

PART II

Morwea Woods

Chapter 6

Life on the Other Side

The sounds of birds chirping were loud. So loud that Connie attempted to roll over and tell them to lower their voices. Her eyes fluttered open surprised. The pain in her side made it impossible to turn over and the realization that she could not tell birds to lower their voices had her sucking in a deep breath for a groan.

"Awake finally. Nice long nap you had."

An older woman with deep lines in her face and eyes an indiscernible color was sitting next to her. Connie blinked from the filtered light, wondering where she was.

"Hi, Connie. I was worried about the extent of your injury." Lt. Neda knelt beside the bed. "You have more color in your face."

There was something different about Neda that Connie couldn't put her finger on.

"It's the energy around this place. It will help you heal faster and opened up your senses." Neda laughed as if she had just told a joke. Her eyes were bright and her face was more tanned than what Connie remembered.

Connie took a slow deep breath, testing the pressure on her ribs. A lethargic feeling moved over her. Her eyes drooped and it was a struggle to keep them opened.

"This is Ramla. She will nurse you back to health and teach you the wood ways if you care to learn. Listen to her."

"What about the tower?" Connie mumbled. It was difficult to speak and even more difficult to stay focused.

"Right now, you need to heal. You're on sick leave."

Ramla rose from her stool. When she returned she held a cup out to Neda who drank deeply from it and then handed the empty cup back.

"Safe traveling," the old woman blessed.

"Thank you, Ramla. Blessings on you and yours."

That was all that Connie remembered.

Ramla walked Nada out to the porch, closing the door behind them so Connie could not hear their continued conversation.

"She's a mystery, Ramla. What's her part in all this?"

Ramla shook her head. "The Lewah Rangers asked the same question. There are some people who are veiled for one reason or another. Some through their own power and some by another's power. Unless I did some deep searching, there's nothing I can see. I don't feel she's a danger in the sense of evil, just the type of person who a lot of things will happen around. My advice to

you, is to keep a distance unless you want to be sucked in to the strange energy that's around her. You said she rescued chadie kits?"

"You think that's what this is all about?"

Ramla laughed. "The guardian of chadies is not that powerful, but I wouldn't want to be in a forest all alone if I were a poacher and I had a chadie death on my hands."

Neda looked at her strangely. "Are you saying that there is a war between the poachers and the chadies and that's why they're gathering around the wall?"

Ramla smiled.

"Well, whatever that strange energy is that's around her, she prevented our deaths. Pili and I inspected the side of the air cart the explosion hit and it was a direct hit to her side. The only injury, besides my sore ribs was the branch that stabbed her. Her CO is going to wonder how she survived the explosion."

"Fates move in ways that are sometimes veiled for a reason."

"She hears us, she sees us, yet she's not one of us. How is that, Ramla?" Neda asked.

"You don't know that," Ramla admonished.

"She isn't one of us," Neda said with certainty.

"You need to go. Your brother hates to be kept waiting," Ramla said.

"I wonder what he's going to say to Captain Sahem about her not returning."

"Captain Sahem has been through this before. It's nothing he'll be shocked about. Come back for a visit in spring. Your friend here will be changed for the better or worst."

"I think for the better. You're too good a teacher Ramla to not find out what she's about," Neda said.

"Go, go. You're just staying to annoy your brother," Ramla told her.

Neda laughed and headed down the road where she was sure a ride was waiting her.

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Connie woke suddenly. Her eyes blinked at the unfamiliar raftered ceiling. A mixture of herb smells and fresh washed linen further attested to the fact she was not anywhere familiar. Turning her head slightly she could see she was in a one room cottage. It was by no means a small home. A table strewn with apothecary tools blocked her view of the other side of the room, and suspended from beams were bundles of herbs, further confirming that she was in a healer's cot and not a big city hospital.

Patiently she waited for a repeat of the sound that woke her. Closing her eyes she concentrated on identifying the sounds from outside. Horses, sheep, dogs, cats, chickens, and her guardians voices coming from far away.

Her eyes popped open again. Gingerly she moved her limbs and then took a deep breath. It was not as painful as it was... yesterday? Clothing was folded neatly on a chair near her. Guessing it was for her, she dressed. Her bladder was in need of emptying.

Slowly, she walked to the nearest door and peered outside. No one was in sight, but she could hear a conversation going on nearby. Turning back into the room she looked for a door to a toilet room. After her third try she found the right door that led outside to an outhouse. Before her stint in the guards she had never seen one only heard about them. Now she knew to make sure there were no bugs around the seat, where to grab a disposable seat cover, if it were offered, what to do if there was not, and how to not breathe deeply when in the closet.

Finished she reentered the house. Standing in the center of the room she identified the herbs hanging from the ceiling, noted the herb bags on the large table, four cots with a folded privacy screen near each, four comfortable chairs surrounding a fireplace, and throw carpets with designs that were faded. The kitchen area took up most of the space in the one room house. The doors she had opened were to closets, one led down into a cellar that she didn't want to investigate, and three others to storage. One had clothing for different sized people and a heavy locked trunk. Two others were for food staples, which at the moment was nearly bare. Connie guessed that by winter it would be full. There were no modern conveniences that she had taken for granted back home and in the barracks.

She crossed the front room and went out the front door. Standing on the porch, she looked for anyone who could tell her where she was and maybe she could get something to eat. Stepping off the porch she moved her foot to the right a few inches at the last minute to avoid stepping on something she was peripherally aware of. Looking down, it was gone.

Voices she had been hearing stopped. Connie paused, blinking in the bright sun. Breathing deeply she stretched her back, listening to the pop of her vertebrae as they adjusted. The sun felt nice on her skin. It warmed her to her bones. She located the source of the buzzing as bees were busy collecting their nectar from three colorful flowered bushes. Horses in a nearby pasture started to move toward her. Without thinking, she went to meet them. Aside from the horses at the tower which horse squad didn't allow anyone from outside their squad near, she hadn't been up close to one.

"Hi," she greeted the first fuzzy nose that lifted over the top railing and reached toward her. She gently patted the whiskered nose, then stroked the long face, admiring the big brown eyes and then ran her fingers along the sleek neck. The feeling she was getting was an interesting mix of emotions or... It was not emotions. It was more a sense of who the horse saw himself as.

"His name is Brownie," a voice spoke behind her.

Connie quickly dropped her hand and turned to the voice.

"I'm Malinda. One of Ramla's students. You're looking a lot better."

Connie nodded, not quite sure what she was picking up from the young woman before her. She was dressed in the same style of clothing as a ranger; colored so that the wearer could blend in with the forest.

"You're right on both counts. We are similar to rangers and we do dress purposely to blend in with the woods." She grinned at Connie's puzzled frown. "Your thoughts are easy to pick up." **I understand you can hear mind speak.**

"What's mind speak? Do you read people's minds?"

"Not everyone's. I wouldn't want to. Too much wasted energy people put into mental chatter that's only going to get them in trouble if they act on it. Mind speak is a mental directed conversation between you and the person that can hear."

Connie laughed disbelieving. "If that were so, by what Corporal Sophia says, most men would get their faces slapped every ten seconds."

"Those are *inner* thoughts, not meant to be heard by another." **Can you feel the difference in this conversation than when I use verbal speak?**

"It's closer than when you speak out loud. Can I mind speak?"

I don't know. Give it a try.

Connie squeezed her eyes shut and thought hard.

"What are you doing to my patient, Malinda?"

Connie turned to see who joined them. The old woman, Ramla was standing with a basket looped around each elbow.

"She was trying to mind speak, but it looked more like she was attempting to send a long letter to another country."

"We'll take that up later. Since you both are here you can help me gather herbs. I was on my way to the forest to look for some jewelweed. Are you up to a walk, Connie?"

"I remember you. Ramla, isn't it? I feel...well," she finished surprised.

"Good memory. Yes. Fresh herbs and rest are always a good aid, and so is a quiet environment."

Malinda took one of the baskets from Ramla. Ramla led the way and Malinda fell behind Connie. Rustlings in foliage, brushes of air against her bare arm, sounds that could be whisperings were just inches from her ear. If Ramla and Malinda were not near, she would have turned and ran back to the open area; instead, she kept moving, focusing on Ramla's back.

"This is the spot. Connie, while Malinda collects her herbs you come with me and I'll show you what I'm looking for," Ramla said.

Ramla walked through a shadowed patch to a beam of filtered sunlight. For a few moments Connie tried to translate what she thought she saw and felt as Ramla was in the shadowed part. Ramla gestured for her to follow. Careful to place her feet exactly where Ramla stepped Connie felt a momentary bleakness as she passed through the shadow. Once in the sun the feeling was gone. Leaning down near Ramla, she stared at the plant cupped in her palm. Ramla pointed to the different coloring of the leaves, explaining that the color of the leaf was what determined the properties of the plant. Ramla's voice sounded as if it were coming from a long distance. Nothing felt the same around Connie as her mind drifted.

Ramla touched her arm to settle her attention. "What are you so jumpy about?"

"I..." Connie took a deep breath to settle herself. "I don't know."

"You're in a different part of the forest, off the path. It's where you go only if you're invited or if you ask and your request is granted." Ramla pointed to the shade they had passed through. It looked frightening to Connie and she would have run mindlessly just to get away from it if Ramla's hand on her arm had not anchored her feet into the ground.

"Everything is energy," Ramla said. "There are some things that take energy, some give, and others share. And then there is just energy. Next time you pass through the shadow, don't give up any of your energy or it will always expect you to do that when you're in its vicinity."

Connie moved as if to go around it.

"It's not something to go around, under or above," Ramla said.

"But its...it feels..." Connie shrugged her shoulders. It was not evil but it had a warning of danger.

"It's a doorway." Ramla gestured to what was around them, "This is not in the same forest as what we walked in, yet it's located near the same place."

Connie stared at her. In her mind a child's tune played. "I remember," she whispered in astonishment.

Ramla nodded smiling. "It pays to listen to the rhymes you learned as a child. They have truth to them. You've probably heard the words realm, dimension, or space." She held the herb up so that the shimmering around it was clearer. "The reason I get these herbs here is because they open up a dreamer's mind to seeing more than what they could if only seeing from one perspective – or dimension," she said with a smile.

"What do you mean?" Connie was staring at the shadow with trepidation.

"Our spirit, essence, soul or manifestations of our self, doesn't just exist in one place, dimension, space, realm or world. People dreaming sometimes are afraid of visiting places that will teach them on other levels because it requires they forget about the heavier body, which they see as an anchor to this physical life. This herb helps the dreamer let go."

"You're not going to give me any of that are you?"

Ramla laughed as if Connie told her a joke. "When you're ready, you'll go on your own. However, you haven't even begun to dream of interesting places yet."

"My dreams are interesting enough," Connie said. Connie suddenly turned to see what had moved just out of her vision. "What keeps moving where I can't see it?"

"Forest spirits. They belong here. Let's go back. It's not wise to spend much time here. Time is different in each dimension."

She held onto Connie's arm and stepped through the shadow.

"To pick any herb or flower in the forest, you ask the guardian spirit of the area for permission."

Connie for a few moments watched in fascination as a tiny light glowed and then disappeared on the flower Ramla was holding. Connie didn't remember Ramla picking it.

"We are guests of the guardian of this part of the forest. Some guardians are very mercurial and unpredictable in temperament."

"Who is the guardian and who are the spirits?"

Malinda was waiting for them. By the looks of her basket, she had been busy. She pointed at a place near the base of a tree, where the roots reached into the river. "Look there but don't stare. Just relax your eyes."

Connie looked where she was pointing. Surprised, she inhaled and held her breath, afraid it would disappear if she moved even to breathe. It seemed like a long time with her heart beating for a breath of air, before the form disappeared. Noisily she let her breath out, excited that for the first time, shadows at the edges of her vision, took on a definite form, and it wasn't something scary. "I saw it!"

"That was Razel of the Broken River."

"He looked so ordinary...I mean, he didn't look like one of those little creatures all bent over and too scary to speak to."

Malinda laughed. "Oh, you'll meet those little creatures too, and so much more. However, don't judge by what you see, because there is always more than what meets the eye."

"During the winter the river is just a trickle and after the winter snows melt it's a roaring river that you don't want to cross. Razel protects the river and those that receive sustenance from it," Ramla explained.

"And you?"

"When I'm here at his consent, he sees that a bee doesn't sting me, or a snake doesn't bite me, or some of the other predators that lurk in these woods around his river don't harm me."

"What does he ask in return?"

Ramla smiled and patted Connie's arm as if she were pleased with the question. "That is between him and me. Each visitor makes her or his own pack. Honor and respect are necessary, but don't forget wit and cunning." She and Malinda chuckled.

"It's good to have the spirits and guardians of whatever place you visit friendly toward you," Malinda said. "You never know what you'll run into and whose help you'll need."

Connie smiled, remembering a phrase used in the schoolyard. "You never know when you'll have to make a bargain with the devil."

"Devil, as in evil?" Malinda asked.

"I guess it is. In the schoolyard we would say that when we wanted to beat someone in a game real bad."

"The devil or evil has different meanings to many, even to the members of the same congregation or family. It can be used as a tool, but like all tools, the possibility of it's usefulness is limited only by the user," Ramla said, "and the consequences of using it are on the user."

"Who would want to use evil as a tool, except evil people?"

"Have you heard the term Whipping up the Devil?"

"I've heard that more from adults at school than kids."

"In some communities, whipping up the devil means to pick an issue that will stir up their members. When the devil takes possession of a person or group is when hate based issues take precedence. Issues that segregate, isolate, and demonize others so the person or group feels they need to go out and injure those they consider not one of them."

"It gives them a purpose and makes them feel special," Malinda said.

Connie was wondering what that had to do with visiting the forest.

"The point here is," Ramla said, "whatever you use to gather up energy, a name, a thing, another person, you're responsible on all levels for the consequences. Know what and who you're calling for aid and if it warrants the calling."

"How do you meet the forest guardian or spirits?"

"Well, it looks like we have a student that asks the right questions."

Connie gave the two women a puzzled look.

"You're not frightened, just curious," Malinda said.

When they walked out of the shadowed forest the light was sudden and bright. Connie stopped to let her eyes adjust.

"It's a different world out here," Malinda spoke softly, as if she did not want to disturb something.

"We have many ways to know things, and more senses than what the average person knows about. These we shall teach you about and it will be up to you to practice and master them," Ramla said.

Connie felt pressure on her elbow as she was guided back to the cabin. Once in the cabin her eyes were able to adjust in the dim lighting.

"So, let's begin with what we picked up." Ramla placed a handful of each herb on the table, careful to arrange them two hands width apart.

"The distance is to keep the energy of each herb separate for the moment. Each herb has its healing essence. When you move them closer together the commingling of energies forms another type of healing quality. Do you see?" Malinda asked.

It was something Connie's mother never spoke about but she was conscious of. Through watching her mother Connie knew how to mix herbs and spices to fit the situation or meal.

"I can see, but how do you know what you're fixing will be helpful to who you're serving it to?" Connie asked.

"Ah," the two said in unison. "A practical question."

Ramla pulled a drying sachet down from one of the hanging baskets. She reached for Connie's hand and dropped the sachet in her palm. "What would this be good for?"

Connie breathed in the aroma it released. "Smells nice. I would keep this in my pack."

"And why would you do that?" Malinda asked, when Connie said no more.

"I don't know. It just feels right."

"We'll start from the beginning," Ramla said. "What you already know and how fast you pick up the rest is how soon you'll be ready to mix your own protection bundle."

"What am I learning, exactly?"

"The Way of Galena."

"I've never heard of that. Is it a religion?" Her nose wrinkled in distaste. She had no intention of freeing herself from one and getting involved in another.

"It's how you live your life. With experience, you learn wisdom. Incorrect decisions can be as important as correct decisions. It depends on what you do with the lesson."

"What is Galena?"

"It's serving others but not becoming a servant. It's helping others but not interfering with their lessons to grow."

It was odd, but Connie thought she felt a tug at her heart and at the same time truly understood what Ramla meant. When she opened her mouth to comment, she quickly closed it, realizing whatever insight she had for a moment was gone. It was now up to some dream or conversation in the future that she would remember with more cognizant awareness so she could examine it closer.

Ramla curled her hand around Connie's that was still holding the bag of herbs. "Since long winded explanations aren't your strong point, just close your eyes and feel. Words are not in this realm anyway."

Chapter 7

Vision Quest

The air in the shelter was stifling and hot and the effect of ingesting ololiuqui had Connie trembling from inside out. Suddenly the air cleared as if a cool wind blew through the shelter. Above her was a star crowded sky and with every breath, they came closer until she was one of the bright shining lights of consciousness - one among others. Abruptly she was somewhere else. Flashes of images from strange places with people dressed in clothing she was not familiar with went by too fast for her to make sense of. What she did catch were mixed emotions from violent to tender. Faces that went with the emotions she would remember. Then things were a blur as she sped somewhere else.

In a cottage a figure sat in a chair and next to her was a wolf bigger than any dog Connie had ever seen. The woman was saying goodbye. She removed a ring from her hand and held it out. Connie's focus became so intent on the ring that she didn't realize she reached out to take it for a closer look. The woman looked at her surprised. The moment Connie realized what she had done she was whisked so fast back into her body she rocked off balance.

"Steady there," Ramla cautioned.

Connie was gently righted in the chair. "I...I saw a woman that looked like me." Connie panted as if she needed to catch her breath. She felt as if she had run a long distance.

"What have you there?" Ramla asked.

Connie opened her hand. Her heart beat loud in her ears as she realized that she had taken from the woman her ring that had meant so much to her. How did she know that?

"I have her ring." Connie looked at Ramla stricken with guilt.

Ramla took the ring from her palm and studied it. "It has the Moore Crest on this side and..." She looked at Connie curious. "How did you come by this?"

"The woman that looked like me was talking to a wolf and she removed this from her finger. I wanted to see what it looked like and...I didn't realize I reached for it to get a better look. How did this happen? Ramla, I need to return it to her. She didn't want to part with it."

Ramla smiled. "And you will in time." She took Connie's hand and slipped the ring on her finger. It fit. "Until then, keep it safe."

Connie felt exhausted and full of questions but her eyes were drooping closed against her will.

"You need rest. You have accomplished more than most people do on their first voyage. It takes a lot of energy if you don't know how to use it efficiently."

Malinda who was in the corner, acting as a guardian rose from her place and assisted Connie to stand.

Falling into her cot she laid for a few moments, staring at the ring. The stone was dark red. Her eyes closed and her hand flopped on her chest. *I want to know of the ring*, she told herself.

* * *

The Crone held the ring in her palm and breathed in deeply and then exhaled. Her eyes moved busily beneath her partially closed lids.

"Well," she drew out thoughtfully, "I will say, it has quite a story." Her opaque eyes opened and she handed Connie the ring back. "It's yours to know through your own power."

"But how do I do that, if not through dreams?"

Dismayed, Connie woke up. Holding up her hand, she was relieved that the ring was still on her finger. Rolling out of bed, she quickly dressed. Her breath created vapor. Snow fall from days ago was piled high around the cottage, making the interior cold. Another storm was moving in and the animals had to be taken care of. But first, the fire needed to be restarted. That was Connie's job this week. Carefully, she laid out the chips, then the smaller strips of wood as Ramla had taught her.

"Use your mind," Ramla told her, seating herself in her chair wrapped in a blanket.

"Start the fire with my mind?"

She pointed to the chair Malinda usually sat in. "Sit."

Connie sat and stared at the wood, trying to set a spark. Beads of sweat were the only things she produced.

"At this rate she's going to put herself to sleep and we'll still have no fire," Malinda said.

"Well then, you show her how to do it," Ramla told her.

Malinda sat cross legged on the floor and patted the space next to her. "Come on little sister. We'll light a fire. When we get finished with this project, we'll start moving mountains."

Connie resettled next to Malinda, laughing at the image that conjured up.

"Now rest in the between state and just hover there for a moment," she said softly. Connie's breathing was slow and relaxed. "Now, image a flame. You're thinking it not imaging it. Relax."

A small flame started in the center of the chips then began to eat its way around the strips of wood.

"There now, that wasn't so hard was it?" Ramla asked. Logs from the wood box lifted out of it and neatly laid in the flame that hungrily engulfed it. "There. Now we have a decent fire."

Connie rubbed her forehead. "I have a headache."

"You're still using too much energy to not think things," Malinda explained. "It's practice. Come on. While the place is heating up, we can go and look in on the animals."

"Why can't we just do it from here?" Connie asked.

"Because we need to visit with them. Besides, you can't just sit in here through the whole winter."

"Why not? Bears sleep all winter."

"Oh, oh. She wants to belong to the Bear Clan," Malinda laughed.

However, Ramla took the exchange seriously. "She's a raven affiliated with the wolf clan. It's to them she must present herself to first."

"What do you mean?" Connie asked quickly.

"Those are things you must seek yourself," Malinda said.

"Why can't you just tell me?" Connie said, but she knew why. She was whining and though she found herself irritated when she did it, Malinda and Ramla would answer her as if it were a serious question. She wondered if she would ever learn to be as patient.

"Because the process is where you learn your skills. Through action and adversary you grow and stretch yourself to become more than what you are now."

Connie pulled her coat from the hook, buttoning it up to her throat, then slid her feet in her knee high boots. "I know a lot of people that are satisfied with just doing nothing. How did I become one of those that wants to stick her nose out to see what's happening elsewhere?"

Ramla looked at her daughter. "I think she needs to learn how to appreciate the snow."

"I don't think she's ready to become a snowflake, mother."

"A snowflake? What's that like? Can you still think? How can you see?" Connie asked. "Can you ever get stuck where you go?"

The two women laughed.

"She's ready for a new lesson."

"Chores first." Ramla waved them out. "I'll get breakfast ready."

As the two crunched across the snow Malinda watched Connie as her eyes anxiously searched the forest tree line. She stopped in mid stride then continued on.

Connie pushed a bale of hay out of the rafters, watching with satisfaction as it broke its bindings when it hit the barn floor, making it easier for her to scatter. She dropped to the floor and began spreading the hay in a wider disbursement, laughing at the pony that had walked underneath the large draft horse to steal a mouthful.

Malinda leaned out of the last stall to see what Connie was laughing about. By then the pony had found a safer place to munch on his hay.

"Malinda, what's the purpose of being a snowflake?"

"Getting cold feet are you?" Malinda laughed at the face Connie made at her. "It's the *practice* of shape changing. It's not the same as shape shifting, where you change into an animal."

Connie looked relieved.

"What bothers you about shape shifting?"

"Does the person lose control and turn into a wild animal? Do they get stuck as an animal?"

"I haven't heard of anyone with that problem but I would imagine there are some who have problems. Why are you concerned about shape shifters?"

"There's a wolf hanging around," Connie said. "I don't think it's a real wolf."

"What wolf?" Malinda was surprised that there were any shape shifters nearby for she or Ramla would have felt it.

"The one that's been watching me since I put this ring on. I can't take the ring off," Connie whispered frightened. She tugged at the ring showing Malinda that she could not remove it.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"It seems so trivial compared to everything else."

"This is everything else. Tell me about the wolf. Is he here?"

"He was at the edge of the forest and then disappeared. It feels like he's watching me."

"Ramla has strong protection spells that won't let anyone that intends harm to cross onto the farm. If he's a helper he hasn't asked or touched her boundary or she would know." She tapped Connie's finger with the ring. "This is his entrance to your dream world."

"I'm afraid of him."

"Is he threatening you?"

"No. He's just waiting," she said.

"The person you saw that looked like you in time traveling was one of your ancestors that," she picked up Connie's hand with the ring and angled it to show the family crest and then the wolf head, "formed a union with a member of the Wolf Clan. This Moore crest has a Raven right there in the upper left. It's tiny on the ring, but it's the only Moore crest with a symbol in the upper left. Wolf and Raven usually travel together as powerful transformation helpers. Wolf is a pathfinder and Raven carries the ceremonial magic that goes with searching for spiritual paths and paths on all levels."

"I'm not a shape shifter, right? You're sure of that?"

"Tell me what you know of shape shifters."

"They're crazy on full moon nights and kill people." She laughed embarrassed. "I really don't know anything, Malinda."

"Full moon nights are when smart farmers plant their seeds for quicker sprouting," she teased.

"Let me tell you what little I know of the wolf." Malinda paused a moment as she prayed for help in telling Connie just what she needed to hear.

"Wolves are very loyal to their family and to whomever they form an emotional attachment to. They are brave, strong and have great stamina. They don't fight unless they have to. In ceremonial rites we call on them to be our guardians to places we've never been to. Does your wolf have a raven nearby?"

"I didn't notice."

"You could be the Raven he's waiting for. It's your ancestor who you took the ring from. Perhaps he's waiting for you to invite him in. Let's finish up here and then we'll ask Ramla. She'll steer you in the right direction."

When the two entered the foyer, they could already feel the difference in the atmosphere. Ramla was sitting in the center of the room with all the furniture pushed back. She had a circle drawn around her. The air smelled of herbs she used to call her spirit guides.

The two took up their usual places outside of the circle to wait. When both women were seated Ramla opened her eyes. She lifted her hand and made signs in the air and then opened up her circle. She walked to a small table and tapped it. A sky with star constellations appeared. "While I began to prepare our morning breakfast I had a vision. It's full moon night and your menses will

start, Connie. You will be an adult and with movement into this stage of life, you have responsibilities. It's time for you to meet your ancestors."

Connie stood before the bonfire, waiting for the leader to call her forward. The realness of the heat from the bonfire she faced and the cold winter air on her back, almost had her forgetting that in another reality, she was lying on her bed with a friendly fireplace snapping in the background. Ramla and Malinda were sitting in attendance, making sure nothing happened to her physical body while she was attending spirit business.

Squinting to see past the brightness of the fire to the dark shrouded forms surrounding the bonfire, did not give her any better view of the others; however, she recognized them as those that had gone before her and those living presently. Turning slightly, she stepped toward the figure that held his hand up to her. Bowing her head reverently, she felt the sacredness of the gathering and the weight of responsibility that was hers. How many lifetimes exactly the figure before her acted in this same role for her and her clan she didn't know, only that it seemed a long time.

"First Daughter of the Raven House of Moore, are you prepared to fulfill your obligation to your ancestors and begin your training as trustee to Morwea and her inhabitants?"

"I wish to know what that obligation is, Guardian of Oaths. Many lifetimes have my ancestors stood before you and still we are taking the same oath with our rights and lands shrinking."

Suddenly they stood outside of a castle wall. There was no color in their surroundings, not even from the forest that was encroaching into the walls of the castle. Connie studied the building noting that it looked weathered but it still was standing.

"This is your heritage. This is what you are swearing to keep strong."

"There's no life here. The buildings are in disrepair...and," she paused, hearing a whisper in her ear, "changes need to be made before the inhabitants return."

"It's winter at the castle."

"I will swear to make the necessary repairs to the buildings and bring spring back to the castle."

"Tradition..." began the Oath Taker.

"Tradition has taken the life out of living here. The routine imposed for keeping the castle strong is not flexible enough for growth or allowing anything new to be incorporated into daily practice. The walls are crumbling with no viable substance to rebuild them."

"Are you changing the oath of your forbearers?"

"I am swearing to repair the castle and if necessary take the walls down to its foundation and rebuild the foundation. I will rebuild it so that it is open to changes that give all living things vitality and substance to thrive. This I swear."

"There have been others that have tried to effect such a change."

"And I will continue their work to bring the change to fruition. It took generations to set the foundation and many more to bring it to what it is now. I accept the possibility that in my present lifetime I will not see the desired changes. It may daunt me on occasion at the task, but it will not shake my resolution to continue the process."

"First Daughter of the Raven Moores, your oath has been accepted."

Back before the bonfire, with the others she chanted an old oath that she was not aware she knew. The clashing of bells ended the ceremony.

Her eyelids felt heavy as she struggled to open them. The air around her was heavy with the scent of mint tea.

"Drink this, Connie. You need to get up and move around," Malinda's voice coaxed.

"I hope I don't have to do that often," Connie whispered. "I feel so tired." She took the cup in both hands with Malinda's wrapped around hers to hold the cup steady.

"It's what we all face at our coming of age ceremony, it's just that some don't remember and others never wake up to take action when they return."

Connie made a face as she could feel something sticky and warm running between her legs. "I started my bleeding."

"You are now what in some cultures would say, ripe and ready for marriage."

"Spare me," Connie mocked. She took a deep breath of the herb teas aroma, then a sip, feeling its properties strengthen her.

"A change of clothing is in the bathing room for you. When you return, we will start the ceremony to welcome you into the Circle of Women."

Connie's mother had taught her what to expect in the way of what to do for her bleeding, and public schooling had taught her the responsibilities that came with it as well as the biological changes in male and female bodies. It was a great weight on her mind for her marriage was to take place within weeks of her first bleed. To be married to someone that clearly did not like her and meant to do her harm was not a future she looked forward to. If she had known the draft would delay those plans, she would not have worried about it. It gave her pause for thought when it occurred to her that father would know that too. So why did he make the arrangement?

Cleansed with ceremonial herbs and dressed in red, Connie stepped out into the main room, astonished at the change of scenery. She was in a cave with symbols drawn on the walls and the flickering flames from the center fire giving motion to the symbols.

"Come little sister. Come forward and join us in our circle to welcome you to the Circle of Women," a young woman called.

There were many women gathered whom she didn't recognize, and all had in their hands herbs and fruit. There were no girls or crones.

For what seemed like hours - hymns, chants and stories were shared. Dances to the beat of the drum were spontaneous and everyone moved to their own dance. She felt welcomed into the woman's world.

Suddenly, Ramla, Malinda, and Connie were sitting in chairs around the fireplace, quietly enjoying a cup of tea in front of the hearth's fire. Looking down at her cup she knew it held an equal mixture of black cohosh, star root, motherwort, black haw and chamomile. She breathed in deep to pick up the chamomile's aroma.

"Ramla, how long was I out in my meeting with my clan?"

"An hour."

"It felt longer than that. Who are the Raven Moores?"

"Let me start with explaining the royal lines. The Moores, Eameets, Anacons, Bocours are related and are old families from which the monarchy - the royal bloodline runs in. Royalty marries within the royal bloodlines, especially for the person next in line of wearing the crown. If a future monarch marries and it's not from one of those families then it had better be from another royal family and one that has bloodlines going back more than a hundred years, otherwise there is no becoming queen or king."

"Why would that practice continue today? What happens if one of them falls in love with someone not from the bloodlines?"

"You can love who you want, but your legitimate children can only come from a royal bloodline – if you're in direct line of ascent. The rules were set down to prevent wars between those who had money and power but not a claim to the throne, and the legal heirs, who may not have the backing to pull off a war. In school did you read about the wars that went on for generations? It destroyed all levels of life. If one did win over the other, the damage took a long time to recover from. By then, another challenge to the throne would come and the killings and devastations would start again. Narrowing down who can rule restricts the killing to specific families with plenty of relatives ready to step in and no big shock to the realm's economy," Malinda explained.

"Queen Eloise, of East Moore Castle, Queen Bel of Moores Lyon's Gate Castle, Queen Tina of Raven Moore Castle, King Gen, King Taylor and King Gilroy are the other three rulers of Morwea which extends beyond the deserts of Yen. King Ken of Anacons in the Long Valley, King Javas in Anacon's Castle on the Mount, Queen Gafna of Bacours Plains Castle, King Browder of Bacours in the Dry High Lands, King Blaz in Eameets Castle in Wineland and Queen Elsa of Obella Castle on the Ocean. Like all the royals, they have summer, fall, winter and spring castles. Their moving their households seasonal is not only for comfort but for stimulating the local economy. When the royal household moves, there are plenty of people that move with them."

"Why the wall?" Connie asked.

"Fear of things not understood," Ramla said.

"And the Besardo," Malinda said.

"Besardo? I've heard that name before."

"They're described as jealous members in the royal family. Hundreds of years ago royal members that were not anywhere near the line of succession, or weren't given postings in the higher positions of government formed a group called Besardo. They didn't challenge outright the abilities of those in important government postings, instead spread hurtful gossip about the member, or his or her family, causing a lot friction between and within the royal families which easily escalated to armed fights, since no one knew from where the gossip originated. I'm talking about arrogant privileged children who grew up to do exactly what they did as children, brag and lord over each other, so it wasn't all that difficult to create friction and then murderous rage between siblings, cousins, and other royalties that carried the grudge through generations. The damage was so serious that there was a time when arranged accidents became popular ...too

popular. Anyone that threatens an heir to any throne is a traitor and death is the penalty," Ramla explained. "Can you imagine how complicated it becomes when two heirs are charged with traitorous conduct?"

"Then it's still going on?" Connie asked.

"Leveler heads prevail these days so anger is redirected and proper outlets given. The Besardo have changed over time. I believe there are two groups. One group fulfills vendettas and hunts down royal family members to kill them. This group is very secretive. The second group spreads gossip and stirs up ill feelings between members where they can and they are sometimes easy to spot but every family has its gossipers and malicious ones at that, and they won't always be Besardo."

"If they are that evil, a person with vision can recognize that type of energy before falling prey to it," Connie said with conviction.

"The Besardo in high places are good at disguising themselves. Disloyalty is punishable by death. There's no quitting once you've been accepted and refusal of an assignment is punishable."

"Assignment? What has this to do with me?"

"The Raven Moore's castle and lands have disappeared. Some people blame that on Prince Jario, your grandmother's second husband, who had betrayed the Besardo."

"Raven Moore. I saw it in my vision. Is the castle as deserted as it seemed in my vision?"

"I have never seen Raven Moore Castle. No one knows where it is. Rumors attribute its hidden presence to either Prince Jario's death putting a spell on the roads leading to it, or Queen Tess put a protective spell over it. I'll go for Queen Tess protecting it until the next ruler claims the throne...that would be you."

Connie stared at Ramla for a long time, absorbing what not so long ago would have been preposterous to now, something to think hard about. "Why did that happen?"

"The Besardo have a vendetta out on the Queen's direct heirs because she reaffirmed the order to hunt any members down as traitors. Jario, a member of the Besardo sought to rise to leadership by assassinating the leader of the Besardo rather than his new wife, your grandmother. Jario wanted it all; to be crowned king of Raven Moore Castle, which would never happen even if Tess died, and leading the Besardo."

"So my grandmother isn't dead?"

"No."

"The Oath Taker called me First Daughter of Raven Moores. What does that title mean?"

"When you turn thirty-five, you will take on the crown and mantle of Queen of Raven Moore from your grandmother."

Connie's mouth formed a silent O. After thinking about it she asked, "Why not my mother?"

"She chose another life."

"Living with the Brethren?" she asked astonished.

"True Brethren are soldiers faithful to Queen Tess, Queen of Raven Moore. They're dedicated to protecting the royal family. Not all Brethren are knowledgeable of what they are protecting or

are faithful soldiers, so beware of who you share that information with. Your mother was very young and very in love with another when her step-father made the decision to dispose the head of the Besardio. Your grandmother knew of his plan and sent her children and grandchildren away, to scatter on both sides of the wall so the Besardio could not find them. Queen Tess arranged to have her faithful establish Brethren parishes scattered about before her children were born, thus solidifying their eccentric behavior. Not all her children wanted to hide and not all believed it was that serious. Lives were lost when loose tongues were over heard speaking of arrangements."

"Connie, what is your quest?" Malinda asked her.

"My quest?" Connie asked.

"When you met with your ancestors you give the Oath Taker a task you pledged to complete as head of the family."

"I said I would rebuild Raven Moore Castle."

"That's....a noble quest," Malinda said dryly.

"Does that mean I'll have to find the Besardio and put an end to them before I can work on the castle?" Connie asked. "It was so clear and now it's unreal."

"With more practice your visions will remain clear. Removing the Besardio, if you mean their influence, has been tried over the hundreds of years of their existence. Jealousy and meanness in any family group is impossible to eradicate." Ramla thoughtfully stared into the fire, nodding at whatever she was seeing or hearing from her own spirit guides.

"How do I rebuild a castle that no one knows where it is?" Connie asked. "It made sense when I said it, but now, I don't even know where to begin."

"Begin with yourself and the rest will fall into place."

"I hope so. How will I know a Besardio and what am I to do should I find one?"

Malinda snorted at that and tossed a log into the fire, sending sparks and flames up the chimney. "Though Ramla says some have learned to hide their true energy, as you become more sensitive, the odor of evil and its presence will be easily recognized. A person that evil is repugnant on all levels."

Ramla shook her head. "Energy is energy. Remember that and you can better handle what they bring." Ramla looked over at Connie. "When a Besardio is on a hunt, there is always more than one. Eight is the usual but should they split up, it will be in pairs."

"What do I do if I meet up with one? I've never killed anyone."

"That is something a person that manipulates energy and takes on causes will face eventually. As you learn more of what you're about, you'll work out ways to protect yourself and others that fit in with how you feel about right and wrong. Your views will change and they should as you are exposed to more. It's time you bring your guides back. They would have been a distraction when you were starting your lessons, but now you need to cultivate them and know how to use their knowledge."

Chapter 8

A Bend in the Road

Horses were coming. She could feel the ground tremble under her feet. Her guess was they were heading up to the mountain to see the Wise Ones that lived in the monastery near the mountain top. You either traveled by beast or you hiked by foot. There was no other acceptable way to the monastery, according to Ramla. Modern vehicles were not permitted in Morwea Woods or on Elden Mountain.

It was the end of autumn and the rains had already begun. They no doubt intended on spending the winter up there because in two days Ramla said the first of the heavy snow would cut off the bridge to the monastery. The passing pilgrims were a big interruption in their life and sometimes an inconvenience to Ramla though she greeted all that stopped by with an open heart and bags of herbs.

Connie had been living with Ramla and her assistant/daughter for nearly a year. If Connie measured her stay with how much she had learned from the two women, she would have said a lifetime. Malinda called it accelerated learning, where her waking and dreaming time were filled with lessons, practices, and memories of past lives with clan memories intermixed. Ramla told her that she knew all this already she just had to be reminded.

Connie looked out at the cottage to see if the visitors were going to stop. If they did, Ramla was going to need assistance in greeting them. Malinda had left for the city the day before. Connie had hoped she would have returned by now. Her cooking skills were passable and Ramla was too preoccupied with her own business to think about meals.

Connie went back into the barn to put away the watering bucket. She would enter the cabin from the back and give whatever support Ramla would need, though she doubted Ramla would need it. Connie shook her head to stop an unpleasant buzz. As she looped the bucket rope over the peg a powerful force of energy hit her and as far as she knew that was that.

How much time passed she was not sure, but the smell of something she could not recall smelling before nearly had her choking. It stank. Remembering Ramla's words that nothing 'stank' it was just an energy she needed to identify did not lessen the stench.

Either it was dark or she was buried under something. Connie moved her limbs and then felt around her. She called for her guardians, and reflexively reached for her medicine bag. Energy from the bag moved through her fingertips and up her arm and then into her body.

"**Ramla**," she softly called. There was no sound, not even in her head.

A tiny light bobbed in front of her.

"Who are you?" Connie asked.

"We look for you. Found you." With that, it was gone.

Cautiously, she moved to sit up. Extending her palm she whispered a command to produce a small spark of light. She could see that she was in the barn but in the underground storage area, the root cellar.

You are safely hidden in the root cellar, Gem said. Ramla and Malinda thought it best you all separate for the time being.

The storage room was never locked, or not in the conventional way so Connie was surprised to find the floor door blocked. Tilting her head back, she extended her sight to see what was preventing the door from opening. Air carts.

"What is going on?" she whispered. The last she remembered horses were coming down the road.

Nothing you should involve yourself in, Calie Can said.

That was something Connie found surprising. With her practice in magic, if that were ever a misleading use of the word, she found Calie Can the most changed of her old guides. Maybe because Calie Can accompanied her on many of her travels to places unnamed and weird, to use an apt description Bau had taken up.

Connie was about to extend herself out to see what was going on when she remembered Malinda's constant reminder that she should never take for granted her safety. Moving around the storage, she selected herbs to create a protection bundle for traveling and one for concealment. Setting up her space she followed the proscribed ritual, which she knew by heart. Lifting her spirit from her physical body, Connie swiftly moved to a part of the forest she was not familiar with, feeling as if she were drawn there. Turning slowly, she tried to get a feel for the area and find the guardian to see if her presence was welcomed.

"Well, what do we have here?" a cocky voice asked her.

Connie turned to see a young girl in traveling clothes studying her. She turned her head to her companion, whom Connie could not sense. The girl's hair was long and braded behind her head. Connie admired her profile and then she was facing the piercing eagle eyes that she feared could see right through her.

"Well?" the stranger demanded again. "Your name?" she enunciated slowly, when Connie remained silent.

"Galena," Connie said.

"Indeed," the other replied. "And you are from?"

"It's polite to return a name," Connie said.

"Asiza and this is my forest."

"Is it?" Connie looked around for a forest spirit to object to such a bold lie.

"It is under my protection. So, I ask you again, what is your name?"

"Who are you to claim a forest?" Connie demanded.

"Will you two just get over yourselves!" a tiny voice piped up.

Connie blinked at a tiny light eye level with her.

"The Queen wishes to see you two, now!" And the light followed a typical bee line around and about and then disappeared.

"What Queen?" Connie asked.

"The Queen of this forest." Asiza made a sweeping gesture forward, though to Connie's eyes it was to nowhere. It was as if nothing was in that space yet it wasn't like a dark gaping hole.

"I thought you said..."

"I protect it from people like you that haven't been invited. You're trespassing. Now you're going to really get it."

"If you were a good guardian, you should have stopped me from crossing over here."

Connie stepped into the nothing space, catching sight of a Troll leaning against a nearby tree, happily smoking a pipe, which he tipped in her direction.

It was in a blink of an eye that the two were surrounded by hundreds of tiny lights of winged people which parted and revealed a beautiful man and woman Connie's size. Beside them were two youths that had a strong resemblance to the man and woman. In the audience were rangers and people dressed in the Queen's Regiment's uniform...from the Realm.

Connie's interest quickened. Was this Queen Elsa of Obella and if so, how did she get to the other side of the wall?

The moment she thought of the wall Connie felt herself sucked back to darkness flat on her back. Of course the travel corridors Ramla had said were everywhere if you knew the tone. Stunned at the sudden change she laid still for a few moments as her senses readjusted. Then the familiar scent of the root cellar came to her. Connie opened her circle and scattered the herbs. Peering through the door, the hover crafts were no longer blocking the door. Slowly she lifted the floor board, with just enough space for her to roll out. Lying still she listened to what was around her. There was no sound and most disconcerting was not finding a connection to either woman that Connie had become accustomed to being aware of.

They are alright, Bau said.

You must leave this area, Calie Can said.

The air is changing. Something is hunting you, Sulu said.

It's time you practice what you've been learning, Gem said.

Rising to her feet she moved cautiously to the side door. Connie opened the door a crack, not needing much more space than that. A trick Ramla taught her. Not seen even as a thin shadow, she moved across the corral, past sleeping horses as the quarter moon was hidden by fast moving rain clouds. Once in the forest she hugged the ancient tree that Ramla called grandfather. It gave her strength and determination to hide in the forest.

Be aware, grandfather tree said.

Ramla taught her to trust her instincts and right now the feeling to run as far away from the cabin as she could became intense. It was a steady drum against her senses, numbing her to everything else. When it finally stopped she was completely lost in the forest. Her soldier training pointed out she was not prepared for she had no supplies. Connie rested her hand on each tree looking for one that felt right. As Malinda and Ramla had said, it was not necessary to explain what she knew instinctively or what she felt, just do it and see where it would take her. She found the one that climbing would give her a view of the forest. Looking up into the nearly denuded tree she could see a star twinkle. It meant it was nearly morning. Cold and damp, she focused on the tree limb she wanted to land on.

"I don't think you can make it," a familiar voice taunted.

Connie turned to Asiza.

"What do you want?" Connie resisted the impulse to look around her for whatever had driven her from Ramla's territory.

"You left rather abruptly. The Queen thought it was because you haven't been trained properly, but I think you're just plain stupid and rude."

"What do you want?" Connie repeated impatiently.

Both felt it at the same time. Asiza, wearing a cloak that seemed cumbersome in a forest where it could get snagged, quickly unfurled it and wrapped the suddenly long cloak over Connie and herself.

Be very still, Asiza warned.

Whatever passed them by was not seen but felt. When the feeling left, Asiza dropped her cloak and tugged on Connie's elbow. "The spirits are angry at the passage of the Besardo and will be exacting a payment. We don't want to be around for that."

As Asiza led the way, Connie watched her, careful to place her feet where she stepped. Asiza's cape lay neatly on her back, not looking as large as it seemed to have been to cover them both. She moved through the forest so silently Connie was not sure if she was present physically.

"You make too much noise," Asiza told her softly when they stopped for a moment. "You walk like a city person."

"I am a city person," Connie snapped. "Where are we going?"

"I'm going home. You're going back to the edge of the forest. You don't belong here."

"I wasn't asked to leave by the forest guardians or spirits. The only person I hear objecting to my presence is you."

"I'm one of the guardians of the forest and you're attracting too much trouble here. You're trespassing."

"I'm not stupid about the ways of the forest spirits. I asked permission and didn't hear any objection," Connie argued back in a fierce whisper.

Three small lights appeared between the two causing Connie and Asiza to take a step back.

"The Queen says there's enough disturbance in the forest without you two creating more," one of the small winged beings stated.

"She wants to see you now, and this time..." another began.

"You're not going to disappear," the third finished.

Connie collapsed onto the dirt path.

"Now why did you do that?" Asiza demanded. "I'm not going to carry her."

Connie disappeared and Asiza was left alone.

"I'm coming!" she said impatiently. "Why do you have to do the theatrics, mother? Why not just bring her directly to you?"

"Because I can do what I want," the Queen responded as in that instant Asiza was in her mother's audience room.

Connie was lying on a couch with a pillow beneath her head. A blanket had been arranged over her sleeping form. Asiza took a breath to respond.

"Think twice before you say it. Now, sit," the Queen directed.

One of the staff brought in refreshments. On the table was placed four settings. When they were alone again Asiza looked toward the door, wondering if she was right in guessing who would enter the door. It swung open as she expected, telling her that it was someone with physical presence.

Quickly she rose to her feet in astonishment.

Neda grinned. "Hello, Cousin. Surprised, aye?"

"Are you why those dark riders are about?" Asiza demanded. "Their presence is causing too much disturbance in the forest."

"You guessed right when you told her she is attracting trouble." She knelt next to Connie and touched her cheek. "She's more aware. That's how they were able to know of her."

"Yes," Queen Eloise said.

Connie's eyes blinked open a few times as she tried to focus on the familiar face that was smiling eye level with her.

"Lt. Neda," she acknowledged.

"I'm glad you remembered."

"Are we leaving?" Connie asked.

"We're here to discuss that. Can you sit up?"

Connie's eyes rested on Asiza, whose arms were crossed over her chest looking annoyed, then moved to a woman who sat surrounded by pillows and... Connie's eyes opened wide. Chaises were stretched out on the arms of her chair and behind her, and the soft soothing buzz was coming from them. They studied her with more than idle curiosity. Connie looked back at the woman, realizing that she was the queen she had disappeared on.

"May I present Queen Eloise of East Moore Castle and guardian of East Morwea Forest," Neda introduced. "Queen Eloise, this is Connie of Raven Moore."

Connie blinked astonished at Neda's introduction and then blushed. "Queen Eloise. Good health to you. I'm sorry about my previous visit that ended so abruptly. I meant no offense."

"No offense taken. It's not often royal family members remember to ask for permission to cross my lands, or for that matter, disappear from my sight, without giving forewarning."

"I don't know how that happened."

"Princess Neda explained you are in training," Queen Eloise said with humor.

"Is Ramla's farm on your land?"

"In a loose understanding of ownership of land, yes, though she's not under my protection. Ramla is her own force to reckon with."

"Is she and Malinda alright?"

"You don't use your own guardians to find out?" Asiza demanded. "You couldn't have been a good student of Ramla's...."

"Be still Asiza. You are acting like a willful child. Connie is your cousin and will be your queen so show respect," Queen Eloise said pleasantly.

Both Connie and Asiza opened their mouths to protest and both quickly closed them with nothing said.

"Ramla and Malinda are doing what they can, which is all that can be done," she answered as if unconcerned.

"Are Besardo after me?"

"Yes. There is a penalty for Besardo trespassers in Morwea. They have determined their fate."

"They would have fared better had they sent their dupes," Asiza said.

"Locating the heir to Raven Moore Castle is not something left to dupes," Neda said.

Ramla and Malinda had never verbally addressed her as heir to Raven Moore Castle so to hear it twice already was strange to Connie.

"What about my mother, brothers and sister? And father?" Connie asked.

"You are an only child, with your mother and you the only two directly in line to the throne. Your mother has passed the honor on to you," Queen Eloise said. "Since you've left the compound, your mother is probably feeling less pressure to protect you."

"But I do have brothers, a sister, and a father."

"Those you came to know as your siblings are your cousins, and the man that posed as your father is your mother's protector. Your mother came to be under protection of a Brethren, as it should be and if her sisters and brothers followed suit, they too would still be alive. They took the threat of assassination too lightly."

"But he's mean to her."

"I don't know the details of your mother's life. If I showed interest it would alert someone looking for the remaining heirs to Queen Tess," Queen Eloise said.

"Those brethren aren't at all what you think they are. Why does mother remain there?" Connie demanded, dropping the composure she gained over the last year.

"I don't know Abnard's reasoning behind...."

"Who's Abnard?" Connie asked.

"The man who agreed to protect you, your mother and your cousins."

"The man she lives with goes by Kalen. Did Abnard force her to marry that man?"

"Someone will look in on your mother so we are all assured she and the others are safe," Queen Eloise assured her.

Connie was feeling frustrated that for all the remembering of lives and lessons she had been going through, her life at the Brethren compound had faded to lacking details. "How old was I when we came to the Brethren compound?"

"Three," Neda said. "Queen Tess's four daughters and two sons, along with her older sister with their families were given the choice to remain sequestered in the castle under her protection until Queen Tess passed on her crown to her rightful heir or to scatter and be protected by the Brethren until her heir took the throne."

"Come and I will show you," Queen Eloise rose and Connie quickly followed. The moment they crossed a threshold into a long hall a light came on. The walls were filled with paintings of people in groups, or alone, and in all sorts of poses.

"These are our ancestors. We are cousins twice removed."

Connie stared at pictures of people she remembered. "I know these faces."

"You should. Every royal member knows her or his family and those of other royal households as well as their family story. It's a royal obligation. You had three years before you left the castle to know these faces."

"But, I know these pictures."

"Yes. Did you feel the change as you stepped over the threshold? This space is where anyone that is given permission may visit wherever they may be. Image it and here you are." Queen Eloise turned around gesturing at the grand display of many family members and the branches they created.

"When you were a child, the guardian of this gallery was Arleen of Atwater. Your grandmother was very insistent that everyone know family story first and then the politics and economics of running a realm. She didn't suffer ignorance lightly nor laziness. All members of her household, servant or royal were educated in letters, numbers and face recognition."

Connie stopped before one large painting of four women that had their arms around each other's waists looking like they were having fun. "It doesn't look like they're laughing at the same thing," Connie said.

"The painter did an extraordinary job of capturing their different personalities." The queen was quiet for a few moments as she studied the painting. "The four sisters not only had different tastes and interests but they lacked patience most notably with each other. Your mother was at birth identified as the one the family line would continue through. It certainly irritated the others, but it's been that way for eons. Your uncles...a worthless lot given to too much complaining, married the same type of woman their mother was. Strong and controlling." She pointed at two men pouting at the hounds that were gathered around them. They didn't hold the reins of their horses but two women dressed as stable hands did. Connie frowned at the symbolism. Her eyes moved back to the three sisters.

"Are they my aunts? Who is that?" She pointed to a person kneeling in the garden, peering over his shoulder at the four sisters. Looking closer, the man was a boy, and he was holding a flower. In his other hand what she had thought was a gardening tool was a soldier's short blade.

"They are your aunts and that boy your father. Your mother got the painter to put him in the painting. Your parents met when they were five, born under different skies but the same year. I'm

not sure by whose design, but once met, they were never far from each others side. He was her protector and got in many an altercation on her behalf. The two were not without their sins," Queen Eloise laughed. Her grin grew wider at Connie's expression. "Mischief was their pastime. It drove the staff crazy so the Queen ordered that he spend his days in military training while your mother was sent to more demanding classes. Queen Tess believed keeping them busy would keep them out of mischief. You should ask your mother about her childhood."

"What happened to my father?" She stared at the face memorizing it and trying to feel a connection but couldn't.

"Wouldn't you rather hear that from your mother? This next painting is Queen Tess showing her daughters something about the forest ways. She had personally taught her daughters and their daughters the ways of the forest and how to return to it should they fear for their lives."

Connie's face went white when she realized that that was whom she had taken the ring from.

"Her mistake was not teaching her sons and grandsons the ways of the forest, trusting that their father's would do so," Queen Eloise went on.

"So why did my mother not remain in the forest?" Connie asked.

"She did for a short time, but then her nephews, Kel and Alan were brought to her when their parents were killed. They were too frightened of the forest to find safety in it. It was necessary to take them somewhere they could adapt to quickly to avoid drawing attention to them. Jennifer later was added to your mother's care."

Connie nodded in understanding. If she had not had Ramala and Malinda with her when she entered Morwea Woods she would have turned around and left, feeling unwelcome.

"The men were more interested in learning soldiering and therefore their sons learned arms and marching. Most royals want to be captains," Queen Eloise mocked, looking toward Neda.

"Not me," Lt. Neda said. "I'm looking to be *Commander* of the Queen's Guard at Omwell Castle."

Asiza made a face. "It's too cold in the winter and the castle is drafty. I want to be..." she paused as she mentally went over a list of possibilities.

"You need to get out more, cousin if your list is too long or nothing is on it," Neda grinned.

"What happened to my father?" Connie asked Queen Eloise.

They were standing in front of a painting that was showing a young girl, Connie's mother, standing with a young man. Connie's mother was looking at the painter with the familiar distant stare, with the young man next to her looking at her with disturbing eyes. Connie shivered from the impression. She had come to believe her mother's life in the compound gave her that absent look in order for her to survive. Now she could see she needed to change her perception.

"The Besardo planned to kill your father a day before the wedding to demonstrate to Queen Tess that she was to take their demands more seriously. Your mother had warned your father numerous times of the friends he was keeping. He was like most youths of that age; full of vigor and belief in their own immortality, and enjoying their brashness in companionship. Your mother feared the prophecy which foretold of his death, that he would die before he left her with a child. So she easily seduced him to lay with her months before the marriage bed. Your father was

schooled in all the things a young royal is schooled in but he had not the sense to listen to the one who loved him the most."

"Has anyone punished his killers?"

"For you, there is no one to punish," Queen Eloise said. "He had been warned numerous times and chose to ignore the warnings. Let those trained in uncovering plots handle it," Queen Eloise said.

"So I just trust that I'm not going to get killed?"

"You will be trained to protect yourself, but my counsel as your elder and I hope someday a friend, is for you to not get caught up in the drama of hate and vengeance. That type of energy attracts like energy and soon it will be so thick the light will find it difficult to shine in."

"Galena, remember?" Asiza said.

"It's just a name," Connie told her.

"It's the name you picked for yourself. It's your name of power," the Queen said.

"Don't repeat it to anyone outside of us. It will give others power over you," Lt. Neda said seriously.

Asiza nodded, looking serious for the first time.

"Now, it's time you move to your next level of training." The Queen looked over at Neda for confirmation.

"Just what are you going to teach her, Cousin?" Asiza asked.

"Not me. You."

"No way!"

"You said yourself that she's noisy in the forest. If you complain about something, you have to have the solution," Neda reminded her.

"I have one question," Connie spoke up. "Why don't you name my father or call my mother by name?"

"That is something you need to take up with your mother," Queen Eloise said. "When she gives you his name, perhaps she will give you her name. Names are power."

* * *

They were at the outer edge of the forest.

"This is the west side of the forest. Mother's aunt lives here," Asiza said.

"Just what is it I'm supposed to learn here?" Connie asked.

"Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged back," a small voice said.

Connie peered around Asiza. A child stood with her hands on her hips and wore a pouty expression on her chubby face.

"Mother sent me, otherwise I wouldn't waste my time here."

The child laughed.

"She's one of mother's special projects," Asia told Connie loud enough to be heard.

The child pointed a chubby finger at Asiza, "You were one of her special projects that went adrift."

"And you're...." Asiza suddenly stopped, but her face turned red. "Alright. You got me again. You've got your next project delivered, so I'm leaving."

"Two for one," the child told her triumphantly.

"I'm not staying," Asiza told her firmly.

"Yep. It's not like I can cook or do your laundry, now can I?"

Connie looked closer at the child's figure, realizing that from this small figure was energy an adult would be putting out.

Asiza was about to argue but instead clamped her jaw shut and gestured to Connie. "Let's get settled." She turned to a faint path and for the first time, Connie actually heard her move through the forest.

"Haven't learned to be quiet, aye?" the child's voice piped mockingly.

"Kids," Asiza muttered.

Asiza led Connie to a tree which she walked right through. Connie, thinking it was an apparition, followed her. The sudden impact of running into a solid tree was as surprising as finding herself lying flat on her back.

The child looked down at her surprised. "No one taught you how to pass through gates?"

Connie tenderly touched her forehead. "Not gates through trees."

"Dimensions, realities and through other realms. Of course, it could be my fault this time. I didn't give you the password."

"Just how old are you?" Connie asked.

The child laughed. "Two hundred of your years."

Connie's eyes opened wide and then her environment changed from forest to a room.

"I'm getting tired of moving you from space to space. You should learn to do this on your own," Asiza complained to Connie.

An elderly woman stood in the center of the room near Asiza. Her smile was contagious and even Asiza smiled at her.

"Can we get this going? I have other things to do," Asiza said, but in a nicer tone.

"Someone else can do them. You have the entire family... oh, yes. That's right, not all are trustworthy, some are down right lazy and then you have the ignorant."

"You should talk. It's not like you aren't related to them too."

The elder woman turned to Connie and looked her up and down. "So, the Moores are back. About time."

"She needs to work on her protection spells, and the meet and greets for each guardian," Asiza said.

"Are you telling me my job? Do you want it?"

"You're getting distracted. If you didn't drive everyone crazy with your constant chatter, you'd have more visitors."

"Sounds just like you. You're being impertinent. Haven't quite grown out of that habit, aye?"

Connie dropped her pack that the queen had supplied her on one of the cots and sat on the edge, feeling miserable with the two. She was not seeing any peace and quiet any time soon. She wished for Malinda and Ramla's quiet.

Two heart beats later, the three were in the center of a small clearing in the forest.

"This is a sacred ring," the child stated. "When you enter someone else's domain, you find a clearing and make your circle and then place your offerings within the circle with you. You wait until the spirit of the place acknowledges you. Don't open the circle until you are sure you are at peace with the guardian or know it's safe to leave. Not all guardians meet you. Some send their emissaries, underlings, and *they* like to rattle your nerves just because they can."

"I suppose you want me to demonstrate," Asiza said impatiently.

"No. I will do the first."

Connie had no idea where it came from but a bag appeared before the child.

"Never leave home without your protection." Kneeling before the bag, she pulled out herbs, small statues, stones, jewelry, a big tooth on an intricately woven leather strap, and a horse. A real one.

Connie jumped back astonished.

"Just kidding," the child giggled. The horse disappeared and a cat appeared. It was not a domesticated kind. It was larger than a chadie and its eyes were luminescent as they swung her way. Its tail was flicking about it annoyed. Connie could feel its energy snapping about it as its tail.

"Were you sleeping?" the child asked the large cat, twice her size.

What do you think? And suddenly the cat was a man. He looked Connie over and turned to Asiza. "I see you're back. So, what is it this time?"

"New project for the Queen," the child said and gestured to Connie.

His annoyance quickly disappeared as he concentrated on Connie. Unconsciously she took a few steps back.

I will not harm you. You are under another's protection.

"Who are you?"

Rozene's familiar. A close ally in her endeavors. Akeen at your disposal for a time.

"Do I have a familiar?" she asked in awe.

Both Asiza and Rozene laughed. Akeen turned back into his cat shape.

"It's a privilege," Asiza told her matter of factly.

"You both are here to work on that privilege," Rozene said. "So, we shall begin by learning first how to protect yourself properly so you don't have to be rescued so often that your guardians and familiar ignore you."

Rozene, still in her child form began to sort through her things. Once she had what she wanted the bag disappeared. Akeen peered over Rozene's shoulder, interested in what she was arranging. There was enough energy in the air that Connie knew not to touch anyone unless she wanted to deliver a shock to her and the recipient of her touch.

"What I have here, is for a specific protection. This," she pointed to a small stone, "Is the most powerful thing in this collection." She glanced at Akeen, "With the exception of you, my friend." Rozene made as if to gather air in her hands and shook them over her collection. The snap in the air disappeared but the stone and other objects took on a glow.

So began Connie's lessons with another teacher; her childhood forgotten as she walked