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APHENGLLOW DEPARTED THE PALACE, PODDING AMIABLY to the guard who stood just outside the door to the archives as she passed, and crossed the palace grounds to the divergent paths that led into the city proper, covering the ground in long, smooth strides. She had trained once upon a time to be a Tracker, back when she was still a girl. But her real skills lay with her enhanced instincts and her unusual connection to the magic of the elements found in earth, air, water, and fire—and so she had been invited to join the Druids at Paranor. She had accepted almost without thinking about it, excited at the prospect of exploring magic's limits and of finding fresh ways to bring healing and the chance for a better life to the Races and their homelands.

In retrospect, she had acted without sufficient forethought, ignorant of how the decision would impact her life. The Druids were held in low regard by the Elves, and those who chose to join them were seen as lacking in both common sense and moral balance. Once you chose to side with the Druids, you were automatically considered to have sided against the Elves. This was the common thinking of her times, and Aphen's assumption that as a granddaughter of the King she would somehow be treated differently proved optimistic. If anything, it infuriated the Elves even more.

Now, six years later, she was back in Arborlon and thoroughly

disappointed to discover that nothing much had changed when it came to how her people viewed her. Slow to anger, they were even slower to forgive, and her return had not generated much in the way of good feelings. Even her family—her sister and uncle aside—had seemed less than pleased to see her. But she had come for a purpose, and she intended to see it through. It was an effort supported by her fellow Druids, who instantly saw the value in it, but was regarded by everyone else as a waste of time. The King, her grandfather, had granted her the permission she requested, but only after making it clear that the same search had been conducted repeatedly by others over the years and that even if she found something useful her discoveries would belong solely to the Elves and not to anyone else—especially not to the Druid order.

She understood the reason for the prohibition. Hard feelings endured from the time when Grianne Ohmsford had served as Ard Rhys and the Elven nation had been threatened by the Southland and its Federation armies. Though it was Grianne who had put an end to that threat, various members of her order had allied with Federation Prime Minister Sen Dunsidan, and both she and the order had been tarnished by the perceived treachery. Queen Arling Elessedil, already harboring a deep dislike and distrust of the Druids, had cut all ties to the order.

It didn't matter that Grianne Ohmsford had been gone for more than a hundred years, or even that her successor as Ard Rhys was herself a member of the Elessedil family. The old King, Arling's son, held fast to his mother's beliefs where the Druids were concerned, and it was only because Aphenglow was an Elf and his granddaughter that she was allowed to conduct her study.

Many others thought she should take her studies and her practices elsewhere if she could not remember where her loyalties should lie.

Head up, eyes sweeping the landscape watchfully, she left the palace grounds behind and moved down the pathway that led to the cottage she shared with her younger sister. Wherever she went in Arborlon, she paid close attention to what was happening around her. The city might have been her home once and it might be so again

one day, but for now she was no better than a visitor from a foreign country. There were enough Elves who mistrusted her presence that she could not afford to take her safety for granted.

Especially not tonight, when she was carrying that which she was expressly forbidden from having. One of the agreements she had made was that she would take nothing from the storerooms. Not at any time. Not for any reason. Yet buried amid the collection of notes and papers contained in her pack was the diary.

And if she were caught with it . . .

She shrugged the matter away. She had done what she needed to do. The diary was important—perhaps the most important piece of information that had been uncovered since the First Council of Druids convened.

Everyone knew about the existence of the missing Elfstones, of course. But only in the abstract and not in the specific. They knew primarily because the blue Stones, the seeking-Stones, had survived whatever had become of the other sets. There were three stones in each set—one each to reflect the strength of the heart, mind, and body of the user. No one knew what had become of the other sets. No one knew their colors or their functions. No written record of their history had ever been found, save vague references to a time in ancient Faerie when all the Elfstones had been crafted—just enough to indicate that there had been five sets altogether and that by their absence it could be concluded that four had been lost. It was the great mystery of all Elven magic.

Yet after virtually everyone had decided the missing Elfstones were gone and would never be recovered, now there was this—a diary written by a girl named Aleia that might at last solve the mystery.

She could hardly believe her good luck in finding it. Imagine, if they could recover the Stones! She smiled at the thought. Everyone knew about the power of the blue Stones. But no one knew the first thing about the other four sets; no one even knew their colors. No records existed that described them. Or at least, none that had been uncovered. It was all so long ago, so far back in time. It was as Ellich had said. The Elves were a different people then. The world was dif-

ferent. The other Races hadn't been born. Only the Faerie people were alive, imbued with various forms of magic—some of which they shared with creatures now consigned either to mythology or by powerful magic to the dark world of the Forbidding.

It gave her pause. All those who had followed or sworn to the Void were imprisoned in the Forbidding—Darklings, Furies, Harpies, dragons, Goblins, and others. Yet the author of this diary had fallen in love with one of them. She had found him beautiful and enchanting, had given herself to him freely and had envisioned a life with him.

With a creature of the Void.

It didn't seem possible, but sometimes Aphen wondered if those viewed as evil were in fact only those who had lost the war and were tarnished by the victors. She understood that reality wasn't as simple as everyone wanted to believe, not as straightforward or as easily explained. Not black and white, but mostly gray.

She reached the cottage, dark now and apparently empty. Perhaps her sister was in bed or perhaps she was not home yet. Her work as a Chosen of the Ellcrys was difficult and demanding, and sometimes her days were eighteen hours long. Aphen didn't think she could ever do what that job demanded. But she guessed there were those who didn't think anyone could do her job, either, or even be what she was.

She opened the door and went inside, pausing for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. The silence enfolded her, and she gave herself over to it, using her senses to detect her sister's presence. She found the signs quickly enough—a gentle breathing, a stirring beneath sheets, a rustle of bedclothes—just up the stairs in the bedroom they shared whenever she was home, which was not often these days. Aphen sighed and sat down, her mind still mulling the entries in the diary and the questions they raised about the fate of the missing Elfstones.

She wondered first and foremost how the Stones had disappeared. Apparently, Aleia had tried and failed to find either them or her Darkling boy. That seemed odd, given that she had the use of the blue Elfstones to seek them. But of course, if she wasn't trained in their

use—which was likely—then she might have lacked the sophistication to detect them.

Still, hadn't others tried to find the missing Elfstones since? Hadn't the Elves themselves used the blue Stones to attempt it? She couldn't imagine that efforts hadn't been made. And yet in all those years, no one had found a thing.

She put her deliberations on that subject aside and gave consideration to what had become of Aleia after her return to Arborlon. She had indicated in her diary entry that she had been given another chance at making things right, one that she hoped might give her a measure of redemption. But what sort of chance? The diary didn't say.

And what was the truth about the Darkling boy? Had he taken the Elfstones solely as a means of forcing her to come in search of him? Was he motivated entirely by his love for her, as she so desperately wanted to believe? Or had he intended all along to steal the Elfstones or whatever other magic he could lay his hands on? Was he the dark creature she feared he might be, his seduction of her purposeful and lacking in any real feeling or passion? Had he been pretending the whole time? There were arguments both ways. She had a feeling this was something no one would ever know.

Which was perhaps for the best. It would be sad to discover that Aleia had been deceived, that she had given herself to a liar and a thief.

Aphen leaned back in her chair and stared out the window. There were so many questions—and so many needing answers when answers were in short supply. Tomorrow she would look into the records of the Kings and Queens of Faerie, at the carefully recorded lineages of royal parents and children. Most were still intact. Aleia and her parents would be listed somewhere. There would be little information beyond the names, but it was a start to the search she now knew she had to undertake.

Her hand strayed to her pack where it rested by her side, her fingers finding the flat surface of the diary where it nestled inside.

“Coming to bed anytime soon?”

Arlingfant stepped into the room, small and delicate and wreathed

in silk. She came over to her sister and knelt in front of her as if in supplication. Her perfect face—oval in shape, and dominated by her dark eyes and pronounced Elven features—canted upward, a smile appearing like a crescent moon come out from behind a cloud's shadow.

"I heard you come in. My senses are every bit as good as yours, Aph."

"Everything about you is as good. Were you sleeping or just lying awake waiting for me?"

"Lying awake. I was thinking." She brushed away loose strands of her dark hair absently. "The tree is so mysterious to me, even after almost eight months of caring for her. She almost never communicates, even in the smallest of ways. She relies on us to do what is needed, and we are expected to anticipate what those needs might be. It seems impossible that anyone could do this. Even though there are twelve of us serving her, we might miss something. We might interpret what we see the wrong way. We might do any number of things to cause her harm. Yet somehow we don't. But that doesn't mean we don't spend every waking minute worrying about it."

She looked away. "Today, while I was cleaning her bark, working at the things that might sicken or mar its surfaces, I had the oddest feeling. I thought I heard the tree say something. The voice just came out of nowhere, like a whisper in my ear. I knew it wasn't one of the other Chosen because I know their voices and this wasn't one I knew. I looked around, but I didn't see anyone near and didn't hear the voice again. But later, I mentioned to Freershan that I thought one of the tree branches had touched me. The tip of a branch, reaching down to touch my shoulder. But when I turned to look, there wasn't anything there."

Aphenglow reached out and touched her sister's face. "The tree is magic, Arling. It doesn't seem too odd that magical things might happen in its presence. Even ones of the sort you describe. Is the tree all right?"

Arlingfant nodded. "She seems fine. No one mentioned anything at the end of the day. It was just these . . . things."

Aphenglow stood up. "Do you want a glass of milk?"

Her sister nodded, and Aphenglow walked into the kitchen, opened the cold box, took out the milk pitcher, and poured a little of its contents into two glasses. She put the milk away again and carried the glasses back into the living room.

“It will help you sleep,” she said, handing Arlingfant the glass.

They drank the milk in silence, sitting in the darkness, the quarter moon’s soft light spilling down through the trees and filtering in through the cottage windows. Her mind drifted back to the diary, and for a moment she toyed with the idea of telling her sister what she had found. It would be good to have another opinion, to share her thoughts with someone who might bring a fresh perspective. But she resisted the impulse. She didn’t want to put her sister in the position of having to cover for her if someone found out. Shared thoughts and fresh opinions could wait until she knew something more.

“Find anything interesting today?” Arlingfant asked suddenly, as if reading her mind.

“Nothing,” Aphen lied. Lying was getting easier. It was starting to feel natural. “I’m getting to the end of my search, though. Not too many more boxes of letters and notes to go. I finished the last of the history appendices a week ago. It’s exhausting work.”

“Translating must be hard. So much of it is archaic. Ancient Elfish. Different dialects. It’s good that you’re trained to read those.”

Aphenglow nodded. She had studied ancient Elven languages starting at the age of ten. She had a knack for it, a real sense of meanings and purposes in the use of words, and when she’d returned a year ago to undertake this task, she had come prepared with more than fifteen years of experience in deciphering what Elves thousands of years gone had written down.

“I might have to return to Paranor for a bit,” she said suddenly. “For a week or so, perhaps.”

The idea had just occurred to her, although in truth she must have known from the moment she had read the first few entries in the diary. She needed to consult the other Druids. A decision had to be made about what to do with this information, and where to take the search from here. She had promised her grandfather she would not take anything away, but the promise had been falsely given. She

had always intended to take whatever she found. She was an Elf and loyal to her people, but not at the expense of the other Races. In that regard, she was a Druid first. Magic was meant to be shared, and it was safest in the hands of the Druids, who would make sure that happened.

“Aphen.” Her sister moved close to her, placing her hands on Aphen’s shoulders. “Take me away. I want to leave here. I want to go with you.”

Aphenglow shook her head. “You know I can’t do that.”

“I know you’ve *said* you can’t. But there’s nothing you can’t do, if you want to. A Druid has immense power, and you are the best of them all. If you tell them you want me there, they will have to let me stay.”

They had covered this before, many times. Arlingfant had it in her head that she was meant to be not a Chosen, but a Druid like her sister. She didn’t care about the inevitable repercussions. She was prepared to give up everything if Aphen would just take her to Paranor.

“You can’t leave your friends to tend the Ellcryns without you,” Aphenglow said pointedly. “They need you. If I am the best of the Druids, you are ten times the best of the Chosen. You are the one who always knows what to do. How many times have you ferreted out sickness or blight that no one else even noticed? You can’t walk away from that. Later, maybe, when your year of service is finished. But not now.”

“I know, I know. You’ve said this often enough. But I want to study magic with you!”

“Which leads to something else you keep ignoring. I don’t make the choice of who becomes a Druid by myself. All in service must agree, and the Ard Rhys must be awake when that happens. At present, she rests in the Druid Sleep and is not to be woken for another two years unless an emergency requires it. Taking in another Druid—even you, Arling—does not qualify as an emergency.”

“Besides,” she added, “there is a reluctance to accept members of the same family into the order. You know this. There are genuine concerns about how blood ties would affect their performance as Druids.”

She embraced her sister. “Nevertheless, when your service is over I will put your name before the others and make every effort to gain you a place. Don’t you think I would like to have you with me? Don’t you know I miss you?”

Arlingfant hugged her back. “I do know, Aphen. I don’t mean to be unreasonable. But it’s hard sometimes to have to wait so long.”

Aphen laughed. “I know what you mean. Go on to bed, now. I will be up shortly. I just need to go through my notes one more time to be sure I’ve written everything down.”

Her sister kissed her on the cheek, got to her feet, and left the room. Aphenglow listened to the soft pad of her feet on the stairs, the squeak of the bed ropes, and silence.

Then she took out the diary and sat looking at the last entry. Pathke, Meresch, and their Aleia. Very likely a King, his wife, and his daughter. She must find their place in the Elven histories and determine if that might in some way help with her search for the missing Elfstones. Certainly it had happened a long time ago; the Elfstones had been missing since the last war between the Word and Void, in the time of Faerie.

And the city of Rajancroft where the Darkling boy had lived—where was that?

She must find all this out and begin fitting the pieces together. She must ferret out—

A shadow passed by the window on her right, and the thought was left unfinished as her attention shifted immediately. She did not react to the movement—she was trained to do otherwise—but instead closed the diary and slipped it down between the cushions on her left, effectively hiding it from view in a smooth natural movement that wouldn’t be noticed by watching eyes.

She waited a moment, giving herself time to think and her watcher time to reappear at the window.

When nothing happened, she stood up, looking as if she might be ready to retire, but using the act as a way to glance from window to window.

Nothing.

And then a silken cord, its threads strong and tightly wound, slipped about her neck and cut off her air.

Her attacker's moves were so practiced and smooth that she was certain he had killed this way before. It would have meant the death of many others, and she had only a moment to ensure it would not be hers. She slammed her head backward into his, stomped down on his right ankle, and thrust her elbow back into his rib cage. She had been trained in hand-to-hand combat by no less an authority than the formidable Bombax, and she knew exactly what to do.

The problem was that it seemed to make no difference to her attacker, who barely responded to what would have crippled others.

Pressed close against him as he continued to twist and tighten the cord, she tried to throw him and failed. He was too heavy, too well balanced. Even as tall and strong as she was, she was no match for him. She tried to use his weight against him, to trip him and topple him to the floor. That, too, failed. They were careening about the room like wild things, slamming into the walls, furnishings flying about, tipping over, breaking. Aphenglow possessed defensive skills that made her the equal of anyone, but she was losing this fight. She could feel her strength seeping away and could see spots before her eyes.

Then Arlingfant came tearing down the stairs, screaming like a banshee, a cudgel gripped in both hands. Without slowing, she whacked at her sister's attacker, catching him on the side of the head with a blow that rocked him just enough for Aphenglow to tear herself free of the killing cord.

But when she turned to engage her attacker, he was already out the door and had vanished into the night. Arling started to give pursuit, but Aphenglow pulled her back, shaking her head.

It took her a moment before she could speak. "Let him go," she said, gasping for breath. "We don't want to give him the advantage he seeks by bungling out into the darkness."

Her attacker was male. Of that she was certain—of his sex if not his Race. She had seen his wrists when he broke away—just a glimpse, but enough to be able to tell by the size and the amount of hair.

She moved over to a bench next to the dining table and lowered herself gingerly. The cord had burned her neck, and her breathing was still ragged. “You saved me, Arling. He was too strong for me. I couldn’t fight him off.”

Her sister bent close, examining her neck. “I hope I bashed his head in,” she muttered. “Sit still. I’ll bring cold cloths and ointment for the burn.”

She moved into the kitchen, and Aphenglow quickly stepped over to the chair, retrieved the diary, and slipped it into her blouse. She was furious with herself for allowing someone to get that close. It shouldn’t have been possible for an attacker to creep up on her like that; her normally dependable instincts should have warned her. That they hadn’t was troubling.

Arlingfant was back, carrying a small, lighted lantern, which she placed on the table next to her sister. Then she proceeded to clean the burns with cold cloths and to apply a pain-relieving ointment. She worked quickly and efficiently, her small fingers smooth and clever.

“Who would do this?” she asked, the anger in her voice undiminished. “Why would anyone attack you in your own home?”

“I don’t know,” Aphenglow lied, already suspecting why, if not who.

“Did they take anything?”

“No. What is there to take? It was probably just someone who doesn’t care for young women leaving their Elven family to join a Druid order. Perhaps someone with a grudge or a perceived hurt.”

“Well, whoever it was will have a sore head in the morning.” Her sister finished with the cleaning and ointments. “He tried to kill you, Aphen!”

“Or scare me. Wanting to send a message of some sort, maybe. We can’t be certain.”

But she was certain. Whoever had attacked her was experienced and skilled. It wasn’t some common person, someone with resentments or a misguided sense of duty. And the nature of the attack suggested her assailant had been trying very hard to injure her badly, not merely scare her.

But who would want to hurt her? Who would benefit from that? She didn't know. She didn't have any identifiable enemies and couldn't think of anyone who carried a grudge of this magnitude. She couldn't help thinking she had been attacked because of the diary. But who would even know she had it? Who had come close enough to find out?

Only her uncle, Ellich. But her uncle loved her and would never do something like this. So was there someone who would benefit by having her dead and the diary in hand? Someone who had been watching her and saw her take the diary from the archives?

But if she had been seen taking the diary, why not just demand it back? Why try to injure her? Or why not just steal it from her, or try to frighten her into giving it up? Harming her seemed extreme, if getting possession of the diary was the principal goal.

Whatever the case, she was determined to press on. The attack had only strengthened her resolve. She would begin her search of the lineage charts first thing in the morning, just as she had planned.

But she would be keeping careful watch when she did.