood.

"I have come for the ring." it said in a rasping unearthly voice that sent chills down Ella's spine.

"I can't," Ella said, panting. "It's stuck on."

The monster had no facial features, but Ella could hear the smile in its voice. "No matter."

Then Ella saw the claws. And jumped.

Chapter Four

The wind screamed past as she hurtled downward. Even before she jumped she had the Form of the raven in her mind, and now she pushed away everything else to focus on the change. For a moment she thought it might not happen, and she panicked as the ground below rushed up to meet her. Then she felt herself disappear and the raven formed in her place. The wings caught the air stopping her fall, and sent her soaring over the forest below.

By now the throbbing in the back of her head had diminished considerably. She was safe, for the moment. She turned her gaze back to the top of the cliff where the dark figure had stood, but now there was nothing. Maybe the thing had left. Or maybe it was waiting for her in the shadows. There was no way to know. She beat her wings harder to gain altitude.

The sound of her mother's scream still reverberated in her mind. She knew what had happened, knew it as surely as she knew her own name. And yet in spite of that fatal surety she let herself hope a thin fragile hope that her mother was still alive. *I have to find out*, she thought. *I have to know what happened.*

But even as the thought formed in her mind, something held her back. W_ait until sunrise._ The creature could not exist in the light of day. She could feel that it was true in the same indefinable way she could feel the thing waiting for her in the darkness.

She flew through the thick of night, alone, alone with her darkest thoughts and fears. The mountains below her seemed nebulous, indistinct in the darkness swelling and rolling like rocky thunderheads, and gradually she lost the sense of flying and felt instead as if she were floating, weightless above the darkened landscape. And the waiting...the waiting was the worst. The knowing and not knowing and the burning fear in her stomach all made the wait for sunrise unbearable.

The night went on for what seemed an eternity until finally, she saw the glow of sunrise in the east, and she felt the Umbrali fade away. The rising light painted the clouds in brilliant hues of pink and orange and red. It seemed wrong somehow for such a thing of beauty to mark the end of such horror.

She landed behind the inn and changed back into herself. Part of her recoiled at the thought of walking through that door but she pressed on. She already knew what she would find. She had heard her mother's scream, seen the horrible claws of the black monster. But she had to see. She had to be sure.

The blood was slick on the floor, thick and sticky under her feet. Her mother lay in the middle of the room, her body nearly cut in half, a look of pure terror frozen on her face. This wasn't real. It couldn't be real. She wasn't dead. No. Not her mother. Ella stumbled out the back door, and vomited on the ground outside. Then she felt her legs go weak, and she sank to the ground. She wrapped her arms around her legs and buried her face in her knees. Her body shook and tears poured out of her eyes and fell to the ground. She didn't look up when she heard the soft footfalls approaching. After a few seconds a voice spoke.

"Miss Ella? Are you okay?"

Ella shook her head. "My mother..." she managed to croak before she broke into sobs again.

Julius sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her to his side. "I know. I'm sorry."

They sat for some minutes in silence before Julius spoke again. "You shouldn't stay here. That thing...whatever it was. It'll be back."

"I know," Ella said. "But...I can't...I don't have anywhere to go."

"You can come with me."

Ella shook her head violently. "I can't. I can't put you in danger. I don't know how, but that thing knows where I am. There's nowhere I can run that it won't find me, and I can't be responsible for any more..." But she couldn't bring herself to utter that last terrible word.

"I'm not lettin' you do this," Julius said with a stony look forming on his face. "If I have to carry you out of here by force then I'll do it. I ain't gonna let you die here. Maybe together we can figure somethin' out...some way to beat this thing." Ella noticed for the first time the fiery intensity that burned deep in those blue eyes.

She didn't say anything at first, but despite her hesitation she knew what her answer had to be.

"Okay," she said, standing. "Let's go."

But they didn't leave immediately. Julius buried her mother in a shallow grave. Ella watched as he shoveled dirt on top of the mangled corpse. It was strange, she thought with some detached part of her mind, that this was the second dead body she had seen in as many days. When Julius finished he and Ella stood silently over the grave for several minutes. She could still feel the intense grief balled up inside her, but somehow she managed to push it back, to force herself to stay in control. Ella looked down at the black ring on her finger and for a moment her grief turned to anger. *It's your fault*, she thought, *none of this would have happened if I hadn't found you.*

But ring did not reply.

And before noon they were on their way. Ella threw an old trunk she had packed with the few things she thought she might need in the back of Julius's wagon and climbed up beside him in the seat.

"All set?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Alright then, best not waste any more daylight. Giddyup!" he yelled to the horses.

Ella felt the wagon wheels start turning underneath them, and they were on their way. She looked behind her for a long time trying to save a picture of the inn in her mind until it was out of sight. Then she turned, and looked forward. The road ahead stretched out in front of them winding through the mountains.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"This little road winds its way all the way down to the East Sea, and the port city of Manhasset. If we make it there safely I have some friends who can arrange safe passage on a ship for us. With any luck that thing won't be able to follow us over water."

“The Umbrali,” Ella murmured.

“Huh?”

“The thing. It’s called the Umbrali.”

“How do you know?”

“The ring. I can feel it. Like there’s some kind of a connection between me and it.” She shuddered.

“So that’s how it tracked you.”

Ella nodded and held her hand up to the sun, watching how it sucked up the light. “It can feel me. And I can feel it.”

“Because of that little ring?”

“Yes.”

“I’d guess you’ve already tried gettin’ rid of it.”

Ella nodded. “I’m not sure running is going to do much good,” she said. “I don’t think it can be killed. I’m not even sure it’s exactly alive. We’re just delaying the inevitable this way.”

Julius shrugged. “Maybe. But isn’t that what life is about? We’re all going to die sooner or later, but given the choice I’d choose later rather than sooner any day.”

“You shouldn’t be helping me,” Ella said. “This isn’t your fight. You don’t know me, don’t owe me anything. Why are you doing this?”

“You ain’t askin’ the right question miss Ella. Sometimes you don’t do something for what you can get out of it. Sometimes you do what’s right because it’s right. I couldn’t live with myself if I just left you to die.” He paused, then added. “Besides, we don’t know why that thing...the Umbrali wants to get the ring. It might be in everyone’s best interest to keep that from happening.”

“So we run away.”

“Yep. I’m sure the time’ll come to turn and fight, but for now we’ve got quite a

trek ahead of us.”

“How much farther do we have to travel?”

“Another three day’s journey to the sea,” Julius said. “We’ll be clear of the mountains by the middle of tomorrow, and if we make good time, we should reach the city of Undersen by nightfall. Then in the morning we’ll cross the river and be on our way to Manhasset.”

Ella nodded, and didn’t say anything more. The two travelers lapsed into silence. Ella contented herself with watching the road ahead, taking note of oddly shaped rock formations they passed by. Some part of her knew she should be grieving for her mother, and yet she felt as if she couldn’t really believe what had happened. It seemed unreal, like a nightmare she had awakened from and now could not fully remember. Or maybe could and didn’t want to.

“Where did you get it?” Julius voice cut into her thoughts.

“The ring?”

He nodded.

Ella hesitated. She didn’t want to tell this story. Not now anyway. But if Julius was going to help her he might as well know. “I found it. Yesterday.”

“Where?”

“There was a body of a man who fell off the cliff. It was on a chain in his hand.”

“And you put it on?”

Ella nodded. “It looked, I don’t know, magical. Interesting.”

Ella glanced in the back of the wagon. There was something back there, but it was covered with a tarp, tightly tied down on all sides. “What is it that you’re carrying?” she asked.

“Just odds and ends. Nothin’ to get excited about really.”

Ella recognized the aversion for what it was, but she let it go. Julius wasn’t

obligated to tell her anything.

The landscape rolled by, and the morning turned into afternoon. Gradually each piece of rocky scenery started to look more or less like every other piece of rocky scenery. Ella and Julius talked on and off as the day passed, and the more they talked the less Ella felt she knew about the stranger who had come to her aid. The man was often quiet in way that said he had a great deal to say but simply chose not to.

But there were other things on her mind too. She could still feel the Umbrali's presence out there somewhere, waiting for nightfall. Ella and Julius had covered a fair amount of distance, but Ella knew that once the sun set the horrible black thing would be after them again. She found herself wishing that Julius would push the horses just a little harder.

"Do you think it'll catch up with us?" she heard herself asking.

Julius shrugged. "Can't say for sure. I'd say we got an edge on the thing seeing as how it can only come out at night."

Ella remembered the claws she had seen curving out from where the thing's fingers should have been. The image was seared into her mind, like a brand. *How could such a thing even be real?* she wondered. But there was no question. It was real. As real as the darkness, and the starless night. She looked back, at the road stretched out behind them. It was back there somewhere, waiting for sundown.

"How much more daylight do you think we have?" Ella asked.

Julius squinted up at the sun for a moment. "I'd say we go another two maybe three hours till sundown."

"And what then?"

"We'll have to stop for the night. The horses need their rest, and they haven't fed properly all day. But luckily for us that ring of yours will warn you if it gets close, so I reckon we should be okay."

Ella was still worried but Julius sounded optimistic and she found her spirits lifting a bit. Still she kept an eye on the sun measuring its descent ahead of them,

as if by wishing hard enough she could put off the sunset if only for a few minutes. After a while Ella noticed something. “The hills are getting smaller,” she remarked to Julius.

He nodded, glancing up at the rocky promontories that jutted up on either side of the trail. “We should be out of the mountains by tomorrow. We’ll be able to make better time when we reach the plains, since the road don’t wind around so much.”

When evening arrived and Julius pulled up the reins on the horses, Ella could not have been more relieved. By now she was sore from sitting on the hard bench of the wagon as it rattled along. She had been sitting down for so long that her legs felt strange underneath her when she first tried to stand, but after a few minutes of walking and working her joints, she started to feel like herself again.

“We’ll make camp here,” Julius said. He glanced up at the sky. “It looks pretty clear. We shouldn’t have to worry about shelter.”

“Do you think its safe, sleeping out in the open?”

“Safe enough,” Julius said. “Although definitely lackin’ in comfort. I’m gonna to see if I can rustle up some firewood before it gets too dark.”

“Why? The nights this time of year aren’t that cold.”

“No, but the fire’ll scare off any animals that might have an idea of makin’ us into their midnight snack.”

He trudged off into the trees that stood beside and path leaving Ella by herself. For a moment she considered following him into the woods, but decided to stay with the horses. She watched the sun, already low in the sky, sink down between the mountains. The moment it disappeared she felt the Umbrali awaken.

Its presence in her mind brought the fresh memories of the previous night boiling to the surface. The images and emotions flashed into her mind like lightning. The things she had avoided thinking about since the morning flooded over her, and she collapsed back against the wagon wheel, her legs suddenly too weak to support her. She didn’t know how long she sat there, her body shaking with grief, tears pouring down her face, but after a while she heard Julius sit down beside her. For a long time there was nothing said. The two travelers

simply sat together, as Ella let all of her grief come out. It was Ella who spoke first, when she finally regained enough of her composure to talk.

“It’s my fault,” she whispered, her voice raspy from crying.

Julius still said nothing. Ella looked up at him and said, “Don’t you understand? If I hadn’t put on this stupid ring none of this would have happened. She’s dead and it’s my fault. I should have let that thing kill me back on the mountain.” She broke into tears again.

“That’s not true,” Julius said quietly. “You couldn’t have known what would happen. You shouldn’t blame yourself. Your mother wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“But it doesn’t matter any more what she would have wanted, does it?” Ella said. Julius didn’t reply. Instead he put his arms around her, and just let her cry on his shoulder.

Then almost without realizing it she let her mind rest on his Form feeling the shape of his soul, letting it become a part of her. Ella pulled back, shocked. She hadn’t meant to do that. She looked at Julius and wondered if he knew what she had done. But if he suspected, there was no hint of it on his face.

“Ella I know you’ve been through a lot,” he said. “But you’ve got to be strong. If you let it defeat you in your mind then it’s already won.”

She knew he was right, but she still couldn’t shake the feeling that all of this was her fault, that it should have been her who died that night. Eventually she simply nodded.

“I’m here for you Ella,” Julius said, “We’ll get through this.”

Ella didn’t move from her spot by the wagon wheel while Julius built the fire. It wasn’t until he finally got the orange flames crackling, lighting up the darkness, that she stirred.

“Want some grub?” he asked her.

“Okay.”

It was hardly sumptuous fare, a few pieces of bread, and some dried fruit. But

Ella took what was given to her without comment and sat by Julius, looking into the fire as they ate. There were few words said, but Ella was glad of the company. A little later she lay back and closed her eyes listening to the crackling of the fire. She could feel the Umbrali getting closer, but it was still a long way off, and despite the heaviness of her heart, Ella lapsed into sleep.

Chapter Five

She had no dreams that night, and despite sleeping on the hard ground under the stars, she found that when she awoke, she was more refreshed than she would have imagined. It was still dark out when she opened her eyes, but a faint gray glow in the east told her dawn was not far off.

Julius was already up, putting out the fire, and hitching the horses back up to the wagon. “Any word on our dark friend?” he asked.

“Its closer,” Ella said, getting up off the ground, “but still a good way off. We shouldn’t have to worry about it tonight.”

“Good,” Julius said climbing up into the wagon. “If we can keep up this pace, we should be able to stay well ahead of it for now.”

Ella climbed up beside him, and settled down onto the hard wood bench with a sigh. Julius rattled the reigns, and the wheels creaked as the wagon started to roll down the trail. The sky behind them had grown from dusky gray, to a rosy pink, and before long a few stray slivers of sunlight started to peek around the mountains. As before, Ella felt the presence of the Umbrali fade with the arrival of daylight. Before the sun had climbed very high in the sky, the mountains had thinned into rolling hills and Ella could see the plains stretching out in the distance.

There was something odd for Ella about emerging from the mountains. She had spent her life with the rocky peaks towering around her and now that she was leaving them, she felt as if someone had taken the walls off of the world. It seemed there was more sky now, stretching from horizon to horizon, filling the top half of the world with gentle hues of blue and white.

The path was smoother now too, and Ella felt the pace of the horses begin to pick up. When she remarked about it to Julius, he nodded but, he looked to the far horizon with an expression of concern on his face.

In another hour the mountains had disappeared almost entirely, with only the occasional large boulder strewn by the side of the road to remind the travelers of the hulking spires of stone that stretched into the sky behind them. The sun was

climbing towards noon when the path they had traveled out of the mountains joined a wider and obviously better traveled road.

“This is the King’s Way,” Julius told Ella. “It’ll take us all the way to Chothall. Here, take the reigns for a second,” he said, and handed them to Ella. He turned and reached into the back of the wagon, underneath the tarp, and retrieved a short sword, sheathed in a simple scabbard. He put the sword underneath the seat behind his feet, and took the reigns back from Ella, without a word of explanation.

Ella was more intrigued than frightened at the sight of the sword. She knew what a sword was of course, she had read about them in books, seen woodcuts of heroes brandishing them against dragons and other monsters, but this was the first time she had ever seen such a weapon in real life. She found herself wondering what it might feel like in her hand, how heavy the blade would be, and how the wooden handle would feel against the skin of her fingers.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sharp thud. Ella looked down to see the wooden shaft of an arrow buried in the wood of the seat between her and Julius.

“Stop the wagon, or the next one goes in the girl’s head.”

Ella looked up to see a figure standing on one of the high rocks scattered throughout the plain with a bow in his hands. Julius pulled back on the reigns and the wagon rolled to a stop.

“Alright you two, keep your hands where I can see them,” said a voice from behind them. Ella turned to see a masked man emerge from behind a rock.

Julius put his hands in the air but didn’t turn to face the highwayman. “Ain’t this a bit small time for you Sean?” he said calmly. “Hiding behind rocks, robbing unsuspecting travelers.”

The highwayman came forward until he could see their faces. “Julius? Well, well. Fancy meeting you here. Been taking care of yourself?”

Julius nodded. “More than I might say for you. Still up to your old tricks I see.”

“A man’s gotta eat,” the highwayman replied. “Besides you’ve got no right to judge. We’re both on the wrong side of the law in a manner of speaking. In a

way you could say that we're on the same team."

"No. We're not."

The highwayman shrugged. "Suit yourself. How's your son? Haven't seen him in—"

"Dead," Julius said.

"Oh." A shadow of shock and sorrow flitted over the highwayman's face. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"I don't know," Julius said, his voice growing distant. "Maybe it was for the best." For a long moment no one spoke. Then Julius said, "So. You gonna rob me or what?"

The man shook his head slowly. "Frankly I doubt you have much worth taking, and...well, I'm sorry about your son. I know you didn't approve of how he turned out, but in my book he was a good man."

"Thank you," Julius said smiling faintly.

The highwayman waved to the archer and Ella saw the man lower his bow. Julius shook the reins and the horses trotted forward again. Ella looked back at the highwayman. He stood there in the middle of the road, watching them, until they were out of sight.

"Well that was interesting," she said at last.

"Yes. Interesting."

It was clear that Julius had no desire to talk about what had just happened so she kept her questions to herself. But she kept thinking about what the thief had said. What had he meant when he said that he and Julius were on the same team? Could she trust Julius? She thought of how little she knew about the strange man who had come to her aid just when she needed it most, and tiny tendrils of doubt started to worm their way into her mind.

But despite her feeling of apprehension, Ella knew she had no choice but to stay with Julius. If she were to try to make it on her own, she could hardly expect to

evade the Umbrali for more than a few days.

Still, she resolved to keep her eye on him. She wanted to be able to trust him. Despite his quiet voice and distant attitude, there was something likable about him. She had felt it when she first met him, and despite her doubts, she still felt it now.

The day passed slowly, and not much was said between the two travelers. Julius seemed to have fallen into a thoughtful mood after the encounter with the highwayman, and spoke to Ella only briefly. It didn't take long for the scenery to become monotonous, and beyond that there wasn't much to occupy Ella's attention. A little before noon a small caravan of wagons going the opposite direction passed them on the road. The wagons were accompanied by men on horseback wearing armor and carrying an assortment of weapons.

"Apparently they've met your friend the highwayman before," Ella remarked as they passed.

Julius looked at her with a cocked eyebrow. "He's no friend of mine," he said in an odd tone that Ella found a bit frightening.

"I didn't really mean friend. It's just that..." she trailed off.

"He's no friend of mine," Julius repeated.

Over the course of the day they passed several other caravans of different sizes traveling the road, although none as large as the first they had seen. Morning turned into afternoon, which gradually into evening. Beneath the light of the slowly sinking sun, Ella saw something in the distance, a growing spot of gray against the lush backdrop of the plains.

"Undersen," Julius said pointing. "I've got friends there who'll put us up for the night."

The sun was already touching the far horizon before they passed through the city gates. As they traveled through the streets, Ella marveled at the new sights.

"It's so big," she said to Julius. "I never imagined so many people in one place before."

“This is nothin’,” Julius replied. “Wait till we get to Manhasset, and this place will seem small.”

“It seems...strange.”

“What?”

“I feel like I’m in a different world. I grew up on the outskirts of Caelum, a town with less than a hundred people, and now here I am in a city with thousands of them. I guess it’s just a little overwhelming.”

“Well don’t let it get to you. People here’s just like people everywhere. There’s just more of ‘em.”

After a good deal of twisting and turning through the narrow and crowded streets Julius pulled the wagon up outside of a building with a weathered wooden placard painted with the name of the place. “The Rusty Nail,” Ella read aloud.

“This is it,” Julius said. “Wait here a minute, and I’ll be back.” He jumped down from the wagon and disappeared into the building. He was inside for no more than a few seconds when he reemerged, and climbed back into the wagon. He took the reigns and guided the horses around the building to a small stable. He parked the wagon under the stable’s thatched roof, and an old stable hand helped him unhitch the horses and put them in two of the empty stalls. Ella stood back watching them, feeling out of place, and unsure of herself. When the men had finished, Julius motioned for Ella to follow him. “Come on,” he said, “They got good grub here. Better’n that dry stuff we been eatin’ at any rate.”

The mention of real food was more than enough to motivate Ella to follow Julius through the door, and into the warmly lit room beyond.

“Julius, my friend!” a voice called out as they entered, “So good to see you again.”

The speaker was an older man, with thinning hair wearing threadbare clothes in muted colors.

“Martha, just told me you’d arrived,” the old man, continued, “and with a visitor too.”

“It’s good to be back Soapy,” Julius said. “This here is Miss Ella Eris, a friend of mine. Ella this is Soapy Collins.”

“Pleased to meet you Miss Eris. Welcome to The Rusty Nail. Finest tavern, restaurant, and inn in all of Undersen.” The man extended his hand with a friendly smile. Ella took the offered hand and shook it thinking *Soapy? What kind of a name is Soapy?*

Ella looked around the room. There was something about this place - the rough wood floor, the long wooden tables, the smell of cooking food; they all reminded her of home. She closed her eyes and breathed in the atmosphere of the room, feeling that this inn and the one she had known her entire life where twins, echoes of each other. The feeling was bittersweet, bringing with it both the comfort of familiarity, and despair at the thought of the death of her mother. And there was another feeling too. She could feel the presence of the Umbrali out there in the darkness, hunting her relentlessly, and suddenly her despair turned into a wave of rage that washed over her all at once, a feeling of pure hatred for that dark presence hunting in the night. *You won’t win*, she promised the Umbrali, imagining that the strength of her thoughts would carry the words over the miles into the ears of the creature. *I will cut you down. I swear over the body of my mother, I will kill you.*

“Ella? Are you okay?” Julius voice cut into her thoughts.

Ella opened her eyes, blinking for a moment as if it would help clear her mind. “Yes I’m fine,” she said after a moment. “I was only thinking.”

“The two of you must be famished,” Soapy said. “I’ll see what I can, get for you.” He disappeared into what Ella assumed was the kitchen, and reemerged a few moments later carrying two plates. He set them on one of the tables and Ella and Julius began to eat. Soapy sat across from them.

“How has your journey been, Julius?” he asked.

“Eventful,” Julius said, as he cut open a steaming potato.

“We ran into a robber earlier today,” Ella volunteered.

“Oh yes, that would be Sean of Gaul. He’s been raiding along that road for the past few months. Slippery little devil too. No one around here seems able to

track him down. He didn't give you too much trouble did he?"

Julius shook his head.

"He let us go," Ella said, somehow feeling it was her responsibility to fill the gaps that Julius's silence left in the conversation.

Soapy nodded. "He's mostly harmless if you don't give him too much trouble."

"He seemed a bit nice actually," Ella said.

"His buddy had an arrow pointed at you," Julius commented.

"Well yes, but at least he was nice about it. He did let us go after..." she trailed off.

"Yes," Julius said. "He did."

"Well then, that's good," Soapy said, although he looked a bit confused.

Ella and Julius went on eating, while Soapy chatted away, and Ella began to feel that the man was avoiding something. Something he didn't want to discuss in front of her. After they had finished, Soapy's wife, Martha, took Ella upstairs, and showed her the room she would be staying in for the night.

"It's a bit small, dear, but the bed's soft and cozy," the older woman said with a smile.

"It's wonderful. Thank you," Ella said.

"Oh, it's nothing really. Even if you weren't a friend of Julius, I couldn't very well let you sleep out in the streets now could I?"

"Still its very kind of you."

After the woman had left Ella lay down in the bed. Despite the fact that she was tired and the bed was quite soft, she found she couldn't sleep. Her mind wandered, mulling over the events of the day, wondering again about the words of the highwayman. She wanted to know that she could trust Julius, and she found it difficult to believe that anyone as unbelievably kind as the Collins'

would be involved in anything underhanded, but she wasn't able to shake her sense of uncertainty about the situation.

As she lay there staring at the ceiling, she heard a low scrabbling noise on the floor. She sat up in bed and peered over the edge to see what it was. She saw movement against the wall, and realized that somehow a rat had found its way into her room. Ella sat quietly watching the creature for a few minutes. As she watched the rodent scurry around the room a plan began to form in her mind.

She lay on her stomach with her head poking over the edge of the bed, her arms hanging down almost to the floor. She lay as still as she could, watching the rat. Eventually it ventured within her reach, and she snatched it up off the floor. The rat squealed, and thrashed about in her hand, turning its head to sink its teeth into her thumb.

Ella fought the urge to cry out, and instead focused on the writhing Form in her hand, feeling the essence of the animal and letting it merge with her own. When she had finished she dropped the rat onto the floor and it scurried away, squeezing through a crack in the corner. Ella stuck her thumb in her mouth and sucked away the blood oozing from where the rat had bitten her. She took a few deep breaths to calm herself, then closed her eyes and let her mind rest on the Form of the rat. When she opened them the room looked much bigger and the drop from the bed to the floor much farther than it had before.

She climbed down the blanket to the floor using the rat's tiny claws. After a moment's thought she decided the best course of action would be to use the hole the rat had used, and see if she could find a way downstairs through there. The opening wasn't very big, but once she squeezed through, she found the space inside the wall was quite roomy. There was little light to see by, but the rat's sense of smell was excellent, and Ella used it to follow the scent of the kitchen through the maze in the wall, until she found herself squeezing through another smallish crack, into a space beneath one of the cupboards in the kitchen. She heard Julius's voice, and then Soapy's, and she inched forward until the tiny rat's nose was just poking out from under the cupboard. She could see the two men sitting at a table across from each other, looking like giants. Mrs. Collins was there too standing at the sink, washing dishes.

"It's dangerous Julius, that's all I'm saying," Ella heard Soapy say.

“It’s always been dangerous,” Julius replied.

“It’s more dangerous now though,” Soapy said. “Eckron has tasted blood in the water, and they’ll be wanting more.”

“That’s why I can’t waste any time,” Julius said.

“We know you’re not afraid, Julius,” Mrs. Collins said turning from her dishes, “But what about the girl? You can’t take her with you into a situation like that. Leave her with us. She’ll be safe here.”

“No. I ain’t leaving her here.”

“Why not?” Soapy asked.

“If she stays, she’ll be in even more danger. Somethin’ you can’t protect her from. I know you don’t understand, but I’ve got my reasons,” Julius said.

“I’ll never forgive you if anything happens to her Julius,” said Mrs. Collins.

“I don’t think I could forgive myself ma’am,” Julius replied. “I’ll do everything I can keep her safe. But trust me when I say she can’t stay here.”

“Well, we know as well as anyone you’ve got a good head on you Julius. We’re just worried about the girl is all. And about you as well. But if you say it’s for the best I’ll take your word for it,” Soapy said.

“Thank you,” Julius said. “That means a lot to me.” He pushed his chair back and stood up. “I shouldn’t stay up too much longer. Ella and I need to stay on the move. We’ll be leavin’ at dawn.”

“Of course, of course,” Soapy said standing too, and shaking Julius hand.

The two men left the room, leaving, Mrs. Collins alone with her dishes, and Ella scampered back to the hole in the wall and made her way back to her room. By the time she made it back and changed back into herself, she could hear Julius moving around in the room to right of her, and she was careful not to make too much noise when she climbed back into the bed. She blew out the candle flickering on the table, and lay back in the darkness, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about what she had learned. It wasn’t much really, only that wherever

Julius was headed held some kind of danger for them. But she knew as Julius did, the danger behind them was far greater than whatever danger might lie ahead.

Something else was nagging at her too, something that seemed out of place somehow. She lay there in the darkness trying to think what it could be. Then she remembered. The rat's bite. She held her hand up in front of her face and saw that her finger had healed completely. *It must have happened when I changed*, she thought. She lay there and pondered her discovery but after a while she let the fingers of weariness pull her down into sleep.

Chapter Six

Ella slept. And dreamed of running. Running and running through the darkness, a darkness so complete that it felt thick and hot against her skin. It was a tangible force, holding her back as her pursuer got closer and closer until...

Her eyes snapped open, and she sat up with a start. Her heart was beating hard in her chest, and her breath came in quick gasps as if she had really been running from something. She lay back against the pillow and forced herself to breathe slower. *A dream. It was just a dream*, she told herself. But it was real too. She was running, running for her life. And if the Umbrali caught up with her there would be no waking up.

Ella tossed and turned for some time, before she finally managed to drift off the sleep again. This time her sleep was peaceful, and dreamless, finally interrupted by Julius voice telling her it was time to go. Ella stretched and got out of bed trying to brush the cobwebs out of her mind as she dressed.

In less than half an hour they said goodbye to the Collins and were on their way again.

"They seemed like nice people," Ella remarked as the wagon rattled over the cobblestones.

Julius nodded. "They're good friends," he said. "Good friends are hard to find."

"Oh, I don't know," Ella said. "I found you didn't I?"

"Found me? I didn't know you were looking for me," Julius said grinning.

"Neither did I."

It took nearly an hour to pass through Undersen. The Rusty Nail hadn't been very far into the city limits, and the narrow streets were clogged with traffic. When they made it out onto the main thoroughfare that passed through the city, their speed improved somewhat. They passed through an enormous set of gates that hung on massive iron hinges mounted in the stone of the towering wall.

“This is old Undersen,” Julius explained. “The entire city used be contained within the wall.”

“Why?” Ella asked.

“Undersen is built on a river. You’ll see it when we pass through the other side of the city. In the time after the city was built, a tribe of wild men swept through the land, sacking cities and towns, burning whatever couldn’t be stolen. The wall was built to protect the city against them.”

“So what happened?”

“Eventually the wild men disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

Julius shrugged. “Some accounts say they was driven away, while other’s say they on their own. Either way the wall’s been there since then, although the city’s long since outgrown it.”

They passed through the old city and out the other side. Here the buildings weren’t quite so crowded together, and the traffic lessened slightly, so they were able to make good time. At last came to the river where several large barges were busy ferrying people to the other side. They waited a few minutes for the next ferry to dock, and Julius paid a man for the crossing, then drove the wagon down a ramp into the flat boat.

It was a strange experience for Ella, who had never been on a boat before in her life. The biggest streams around Caelum were shallow enough to wade through, and often disappeared entirely during the drier parts of the years. The ferryman raised the ramp, and the boat started across the river. It was not driven by oars or sails but was instead pulled along a rope stretched from one side of the river to the other. It took several minutes to cross, but Ella was a bit disappointed when they touched the other shore. The gentle rolling of the boat in the river’s calm waters seemed peaceful and relaxing, and she loved watching the gentle ripples roll off the bow of the boat as it pushed through the water.

They disembarked on the other side, and Julius spurred the horses on with renewed vigor as if to make up for lost time. It was still morning, but the sun was high in the sky, inching toward noon, and it seemed no time at all before the

city was lost in the distance behind them.

"I hope we can make it to the Morrow Mountains before nightfall," Julius told Ella. "There's a town there where we can bed down for the night."

"And after that?"

"With any luck, we'll be in Manhasset by noon the next day."

Ella frowned, remembering the Collins' warnings of the danger that waited in Manhasset, and her thoughts turned again to the danger that lay behind them. The Umbrali's presence, lay dormant in the heat of the day, but it was still present. There was no way to be sure, but it seemed that with each passing day, the Umbrali fell a little further behind.

"It seems like we've had pretty good luck so far," Ella mused aloud.

"I don't put too much stock in luck," Julius said. "It tends to give out on you when you need it most. Better to rely on your wits. Remember that."

"I will," Ella replied.

"It'll be good to see the sea again," Julius said looking off at the horizon.

"Somethin' about that salt air gets into your blood. You never forget it."

"I've never seen the ocean before."

"Never?"

Ella shook her head.

"Well let me tell you, it's a beautiful thing to see all that blue stretchin' out in front of you as far as the eye can see. I can't do it justice in words. Its something you've got to see to believe." He paused for a moment then went on. "I've spent a good bit of my life on one ship or another."

"Didn't you miss home?"

Julius shrugged. "Home's generally where you find it. Ship can be as good a home as any."

“What was it like?”

“The sea? Exciting. Dangerous. Hard work too. But I didn’t mind. I saw some things at sea, things I’d never have imagined possible.”

“Like what?”

“Well I remember one time when I was sailin’ on a ship named the Bonnie Sally and one of the men spotted an island. Now we had sailed through those waters lotsa times and never saw land before, but there it was all the same sittin’ there just like it had always been there. It was a curious enough sight that the captain sent me and some other men ashore to investigate. We lowered the boats and rowed out to the new island. It wasn’t much like any island any of us had ever seen before. There was no beach, just flat hard rock. We pulled the boat up and did a little exploring. It weren’t hardly big enough to call an island, not more’n half a mile long, maybe a third of a mile wide. We walked towards the center of the island and saw there wasn’t anything growing there.”

“But I thought you said it was just flat rock.”

“Sure, but even on a rock, you’d expect to find a few sprigs of grass or patches of moss but here there was nothing but barnacles.”

“Barnacles?”

Julius nodded. “Little animals with shells that live in the water. They stick themselves to all kinds of things. Rocks, ship’s hulls, you’ll even find them stuck on to some big fish. Well anyway this big rock of an island was covered with them. After a while we realized we’d discovered a new island that had just been pushed up out of the sea. It was an exciting feelin’, standin’ there, on new ground where no man had ever stood before. We finished our survey of the island, but there weren’t anythin’ there to write home about, so we met back at the boat and headed back to the ship. We were almost all the way back when we heard a splash. I looked back and saw a huge head rising up out of the water at the end of the island. It looked at us for a minute with eyes as big as me, and then it dipped back down into the sea. Then the whole island began to tip forward and we realized it wasn’t an island at all. It was a huge sea tortoise and we had been standing on its shell.”

“Wow,” Ella said. “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“It was pretty amazin’,” Julius said. “Although I’ve heard stories about real sea monsters with hundreds of teeth and tentacles that could pull a ship under.”

” Did you ever see anything like that?”

” No,” Julius answered. “To be honest life at sea could get pretty borin’. I’m not saying that nothing interesting ever happened, but after weeks of looking at the endless horizon every day, it could get pretty monotonous.”

“I still think it sounds awfully interesting. Tell me another one. A story I mean, about when you were a sailor.”

“Alright,” Julius said. “I’ll tell you the strangest thing I ever saw, on the ocean or anywhere else. I was still on the Bonny Sally at the time. We’d just made a run to the island of Winamere, and after a few days shore leave we set out again, bound for the coast of Eckron. Three days out we ran into a storm like I’ve never seen before or since. The wind tore our sails to shreds before we could take them up, and the waves were so powerful I thought the ship would break apart. I still remember the awful sounds that storm made. The wind howled like a wild animal and the waves pounded against the hull like a drum. I thought we was dead for sure. I don’t know for sure how long the storm lasted. The clouds blotted out the sun so you couldn’t tell day from night. The darkness was so thick we could barely see. We had to feel our way around the ship. Then, after what seemed like an eternity the storm lifted. And then the real trouble began.”

“Real trouble? Worse than the storm?”

“Aye lass. You see the storm blew us far off our course into a part of the sea where no sailor would want to go: the doldrums.”

“Doldrums?”

“They’re patches of ocean with no current and no wind. Just the water, stretched out as smooth as glass for miles and miles. Running into them is the worst thing that can happen to a sailor. Even if the ship were torn to pieces by the storm it would’a been better for us than bein’ stuck in the doldrums.”

“Why? What’s so terrible about a patch of calm sea?”

“Because with no wind the ship won’t move. It’s not so bad at first, but when the

water runs out things start to get ugly. It's the thirst that gets you in the end. Sailors go crazy sittin' in the middle of a sea full of water that they can't drink, not that there weren't those who tried."

"What happened?"

"The salt in the sea water made them even more thirsty. By the end of the first week without water a third of the men were dead and they were the lucky ones."

"So how did you escape?"

"Hold on," Julius said holding up a hand, "I'll get to it. No skippin' to the end now, especially when I'm just gettin' to the good part."

"Alright then, go on."

"Well anyway, so there I was stuck in the doldrums watchin' the men around me die and knowin' it wouldn't be long before I'd die too. That day I watched the sunset and wondered if it might be the last I'd ever see. The night fell and the stars came out over the water. I could barely stand I was so weak, but I pulled myself over to the ship's railing. I looked into the calm water and thought about just jumpin' in and ending it quick like. Then on the horizon I saw something. Somethin' that chilled me to the bone. It was a ship, or at least it looked like a ship."

"What do you mean?"

"Well for one thing it was movin'. The sea was as calm and windless as ever mind you, but this ship moved as if it were under full sail. And it was headed straight for us. The moon was out that night, and I remember I could see the other ship as clear as if it was daylight. It looked real enough, made of wood same as any other ship, but the sails hung from the masts in tattered and rotten shreds, and there was a spooky kind of fog that moved in following in its wake. This ship got closer and closer until I could see the crew aboard it climbing the rigging and hurrying across the deck. They weren't like any ship's crew I had ever seen before. They looked unnaturally thin in the moonlight and as the ship grew closer saw they weren't human at all but just skeletons, with bits of rotted flesh hanging from their bones. I scarce believed what I was seein'. I grasped my spyglass and put it up to my eye so that I might get a better look. As it came into focus in the eerie moonlight I saw the figurehead of the ship, a dragon so terrible

and lifelike that I thought it might hurl a stream of fire out of its nostrils at any moment. It was then I knew, before I even saw the name that the ship was the *Ark of Velns*.”

“*The Ark of Velns*? That name sounds familiar, but I can’t recall why.” Ella said. “I may have heard it from some traveler.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you’d heard of it before.” Julius said. “*The Ark of Velns* is the most famous ghost ship to ever sail the ocean.”

“Ghost ship?”

“Aye lass. It’s said that it was caught in the doldrums much as we were, and the crew had all died of thirst. The ship and its crew found themselves in the dark seas of the underworld, cut off from the sunlight and the taste of true sea air forever. Well the captain of that ship was none other than Old Silas Stilforth himself, the most cunning captain ever to sail the seven seas, and when he found himself and his crew in the underworld he decided that the darkness of death was not to his liking. So he and his crew sailed up the river Styx and past the Leviathan that guards the watery entrance to the land of death into the light of the sun again.”

“How did he get past the Leviathan?” inquired Ella. “If it were as easy as you make it sound, people would be leaving the underworld all the time.”

“I never said it was easy. To this day, no one knows how he did it. Everyone’s got a theory of course, although I’d wager the truth is stranger than any of them.”

“But what happened to you?”

“Well, the ghost ship pulled up alongside us and dropped anchor. I’ll never forget the look of that ship, sittin’ there so close, lit up by the milky light of the moon. I remember thinkin’ that if I had a stone by my hand I could have thrown it and hit the hull of that ship. They lowered a boat, and some of that strange crew began to row towards us. I looked with my spyglass at the helm of the ship and saw Silas Stilforth standing there at the wheel. There was something commanding about his presence even in death. Even his posture was enough for anyone to tell that he was in charge. He stood there straight and proud, scanning the horizon, gripping the moldy wheel of the ship with his bony fingers. Then, I

remember, as I looked through my spyglass he turned his gaze and looked directly at me.”

“Were you afraid?”

“It might seem strange to say, but no. I felt something else, a feelin’ I can’t fully explain. Somehow I felt completely at peace with the world in that moment as if nothing the ever happened really mattered. Then he turned his gaze away, and the feeling was gone. Eventually the rowboat made it to our ship and one of the crew climbed on board. He looked around for a moment as if searching for something, then gave out a low call. It wasn’t words exactly, but more like a fragment of a song, half remembered. I was surprised to hear the call answered and even more surprised when I saw one of the crew members who had died earlier that day rising from the place where he had fallen. He walked over and joined the skeletal figure and climbed down into the boat. I looked down, and saw that the other sailors, whose bodies we had thrown into the sea, rising up from the depths to join the rest of the crew in the longboat. The skeleton who had climbed aboard looked at me with empty eye sockets and saluted me then turned and disappeared over the bow. In a few minutes the longboat returned to the *Ark of Velns* and the old ship sailed away into the darkness.”

“And what happened to you? How did you escape the doldrums?”

“The very next day, we felt the wind begin to move over the water, so we rigged up what was left of our sails and let it carry us to the nearest port.”

“It’s an amazing story,” Ella said in a hushed voice.

“Would you believe that you’re the first person I’ve ever told it to?”

“Really? Why would you keep something like that to yourself?”

“Well its a bit of a wild tale don’t you think? Not many people would believe I was telling the truth, and if they did then they’d probably think I was seein’ things, half crazy from the lack of water.” He paused for a moment. “And maybe I was. But it’s a fine story all the same.”

“I believe you,” Ella said.

“Yes,” Julius answered with a smile, “I believe you do. Maybe that’s why I told

you.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Miss what?”

“The sea. Sailing. You had such great adventures. Don’t you miss it a little?”

“Maybe a little,” Julius conceded. “But the high seas aren’t the only place to find adventure. After all I met you under some pretty odd circumstances didn’t I?”

Ella nodded, her mood suddenly turning somber. She had kept from thinking of that night all day, and now it came back into her mind again, invading her emotions and making her feel suddenly weak. Julius had said she had to be strong, but it was so hard not to think of what she had lost. She felt tears welling up in her eyes, but she stopped herself, steeling her resolve to stand against the emotions that threatened to tear her apart. She would not falter. One small misstep would bring the Umbrali closer to winning.

The wagon found its way down the rutted path as the sun trekked across the sky. For the first few hours the landscape around them had been nothing but farmland, but as the day drew on towards noon the signs of civilization grew more and more scarce. The rolling farmland was replaced by hills covered with lush grass that rippled like waves when the wind whispered through it. But the beautiful scenery did little to combat Ella’s bleak mood. The rattling of the wagon on the rough path had left her feeling stiff and sore, and she found herself thinking that she would be very glad when they had finally stopped for the night. Up in the distance she could see where the grassy hills ended at the edge of a thick oak forest.

“Wormwood Forest,” said Julius pointing up at the trees ahead.

“Wormwood?”

Julius nodded. “Its an old name,” he said softly. “A very old name.”

” Sounds scary.”

“Well it’s certainly not your normal patch of trees.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“I’d say that depends on you.”

“What do you mean?”

“They say the forest is haunted...in a manner of speaking.”

“You mean there are ghosts in there?” asked Ella with some amount of trepidation.

“Not ghosts exactly. It’s more like the trees have grown there so long that their roots have grown together until the wood is really just one big living thing. There’s some that even says it can think for itself. The locals almost think of it as a god. It’s generally considered powerful bad luck to fell one of the trees of Wormwood forest.”

Ella tried to convince herself that what Julius had told her was simply the product of silly superstition, but felt herself shiver a bit as they drew closer to the ancient wood.

“Don’t let it worry you too much,” Julius said seeing the expression on her face. “I’ve been through here many a time and I’ve never had no harm come to me for it. I s’pose it’s a bit like the sea. It can be dangerous and deadly and if you turn your back on it for long it’ll kill you, but it’s not evil in the sense that most people think of evil.”

As they passed beneath the branches of the ancient oak trees that shaded the path Ella could feel the forest around her. Julius had been right. The wood was alive, although not in any sense that could be properly described. Ella could almost sense the thoughts of the forest moving through the tree’s roots.

“They say that if one of the trees is cut down the whole forest feels its pain,” Julius said.

“How is it you know so much about this place?”

“I keep my eyes and ears open. You’d be amazed what you can learn by watchin’ and listenin’.”

There was something oddly peaceful about being in the wood. The dense foliage overhead filtered out most of the sunlight leaving the forest floor in a murky darkness occasionally dappled with spots of light that had managed to make its way through the leaves. It was cooler in the wood and quieter too. Ella imagined for a moment that the trees were listening to their passage, listening so intently that they sucked up some of the sound. She felt strange now as if every thing around her were no more real than a dream. *It's the forest, a stray thought said, The forest is making me feel this way.* But the knowledge was of no use to her, for she could not seem to rouse herself enough to care about what was causing her to feel so peaceful, so relaxed, so tired. Suddenly the wagon gave a sudden jolt and jarred her from her stupor.

"That didn't sound good," Julius said. "Stay here, I'll see if there's anything wrong."

He climbed down from the seat, and went to inspect the back of the wagon. The horses shuffled and pawed the ground seeming anxious to go and leave the forest behind.

Then Ella looked up and saw it. It was a strange looking fruit hanging from a branch that stretched out just above her head. Ella looked up at the fruit hanging there waiting for her to reach out and pluck it and she suddenly realized how hungry she was. The hunger surpassed anything she had ever known as if she had never truly experienced hunger until that moment in time. Her hand reached up to grab the strange fruit. She heard a voice that sounded very far away yelling, telling her not to eat it. But the sweet skin was already at her lips, and the dark juice dribbled down her chin as she sank her teeth into the meat of the fruit. And the world fell into darkness.

Chapter Seven

She dreamed that she lay in the wood under the cool shade of a great oak tree. It seemed as though an age had passed and she had laid there so long she had become part of the tree. Her hair had turned to fine vines and her skin to bark. Her eyes were mere knots of wood that stared out at the world that flashed from day to night in a moment, and her legs grew into the ground stretching deeper and deeper until they mingled with the mass of roots that ran through the earth beneath her.

The forest spoke to her with a voice that was not a voice, like the whisper of the wind rustling through dry leaves. *Where do you come from little one?*

And Ella answered with a wooden tongue and lips of bark “From a place to the west of here. A town called Caelum.”

We have sensed your coming. The birds speak of a horror that creeps across the land searching for you, never sleeping, never resting, always searching. You cannot run forever.

“I don’t intend to run forever. I intend to fight.”

Many of the world of men have tried and failed to defeat your adversary. It is not a light thing to undertake. You are so small, and so young.

“My age is of no importance. I will defeat it. I will defeat it...because I have no other choice.” Even as she spoke the words they sounded strange to her. The strength behind them came from somewhere she didn’t know she had, and she began to feel as if were not really her that was speaking to the forest, but rather the person she wished she could be.

Your fate is in your hands. But beware. You face an enemy far more fearsome than the Umbrali.

“Another enemy? Who?”

But before the forest could answer, Ella felt as if she were being shaken apart. A loud roaring sound filled her ears, blinding light pierced her eyes, and she felt

that she was rushing upward at an impossible speed. Then in an instant the sensation was over and she found herself looking up into the worried face of Julius.

“Are you alright?” he asked

“Yes. Fine,” Ella said. She looked around and took stock of her surroundings. She was surprised to find that she was no longer in the forest. Instead she was lying in the back of the wagon. “How long was I out?”

“About three hours. As soon as you fainted I made for Danesil as fast as I could. I thought the doctor there might be able to help you. But then, just now you cried out and came to.”

Ella rubbed her head and sat up. “Three hours? But it only seemed like a minute or two.”

“What happened? What did you see?”

“It was just a strange dream. What was that fruit that I ate?”

“I don’t know. Never saw nothin’ like it before in my life. You sure you’re okay?”

Ella nodded. “I feel fine,” she said. “Really.”

“Well that takes a load off my mind,” Julius said. “I was afraid it was some kinda poison.”

“Whatever it was, it hasn’t killed me,” Ella said, climbing into the front of the wagon.

“Good to hear it,” Julius said settling into the seat beside her and taking the reins.

As the wagon began to roll, Ella considered telling Julius about the dream and her talk with the forest, but something held her back. It seemed strange that this man had done more for her than anyone else in the world and yet she still couldn’t bring herself to completely trust him.

Maybe it 's the fact that he just happened to be passing through at the exact same time the Umbrali showed up. That's a pretty big coincidence considering the small number of people who come through Caelum. Ella shook her head as if that might help her to clear her thoughts. *I can't be thinking this way. I can't believe Julius had anything to do with...*

She couldn't bring herself to complete the thought, and suddenly she was angry with herself for letting doubt creep into her mind. She wanted to trust Julius. He was the only friend she had left in the world now. How could she mistrust him when he was risking so much to keep her safe?

Ella looked out at the scenery as it rolled slowly by. The ground here was still flat, but the color of the grasses had faded from a lush green to a brownish yellow color. The sun still shone high in the sky, but it was past noon now sinking imperceptibly towards the jagged forms of the mountains on the horizon.

The rest of the day passed slowly. Ella didn't really feel like talking much, and Julius seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, so once again they rode together in silence. As the sun sank in the sky the mountains got closer and closer, seeming to grow out of the land as they approached, and just before sunset Ella saw a number of small buildings clustered in the shadows of the towering mountains.

Although there was still some light in the sky when they arrived, the torches and candles had been lit in the windows, and Ella could see their warm glow spilling out onto the street. It was a small town, larger than Caelum certainly, but not by much. Julius pulled the cart in front of one of the larger buildings, and got down.

"This is as far as we go tonight," he said to Ella.

Ella disembarked from the wagon and followed him into the warmly lit building. The sign above the door read "King's Pass Inn".

Five men with wrinkled skin and hair that was either graying, thinning or both sat in one corner of the wide room playing a game of cards with looks of intense concentration on their faces. Behind the bar a plump woman bustled about filling drinks and cooking over the wood stove that sat against the wall. It was immediately obvious that Julius was well known and liked here. The card playing old men looked up from their game and greeted him enthusiastically. "Julius you old dog," one of them called out, "We weren't expecting' you for another week. Care to join us for a round?"

“Eh, don’t invite him,” said another. “I’ve lost enough money to that man over the years to buy a whole herd of cows.”

“You knew the risks Joseph,” Julius said. “Although you might do better if you didn’t drink when you were playing,” he added conspiratorially.

The rest of the men laughed at this and the woman from behind the bar said, “Now don’t you be botherin’ Mr. Julius till he’s had a bit to eat.”

“Now there’s an offer too good to pass up,” Julius said.

“And who might your young lady friend be?” the woman asked.

“Of course, I’m forgetting my manners. Mrs. Peabody this is Ella. I’m givin’ her a lift to the coast. Ella meet Mrs. Peabody, the best cook for fifty miles.”

“Well, that’s not saying much in these parts,” said Mrs. Peabody.

“Well I wouldn’t say no to whatever you care to dish up for a couple of weary travelers like us,” Julius said.

“I’m sure I can manage to throw something together,” Mrs. Peabody said, bustling back into the kitchen.

“So what do you say Julius?” Called one of the wrinkled old men from across the room. “Join us for a hand?”

“I think I’ll let you boys keep your money for tonight,” Julius answered. “Ella I’m goin’ to the stable to tend to the horses. Wait here, I’ll be back in a sec.” He disappeared through the back door of the tavern.

Ella leaned against the wall waiting for Julius to return, feeling somehow out of place without him. A little later he reappeared and went over to where the old men were playing cards.

“Looks like you’re not doin’ to good Thad,” he said. “Maybe you should quit while you’re behind.

“Just you mind your own business, Julius,” Thadeus replied. “I’m sure to run through this streak of bad luck eventually.”

Julius shrugged. “Your funeral.” He left the table and came over to Ella. “Hungry?” he asked

She nodded. “Starved.”

“I’ll get us some food,” he said. “You’re in for a treat. Mrs. Peabody’s one of the finest cooks I know.”

A few minutes later she and Julius were sitting in front of pewter plates that each held a steaming piece of meat and a generous helping of boiled greens.

“It’s a bit of rabbit my Bobby caught yesterday,” Mrs. Peabody explained. “I’ve just seasoned it with a little pepper but it tastes heavenly.”

“Can’t beat the taste of plains rabbit,” Thad agreed as Ella bit into the white meat.

“Speaking of Bobby where is he?” Julius asked. “Haven’t seen him all night come to think of it.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s around somewhere,” Mrs. Peabody said in a strange tone of voice. Ella looked up at the woman and saw nervousness and a hint of fear in her eyes.

“How’s the trip been so far Julius?” Joseph asked.

“Not too bad,” Julius said.

“Have any trouble comin’ through Wormwood, did ya?”

“We got through okay,” Julius said.

“Well you should consider yourselves lucky. That forest ain’t natural. Ain’t natural at all.”

“Oh don’t go on,” Mrs. Peabody said. “There’s no need to frighten the girl with your silly stories.”

“It ain’t silly woman,” Joseph retorted. “Just cause you wasn’t born yet at the time don’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“Go ahead,” Ella said. “I don’t mind hearing it.”

“Well they say the Wormwood Forest is special. You know, haunted like.”

Ella nodded. “Julius told me about it.”

” Right, well because of that very fact, it’s always been considered bad luck to cut down the trees of that forest.”

“Extremely bad luck,” Thad added.

“Right,” said Joseph. “So anyway one day a good ways back a man came through town and heard the story of the forest. He laughed and called us superstitious fools for believin’ in something like that, said he’d prove to us that it was all a lie. He was so sure of it, he said that he would go into them woods and cut a tree down and bring it back and show us there was nothin’ to be afraid of, and the next day he set out for the wood with a shiny axeaxedthrewed over his shoulder.”

“What happened to him?”

“Well the day went by and nobody from the village heard nothin’ from the wood. Then another day passed and another and another. Finally some of us works up enough guts to go into the forest to look for him.”

“And did you find him?”

“Well that’s a bit tricky. You see we searched all day for him but couldn’t find any sign of him at all. It started to get late and the we headed back for the village, cause none of us wanted to be out in that wood after dark. We was almost out when I spied something glinting in the light of the setting sun. So we all ran over there and saw the stranger’s ax layin’ there on the ground next to a tree. Well, we looked around and didn’t see any other sign of the man. It was like he’d vanished into thin air. We was about to give up the search for good when one of us took a good look at the tree we was standing next to.”

“What did you see?”

“Well, you can believe this or not, but I’d swear on the grave of my dear sweet mother that that tree had a face grow’d into the wood looked just like the man

himself.”

“What did you do?”

“We ran out of them woods like our shoes were on fire, and didn’t look back once.”

Thad cut in and said, “It’s really true lass. I saw it too. Not somethin’ you’re likely to forget if you know what I mean.”

” Well I still say it’s all a lot of foolishness,” Mrs. Peabody said.

“Well, you can say it all you want,” drawled Thad, “but I’ll bet you wouldn’t go into those woods alone in the dark.”

” That is not the point,” Mrs. Peabody said. “It’s silly to scare the child with those old stories.”

“Alrighty then how about a new story?” asked Joseph.

“Oh, don’t start again about your cattle,” said Thad. “I keep telling you they’re just getting picked off by some big cat from the mountains.”

“Don’t you try to sell me on that theory, Thadeus. I know for a fact no cat could’a taken down my prize bull, and you’ve lost livestock too. You can’t tell me any mountain lion could do that kind of damage.”

“And you think you know what could?” Julius asked.

“Don’t get ‘im started,” Thad groaned.

“Just you hush up. The man done asked me a question.” Turning to Julius and Ella, Joseph said, “I think its being done by a werewolf.”

“And I think your crazy. No one’s seen anything like a werewolf in these parts since our granddaddies was children.”

“You can’t deny that every single on of them killings happened on the night of a full moon,” Joseph said.

“Well then, we might be in for an interesting night,” Julius said thoughtfully.

“Unless I’m mistaken tonight should be a full moon.”

” Hey that’s right,” Joseph said. “So if I’m right, then that thing should be out there right now lookin’ for something to eat.” He paused for a few seconds then said, “You know it’s an awfully long way back to my farm, and this night air does somethin’ terrible to my old joints. I think I might just stay the night here.”

“Yeah that’s a good idea,” Thad agreed quietly suddenly looking less than sure about his earlier claim.

“I can’t believe the things you two get into your heads,” Mrs. Peabody said. “Honestly, werewolves! The very idea!” Her voice seemed strange to Ella, higher pitched, like the squeak of a cornered mouse.

“Well, we should be getting to bed,” said Julius, changing the subject. “We’ll be needing an early start in the morning.”

Despite the fact that the mattress on her bed was thin and hard, and small room had a slight musty odor that tickled her nose, Ella had no trouble falling asleep. But she awakened some hours later, aware that dawn was still far off. She lay in bed listening to the stillness of the night, trying to determine what had awakened her, but as far as she could tell, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

She tried to shut her eyes and go back to sleep. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong, a worry with no perceptible origin.

She swung her legs off the bed and put her feet down on the floor, feeling the faint grain of the worn wooden floor beneath her toes. She stood, walked quietly to the door, and opened it. It gave a tiny squeak as it turned on its hinges that seemed much louder against the silence of the night. Her feet carried her along almost without her knowledge, as if they knew where she was going somehow. Before long she found herself out back of the inn, looking at the stables.

The stable door felt heavy as Ella swung it back and stepped inside. The door creaked shut behind her, and she stood still for a few seconds letting her eyes adjust to the dim light. There wasn’t much in the room, just a few bales of hay, and some rusty looking tools hanging on a wall. Ella heard a low snort from the stalls where Julius’s horses were penned. She walked over to the animals, and one of them stuck its head out at her as she approached. Ella reached out and stroked the horse’s long nose with her fingertips, trying to figure out what she

was doing out here.

A scream shattered the darkness and made Ella's heart jump in her chest. It was a scream of rage that went on for several seconds. And it was close. She stood still as a statue, her arm frozen in the motion of stroking the horse's nose. Only her eyes moved, flickering to the barn door, waiting for something to happen.

The scream cut through the night air again. It was like nothing she had heard before, neither a human scream nor the roar of a savage beast but something in between, a howling moan that sent goose bumps prickling across the back of Ella's neck.

Then there was a scratching sound at the door and the horses panicked, rearing up in their stalls and pounding the walls of the stable with their hooves. Ella found her feet again, and backed slowly away from the stable door. There was a ladder leading up to the hay loft, and Ella's hands found the rungs. She started climbing, never taking her eyes off the door, then pulled herself up into the loft and dropped into a crouch. For a moment the scrabbling at the door stopped as if the creature outside had given up.

Then there was another enraged roar and the barn door exploded into a hail of splinters.

Chapter Eight

The full moon was setting outside and Ella could see the outline of the creature silhouetted in its milky rays. For a moment it stood there, stock still, sniffing the air with its long nose, every hair on its back extended. Ella's mind flashed back to the old farmer's talk of a werewolf in the area. Ella had never seen one in person but she knew the creature standing in the doorway sniffing the air couldn't be anything else. She felt her blood run cold at the thought, but she forced the fear from her mind.

The werewolf slowly advanced on the stalls where Julius's horses screamed in panic. Drawn to the smell of their fear in the air, its gait seemed almost leisurely as it advanced on its prey. *It's going to kill the horses*, she thought. _ _ Without the horses they would be stranded, and within a day or two the Umbrali would find them.

Ella knew what she had to do. She took a moment to get her nerve up, then launched herself out into open air.

The fall lasted less than a second but it seemed slow and lazy somehow as if her brain were stretching out time to make the most of it before she was ripped to shreds by the werewolf's claws. She slammed into the werewolf's back face first wrapping her arms around its neck as tightly as she could. The werewolf roared and tried to shake her off, but she locked her fingers into its fur in a death grip. The monster was almost twice her size, but it couldn't reach her. She smelled the rancid breath from the creature's mouth as it turned its head to snap at her.

There was no time for fear. She focused on the raging thing beneath her, feeling the shape of its Form and absorbing it into herself. It of the beast became a part of her core and she reached out to that Form in her mind. And changed.

She opened her eyes and looked at the other werewolf. The enemy.

Ella fought for control of the savage mind. It was filled with primal rage and a lust for blood. The eyes of the other werewolf bored into hers and she felt violent instincts invading her thoughts. Where there were two wolves, one of them had to submit or be killed, and Ella wasn't about to submit. She lunged.

The world seemed to slow down, as Ella lost herself in the lazy red haze of the werewolf's rage. She heard the screams of rage and pain and could not tell if they were hers or the other's. Blood and fur flew through the air, falling to the ground like a heavy shower of dirty snow. She heard as if at a great distance the sounds of human voices calling out, coming closer. She would deal with them later. It felt as if the dance of death went on for hours, though afterwards she realized it couldn't have been longer than a minute. She felt her jaws close on something, and tasted a liquid sticky and sweet. Her opponent thrashed about for a few moments more and then lay still.

The conquering werewolf stood over its defeated opponent and roared at the sinking moon in triumph. Then it saw a new challenge standing in the stable doorway. A large creature standing on its hind legs, approaching the werewolf's kill. The werewolf gave out a low snarl and started to advance on the new threat. There was a tickling, in the back of its mind as if some half formed thought was trying to push its way through. The werewolf paused, confused for a moment. It could smell the fear in the figure in the door, could see it would be an easy kill. The werewolf advanced again.

Ella was lost in the screaming whirlwind of rage that filled the werewolf's mind, but she concentrated again focusing all her energy on bringing the mind of the animal to bear. She could feel this fight even more keenly than the physical one she had just been through. It was a strong mind, filled with fear, and hunger and rage. Too strong. Almost.

Somehow she found a crack in that wall of rage, and pushed through, filling the boiling cauldron of raw instinct with her own thoughts. Somehow she found the willpower to focus on the change back into herself

The feel of being in her own skin once again was like a bath in a pool of cool water. She stood still for a moment, just breathing, then the strain of what she had just been through, caught up with her like a tidal wave. Darkness flooded the sides of her vision and she fell forward into Julius's arms.

Ella slept with no sense of time.

When she opened her eyes she found herself back in her bed in the inn. She might have dismissed the whole ordeal as a dream, but for Julius sitting there watching her with a worried expression on his face.

“Good morning,” Ella told him smiling faintly.

“Welcome back to the land of the livin’. How do you feel?”

Ella considered the question for a moment. “Rested,” she finally answered. “I feel like I’ve slept for days and days.”

“Actually its only been a few hours. Do you feel well enough to move?”

“I guess,” Ella answered. “We haven’t lost too much time have we?”

“No, its still pretty early.”

“Good. Good. Let me change clothes and I think I’ll be ready to go.”

Julius nodded slightly and left the room. Ella changed quickly and when she emerged from her room with her trunk in her hands Julius was standing outside waiting on her.

“You might want to be careful around Mrs. Peabody,” he said.

“Oh? Why is that?”

“The werewolf you killed was her son.”

“Oh.” Ella felt as if the bottom had dropped out of her heart. She had never felt so completely at a loss as to what to do or say.

“She says she didn’t know, but I’m guessin’ she probably did and just couldn’t bring herself to do anything about it. Her husband died a while back and Bobby was her only son. She’s pretty shaken up about the whole thing, so try not to say anything to her.”

” Okay,” Ella said, nodding. She tried to ignore the feeling of guilt building inside of her.

_It would have killed someone eventually if I hadn’t killed it, _ she thought.

You mean just like you almost killed Julius?

Ella remembered what it had been like inside the body of the werewolf, her mind

trapped behind a screaming wall of raw instinct and insatiable hunger. She knew that what she had done was unavoidable, but she felt pity for that boy trapped inside a monster's body.

Ella dreaded having to face Mrs. Peabody, but they didn't see her before leaving. Ella felt relieved, and then ashamed of her relief. Julius left some money on the table for their night's lodging and Ella followed him to the barn where she helped him harness the horses to the wagon. The body of the werewolf was gone, although Ella could still see the evidence of their struggle. She was glad when the wagon rolled out of the stable and out of town.

Neither of the two travelers said anything for some time. The silence seemed awkward as if both parties had something to say but were afraid to say it.

"I'm sorry." The words came out of Ella's mouth without forethought, and when Julius turned to her and asked "What for?" she wasn't sure exactly what the right answer was. "I wish I hadn't killed that boy," she said finally. "He couldn't help what he was."

"No," Julius said softly, "but that doesn't mean he was any less dangerous."

Ella knew Julius was right but she couldn't bring herself to answer him.

"If you hadn't killed him, he would have eventually killed someone else," Julius continued.

"I know," Ella said. "I just know what he was going through. When I was in the werewolf's body the urge to kill was so strong I almost lost myself to it." She paused. "I almost killed you."

"But you didn't," Julius said quietly.

Ella shook her head. "I killed him," she said. "In spite of what he was he had never taken another person's life, and I killed him to save my own."

"You can't be so hard on yourself," Julius said. "Who's to say that me or anyone else wouldn't have done the same thing?"

"But it wasn't anyone else," Ella said. "It was me. He's dead because of me."

And that small accusing voice in the back of her head said, *You wanted to see what adventure was like. Is this what you expected?*

And as much as she wanted to deny it Ella knew that she was the one to blame for all of this. It was her fault her mother had died and now she was responsible for another death. She felt as if her heart had turned to lead in her chest. Tears welled up in her eyes. Tears of sorrow and bitterness mixed together in her eyes so thick that she could hardly see. She cried until she had no more tears left in her eyes, and then simply sat there with her eyes closed, her body shaking. And after a while it seemed that even her emotions were gone and she was left feeling hollow and empty.

“I should have let it kill me,” she said at last. “I don’t deserve to live.”

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” Julius said.

“Why not?”

“Because they aren’t true. You couldn’t have known what would happen when you put on the ring. And if you hadn’t killed the boy, then someone else would have had to. You can’t be so hard on yourself.”

Ella shook her head. “I don’t know. I feel like I’m turning into a different person, and I just wish I could go back. I wish I could end all of this.”

“If you give up it won’t be the end,” Julius said. “After you’re dead who knows what the Umbrali will do with the ring. That’s why you’ve got to keep going. It’s natural for you to feel the way you feel, but don’t let your feelings control you. You’re gonna meet people in life who’ll tell you to follow your heart, but don’t listen to ‘em. People like that are unpredictable. Sometimes you’ve got to keep going when your heart just wants to give up. Sorrow and pain can turn you aside from what you ought to do if you let them. You have to let your soul guide you. It’s the essence of everything you are, and everything you can be. It’s the piece of you the no one can kill, and it is the place you must rely on for your strength. The heart is a fickle thing, but the soul is as solid as a rock.”

Ella wasn’t sure how to respond. There was something enormous about what Julius had said to her that she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around. It was as if she had been walking in darkness and now Julius’s few words had lit up the world like the sun. There was no way to say what she was feeling, trying to

speak such a thing aloud would have cheapened it, made it seem trivial. And so she took shelter in the silence of her own thoughts, pondering Julius's words, turning them over and over in her mind, and the wheels of the wagon rolled on.

Chapter Nine

The morning sun was still rising in the sky, but in the distance between the mountain peaks Ella could see thick black storm clouds gathering.

“Look’s as if we might be in for a bit of a blow,” Julius commented.

Despite the fact that the air was still quite warm Ella shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, as if she could already feel the stinging cold rain on her skin.

“Don’t trouble yourself too much about it,” Julius said. “We’ll reach the Manhasset before it starts if I’m any judge of things. Still if we get a little wet, we’re not so sweet that we’ll melt, eh?”

Ella smiled at the remark but said nothing, and the silence stretched on, punctuated only by the creaking of the wagon wheels and the clop-clop of the horse’hooves as the road rolled by underneath them. Far in the distance the faint rumble of thunder added an ominous tension to the quiet atmosphere and Ella felt a cold breeze tousle her hair.

Julius looked at the sky, unperturbed. “Not far now. Maybe another mile, and we’ll be in sight of the port.”

Around a bend in the road ahead of them a rider appeared. He was riding a black horse and wearing a strangely colored tunic that looked like a uniform of some kind.

“City herald,” Julius said, squinting at the approaching figure. “Judgin’ from his speed he must be carryin’ important news.”

The rider on the black horse was on them in less than a minute. “What news do you carry sir herald?” Julius called as he approached.

The rider slowed his mount and shouted to them, “The dread pirate Simeon Grey has been captured! Rejoice for the triumph of the city of Manhasset and the Kingdom of Eckron!”

Then he was gone, disappearing in the cloud of dust that rose from the hooves of his mount.

“Seems a lot of ruckus to make over one man.” Ella said. “He must have been really awful for them to make such a fuss.”

“Well he is very...effective,” Julius said. “But not necessarily awful.”

“What do you mean?”

“Calling a man a pirate don’t mean he is one.”

“What do you mean? Why could anyone call a law abiding man a pirate?”

“He is a law abiding man lass, just not the right law.”

“I’m confused.”

“Well I’ll do my best to explain it to you as best I can. It started about fifteen years ago. The king of Eckron had just died and his eldest son Uther Renault IV stepped up to take his place. He was a young man, no more than twenty when he rose to power. When he became king he inherited his father’s title, land and his unquenchable thirst for power.”

“What do you mean?”

“Uther’s father had built up the army of Eckron to be a fighting force like none other. He had already defeated most of the countries surrounding Eckron when he died. But Uther wasn’t satisfied with that. Within the first year of his reign he had already expanded the borders of his country by twofold. His military genius combined with the smashing power of the Army of Eckron seemed unstoppable. During the next five years he swept over the land like a wildfire.”

“But what does that have to do with the pirates?”

“Well, after five years of victories, Uther finally came up against a nut he couldn’t crack. The City of Pridian. It was an area well protected by a natural formation of mountains, and many years before, the Pridian’s had built a thick stone wall that blocked off most off the spaces the mountains did not. Many of the nearby cities, fearful of the terrible army of Eckron, fled to Pridian for

protection and joined with the people of Pridian in their stand against Uther.”

“So what happened?”

“Uther decided it would be a waste of resources to attack such well defended positions directly so he waited, and laid siege to the roads that led in and out of the city, hoping to starve them into submission.”

” Did it work?”

Julius shook his head. “Despite the fact that the roads to the city were blocked by Uther’s army, the people of Pridian had another way out. See, Pridian was equipped with one of the best navies in the world, so it wasn’t much trouble for them to supply the city with their many ships. Uther tried to send his own navy to stop the supply chain, but despite the fact that they were outnumbered, the smaller and faster ships of Pridian outmaneuvered the Eckronian juggernauts and won a decisive battle on the sea. The King of Pridian was so encouraged by the victory that he sent many of his war ships on the offensive. They sailed across the sea and began attacking the enemy ships, and plundering their goods.”

“So what happened? Did Uther give up the fight?” Ella asked.

Julius shook his head. “I think he saw it as his destiny to conquer the world and nothing was going to get in his way. The siege at Pridian went on for a year with little change. There was the occasional skirmish but Uther wisely realized that he had no chance of taking the city by a direct attack on the walls. Near the end of the year he sensed that his men were becoming restless at the waiting.”

“But what could he do? You said yourself there was no way for his army to get to the city.”

“Well that’s what everyone thought. But while it seemed Uther’s troops had been simply waiting, Uther had them hard at work digging a tunnel straight through the heart of one of the mountains. It took them a whole year to complete it, and even then it wasn’t very big, but it was enough. The Eckronian troops poured through the tunnel and suddenly the men of Pridian found themselves pressed back against the very wall they were defending. They fought valiantly but they couldn’t beat an enemy attacking them from both sides and it wasn’t long before they were overwhelmed. From there it was easy work for Uther to take the city. He ordered his men to completely decimate Pridian, killing all they found, men,

women and children. Few survived that day of slaughter. The king of Pridian, when he saw his defenses were breached, sent his young daughter, and a small number of his close advisors away in a ship, but he himself stayed behind.”

“Did they kill him?”

“Yes but only after they had beaten him and made him a public example in the capital city of Eckron. Then they cut off his head and placed it above the gate of the city for all to see.”

“What about the king’s daughter?” Ella asked.

“Well the ships that the king sent out to cut off the Uther’s supply lines returned to port to find their city had been destroyed. Shortly after that they found the ship with the king’s daughter on it, and took her under their protection.”

“But where did they go? If their city was destroyed, what could they do?”

“Well Uther figured that they’d sail the sea until they starved, or where destroyed by his navy. After all, they had no safe place to make harbor, and restock their supplies, that wasn’t under the control of the Uther’s forces. But one month passed and then two and three and the navy of Pridian continued to sting the supply lines and merchants of Eckron like wasps.”

“But a wasp has to have a nest,” Ella reasoned.

“And Uther tore his hair out tryin’ to find it. But to this day the navy of Pridian continues the fight the war on the sea that they lost on the land ten years ago. So Uther started calling them pirates, turnin’ people against them, casting them as savage freebooters rather than men fighting for their country.”

“And that worked?”

“To a large extent, yes. Uther is nothing if not shrewd in his ways of managin’ his people. He is as great a politician as he is a conqueror.”

“And what about the one the herald said they captured? What was his name? Simeon Grey I think he said.”

“Simeon Grey is one of the most feared of the ones Uther called Pirates. He’s a

tactical genius, and his ship is one of the fastest in the sea. Many a Eckronian sailor has been sent to a watery grave by the thunder of his cannons.”

By now they were nearly out of the mountains, and Ella could see the landscape before them gently sloping down to the sea. The waves looked dark and ominous under the thick storm clouds, but the sun still shone from behind them, giving the whole scene an eerie aspect that sent goose bumps racing over her skin. Julius’s mood seemed affected by the atmosphere as well and they lapsed into silence as the city of Manhasset grew steadily closer. The city looked squat and sturdy, as if years of storms had culled all but the strongest buildings from the bunch. There was little color or contrast to the buildings, only the dull gray of stone and mildewed wood. The scent of salt air blew in from the sea, cool and invigorating. The road was smoother here, and the bumps and jostles lessened until she could almost imagine she was on the sea already, sailing through the frothy water, and catching the sea spray in her hair.

“There’ll be a big celebration, if I don’t miss my guess.” Julius said as they drew up to the outskirts of the city, and indeed Ella could already hear the sound of reveling in the distance.

“Do you think it’ll be a problem?”

” Well the streets are sure to be crowded, but there’s not much we can do about that.” ‘s voice seemed strange to Ella and she looked over at him wondering what was wrong, but his face revealed no more emotion than if it were made of stone.

“I’d prefer to avoid this particular mob if I had a choice,” Julius went on, “but since I don’t I suppose we’ll make the best of things. Just keep your eyes and ears open for trouble.”

Ella nodded, although she wasn’t sure what kind of trouble she was supposed to be looking out for. The odd tone in Julius voice had put her on edge, and she couldn’t seem to shake an strange sense of foreboding as they drew closer to the city.

They passed through the city walls, and Ella was surprised how empty the streets looked. She shivered slightly despite the fact that the air was rather warm. As they drew further into the city they began to encounter signs of the ongoing celebration. Several taverns they passed sounded as though there were minor

wars happening in them, and Ella saw two men thrown backwards out of a bar and onto the street. Makeshift streamers and banners hanging from various windows flapped slightly in the soft breeze. But despite the air of celebration Ella felt as if something was wrong. Even the horses seemed to be getting jittery, although Ella thought she might just be imagining it. As they passed through the city the level of activity seemed to intensify as they drew closer to the center.

As they approached the opening in the middle of town the wagon was forced to slow for the press of people that had congregated there. Julius took the wagon by way of a side street in order to avoid the crush of people in the square but as they passed Ella saw between the gaps in the buildings that the people were gathered around something in the middle of the square. It was difficult to see but Ella was finally able to make out a man with his head arms and legs fastened in stocks. He refused to look at the jeering crowd instead looking dejectedly at the ground. She felt a twinge of pity for the man. There was something frightening about seeing him bound there, like seeing an eagle trapped in an iron cage. The wagon passed the square and the roar of the crowd began to fade in the distance. Ella looked at Julius and saw that he had a grim expression on his face.

“There’s nothing you can do about it,” she said, somewhat unsure of how to approach him.

“I know.”

The clouds had thickened now and crept inland until they slipped over the sun, covering the city in their shadow. The wind from the sea grew colder, and Ella wrapped her arms around herself to keep out the sudden chill.

“Won’t be long now,” Julius said, looking up at the encroaching clouds.

“Are we almost there?”

“Almost”.

A few minutes later the wagon stopped in front of a gray stone building. Beyond the structure Ella saw wooden docks stretching out into the water splitting into thin jetties where ships of various styles and sizes rocked at their moorings. The choppy water reflected the darkness overhead except where the wind whipped the tips of the waves into a dull white froth.

“Wait here,” Julius said climbing down from the wagon. “I’ll be back.”

Ella nodded, and Julius ducked into the building leaving her alone with the approaching storm. She looked up at the sky again. The clouds were thicker now, the thunder more intense. A crackle of lightning flashed across the sky and Ella found herself hoping Julius would hurry.

Across the street from the building, Ella saw a man dressed in rags huddled in a doorway shivering, looking up at the sky in apprehension, and she felt a twinge of pity for the homeless stranger with no shelter from the coming storm. Suddenly the man’s eyes locked with hers, and the intensity of the stare was so great Ella almost shut her eyes. The man started across the street towards her and Ella felt a stab of apprehension. Something inside of her wanted to run from those burning eyes, but she stood her ground. The man walked strangely, as if he had forgotten how, and was learning again. He reached up and grabbed her arm, locking her in an iron grip.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he hissed. “There’s danger.”

“What kind of danger?” Ella asked trying not to look at the grime on the man’s hand or his ragged unkempt fingernails.

“Don’t go...stay away. I can see...”

“See what?”

The man looked at her as if he were about to speak. Then a shadow of fear crossed his face and he scuttled away. Ella thought about chasing after him, but she realized that would only frighten him more and if she got lost, she might not be able to find her way back to the wagon. It was likely the man was crazy, and his warning was merely the product of a shattered mind, but it unnerved her nevertheless. She looked towards the door Julius had disappeared into and hoped he wasn’t in any danger. As if in answer to her fears she saw Julius appear around the corner of the building, trotting towards the wagon.

“I think we’re in for quite a storm,” he said as he vaulted up beside her.

Ella looked up and thought she could already see the torrent falling from the clouds. Julius cracked the reins and the horses broke into a trot turning the corner and then swinging into a stable door that stood gaping open in

anticipation of their arrival. Seconds after they were inside, Ella heard the wall of rain sweep over the street behind them, the millions of drops thundering against the cobbles. Overhead the rain thrummed against the stable's high ceiling.

"Well you two made it just in the nick of time. Any longer and I fear you'd have been swept out to sea." Ella heard a grating laugh and looked around for the source of the voice. The stable was dimly lit but she could make out the silhouette of a man standing further back in the gloom. The man struck a match against the stone wall and held it up to the pipe he held clenched between his teeth. The face illuminated in the match's light was wrinkled and scarred, partially covered by an unkempt beard and tipped with a bulbous nose that sat a tad crooked, as though it had once been broken and clumsily reset.

"You wouldn't be rid of us that easily," Julius said swinging down from the wagon.

"No, I shouldn't be that lucky," the man said "But who's this?" He gestured at Ella. "A new recruit perhaps?"

"Her name's Ella. Ella this is Kaizer, our gracious host."

Kaizer strode forward to where Ella stood and extended his hand, "Pleased to meet you Ella," he said.

Ella grasped the offered hand and shook it tentatively. There was something unnerving about the man's touch that Ella couldn't explain, but couldn't ignore either. "Pleased to meet you too, Mr. Kaizer," she replied giving as convincing a smile as she could muster.

Kaizer released her hand. "I'm sure you both must be starving, and as I doubt you have any desire to venture out into that," he pointed to the still open door and the pouring rain outside, "I must insist that you dine with me."

"We'd be glad to," Julius said.

"Don't look so squeamish, girl," Kaizer said. "It's not as if I intend to cook it myself. That would be a disaster." He laughed that grating laugh again, and Ella shuddered slightly. "Come on, time's wasting. Lets get these horses of yours stabled and fed Julius."

Ella let the two men be about their business. While they worked she stood in the doorway and looked out at the falling rain. The storm had already faded from its initial fury into a steady drizzle. She closed her eyes and let the soothing sound of the rain wash over her. What a difference it made to be watching the rain from inside where she was safe. She remembered lying in bed in her room in the attic and letting the drumming of the rain on the roof lull her to sleep. If she closed her eyes she felt she could almost feel herself back there. The memory was sharp and painful, but she didn't cry.

A few hours later Ella and Julius sat at Kaizer's table looking at a meal that looked as appetizing as anything Ella had seen since she left home.

"My compliments to the chef," Julius said.

"Yes," said Ella, "it's quite good."

"Ah, well that's all thanks to my servant girl, Valerie. She's handy at cooking, cleaning and just about anything else she puts her hand to."

"Where is she?" Ella asked.

"She prefers to eat in the kitchen," Kaizer answered shortly.

Ella nodded and returned her attention to the food on the table. There was some kind of bird, baked in spices with tender and juicy meat the Ella thought was heavenly, and several potatoes that had been baked in the coals of a fire leaving their outsides crisp, and their insides flaky and delicious when treated with butter and salt.

Ella ate until it hurt to eat any more, and pushed herself back from the table. "It was a wonderful meal", she told Kaizer.

"Yes," Julius agreed. "Fit for a king."

"Thank you my friend. It's an honor to receive such accolades."

"But getting down to business," Julius said. "Are we on schedule for delivery?"

"Are you sure its wise to speak of such things given," he paused and looked at Ella, "present company."

Julius sighed and shrugged. “Maybe it *would* be better if you left us alone for the moment, Ella,” he said.

Ella nodded and left the two men at the table and walked back out to the stable. The high ceiling made the room seem dark and cavernous. A few empty wagons sat in the shadowy recesses of the structure, though Julius’s was the only one that was full. A heavy block and tackle rigging hung from a thick beam that ran above the open floor.

Ella heard a soft snuffing sound from one of Julius horses, as if it were trying to get her attention. She walked over to the animal and stroked its long nose absently as she pondered her situation. She wondered what it was Julius and Kaizer were talking about. What hadn’t they wanted her to overhear. Why the secrecy?

She left the horses and continued her exploration of the stable. In the back of the building a room was filled with sacks of feed and bales of hay for the horses, but nothing else of interest. Ella looked over again at where Julius’s wagon sat against the wall. The burlap tarp still covered whatever was in the back. Ella glanced at the door to the inside of the house then, after a moment’s hesitation started toward the wagon.

The knots in the rope holding down the tarp were tied tight, but Ella was determined and she quickly worked them apart, and swept the tarp aside.

It took a few seconds for her to process what she was looking at. The cannons were stacked neatly, strapped down to the wagon bed with their open ends facing Ella. Cannons? There had to be at least thirty of them.

Before she had time to consider the implications of her discovery she heard voices approaching from the outside. She hurriedly replaced the tarp and crouched down under the wagon.

She peered through the spokes of the wagon wheel, and saw four men wearing amour walk into the stable and approach the door that led into the house. They moved in silence, their faces grim. They paused in front of the door for a moment then one of the men gave a signal and they flowed through with the speed of a snake sliding across the ground. A moment later Ella heard the sounds of a struggle inside. She heard Julius’s voice, yelling, muffled by the walls, but she could not make out what he was shouting.

Almost without thinking she called the Form of the rat to mind and let herself fall into it. It was only an instant after she completed the changed that the men reemerged from the house leading Julius with his hands bound behind his back. He did not struggle or even glare defiantly at his captors. Instead, Ella saw something in his eyes she didn't recognize. Resignation? Defeat?

Kaizer appeared in the doorway behind them sporting a satisfied sneer. "Well there he is boys," he said to the gaurds. "Notorious Pirate sympathizer, evil as they come."

"Thanks for the tip," said the man who seemed to be in charge. Outside the stable a lorry pulled up and the guardsmen pushed Julius towards it.

"Just doing my duty as a citizen," Kaizer said, giving the man a mock bow. "I can think of no higher calling than to assist the state in such matter."

"Spare me the sanctimony," the head guard said. "You'll receive your reward in due time."

"That is indeed most generous of you," Kaizer said, bowing again.

"You'll never get to spend it," Julius said quietly.

"Oh? And why not? Are you going to stop me my friend? If the hospitality the people of the city have shown Simeon Grey is any indication, I'll be surprised if you live out the week."

Julius said nothing in reply. Instead he stepped into the back of the lorry and sat down inside.

"And while you're deluding yourself my friend, it would appear that the girl you brought with you has vanished. Who knows? Maybe she'll save you." Kaizer shook with laughter at his own perverse wit while Ella watched him with steely eyes.

Perhaps I will, she thought.

Chapter Ten

The clouds had faded to nothing more than a memory, and the stars shone brightly over the city of Manhasset. The moon dipped low in the sky, but it still provided more than enough light to see by. Ella looked across the street at Kaizer's house. Her fingers tightened around the sword she had taken from the back of Julius's wagon. She looked around one last time to satisfy herself that no one was watching then she scuttled across the street to the stone building.

She hoped Julius would forgive her as she focused on his Form in her mind. The experience of changing into an animal was odd enough, but there was something almost wrong about wearing someone else's skin and bones as if they were her own. She walked up to the front door of the house, and banged on it with her fist. She hoped Kaizer wasn't too sound a sleeper. There was no immediate response from within the house so Ella banged away at the door again, longer and harder this time to make sure her point was getting across.

After a third bout of knocking Ella was almost ready to give up and wait until morning when she noticed a cord hanging next to the door that went up through the wall and into the interior of the house. Ella gave it an experimental tug, and heard the faint sound of a bell ringing inside. She pulled again, harder this time, and heard the sound again, louder, coming from inside the house. There was still no immediate response but Ella kept pulling until finally she heard a shuffling from behind the door and the sound of Kaizer swearing angrily. She heard the sound of a loud clunk, and the door swung open to reveal Kaizer wrapped in a bathrobe. His mouth stood open as if he were about to say something, but when he saw Julius standing on his doorstep his eyes widened in surprise and he stood speechless.

Ella's fist smashed into his dumbfounded face and she heard a sickening crack just before blood gushed from his bulbous nose. Kaizer cried out in pain, and Ella was mildly surprised to find that her hand hurt as well. She pushed past Kaizer into the house, slammed the door behind her, and shoved Kaizer against it.

"Julius?" Kaizer asked, holding his bleeding nose with one hand holding the other up to protect him from any further assault. "But...how? You cant...it was all a misunderstanding, I had no choice."

“I’m sure,” spat Ella as she changed back into herself.

“You...you’re not...a changeling?”

Ella had the sword pressed against his throat almost before the change was complete. “Correct.” It felt good to finally let out the anger and frustration that had building within her.

“But...what do you want with me?” Kaizer asked looking down at the blade pressed into the fat of his neck.

“Why did you do it?” Ella snarled, “Why did you turn him in? He trusted you.”

“He was smuggling weapons and equipment to the pirates,” Kaizer said in a quivering voice. “With the situation the way it is now...I couldn’t afford for my involvement to become known.”

“Not to mention the fat reward you collected from the authorities.”

“You can have the money, I’ll give you anything. Please don’t kill me.”

“What I need...is information.”

“What is it? I’ll tell you anything...please-”

“Shut up.” Ella snapped. “Who was the contact? The one you were going to use to ship those weapons to the pirates. Is he in the city here?”

“Farshorth. Captain Cirrus Farshorth. He’s the one who picks up the supplies, I don’t know where he takes them after.”

“Where? Where is he?”

“His ship’s the Lupine Fury. It flies a green flag with the emblem of a dragon and its figurehead is a wolf.”

“Is he in the harbor now?”

Kaizer shook his head. “He stays anchored in deeper water, out of sight of land. He’ll be here till tomorrow night when the transfer is supposed to take place.”

“Thank you Kaizer,” said Ella releasing him. “You’ve been most helpful.”

Kaizer rubbed his neck where the blade had pressed against it. “You’re not going to kill me?”

“No I think it will be much more fitting to let the authorities do that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I wonder if you told them how long you’ve been in league with Julius and his pirates. I doubt it. Surely, they’d like to add another pirate conspirator to their collection no?”

“You can’t do that. Please. I’ll be made a public example.”

Ella whirled around, and forced the man’s head back against the wall. “I don’t seem to remember you being too concerned about that when you led them straight to Julius. I’m being more than merciful. If you hurry you may be out of the city before they know you’re gone. That’s far more of a chance than you gave Julius.” She paused pretending to ponder for a moment. “Or I could just kill you now and save you the bother of packing...”

“No please, I’ll leave, I’ll go, please don’t kill me,”

Ella released him again looking down at the cowering man with disgust, then turned on her heel and swept into the house. She made her way through the dark hallway to where she remembered Kaizer’s room was and opened the door. A candle, freshly lit, stood on the bedside table, and beside it sat a small bag that felt heavy when Ella picked it up. She deposited the bag in her pocket and made her way out of the house and into the street her steps quickening as she emerged into the chilled night air. The darkness triggered something in her. She felt suddenly drained of emotion. The anger she had let build up in her soul, shocked her even now, even after she had spent it. She leaned against a wall and closed her eyes. *No, not now. You’re not done.* She stood up straight and walked into the night. She still had much to do before it was over.

Julius sat slumped against the stone wall of the jail cell with his head resting on his chest. His face was battered and bruised from the beating he had received from the watchmen trying to glean more information about the pirate’s whereabouts. By now his nose had stopped bleeding but it still throbbed with

pain. He felt they would execute him before long.

His thoughts turned to the cell next to his. He had only seen Simeon Grey once as they passed each other in the hallway, and he had been shocked by the mask of cuts that covered the man's face. But worse than the battered and swollen face, was look of complete defeat he had seen in those eyes. Looking into those hollow eyes it seemed to Julius as if the man's soul had already died. The gallows would be a mere formality.

The sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway outside, breaking into Julius's thoughts. He pulled himself to his feet and crossed the bare cell to look out the tiny window in the door. Just outside a guard leaned against the wall, twirling a splinter of wood between his fingers, and looking bored. A second guard walked down the hallway towards Julius's cell and came to a stop in front of the first guard.

"Look alive. The governor just came into the guard house and demanded to see the pirate sympathizer we captured yesterday."

"The governor?" asked the second guard, straightening up and fumbling for his keys. "At this time of night?"

The first guard shrugged. "Don't ask me. He just said he wanted to talk to the new prisoner."

"That fat one isn't talking any more than Simeon Grey. Bloody stupid cause to loose you life over if you ask me," the second guard opined as he inserted the key into the lock. "I doubt the governor can get anything out of him that we couldn't beat out of the stubborn old-"

His words were cut off as the butt of the second guard's sword slammed into the back of his head. He slumped to the ground, and Julius saw the air around the second guard seem to shimmer and his face dissolved into Ella's. She grasped the key and finished turning it swinging open the cell door.

"You look terrible," she said.

"I've felt better."

"Any idea which cell they've got this Simeon Grey character in?" Ella asked in a

whisper.

“It’s one after the next one down,” Julius said pointing.

Ella walked down to the indicated cell door and unlocked it. The door creaked open and she raised her lantern casting its dim rays into the cell. Julius looked over her shoulder and saw Simeon Grey slumped against the wall looking at the floor.

“This is the famous pirate you told me about Julius?” Ella said as the man looked up into the light of the lantern. “So far I’m not impressed.”

“Let my hand feel the handle of that sword and you soon will be lass,” said the dimly lit figure rising to his feet.

Ella smiled and offered the weapon to Simeon. “As long as you don’t point it at me.”

A faint sound wafted through the air and Simeon tensed. “That’s the hour bell. The new shift will be here at any moment. We must make haste.” He brushed past them striding out into the hall and taking the sword from the fallen guard and thrusting it into Julius’s hands.

“There’s a carriage waiting for us outside,” Ella told Simeon and Julius. “If we can fight our way out that is.”

“There’s more to you than meets the eye,” Simeon said, his eyes narrowing.

“You have no idea,” Ella replied. She reached out and touched the skin at the base of Simeon’s neck. His eyes narrowed, but he didn’t back away from her touch. She closed her eyes and a moment later shifted into his Form.

“A shape shifter?” He raised his eyebrows, but said no more.

“It’s good to see you’re okay Ella,” Julius said. “I was worried about you.”

“I was worried about you too,” Ella said. “But we’re not out of danger yet. We still have to get out of here.”

Simeon turned to them and a smile flickered across his face. “Let me deal with

that.”

A flight of stairs led up and out of the prison. Presently they heard the sound of footsteps descending towards the dim hallway. Julius and Simeon pressed themselves against the wall on either side of the opening to the stairwell, while Ella stood in the middle of the prison hallway waiting for the guard to appear.

Ella watched the boots descend the stairway, saw the look of shock that crossed his face when he saw the dead guard and gaping cell doors. He opened his mouth as if he were about to speak but before the words could make it past his lips Simeon’s sword snaked across his neck and he fell to his knees with blood gushing from the wound and gurgling out of his open mouth. A moment later he slumped forward. Ella looked down at the fallen guard laying there in a pool of his own blood, and her memory took her back again to the scene that haunted her memory day after day, her mother, cut open, lying there on the floor, her eyes frozen open in terror, her mouth open in mid scream. Dead.

“Are you okay Miss Ella?” she heard Julius’s voice ask.

“Fine.”

“Come on,” said Simeon. “We can’t afford to waste any time.”

Ella nodded, stepped past the spreading puddle of blood and joined Julius and Simeon at the foot of the stairs. Simeon motioned for them to be quiet then climbed the stairs with Ella and Julius close behind him.

“What do you want us to do?” Ella whispered when they reached the top.

Simeon’s face was set like a stone. “Stay out of my way.”

He sprinted up the last few steps and burst through the door at the top. Ella heard the sound of a guard’s exclamation of surprise cut short by a cry of pain. She pushed through the door in time to see the man fall to the ground as Simeon drew his bloody sword from between his ribs.

There’s another room just through that door,” Ella said pointing. “By my count there were seven guards when I came through before.”

Simeon nodded. “You two stay back,” he said starting for the door.

Julius said, “Are you sure you don’t-”

“Yes.” Simeon stood alone facing the door. There was a long pause during which Ella found herself holding her breath. Then he pushed through the door, with his sword held high.

Ella would remember later how quiet the man was in his charge into the teeth of the enemy. No battle cry or scream of rage escaped his lips. Instead he simply killed with horrifying efficiency. Not a movement, not a breath, not a blink was wasted. The first guard to die never even saw the blow coming but he must have felt the blade pass through the back of his skull and into his brain, and looked with fading vision at the sword’s tip as it emerged between his eyes.

Simeon pulled the guard’s sword out of its sheath as the man crumpled to the floor. He looked strangely relaxed, almost peaceful as he stood there with the two blades in his hands, the blood of a dead man dripping from one of them in a steady rhythm as if still resonating with the beat of a dead heart. The rest of the guards hurriedly yanked their swords out their sheaths and stood facing Simeon. For several seconds there was no movement at all. None of them seemed courageous enough to move or even breathe, and Simeon simply stood there as still and patient as a statue, waiting. Finally one man worked up the courage to charge forward and a feeble attempt at a roar escaped his lips. Simeon cut him down with a single stroke, watching disinterestedly at the blood that burst out of the man’s neck and splattered against the wall.

The rest of the guards charged all at once, and Ella lost track of specific events in the flurry of violence that followed. Instead she was left with the incredible sense that a dance was taking place. Simeon moved so smoothly, so precisely, that Ella lost herself in the awe of simply watching him. The arc of the swords as they cut through the air, then cut through the skin, the red of the blood that spewed out of the wounds, it all seemed horrifyingly beautiful.

Then, in an instant, it was over. Simeon stood still for a moment amidst the human debris that lay scattered on the floor around him, then motioned for Ella and Julius to follow as he headed for the door and they ran out into the street.

Moments later a carriage skidded around the corner so fast that it stood on two wheels for a moment before crashing back down to stability on the cobblestones. Ella saw Simeon’s grip on the handles of the swords tighten imperceptibly, and

she reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "Its okay...I think."

The driver of the wagon pulled to a stop directly in front of the trio. "Did I miss anything?" he called down in a cheerful tone.

"Not much," Simeon said taking a long look at the driver. "I wouldn't have expected even you to be foolish enough to come ashore yourself with the situation as it is, Cirrus."

"And I didn't expect you to go and get yourself captured now did I? Isn't life full of surprises?"

"Surprises. Like the fact that that hunk of rotting timber you call a boat is still afloat." Simeon's said in a dry and humorless tone.

"I've half a mind to leave you here if you intend to insult my ship." Cirrus answered. "Now hurry it up and get in before I change my mind."

Ella and Julius had already entered the carriage and Simeon climbed in behind them taking a seat and slamming the door. As the carriage started to move he spoke to Ella. "My life is in your debt."

Ella wasn't sure what to say so she simply nodded slightly.

"What is your name young lady?" he asked.

"Ella. Ella Eris."

"It's a pleasure to make the acquaintance of one so brave, Miss Eris, though I must say, I'm at a loss as to why you would risk yourself to save me."

"Actually I was more concerned about Julius," Ella replied nervously. "He's shown me a great deal of kindness. I couldn't just leave him to die."

"It wasn't much really," Julius said, looking a bit embarrassed. "I'm just glad to see you're okay miss Ella."

Ella threw her hands around Julius neck and gave him a quick hug. "I'm glad you're okay too," she said, feeling a few tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

Julius's eyes suddenly went wide, "The Umbrali. It must be close."

Ella nodded. "Very close."

"But you shouldn't be here."

"I don't suppose you two might explain what you're talking about?"

"It's complicated," Ella said, "At the moment we need to move as fast as possible." She closed her eyes, trying not to let the closeness of the Umbrali overwhelm her. She had pushed its presence to the back of her mind for longer than she would have thought possible, but now the sensation of fear flooded back into her mind. It was out there, not far away, coming closer. It wouldn't be long before she would hear that scream, that awful inhuman scream.

Its coming, its coming, its coming, the words roared inside of her mind and she shut her eyes trying to keep the horror at bay.

The Umbrali moved through the streets of Manhasset, sprinting towards Its goal. So close now. So close. It moved with a sense of infinite purpose, an overwhelming single-mindedness that no human could understand. The lights of houses and taverns flashed by the Umbrali as it ran down the narrow city streets. It made no attempt at stealth. The prey was too close for that. With each step the monster took the distance between them closed. The ring was almost within its grasp.

Chapter Eleven

The carriage rounded another corner on two wheels and still Julius screamed at Cirrus to go faster, but Ella was barely aware of anything except the fear. She sat pressed against the corner of the inside of the carriage with her arms wrapped around her knees, and her eyes shut tight. She felt the carriage rattle to a stop and somehow managed to respond to Julius when he took her arm and told her they needed to hurry. Her feet moved sluggishly at first as if she had forgotten what they were for, but then the scream pierced the air behind them and she began to run. She felt the wood of a dock rattling beneath her feet and she looked up to see a smallish rowboat tied up at the end. A man was hurriedly untying the rope that held the post to the end of the dock.

Ella reached the boat first, but Julius and Simeon were only steps behind. Ella heard Cirrus yelling “Push off! Push off!” before he had even reached the boat. He entered the boat last with a flying leap from the dock, then grabbed the oars and dug them into the water with long hard strokes. As the boat started to move further from the dock, Ella heard the scream again. She turned to see the dark shape of the Umbrali moving down the dock towards them. When it reached the end of the dock, Ella half expected it to continue out over the water. Instead the monster stopped abruptly. Ella thought for only a moment that it looked confused. It howled in rage at the retreating row boat, but even at this distance Ella’s fear had begun to fade. It was several minutes before anyone spoke, but when they were finally out of sight of the shore Simeon looked at Julius. “I believe an explanation might be helpful,” he said quietly.

Julius nodded. “I s’pose it might,” he said in a voice that sounded heavy and tired. Ella simply sat there and listened as he recounted the story of how she had found the ring, and the details of their journey to escape the Umbrali. When he finished Cirrus said, “As I live and breathe, that is some kinda tale my friend. I’m pretty near sure I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen that thing for myself.”

“It’s all true,” Julius affirmed.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Ella murmured quietly. “I’ve put you all in danger. I didn’t mean...” she trailed off.

“Well I suppose Simeon would have been in trouble any way you slice it,” Cirrus

said, “and Julius knew what he was getting into ahead of time. As for me, I’ve certainly never been one to shy away from adventure. So I reckon you don’t have much to be sorry for.”

Adventure, thought Ella. That’s what I wanted isn’t it? Is this an adventure? This, this jumbled up swirl of pain and fear, and never really being able to rest? Is that what I wanted? It’s my fault my mother’s dead, and all for this? The storm of guilt made her feel suddenly sick.

By the time they reached Cirrus’s ship and all of them climbed aboard Ella could see the light of the sunrise growing behind the mountains, and she felt the Umbrali’s presence in her mind fade. Still she was feeling weak from her encounter and needed a little help climbing up out of the boat.

“Welcome to the Lupine Fury,” Cirrus said as she stepped on deck. “One of the finest ships ever to sail this sea or any other.”

Simeon gave a snort of derision, but said nothing.

Julius took Ella’s arm and led her below deck, as Cirrus began barking orders to his crew. The air between the walls of the ship was dank and heavy and thick with the smell of sweat. Ella dug her fingers into Julius’s arm and leaned against his side.

“Are you gonna be okay?” Julius asked.

Ella nodded weakly, but she barely believed it. The chase had sapped away her energy, and now her stomach churned under the assault of the ship’s oppressive atmosphere.

Julius helped her through a narrow doorway, and into the tiny room beyond. She sank slowly onto the tiny bed. Her eyes fluttered closed for a moment, then opened again, and she saw Simeon’s face floating next to Julius’s looking down at her.

“You’ll never know how grateful I am for your assistance,” Simeon told Ella. “I was ready to die in that prison and you gave me back my life. Thank you.”

“It’s not something either of us are likely to forget soon,” Julius said.

Ella murmured something in response, but the words didn't make sense even to her. Her eyes flicked shut again. She heard Simeon and Julius speaking, but their words were muffled and distorted, and before she could understand them she fell into a deep sleep.

For the first three days of the voyage Ella spent most of her time below deck being sick. She had never realized how repulsive food could look until now, but the feel of the ship rolling beneath her churned her stomach into such a state that the very thought of eating sent her running to the bucket in the corner of the cabin.

Some of the sailors teased her about her sickness until Simeon caught one of them at it. There was nothing so dramatic as a fight, or snarled threats, but immediately thereafter the taunting stopped.

When Ella awoke on the third day something seemed to be different. She was able to stand with confidence and the rolling of the ship beneath her feet seemed almost soothing. She climbed out onto the deck and took a deep breath of the salty sea air. When she saw Julius walking towards her, she rushed over to meet him and threw her arms around his chest.

"Well, I see you've finally got your sea legs," Julius said when he had disentangled himself from the embrace.

"I feel like an idiot, being so sick," Ella answered. "Is it this bad for everyone?"

"Well maybe not everyone, but I know I was pretty green in the face on my first voyage." Then Julius smile faltered and a troubled look flickered across his face. "I've been wanting to tell you, I'm sorry I didn't explain everything to you beforehand, about all this I mean," he said. "It's not that I didn't trust you, but I thought it might be better...safer for you if you didn't know."

"It's okay Julius," Ella said. "I understand. I'm just sorry I didn't understand before. For a there I wasn't sure I could trust you."

"Well I suppose I would have been suspicious too if I was you," Julius said.

"Well well, look who's back in the land of the living," Simeon said, walking up to them. "Good to see you up and about miss Eris. I trust you're feeling better?"

“Yes. Thank you.”

“No. Thank you. Julius and I both owe you our lives.”

“Well I didn’t do it by myself,” Ella said. “We might not have made it to the door if it hadn’t been for you.”

“Nevertheless,” Simeon said, “you acted as bravely as any sailor I’ve ever commanded.” He paused and looked off at nothing. “We could use more like you in this war,” he said quietly.

Ella frowned. “I wasn’t trying to be a part of the war.”

“Wars like this got a way of sucking you in,” Julius said. “Everyone’s got to take sides sooner or later.”

“Take sides or be destroyed,” Simeon said. “Hardly a pleasant state of things.”

“I didn’t even know about the war until Julius told me about it.”

A wistful look crossed Simeon’s face. “It must have been nice, to be oblivious to all of this.”

Ella nodded, and her thoughts started to turn towards home, but she caught herself before those memories could wash over her again. “Where were you during the war Simeon?” she asked, hoping to turn the conversation away from her past. “Julius told me the story of what happened at Pridian. Were you one of the ones who made it out with the ships?”

“No,” Simeon answered. “No, I was there for the whole thing.”

“Then how did you escape?”

Simeon gave a short laugh. “I didn’t escape,” he said. “I was cut down in the battle and left for dead.” He lifted his shirt and pointed to a wicked looking scar that came halfway across the right side of his stomach.

“But you didn’t die,” Ella said.

Simeon shook his head. “No I didn’t die. I lived.” He spoke with a far off look in

his eyes as though he were still seeing that horrific day playing out again. “I lived to see a battlefield strewn with the corpses of thousands of good men whose only crime was their love of freedom. I lived to walk the streets of the city I grew up in, and to see its buildings razed to the ground, and its flag reduced to ashes. I lived to see the piles of children’s bodies burning in those horrible streets. I lived. And for a while I wished I hadn’t.” He paused for a moment, and then went on. “But as time went on I began to feel my life had a purpose. I could sit around feeling bad about the past or I could do something about the future. So now I’m thankful for every breath I take, because life is about living. It sounds simple, but it means something important.”

“That’s a powerful lesson.” Julius said. “Something we all oughta learn before we die.”

“Maybe so,” Ella said, “but if I’m not sure I would want to if it meant having to go through all of that.”

Simeon shook his head. “You shouldn’t be sorry for the things I’ve been through,” he said. “It’s true that I’ve had my share of troubles. We all have. But you can’t let things like that control you.” Simeon shut his eyes tight for a moment as if trying to take control over some inner struggle, then took a deep breath and went on. “If you dwell on the past too much you’ll become bitter and angry. I keep myself busy and do what I can to be a thorn in the side of Eckron, so that hopefully some day I can say that those men didn’t die in vain.”

Ella leaned on the railing of the ship and stared out at the distant horizon. “Do you really think there’s any chance of winning?”

Simeon sighed. “Honestly? I don’t know. I’d like to think so, but for all that we’ve been able to do, we really haven’t accomplished much more than just slowing them down.” He looked out at the water, quiet for a moment then said, “But it’s a thing worth doing even if that’s all we can do. Giving up means death, but maybe fighting on means death too. Eventually every path leads there anyway.” A smile flitted across his face, but it was quickly replaced with a more somber expression. “What about you?” he said after a moment.

“What about me?”

“Do you think you can win your battle. Can you beat this thing chasing after you?”

“I don’t guess I have much choice. If I don’t kill it, it’ll kill me,” Ella said. She paused, stumbling over the words in her mind before she went on. “There’s more to it than that though.”

“Because of your mother?”

Ella nodded. “As long as it lives I can’t...I can’t forgive myself,” she said.

Simeon nodded, the expression on his face grave. “I know how you feel,” he said. “And more importantly, I may know someone who might be able to help you.”

“You do?” Ella asked feeling her heart skip with excitement. “Who?”

“The Queen of Redemption,” Simeon answered. “Her name is Lady Celia.”

“Redemption?”

” It’s the name of the city we founded after the destruction of Pridian,” Simeon said

“The wasp’s nest,” Ella murmured to herself.

“She is a sorceress of sorts,” Simeon went on. “She may be able to advise you as to how you might defeat this dark creature.”

“I’d be grateful for anything she might be able to do,” Ella said.

“I can’t make any promises. I know almost nothing of magic myself and I have no way of knowing whether she can help you or not.”

Julius had stood there silent for some time, but now he spoke again. “I remember Lady Celia,” he said. “Although the last I recall of her was just before the fall of Pridian. The king was so proud of his daughter that on her fifth birthday he ordered a city wide celebration. Even then I only saw her from a distance. I’d imagine she’s changed quite bit since then.”

“She has,” Simeon said. “She’s turned into quite a beautiful young woman, although I think it came as a surprise to everyone that she inherited her mother’s talents as well as her looks.”

“Lady Penelope,” Julius said. “She was a powerful sorceress.”

“Indeed she was,” Simeon agreed. “I was hardly old enough to be called a man in those days but I remember Queen Penelope. Her marriage to the king was one of political expediency, but she truly did grow to love him and the city.”

Julius nodded. “And the people loved her. It was a brave thing, they said, to come so far to marry a man she’d never seen before.”

“Where did she come from?” Ella asked.

“It was a small kingdom called Everbrook. Her marriage to the king was part of a trade deal with them,” Simeon explained. “Everbrook was one of the first countries to fall to Uther’s armies.”

“Did they destroy it the same way they did Pridian?” asked Ella.

“No, Some would say they suffered a worse fate.” Simeon said. “Uther easily destroyed their small army, and after he executed the royal family he set up a puppet ruler in their stead, a man with no scruples or regard for anything other than himself. Lady Celia was so grieved at the death of her family and the enslavement of her people that she swore revenge on Uther and the kingdom of Eckron.”

“So she was part of the reason that Pridian fought so valiantly against Uther?” asked Ella.

“Partly, though you can’t discount the will of the people to defend themselves from an invasion by a hostile army.” Simeon said.

“There’s one thing I’m still confused about.”

“And what is that?” Simeon asked.

“This city of yours: Redemption. Why hasn’t Uther found it after all these years?”

Simeon hesitated for a moment then smiled. “I think that’s something you’ll just have to see for yourself.”

Chapter Twelve

The time passed slowly for the next few days. Julius and Simeon both kept themselves busy, and Ella was forced to entertain herself by exploring the holds of the ship. She discovered that the cargo hold of the Lupine Fury contained several crates filled with a kind of fine cloth Ella had never seen before, dyed in brilliant hues, and a number of large clay pots, sealed off at the top, but filled with some liquid that sloshed with the rocking of the ship.

As the days crawled by Ella felt herself growing more and more impatient. Why couldn't they get there faster? What was taking so long? None of her wishing could drive the ship any faster, or make the time pass more quickly.

Over the course of the long empty days, she found herself wondering what the Queen of Redemption would be like. Ella imagined her as a harsh woman with a stern face etched with worry lines from the weight of such responsibility. Could she really help? Ella knew nothing of the way of magic beyond her own talent as a shapeshifter, but she suspected that the Umbrali would be nearly impossible to kill. She could feel it out there now. Somehow it was following her across the sea, though the distance between them was now as great as it had ever been. When Ella told Julius that the Umbrali was still pursuing them, he had suggested the Umbrali might have found a way to hire a boat, and when the sun set Ella could imagine the black silhouette standing on the deck of some ship, looking out to sea sensing her just as she could sense it.

Ella awoke on the sixth day of the voyage, and had no sooner stepped out of her cabin, when she sensed excitement in the air. It was nothing she could name, but the crew seemed restless and impatient. They were close. Something else was different too, although Ella didn't immediately realize what it was. Then she saw it. The sea around the ship, was as flat and smooth as glass, disturbed only by the ripples that curled off the ship's bow.

Cirrus walked up beside her. "Amazing isn't it?" he said.

Ella nodded. "Why does it look like that?"

"Because we're in the doldrums lass. There's no wind here. At least," he added, "no natural wind."

“Then what’s pushing the ship?” asked Ella glancing up at the sails, which looked as full as ever.

“Its magic,” Cirrus said, waggling his eyebrows conspiratorially, and walked off.

When Ella found Simeon and asked him about it he replied, “Captain Farshorth is essentially right. Lady Celia learned how to harness something I’ve heard called ‘spirit wind’. It doesn’t affect the real world in the way normal wind does. But it can be harnessed to propel a ship under the right conditions.”

“So that’s why no one’s ever found this place,” Ella mused. “No one in their right mind would purposely sail into the doldrums.”

“Precisely.”

“How much longer till we get there?”

“Impatient are we?”

“A little,” Ella admitted.

“We’re close,” Simeon said, and even before the words had left his mouth a cry came down from the crows nest, “Redemption, ahead!”

Ella ran to the bow of the ship and looked out at the horizon. At first she saw nothing, but as she watched, a tiny black dot appeared at the boundary of the blue expanse of ocean.

Julius came up and leaned against the railing next to her. “There it is Ella: Redemption. King Uther would give his right arm to see what you’re looking at right now.” He paused for a moment, then added, “Actually he’d probably give someone else’s right arm.”

Over the next few hours the dot on the horizon grew closer and closer, taking on more detail as it did, and the more Ella saw the more amazed she became. She had expected to see an island with white beaches, palm trees and tall ships docked in the harbor. But there was no white sandy beach, and no palm trees blowing lazily in the wind. What she saw instead took her breath away. It was a city that appeared to be built out of pieces scavenged from old ships. And there was nothing to hold it up. At first Ella thought it must be floating somehow but,

as they got closer she saw that the city was supported by thick pilings that poked up out of the water. The streets weren't streets at all, but rather a network of canals bordered by uneven docks for foot traffic. The city was built in the shape of a crescent moon partially encircling a portion of ocean that Ella realized served as an kind of harbor. There were ships anchored at irregular intervals all along the inside of the crescent. Ella counted at least fifty of the larger vessels although a few of them were being disassembled, presumably for materials to expand the city further.

"There she is Ella," Simeon said. "Redemption."

"It's amazing," Ella said. "I'd never have thought anything like this was possible. How far down do those pilings go?"

"Its actually only about forty feet," Simeon said. "More in some places, less in others. A long time ago the ocean the city is built on was an island, a small but prosperous nation. But one day the island started to sink. The sea crept further and further up the shore until the whole island was submerged. The only thing left above the water was that," he said pointing. Ella followed the direction of his finger and saw a weather worn dome of rock jutting out of the water in the center of the crescent. An ancient stone structure sat atop the solitary piece of dry land.

"What is it?" Ella asked. "Some kind of castle?"

Simeon nodded. "Its all thats left of the old island. And it was the starting point for all of this," he said, gesturing to the city.

"Amazing," said Ella. "I can't begin to imagine how you managed to build something like that."

"Well I had a little help," Simeon said, winking at her.

"You know what I mean," Ella said. "How many men were left after the destruction of Pridian?"

"About five hundred as I recall," said Simeon. "But there are many more of us by now."

"But how could your number grow so quickly in fifteen years?" Ella asked.

“Pridian wasn’t the only country to hear the howl of Uther’s armies or be blinded by the flashing of their shields in the sun.” Simeon said. “Over the years we’ve pillaged many of Eckron’s ships carrying prisoners and slaves more than happy to join the fight against their oppressors.”

“It’s quite a feat, building a city out of the water,” Ella said.

“More than you realize. There are probably fifteen hundred people living here right now, not counting those in the navy.”

“Incredible,” Ella said. I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it for myself.”

The Lupine Fury slipped slowly into the artificial harbor, and the crew maneuvered it into an empty berth along the inside of the crescent. When the moorings were secure, Ella disembarked from the ship relieved to be standing on a firm surface once again. The dock around the ship was a flurry of activity and Ella felt a little lost until Julius came up beside her.

“I never thought I’d see this place with my own two eyes,” he said.

“You’ve never been here before?”

“No. But I’ve dreamed of it many times. Redemption. One of the few places in the world free from Uther’s influence.”

“Maybe one day that will change,” Ella said.

“Maybe,” Julius answered.

“Have a little faith my friend,” Simeon said, coming down the gangplank behind them. “As long as we live, there is hope.”

Something stirred in the crowd on the dock, and a figure appeared running towards them. The boy wore fine clothing though none of it seemed to match. The pants were clearly too big for him, as they were held up with a rough piece of rope, and his head was covered with a purple hat so wide and floppy Ella had to stifle a laugh when she first saw it.

He stopped in front of them panting with exertion for a moment before managing to straighten up and speak. “Sir Simeon Grey.”

“In the flesh,” Simeon replied smiling.

“Her royal highness, Lady Celia, queen of Redemption and of the people of Pridian, requests an audience with you immediately.”

“Very well, squire. You may tell her I’m on my way.”

The boy saluted smartly, nearly knocking his over sized hat off in the process, then turned and ran back in the direction he had come.

“Well it’s good to know someone missed me,” said Simeon with a smile.

“Don’t forget to ask her about the Umbrali,” Ella said anxiously.

“Actually, I thought you might ask her yourself,” Simeon replied.

“Me? But I can’t go before a queen looking like this,” Ella said.

“You look no worse than I,” Simeon pointed out, “And the squire did say immediately.”

“Alright then,” Ella replied. “Lead the way.”

Chapter 13

She followed Simeon through a series of narrow corridors that twisted and turned until Ella felt as if she were inside a maze. At last they emerged into a long hallway lit by narrow slits in the ceiling that let in ribbons of sunlight that striped across the dark stone floor. At the end of the hallway they came to a huge set of doors that stood nearly twice as tall as Simeon. They were made of some material Ella could not immediately identify that seemed to glow softly, and they were covered in the letters of a language Ella had never seen before. Two burly looking guards stood stiffly at attention in front of the doors. Both of them gripped rusty halberds in their hands and sheathed swords swung at their sides. Their suites armor appeared to be more ornamental than anything, although Ella noticed they didn't quite match. They saluted when Simeon approached.

"I believe the queen is expecting me," Simeon said.

The guard named on the right looked hesitant for a moment, but before he could voice any objections Simeon said, "I'll vouch for the young lady."

The guard still looked unsure about the matter, but he said nothing but, "Yes sir." The two men turned and grasped the handles of the doors and pulled them open. The doors swung on their hinges with not a whisper of sound. Ella and Simeon stepped into the room, a moment later the doors shut behind them with a muffled thump. The room before them was not particularly large, but it had a feel of the simplicity of elegance. It stretched out in front of them long and tall and thin, like a giants hallway. Along either side of the room stood a row a slender pillars, like silent sentinels, guarding the quiet tranquility of the place. At the far end of the room a young woman that sat in a raised chair that was carved from the same strange material as the doors. The only other person in the room was the oddly dressed herald that they had seen earlier on the docks, standing stiffly at attention by the door.

"Your majesty, Sir Simeon Grey," the herald announced, then noticing Ella he leaned over and whispered, "What is your name?"

"Ella Eris," she whispered back.

The herald straitened again and said, "Sir Grey is accompanied by a Miss Ella

Eris.”

“Come forward,” said the woman on the throne.

Ella followed Simeon to the front of the throne room, and followed his example as he knelt before the queen.

“Please rise,” she said, “I have been waiting too long hear word of you to waste time on such formalism Sir Simeon.”

Simeon rose from his knees, and answered, “I am gratified to learn of your majesty’s concern for me. For a time I myself doubted whether I might see your face again, but good fortune has smiled upon my life again.”

“Your good fortune is our good fortune as well, Sir Simeon. There has been great concern over your wellbeing since you did not return at the expected time, and now that you do return it is without your ship or your men. I suspect you have a great many things to tell, but first I must ask. Who is this you have with you?”

“My Lady Celia, this is Ella Eris, a remarkable young lady who is single handedly responsible for my presence before you today. I owe her my life.”

“Miss Eris, you’ve earned my gratitude,” the queen said softly. “When Sir Simeon did not return at the appointed time I feared he might have been killed. I hardly dared to hope for his safe return. He has been of great value to our cause, and loosing him would have been a terrible blow to us. Both I and my people are indebted to you.”

Ella curtsied feeling a bit overwhelmed at the accolades, but managed to say, “It was nothing your majesty.”

“A great deal more than nothing, I should think,” the queen said rising from her throne. She stepped down and stood in front of Ella. “Simeon is the most effective captain in our navy. He’s done more for our cause than I could ever hope to tell you. Losing him would have been devastating both to the people of Redemption, and...to me as well. So I say again, thank you for your service.”

Ella wasn’t sure how to respond, but mercifully the queen went on. “I can tell there is much to this story, and I wish to hear it, but perhaps this is not the time or place. Will the two of you do me the honor of dining with me this evening? I

will hear your tales then.”

“We would be honored your majesty,” Simeon said bowing.

The queen smiled and said, “Very well then, I will expect you in my dining hall at sundown.”

Simeon bowed again, and Ella attempted a curtsy.

” Herald, show Miss Eris where she might bathe and rest,” said the queen.
“While she is here she is our most honored guest.”

The strangely dressed boy saluted smartly in response and motioned for them to follow him.

“What am I going to do?” Ella whispered to Simeon as they wound back through the twisting corridors. “I don’t know anything about dining with royalty.”

” I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Simeon replied. “No one’s going to hang you for not knowing palace protocol, but if you’re worried about what to do, just keep an eye on me.”

Just then the herald stopped and gestured at a wide wood door set deep in the stone wall. “The Bath,” he announced.

A few minutes later Ella found herself taking the first bath she’d had in since she left home. It was tempting to simply bask in the warm water and let her tensions dissolve into the soapy foam, but she managed to focus on scrubbing away that the dirt and grim that had accumulated during the preceding days. She lathered the soap in her grimy greasy hair for several minutes feeling as if she were washing her very soul. Simeon had instructed one of the servants at the palace to find her something suitable to wear, and when Ella put on the floor length dark green dress and twirled in front of the mirror, she thought she must be dreaming.

When she was finished a young servant girl led Ella to the room that the queen had had prepared for her. It reminded Ella of what she had seen of the rest of the palace. The decorations were simple, but elegant and luxurious.

She was a little sorry when the servant girl curtsied and left. It was strange, being alone in an unfamiliar room. It was the feeling of trespassing, intruding, as

if someone would burst through the door at any minute and reprimand her for some slight infraction.

She noticed that someone had set her trunk just inside the door, and it looked as though it had been waiting for her to get there. She grasped it by the handle and carried it over by the bed that sat against the far wall. The bed was larger than any she had ever seen before, covered with blankets the color of rich burgundy, and fitted at the head with pillows that looked so soft and white that Ella thought they might float off the bed and join the clouds in the sky. A marble wash basin was fitted into one of the corners of the room with a smallish spigot sticking out of the wall over it. Ella walked over and turned the handle releasing a clear stream of water into the basin. She held her hand under the flow, letting the cool water ripple through her fingertips for a while before reluctantly turning off the stream. She had heard of things like this, pipes that carried water directly into a house, but she had never seen anything like it in Caelum.

Beside the basin, against the wall stood a mirror, larger than any mirror Ella had ever seen in her life. The mirror's frame was a kind of dark red wood that felt as smooth as the glass itself.

She stepped back and regarded her reflection, again admiring the green dress, the slight ruffles at the cuffs and the precise needlework around the hem. She was about to turn away when she saw something strange. It was almost nothing at first, a tiny wisp of smoke on the ground sliding around her ankles, but then it started to grow, swirling up around her like a snake. She looked down to where the ribbon of smoke was curling around her waist, but she saw nothing. The strange apparition existed only in the mirror. She watched in fascination as the smoke swirled upward encircling her waist weaving itself around her arms. Ella wanted to turn away from the surreal image but something inside her wouldn't let her move. The ribbon of smoke had reached up to her neck now, and now it paused just for a moment hovering there in front of her reflection's face. Then as quickly as a snake striking it darted past her open lips and into her mouth. It tightened around the arms of her reflection as if it were a solid object pinning them to her sides. Despite the fact that Ella stood perfectly still, she saw her reflection squirming and fighting against the ghostly bonds. The reflection tilted her head back and screamed, and Ella heard herself screaming with it. Then the image vanished, and Ella looked again at her true reflection. The shock of the abrupt transition to normalcy overwhelmed her almost more than the apparition itself had. A wave of nausea washed over her and she staggered backward and

fell onto the bed. She lay there for several seconds with her eyes squeezed shut and her arms wrapped tightly around her body.

After a time, she risked another look at the mirror, which still appeared as normal as possible. After satisfying herself that the horrific apparition was gone for good she sat up in the bed and tentatively attempted to stand. At first she felt dizzy, unbalanced, as if her body were suddenly confused as to which way was up, but gradually the feeling passed.

She tottered out of the room, still feeling unsteady, but supremely sure that she wanted to be away from the mirror. What she had seen in that reflection had shaken her so that the whole world seemed a little off balance, like looking at a picture hanging slightly crooked.

She stepped out into the hall and took the corridor extending off to her left at a whim. Despite Simeon's warning, she took very little notice of where she was going.

When they had entered the castle Ella had seen that it was by far the largest building in the strange city, but now, from the inside it seemed even larger. The stone corridors twisted and turned like a maze that might stretch on forever. But there was something soothing in the sound of her footsteps echoing off the walls and the feel of the cool air that flowed through that castle halls.

Ella wandered aimlessly through the endless halls. She was surprised at how few people she saw. The few souls she did pass paid her no attention at all, but simply went on about their business as if she was not even there. After a while she began to suspect that she might have doubled back on herself, but the various corridors were so similar it was impossible to tell.

Then something caught her eye. It was a small alcove set in the wall of the corridor. Light spilled out of the small opening illuminating the section of gray hallway directly in front of her. Ella peered into the opening, shielding her eyes from the light.

Immediately she saw that the space was much bigger than she had first thought. It was a courtyard filled with light that came down from somewhere high above her. It took several seconds for her eyes to adjust so she could see the room properly. Its floor was littered with stones carved into a menagerie of curving swirling shapes. Some of them were quite small but several stood taller

than she was. She ran her hand of the surface of one of the stones and felt the rough texture grate against her fingers. Unlike the gray rock that made up the castle these stones were stark white. There seemed to be no reason for any of the stone's particular placement but Ella felt that the configuration was far from random. The layout of the carved stones represented an exquisitely planned chaos. *Its almost like a garden*, she thought._ A stone garden._

Something about the place made her feel peaceful, at ease with herself. She felt world settle into place again as the last remnants of the horror she had felt looking in the mirror drifted away. She sat down on one of the lower rocks and began to to really think about what she had seen.

Where had the image in the mirror come from, and more importantly what did it mean?

She thought back to her dream in the forest. The voice had told her she faced a danger greater than the Umbrali. Could that warning and the image in the mirror be related? Ella closed her eyes in frustration. *All I have are questions*, she thought._ The only thing I know for sure is that I have to defeat the Umbrali and I don't have clue how to do that. _ She took a deep breath then let it out, trying to clear her mind. She had to stay focused. She would not let the unknown overwhelm her.

She stood up and walked back out into the hallway leaving the courtyard behind. She followed the hallways back towards her room, and she was surprised to find she had no trouble finding her way, despite the unfamiliar corridor's twists and turns.

She stood in front her door from a moment fighting a tiny sliver of fear that had crept back into her mind, then opened the door cautiously and peered into the room. Some strange part of her half expected something to have changed, but the bed, her trunk, the washbasin and even the mirror looked exactly as she had left them. Ella reached behind her and shut the door quietly. She stood there with her back to the door for a moment eying the mirror.

From this angle she couldn't see her reflection, and she meant to keep it that way. She pressed her back against the wall and inched along until she was standing directly beside the mirror. Then she carefully reached out, grasped the wooden frame and pushed, turning the mirror away from her. The wooden legs

of the frame scraped against the smooth rock floor with a quiet rasping sound. When she was finished she stood back and reviewed her handiwork. The mirror now stood facing the wall with the smooth wooden back of the frame facing out. There was no way she could see her reflection. Ella let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

At least that won't bother me anymore. She walked over to the narrow gap in the rock wall that served as the room's window and breathed in the sea air. From this angle she could see nothing of the city, only the seemingly endless expanse of ocean that dropped off at the horizon line.

I could imagine I was the only person in the world, she thought looking out over the waves, and suddenly she felt very lonely, as if it were really true. But it wasn't true. It couldn't be. Because somewhere the Umbrali was still searching for her. She could feel it in her head, looking for her. It was very far away still, but her escape to sea hadn't stopped it, it had only slowed it down. Even now she could feel the dark form getting closer. She could tell by the red light cast over the water, that the sun was sinking somewhere behind her. Sunset was not far off.

Chapter Fourteen

Reginald Adams looked out at the sunset, and shivered involuntarily. As any man who had ever known him would testify, he was not a man given to cowardice or silly superstition, but something about the man, *No*, he corrected himself, *the thing*, that slept in the hold by day, and paced the deck by night, unnerved him. He should have refused the offer. He knew it now, he had known it then. But he had been blinded by the light that flickered off of the ridiculously large pile of gold the strange creature had offered him in exchange for passage. Money. It was the mercenaries only code, the only code he had lived by for fifteen years. Never once had he regretted his choice of profession. Because it was really about more than money. It was something he was good at. Some said he was the best. The best. That's what the thing had said, that night in the tavern. "They say you're the best," in that voice that sounded like a thousand haunted souls. *The best. I'm the best*, thought Reginald Adams. *For a price*. The glinting of light off of a pile of gold. And the assignment was easy, almost too easy. No fighting, no trouble, just transportation. Simple. But there was nothing simple about the voice screaming in his head to turn down the offer, and walk away from the man, who's hood cast such a heavy black shadow on his face that Adams could make out nothing of his features. *I shouldn't have done it*. But it was too late for thoughts like that. And the sun was already slipping down behind the horizon.

The booming knock on the door, startled Ella so much that she jumped a little. Then she recovered her wits and felt a bit sheepish about being so surprised. "Yes?" she called out. "Who is it?"

"It's Simeon."

"I'll be right out." She grabbed the hairbrush she had found by the water basin and flicked it through her hair, then ran to the door, and threw it open.

"Sorry," she said to Simeon as she closed the door behind her. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

Simeon shrugged. "No harm done." He led her through the castle halls to a room where a veritable feast was laid out at one end of a long table. Lady Celia sat at the head of the table, but she rose when they entered.

“Welcome, Sir Simeon,” she turned to Ella, “Miss Eris. Thank you for joining us.”

Simeon bowed. “Thank you for the invitation my queen,” he said. “It is an honor.”

“Yes, thank you,” Ella echoed.

“Please, be seated,” Lady Celia said, gesturing toward two chairs that sat waiting for them. Simeon and Ella sat down, and the queen resumed her place at the head of the table. When they started to eat, Ella watched Simeon closely and tried to imitate him in every way possible. She was nervous, afraid that she might make some breach of protocol. The queen had asked them there to discuss the circumstances which had brought her and Simeon here, yet the dinner was mostly quiet occasionally punctuated by inconsequential small talk. It wasn’t until they had all eaten their fill that the queen said, “Now, tell me Simeon. What has happened these past few weeks? We feared the worst when you failed to return at the appointed time, and now that you have come back to us you do so alone, lacking both your ship and your men.”

Simeon bowed his head for a moment as if he were suddenly weighed down with a heavy load. There was a brief pause, then he spoke in quiet tones. “My men. I failed them. I failed you, my queen.”

“What happened?” The queen’s voice was not harsh but it carried a power that demanded an answer.

“We were...ambushed,” Simeon said, looking up into the queens eyes. “It looked like a simple merchant ship, but when we boarded the hold was packed with soldiers.”

“And your men were killed in the fighting?”

“Most of them.”

“And the rest?”

Ella saw Simeon swallow and close his eyes. “The soldiers subdued them and lined them on the deck in front of me,” he paused and Ella expected to see tears in his eyes, but something strange and alien shined out instead. “They killed

them one at a time...right there in front of me.”

“But not you,” the queen said.

“No. Not me. They knew me. Somehow they knew who I was. They thought they could get some kind of information out of me.”

“Did they?”

Simeon shook his head. “They might have though. I had heard the chief inquisitor was on his way from Eckron. I’ve heard stories...”

“But you were rescued,” the queen said, “by Miss Eris here.”

“Yes,” Simeon said.

“Quite a remarkable feat, infiltrating the enemies stronghold alone,” the queen said. “Even Simeon here might have a bit of trouble with something like that. How did you manage it?”

Ella was suddenly frightened, unable to speak. She had spent her life hiding what she was. Was it safe to reveal it now?

After an awkward pause Simeon spoke for her. “She is a changeling my lady.”

“Indeed? I thought I sensed an air of magic about you,” said the queen rising from her throne and stepping down to where Ella stood. “You mustn’t be afraid,” she said looking into Ella’s eyes, “What you have is a gift, not a curse despite what some might say.” She opened her mouth as if she were about to speak again then stopped for a moment. Finally she said, “I sense something else though. Some other magic that is not your own.”

“Do you mean this?” Ella asked holding up her hand showing the queen the band of darkness on her finger. Lady Celia reached out and held Ella’s hand in her own, splaying apart the fingers, examining the ring from all sides.

“This is a powerful artifact,” she said at last. “I can tell little about the ring itself, but it is linked to something else.” She closed her eyes with her fingers resting lightly on the ring, then opened them again and said, “A protector.”

“The Umbrali,” Ella whispered.

The queen looked up sharply. “Have you seen this creature?”

Simeon nodded. “It was there, in the city. I only caught a glimpse but that was enough. It was like a man made out of shadows.”

“Where did you get this?” the queen asked turning back to Ella.

“I found it your majesty, in the hand of a dead man.”

“But where? Where did you find it?” the queen repeated.

“Near my hometown of Caelum,” Ella answered.

“You might have done better to leave such a thing where it was,” the queen said.

Anger suddenly flashed behind Ella’s eyes, and before she could stop herself she was speaking. “You think I don’t realize that by now? The Umbrali killed my mother trying to get to this,” she said holding up the hand with the ring on it. “Do you think for a second I would have taken it if I had known any of this would happen!”

“I’m sorry,” said the queen, in a softer voice. “I know it must be hard.”

Ella sat back, her anger dissipating as rapidly as it had appeared. “It is,” she said.

“I lost my mother at an early age as well,” the queen continued. “I can guess what you must be going through.”

“If you know what I’m going through, then you should know that I’ll do anything to have my revenge on the thing that took her from me.”

“Yes,” said the queen, “I do. But unfortunately it is out of my power to assist you in this matter. I inherited certain skills from my mother but something like this is far beyond my ability. My power would be of little use against such a creature as the Umbrali.

Ella closed her eyes as the realization of what the queen had said hit her. She had dared to let herself hope that there might be a solution to her problems here at

the heart of this amazing city, but now she felt despair creeping back into her heart.

Then she felt a hand on her arm, and looked up into the eyes of the queen. “Don’t lose hope Ella,” the queen said softly. “I know someone who may be able to help you.”

“Who?” asked Ella, hardly daring to hope again.

“She trained my mother. She calls herself Granny Grimalkin.”

“Is she here in Redemption?” Ella asked.

The queen shook her head. “She lives near the edge of the world, in the heart of the Black Mountains,” she said.

“But how am I supposed to get there?”

“You’ve helped us Miss Eris,” said the queen with a smile. “Now it’s our turn.”

Simeon frowned. “The Black Mountains lie in the Tarsinus Peninsula, in the far south,” he said. “Between here and there she would have to pass through the very heart of Eckron.”

“Which is why I am sending her with you, Sir Simeon. I can think of no one more capable. Besides, you owe her your life. This will give you the opportunity to repay that debt.”

Simeon bowed his head. “If that is your wish.”

“It is,” the queen replied. “For this voyage you will have the finest sailors available, and,” she added, “the swiftest ship in our fleet.”

Simeon looked up. “You mean...”

“Yes.”

“But its-”

“It’s exactly what you’ll need to complete this mission. Now hurry. We have delayed enough already. The creature of shadows will not be deterred. Assemble a

crew, and prepare the ship. Be ready to leave before the morning light.”

“As you wish, my queen,” Simeon said rising from his seat. Ella started to rise too, but the queen motioned for her to stay in her place.

“There is one other thing,” Lady Celia said as Simeon turned to leave.

“What is it, my queen?”

“That you return to me safely. I do not think I could forgive myself for sending you to your death.”

Simeon gave a curt nod, bowed again and left the room.

“I don’t know how I can thank you,” Ella said after the door had clicked shut.

“Consider my thanks for bringing him back to me,” the queen said. “It means more than I can tell you.”

“I still don’t know what to say,” Ella said, poking at a crack in the stone floor with the toe of her shoe. “I wasn’t trying to be a hero.”

“Real heroes never are.”

“There was something, I wanted to ask you,” Ella said, suddenly remembering the incident with the mirror.

“What is it?”

“Is there something...unusual about the mirror in my room?”

The queen looked surprised. “No. At least not that I’m aware of,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

Ella told her about the strange apparition she had seen.

” I don’t know,” the queen said when she finished. “I’ve never heard anything that would indicate that it’s anything other than a normal mirror. Of course,” she added, “even normal mirrors tend to be a little magical. They say that the reflection is an image of the soul.”

” So you’re saying that this will happen every time I look at my reflection?”

The queen shrugged. “I don’t know. We could try it if you’re up to it.”

Ella shuddered a bit, but she nodded. “I’ll try,” she said.

“A few seconds should be enough. Come, my quarters are just down the hall. I have a mirror there.” She rose from her place and led Ella out of the dining room. Shortly they arrived in front of a door which the queen pushed open motioning for Ella to follow her inside. Ella expected the interior to be luxurious and opulent, but she found it was only a little larger than her own room, and that the furnishings, while obviously well made, were far from extravagant.

“Here,” said the queen, leading Ella up to a mirror, that looked much like the one in her own room. “What do you see?”

Ella looked into the glass with some trepidation, but she saw nothing but her reflection.

“Do you see it?” the queen asked.

Ella shook her head. “Maybe I just imagined it.”

“Hmmm, perhaps,” said the queen. “But it may be something important. There’s something I’d like to try if you wouldn’t mind.”

“What is it?”

“Something my mother taught me. I can look into your mind, into your soul and see what lies there. It may give me some understanding of your vision, but it can only be done with your consent.”

Ella hesitated a moment then nodded. “Okay.”

“Give me your hand.”

Ella extended her hand. The queen took it in her own and closed her eyes. For a moment she felt nothing, then her skin began to tingle all over and her thoughts became sluggish and hazy. Then she felt the ring on her finger grow hot, and burn against her skin. Ella cried out in pain, but the queen did not release her

grip. Then in an instant the pain disappeared, and was replaced. Replaced with a something unlike anything Ella had ever felt before. Like a boiling cauldron of..._power_. It started in her stomach, but Ella felt it begin to spread, up into her chest and down into her legs. When the feeling reached her hands there was a brilliant flash, and the queen was thrown back onto the floor. Ella ran forward to help her.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “What happened?”

The queen sat up cautiously and rubbed her head. “I’m not sure,” she said. “There was something in your mind. Like a closed door. And when I tried to open it...”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

The queen shook her head. “I’ll be fine,” she said, “but I’m not sure what just happened. There was power...more power than I would have imagine but...I’m just not sure.”

“What should we do?”

“For now, I think it would be best to stick with the plan. Granny Grimalkin may be able to make some sense out of all this. For now you should try to get some rest. I will have someone remove the mirror from your room for now. Can you find your way back on your own?”

Ella nodded. “I think so,” she said. “And thank you again for everything you’ve done for me. I won’t forget it.”

When she returned to the room she lit a candle off of the torch that burned in the hallway. The room seemed bigger in the dark, and the corners sucked up the soft light of the candle. She settled down into the soft bed, and blew out the candle. She lay there staring into the dark, turning the day over in her mind. There was so much to deal with, it was all happening so fast. She felt she was losing control of her life, and she didn’t like it. But gradually she felt her worries slip away as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Ella dreamed of running, trees flashing past in the darkness. Her legs were beyond pain now. Her feet pounded against the ground feeling as if they belonged to someone else. Her breath came in ragged gasps into burning lungs that screamed at her to stop. But she couldn't stop. The fear in her mind overpowered all reason, driving her down the dark road. She dared not look behind her for fear of what she might see, but she could feel the black specter coming closer and closer. She had long since lost all sense of time. Had she been running for minutes, hours? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the running, running until at last there was no way to run any more and she collapsed on the hard leafy floor of the forest. In the darkness behind her, a black figure loomed.

Ella sat up in bed, drenched in a cold sweat. For a moment she was disoriented, confused by the power of the dream unable to tell what was real and what wasn't. She could see through the window that it was dark outside, and she began to vaguely remember falling onto the soft bed and slipping into sleep.

Why can't I get a break? she thought. *I can't get away from this thing even in my dreams.*

She swung her feet over the side of the bed and walked shakily over to the window. She saw the moon still hanging high in the sky and sensed that morning was still a long way off. But sleep was, at least for now, out of the question. She looked down at herself and realized she had fallen asleep in the dress she had worn for her audience with the queen, only now it was rumpled and creased from her tossing and turning. Reluctantly, she took it off and put on a simple cotton dress from her trunk. Ella glanced around the room, then blew out the candle and slipped quietly out the door.

She wasn't sure where she was going, she just wanted to be moving. It was a feeling that gripped her more and more of late, a quiet restlessness that would never let stay still for long. She let her feet carry her down the halls of the castle with no particular goal in mind. When she came upon a doorway that led to a spiral stone staircase and, she decided to explore it. She followed the stairs up and around until she saw the star filled sky through an opening ahead of her. She emerged onto the platform at the top of the tower and took a deep breath of the cool night air.

“Peaceful isn’t it?”

Ella whirled, her heart pounding in her chest. Then she saw the queen sitting on a stone block looking up at the stars. “Lady Celia, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to disturb you.” She turned to leave.

“Don’t go,” the queen said. “I’d prefer the company.” She motioned for Ella to sit next to her and Ella tentatively crossed the space between them and sat down.

“I see you couldn’t sleep either,” said the queen.

“No,” Ella said. “I had a nightmare.”

The queen nodded absently. “I know what it’s like,” she said. “I’ve dealt with my own share of troubling dreams.”

“What do you dream about your majesty?” Ella asked.

“You can call me Celia if you’d like,” the queen said. “I’m not so vain as to constantly need to be reminded of my station.”

“No of course not your majesty...I mean Celia. I’m sorry if I-”

“It’s all right. Really,” Celia said. There was a lapse of silence before she spoke again. “You know you and I aren’t all that different Ella.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re both pursued by a foe we don’t know how to defeat, haunted by an unthinkable past,” Celia said. “You asked what I dream about? I dream of the smoke of my homeland rising over the horizon. I dream of the only home I had ever known consumed by flames, and the hordes of soldiers slaughtering thousands of innocents. And I dream of my father.” Celia sighed and looked out at the stars. “Sometimes I think I can remember him, but other times I feel his memory slipping away, lost in the clutter of the mundane things that seem to fill my mind out of necessity.”

Ella nodded unsure of what to say.

“Sometimes I think I might be happier if I could forget him,” Celia continued.

“Why?”

” Because memories like that are painful. Sometimes it’s hard to face the past.”

Ella nodded again. This at least, she understood.

There was a long pause before Celia spoke again. “I wish I was going with you.”

“Oh?”

“I’ve read about Granny Grimalkin in my mother’s journals and I’ve had occasional communication with her through various means, but I’ve never seen her. I’d like to be able to sit down and talk with her. To find out more about my mother and what kind of person she was.”

“Maybe you can one day,” Ella said.

“Perhaps,” Celia agreed. “As far as I know she’s the closest thing to a relative I have left in the world. I can tell from my mother’s journals that she cared for Granny Grimalkin almost as much as she loved her own mother.” She looked wistful for a moment. “I wish I had known my mother better though. Reading her journals isn’t the same as getting to sit down and talk to her.”

“I know how you feel,” Ella said softly. “I miss my mom too.”

“At least you can remember her.” Celia sighed and looked out over the city spread out below them. “Sometimes I don’t think I can do this job. Father did his best to provide for my instruction in matters of state, but being in charge isn’t easy. Everyone looks to you for answers and sometimes you don’t have any. I look out at the city, and I realize how fragile it is. How easily it could be crushed.”

There was a long period of silence before Ella spoke. “I wish I could help,” she said. “I don’t know how, but I’d want to do something. You, Julius and Simeon, you’re the closest thing I have to family now.” She looked out over the city and the dark canals reflecting tiny bits of starlight. “I’d like it if this could be my home,” she said.

The queen said nothing for a moment. Instead she simply stood there looking down at the city. “Redemption,” she said finally. “It’s an aptly named city. A

place to start anew, to leave the terror of the past behind and face the future without fear. You would be a welcome citizen Ella. But before you can join our fight you must finish your own. I know very little about the Umbrali but I do know defeating it will not be easy. You've been through a lot and I can tell you're strong, unusually strong for one so young. But you'll need every ounce of strength you possess to make it out of this alive."

Ella nodded.

Celia looked up at the stars again. "There are men that say you can tell the future by the stars, that the fates of men are inexorably linked to the movements of the heavenly bodies."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know," Celia replied, "I think there is an underlying truth in the idea. The stars follow a pattern, a cycle if you will. Life can be the same way some times. Life, death. Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter. Life is full of patterns. History is full of cycles, huge sweeping changes that take place over hundreds and thousands of years. And we're all a part of it even though its hard to see sometimes." She stopped and Ella thought she was done but after a moment she spoke again. "You may be more important than you think Ella. Don't forget it."

Ella was about to reply when the sound of footsteps echoing in the stairwell reached her ears. She turned and saw Simeon emerge onto the tower. He bowed before the queen, and said, "The ship is ready your majesty."

The queen nodded. "Excellent. You've done well." She turned to Ella. "You must go," she said. "I hope that fortune may smile on your journey. I have faith that I'll see you again soon."

"Goodbye Lady Celia," Ella said. "And again...thank you."

Ella turned and followed Simeon down the tower stairs. They wound their way through the castle until they came out out onto the docks. Simeon wore a grim expression that seemed a barrier to any kind of conversation, so they walked in silence. The city's canals and docks were eerily quiet so early in the morning and Ella listened to the quiet clap clap of water against the pilings beneath them. The sound echoed up to join the sounds of their footsteps booming against the wood of the dock. When they reached the harbour, Ella looked to where the Lupine

Fury had been berthed, but the ship was already gone. Then, farther down the dock, Ella saw a ship that stood out from the rest. It was smaller than the Lupine Fury and its hull swept back in a way that made the ship look fast even standing still. It lacked the weather worn look of the Lupine Fury as well. In fact it looked almost too beautiful to be sullied by actually placing it in the sea.

“The queen’s flagship,” Simeon said pointing to the ship. “There’s many a sailor that would give their right arm for the chance to sail aboard the Silent Rose.”

“It’s beautiful,” Ella said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a ship quite like it.”

“And I don’t expect you ever will again. It’s one of the few ships in the fleet we built from scratch after the Battle of Pridian. Most of the other ships are either left over from before, or vessels we captured from Eckron and modified to fit our needs.” He spoke the last with some disdain.

“It looks very fast,” Ella said.

“Faster than you might imagine,” Simeon said. ““It’s enchanted so that no matter where it is, it always has the wind in its sails.”

“Incredible.”

Simeon nodded. “I sailed it once before on its maiden voyage. I couldn’t believe how smoothly it handled. It could almost sail itself. unfortunately it’s not what you’d call a war ship. It’s outfitted with some cannons and it can fight if necessary, but it’s not meant to hold up in an all out battle.”

“And if we’re attacked?”

“If we’re attacked in the waters so close to Eckron it won’t matter what kind of ship we have, our chances of making it out alive will be small. We’re not going to fight them. We just want to get past them.”

By this time they had reached the ship and Ella climbed up the gangplank followed closely by Simeon. A short row of men and, yes she was sure now that she looked closer, one woman, stood waiting at attention on the deck. Ella was surprised to see that Julius was there as well.

“I’d like you all to meet Miss Ella Eris.” Simeon said to the sailors. “She will be

our only passenger on this voyage. No doubt most of you are wondering what this is all about, but it should be enough for now that you know we've been specially commissioned by the queen for this mission. None of you is being forced to be here so I'll assume we're all on the same page."

There was an answering chorus along the theme of "Yes sir!" and "Aye aye captain."

"Good," Simeon said. "Now, for Miss Eris' sake, some introductions are in order." He pointed to the first man in line. "This is Mr. Hutch, our first mate." He moved down the line, pointing at a huge man with improbably large muscles, "Mr. Brutus Carlyle. Mr. Julius you already know. This is Mr. Wilcox," Simeon pointed to a thin nervous looking man, "and finally we have Daphne," he said pointing to the woman. Ella looked closer at her. Her eyes were narrow and she had a thin nose that reminded Ella of a hawk's beak. It would be too cruel to say she was ugly, but too generous to call her anything more than vaguely pretty.

"Alright," Simeon continued, "Enough talk for now. Let's unfurl those sails and see what this ship can do!"

Chapter Sixteen

Ella felt lost in the commotion as the small crew leaped into action, pulling lines and climbing up the ship's rigging. The unfurled the sails, and she watched them fill with wind. The Silent Rose crept forward, and the city slid past the ship, slowly at first then with greater speed as the ship gained momentum. In a few minutes the ship had sailed out of the harbor and into open water. The ship sliced across the ocean under the burning stars, and within a matter of minutes Redemption was falling into the darkness behind them, reduced to a mere silhouette against the far horizon. Ella turned and looked to the opposite horizon where the faint pink glow of impending sunrise peeked over the edge of the world.

"I took the liberty of putting your trunk below deck," Simeon told Ella when they were underway. "The crew's sleeping quarters on such a small ship tend to be a bit cramped, so I've placed you in the rear cargo hold. It's not ideal but--"

"I'm sure it will be fine," Ella said quickly. She didn't want Simeon to think she needed to be coddled.

"It's two days till we pass the straights of Eckron, then another day and a half till Tarsinus. If we make it through alive," he added as an afterthought.

"And then?"

"Then we have to find this Granny Grimalkin character. The information the queen provided me with is a bit sketchy, but if she's out there we'll find her."

"Aren't you worried you might be captured again?" Ella asked.

Simeon shook his head. "The Black mountains aren't under the authority of Uther or Eckron. In fact no one has ever conquered the area as far as I know."

"Really? Why not?"

"Two reasons. First, the terrain is so treacherous it would be all but impossible to maneuver a full sized army through there, and second, because there's nothing in the Black mountains worth conquering. It's mostly barren with a few nomads

and hermits hiding away from the rest of the world.”

“Then we shouldn’t have any trouble reaching her,” Ella said.

“Don’t be too sure of that. They say there are other things in those mountains. Monsters and other terrors long since driven out of the rest of world. But one way or the other we’ll get you there. I only hope she can help you.”

“Yeah,” Ella murmured. “Me too.”

“Now, don’t look so depressed. We’ll probably be killed off the coast of Eckron and you’ll have wasted all your time worrying about nothing.”

“Don’t say that. It’s not funny.”

“I know it’s not,” Simeon said with a slight smile. He looked up at the stars fading overhead. “I think I’ll turn in, try to get some rest. I was up all night and a little sleep might help put an edge on my dull mind.” He turned and addressed the first mate. “Hutch, the ship is yours. I’m going to try to get some sleep. Wake me if anything of significance happens.”

“Yes sir!” The sailor snapped a salute.

After Simeon had retired Ella felt a bit out of place. She amused herself for a while getting acquainted with the ship, but it didn’t take very long. *Silent Rose* seemed tiny compared to the *Lupine Fury*. Where the *Lupine Fury* had had three levels underneath the main deck, the *Silent Rose* only had one.

It didn’t take long before the small boat began to feel claustrophobic. The hot sun beat down hard on her head and the sea breeze brought little comfort. Her glance happened to fall on the first mate standing at the wheel. He was staring, no, glaring at her. Ella shivered. *What’s his problem?*

“Quite an adventure this has turned out to be.” The voice caught her off guard and she turned to see Julius smiling down at her.

“Yes,” Ella answered softly. “An adventure.”

” She’s quite a ship,” Julius continued. “Sails as smooth as velvet.”

Ella nodded. "I'm glad you're here, Julius. I feel so out of place. It's good to have a familiar face around."

"I think that's why Simeon asked me to come along."

"Really?"

Julius nodded. "He certainly didn't need my skills as a sailor. I'm older by far than anyone else on this ship."

"Well whatever his reasons it means a lot to me to have you here," Ella said. "I was beginning to think I would die of boredom before we even got to Eckron."

"Well we couldn't let that happen now could we?"

Ella shook her head, smiling. "By the way, I've been wondering about something," she said.

"What's that?"

"How does a city like Redemption support itself?"

"Well, I'm sure you've already guessed that they eat a lot of fish. But most everything else they get from outside sources. You see, Simeon and the other pirates, as they're called, don't just attack military vessels. Often they prey on merchant ships bearing goods to and from Eckron. They do it to harass Uther as much as possible, and also to help supply Redemption."

"Do they kill them?" Ella asked.

"No," Julius answered. "For two reasons. First, we're only trying to harass them, to disrupt their economy as much as possible. We're not murderers."

"And the other reason?"

"If we kill them, we won't have an opportunity to take from them later."

"And that's how Simeon got captured," Ella mused.

"Yep," Julius said. "Uther finally got smart, and sent out a decoy."

“It must have been terrible for him to have to watch his men die like that,” Ella said.

Julius nodded. “I’m sure that had something to do with how ruthless he was with those guards back at the jail. He’s been doing a pretty good job at keeping it hidden, but don’t make the mistake of thinking that he’s gotten over it.”

“He must hate them.”

Julius nodded again. “Most likely, most likely. But there’s something else to it too.”

“What’s that?”

“Well I couldn’t say for sure, but I’d guess he feels a bit guilty about it.”

“Why? He couldn’t have done anything to save them.”

“That may be true but I doubt Simeon sees things that way. He had sailed with some of those men for many years. They were the only family he had in the world and he wasn’t able to save them. He may even feel that he should have died with them.”

“That’s terrible.”

“That’s war lass. People die, and those who don’t wish they had. Years later people might write about the glorious victories and the brilliant campaigns but every word is written in blood.”

“It sounds awful.”

“It is awful. But sometimes it’s preferable to being ruled by someone like Uther. Freedom is a thing men value more than anything once they’ve tasted it.”

“Why is it that life can be so painful? If it’s all like this, then why is it worth living at all?”

Julius smiled a little. “It’s not all like this. Pain is a part of life, yes, but good things happen too. Sometimes the worst of the experiences in your past can lead to good things you never could have imagined otherwise,” Julius said.

“I suppose.” Ella said, but she wasn’t convinced that anything could be worth the pain she had been through.

Julius saw the look of doubt on her face and smiled. “I don’t expect you’ll understand it all now, but I think you will in time.”

“Right now I just wish I could get my mind off of things,” Ella said. “Sometimes I wish I could just switch off and not have to deal with it for a while.”

“I reckon I’ve felt that way too,” Julius said. “I don’t know about switchin’ off, but I might be able to take your mind off of things for a while.”

“How?”

“I could tell you a story.”

Ella wavered a moment, then nodded. “On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“It has to be a true story.”

“Sure? True stories don’t always have happy endings.”

Ella nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Alright then, how should I begin? Once upon a time?”

Ella nodded. “Once upon a time,” she said.

Chapter Seventeen

“Alright then,” Julius said. “Once upon a time, in a land far far away...although to be specific it was about six hundred years ago in the kingdom that stood on the plains of Ecklish, there lived a king. He was not the best or worst king that land had seen, and his reign might have passed virtually unnoticed if not for one thing, and that thing was this. The king had a great many wives. Of course it was hardly uncommon for kings of the day to accumulate wives for themselves, but this particular king had more than any of them. It might come as a surprise then to hear that the king loved one of his wives more than the rest. Her name was Dekla. Dekla was the king’s first love, and the one he bestowed the most of his favor upon. Then one day the king took a new wife for himself. As this was not a terribly uncommon thing Dekla hardly noticed it. But in the weeks and months after that Dekla noticed that the king’s attentions towards her began to wane in favor of his new wife. Dekla asked after the king’s new wife. She learned the woman’s name was Vosgran, but little else. Frustrated, she went to the royal wise man who was learned in the ways of alchemy and the telling of fortunes. The wise man told her that Vosgran was really a witch, who had cast a spell on the king to make him love her more than any other. Dekla was infuriated, but she was at a loss to know what to do. If she tried to move against Vosgran, she would incur the wrath of the king. But at the moment she was ready to give up hope the royal wise man came to her aid. He told her of a potion that could take away Vosgran’s beauty and transform her into the most hideous monster the world had ever seen. The queen commissioned the wise man to make the potion, elated at the thought of revenge. Some of the ingredients were very difficult to find and the task took several months, but at last the wise man called for Dekla. “It’s almost finished,” he told her. “It lacks now only two ingredients: the fury of your blood, and the anguish of your tears.” The queen gave of these things gladly and the wise man presented her with the finished potion. Later that night she tricked Vosgran into drinking it. Dekla laughed as the features of the beautiful young woman twisted themselves into obscene deformities until at last she appeared as a monster, repulsive in every way. When the transformation was complete the young woman looked into a mirror and saw that her flawless skin had become slimy and green, and that her perfect hands had sprouted terrible claws. Her beautiful blue eyes now burned black and red, as if a fire were raging behind them, and her mouth had stretched and filled with terrible fangs. Stricken with grief and rage, she turned to Dekla and tore at her with her newly clawed hand.

Vosgran struck a mortal blow but before Dekla died she choked out these words. "I am dying, but you will not be so lucky. The potion that has made you monstrous will preserve you in this state forever. You will be reviled and hated by everyone you meet, and your children will be pursued through the wilderness, hunted down and killed by the very man who once loved you." Overwhelmed with shame and fear, Vosgran ran from the castle. For many years no one saw her again. Then there was a report of a monster terrorizing an outlying village. The king sent men to investigate and they found a hideous creature with green skin and razor sharp claws preying on the cattle of the village. One brave knight faced the monster and killed it, bearing its head back to the castle as a trophy of his victory. But not long after that there were more reports of the creatures people had started to call goblins terrorizing the far reaches of the kingdom. A bloody battle between a regiment of knights and a band of the goblins made the seriousness of the threat clear to the king. He called together the all wise men and magicians of his land, and the lands around to find a way to deal with the problem. The royal wise man who had made the potion came forward and told the king of the queen's plot to disfigure her rival, and of the hideous monster Vosgran had become. He suggested the goblins might be her children. Some of the other's laughed at the idea. Since Vosgran was the only one of her kind, they said there was no way she could bear children. But the royal wise man reasoned that just as certain kinds of dragon reproduce exact copies of themselves, so the changes the potion made to Vosgran might have affected her in a similar way. Careful examination of the goblin's corpses revealed that they were exactly alike in every way, save for a strange pattern of scars that each bore on its body. One magician guessed that all of the goblins, might be under the control of Vosgran, and the goblins could only be defeated by eliminating her. Since she couldn't be killed they hatched a plan to imprison her forever. Placing her in a physical prison wouldn't be enough. Since Vosgran was still a cunning sorceress, and immortal besides, she would eventually find a way to escape any physical bonds. One of the magicians recommended opening a door to another world, a place barren and uninhabited from which she would never be able to return. But there was a difficulty. The spell that would open the door between the worlds would require immense power. That kind of power could only be supplied by the willing death of a man.

Even as the soldiers scoured the countryside trying to find Vosgran, there was debate. Who would be willing to die to complete the spell? At long last the royal wise man came forward. "I am an old man," he said, "and it was my potion which has caused all this trouble. I will be the one to die."

When the soldiers finally captured Vosgran, the royal wise man asked for a single day to spend with his family and bid them all farewell. When the day was over he presented himself at the place where Vosgran was being held and gave up his life so that she might be imprisoned forever.

Chapter Eighteen

“What happened after that?” Ella asked when Julius had finished speaking.

“Life went on,” Julius said. “It usually does. Of course there were still a few goblins left in the mountains, but after Vosgran was gone they became less of a threat. There was still the occasional attack on a village of course and for a while the king’s soldiers tried to kill them all off. But there was always one or two they missed. For the most part the goblins kept to themselves, and after a while they wandered into the untamed wilderness. They’re still around today, though they’re so rarely seen, some people think of them as legends.”

“Its a bit sad,” Ella commented.

“Yes, I supposed it is,” Julius agreed. “But then, you did say you wanted to hear a true story.”

“Do all true stories have a sad ending?”

“Well the thing about true stories is its hard to say where they end for sure. But there is a lot of sadness in life.”

Ella grew quiet, thoughtful, and after a while went above deck leaving her alone. She sat in the dim light for few minutes thinking over the story Julius had told. A little later she too ascended the ladder to the upper deck.

There seemed to be little activity amongst the sailors, and a glance at the sun told her it was a little after noon. She noticed the first mate glaring at her again from his post behind the wheel and she turned away to avoid his gaze. *What is his problem?* she wondered.

“So you’re the reason we’re all here.” The man who spoke sat atop one of the iron cannons holding a strange looking instrument in his hands.

“I suppose so,” Ella said a bit uncertainly. “You’re Wilcox right?”

“Correct,” the man replied. He rose and extended a hand. “Stephen T. Wilcox, navigator and occasional ship’s cook.”

Ella shook the extended hand. "Good to meet you Stephen."

A pained look crossed the man's face. "Please, call me Wilcox. I don't particularly care for...my first name."

"Alright then...Wilcox. Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Well if you're the reason we're all here, then let me tell you the pleasure is mine. I mean really, who'd have thought. The Silent Rose...Simeon Grey, this voyage is like a dream come true."

"It is a beautiful ship," Ella agreed.

"You don't know the half of it," Wilcox said, and excited tone creeping into his voice. "This lovely lady is faster than any ship in the water. Even a Corsair couldn't match her speed."

"Corsair? What's that?"

"Sailor's nightmare," Wilcox said. "Generally they sail off the Demean Peninsula, but they've been known to come as far south as Eckron. They're long thin ships, like needles in the water. They're propelled by oars which makes them unbelievably fast. They're crewed by...well they're men after a sort but then again, not men. Some say they're possessed by evil spirits, but personally I think they're just crazy."

"What do they do?"

"They're cannibals," Wilcox said in a hushed voice. "They're teeth are filed into points. If they capture you they'll eat you alive or worse."

"Worse?"

"They may turn you into one of them," Wilcox said. "How would you like that? Being robbed of your reason, compelled to eat the flesh of other men. I tell you Miss Eris if you're on a ship that's captured by the Corsairs you'd do better to commit suicide than to fall into their hands."

"Oh stop it Stephen," said the woman Simeon had introduced as Daphne. "There's no use in telling the girl such stories."

“You mean it’s not true?” Ella asked, turning towards Daphne.

“Of course its true,” Daphne said. “But there’s no need of worrying you about it. There are far more pressing dangers in life to spend time worrying about the obscure chance that you might be eaten alive.”

“I suppose,” Ella said uncertainly.

“Come on,” Daphne said. “I’ll give you the grand tour of the ship. It might help get your mind off of the grisly stories Wilcox like to scare people with.” She led Ella away from the thin man, who looked a little sheepish after being reprimanded. “How familiar are you with the layout of the ship, Miss Eris?”

“Not very.” she paused and laughed. “To be honest I’ve never even seen the ocean before this week.”

“Well then we’ll start with the basics. The Silent Rose is a kind of ship called a sloop. It’s not as big as some other vessels, and it only has one mast, but its advantage is that it is much more maneuverable than a larger ship would be, and it can sail in much shallower waters.

The tour, if it could be called that, continued. There wasn’t much to the small ship and Ella had seen it all before anyway. But there was something comforting in Daphne’s words, a feeling of empathy she couldn’t quite name.

“And here we have the dinghy,” Daphne said pointing to the small boat that sat in the middle of the deck. “She’ll ferry us ashore when we get were we’re going, or in the unlikely event that something should happen to the ship, she’ll carry us to safety.”

“Why are boats always referred to as women?”

Daphne shrugged. “Tradition,” she said. “The sea herself is said to be a woman of sorts. And since most sailors are men I think they get a bit lonely out at sea.”

“But ships aren’t people,” Ella objected. “And the sea certainly isn’t.”

Daphne held a finger up to her lips and smiled. “Best not to say that too loud. They might hear you.”

“Oh that’s great,” Wilcox objected from his spot on the cannon. “Oh, don’t scare her with scary cannibal stories,” he trilled in a painfully bad imitation of Daphne’s voice. “You’re no better. ‘They might hear you’ indeed. Don’t make me laugh.”

“You don’t believe in the spirit of the sea?” Daphne asked Wilcox with a serious look on her face.

Wilcox shrugged. “I’ll believe it when I see it. And as for the spirit of a ship. Ha!”

Daphne’s eyes narrowed, but she held her tongue.

” Besides, you’re forgetting the most important feature of any warship. The cannons!” He gestured at the heavy iron tube with a flourish.

Daphne rolled her eyes. “Well, then Stephen. Please do enlighten us as the workings of the ship’s artillery.”

Wilcox ignored the snide tone of her voice and stood up. “This particular ship,” he said, “is armed with ten cannons. Five on each side. Now the cannon was invented nearly a hundred years ago, and the principle of its operation is fairly simple. The cannon powder, packed in behind the ball explodes, driving the ball out of the cannon at a great rate of speed. They are nearly universal on warships and many merchant ships now carry them as well. But the cannons on our ships are unique, superior to anything Eckron has developed. They’re forged in the foundry of Euclas, the greatest blacksmith that ever lived. He uses a secret ingredient which makes his iron stronger than any other known metal. His cannons can be loaded with more powder than normal iron cannons could withstand, meaning that our cannon balls fly much faster and farther than our enemy’s. Its really quite fascinating.”

“Are you done?” Daphne asked tapping her foot impatiently.

“I suppose,” Wilcox answered. “For the moment.”

“I didn’t mind hearing all that,” Ella said, as Daphne led her below deck. “You don’t need to be so hard on him.”

Daphne smiled. “Oh I pick on Wilcox all the time, but don’t get the wrong idea.

He's probably the smartest man on this boat. It's just that sometimes all his smarts get too big for his head, and start to spill out of his mouth."

Ella chuckled and Daphne continued. "Anyway, this is the hold. It's where we store our supplies: cannon powder, shot, and most importantly, food. If you can call it that," she added with a grimace. "The menu here at sea is a little bland. Mostly we eat this," she said reaching into a crate and tossing Ella something that felt as hard as a rock, if not quite as heavy. "It's called hardtack," Daphne explained. "Basically it's really stale bread. She kicked at a lumpy sack on the floor. "Potatoes," she explained. "Not much taste, but they last for months. And these sacks over here have corn meal in them. Anyway that's pretty much the whole deal, stem to stern. Except for the captain's cabin," she added. "Though calling it a cabin's really too generous. It's more like a closet with a bed." she shivered. "Personally I prefer my hammock. I get claustrophobic in small spaces. But then maybe that's why I love being out at sea so much.

Ella nodded, then said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Ella looked down at her feet. "It may just be my imagination, but I get the impression that your first mate doesn't like me. And the big one, what's his name?"

"Brutus."

"Right, Brutus. He hasn't spoken to me since I've been on board."

"Brutus doesn't speak to anyone. Ever. As far as I can tell, he hasn't since he was a child. I don't know what happened, but whatever it was it really got to him. As for Hutch, well you might want to steer clear of him."

"Why? What does he have against me?"

Daphne shook her head. "Don't worry about it. Just trust me when I say it's nothing personal. And like I said, don't get in his way."

Don't worry about it. Easy for her to say, Ella thought when Daphne had returned above deck. I'm on a ship full of strangers, and one of them hates me for no reason but I'm not worried at all.

By now the day had progressed into late afternoon, and Ella realized she was hungry. She dipped into the crate of hardtack and came out with a vaguely bread-like lump. She took an experimental nibble. It was nearly the blandest thing she had ever tasted in her life. The outside crust was as thick and hard as leather, but she found that once she got past it the inside wasn't half bad. As she chewed carefully on the hardtack, Ella heard Simeon's voice floating down from above her. The words were muffled so she couldn't quite make them out, but she thought she could hear the voice of the first mate as well. The conversation carried an undertone of tension, but try as she might Ella couldn't hear what was being said. Frustrated she climbed the stairs to get closer to the conversation.

"You volunteered for this assignment," Simeon was saying, in the carefully controlled tone of a man desperately trying not to get angry.

"Yes sir. But you didn't tell me..." the first mate trailed off when he saw Ella. There was a period of silence then he said, "I should go and check on the water supply." It was an obvious ruse, but no one commented.

He stormed past Ella, down into the ship's hold.

"Is something wrong?" Ella asked Simeon.

Simeon shook his head. "Nothing you need to be concerned about. Just try and stay out of his way if you can."

"Um, okay." Ella shook her head. "Stay out of his way." It was the second time she had heard the warning in as many minutes.

"It'll be okay," Simeon said, putting his hand on Ella's shoulder. "Hutch is a good man. I wouldn't have him along if I didn't trust him." He turned and walk to the stern of the ship.

Ella turned to Wilcox who was standing nearby on the deck looking through some kind of mechanical device, and trying not to look as if he was eavesdropping. "Any idea what's going on around here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm just as much in the dark as you are. Although I think it's pretty apparent that our illustrious first mate doesn't like you very much."

"So I gathered. Any idea why?"

Wilcox shook his head. “I’ve known him just about as long as you have. We’ve never served on the same ship before. Whatever his problem is he hasn’t shared it with me.”

“Daphne acted like she knew.”

“Could be. I believe the two of them hail from the same region, so she might have known him even before they came to Redemption. But like I said, I just don’t know.”

“Where are you from?”

“Who me? I’m from Riparia. Nice place. Well, it was until...you know. Things probably would have been okay for me if I would’ve kept my mouth shut, but I was never the kind of person to just sit by and let things happen. So I spoke up.”

“And what happened.”

“They sold me into slavery put me on a ship bound for Eckron. Turns out it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Simeon here captured the ship and set all of us prisoners free. Most of the other’s on the boat just wanted to go somewhere and hide, but I wanted to help. I begged Simeon to take me with him, and to make a long story short he did. There’s a lot of people in Redemption with similar stories. I just want to do whatever I can to stick it to Eckron, you know? But hey, enough about me. What’s your story?”

So Ella told the whole thing over again, the ring, the Umbrali, the death of her mother, Julius, Simeon, and finally Redemption.

“Wow,” Wilcox said, when she had finished. “And I thought my life was exciting.”

Ella nodded, but her mind was elsewhere. *I got through the whole story without tearing up. Am I losing my feelings? Is this what happens? Will I forget? Maybe I want to forget.* She shook herself out of her thoughts and forced herself back into her conversation with Wilcox. “What’s that thing in your hand?” She asked, pointing at the strange device Wilcox was holding.

“Oh this? It’s called an octant. Pretty nifty huh?”

“That depends on what it does.”

“Oh, well it’s a navigational tool. Basically what it does is tell you how far north or south you are. You see you look through this section here until you can see the horizon, and then adjust this part here until you see the sun.”

The explanation went on, but before long Ella lost track of what Wilcox was saying.

“First you try to scare her, and now you try to bore her to death,” Daphne said. “Honestly is that any way to be treating our only passenger?”

“I was just answering her question.”

“It might come as a shock to you but not everyone is blessed with your overblown intellect,” Daphne said. “Try to keep your explanations shorter and simpler, and maybe you won’t confuse people so much.”

“Yeah,” said Wilcox, his head hanging a bit.

” Hey, it’s okay,” Ella interjected, as Daphne walked away. “There’s nothing wrong with being smart.”

“She’s right though,” Wilcox said. “I do tend to get carried away. I don’t want anyone to think that I’m trying to show off.”

“Well I don’t think that. There’s no reason to be ashamed. Even if people don’t always understand you.”

Wilcox smiled and nodded. “Maybe you’re right. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The hours passed slowly for Ella, but gradually the afternoon turned into evening and when evening turned into night, Ella felt the Umbrali awaken. She could feel the distance between her and it growing as the Silent Rose sped through the waves. But it was still on the trail. Somehow it had found a way over the water. *Another ship, she thought. It has to be another ship.* She lay in a hammock hung in the cargo hold rock gently back and forth, and staring up at the ceiling. And before long she lapsed into sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Ella dreamed of home. She was back in her attic again safe and secure from the world outside. But there was something else. Something out of place. A door set in one of the walls. Ella had never seen it before and yet it seemed strangely familiar. The door looked very old and it was covered in thick vines that twisted around the frame. Ella tugged on the door's rusty iron handle, but the vines held it shut fast. She tried again pulling with all her strength, compelled by an inexplicable feeling of urgency. The door moved, ever so slightly, and a tiny crack appeared between it and the frame. Then there was a flash, so bright that it blinded her for a second, and she closed her eyes against the terrible light. When she opened them again she was back on the Silent Rose. But there was something different, not with the ship, but with her. The boiling feeling of power had returned. It spread through her until it filled her from the crown of her head, to the tips of her toes bringing with it a feeling of euphoria. She could feel it inside of her -raw power, waiting to be used, coursing in her veins. But almost as quickly as it had come the feeling passed, fading into nothing more than a memory. *What was that?*

But there were no answers. Ella looked into the crushing black surrounding her and suddenly she felt very lonely. Her thoughts turned to her mother as she had been in life. Ella closed her eyes and pictured her face, smiling, laughing, her brown eyes squinting at the edges like they always did when she was happy. She wished she could look into those eyes one last time.

She remembered the last time she had seen her mother's eyes cold and dead windows into an empty husk, staring into an eternity only she could see. But they were not the same eyes that had smiled at her as she grew up. Ella remembered once finding a locust clinging to the bark of a tree, only to realize that it was simply an empty shell abandoned by the insect that had outgrown it. It occurred to her that her mother's body was much like that of the locust, in that it looked like her mother but the thing which had inhabited was gone, leaving only a shell behind.

Ella lay back on the bed and tried to sleep, but she found her mind so crowded with thought that sleep proved impossible. After several minutes of restless tossing she gave up and got out of bed. She made her way to the door by feel, and after some amount of fumbling she managed to get it open. She cringed at

the squeal of the hinges that cut through the darkness like a knife. In the corridor outside a few faint beams of moonlight shone down through cracks in the deck above. She made her way to the steep staircase that led above deck and climbed up into the cool night air. The gibbous moon hung above the water, its pale white light flickering eerily off the waves. As soon as she stepped onto the deck Ella saw the silhouette of a man leaning against the railing. She approached quietly, curious when she saw in the faint light that it was Simeon.

“I see you couldn’t sleep either,” he said as she took a place beside him gazing down into the waves.

“No, I couldn’t,” Ella said. “I couldn’t get my mind off...things. Why are you still up here? Worried about tomorrow night?”

Simeon nodded. “I can’t let myself stop worrying about all the things that could go wrong. I don’t know if I can...” he trailed off into silence.

“You’ve got to have a little faith Simeon.”

“Faith in what?”

“Faith in yourself if nothing else. If there’s no chance of us getting through then you might as well throw me overboard and head back home. But I think you can do it.”

“Your confidence is unfounded.”

“So is your fear.”

“Really? How can I not doubt myself? After...”

“Julius told me once that you couldn’t let the past control your future. Believe me I know how you feel.”

“I doubt it.”

“Oh? You don’t believe that every day I wish I hadn’t put this ring on, knowing that my mother could still be alive if not for me?” Ella throat constricted and she brushed a stray teardrop from her eye then went on. “The point is that Julius was right. You’re here *now*, and you *can* still make a difference if you don’t waste

your future on the mistakes of the past. You may yet see great victories over Eckron, but only if you first see yourself as more than a failure. You've been given a chance. You didn't ask for it and maybe you don't deserve it but if you let it pass unheeded then your life is less than worthless."

She looked over and saw Simeon's face, stony and bitter as gall in the moonlight. There was a long passage of silence between them. Ella had spent her words, and she let them sink in for lack of anything else she could do. After a long while Simeon spoke.

"I know you're right, but that doesn't make it any easier. I feel as if I'm at war with myself. On the one hand I feel such sorrow at the loss of my men that I wonder how I can go on living. Yet on the other hand I feel rage, hatred for the soldiers who killed my men. I am not the same person I was. I've seen horrible things in my life, but nothing like that. That day I felt as if my soul had been broken in two. Before then I fought for ideals. Liberty, Justice, Freedom. But now I find myself thirsting for revenge." He paused for a moment, but Ella held her tongue sensing he wasn't finished. "I feel darkness creeping into my soul and I fear what it might bring me to. I do not want to become cruel and heartless yet I feel like the light of humanity is dying inside me. If I become what my enemy is then what is my life worth?"

"You don't have to be like them. There's always a choice."

"I wonder."

"Wonder?"

"I wonder if we really have a choice in our lives or not. Maybe we're bound to our path. By the inexorable decree of fate."

"I don't believe in fate," Ella said. "But then, maybe I'm destined not to."

Simeon smiled at that, and Ella was glad to see a spark of something more than sadness in his face.

"I'm going to head back to my cabin and try to get some rest," she said. "I'd suggest you do the same or you'll be fated to be tired in the morning and probably unprepared for the journey ahead."

She turned to leave him, but he stopped her. “You’re very strong,” he said. “and so young. It makes me ashamed of my own weakness.”

Ella shook her head. “I’m not strong. I feel like I’m torn up inside with pain and fear and guilt. But I’ve learned that if I let those things take over then I’m as good as dead. And I’m not ready to die. Not yet.”

She turned and left him there, standing at the rail looking out to sea. She felt drained walking through the darkness back to her cabin as if she had poured part of her own soul into Simeon’s. She opened the door, lay back on the bed and in a moment she fell into sleep.

Captain Reginald Adams watched the cloaked figure pace back and forth on the deck like an animal. *Like a lion, thought, or a panther.* Reginald Adams was afraid, and it was not an emotion he entertained often. He wanted to be somewhere else. Anywhere else. The gold didn’t matter. He knew his men grew more and more uneasy with each passing hour. Some of them voiced their fears while the others kept silent. *But none of them will do anything. They’re afraid. I’m afraid. And what can I do?* So he had sailed, as far and as fast as he could. Each night, when the creature emerged from its cabin, It would check their progress. By now, Adams knew they were chasing something. Something the creature was very anxious to catch. But It never showed anger or any sign of impatience. It rarely spoke at all. It simply waited. Sometimes it would stop its pacing and simply stand there at the ship’s railing looking out at something only it could see. Adams had taken to sleeping during the day, and taking the night watch so that he could keep an eye on the thing. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop it from doing whatever it wanted, but he couldn’t feel comfortable sleeping while that thing walked his deck. *Its a ghost. Or a monster. Or worse.*

Chapter Twenty

When the morning came Ella awakened to bright sunlight filtering down from the deck above. She yawned and stretched, her mind curiously clear of the cobwebs that usually clouded her thoughts after sleep. She pulled herself out of bed and into a fresh set of clothes from the trunk and stepped out into the main hold. She almost ran into Julius as he passed her.

“Mornin’ sleeping beauty,” he said, giving her a wide grin.

“Well you’re in a good mood.”

“And why shouldn’t I be?”

“I’d think the idea that we’ll be sailing within miles of thousands of people who’d like to kill us might be a bit troubling.”

Julius waved his hand dismissively. “I’ve been alive a long time girl. If I started worrying about dying now I’d never get anything done. Besides, we’ve got all the way till nightfall before we pass Eckron, so why start worrying about it now?”

No sooner had the words left his mouth when they heard the cry “Ship ahoy!” from above deck.

Julius grinned sheepishly at Ella. “Then again maybe I spoke too soon.”

Ella followed him above deck where they found Simeon and several other crew members peering over the bow of the ship towards the horizon. Simeon held a spyglass up to his eye with a frown on his face. They’re flying the flag of Eckron, and that’s a warship by the look of it.” He closed the spyglass with a snap and turned to face Ella and Julius. “I hadn’t expected to encounter them quite so soon. These waters aren’t part of their main shipping lanes.”

“Maybe they got blown off course,” Daphne suggested. “There’s some pretty nasty storms come up this time of year.”

“What are we going to do?” Ella asked.

“I’m going to wait for now. We’re flying a Riparian flag, and they have no reason to suspect us. It might be that they just keep sailing, but if not then we’ll have to fight. I had hoped to avoid this, especially so soon, but at least we’d be facing them one on one.

“How soon will we know?” Julius asked.

“Within the hour,” Simeon answered. “Maybe sooner if they decide to take an interest in us.” He turned to Ella. “I want you to stay below deck for now. You can’t be of much help up here anyway. Julius you go with her. If it does come to a fight do what you can to keep her safe.”

Ella and Julius both nodded and went back below deck. Behind them Simeon was already shouting orders to the crew. Apprehension gripped Ella as she made her way back down into the shadows below deck.

“I’m scared Julius.”

“Well I won’t say that I haven’t got a few butterflies in my stomach too, but maybe its best if we try to keep our minds off things for now. There’s not much we can do to help at this point. Let Simeon do what he does best and we should be fine.”

Ella knew Julius was trying to make her feel better about the situation, but despite his reassurances she she couldn’t shake the horrible feeling that things were about to go drastically wrong.

She listened to Julius chatter on about trivial things feeling oddly detached. Ella would answer back when he would ask her a question, but she had no real sense they were carrying on a conversation. Slowly she realized she no idea exactly how much time had passed since they had come below deck.

“What is going on up there?” she wondered aloud.

Julius shrugged. “I shouldn’t worry it. Simeon’s capable enough.”

“I don’t know why, but I have this feeling that things aren’t going to go to well and I can’t shake it.”

“I reckon I know how you feel. I’ve been there myself a time or two. But I’m

still here aren't I?" he said, his face brightening.

Ella didn't answer.

Julius stood from the barrel he had been sitting on. "Come on, let go and see what's going on," he said. "I'll bet that ship is long gone by now."

"But Simeon said to stay below deck."

"Then he can throw you in the brig for disobeyin' orders."

"That's not very funny Julius."

"Or maybe it is and you're just in too sour a mood to notice."

Ella smiled a bit at this, and followed Julius back above deck. As soon as she emerged into the sunlight she could see that Julius had been wrong. In fact the enemy ship lay just off the bow. Ella cringed for a moment, expecting cannon fire to erupt at any moment, but it simply sat there in the water. Ella found the silence almost as unnerving as if she were in the middle of a battle. Then she saw that the ship sat at an odd angle.

"Looks like she's sinking," Julius said. "Either that or run aground on a reef."

"They're flying a white flag," Ella said.

"I thought I told you to stay below deck," Simeon said. Ella looked up and saw him swinging down the ship's rigging faster than she would have thought possible.

"And I say we have a right to know what's going on," Julius called back.

"The situation is very dangerous," Simeon said. "I cannot have you in my way, endangering yourself as well as me and my crew."

"Dangerous?" Julius snorted. "They've run aground lad. A blind man could see that."

"It could be a trick." Simeon said.

"So what do you propose? Do you plan to shoot at a ship flying a white flag, or

should we just sit here till we starve waiting for an excuse to attack?”

“I won’t allow myself to be taken in again,” Simeon said softly.

“Look at that ship lad,” Julius said. “You know as well as I do, she’s stranded on those rocks. It’s no trick. Now if you’re going to take out your revenge on those men the get it over and done with, but don’t think any of us won’t know that’s what you’re doing. Maybe those men deserve to be killed in cold blood. Maybe they’re butcher’s and murders the lot of ‘em. Or maybe their just a bunch of farm boys pressed into service, lookin’ out of those portholes wonderin’ how this happened to them. But if you’re still the man I think you are you’ll pull up anchor and sail for that horizon as fast as these sails will carry you.

Ella watched Simeon’s face. It seemed an entire battle was playing out behind those eyes. Anger hardened his features and narrowed his eyes but behind that there was a small spark of reason fighting valiantly for control. For a moment Ella thought he might really sink the stranded ship, but finally he gave the order to hold fire then ducked into his quarters as if he could no longer bear to even look at the ship, or anything else.

Ella turned to Julius. “You knew he wouldn’t do it didn’t you? You knew he couldn’t let himself become like them.”

Julius smiled a strange smile back at her. “Actually I thought he was going to wipe them out. Color me surprised.” He turned and disappeared below deck again.

“Wait, really?” Ella said hurrying after him.

Julius shrugged, and gave her another enigmatic smile. “You never can tell.”

Ella hurried down the stairway after him. “Julius wait. I want to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“What if he had opened fire on that ship?”

“What of it? They are the enemy.”

“But killing men in cold blood is like murder. If Simeon killed those men he wouldn’t be any better than the enemy.”

“What makes you think that Simeon Grey is any “better” than the enemy to begin with?”

“What do you mean? He would never do something like was done to him. At least I don’t think so.”

“I’d like to bring to your attention that neither would those soldiers who killed his men have done it of their own will. They followed orders. If they hadn’t then their own lives would be forfeit.”

Ella looked confused and Julius sat down on a barrel leaning his back against the hull of the ship and continued. “The sad truth of war, is that many times, those on the other side aren’t much different than yourself. Both of you are forced to fight or be killed. You don’t fight the enemy because he is evil. You fight him because he is the enemy.”

“But Uther is the king of Eckron and he’s evil.”

“No arguments there, lass. Uther’s as evil as they come. He is set to expand his empire not matter what the cost to his subjects or anyone else. His blind ambition had resulted in thousands of deaths, and hundreds of thousands enslavements in one form or another, and it is well and good that we fight against him.” Simeon looked up and saw Ella’s confused expression, and reached out putting an arm on her shoulder. “I’m just trying to make you think. Evil’s not as cut and dried as people like to believe. Everyone has some kernel of evil in their souls somewhere. Its part of being human I reckon. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying everyone is bent on ruling the world. But everyone has the capacity to be selfish, to think of themselves before they think of anything or anyone else. That’s where evil really starts.”

“I think I understand,” Ella said. “At least a little anyway.”

“Aw, don’t mind my ramblin’,” Julius said dismissively. “I guess I just want to make you think about things. I know you’ve got a good head on them shoulders, but it’s no use to you if you don’t put it to work. That’s all.”

“No, I’m glad you said the things you said. I guess I never really thought about

things that way before.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m slandering Simeon. He’s a good man. One of the best I know.”

“But I know what you meant. You’re right. We’re all evil in a way.”

“Or at least have the potential for evil, yes.”

“It’s a little unnerving to think that under different circumstances any one of us could turn out like Uther.”

“Circumstances ain’t the only determining factor. Uther’s evil ultimately because of the choices he’s made not because of circumstances.”

“But-”

“No buts. You are who you are because of you. Not because of the world, or your parents or how much money you had. Those things matter, yes, but nothing can make you be something you shouldn’t.”

It was a heavy thought to digest. And yet even as Ella thought about what Julius had said there were other things on her mind. She wandered listlessly around the ship for the next few hours. It was maddening to know that they might be in great danger tonight yet now it was all could do to overcome the boredom of waiting. Eventually she went back to her cabin and lay down for a nap. If things did get interesting tonight she didn’t intend to sleep through it. She dreamed senselessly about a talking fish which turned out to actually be a man in a fish suit, and about wearing shoes ten times the size of her feet. She finally awoke feeling groggy and sluggish, and went above deck to see what was happening. The sun was setting and she saw Julius watching it sink towards the water.

“Your hair’s gone all funny,” he told her. “You look like a disgruntled rooster,”

“I feel like a disgruntled rooster,” Ella replied running her fingers through her hair in an attempt to make it a little more presentable.”

“Sleep well?”

“Well enough, I suppose, although to be frank, I feel more tired now than when I

went to sleep.”

“It’ll wear off,” he said gazing out at the red sun falling slowly towards the horizon. “Nothing like watching the sun set at sea Ella. Its one of nature’s great wonders. There’s not a painter in the world that could capture the true the glory of a sunset.”

Simeon joined them at the rail. “There’s an old saying about sunsets at sea,” he said. “Red sky in morning, sailor take warning. Red sky at night, sailor’s delight.”

“Let’s hope this is a good omen then,” Ella said.

Simeon nodded. “We can use all the help we can get. If the moon is as bright as it has been these past nights, then it’ll be hard to slip past their blockades. I’m hoping those clouds will give us some cover. I don’t want any lights burning after dark. We don’t want to draw any attention to ourselves.”

“Do you think we can make it through?”

“I don’t know. Everything depends on us staying unnoticed. If we get involved in a battle with one of their warships you can be sure there will be more not far off. I know I can’t fight off the entire navy of Eckron by myself.”

“Hey don’t sweat it,” Ella said, cheerfully punching him in the arm, “I’m sure we can take ‘em.”

Simeon smiled faintly. “I wouldn’t want people to think we were showing off,” he said.

The sun had sunk halfway into the water, and it looked for all the world like a great fiery dome. It seemed to be slipping away faster now, sliding into the distant horizon until only a tiny sliver of light, was visible, and then even that was gone.

“How long till we reach Eckron?” Julius asked Simeon.

“About another hour. We should be through by midnight.”

“And after that its smooth sailing,” Julius said.

“I hope you’re right,” Simeon replied. “I hope you’re right.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Darkness fell quickly after the sun set, and Simeon paced the deck looking gloomily up at the crystal clear sky. The moon was just rising when he gave the order for all lights to be extinguished.

“Are we getting close?” she asked.

He pointed at the horizon, “Look there and tell me what you see.”

Ella followed his pointing finger squinting trying to make out anything in the darkness. At first all she could see was more dark sky, but as she watched she saw some of the stars close to the horizon winking in and out of sight. “Is it the land?” she asked.

Simeon nodded. “If it were daylight we would be able to see the shore from here. We should be able to see the lights of the city shortly.” He spoke briskly, with an edge in his voice that made Ella feel the danger of their situation more keenly. She tried to shake her feelings of apprehension, but found it impossible.

“Calm down lass,” Julius told her. “You look like you’re about to pace a hole in the deck. It’s out of our hands anyway.”

Ella put her hands to her head in frustration. “I know, I know, it’s just...I feel so pent up inside, like I’m going to explode from the worrying, and the waiting. It’s seems like every day stretches out more and more, and the more I think about it the slower the time seems to go. I wish we were there already. I know it sounds silly but I don’t know how much longer I can wait.”

“I reckon you can wait as long as you have to,” Julius told her. “Impatience isn’t going to make this boat move any faster.”

“Ship ahoy!”

The call from the crow’s nest startled Ella so much that she jumped. Simeon peered intently through his spyglass, but even Ella could see the faint lights on the horizon.

“Have they spotted us?” Julius asked.

“Hard to say,” Simeon answered. “I don’t think so. It’s odd though.”

“What is?” Ella asked.

“It’s not just one ship. It looks like a convoy. There are at least three of their heavy warships and some smaller craft as well. It would seem they’re guarding something important.”

“Could be Uther’s personal escort,” Julius interjected.

“Hard to say,” Simeon said. “Whatever it is, it must be important.”

The minutes passed slowly, the tension in the air building with each passing second, but none of the ships broke from their formation, and eventually the lights disappeared. Simeon let out a long sigh of relief, but his posture remained rigid. In the west the lights of the city flickered over the water, but eventually they slid past and faded back into the night. It was another three hours before the mood aboard the ship lightened.

“Well boys I’d say we’re well clear of them,” Simeon said.

“I guess our luck is holding,” Wilcox replied.

Simeon frowned. “I don’t like luck. It always runs out just when you need it most. I won’t be happy till we’ve found this witch. Still, I am pleased with tonight’s progress. Eckron was a major hurdle and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t relieved that we’ve passed it unscathed. But now I’m going to get some sleep, and I suggest you do the same. Mr. Wilcox, you have the wheel tonight.”

“Yes Sir,” Wilcox said, saluting.

“I can’t believe it,” Daphne said after Simeon retired to his cabin. “I mean we just sailed through the heart of Eckron with not a scratch to show for it.”

Ella was about to answer when Hutch pushed past her. He turned and glared at her, before disappearing below deck.

“What is his problem?” Ella said. “He hasn’t spoken one word to me since we’ve

been on this boat. And every time he looks at me..." She shook her head. "What did I do to make him an enemy?"

"Maybe he resents the fact that we have to go on such a dangerous voyage because of you," Wilcox said, from his post at the wheel.

"But he didn't have to go," Julius said. "None of us did."

"Hey, it was just a guess," Wilcox said. "Although you shouldn't be so bothered that he hasn't spoken to you Ella. The man's not the greatest conversationalist."

Ella shrugged.

"Anyway, why are we sittin' here so glum on his account?" Julius said. "I'd think we should be celebratin'. After all, we did just make it through the straits of Eckron in one piece."

"I think I'll just head off to bed," Ella said after a while. "It's been a long night."

She went back down to the cargo hold and slipped into her hammock. She wasn't really sleepy, but she didn't feel much like celebrating either. She lay in the darkness staring up at the ceiling.

I miss you mom, she thought, trying not to let herself cry.

It's your fault she's gone. Ella shut her eyes trying to shut out the accusing thought. But she knew it was true.

My fault, she thought. *I knew I shouldn't have done it. But I wanted adventure. And now that I have it all I want is for things to be the way they used to be*. She tossed and turned in the hammock fighting with her own thoughts until at last, sleep took her.

If she dreamed, she was not aware of it, but when she awakened, she felt renewed and refreshed. She yawned and stretched then lost her balance and tumbled out of the hammock onto the floor. She sat up and rubbed her head where it had thumped against the coarse floor. "What a way to start the morning," she muttered. She stood from where she had fallen and went up above deck.

“Good to see you finally join us,” Julius said, when he saw her. “It’s already the middle of the morning.”

Ella rubbed her head again. “I guess I slept harder than I thought.”

“Well, you haven’t missed much,” Daphne said. “But Simeon says we’re getting close.”

“Really? How close?” Ella asked.

Simeon turned from where he stood at the rail and said, “We won’t reach the coast until after nightfall, but we’ll be sailing through the Children of Fire in a few hours.”

“The Children of Fire?” Ella said. “What’s that?”

“They’re a series of archipelagos that stretch out in a line off the coast of the black mountains.” Simeon pointed and Ella saw several black dots on the horizon.

Ella caught a trace of worry in his tone. “Is there something wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not exactly. I’m just not familiar with these waters. I have a map of the region but I don’t entirely know what to expect. I have to play it as I go along, and I’m not entirely comfortable with that.”

“I’m sure you can handle it,” Julius said.

“Your confidence is appreciated but all the same I won’t be happy till we’re safe back home.”

Ella wandered about the ship, periodically craning her neck to see if the black dots on the horizon were getting any closer. The sun inched across the sky and the islands in the distance seemed to actually grow farther away the longer she watched them._ _

After what could have been an eternity, they reached the first of the islands. Ella looked out at it as they sailed past amazed by the lush vegetation and rugged terrain. It looked as though no human had ever set foot on it, and certainly no civilization could have touched it for hundreds of years. The number of visible

islands had increased as they got closer and now Ella thought there must be hundreds of them dotted across the sea as far as the eye could see. “Why do they call them the Children of Fire?” she asked Simeon.

“Well, they say these islands were formed by volcanoes, pushed up out of the sea by the pressure of the molten rock beneath them. Of course that was a long time ago.

Ella pondered the idea of a newly formed island rising from the sea. She wondered what it must have been like to see the ocean boiling from the heat of the lava as the islands formed.

As she stood on the deck and watched the islands pass, she saw something in the water. She thought her eyes were playing tricks on her at first, because the coloring of the strange object almost matched the blue of the waves. She pointed it out to Simeon, who squinted at it, then took out his spyglass for a closer look. He didn’t say anything for a moment, and Ella looked up at him. His face was a mixture of fear and disbelief.

“What is it?” Ella asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said carefully. “If it’s what I think it is, we could be in trouble. Hutch! Get over here and take a look at this.”

The first mate took the spyglass from Simeon’s hand and looked at the thing in the water.

“Is that what I think it is captain?” he asked.

Simeon said nothing. His gaze was fixed on the thing in the water.

“Well, I mean we’ve all heard stories,” the first mate continued, “but I never thought I’d see one.”

“What is it?” Ella asked, impatient that everyone seemed to know what was going on except her.

Hutch glared at her, then turned back to Simeon. “If half of what I’ve heard is true I’d say we’d best prepare for the worst.”

“Alright then,” Simeon replied quietly. “Battle stations.”

Chapter Twenty-two

“Battle stations!” Hutch bellowed to the crew.

“Simeon, what’s wrong?” Ella asked.

“Have you ever heard of an Ursamare?”

“No, is that what that thing is?”

“I think it might be.”

“But why all the fuss? Its not very big.”

“That one’s an infant. They can get much, much bigger.”

“How much bigger?”

“On average? About twice as long as this ship.”

“Oh,” Ella said, the seriousness of the situation dawning on her.

“Yes. Oh.”

The crew had pulled cannons back and were hurriedly ramming in the cannon powder, when Ella heard Hutch cry out, “There’s another one captain! There, off the starboard bow!”

Simeon and Ella hurried over and looked out at the water. Ella saw the thing immediately. Its back rose out of the water covered in segmented plates that met in the middle in a glistening row of black spikes. And it was headed straight for them. The cannons had been rolled back and the sailors were loading them as fast as possible driven on by their fear of the oncoming monster. It was still several hundred yards away but the distance was closing rapidly.

“Prepare to fire,” Simeon said.

The crew pushed the cannons into position, fuses in hand.

“Fire at will.”

There was an agonizing pause as they waited for the charging monster to come in range. Then the mouths of the cannons roared and lashed out with tongues of flame. Two of the three cannonballs splashed harmlessly into the sea, sending geysers spaying up into the air. The third struck the Ursamare’s shell with a sickening crunch, but it did nothing to slow the charging monster. There was no time to reload the cannons. Ella watched in horrified fascination as the monster closed on the ship plowing through the water with incredible speed. And then it hit. There was a sickening lurch and the sound of splintering wood, and then Ella felt herself falling backwards over the railing, and tumbling into the sea.

The water closed over her head, and she flailed frantically in the rough sea. She fought her way upward, her lungs burning, and just when she thought she could stand it no longer, her head broke the surface of the water and she gasped for air.

“Man overboard!”

Ella turned to the source of the voice, and saw the damage the monster had done to the Silent Rose. A huge hole gaped in the side of the ship, and the water was littered with shattered pieces of the ship’s hull. Ella felt herself sinking again. She grabbed for one of the nearby pieces of debris wrapped her arms around it and kicked towards the ship. She could see the ship was taking on a tremendous amount of water, and had already started to list to one side. She looked around frantically for the monster, but there was no sign of it. She reached the ship and climbed up the side, gripping the rope that had been thrown to her, her hands slipping on the wet hemp. Simeon pulled her aboard and she lay on the deck panting.

“We’ll have to abandon ship,” Simeon said.

“But captain,” Hutch argued, “this is the Silent Rose. There’ll never be another boat like her.”

“Mr. Hutch,” Simeon barked. “I will not tolerate insubordination, especially in a time of crisis. I am well aware of what I am ordering, you can be sure. But there’s no way we can save her. The least we can do is try to save ourselves. Now all of you, salvage anything that might be useful and get yourselves into the dinghy. We won’t have much time. “

“Ella, come with me,” Daphne said, hurrying towards the hatch. “We need to try to salvage some of the supplies.”

Ella nodded, wiping the salt water still dripping from her hair into her eyes and followed Daphne below deck, where the two of them picked up one of the crates of hardtack and carried it up onto the deck. The ship was taking on a great deal of water and the increasing slant of the deck made it difficult for them to maneuver the heavy crate. Finally, they made it to the side where they lowered the box into the dinghy where Julius was already waiting. Brutus came after them with one of the ship’s water barrels. Wilcox brought up the rear, his arms laden with maps and navigational equipment. Simeon stood on deck tapping his foot and looking anxiously out to sea.

“Quickly, quickly”, he said in a low voice. “Before that thing decides to come back.”

The crew finished loading the supplies, and then themselves, into the boat. Simeon was the last to leave the *Silent Rose*. He glanced around at the ship for a moment then stepped over the railing, climbing down the rope into the dinghy. As soon as he was aboard, Brutus started to row away from the ship, his heavily muscled arms straining as he pulled at the oars. The dinghy was almost a hundred feet from the *Silent Rose* when a huge set of jaws rose on either side of it and closed, snapping the ship in half like a child’s toy. Pieces of planking whizzed through the air. One of them blurred so close to Ella head that she felt it breeze past her ear. The two mangled halves of the ship took less than a minute to sink below the waves.

“Do you think it’ll come after us captian?” Hutch asked.

“I don’t know,” Simeon replied. “I know we won’t stand a chance if it does.”

“That thing could swallow us whole,” Ella said, horrified at what she had just seen.

Simeon looked into the water below them, seeking for any sign that the Ursamare was coming after them.

“I’ll go and see what I can see,” Ella said.

“What? Wait-” but before Simeon could finish the warning, Ella closed her eyes

and focused on the Form of the raven. She felt a sickening lurch in the pit of her stomach and she was in the bird's body. She launched off the back of the boat, flapping hard to gain altitude. From her lofty vantage point she looked down into the water and saw the shadow of the Ursamare, slicing just below the water. It was headed straight for the boat. Ella screeched out an alarm, but she didn't even know if they could hear her, let alone have any idea what she was trying to communicate. She watched in horror as the gap closed. Then suddenly at the last second the Ursamare slowed then dove deep into the water. Ella dove back down to the boat and changed back into herself.

Row that way," she said pointing.

"But why? That's just more open sea." Hutch argued.

"Do it," Simeon told Brutus.

"The water's really shallow just a few hundred feet over that way," Ella explained. "I don't think it will be able to follow us there without getting stuck."

Ella peered into the water, searching for any sign of the Ursamare as the boat inched with what seemed to be agonizing slowness towards the shoal. Ella saw the swell of water and then the spiked back of the sea monster approaching from behind them. Ella wanted to pull her gaze away from the onrushing monster, but she could not help but watch as the terrible row of spikes sped towards them. It came closer and closer, but just when it seemed the impact was inevitable it slowed. For a long moment the ridge of spikes stood stationary in the water, then the Ursamare turned and swam slowly away.

"Woo wee," Daphne said, wiping the sweat off her brow. "That was some close thing eh?"

"Once again I find myself in your debt Miss Ella," Simeon said.

"Yes, yes, we're all very impressed," Hutch said impatiently, "but what now?" We starve to death here in the shallows? I think I'd rather be eaten by the Ursamare, which I might add, is probably still waiting for us out there."

"Actually, from what I saw these shallows run in a curve, towards that island over there," Ella said, pointing. "We should be able to make it to the beach without putting ourselves in any danger."

Hutch grumbled under his breath all the way to the beach, but everyone else seemed to be in relatively good spirits. After half an hour of steady rowing the boat crunched onto the sandy beach. For a few long moments everyone stood in silence surveying the scene before them. The island had looked small from the water, but now it seemed much larger. The beach led up to a thick wall of trees that seemed to cover most of the island. In the middle of the island a rocky promontory jutted up out of the forest.

Daphne was the first to speak. "Well, what now?"

"Now we can spend the rest of our miserable existence here on this island. Personally I still think I would rather have been eaten."

"That can be arranged Mr. Hutch," Simeon said. "But for the moment I think our best course of action is to find a supply of fresh water. I'd say this island is probably about ten miles in diameter. That should take us some time to walk."

"Or we could just let Ella fly over the island to see what she can see." Wilcox offered.

Simeon nodded. "That idea has merit. Assuming of course that you have no objections Miss Eris."

"None at all," Ella said. She closed her eyes and let herself flow into the bird's Form. When she opened her eyes, she saw the crew towering above her like giants.

"I have to say that was a bit unnerving," Daphne said.

"Squawk," Ella replied, forgetting for a second that she couldn't talk. Then she beat her wings against the air and flew riding the brisk sea breezes higher and higher until she almost lost herself in the sheer joy of flying. She let the wind carry her over the island, looking down, scrutinizing the terrain for any sign of fresh water flowing. It was difficult to see anything through the dense foliage, but after a few minutes she spotted a glint of sunlight reflecting off of something beneath the thick leaves. She glided down to where she had seen the flash and caught a glimpse of a clear stream running through the forest. She followed its path to the beach where a miniature delta fanned out where the stream flowed into the sea, then turned and headed back towards where she had left the crew. She climbed up into the breeze then let herself coast down to the beach where

they were waiting for her. She lighted on the sand, changed back into herself and pointed in the direction of the stream.

“That way. Not more than half a mile.”

“Good work,” Simeon said. “Brutus, you and Hutch take the boat to the mouth of the stream. The rest of us will walk.”

It was hard work walking in the soft sand. The distance to the stream had looked so small from her vantage point high in the air but back on the ground the beached seemed to stretch on and on, and by the time they had reached the mouth of the stream Ella was out of breath.

Simeon reached a hand down into the stream and brought the water up to his mouth. “It’s fresh,” he confirmed.

“Should we make camp here?” Hutch asked, pulling the boat onto the shore.

Simeon nodded. “It’s getting late. Luckily the weather looks clear for the moment so we won’t have to worry too much about shelter tonight.”

“We could survive for some time in a place like this,” said Wilcox. “Who knows what kind of resources that forest holds?”

“Thank you for your input Mr. Wilcox, but I’d rather not stay on this island any longer than necessary,” Simeon said.

Wilcox looked a little hurt at the rebuttal but said nothing.

“What’s your plan captain?” Daphne asked.

“We aren’t all that far from the coast,” Simeon answered. “If everything had gone to plan we would be in sight of the mainland right now. As it is, we should be able to reach the shore in a few days at most.”

“These islands aren’t far apart. We can go from one to the other like a frog leaps from one lily pad to another,” Wilcox said.

“And what of the Ursamare?” Hutch asked. “How can we be sure it’s not out there waiting for a few tender morsels such as ourselves to come traipsing out

into open water where it can pick us off easy like.”

“I’d hardly consider you a tender morsel,” Wilcox said. “You’d likely give it indigestion.”

“I know he gives me indigestion,” Daphne said.

Hutch glared. “Fine make it all into a big joke. I hope the lot of you get eaten first, just so’s I can have the pleasure of hearing you scream.”

“Actually I don’t think the Ursamare attacked us for food.” Wilcox said.

“What makes you say that?” Ella asked.

“Well it wouldn’t have rammed the ship if it was looking for food. It may have big teeth but I don’t think even it would enjoy chewing on wood.”

“Well if it didn’t attack us for food, then why in the name of reason did it attack? For the sheer bloody sport of it?” Hutch asked.

“I think it was protecting its young,” Wilcox said. “Remember the smaller one we saw just before the attack?”

“I’ve known she bears to act the same way,” Julius said. “They may be gentle as a lamb normally, but get too close their cubs and their rip your arm off.”

“A protective mother,” Hutch said. “How touching.”

“The point is, we’re far too small for the shark to consider as being good for food,” Wilcox said. “Odds are it’s already moved on.”

“Odds? What odds? All you have is a guess, Mr. ‘I’ve read the dictionary so I’m smarter than you’,” Hutch said.

“We take a risk every time we set sail Mr. Hutch,” Simeon said. “I’ve never known you to be a coward.”

“I didn’t say we shouldn’t try it,” Hutch replied through clenched teeth. “I’m just saying we should be prepared for the risks.”

“And what about Ella?” Daphne said.

“What about her?” Hutch said. “As near as I can tell, she’s better at staying out of harm’s way than, any of us. First sign of danger she can just change into a bird or a snake or whatever and leave us to fend for ourselves.

Ella hated snakes and she had never touched one let alone changed into one, but she thought this might not be the best time to mention it.

“She’s also being chased, by something that could make mincemeat out of our friend the shark and ten others like him with no trouble,” Julius said. “If you’d like to be around when it finds her then be my guest.”

“But we can’t abandon her,” Wilcox said.

“Why not?” Hutch grumbled. “She’s got us into enough trouble already.”

“I will remind you, Mr. Hutch, one more time that this young lady risked her own life to save mine,” Simeon said.

“And mine,” Julius added.

“No one forced you or anyone else to come on this mission,” Simeon continued. “so I don’t want to hear any more talk against Miss Eris. Am I clear?”

Hutch nodded sullenly.

“Good. Now Ella, how far do you think you can fly in a day?” Simeon said.

Ella shrugged. “Maybe twenty or thirty miles. Maybe more. It’s hard to be sure.”

“The wind should be in her favor if she were flying towards the shore,” Wilcox said.

“You should be able to make it then,” Simeon said. “You may have a chance of reaching this witch if you go on ahead of us.”

“And hopefully the farther ahead she is the less likely that thing that’s after her would be to try to kill us,” Hutch said.

Ella nodded slowly. “That may work, but I don’t know what to expect when I get there.”

“I can give you a rough idea of where you’ll have to go but you’ll be on your own.” Simeon said.

“I guess I don’t have much choice,” Ella said.

“Well you won’t be able to leave today unless you plan to fly at night,” Daphne said. “We only have a couple hours of daylight left.”

“Did anyone think to bring any food?” Hutch asked. “We’ll die of starvation before we can get started.”

Ella reached into the boat and pulled out the hardtack they had gotten from the galley. “No one will starve tonight.” she said.

“No but we might break off our teeth trying to chew that stuff,” Wilcox said. This got a laugh from everyone and the mood seemed generally improved after that. Brutus went into the forest to gather wood and returned about an hour later with an armload of dry sticks and logs. Wilcox spent another half an hour of scraping with a flint, but eventually the spark caught and the fire crackled in the fading light of the sinking sun. Ella chewed through one of the hardtack biscuits as she gazed into the flickering flames. Julius was regaling the crew with some story that had them all shaking with laughter, but Ella wasn’t listening. She couldn’t stop thinking about being on her own and what that would mean.

Simeon came over and sat down next to her. “Worried?” he asked.

“A little.”

“Good. If you weren’t I’d think you weren’t taking this seriously.”

“I don’t know how to thank you for all you’ve done. I don’t know what I would have done without you and Julius’s help.”

“I’m just trying to repay you for saving my life.”

Ella looked into the dancing flames and smiled. “You know I’m not sure I really believe that anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“You aren’t doing this because you feel obligated to me. At least, that isn’t the only reason. You really care about me. Just like you care about them,” she said pointing to the crew, “and like you cared about the crew you lost to the enemy. I think that’s why you didn’t destroy that ship.”

“I don’t quite follow.”

“I’ve been thinking about it...about you. You’re not really fighting this war for revenge for past wrongs, any more than you helped me because you thought you owed me something. You fight and live for the hope of the future, not in remembrance of the past, whether it be good or bad. The dead can’t enjoy freedom. But you fight for those that live on and for yourself because you know that you’re nothing without a future.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Maybe?”

Simeon shrugged. “The inside of my head can be a confusing place to live sometimes. I can’t say the past doesn’t serve to motivate me at times but I know I have to move forward. Living for the future has its own discouragements. You can’t be sure what you’re fighting for will ever come to be. I want liberty for my people, but I don’t know how we can ever live in anything but fear of destruction. I don’t think we can win this war.”

“Then we will die fighting,” Ella said. “But first we have to get back to Redemption.”

“First we have to kill the Umbrali,” Simeon said.

“Not we,” Ella said. “Me. This is my battle whether I like it or not. You’ve helped me more than I could have hoped, but...no one can face this thing for me.”

Simeon nodded. “I know,” he said. “Good luck.”

Chapter Twenty-three

Hours later the fire had died down to glowing embers and the crew lay sprawled out on the sand sleeping. Ella lay with her head against her hand her elbow pressing into the gritty sand. Sleep seemed more and more elusive of late, just when she knew she needed it most. She flopped into her back and stared up at the stars sprinkled across the sky. The moon hadn't risen yet and the stars shined even brighter against the black velvet of the night. The night air was as crisp and clear as a perfectly cut gemstone.

She could feel the Umbrali getting closer in the back of her mind. Its presence stuck in her head like an annoying song. Sometimes when she could keep her mind engaged the ominous presence would be momentarily forgotten but it never truly disappeared. And now in the still and silence of the night she could feel it more keenly than ever. She closed her eyes tight trying to shut out the unwelcome thoughts but instead her last glimpse of her mother jumped into her mind, her arms raised in a futile attempt to defend herself from those terrible black claws. Then the Umbrali stood before her and she dreamed she was not afraid, as those horrible red eyes shined out of the formless face and the claw raised to strike.

Then she felt a hand shaking her. "Wake up Ella."

She opened her eyes and saw Simeon's face peering down into hers. She blinked a few times to clear the sleep from her eyes. The gray morning sky looked bleak and ominous. She sat up and stretched, trying to work out all the tension in her muscles.

"You've got a big day ahead of you," Simeon said.

"I remember," she said, wishing she didn't.

"Hey lazy bones," Daphne said.

"Hey," Ella said standing up. "Where's Hutch, Brutus and Wilcox?"

"Went to forage for food," Julius said. "Said there's got to be somethin' to eat on this island besides hardtack. Speaking of which, here, have some."

Ella took the hardtack from his hand and tore off a bite in her teeth. While she chewed, Simeon went over the details of her journey once more. "You're flying south," he said pointing. "It shouldn't be hard to stay on course. If everything goes as planned you should see the Black Mountains on the horizon in about an hour, possibly less since you'll have a higher vantage point. This chain of islands runs all the way to the mountains. When you get there fly along the coast until you see a bay surrounded by cliffs on three sides. That was where we had planned to dock the Silent Rose. You'll have to go through a cave at the far end of the bay. After that you follow a valley for several miles and you should see another cave on the left. That's where the witch lives."

"Sound's easy," Daphne said.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Ella said.

"Why's that?" Julius asked.

Ella shrugged. "Just a feeling," she said.

"She may be right," Simeon said. "This could easily get much more complicated than we can foresee."

Daphne shook her head. "As if we haven't had enough trouble already."

"No use getting all down in the dumps about what hasn't even happened yet," Julius said. "Ella can take care of herself if need be."

"Yes I believe she can," Simeon said nodding.

There was an awkward moment of silence. "Well I guess I'd best get started," Ella said finally. There was a sinking feeling in her stomach as she realized that this was the time she would have to say goodbye. She'd known this moment was coming but now that it was here she realized she wasn't ready for it. All of a sudden she threw her arms around Julius's neck and hugged him tightly fighting back the tears crowding into her eyes. She turned to Simeon and shook his hand feeling a bit awkward.

Daphne came up and gave her a hug. "Good luck Ella. I'm sure we'll see you soon. Don't worry about us."

Ella nodded afraid that if she spoke her voice would crack. Finally she managed to speak. "Goodbye everyone. Thank you for all you've done for me. I'll never forget it."

She closed her eyes and focused feeling herself fall into the body of the bird. When the transformation was complete, she looked up at the faces staring down at her relieved that at least now they could not see how emotional she was. Julius lowered his hand and she hopped onto his finger. Then he lifted her above his head and with a swift downbeat of her wings she launched herself into the air.

She beat her wings hard and fast focusing on gaining altitude in the cool morning air. She was tempted to look down and watch the figures on the beach grow smaller with each passing second, but she made herself focus on the horizon in the distance. The chain of islands stretched out in front of her like a badly cobbled road and she let herself ride on the wind as it lifted under her wings pushing her towards her destiny. In the east the sun was rising its light reaching out to touch the highest tips of the islands then flowing downward until the world was flooded in light. The air lower down was filled with fog that sat on the water and flowed over the islands like a blanket, but soon after the sunrise the fog began to fade away leaving only tiny white wisps behind, and then even those disappeared.

Ella let herself get lost in the flight, gliding along on the soft morning air. Wilcox had been right about the wind. It blew in a steady stream towards the coast and Ella rode it as if she were floating down a river, flapping her wings only occasionally. She knew that if she was going to make it to the coast she would have to save her energy. The islands passed slowly beneath her, and Ella had lost track of how much time had gone by when she looked up and saw the faint outline of land on the horizon. She thought that she should be able to make it before nightfall.

She passed the time by looking down at the islands as she flew over, trying to find shapes in their jagged coastlines. One looked like a fish with two heads, another, like a man with an enormous nose. She remembered a time back home when she had spent the afternoons looking up into the sky and seeing shapes in the clouds. It had been only a week since she had left, but now it seemed an eternity separated her from her old life. So much had changed since then that she felt she was living in an completely separate world.

She felt the Umbrali in the back of her mind. It was closer now. Whatever transportation it had found had managed to keep pace with the Silent Rose, and the night they had lost on the beach, had brought it closer still.

The hours passed and the sun climbed higher in the sky. Ella drifted on the wind trying hard to resist the urge to flap her wings to push herself faster. She knew she had to save her energy or risk exhausting herself. The ocean seemed to crawl past underneath her, but now she could see the coastline more clearly.

It was obvious that whoever had named the Black Mountains had been somewhat short of imagination. She could see in the distance that the mountain chain rose from the water like the spiked spine of some enormous monster. The tips of the mountains were as black as coal, brushed here and there with brilliant white streaks of snow. Near the bottom of the mountains the black rocks were specked with spots of dark green vegetation. As the mountains grew closer they looked more and more foreboding.

She could see dark storm clouds hanging low over the jagged terrain occasionally illuminated from within by faint flashes of lightening. Ella hoped the clouds would dissipate before she reached them, but her hopes faded as she got closer and the storm showed no signs of dissipating.

By now it was late afternoon and Ella could clearly see the harbor Simeon had described, an almost perfect circle ringed about with towering cliffs and overshadowed by the thunderheads.

Ella felt the wind begin to change, blowing across her path in gusts forcing her to flap hard to stay on course. Then the rain came beating down on her wings, soaking into the feathers and weighing her down. She dropped into the harbor looking frantically for any sign of the cave Simeon had said would be there. The heavy sheets of rain obscured her vision, but a flash of lightening illuminated what looked like a patch of darkness at the base of one of the cliffs.

Ella swooped down towards it almost fainting with relief when she saw that it was an opening. She flew through the opening and into the cave. The water from the bay reached into the cave some forty or fifty feet where it crashed against the sand. The light was thin in the mouth of the cave and Ella had a hard time seeing much of anything. She landed in the wet sand with a thud and made the change back into herself. She stood on the damp sandy ground and looked into the thick

darkness ahead.

Chapter Twenty-four

The air inside the cave dripped with humidity. Ella wrapped her arms around herself to protect herself from the cold clammy atmosphere, and she wished that she could have brought along a coat of some kind.

Outside the cave she could hear the rumble of thunder and the crackling lightning. One of the flashes illuminated the interior of the cave and she spotted something lying against the wall. She walked over to it, stepping gingerly over the uneven ground. Through the dim light she saw that someone had left an oil lamp and a small box of matches near the mouth of the cave. Her hands shook in the cold as she gripped the wooden match and struck it against the rock.

The tip of the match sparked for a second, and then went out. Ella tried a second match with similar effect. The third finally caught, and the flare of the flame temporarily blinded her. She guided the match down to the wick of the lamp and it began to burn. Ella lifted the lamp above her head. The quavering flame cast a warm glow against the dark wall. With the help of the light she could see that the cave extended far back into the rock. The fatigue of the days flight weighed heavy on her, but she resisted the urge to rest. She didn't know how far the cave extended, but unless she wanted to fly in the storm she would have to find out.

She slipped the box of matches into her pocket and started into the cave. The lamp in her hand cast eerie dancing shadows on the walls. The cave's initial opening narrowed into a small passage which wound through the rock for several hundred feet. The sound of the thunder and the crashing waves faded slowly behind her until they were nothing more than a memory. The narrow passage grew narrower still until Ella thought she might not be able to make it through. But just when she thought she might have to turn back, it widened again opening into an expansive cavern.

It was like nothing she had ever seen before. The stone hung down from the cave's ceiling in waves looking for all the world like frozen curtains. Ella reached out to touch it to reassure herself that it was real. Other stone shapes hung down from the ceiling in long spikes and similar formations clumped together on the cave floor, and some formations too strange and beautiful to describe, faintly shining in the warm glow of the lamp. Ella had never imagined such a place could exist. It was like a palace, hidden underground with a vaulted

ceiling so high her light barely reached it.

She picked her way through the grotto with a profound sense of awe. It went on for hundred's of feet. Every footstep she took echoed against the cave walls, amplified by the hard rock until they sounded shockingly loud in her ears. Ella crossed the space and found a low wide tunnel on the other side. She had to crouch down to avoid bumping her head on the hard rock ceiling. Several times she did bump her head on the cave's uneven ceiling as she followed the winding tunnel, and the farther she went the more she wished she could straighten up and walk normally. Her back started to hurt, in addition to her head which she continued to bump against the cave ceiling. She thought the tunnel must be getting lower but she couldn't be sure.

After hitting her head for what must have been the tenth time she sat down leaning against the wall of the tunnel grateful for the chance to straighten out her back again. She put her hand up to her head and rubbed it gingerly. There was at least one spot where she had struck it so hard that a knot was beginning to form. She rested for a few more minutes, then got up with a groan and continued walking. She had only gone a little further when she saw the tunnel ahead of her widen out.

She hurried forward hoping to find another cavern like the one before, but she was quickly disappointed to find that while the cave was wider the ceiling was no higher. There was something different though. She didn't notice it at first, but there was a shallow pool off to one side, its waters so still they looked like glass. She walked over to the pool and the flickering light of the lamp illuminated strange pale white fish with no eyes gliding through in the quiet water.

Looking down at the still pool she realized how thirsty she was. She had gone all day with no water and now her body practically begged her to take a drink. Still, she hesitated. She had no way of knowing if the water in the pool might be dangerous. But she decided it was worth the risk and cupped some of the water in her hands bringing it up to her parched lips. It had a sharp taste but she was too thirsty to care. She put her lips down to the water and gulped it down, relishing the feel of the cool liquid sliding down her throat.

When she had drunk her fill she picked up the lamp and set off again. She watched at the ripples she had caused fan out, bouncing against the sides of the pool, doubling back on themselves in ever widening patterns. The pool looked

no deeper than a foot but it stretched on for at least fifty feet. A thin rock ledge ran alongside the water and Ella followed it until the pool ended. The tunnel continued on twisting and winding up and down. Ella went on walking trying to ignore the fatigue that seemed stronger and stronger with each step. If she stopped she knew the lamp might run out of oil and she would be trapped miles underground without light. So she pushed herself to continue, focusing on simply putting one foot in front of the other. Then she rounded a corner and came face to face with a stone wall.

For a moment she thought she had run into a dead end, but as she walked forward to look she saw a crack in the wall just wide enough for her to squeeze through. Ella hesitated.

The crack in the wall hardly looked like an acceptable path forward. Perhaps she had taken a wrong turn somewhere. She looked down at the lamp in her hands. Nearly half of the oil in it was gone. If she turned back now she might make back to the mouth of the cave but then she'd be stuck with no way to go forward. But despite her misgivings she knew she hadn't missed a turn. There had been no turns to miss. This was the way forward.

She held up the lamp and looked into the narrow space, but she couldn't see how far it extended. Ella groaned in frustration, then turned sideways and slipped between the walls of rock.

Her progress was slower now that she was forced to inch along sideways, and after a few minutes of being squeezed in the narrow cave she started to panic. She began to think what would happen if she got stuck in here and the light ran out. *No one would ever come to help me. I'd be stuck down here. Forever.* She swallowed the fear rising in her throat and pushed forward. There was no chance to rest now. The cave walls were too close together to even allow her to crouch, much less lie down. She began to feel as if she were being crushed between the walls, slowly squeezed to death, but despite the fear she kept inching forward.

After what seemed like hours she felt the tunnel begin to widen. It was almost imperceptible at first. She hardly dared hope that her torment might be ending, but gradually the change grew more definite. Ella sighed in relief at being able to walk straight forward instead of inching along sideways like a crab. The tunnel was still fairly narrow and her shoulders brushed against the walls occasionally but the ceiling was high enough for her to stand upright and she was able to

move much faster.

Ella checked the oil in the lamp with more frequency now. She had no idea how much further she had to go and she worried the lamp might give out before she found the other end of the cave. She was preoccupied with checking the oil when she almost walked straight into a pit that opened in the middle of the floor. She stood there stunned looking down at the black hole in front of her, terrified what her inattention had nearly cost her. She held the lamp out over the pit, trying to get an idea how deep it was, but the dim light didn't illuminate the bottom. She picked up a loose rock and dropped it into the darkness. She counted slowly to ten before she heard the faint plinking sound of the rock hitting bottom.

Ella considered her situation. The pit in front of her was fairly wide, but she thought she could make it across if she jumped. She could find herself tumbling to her death at the slightest misstep. She backed slowly down the tunnel and took a deep breath. *I can do this*, she told herself. *I didn't come all this way to fail here*. Then without giving herself time to reconsider she ran forward and launched herself over the pit. She hung in the air over the chasm for a single stomach dropping moment then tumbled to the ground on the other side. The lamp flew out of her hand clattering to the ground in front of her, and the flame went out. The blackness fell in on Ella thick and heavy as a damp cloth. She crawled forward in the darkness sweeping her arms in a wide arch trying to locate the fallen lamp. When she felt her fingers brush the tip of its metal base she wrapped her hand around it clutching it like a lost treasure. The rough rock felt harsh against her knees as she dug in her pocket for the box of matches she had placed there earlier. For a single horrifying moment she thought she had lost them when she jumped, but then her hand closed around the reassuring form of the box. She pulled it out of her pocket and gently slid it open. She counted the remaining matches in the box by feel. Only three.

Ella took a deep breath and tried to keep her hands from shaking. She reached into the box and pulled out one of the matches. She felt for the head of the match and struck it against the stone wall. A faint spark glowed at the tip of the match for a moment and then faded. Ella tried the match again with no success. She placed it on the cave floor and picked the second one out of the box. Her body trembled with anticipation as she struck it against the wall. This time a definite flame curled from the end of the match, and Ella barely restrained herself from shouting for joy. She carefully guided the match to the wick of the lamp, but just before the flame touched the wick it sputtered and went out. Ella groaned in

disappointment and frustration. She waited a few moments trying to still the roar of her beating heart before she picked up the final match. Then, before doubt could overwhelm her, she reached out and struck it against the wall.

Ella thought that the flame that leaped from the end of the match was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Quickly but carefully she brought the lamp up to the flame where the wick glowed and then caught. She held the match there for a moment to make sure that the flame would hold. The pounding of her heart still sounded loud in her ears but with the lamp lit her apprehension began to subside. She got up off the hard floor and brushed the dust off her knees with her free hand, then set out once more shielding the flickering flame with her hand. She followed the passage for several hundred feet and found that it opened into a wide grotto though not so large as the one she had first seen.

Here Ella found herself faced with a dilemma. There were two passages, one on the left and one on the right. Ella examined both of them but there was nothing to indicate which one she should take. She glanced down at the lamp and noticed that the oil sat even lower in the reservoir. Time was running out. She stood in the cavern between the two tunnels debating with herself. She went a few steps forward and then stopped again looking for any detail she might have missed that would show her the right way. She took a few steps into the tunnel on the right then turned again back into the cavern unsure of herself. She slowly approached the tunnel on the left and stood in its mouth.

She didn't know why but something made her want to take this way. She stood till for a moment trying to sense what it was leading her to this tunnel. Then she felt a draft, so faint as to be almost imperceptible coming from the tunnel in front of her, and she knew. Ella resisted the urge to hurry down the tunnel making sure she watched the ground ahead for any more pits or other obstructions. Within a few minutes she heard something ahead and realized it was the hushed roar of the rain.

Now she ran, shielding the flame with her hand. She was on the opening almost before she realized it, because the storm clouds obscured much of the light from the moon and the stars. She stood in the mouth of the cave listening to the sound of the rain and thought to herself that it must be the most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

Overwhelmed with relief and exhaustion Ella fell against wall of the cave and

collapsed to the floor. The stone was cold and wet against her skin, but she was too tired to care. Her eyes fluttered shut, and the lullaby of the rain sang her to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-five

The next thing she knew the sun was pouring down into the mouth of the cave as if it was impatient to make up for the time it had lost during the storm. Ella stretched and got up shielding her eyes from the bright rays that illuminated the lush valley stretched out below her. The ground was covered in short stubby dark green bushes, patches of yellow grass, and down at the bottom of the valley the shining ribbon of a river glinted in the sunlight. Ella thought back to what Simeon had told her. She knew she had to follow that river for a few miles until she came to the witch's hut. By the look of the sun she had wasted several hours of daylight already, but her heart was lighter now that she was out of the darkness of the cave.

Ella changed into the raven once again and beat her wings to lift her off the ground. She knew she could make far better time flying than waking, especially over unfamiliar terrain. She glided down following the gentle slope of the valley. She glanced back at the mouth of the cave and realized she would never have been able to see the entrance from the air unless she was right on top of it. Still she wondered why the route had been so unusual. Surely there were other ways to get to the witch's house, or hut or whatever she lived in.

As she was thinking, a shadow passed over her and the birds instincts took control of her mind for a second steering her sharply to the left. Ella barely had time to register what had happened when a huge black shape hurtled through the air she had been occupying not a second before.

At first glance she thought it was some monstrously oversize crow but then she realized that the head was all wrong for a bird. While the rest of the body was cloaked in thick black feathers the head was covered in hair and ended in a fierce set of canine teeth where its beak should have been.

Ella barely had time to take in what she had seen when the monster flapped its wings coming up beneath her and snapping its jaws inches from her wing. Ella veered again, then went into a steep dive. She could see out of the corner of her eye that the thing was following close behind. She dipped down into the bushes flitting along just above the ground with the monster crashing through the foliage behind her. Her smaller size gave her a momentary lead on the larger animal and she landed on the ground, focusing on changing back to herself. At

least she could match the monster for size, and she hoped it might show less interest in her if she were not such easy prey.

Standing on her own two feet she saw the monster continue its charge. The wolf headed bird opened its mouth and screeched. Ella ran as fast as she could through the brush, but when she looked over her shoulder she saw that the monster was still gaining on her. It flapped its wings to lift itself into the air, then swooped down with talons extended. Ella fell to the ground and barely missed being cut open by those razor sharp claws. The monster flapped away then turned for another assault, and Ella realized she was no safer on the ground than in the air. She wished she had some kind of weapon anything she could use to defend herself. She looked on the ground as she ran searching for a big stick or even a loose rock, but she found nothing.

Ella heard the monster scream again, and she looked up to see it bearing down on her once more. She threw herself to the ground and felt the rush of air as the black winged creature flew past inches above her head, then she changed back into the raven and took flight. For the moment she had the advantage. With her lighter form she was able to gain altitude far faster than the larger creature. She flew up and up and up as high and as fast as she could. Far below her she could see the monster flapping furiously to catch up with her. It closed the gap between them, a hundred feet below her, then fifty, then ten.

Then Ella changed back into herself. A wave of panic overtook her as she found herself a thousand feet in the air with nothing to support herself. Then she felt her body hit the monster. She grabbed one of its wings throwing it off balance and both of them started to tumble towards the earth. The monster raked out at her with its claws and Ella felt a stinging pain in her arm but she ignored it. She tightened her grip on the joint of the wing and pushed her fear away focusing on the monster feeling the Form of its body and spirit. Then she let go.

The wind whistled past her face, and the ground came up in a rush. Ella focused and changed, feeling herself form in the body of the monster. She spread its massive wings and turned her headlong plunge into a graceful dive. She climbed into the sky again looking for the other monster. She spotted it far above her screaming with rage as it swooped down for another attack. Ella swerved to the side in an attempt to evade the strike but the larger body responded sluggishly and the monster grazed the tip of her wing with its claws. Ella fought back the pain and looked down to see the monster below her pulling out of its dive. She

swept back her wings and practically fell towards it as it flailed to gain altitude.

She collided with the monster's back in a rush of wind and feathers wrapping her talons around the joints of its wings. The monster screeched again twisting its head to snap at her. Ella snapped back sinking her teeth into the the back of the monster's neck. Her jaw tightened and she felt the bones in the monster's neck snapping under the pressure. A moment later the monster went limp, and she released it watching as it tumbled downward until it hit the ground in a heap of blood and feathers. Ella waited until she was sure the thing was dead before she landed and changed back into her own Form.

"Very well done. I'm impressed."

Ella whirled to face the voice. An old woman stood there watching her, head cocked to one side. She was draped in a dark green cloak and leaned heavily on a gnarled walking stick.

"You're...are you...Granny Grimalkin?"

The woman nodded faintly. "And you are Ella Eris, no?"

"Yes," Ella said nodding. "You got the queen's message?"

"I did. Although, I scarcely needed it to know you were coming. We're daylight's wasting. Come." The old woman began to hobble away.

Ella hesitated for a moment then followed after her. "What was that thing?" she asked hurrying to catch up with the witch.

"Ravenwolf. Very rare, very dangerous. Very unimaginatively named. They're fiercely territorial you know."

"I noticed."

"I see you made it through the cave. You found the lamp I left for you?"

"Yes. I mean I assume it was the one you left, that is, it was the only one in the cave."

The witch looked at her a raised eyebrow, and Ella shut her mouth hoping to

avoid sounding stupid. There was something about the old woman that unsettled her, made her thoughts run crossways. She followed the witch in silence for several minutes until they came into view of a small hut built against the wall of the mountain.

“Here we are,” the witch said. “Home sweet home.”

Ella thought that the disheveled assemblage of stone and straw hardly looked sweet but she kept her opinion to herself. The cottage door was low and Ella had to duck as she passed through. When she straightened up she was surprised to see that the inside of the hut looked far bigger than the outside. It took her a moment to realize that the space extended back into the mountain, though whether the hollowed out rock was a natural cave or man made she couldn't tell.

“You've come a long way,” the witch said. “Can I get you something to eat?”

“I am hungry,” Ella admitted.

“You like chicken soup?”

“Yes, very much.”

“Then its too bad I don't have any.” Ella couldn't figure out whether this was supposed to be a joke or not but the witch continued. “I do have this garma stew though. Very tasty.”

Ella opened her mouth to asked to ask what a garma was then decided against it and just nodded. “That's sounds lovely.”

“It is,” said the witch. She ladled the thick slop into a bowl and handed it to Ella. Meaty chunks of indeterminate origin floated in the stew but the smell that wafted into Ella's nostrils fairly made her mouth water. She took a heaping spoonful of the aromatic stew and lifted it to her mouth. She was through her second bowl before she finally started to feel full. “It was very good, Miss, err I'm not sure what to call you. That is, Celia told me your name was Granny Grimalkin, but-”

“Yes,” said the hag. “It is.”

Once again Ella felt herself foundering. “Why do you live out here. So far from

everything?”

“I like my privacy.”

“Don’t you get lonely?”

The old woman took a deep breath. “I suppose,” she said. “But you didn’t come all this way to ask me about my taste in real estate.”

“No,” Ella said. “I didn’t. I need your help. I’m being followed, hunted by a monster made out of darkness.”

The witch nodded. “The Umbrali. Yes, I know of it.”

“Can you help me?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But you haven’t told me the whole story yet.” Granny reached forward and grabbed her hand, “You’re here because of this,” she said pointing to the ring.

“Do you know what it is?” Ella asked.

“Ah, a good question.”

Ella waited for several seconds waiting for Granny to continue. “And?” she finally said.

The old woman started a bit as if her mind had wandered off somewhere on its own. “It’s difficult to say for sure,” she said. “It’s very old, I can tell you that. And it’s magical. *Intensely* magical,” she added. “But as to exactly what it is...well, I just can’t say.”

“Then...you can’t help me?”

“I didn’t say that. There are at least a few things we can know about the ring. For one thing, it’s been hidden for a good long while.”

“How do you figure?”

“If an artifact like this had been loose in the world for very long I would have noticed. There’s power in this ring that wizards only dream of. Old power, from

the age of magic, possibly even earlier.”

“But I found it in the hand of a dead man,” Ella said. “How did he come to have it?”

“Yet another excellent question, and another one I cannot answer. Wherever the ring was hidden it was well protected. Taking it wouldn’t have been easy. Getting around the ring’s guardian, must have been quite a feat in itself. The Umbrali is formidable to say the least.”

“But can it be beaten? Can it be killed? Can you help me?”

“You want me to help you kill the Umbrali? A creature from before the dawn of man, made of darkness, made of fear? A creature nearly as old as the world itself?”

“Yes.” There was no doubt in her voice, no waver in her resolve. This was the purpose of her journey. And the witch would help her.

The witch cocked her head and looked at Ella with an indecipherable expression. “Alright then,” she said at last. “Let’s get to it. Come with me.” She hobbled toward the back of the cave, muttering to herself, until she came to a long table covered with vials, bottles and jars containing substances whose identities Ella could not even begin guess.

“Ah yes, here it is,” said the witch selecting one of the vials from the table.

“What is it?”

“Just a little something I cooked up. It’s essentially a sleeping potion with a few special ingredients.”

“And we need it for?”

“To help us sleep of course.”

“But it’s the middle of the day,” Ella said.

“Exactly,” said the witch.

Ella shook her head, and decided it would be best not to argue. The witch poured the contents of the vial into two cups made of clay, and handed one to Ella. Ella started to put the cup to her lips.

“Wait!” said the witch. “It’s very fast acting. Come over here and sit down first.”

The witch led her to a rickety looking rocking chair, and Ella sat down, slowly, afraid it might collapse beneath her. The witch sat down next to her in a similar chair. “Alright then,” said the witch. “Bottoms up.” She raised her glass to her lips and tipped the liquid into her mouth, and Ella did the same. The liquid was thick and sweet like syrup and she swallowed it all down in one gulp. The effect was nearly instant. She felt as though her limbs were made of lead, and her eyelids started to droop. She let them close completely and fell into sleep.

Suddenly she found herself back in her old room in the attic. Everything was as she remembered it except for one thing. There was a heavy door set in the wall grown over with vines. *I’m dreaming again*, she thought.

“Nice place.” Ella turned and saw the witch.

“How did you get here?” she asked.

“I’m a witch,” the witch answered. “Don’t ask so many questions.” The old woman looked around the room for a moment. “A little small,” she commented. “I’m guessing that door wasn’t there in real life.”

Ella shook her head.

“It’s the ring,” said the witch. “Give me a hand.” She started to tug on the edge of the door. Ella wasn’t sure what they were trying to accomplish, but she joined the witch pulling with all her might on the old door. At first the vine encrusted surface resisted their efforts. But then, abruptly, the door gave, and a blinding flash of light filled the room.

Chapter Twenty-six

Ella squeezed her eyes shut, and saw the afterimage of the flash floating against her eyelids.

“Well that was interesting,” said the witch. Ella risked opening her eyes. The light had diminished now, but it wasn’t gone. It filled the room like a glowing fog. “What is it?” Ella asked.

” Magic,” granny answered. “Pure, raw, unfiltered power. Come on, help me get this thing the rest of the way open. They pulled on the door again. It opened slowly groaning in protest, until at last there was enough of a gap for Ella and the witch to see through. Despite the initial flash of light the space beyond the door was mostly dark, although the same glowing fog hung in the air providing some illumination. “It’s a cave,” Ella said.

The witch nodded. “The magic is coming from in there. This stuff,” she said waving her hand at the glowing fog, “is just residual. The source is inside.” She squeezed herself through the opening, and Ella followed after her.

As soon as she stepped through the door, Ella realized she had been mistaken. The space beyond the door was not a cave. The walls were smooth and flat, cut out of the rock with a purpose in mind, and the arched ceiling was supported by polished stone pillars. The hall stretched out in front of them, and at the end Ella could see that it opened into a much larger space. Ella and the witch walked toward the room in silence. When they reached the end of the hall they found themselves standing at the rim of a great amphitheater. The area below them was formed by a series of great stone circles, each a progressively smaller and lower than the last leading to the bottom of the room like a great staircase. And at the bottom of the circle steps lay a round pool of light that cast a glow up into the whole room.

“What is it?” Ella asked.

The witch didn’t answer for a moment. Then she said, “I’ve never seen anything like it before. This much magic, this much power gathered together in one place.” She started to descend the stairs, and Ella followed her. It seemed to take a long time to reach the bottom, although Ella wasn’t sure how time worked in

this dream world. “What now?” Ella asked when at last they reached the bottom and stood before the shining pool.

“Now you drink,” said the witch pointing at the pool.

Ella hesitated. There was something vaguely menacing about the shining pool. Something that made her uneasy, restless. But she had come to the witch for help. She couldn’t back out now. She crouched down and lowered her mouth to the light.

The light flowed between her parted lips as soft and easy as a breeze. There was no taste, but as she drank she began to feel lightheaded and peaceful, as if her whole body were buzzing with the power. It was wonderful, so wonderful that she lost herself in it. There was nothing, nothing but the power, the glorious light that shone inside her. Then she felt something on the back of her neck and suddenly she was being pulled back, away from the pool.

“I think that’s enough for now,” said the witch.

Ella shook her head trying to clear it of the fuzzy feeling that filled her brain. “I guess I got a little carried away,” she said.

“Hmm yes,” the witch said raising her eyebrows.

“So what now?”

The witch looked up and around them as if listening for some faint sound. Then she said, “I believe we’re done here. Time to rise and shine.” Even as she spoke the words Ella saw the great amphitheater begin to waver as if it were no more than a mirage. Then it dissolved completely and she woke in the rickety old rocking chair in the witch’s cave. As soon as she opened her eyes she knew something was different. She could feel the power she had drunk from the well coursing inside of her as real as it had been in the dream. It was the same feeling she had experienced on the ship but somehow more solid, more permanent.

“Can you feel it?” the witch asked, as she rose from her own chair.

“It feels...good. I feel like I could fly or...I don’t know. It’s amazing.”

The witch nodded her head. “Good good. Now for the hard part.”

“Which is?”

“Teaching you how to use it.”

The witch led Ella outside into the sunshine. Ella’s eye’s had grown accustomed to the half-light of the cave and now she squinted in the sun’s glare. They walked for several minutes until the witch pulled up short and plopped herself down on a nearby rock. “I reckon this place is as good as any.”

Then she simply sat there for a minute with her eyes closed without saying anything. “I don’t feel right about this,” she said at last. “The power you have isn’t natural. I’ve built up a lifetime around magic and I’ve never seen anything like it. The training needed to develop a fraction of the power you have is beyond your wildest dreams.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“So much magic in the hands of someone not fully able to appreciate it might be dangerous.”

“Is there another way?” Ella asked.

The witch paused a moment before answering. “No. That’s the only reason I can allow myself to do what I’m about to do. So, let us begin.”

Ella swallowed. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to close your eyes and focus. Let your mind feel the power inside you. It runs throughout your body, but its focal point is somewhere in your stomach. Can you feel it?”

Ella nodded.

“Good. Then listen carefully I want you to try to let the power flow up from that spot through your body and out of your right hand. Can you do that?”

“I’ll try,” Ella said quietly. She let her mind rest on the boiling cauldron of energy that burned inside her. Then she gathered the power together and let it flow from her hand just as the witch had told her. A bolt of white light shot out and slammed into a rock, shattering it into shards that scattered across the

ground.

“Very good.” the witch murmured. “But do me a favor and watch were you point that thing.

Ella looked down at her hand in disbelief. “Did I really do that?”

“You did,” the witch replied.

“But that’s, that’s...”

“Not bad for a first try. But you need more control. Try again, but this time tone it back a little.”

They stayed out in the valley all afternoon with Ella working under the witch’s instruction. It took some time but eventually she learned to control the release of power until she could create something as benign as a small light that flickered like a candle at the end of her fingers. Then the witch taught her how to form the magic into a shield around her which she tested by throwing rocks at Ella.

“It should stop most physical objects,” she explained, “but it won’t protect you from spells. That type of shield is far more complex. Even with your power I could hardly train you to form one in a single day.”

“Can the Umbrali do magic?”

“The Umbrali *is* magic,” the witch answered. “And you can count on the fact that it will be far more experienced than you. But I think you can match it in pure power. It will be an interesting fight to watch.”

“Aren’t you going to help me?”

The witch shook her head.

“Why not?”

“Quite frankly because I can’t. You got yourself into this mess. You can get yourself out.”

“But...”

“No buts. I’m an old woman and I haven’t got a tenth of your power. This is a test Ella. A test of your willpower, your resourcefulness.”

But I could die! Ella thought. *I could die and act like it’s some kind of game!* But she had known that it would be like this. She had said as much to Simeon. *My fight. Mine. Alone.* But now she said nothing. She merely nodded. She felt as if there were a lump in her stomach, as though her insides had been knotted up. She wasn’t ready. But it didn’t matter. The Umbrali was coming. It would be here by tonight. There was no more time for running. She felt tears welling up in her eyes, but she forced them down and steeled her heart against self pity. Sorrow was of no use to her now. She had come too far to let this thing win now.

“Which way will it come?” she asked.

“Through the valley,” granny said pointing a finger out at the bending river flowing between the mountains. “It’s the fastest way.”

“Not through the caves?”

“No.”

“Why did you send me through the caves then?” Ella asked.

“You are not immortal. The valley holds many dangers for the unsuspecting traveler. The caves, despite the obstacles they present are far safer.”

“Getting to you isn’t easy is it?” Ella observed.

Granny Grimalkin sighed and sank down onto a convenient boulder as if suddenly feeling a heavy burden on her back. “It’s true that I haven’t had many visitors,” she said wearily. “Truth be told I’ve been hiding away for more years than I care to remember.”

“Why?”

“The world is a more dangerous and complex place than you might think, Ella. When you are given the gift of power you begin to see how true that is. I believe you might know something of this yourself, yes?”

Ella nodded. “Mother always warned me not to let anyone know that I was a

changeling. She said if people found out it could be dangerous for me. Because people were afraid of magic. Afraid of what they didn't understand."

"It wasn't always like this. Magic had been pushed further and further into the corners of the world. In recent years it's gotten even worse thanks to Uther. He's completely terrified that someone stronger will rise up to overthrow him, so he's carefully driven away or destroyed anything that could resemble a threat. Unfortunately for us it wasn't too difficult."

"Why not?"

The witch sighed. "Because instead of trying to take care of every magician witch and wizard that could be a threat to him, Uther let other people do his work for him. He planted fear in their minds. Fear of magic. Fear seems to be something we humans crave. If there is nothing in life to fear, then we will create something to fear." She spoke now with a faraway look in her eye, and Ella suspected she was remembering something from her past.

"But enough philosophy for now," she said. "The day is passing even as we speak. If you are to win this fight we must prepare. Come." She pulled herself onto her feet grasping her knobbly staff in her crooked fingers and began walking down the valley. Again Ella was surprised at her speed and hurried to catch up.

"Where are we going?"

"To see where the Umbrali will come," said the witch. "It might do you good to get a feel for the land."

"But I thought you said that place was dangerous," Ella said.

"Only if you don't know what you're doing, and if I didn't know what I was doing I'd be dead long before now."

They walked for close to half an hour when they reached a bend in the valley. As they rounded it Ella saw that the wide valley narrowed to thin ravine. The river water roared through the narrow gap leaving only a small ledge barely wide enough for a single man to walk on.

"This is where he will come," The witch said pointing. "This is the best chance

you will have.”

“He won’t have anywhere to go,” Ella observed.

“No, but don’t think it will be easy. The Umbrali needs no light to see. Darkness is his natural element.”

Ella thought for a moment. “It’s too bad we can’t light up the ravine. That might help level the playing field.

The witch raised her eyebrows. “I have an even better idea,” she said. “on, I’ll show you.”

When they reached the cave house Ella watched the witch rummage around looking for something.

“No wait, it must be back here,” she muttered to herself, scurrying towards the back of the cave, tossing a string of odd looking beads behind her onto the floor with a clatter. Ella looked down at the beads and saw that they were really tiny bones, including what looked like a tiny human skull in the middle. She stepped gingerly around the macabre piece of jewelry. Near the back of the cave she found the witch rubbing the dust off of a black box. It was perfectly cube shaped with no visible breaks in the box.

“I think I must have put it in here,” the witch said to Ella as she ran her hands over the box. She began mumbling to herself under her breath in what sounded like a foreign language. Ella watched in fascination as symbols lit up on all sides of the box, and the top folded off by itself.

“Ah yes, that was the one,” the witch said obviously pleased with herself. She pulled something out of the box and handed it to Ella. Ella looked at the thing in her hand with disgust. It appeared to be a dried and withered human hand somehow preserved from rotting.

“Hand of Glory,” The witch said by means of explanation.

“Hand of what?”

“Glory. Come on. I could tell you what it does but its better for you to see for yourself.”

The witch led Ella farther back into the cave while Ella trailed along behind holding the disgusting ornament as far away from herself as possible. They had gone quite a ways back before Ella noticed that something was odd.

“Wait a minute, you don’t have a candle. How can we still see?”

“I can still see because I’m a witch. You on the other hand, are holding the Hand of Glory, no pun intended.”

“You mean it’s like a light?”

“Only for the person holding it. It might prove useful.”

“And it’s a real hand?” Ella asked.

“Oh yes,” the witch replied. “Quite real.”

Ella was repulsed by the thing, but she tucked it in her pocket anyway. She would take all the help she could get.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Evening was already fast approaching when Reginald Adams heard the cry of “Land ho,” from the crow’s nest. He walked slowly up to the stern and looked towards the horizon. He had sailed the seas for many years but he’d rarely been as far as the Black Mountains, and he wasn’t happy about making the trip again. The mountains loomed on the horizon like shadows against the dusky sky, while the sun slipped slowly into the water. On the eastern horizon a few faint star twinkled in the dying light. Captain Adams looked up at the moon a thin sliver of a crescent barely making a dent in the falling darkness.

“Good evening Captain.”

Adams whirled to face the hooded figure, with his heart in his mouth, and his face blanched white. He had faced a good many terrors in his life, but something about that voice seemed to reach into his very soul and dig out its most basic fears.

“Do not sneak up on me like that,” he growled.

“Apologies captain,” the thing answered in its moaning voice. “How is our progress?”

“We’ll be there in a matter of hours. Are you certain of the bearing?”

“Oh yes captain. Quite certain.”

It took slightly longer than he had anticipated. Due to the heavy darkness and the dangers of sailing through the archipelagos, they had to take depth readings with uncommon frequency. The hooded creature’s pacing seemed even more impatient than usual as they neared the looming mountains. Finally around one o’clock they made harbor.

“I would be grateful if you could prepare a boat for me,” said hooded figure.

Adams motioned the crew to ready a boat.

When they had lowered it into the water the thing spoke again. “It would appear

our business is at an end Captain.”

And suddenly there were claws at the ends of those black hands. The creature made a quick thrusting motion, and Adams felt them enter his belly as cold as ice. The creature wrenched out the claws and stepped back as Adams fell on his knees looking in disbelief at the growing pool of blood spreading out in front of him.

“Thank you captain.”

The Umbrali dispensed with the rest of the crew in short order. Naturally they made an effort to defend themselves and avenge their captain, but it seemed to the Umbrali that the sounds of their shouts, and the red of their blood were as peaceful and soothing as the sound of the rain on a summer night. When the final seaman had gasped his last, the Umbrali sheathed its claws and climbed down to the boat that sat waiting in the water. It settled into the small craft and started to row.

Ella sat hunched down behind a rock feeling sore and uncomfortable. The joints in her knees were stiff and she wrapped her arms around herself shivering in the unusually cold night air. With each passing second the fear she had managed to keep at bay for the past week threatened to overwhelm her. *Stay calm.*

Stay calm. Far easier to think than do. Ella could feel her heart thudding with anticipation. The witch had given her something to drink to make her more alert, but now she wondered if it might be working too well. But in spite of her fear, she was resolved. There was no more running. She would face the thing tonight. And one of them would die.

The Umbrali reached the mouth of the ravine where the current became too swift to fight. The Umbrali pulled the boat onto the shore and continued on foot. It could sense his prey out there in the darkness. Still. Waiting perhaps? Resigned to fate or preparing to put up a useless fight? No matter. The end was inevitable. The Umbrali knew. It could not be killed. It could not be stopped. It would win. The hood that had once covered its face was pushed back now revealing the two glowing red eyes set in coal black features. It followed the narrow path gingerly avoiding weak places and crumbling rocks. Up ahead the ravine took a sharp turn.

Ella fought against her racing heart as she sensed the Umbrali getting closer,

closer. How much longer before the thing would be in view? She could feel the power inside of her raging with her fear. Waiting to get out. Suddenly an inhuman scream pierced the air, sending Ella's heart beating faster still. *I remember that scream. I remember that night. I remember...* But she wouldn't let herself. She had to stay focused. To stay strong. She clenched the Hand of Glory tight in her fist and looked out on the eerie glow it cast over the valley. Then she saw it, the figure eerily unilluminated even by the light of the hand of glory. It was still a long way off but Ella could tell that it sensed her presence. For a long moment it simply stood there, as still as darkness itself. Then it stepped forward. It moved slowly, but there was no caution in those steps. It was toying with her, letting her fear grow, as it strolled towards her. It was close now. Only a few more steps and...

Ella leaped from behind the rock and let the power flow out of her. It burst from her fingers in blinding streams of white light that exploded against the Umbrali knocking it through the air like a rag doll. Ella felt a flash of exhilaration, but even before the Umbrali rose from where it had fallen it flicked a blood red tendril of energy towards her that sliced through the darkness like a whip, too fast for her to even flinch.

The blow was haphazard and only struck her arm, but it connected so forcefully that that it knocked Ella to the ground. The pain was so intense it was all Ella could do to climb back onto her feet. She saw the Umbrali, rising from where it had fallen. She focused on the power inside of her, bringing it to bear on the rising black form of the Umbrali. The light burst forth from her hand as before but this time the Umbrali was ready, deflecting the blow as if it were nothing more than a stiff wind. The red whip of energy snaked out again striking her neck. The pain was an explosion in her mind, so powerful that her vision went black for a moment. The Hand of Glory slipped from her grasp and suddenly she was plunged into real darkness. There was no time to stoop down and pick it up. Ella let another blast of power light up the night as it sizzled through the air towards the dark form. But the Umbrali deflected this blow as easily as the last. Then it laughed, a harsh cold merciless laugh.

For a moment Ella felt despair wash over her, a feeling of undeniable hopelessness. She had come all this way, for nothing. She could never win. Not against this monster. Even in the darkness she could see the wicked curve of the Umbrali's claws as it advanced on her. And she remembered.

And in a moment the despair turned into something else. Rage. It burned inside her. It gave her the strength she needed to push on through the haze of pain. “Monster!” she snarled. “You killed my mother.”

“Yes,” the black form replied, “and now, I am going to kill you.” It took another step forward. “No more running.”

Ella's response was an inhuman growl and another blast of the white hot energy. It struck the ground directly in front of the Umbrali, throwing up a geyser of dirt and rock that knocked the monster backward several feet. Then Ella heard laughter again. “You little fool of a girl,” the Umbrali said. “What do you think you will do to me? I have faced far more able opponents than you and none of them could kill me. You're worse than pathetic.”

Ella tried not to listen, but the words cut into her mind, and her rage faded back into despair. *It's right*, she thought_. I don't have a chance. I'm doomed._

“That's right. Doomed,” the Umbrali said coming closer.

It's in my thoughts? Ella was startled. Something was suddenly gnawing at the back of her mind, some fit of inspiration about to burst through. But there was no time. The Umbrali loomed over her and sunk its claws into her chest.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Ella looked down in horror at the wicked curve of the claws as the Umbrali pulled them out of her chest covered in her blood. She could feel the darkness closing in on her as she fell to the ground. Then, some hidden corner of her mind remembered the rat.

And she changed. For a moment she felt the Umbrali's confusion, but in an instant she was already changing back into her own Form, the gaping hole in her chest completely healed. She pressed the advantage of her surprise letting loose another bolt of searing power, that struck the Umbrali full in the chest throwing it backwards.

When will you learn that I cannot be killed? The words were in her head now.

And suddenly Ella realized what it meant. This was how the Umbrali had followed her all this way, this was how it could feel her thoughts, and this was how she could sense it getting closer. *It works both ways*, she thought. *Its soul is bound to the ring. The ring is bound to me.* And then the path was clear. All that white hot magic would accomplish nothing against the monster's body. *But against its soul...*

Ella vaguely felt the Umbrali's red stream of magic wrap around her neck but the pain was nothing now. The power was everything. It flowed, not through her hands, but through her mind, through her soul. She poured it all into that dark presence like a roaring boiling river. The magic met with the soul of the Umbrali with a flash. Ella could hear the monster's screams ringing in her ears but only the world in her mind was real. Seconds, minutes, hours, time meant nothing. Nothing. The soul of the Umbrali dissolved. Into nothing.

The red glow of the monster's eyes flared for a moment then faded into blackness. And the black form dissolved into dust so fine that the wind carried it away leaving nothing, no evidence that such a thing had ever existed.

And Ella was left in the valley. Alone.

There was nothing left in her. No fear, no anger, no joy. Nothing. The power had taken it all. The walk back to the witch's cave was a blank space in her mind.

She remembered only staggered into the doorway and finding the witch sitting just inside rocking in her chair, with a pipe between her teeth. “Did you kill it?”

Ella managed to nod her head, as she slumped into the chair next to the witch. The witch brought her something to drink. It was bitter on her tongue but after she drank it she felt her strength slowly returning. They sat there in silence for what seemed like hours before Ella finally spoke. “It wasn’t what I thought it would be,” she said.

“What?”

But Ella didn’t answer. She simply sat and stared out at the night, sipping at the drink in her hand.

The two of them sat there in silence for a long while before the witch spoke again. “Are you happy now?”

For a moment Ella was startled by the question. It seemed strange, foreign to her to think of happiness now. She shook her head. “I’m not even sure I know what happy means any more. I put the ring on thinking it might lead to some grand adventure. And it did. And I wanted to kill the Umbrali to avenge my mother’s death. And I did. But it doesn’t make me any happier. The only thing I wish now is that everything could go back to the way it was before.”

“There’s no power in the world that can do that for you.” said the witch. “Bad things happen. Sometimes they’re the result of some fault of our own, sometimes they’re simply the product of chance. But whatever the reason you can’t change them. You can only look to the future. You can’t bring your mother back to life, but you may be able to save the lives of thousands of others. The ring you wear gives you great power. Use it wisely.”

“But I don’t want great power.”

“Then perhaps you are the best person to have it. But you must be tired. Get some sleep. We can talk more in the morning.”

Ella wondered how she could possibly sleep after a night like tonight, but she lay back on the bed the witch had prepared for her, and before she had time to think about it she drifted into sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

When she woke up she saw that the sun was already shining brightly outside. She lay there in the soft bed, enjoying the luxury of laziness for a moment. The events of the previous night seemed unreal to her now as if they had only been a strange dream. Finally she summoned the energy to throw aside the covers and get up.

She found the witch hunkered over a bowl of water, staring intently at the pattern of dark shadows that moved across the bottom. “Good to see you finally awake.” she said without looking up. “Daylight’s wasting.”

“What are you doing?” Ella asked still rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

“Checking on your friends,” the witch said. “They’ve made considerable progress.”

Ella rushed over and looked down into the bowl, but she could see nothing but her own face in the reflection in the water.

The witch looked up and saw the disappointed expression on Ella’s face. “Skrying’s a difficult art to learn,” she said. I wouldn’t expect you to see anything without the proper training.”

“I just want to see them again. That’s all.”

“You’ll see them soon enough. They’ll be here by tomorrow evening.”

Tomorrow evening. It seemed like it might be an eternity away. Ella closed her eyes and thought of seeing Julius again. Suddenly she found that the numbness that gripped her the night before had been lifted and she felt her heart begin to fill with something else. It was an amazing sensation of euphoria that started small and tiny like the flame of a candle, but it grew and grew until she could no longer contain it. A smile flickered on her face. It widened into a grin. And then Ella began to laugh. She couldn’t have said why she laughed. It came from something deep inside her, a bottomless wellspring of joy and hope and love. And for Ella no explanation was necessary. It was enough that she could feel again, that the world could still be beautiful, that life could still be worth living

even in the face of tragedy.

When she had finished laughing she wanted to speak, but no words seemed adequate, so she kept her silence.

“Are you happy now?” asked the witch with a smile.

Ella said nothing, but she smiled. It was a smile that came from somewhere deep inside of her soul, somewhere she had fear was dead. And she nodded.

“Good,” said the witch. “Then you can help me pack.”

“Pack? Are you going somewhere?”

“Of course. I’m coming back with you. I’ve been hiding out here for far too long. And besides, I have a feeling you might need me. Walking around with that much wild magic on your finger could be dangerous.”

“I’ll take any help I can get,” Ella said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” the witch said with a faint smile.

It took all of that day and most of the next to gather up everything the witch wanted to take with her and even then Ella was amazed at the amount of things left behind. By mid-afternoon the next day the witch’s things were piled up in a heap on the floor in the middle of the cave.

“It looks like an awful lot” Ella said, eying the pile uncertainly.

“That’s why I have this,” the witch replied, producing a worn leather bag with a flourish.

“A bag?”

“Not just any bag girl. It’s a bottomless bag. You can fit almost anything in it.”

Ella looked at the bag skeptically, but her skepticism turned to amazement as the witch stuffed the entire pile into the bag one piece at a time. When she had finished the bag looked no fuller than when she started.

The witch slung it over her shoulder. “Come on. If we start now we should be

able to make it to the shore before your friends do.”

Ella followed the witch out of the cave. When they were a few hundred feet from the cave the witch turned back and muttered a few unintelligible words under her breath. When Ella looked at where the cave had been all she saw was the blank side of the mountain.

“That should keep out the riffraff while I’m gone,” the witch said and started towards the valley. Ella stood there for a moment looking at where the cave had been, then she turned and followed the witch. They walked in silence for hours following the valley out to the sea. When they finally reached the harbor, the sun was already low in the evening sky.

Out on the horizon to the north Ella could just make out the silhouette of the dinghy, and, as it got closer, the sun slowly sank into the horizon illuminating the clouds above it with hues of pink, purple and gold.

“Beautiful isn’t it?” said the witch.

“Yes, it is,” Ella replied. And she sat, and watched the sunset, without fear.