

The Stone Princess (sample edition)

by Michael D. Jeffreys

*being but the first part of the greater work
The Chronicles of the Queen of the Moonstones*

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Chapter I

Frayda was trying to be quiet, but over the course of the last two years that we had been working together, I had become attuned to the sound of her little feet tiptoeing down the stairs. Someone was coming, and she was preparing to receive our visitor.

The choreography of sounds that followed were as comforting as they were familiar—one, two, THREE strikes of the match to get it to light, followed by the gentle tinkle of the glass chimney being put into place, and finally the mechanical *snick* of the door latch being disengaged. In my mind's eye I could see her opening the door and sticking her head out to inspect the front walk that bridged the gap between our building and the street, making sure that everything was, well, *presentable*.

Midnight visitors were not common, but not unusual either. It had been about a fortnight since the last one, but I never went to bed without preparing for the possibility that someone would be coming to us for help. Getting prepared meant making sure I had “work clothes” laying out on the small table next to the door to my room. This time of year, “work clothes” consisted of a thin cotton shirt with long sleeves, a thick wool sweater, wool trousers, and some nice warm socks. My boots would be waiting at the foot of the stairs.

No sooner had I scooted to the edge of the bed and begun trying to rub the sleep out of my eyes than I could hear the clop-clop-clopping of hoof beats approaching on the cobblestone street that ran past our home. *At least two*

horses, I thought, and some kind of wagon, too. No surprise when it stopped right out front; Frayda always had impeccable timing. After two years, I had gotten used to it, but I still marveled at the way Frayda always knew someone was coming, no matter the lateness of the hour, and could somehow wake up bright and chipper every single time.

■ ■ ■

My thoughts drifted back to a particular day about two years earlier, the day after our third late-night visitor. Wherever Frayda and I were and whatever we had been talking about, I don't recall, but I do remember coming right out and asking her, "How do you know people are coming so far in advance of when they get here?"

"The same way you do," she replied, rolling her eyes in the fashion of the eight-year-old that she was at the time.

"The way *I* know people are coming is because *you* are already at the door waiting for them to arrive," I said in exasperation. She gave me a tight-lipped smile in response and said nothing. "That's what I get for trying to get the daughter of a wizard to explain *anything*." I punctuated this last bit with a smile so she would know I was teasing.

"Daddy's *not* a wizard," she insisted. With a *Hmmph!* she turned her back to me and stepped away. *You are NOT FUNNY and this discussion is OVER.* I knew better than to push any farther, and I wasn't going to learn anything even if I tried.

The man who was Daddy to Frayda was Uncle Cyrus to me. He owned the building where we lived. It was part retail showroom, part workshop, and part living space.

There were a few rooms on the street level that we used for “family,” namely, the parlor at the front and the kitchen at the back, but we spent most of our time upstairs on the second level above—the third still being mostly empty—or on the rooftop terrace. I even had my own room—a great luxury, considering where I came from.

Uncle Cyrus and Aunt Lyra had taken me in about five years before; three years prior to when Frayda and I started working together. I was not easy to live with at first, but through gentleness, patience, and love, they had, in spite of my attempts to thwart their good intentions, gradually helped me to become part of their family unit. By the time Frayda and I had started our little business, Aunt Lyra and Uncle Cyrus were like a mother and father to me, and dear Frayda was like my little sister. I loved her fiercely, although everyone who knew her would probably make the same claim. *Everyone loves Frayda and Frayda loves everyone* was an indisputable fact I had learned within the first few weeks of meeting her. I suspected, but couldn't prove, that I was her favorite, but I knew without a doubt that I would fight to the death with anything or anyone that tried to harm her.



The sound of Frayda's voice calling out a soft greeting brought me back to the present. *Everyone will be waiting for ME now*, I thought, so I began getting dressed. I didn't bother to light a lamp as I was fairly proficient at finding and orienting my clothes in the dark after practicing for the last two years. I always opened the door to the hallway first in hopes of being able to eavesdrop on at least some of what

was going on down below, but the only sound that came up the stairs that night was Frayda's faint but cheerful voice. I could tell by changes in pitch that she was asking questions, but I could not hear the actual words. I could not hear our visitor at all.

I won't learn anything from up here tonight, I thought. Best to get down stairs as quickly as possible. However, *as quickly as possible* proved to be, well, not quick at all. I was having a difficult time waking up. My mind felt foggy and my fingers felt thick and unresponsive. Things got a little easier once I realized I was trying to push my head through the sleeve of my shirt.

Once I was part-way down the stairs I could finally hear both sides of the conversation. Frayda excelled at small-talk and polite questions and could often extract a lot of information from our new customers without them even realizing it, or at least in a way where they enjoyed it. As I came down the last few stairs I could hear her asking, “. . . so how old are you, then?”

The visitor, who I still could not see, replied very softly, “I actually had my fourteenth birthday just a few weeks back.”

“Really? Fourteen?” Frayda exclaimed. “I thought you were *older* than that.”

I arrived at the bottom of the stairs and pretended to be completely absorbed in tying my boots. With my head down, I directed my gaze in the general direction of our visitor, who had not attempted to enter the house and was instead standing just outside the door. I did not want to frighten him off this early in the process by looking directly

at his face, so I made sure to focus my attention somewhere about knee level, relying on my peripheral vision. Frayda's last comment obviously pleased him; he had one of those "aw, shucks" grins on his face like we guys get when the ladies that pique our interest say something we like. *Don't start something you can't finish, Frayda*, I thought with a smile of my own. *He's too old for you.*

Frayda, meanwhile, had turned around to face me. "Hale," she said, "this is Garrick. His papa says he needs help with his ox and would we please come right away?"

Frayda had just told me a lot—I now knew our customer's name and the nature of his problem. No big secret there; anyone who heard what she said would have heard that as well. What she did not say audibly, but what I still heard, was *I don't sense any Dark Magic at play; so far, he appears to be who he says he is.*

Garrick, who was not privy to our code, made the common mistake of assuming that Frayda was merely conveying the nature of his message from her to me, the next obstacle in the levels of bureaucracy he was apparently going to have to navigate. "Like I told the greeter girl here: Papa said 'Take the wagon into town. There's an animal healer who lives in the upstairs part of some place called Rarities and Oddities. It's in one of the old merchant districts. Ring the bell and wake him up and ask him to come. Be quick!'"

I wasn't sure whether his father had actually said, "Be quick!" or if Garrick had added that to try to encourage me to hurry along, but as I had only one forward operating speed at that time, I spent a few seconds with my attention

entirely on my remaining boot, wondering why the same boots that were effortlessly tied in daytime took a monumental effort at night. I could see him awkwardly shifting his weight from one foot to the other while he waited for me to look like I was going to Do Something, like, carry the message to whoever was next.

“Well,” I said, glancing up at Frayda, “if it’s the animal healer you are looking for, you found her.” As if on cue, Frayda pivoted back to face Garrick and gave him her most disarming smile.

What usually happened, in fact what *always* happened, was the individual on the receiving end of her smile would almost visibly melt and respond with a smile of his own. I liked to call it *The Frayda Effect*. Everyone loved Frayda and Frayda loved everyone. Poor Garrick was already knee-deep in Frayda’s charm and did not even know it. As always, her smile had the desired effect and in no time at all he offered a sheepish smile in return, followed by “You’re not what I expected.”

None of our new clients ever expected *us*; they always expected *someone else*. What they actually *got* was a ten-year old girl who gave the first impression of being a combination of feckless and clueless and yet still prescient enough to greet them at the door in advance of anyone ringing the bell; and then me, her 17-year-old cousin, the “demon boy” with yellow eyes that looked like they glowed in the dark.

“Probably, we’re better than you expected,” I replied, my eyes still on Frayda, smiling to show I was Not Offended. “She is, anyway.” Frayda and I were now fully into our

roles. It helped us to think that we were actors in a play, reciting our lines at the right time and in the right way because that's what the audience wanted. In our line of work, our customers needed to believe that we were as good as we said we were.

And we *were* good. We had a phenomenal success rate. We just had a routine that was one part entertainment, two parts calming-the-customer, both of us slipping into it without wondering whether the other was going to keep up. By the time people arrived at our door, they were usually pretty anxious and it was best for all of us if everyone could relax a little bit.

As I stood up with my now-tied boots tamed into submission, I made sure to keep averting my gaze so that Garrick and I would not make eye contact. The magnitude of the effect my eyes had on people was always greatly reduced so long as I did not look directly at anyone. I spent most of my time around other people looking at feet and hands and knees because it was just easier for everyone that way. It was when I looked straight into their eyes that people got put on edge and perceived, or believed, that my eyes glowed.

Congratulations, Garrick, you've been vetted, I thought, walking now toward the coat tree beside the door. "Frayda, I'll help you with your cape," I said while I walked.

Garrick was eager to get moving, so he said, "Papa told me to be sure to ask if you need help loading any baggage into the wagon. I can carry stuff for you if you want."

"It's just the two of us," Frayda replied. "No baggage."

I helped Frayda wrap herself up in her cape—a favorite gift of hers from a grateful client some time back after we successfully treated the family dog who was struggling in the throes of trying to give birth to a litter of valuable pups. Frayda loved her cape—it made her look sophisticated, it was wonderfully warm, and, most of all, because she had *earned* it.

I followed the cape with the little pink purse that she liked to carry when we made our house calls. It was mostly a show piece, but it was also a safe place to keep the crystal vial that was a central prop of our standard performance, although it wouldn't make its appearance until around Act IV or so. The purse itself was shaped like a half-moon with loopy wooden handles along the flat side which made it both easy to open and easy to keep securely shut. Where it came from I never knew, but it had long ago faded from its original grandeur. Frayda loved it anyway and, as it had other uses, it came with us on every visit.

Finally, I grabbed my own coat and worked my way into it, being careful to avoid putting my head into one of the sleeves while under the intense scrutiny of a new customer. With my attention firmly focused on Frayda, I adopted my most aristocratic tone and exclaimed, “Your most exalted highness!” Then, with mock formality, I bowed at the waist and pointed toward the wagon out in the street. I was Mr. Aristocrat and she was Her Majesty The Regal Queen.

“Indeed!” she replied, using a stiff accent appropriate for The Regal Queen. Then, she straightened her back and marched in Regal Queen fashion toward the front-most passenger seat of Garrick's wagon, her cape ballooning out

around her down to her ankles. In our imaginations we were acting as proper lords and ladies would act, with a few exaggerations, and it amused us. Whatever anyone else thought of our behavior did not concern us in the least.

Following on Frayda's heels, I stepped out and turned around to face the door so that I could pull it shut. The faint *click* of the door latch (this particular one being an invention of my uncle's) assured me that the door was secure. I spun around, and with my first step away from the door, I checked my pants pocket to make sure my mother's sunstone ring was where I wanted it and simultaneously checked my jacket pocket for my stone kit. Check, and check. All present and accounted for.

Meanwhile, Garrick was making a show of being unable to lift Frayda into the wagon. "Oh, you're just way too heavy," he said, between mock grunts and groans. "I don't think I can do it." Frayda giggled, which was evidently the response he was waiting for, and then he effortlessly lifted her into the wagon, placing her squarely on the seat behind the driver's bench. *He must have a sister*, I thought. *Good*.

The wagon was not a freight wagon like I expected. It was designed for people, with three rows of benches behind the driver's bench, each with a leaf-spring suspension to help smooth the ride. Harnessed to the front were two very healthy-looking horses, appearing very patient and content. For Frayda and me, who tended to walk everywhere we went, it was luxurious. We were in for a *nice* ride.

Frayda slid to her left as I climbed up and sat down to her right. "This is some kind of wagon," I whispered in her ear.

“I can't wait to see the farm.” Her response was just a tight-lipped smile as if to say, *See, I told you so.*

Garrick hauled himself into the driver's seat, then, turned around to face us. “Pardon me for having been rude. My papa runs the Whistle Tree Farm a few miles outside of town. You might have heard of him—Farrick of Whistle Tree? No matter either way. Once we are out of town, I figure it's about a half-hour ride. Johnny and Molly here,” he said, pointing to the horses, “will keep up a good clip. We will be there in no time.”

I whispered in Frayda's ear, “The father is Fuh-Fuh-Farrick, the son is Guh-Guh-Garrick, *his* son will have to be Huh-Huh-Herrick, right?”

She giggled, and then acted like she shouldn't have. “Be nice.”

Meanwhile, Garrick had picked up the reins and released the wagon's hand brake. Then, he clicked his tongue or did whatever horse drivers do to make that ubiquitous *let's go* noise that all horses seem to understand. The horses started moving; we smoothly and steadily gained speed, and away we went.

■ ■ ■

It was peaceful and quiet outside the city. Even at night, the city was wide awake—certainly busy enough during the day, but busy still even at night. I hardly came outside of the city any more, so the contrast was a bit of a shock, but a welcome one. None of us seemed to be in the mood for conversation, so I was thinking thoughts about warm things—a warm bed, fresh bread, the way the sun feels on a spring day.

It was about the fourth time I was savoring my imaginary warm bread that I heard Frayda whisper “Hale? Are you awake?”

“No,” I replied.

“Okay, good,” she said at a more audible volume. “How about I trade you with whatever I brought to eat in my purse for whatever you brought.”

This was the beginning of one of Frayda's favorite games. It came about because I had a habit of forgetting to take things out of my pockets. Some of our clients had no money and could only afford to pay us with food or sweets that they made themselves. If someone gave me a small package of sweets to give to Frayda, as often as not I would forget I had it, leaving it to sit in my pocket until she drew my attention to it.

“Do you really think I would like what you have in your purse?” I asked. This was code for *go ahead and start the game*. If I did not have anything to offer, I would say something like, “If you think I'm going to fall for that trick again . . .”

“I *do*, but you'll have to wait and see,” she said. “You like surprises, don't you?”

“Sometimes. If I agree to trade, though, you have to promise me that whatever it is I have, you will eat it, no matter what it is.” I had to add this stipulation; it was also part of the game.

“But I still get five guesses, right?” Frayda never used all five of her guesses; invariably, she would use only three or four to steer herself into an inescapable corner of misery and lamentation. This was also part of the game.

“Of course,” I said. “Do we have a deal?”

“Deal!” she said, and with that, we shook on it.

She started with Question One: “Let’s see . . . is it something that was warm and is getting colder?” as in *is it a cookie or a warm muffin fresh from the oven?* Two of Frayda’s favorite things.

“No,” I replied.

Then came Question Two: “Is it . . . like . . . spongy . . . and maybe . . . covered on one side with Mama’s special chocolate frosting?” This was code for *is it a slice of my favorite kind of cake.* She couldn’t stifle the giggle that arose at the thought that I would actually carry chocolate-frosted cake around in my pocket.

“No.”

That night, Question Three was the clincher: “Is it . . . Oh no! It’s not cold and wriggling, is it? Oh no, oh no, oh no no no! Your pocket is full of worms and now I have to eat one! I hate worms!” Despite the sincerity of her tone, I knew better than to believe she actually hated worms, or for that matter, any living thing. It just amused her to *talk* about hating worms, and she loved it when I played along.

“You guessed it! And remember, you promised you would eat it!”

That night, the “worms” were some cinnamon candies which Frayda and I both happened to like. They were still fresh because I had purchased them from the confectioner’s shop only the day before. If I had something long forgotten and stale in my pocket, I would not have played the game; however, that night, Frayda was in for a treat. The candies were wrapped in some wax paper which I had to unfold.

While I did this, I said, “Before you can have any worms, you have to give me whatever food you brought in your purse.”

Frayda had a smirk on her face as she pulled out a half-eaten, stale cookie. I acted astonished as I asked, “Is that a leftover cookie from the batch that your mother made a week ago? I don't want that.” This, of course, was also part of the game. Frayda always had to get something good by giving me something no one would want.

“We made a deal. You have to take it.”

“We did make a deal, and we always keep our promises, don't we?” I replied. She handed me her stale cookie, and I handed her one of the cinnamon candies which, of course, made a direct transit to her mouth.

“Hale,” she said, her speech slightly altered by the candy disk she was enjoying, “I think I made a good deal. This worm is better than the stale cookie would have been.”

“Now that I've seen the cookie, I happen to agree with you. I'm glad I didn't promise to eat what *you* traded to *me*.” She giggled. I handed her another of the cinnamon candies. “Offer this one to Garrick.”

“If he doesn't want it, I might save it in my purse and use it to trade with you next time.”

“Fair enough, but ask Garrick if he wants it first.”

■ ■ ■

After that, for a long while, we were all content to occupy ourselves with our own private thoughts. I glanced at Garrick from time to time; he was alert, scanning the road for obstacles, checking the horses, or doing whatever a horse driver does. There was a full moon, so the road was

well lit and he was keeping the horses at a good clip, like he promised. Frayda was sitting with her back ramrod-straight, like a distinguished lady might do, with her purse in her lap and both hands on the curved handles. I knew she was awake because, although she had her eyes closed, I could make out a faint little tune that she was quietly humming to herself. It must have been a happy tune, because her lips were forming an ever-so-slight but absolutely adorable little smile. I felt an overpowering wave of affection wash over me, and without even thinking about what I was doing, I reached around behind her to grab her opposite shoulder and pulled her toward me. “I love you, girl,” I said, quietly. She didn’t respond to me at all except that the smile was now about five times as large.

Was my uncle some kind of genius, or a madman for placing us together like this? I had my doubts at first—who wouldn’t—but I had to admit that Frayda and I worked very well together and that this business of ours was not just some kind of free babysitting enterprise for my aunt’s and uncle’s benefit like I had initially anticipated it would be. *Earn your keep, Hale. Babysit your cousin and keep her out of our hair.*

Had it really been two years and some months ago that Uncle Cyrus had first broached the subject? I could still remember the day in vivid detail—he and I were up on the terrace atop our building. It was a lovely summer day, late enough in the season that the weather was pleasant, but still warm. We were having one of our “man to man” sessions where we would get together and just talk as neither one of us had anything that had to be done right away.

“I’ve been doing some thinking, and I want you and Frayda to go into business together,” he said, out of the blue. We had been silent for some time and my mind had been wandering to some far-off place.

“I suppose you mean that one day Frayda and I would run the shop together. I think that would be fine,” I replied. “I can make sure it stays in the family.”

He was shaking his head *no* while I was saying this. Obviously I had misunderstood his meaning. “I don’t mean one day, as in some indefinite date in the future. It’s too late to start today, but perhaps tomorrow, we can start making some arrangements.”

At first I thought he was joking. Then, I realized he was serious. For a good while, I was at a loss for words. I think I just stared at him with my mouth hanging open. Suddenly, my head was full of words of objection and I tried to voice them all at once. “What!? She’s eight. I’m fifteen. I don’t have any skills. *She* doesn’t have any skills. I can’t legally own a business for, what, three more years? I can’t make the things you make or find the things you find or . . .” My voice trailed off as I ran out of steam.

“Hale,” he said, “I sense that you and Frayda are each at a crossroads in your life. Not necessarily the same one, but important to each of you nonetheless. She practically worships the ground you walk on. I know I’m her father, but you two are very close and I can’t deny that in many ways, you have more influence in her life than I do. There are things she needs to learn that, although I love her dearly, might be better learned from someone else.”

“That someone else being me?” I asked.

“I believe so. I know so. I could force the issue and make her learn stuff, but you know as well as I do that she would most likely rebel against that. With you, . . .” Here he paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. “With you, she would *enjoy* it, really *learn* it. I’m sure you have noticed that she’s a very independent-minded creature—”

“Actually, I hadn’t noticed,” I said, and we shared a short laugh together.

“She’s a very independent-minded creature, and she is starting to become much more aware of her magical ability. She needs to learn how to *channel* it, how to have *discretion* about how and when to use it. She needs to know how to avoid the trappings of Dark Magic.” Avoiding Dark Magic was a passion that Uncle Cyrus and I both shared. “I know you would steer her down the right path.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to say.

“Hale, I know you still carry a lot of hurt and anger because of your mother and the role that Dark Magic played in all that, but I’ve also seen how much you’ve grown. You don’t have to have all that resolved before you can be a positive influence on Frayda; it may even be better for both of you if you have not resolved those issues. Whatever successes you have together, Frayda will learn to emulate. Whatever mistakes you make, Frayda will learn to avoid. I did not have that kind of instruction at Frayda’s age, and neither did your mother.” His eyes adopted a far-away look as he continued, “If I had had a big brother like you . . .”

He didn’t say it, but I finished the sentence in my head. *If I had had a big brother like you, your mother—my little sister—might still be alive.*

“I don't know, Uncle,” I said. “Part of me likes the idea, and part of me is . . . well, in all honesty, part of me is afraid I will fail.”

“There's no gain without risk, my son. Frayda would learn a lot from you, and I daresay teach you a few things along the way. You wouldn't have to turn a profit; we don't really need the money.” He had a point there. We were not wealthy, by any means, but when it mattered, we were warm, dry, and had enough to eat. “It doesn't need to be a formal business, so the legal issues don't apply. Just the two of you working and being together is enough. You could charge a pittance, maybe even pay Frayda from your earnings. I'd leave that up to you.”

“What, exactly, would we do?” I asked.

“Have I not already made that clear?” He paused with a frown, probably playing back the conversation in his head. Then, he continued, “No. I suppose not. You and Frayda will be healers for people's sick and injured pets! Pets are a big business in the city. You'll have no shortage of customers once people find out what you can do. People *love* their pets.”

I stared off into space for a while before he interrupted my thoughts. “Think about it,” he said.

I did think about it, and then we did some planning, and then Frayda and I opened for business. Without so much as a single advertisement or even a sign out by the street, we began to acquire, and retain, a clientele. Word-of-mouth was that we could be relied upon to be competent, honest, and affordable. We charged only as much as people could pay, sometimes giving our services away rather than leaving

someone's beloved pet to suffer. Frayda couldn't stand to see any living thing suffering, so as long as there was no Dark Magic involved, we didn't turn anyone away.



I heard a commanding “Whooooaaaa!” that snapped me out of my reverie, and only then did I realize that we had arrived at Whistle Tree Farm. I had been so focused on my thoughts that I had absolutely no recollection of the last part of our journey.

Garrick had stopped us on a circular drive of crushed stone at the point closest to a rather large barn off to our right. There were some carriage-style lanterns above the open doorway which provided enough light for me to see that the expanse between where we were and the doors was probably soft and muddy.

I hopped down from the wagon and took a few steps toward the barn to see if my suspicions were correct. *Crunch—crunch—squish.*

Yep, that's mud, I thought. Frayda was wearing shoes of cloth with leather soles—fine for walking on city sidewalks, but not capable of keeping her feet dry. I didn't want her dealing with cold, wet feet all night, nor did I want her prized cape dragging through the mud, so I returned to the wagon and once again adopted the mannerisms of Mr. Aristocrat, saying to Frayda, “Your majesty—I can hear a multitude of slimy worms crawling all around us who are eager to crawl into your shoes so they can snuggle up between your delectably warm toes. Perhaps you should ride on my back until we pass through the worm kingdom and are safely in the barn.”

“I say, that is a wonderful idea. It just wouldn’t do for me to try to walk through worms,” she said in her Regal Queen voice. Once again, we were Oh So Funny and also without concern as to whether anyone else heard us or not. I turned my back to her so she could wrap her arms around my neck and let me lock my arms under her knees, piggy-back style. Remaining in character as Mr. Aristocrat, I said to her, “Do try to resist the urge to oink.”

“*You’re* the pig,” she said. “*I’m* the queen. *You* have to try not to oink.”

“Oink!” I said, and started squishing my way from the wagon to the barn. If Garrick had an opinion of our antics, he kept it to himself.

Frayda had her chin on my shoulder, which meant her soft, curly hair was tickling my face on that side. It was also pretty much blocking the vision out of my left eye since the wind was blowing gently but steadily from that direction. When we were about halfway across the muddy expanse, I said to her, still as Mr. Aristocrat, “Your most exalted highness, your wispy tendrils seem to be very intent on poking me in the eye.”

She didn’t respond in kind, but rather, in all seriousness, said in a quiet whisper, “You haven’t given me a piggy-back ride in a long time.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “I remember doing this very thing not more than two days ago.”

“I had to *ask* for that ride. I didn’t say you haven’t given *me* a ride, what I said was you haven’t *given* me a ride. It’s different when you offer to give it to me without me asking.” This was an example of what I called a *Frayda-*

ism. Frayda enjoyed exploring the subtle nuances in the way a word could have multiple meanings just by whether you placed the emphasis on that word or not. I didn't always grasp what she meant, but I got it this time. With her arms already wrapped around me, she gave me a subtle squeeze. *I love you anyway, Hale*, it said.

Once we got into the barn, I saw more clearly that the barn consisted of a long, central hallway with stalls and partitions down each side. Even without farmer-knowledge, I realized that this was not what I would call a “working” barn, full of, say, nothing but dairy cattle or pigs or what-have-you. Neither was it a “farmhouse” barn like a family would use to house their single cow and horse. Using my keen deductive reasoning, though, I quickly determined that the light in the very last stall at the other end of the barn was where we would find our ailing patient.

Frayda positively loved animals, and if I had set her down right then, she would have been unable to see over the partitions. However, from her vantage point on my back, she was high enough to see whatever, or whoever, lived behind the wooden walls.

Every single creature in that barn was to her the finest specimen of its kind she had ever seen. “Oh Hale, look! What a nice looking pig. And the cow! She has a nice face. Look at this . . . and this . . .” I admit I tuned her out until, when I rounded the last partition at the end, I heard a sharp intake of breath next to my ear. Frayda's wriggling legs were telling me, *Let me down!*, so I knelt down and she quickly slipped off of my back.

She ran forward about two steps and stopped next to the head of a giant (to me, at least) ox who was laying rather lethargically on the floor. “Wow!” she was saying. “He’s beautiful! No. He’s magnificent!”

In the region closer to the ox’s tail, I noticed a man and a woman standing very close together; his face contorted with worry, hers looking mainly just tired. I could see that Frayda’s enthusiasm for the ox had pleased the man; in spite of his worry, he smiled with a tight-lipped smile that did not quite make it to his eyes. This was Farrick, I presumed, although he had yet to introduce himself. Farrick’s eyes were still locked on his beloved ox when Garrick caught up to us and rounded the partition. Only then did Farrick stop looking at his ox and take us in for the first time.

Farrick was shocked when he first saw us, but he tried to hide it. He looked Frayda up and down, glanced at me for a second, then turned and frowned in Garrick’s direction. Even though he wasn’t my father, I could interpret the expression on his face: *I thought I gave you instructions to get the animal healer, not some yellow-eyed weirdo and a little kid.* He opened his mouth as if to say something, but Garrick preemptively interrupted him by introducing us. “Papa, this little one is Frayda, and the big one is Hale. She’s the healer. He’s . . . whomever she says he is.” *Trust me* hung in the air, unspoken.

“Well,” Farrick said, “I thank you both for coming. I’m Farrick, this is my wife, Nora.” I didn’t expect the farmer’s wife to be there, so that meant that either this ox was a big deal, or she loved it enough to be out there too.

Farrick continued, “Garrick, you've met, and the big guy on the floor is Mr. Jubilant. I've seen a lot of things in my time, but nothing like this. He's strong, and he's usually happy, I mean, not that I really *know* but he *seems* happy, if you know what I mean. I've always gotten the impression that he likes being an ox, what with all the plowing and hauling heavy stuff for me. The kids all love him and he is so gentle. I'm at my wits end.” By the way he was rambling a bit I surmised he was rattled by the state of Mr. Jubilant. I could tell he genuinely cared for his animal, not just because of how important and profitable an ox can be on a farm, but because Farrick was just that kind of person.

During his short monologue, I was trying to examine Mr. Jubilant without being too obvious about it. Frayda was the healer, as far as Farrick was concerned, and our script depended on maintaining that impression. As for the ox, the one eye I could see (the other being on the other side of his head) had a glazed-over quality that made me think he was awake, but not necessarily aware of what was going on around him. More troubling to me was the way his breathing sounded. Even to me, unaccustomed to what an ox should sound like, it sounded labored; each breath a struggle, with a subtle but disturbing rattle each time he exhaled. *We might be in for a long night*, I thought to myself. *We might not get paid, either*. We never accepted payment if the animal died or if, for some reason, we were unable to make it better.

Frayda knelt down near Mr. Jubilant's head, skooching her cape up so it wouldn't come in contact with the barn floor, and said quietly, “Hello, Mr. Jubilant. I'm Frayda.”

Then, she adopted a far-away expression that I recognized when she was using her magic ability to examine an animal. She wasn't looking *at* Mr. Jubilant, she was looking *into* him and *through* him. It only lasted for a second or two, then, she turned to face me, her face expressing puzzlement. "I don't see anything."

I don't see anything was not the answer I expected, and it was not in the script. If she had said "I saw red," I would know that whatever was ailing the animal was something natural—an illness, indigestion, even a broken bone. Any color of the rainbow would do; Frayda had explained to me that natural events always had some kind of pretty color (her words, not mine).

At other times, if instead of a color she perceived a fuzziness (again, her word, not mine), she would say, "I fear we may already be too late." That phrase was my clue that there was some element of Dark Magic at play, and that our task of healing the animal would be substantially harder, or in most cases of that sort, impossible. We could counteract some Dark Magic, but not always. Usually, trying to counteract Dark Magic just made the situation worse, as if the Dark Magic could feed off of our attempts to reverse it and just grow stronger in response. Rather than coming right out and saying that it was Dark Magic, we used code, because we didn't want our customers to think we were accusing them of anything. People tended to get defensive if you accused them of being affiliated with Dark Magic, especially when they were innocent. Even more so when they were guilty.

I was standing there trying to figure out how to make *I don't see anything* work into our routine when she said, "I'm going to see if I can feel anything. Maybe he's just sick enough that the colors can't come through."

"Okay," I replied, somewhat relieved. She was improvising in a way that made it easy to get back into our regular routine as subtly as possible. *Clever girl*, I thought. *I'm impressed.*

Even with this second assessment of Mr. Jubilant's condition, Frayda was relying on her own innate ability to collect magical energy. She didn't need my help or any kind of magical "boost" yet. I just stood patiently out of her line of sight so as to avoid distracting her.

■ ■ ■

Whereas Frayda had more ability to *collect* magical energy than I did, I was far more capable of *manipulating* it than she was. Manipulation is the greater of the two abilities because, even without being able to collect magical energy of your own, you can draw it away from other sources. *How* and *why* you might draw that energy was part of what differentiated Magic from Dark Magic.

Collecting energy usually meant being able to store it as well. Collecting energy was a lot like resting your muscles. It just happened over time when you weren't using magic. Different people could collect energy at different rates—some much faster than others. Likewise, people's ability to store energy varied greatly. There didn't seem to be anything you could do about your abilities to collect and store energy. However, one could learn to become more

adept at manipulating energy, up to certain limits that seemed to be inherited or otherwise determined at birth.

I was fairly adept at manipulating energy. My ability to gather energy on my own was very limited, and I could not store very much energy either. I could, however, draw magical energy from other sources. The sources that were most effective for me were a type of stone I called sunstones—outwardly, they appeared just like other stones, but when examined on a magical level, they revealed their ability to gather and store energy. The quickest and most reliable way for me to rejuvenate a sunstone was to leave it in the sun, which is why I called them sunstones as a child. A day in the sun was to the sunstone what a good night's sleep is to you and me. Furthermore, merely taking magical energy from a stone was not usually Dark Magic in itself. It was what you *did* with it that would determine whether it was Dark Magic or not.

It was also possible to share magical energy between individuals. Frayda and I could “blip” a small amount of magical energy between us as long as we were touching each other. If you *gave* magical energy to someone, well and good, but to *take* magical energy from someone . . . that was Dark Magic.

For those who could manipulate magic in greater quantities than they could draw from their own sources, it was tempting to take magical energy from other people. It could be so *easy*. Some people had no ability to manipulate magical energy at all and therefore did not realize that they had any energy to give. Unscrupulous magicians would secretly take that energy and use it for their own purposes.

“It's not wrong,” they would claim. “They weren't going to use it anyway.” But it was *stealing* and it was *wrong*. When you built your magical efforts on a foundation of *wrong* you ended up with Dark Magic.

Dark Magic had a way of becoming perverted over time. Your spell would look to be exactly what you wanted it to be, but in time, it would turn sour, sometimes becoming the exact opposite of what you had set out to do. Days, months, even years might go by before its deterioration was apparent, but sooner or later, it would always deteriorate. Always. Dark Magic robbed me of my parents, and I had resolved years ago that I would never, ever, take magical energy from anyone, unless it was freely given. Now, one of my top priorities was to help Frayda learn to resist the temptations of Dark Magic so that she wouldn't be corrupted by it either. I resolved to teach her by doing, not just by telling.

■ ■ ■

Frayda shifted her feet slightly so she could place one of her hands on Mr. Jubilant's head between the ears. I smiled when I saw she just couldn't resist the urge to give him a little scratch before she closed her eyes and began focusing her magical energy again, delicately probing into and around Mr Jubilant's massive ox body.

Suddenly, Frayda was on her feet with her clenched fists pressing into her temples on either side of her head. She looked like she was either running in place or stomping out a fire, and she was screaming. “It's BAD. It's BAD. It's VERY VERY BAD! It's very bad, Hale!” At first, I thought this was just another improvisation routine, but one glance

at her face quickly banished that thought. There were tears welling up at the corner of both eyes. Her lips were trembling, and she had a dazed look about her that made me think she was staring at the vision of something within her own memory.

You fool! I thought to myself. What danger had I just exposed her to? If she was hurt . . . I wouldn't be able to bear it. Uncle Cyrus wouldn't have to kill me, I would gladly do it myself.

I heard some murmurings from Nora and Farrick. She was looking at Frayda, her face showing both worry and concern. He was patting her hand, probably encouraging her to wait and see. I flashed them a quick smile; whether or not it gave them any comfort I did not know, nor did I want to try to find out. I was concerned for Frayda.

As quickly and as gently as I could, I placed my hands on her shoulders and squeezed affectionately while I knelt down to her eye level. “Frayda. Frayda!” I squeezed more tightly. “Frayda!” Finally, the far-away look in her eyes melted, and I had her full attention. My hands felt the familiar tingle as I “blipped” some magical energy to her, not knowing if she needed it but not caring either. “Frayda, I’m right here. Are you okay?” I heard my own voice trembling as I said this, but it was no use trying to hide my emotions from her, she would have sensed them anyway.

She looked away from me and, for what seemed like an eternity, she did not answer. Finally, when I thought I could not stand it any longer, she turned her face to me and tried to smile. She had tears streaming down her face and her body was trembling, and the smile didn’t really work, but

she managed to say in a tone barely above a whisper, “I’m okay, Hale. I think I’m okay.”

I crushed her in a bear hug, fighting back tears of my own and just held her close while I waited for her trembling to subside. Finally, after a minute or two, I could tell that she had calmed down.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I asked gently. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“I *can* tell you what I saw, but I *can’t* tell you what I *saw*,” she replied, using a Frayda-ism. Translation: *I’ll describe it, but I don’t understand it.*

“Okay,” I replied. I put my hands back on her shoulders and in a gentle voice said, “I’m right here. I’m not leaving you.”

She took a deep breath and then tried to adopt a very brave, grown-up posture. I realized I was about to have a conversation with Grown-up Frayda, my pet name for the way she would sometimes say things in a way that someone two or three times her age would have done. It was fun to me. It could be unnerving to others when they did not know her well. It was going to be a real asset to me now, because I needed to know as much as she could possibly tell me. “It was like an emptiness . . . less than emptiness . . . like an emptiness that sucks everything into it and still remains empty. It felt my presence. It didn’t know who or even what I was. I felt it trying to figure me out, like you might do to something you left in a pocket and forgot about . . . I poked it, somehow, not with my finger or anything, but with magical energy maybe . . . it recoiled from that, and then . . . I felt its rage, and its hate, and its fear, and then I saw your

face and I knew you'd protect me . . .” She melted into tears again and gave me another bear hug. Grown-up Frayda was gone, but I still had Frayda.

I held her tightly, and tried to think. *Not colors, therefore, not natural. Not fuzziness, therefore, not Dark Magic. What else, then?* I had never heard of such a thing before. Furthermore, what were we to do? Should I stay here and deal with this unknown thing, putting Frayda at risk? Should we leave? *Ask her*, I thought. *Make the decision together.*

“Frayda,” I said. “I don't know what we are dealing with here. I do not want you to get hurt. If I stay, I need you with me. If you do not want to stay, we will leave. What do you want to do?”

“I want to try to help Mr. Jubilant get better. He is a wonderful creature, and I don't want to leave him like this.”

“You're a brave girl,” I said, then, on impulse, I planted a kiss right in the middle of her forehead. “I think I might have need of a larger-than-usual number of my sunstones tonight. I will need you to help me with that. Does that sound good to you?” She nodded her head yes. Normally, I used one sunstone, sometimes two, for natural causes. I had eight real sunstones in my kit and as many fake ones that were just for show. I also had my mother's sunstone ring, my most prized possession, but I had never, ever, dared to use it. *There's a first time for everything*, I thought grimly. *Tonight could be the night.* It would be my last resort. I continued telling Frayda, “We're going to start like we always do. Let's make a potion of sunwater and get Mr.

Jubilant to drink it; then, I will see if I can figure out what to do next.”

Giving our patients sunwater was how we always got started. It gave us a reliable and ethical way to put magical energy into somebody, animals of course as we never worked on people, and it gave our customers a bit of a show. I had come up with the idea of using sunwater. Frayda had added to it, and she had come up with a routine that got worried pet owners involved in a way that assured them that they were helping us heal their beloved pets.

“Right!” she exclaimed with enthusiasm. “I’ll get the vial and the water.”

“And you’ll do all the talking, right?”

“Yes!”

I smiled at her. I had Frayda back, all right, and I was beginning to feel better.

The vial came out of Frayda’s purse. Uncle Cyrus had procured it for us. It was similar in size and shape to the glass test tubes like the chemists use, but it was made of some kind of crystal with rough-cut sides that refracted light in beautiful patterns. More importantly to us, it never spilled its contents; yet, we could dispense the entire dose with one quick inversion of the vial near the animal’s mouth. It was a real benefit for treating animals that wanted to bite or scratch because we could be quick.

Frayda walked over to Farrick and Nora to show them the vial and explain what it was for. Nora had looped her arm through her husband’s, as women often do. On that particular night, it struck me that with that simple gesture, Nora was saying without audible words to her husband,

you're not alone; I'm here too. Since I knew what was coming, that Frayda would ask either Farrick or Nora to fill the vial with water, I focused my attention instead on untying and unrolling my stone kit.

On most of our visits, I would do this with a flourish, waving my hands over the stones before selecting them and drawing on my magical energy to make them light up and sparkle. Tonight, I did not bother with showmanship and just picked one of the sunstones at random; since they were all fully rejuvenated, the actual stone I was going to use didn't matter.

Meanwhile, the vial was now filled with water. I surmised that either Farrick or Nora had dipped it into Mr. Jubilant's water trough and then handed the now-filled vial back to Frayda, but I hadn't been paying attention and so I missed that part. Frayda was explaining the next step to them in her well-rehearsed patter. "We have found that when people love their animals, it makes the healing process quicker and more effective. If either, or both, of you would be willing to hold this, Hale will mix the sunwater right here and then we can give it to Mr. Jubilant."

Farrick held out one of his hands. "Just hold the vial right here, like this," Frayda continued. She had placed the vial in Farrick's massive outstretched palm and was guiding his other hand to hold the vial at the side. "There. You won't drop it if you hold it like this. Miss Nora, you can hold it too, if you want, right here." She gently guided one of Nora's hands to the side of the vial. "It always helps," she added, with a smile.

Meanwhile, I approached with the sunstone and manipulated a single drop of glowing liquid out of the stone and into the vial. Normally, I try to make this more dramatic, but that night, all I did was step back and let Frayda take over again. The sunwater was doing what it always did. The entire vial was lit up from within, like it really had sunlight in it, and there were some beautiful patterns of light and shadow on our faces, the nearby walls, and even the rafters above.

Frayda continued her instructions by saying, “Now. Just stay still for a minute. I know you love Mr. Jubilant, and I want you to think of how this sunwater can help him, and that when we give it to him, you are helping him too because you love him. Okay?”

Farrick and Nora both nodded their heads in assent, saying nothing. Their eyes were fixed on the vial, its bright glow having the desired effect to calm them down and give them hope. “You can close your eyes if you want to,” she added. They did. Almost immediately, the vial began glowing even brighter, but now, it was also infused with colors that had not been there before. Even in my state of anxiety, I marveled at how beautiful it was. “The extra colors are from the love you have for Mr. Jubilant,” she said. I had initially thought that this last part was putting it on a little thick, but Frayda insisted it was just as real as the sunwater was.

“Oh, this is good!” she exclaimed, giving them one of her charming smiles. She and I might be a bit rattled, but she was putting Farrick and Nora and Garrick at ease. “Now, I’ll take it from you,” she said quietly. She gently lifted the vial

from Farrick's hand and walked it over to Mr. Jubilant's head, where she stopped.

"Hale, would you take care of my cape?" she asked. I rolled it up and held it aloft while she knelt down and gently poured the sunwater into Mr. Jubilant's mouth. His tongue was hanging out from the back side of his mouth and I thought perhaps the sunwater was just going to pass through his teeth and run out into the dirt of the barn floor, but the vial did it's thing. Not a drop was spilled and Mr. Jubilant swallowed it all.

"We will need to wait a few minutes for the sunwater to get in there," said Frayda, rising again to her full height. "Now what?" she whispered to me.

I whispered in return, "I'm going to do what you did, which is, to try to work out by feel what is going on in there. I need you to either hand sunstones to me as I wear them out or hold them yourself and blip the energy over to me." Frayda was as good at blipping energy as she was at capturing it; if she was willing to hold the stones for me, I would be able to work with both hands; however, she would have to be touching me and that would expose her to more risk if things went bad. She knew that, so I didn't have to warn her in that way.

"I'll blip."

Although Frayda could not normally discern the difference between magical stones and inert ones, she knew mine by sight because I had previously shown her some years before. Once she had known, she never confused a real one with an inert one. Unfortunately for me, she couldn't extract energy from the stones by herself, but if she

held the stone and touched me, I could draw the energy from the stone through her, and, as a bonus, she could give me whatever energy she had naturally if she determined I needed it.

“Thank you,” I said. “If, at any time, you think we should stop, we stop, okay?”

She didn't say anything, but just smiled a small smile and nodded her head up and down. Probably, she was nervous. I was too.

“Let's get started,” I said, as I knelt down by Mr. Jubilant's massive head. I placed one hand on his shoulder and the other near where Frayda's had been. I felt Frayda's tiny hand on my shoulder, and I knew she had chosen a sunstone and was holding it in her other hand.

“I'm ready,” she said. I closed my eyes and immediately felt like I was riding a wave of magical energy that was taking me out of my body. I was somehow both around and inside Mr. Jubilant. I could see the light of the sunwater we had administered to him, and I borrowed from it to examine what I could. I looked for something in his stomach, then his lungs, then his heart. I checked bones and muscles. Because of his size, my first sunstone ran out before I could locate a problem. Usually, I could find and fix things with just one stone, but he was big, so that didn't surprise me.

Without moving or opening my eyes, I said to Frayda, “I need another stone. That one's already depleted.” I felt her hand leave my shoulder, then return. I felt that familiar tingle in my skin underneath her hand, and I resumed my examination. I checked and rechecked everything and was about to give up when I saw (from the inside) a wound of

some type just about perfectly centered on his back between his front shoulders. I directed some of the light from the sunwater toward the wound and found there was some kind of “trail” that began there and worked its way through his body in a haphazard fashion, evidence (I thought) of something exploring without knowing where it was or, perhaps, what it was looking for. I followed the trail with its zigs and zags and eventually came to the other end.

What Frayda had described as the emptiness was there. I steeled myself for an attack, because it would surely attack when it realized it had been discovered. While I thought I had prepared myself, I had underestimated its intensity.

Because I was more capable of manipulating magical energy than Frayda was, it was less able to frighten me, but it was fearsome nonetheless. The first impression I got of my adversary was of a cornered alley cat and how it would arch its back and hiss to try to frighten whatever threatened it. *It might be a bluff. I'll push back*, I thought. It recoiled from me. *Gotcha!* I thought, then, I felt a powerful counterattack that stunned me for a moment. And with that, my second sunstone was exhausted.

Frayda grabbed another sunstone and I started again. It was like the fights I used to get into as a kid, when neither one of us was strong enough to overcome the other, but neither one was willing to admit defeat, either. I pushed. It pushed back. I kicked and punched. It fought me, blow for blow. I wasn't losing, but I wasn't winning.

Sunstone number three was soon exhausted, and numbers four, five, and six followed quickly thereafter.

“This isn’t working,” I said to Frayda. I was getting tired, and so was she. “We only have two sunstones left.”

“I’m slowing you down, Hale. You can use energy better than I can. Perhaps, if you held the stone yourself, you could use all of its energy all at once.” I looked at her, contemplating what she said. “You know where to look now; you don’t need both hands any more.”

I closed my eyes because I was hurting in all kinds of ways and I was getting exhausted. Without looking, I just held out my left hand to her and waited for the next stone.

“Use both stones. Use them together,” she said, as she placed the last two stones in my hand. *How come I never thought of that?* I asked myself. *Because you’ve never done it before,* I answered. Would I be able to draw enough energy all at once? Would I be able to manipulate it effectively enough? It was a lot to try to learn all at once, knowing that I had to get it right the first time.

I focused my thoughts on what I had to do. The stones would cooperate, but I doubted my ability to literally drain both stones instantaneously. Up until that time in my life, I only ever used whatever amount I needed at whatever pace I was working. Now, I had to draw all the power from not one but two stones and direct it at the vile filth that was plaguing Mr. Jubilant. As if sensing my thoughts, Frayda wrapped her arms around me and hugged my back. “I will be right here,” she said.

I took a deep breath and prepared to face my opponent. I let my mind drift back to my days as a street urchin, having to fight for myself. I had learned how to knock the wind out of people with a single punch to the center of the torso—it

had been done to me enough that I eventually learned to do the same thing. It was a wonderfully effective way to immobilize your adversary long enough to steal his food, or flee, or both. People called it “knocking the wind out of someone” because when done right, it left your adversary unable to breathe for half a minute or more.

I did a mental rehearsal of the steps I needed to take. I would probably get only one chance, so it would have to be right the first time. Put your weight on your back leg . . . push off with the back leg to transfer weight to the front leg . . . push with the front leg . . . extend your arm . . . draw as much power from the sunstones as you possibly can, and faster than you have ever tried in your life . . . use your momentum and the magic energy of the sunstones and punch this Empty Darkness right in the gut. Did it have a gut? In the magic dimension, it wouldn't matter. It was my ability to manipulate the magical energy that would determine what happened.

I willed the stones to feed me their energy. I felt the collective power of both stones course through me. It *hurt*. I imagined performing the punch, directing all of it at the black emptiness in Mr. Jubilant's body. With my out-of-body magical senses I heard a bone-crunching CRACK! then saw a blinding light. Then, suddenly, all my magical senses seemed to just shut down. Slowly, I became aware of my physical senses again and realized that I was on my back, looking up at the rafters of the barn, with poor Frayda pinned underneath me. I sat up quickly. She was still holding on. “I'm still here!” she said.

Above Mr. Jubilant there was an ugly, stinking, oily cloud of vile smoke. It seemed to absorb some of the light in the room, then, it began to dissipate and diminish. Frayda and I, along with Farrick, Nora, and Garrick, were coughing and gagging. When we had finally caught our respective breaths, Farrick was saying, “By gaw, I’ve never seen the likes of that before. That stinking smoke came right out of the place on his back where that weird wasp stung him, too.”

I stood up and tried to brush the straw and dirt from my clothes. *Oh no—Frayda’s cape*, I thought. Sure enough, it had picked up its share of straw and dirt when I smashed her into the ground. “Frayda . . . I’m sorry. Your cape . . . your favorite cape . . .” In hindsight, I reflected that the last thing I should have been worried about was Frayda’s cape, but perhaps I was in shock or just exhausted.

“It’s okay, Hale. Mom and I can clean it.” She paused. “You might want to ask Farrick about that wasp.”

I mentally pounded my head with my fist in frustration. *Perhaps I should really pound my head*, I thought. *I’m making too many mistakes*. “I should have thought of that,” I said to her. Then, to Farrick, I said, “Tell me more about that wasp you mentioned.”

“I should have known there was more to that thing than I first thought,” he said, “but oxen get bit and stung all the time and tend to just shake it off, so I didn’t think much of it. I didn’t get a good look at it, but I remember thinking it looked weird, certainly not like any of the ones I’d seen before. Big and black, dark, like its shadow was too big or something, and fast. It came right up to him, didn’t even

look for any other place to be, and stung him right there on his back and was gone, just that quick.”

Mr. Jubilant had begun to stir. His eyes were open wide and looked bright and normal. He wasn't struggling to breathe any more. In fact, he felt so good that he slowly rose to his feet and lumbered over to his feed bucket without a care in the world. It was just another routine morning as far as Mr. Jubilant was concerned.

Frayda and I exchanged a look, silently communicating to each other *He's better. We did it.*

I glanced at Farrick. He was beaming as he admired Mr. Jubilant. Patting him affectionately on the neck, he said “You gave me quite a scare there, old friend. It makes me feel real good to see you up on your feet.”

Frayda and I were gathering up our gear, which meant she was grabbing her purse and I was rolling up my stone kit and tying it shut. Farrick directed his attention to Frayda and said, “You have done me a real good turn. I know you expected to be paid, so what do I owe you?”

Frayda simply turned her back to him and started walking away. Farrick was staring after her with his mouth open in astonishment. I knew Farrick would insist that we let him pay us; to refuse would be an insult, so I offered this explanation: “As often as not, Frayda feels like . . . seeing an animal recover is payment enough.”

“Well, it's not. Not to me. You see this barn? This is the luxury barn. Mr. Jubilant gets to sleep here because he's the primary reason my farm is successful. I have other oxen; he's like their leader. They all work better when he's around.

I don't know why, but I know it is so. You've got to let me pay you."

"We don't really have a fee. A lot of our customers just pay us with items that they make, especially if they don't have any money," I said. I really had no idea what to request for a fee. Obviously Whistle Tree Farms was a prosperous operation, but that didn't give me the right to charge him more than anyone else just because he had more money.

"All right then . . ." He closed his eyes and started muttering various numbers and named a fee. "I'll happily pay that, because, between with how hard you worked and how much money Mr. Jubilant is worth to me, that's a fair market price." Was it? I didn't know. But it was way too much for me to accept. People could work an entire year and not earn what he was prepared to pay us.

"We can't take that much. None of our other customers have ever been able to afford such a fee. It wouldn't be right," I said. I wanted him to hear the sincerity in my voice so he would know I was telling the truth, not trying to insult him.

"What will you take, then?"

I answered, "I like it best when people can find something to give to Frayda that she will treasure or enjoy. How about breakfast? She always enjoys breakfast. Or a tour of the barn. She loves animals."

"I can do better than that! We will send you home with some of the best products Whistle Tree Farms has to offer. You said people often pay you with what they make. I can certainly do that." He sounded genuinely pleased.

“Okay.”

“Nora?” Ferrick said to his wife, leaving his request unspoken.

“I will take care of it, dear. You stay here with Mr. Jubilant. I'll just run over to the chowhouse real quick and grab some stuff quick as I can—maybe some hams and dried beans and whatever else might be there. I will ask Ida if she has any fresh biscuits or something that we can wrap and send along with you.” Then, she sped off toward the front of the barn.

Garrick waited to see if his father was going to give any orders before saying, “I need to tend to Johnny and Molly before we set out again, or maybe switch them with Jarvis and Milly.”

“There's a good lad. I never even gave them the first thought, and with them being two of my best horses! See to that, and then, maybe see if your mother needs help putting stuff in the wagon for these two,” meaning Frayda and me. Then, to me, he said, “You'll ride back in my wagon and you'll take what I give ya and I'll have no argument on the matter. Deal?”

I smiled. “Deal.” We shook on it, as if it needed to be formalized.

Together, we turned and started walking toward the front entrance of the barn, catching up to Frayda along the way. She was doing her best to peer between the slats to gaze at the various animals. Farrick said, “Here, let's do that this way,” and picked her up like she weighed nothing at all. Now, she could see the animals from a better perspective. Farrick walked her up one row and down the other, then,

back to the front entrance. By that time, I could see that Garrick had the wagon loaded and was patiently waiting for us to come out, so I decided it was time to go.

“Frayda, we need to get going. Garrick is waiting for us,” I told her.

“Okay,” she said quietly, but sadly.

Farrick set her down gently, then, knelt down to her eye level. “You can come back any time, and I'll show you all around, and we can see whatever animals you want. Deal?”

“Deal!” she said, now with a big grin.

With a start I remembered the muddy expanse between where we were and the wagon. I was far too tired to want to do what I needed to do, but I knew it had to be done, so, switching back to my Mr. Aristocrat personality, I said, “Your majesty . . .” and then stopped. I had absolutely no idea what to say. I decided I didn't want try to say anything else; I just knelt down and let Frayda climb on my back.

■ ■ ■

The sun was up now, and we were still a good ways out from town. So far, Frayda had not said another word since we left the barn. She had kept her eyes fixed straight ahead and her back ramrod straight like the night before, her pink purse on her lap and her hands clenched around the handles. My attempts at small-talk went unheeded. I thought *she may or may not be mad at me, but she is definitely mad at something.* We were both tired, and I was tempted to just let things alone until later when we had gotten some rest, and then I decided against it.

“You were brave today,” I said.

“I was *not* brave today,” she retorted. Tears formed in her eyes. She dabbed at them angrily because she did not want me to see them.

“You *were* brave. More than that, you were *smart* and I would have made a mess of things without your help.”

She turned to face me, and I detected right away that Grown-up Frayda was about to share her thoughts with me. “All of my life, Hale, I have heard people say things like ‘I was scared to death.’ I have even used phrases like that myself.” She paused to gather her thoughts for a few seconds and then continued. “Last night, I faced real fear for the first time. I shut down, Hale. I didn’t face it, I ran. I am ashamed, and I am mad at myself for being weak, and I know I disappointed you.” She started crying again, but didn’t try to hide it this time.

“Frayda, you were not weak. You were stunned. You were surprised. Like an army in a war, you rallied and regrouped.” She pressed her lips together and frowned, saying nothing. “You were there for me. I was weak at times, and during those moments, you were strong for me. I could not have done what I did by myself.”

“And you were strong for me when I was weak,” she said softly.

“You see? That’s what we do when we love each other. Neither of us can be strong all the time. The strong one protects the weak one. Sometimes, I will be the strong one. Sometimes, you will be the strong one. You were certainly the strong one more than once last night.”

“You sound like Daddy when you say that.”

“A high complement, coming from the daughter of a wizard,” I said, with a chuckle.

“Daddy is *not* a wizard.”

“You’re lucky to be the daughter of a wizard,” I said, as if I hadn’t heard her. A few seconds later, I added, “Lucky you.”

Frayda reached over and grabbed my hand, giving it a strong squeeze. “Lucky *us*, Hale. Lucky *us*.” And with that comment, she leaned her head on my shoulder and fell asleep.

Chapter II

In the early days, I hated Frayda. It wasn't her fault—I had resolved to hate her before we ever met.

The day I arrived in the city of Leviathanos was the third and final day of the long journey from Cape Town, the coastal city where I had spent my entire life. In the early years, I lived alone with my mother in a shack near the beach. Later, the man I would learn to hate as my stepfather married my mother and took us in to live with him. When my mother died, he abandoned me. He didn't like me any more than I liked him. He had sent me across town on an errand, and when I arrived back home, he had already cleared out and left town. The new owners of what had been our house gave me enough time to collect my things and chased me off. I spent the next two years living on the streets, fighting with other street urchins, as we were called, stealing food when I had to but occasionally paying for it when I could, and generally hating everyone.

Somehow, my Uncle Cyrus found out where I was. I had never seen him before, but I knew his name. I knew he was my mother's older brother. She told me he was kind and honorable, and on her deathbed, she had urged me to go to him for help. She assured me he would take me in, that he had promised her he would. When she died, I was ten years old. Days later, when my stepfather abandoned me, I had no money—just one set of clothes, a blanket, and my bag of magic stones. It would have been just as easy to get to the moon as to Leviathanos and Uncle Cyrus. I couldn't even send a letter. I never expected him to actually make the

effort to locate me, and his sudden appearance caught me totally by surprise.

Over the three days and two nights that we traveled, he excitedly told me about my Aunt Lyra and the city of Leviathanos. He told me about the home in which he lived, which was to become my home, and the fact that he ran a store. He told me about my cousin Frayda, and assured me that although I was twelve and she was five, she was not going to be difficult for me to put up with. "She loves everybody," he assured me. He also assured me, more than once, that this was a permanent thing, that I would be welcome to stay as long as I wanted, that we were family and that he had promised his little sister, my mother, that if anything ever happened to her, he would step in and become my guardian. He even had some kind of legal document, drawn up by the proper legal authorities, and he proudly showed it to me and explained that what it meant was that in the eyes of the law, he was now not only my legal guardian but was also legally obligated to provide for me in the same manner as if I were his natural child. He convinced me that I was no longer a street urchin. As for the rest, like getting along with Frayda, I didn't believe a word.

When he first told me about Frayda, I admit my heart leapt at the thought of having someone who would be family, and a kid, and maybe even look up to me, or perhaps just be fun to be with. In the early years, when my mother and I were all each other had, I had wished for a brother or sister. With the arrival of my stepfather, reason took over: better to be alone than to have someone you

cared about suffering along with you; better to remain distant rather than to become fond of someone. Everyone always left me; eventually, my cousin Frayda would too. It was better for me if I just hated her. That way, she could never hurt me and, inevitably when she left, I would not care and not hurt.

For the three days of our stagecoach journey, Uncle Cyrus tried to prepare me for my new home and new family. For those same three days, I became more and more determined to hate Uncle Cyrus, to hate Aunt Lyra, and most of all, to hate Frayda. Finally, our long stagecoach journey ended, right in front of the shop called Rarities and Oddities that Uncle Cyrus had been telling me about. To the right of the shop window was a door, leading to the family's home alongside and above the shop. Framed in the open doorway were two people who I knew instantly to be Aunt Lyra and Frayda.

“Come, Hale, come and meet Frayda and your Aunt Lyra,” Uncle Cyrus was saying to me. He had alighted from the stagecoach and had turned around to watch me while I climbed out. With a grand gesture, he spread out his arms and said with enthusiasm, “Welcome! Welcome to Leviathanos and your new home!”

I barely had time to take in my surroundings before Frayda broke loose from her mother's light grip on her shoulders and ran to meet me, smiling broadly and preparing to embrace me. She was adorable. *Don't let her get to you, I reminded myself. Remember—you have to hate her so she can't hurt you.*

I pretended to be glad to meet her, letting her hug me and returning the gesture. Uncle Cyrus was beaming from ear to ear. Frayda grabbed my hand and started pulling me to the door, walking backward because her eyes were on me. “Come on, come on!” she was saying. Suddenly I realized she had not been the least bit bothered by my eyes. She had looked me directly in the eye as she ran toward me, and she was looking me in the eye while pleading for me to Come On! Even my mother had sometimes looked away from me; Frayda didn't, not then, not since.

Nonetheless, I determined the best course of action for me was to hate her. *I will be eighteen in six years. Maybe then I can live on my own. I can hate her for six years. I have to*, I thought to myself. No one was going to hurt me. People you cared about hurt you. People you hated would leave you anyway, sooner or later, and it wouldn't hurt. I would be in control. I would make sure Uncle Cyrus and Aunt Lyra and Frayda would hate me. Especially Frayda. *Six years, Hale. Six years*, I told myself.

■ ■ ■

For the first few months, it was easy to hate everyone, especially my aunt and uncle. They were adults, they had the power to tell me what to do, and I could resent them for that. It was enough. Frayda, however, was a different challenge. I tried to discourage her every way I knew how, telling her to go away and leave me alone as much as I could get away with. Sometimes, though, I had to spend time with her, so in spite of my intention to hate her, there were times when I had to be civil.

Frayda was undaunted. No matter how many times I would tell her to leave me alone, eventually, sometimes days later, she would worm her way into whatever I was doing at the time, often, just silently watching. I began to realize that I didn't resent her attention, so I stopped trying so hard to hate her, but I wasn't willing to really, truly, let my guard down. Emotionally, I kept her at arm's length.

One area I never, ever, let Frayda become a part of was my fondness for my sunstones. When Uncle Cyrus brought me back from Cape Town, I had only the clothes on my back and my bag of stones. The clothes were a recent purchase he had made; the stones were my own. I kept them in a little burlap sack, and they were my only friends in the world. My stones had never hurt me, and they had never left me. I didn't trust anyone or anything else.

When I was alone, I would sometimes get one of the sunstones out of the bag and play with it. I would "tickle" a stone, or at least that is how I imagined it. The stone would "laugh" and sparkle, giving off a bit of light that resembled light passing through a prism—patterns of light and shadow and sometimes, even color. Each stone seemed to have its own "shape" that determined the patterns of light that it emitted. Frayda, if given the chance, loved to watch me tickle the stones. On more than one occasion, I had told her in no uncertain tones, out of earshot of Uncle Cyrus and Aunt Lyra, "You don't ever, *ever*, mess with my stones. Do you hear me?" She would always nod her head yes without ever appearing disappointed in any way.

About two years elapsed, during which I adjusted to the family routine and started contributing in various ways.

Uncle Cyrus had assigned me certain chores that were mine to do, and periodically, he would add something to the list, like sweeping the front walk of the shop or going with Aunt Lyra to the market to help carry back whatever she needed to acquire. For my part, I resented having to do these things, but I figured it was the best, or only, way to keep a roof over my head. *This, or live on the street*, I reminded myself.

The one job I particularly hated was sweeping the front walk of the shop. As a street urchin, I sometimes earned a coin or two from some of the store owners by sweeping their sidewalks, but it was something I had to do to survive. The store owners didn't need me to do the work, but out of pity, they let me do it so I could feel like I was earning some money instead of just begging. I wasn't fooled. Doing it for Uncle Cyrus was, to me, an insult, like he was trying to remind me where I came from so I wouldn't forget my place.

One day, over supper, Uncle Cyrus was telling us about one of his customers who had paid him a visit earlier in the day. "So my customer said to me, 'Who is that lad out front?' I said to him, 'That's my nephew Hale. He lives with us now.' He said, 'He's doing a really good job, isn't he?' I said, 'He always does. He's a good lad.' I meant it." Uncle Cyrus turned to look at me, and added, "You do do a good job, Hale. I didn't have to make it up."

I didn't want to admit how good it made me feel to know that Uncle Cyrus approved of my work. Before long, I realized that I really wanted him to approve, and I began to try harder so that I would feel like I earned it.

Underneath it all, I knew that the one thing he really wanted and which I steadfastly refused to allow was for Frayda and me to have a more significant relationship. Somehow I could sense that deep down it was more important to him than almost anything else, but I resolved I would never give in. *It's not going to happen. Deal with it, Uncle*, I thought to myself. He never tried to force it, and over time, Frayda and I had arrived at a sort-of equilibrium where she was content and I stayed out of reach, safe and in control.

And then, one day, it spun out of control. I had come upstairs to retrieve something from my room—a book, perhaps—and I found Frayda on the floor of my room, playing with my stones. She had made a circle of the stones with herself in the middle, and when I found her, she had one of the stones in her hand and was humming a soft tune to herself.

I was mad. Not just mad, furious. She had her back to me. I stomped over to her, grabbed her under her right arm, and yanked her to her feet. Before she could move, I reached across with my left hand and spun her around to face me. Then, I lifted her off of the floor and held her so that her eyes were at my eye level, a mere handspan from my face. “I thought I told you that you were never to mess with my stones!” I yelled, giving her the meanest glare I was capable of. Her eyes were wide with surprise. I let her go; she dropped to the floor. She stood there, facing me, not moving. I drew my hand back and away and then, in a fit of rage, I swung toward her face and struck her on her right cheek with the back of my right hand. It was the same kind

of maneuver my step father had done on me any number of times, and finally, it was my turn to be on the giving end instead of the receiving end. Somehow, in my anger, I thought I was getting even with him by hitting my cousin.

I wasn't done. I stepped behind her and yelled, "Get out! Get out right now!" while shoving her as hard as I could toward the open door. She lost her balance, half-running and half-sliding across the room, arms and legs flailing. Her forehead hit the doorframe with a loud *thunk!* She stood there for a second, stunned, then turned to look at me. Without a word or even a sound, she raced out of sight, toward her own bedroom by the sound of it. I didn't care where she went. I hated her anyway, or so I tried to make myself believe.

I knew deep down that what I had done was wrong and I tried to blame her for it. I also knew that I really didn't want to hurt her, but I didn't want to admit that either. I sat on the edge of the bed and put my elbows on my knees and tried to figure out why I had done what I had done and what, if anything, I should do about it.

I kept trying to be mad, but more and more I was filled with regret. However strong the anger was, the regret was ten times stronger.

Very soon thereafter, I heard footsteps approach the open door. Someone was sniffling and hyperventilating the way you do after you have been crying and before your breathing returns to normal. I looked over toward the door. Uncle Cyrus was standing behind Frayda, with his hands on her shoulders. One look at his face convinced me that I

would have to choose my next words carefully if I was going to live to see the end of the day.

“Would you care to explain to me why I found my daughter crying on her bed and refusing to talk to me about it?” he said. He was angry. I had hit his daughter and he knew it and he was ready to tear me apart.

“She came into my room and was playing with my stones. I told her to get out.”

“Frayda, is that true?” he asked her, keeping his eyes locked on me. So far, she had been looking at the floor the whole time. With her gaze still fixed on the floor, she nodded her head *yes*.

“Then perhaps you would also like to explain this,” he said to me, pointing to a large bump on her forehead, “and this.” He was pointing to a large bruise on the inside of her right arm, from where I had grabbed her and lifted her off of the floor, “and this.” This time, he pointed to her red, swollen cheek.

“I lost my temper. I hit her.” I dropped my head and started staring at the floor. I was ashamed and trying to figure out how defiant I was going to be. *It was her fault, after all*, I kept telling myself.

Uncle Cyrus gently turned Frayda around so that he could see her face. He bent over at the waist to look her in the eye. “Do you disagree with anything Hale said?” he asked her. She shook her head *no*. “I want you to go to your room and wait for me there. Hale and I have some things to talk about. I will deal with you when I get there.” With that, she softly walked toward her room.

Uncle Cyrus stood up to his full height and fixed his gaze firmly on me. With that simple movement, it actually seemed like he grew both wider and taller at the same time, such was his rage.

“You find my daughter playing with some stones, and your response is to *hit her?*” he asked, clenching his teeth.

“She was not supposed to be here. She knew not to play with my magic stones.” The excuse sounded lame to my own ears, but it was all I had.

“To her it's just a bag of rocks! She knows you care about them, and she's trying to get inside of your world so she can participate with you in the things that matter most to you, and for this, you punish her?” He stopped, his eyes ablaze with fury, and just stared at me for what seemed a long time. “She's seven years old! She's half your size! If you were half as tough and smart as you think you are . . .” his voice trailed off and he took a few breaths. “I expected better of you. You have really disappointed me.”

I just sat there. For once, my desire to deliver some kind of disrespectful reply was overcome by my desire to keep my mouth shut. I had anticipated that he would hit me; that's what my stepfather would have done. The last thing I expected to happen was for him to say *you really disappointed me*, and at that moment, I realized that more than anything else, I wanted his approval. It tore me up inside to think that I had disappointed him.

“You will never, ever, strike my daughter in anger. Never again,” Uncle Cyrus said firmly. It wasn't a threat, it wasn't a promise, it was just a fact. I didn't dispute it. I resisted the

urge to say *it wasn't my fault*. It *was* my fault. I wasn't ready to say that, but I realized it nonetheless.

"We're not done, you and I. I'm going to talk with Frayda, and when I finish with her, I will return. I will inform her that she is not to touch your stones again, nor is she to come into this room, unless you give her permission." With that, he spun on his heel and marched off.

For my part, I just sat on the edge of my bed, feeling sorry for myself. Would Uncle Cyrus kick me out? It would serve me right if he did. Would he lock me in the basement, chained to the wall? I probably deserved that, too.

Eventually, overcome with emotion, I buried my face in my pillow and cried my heart out. I hoped the pillow would muffle the sounds of my sobs, but I didn't really care.

■ ■ ■

Some time later, Uncle Cyrus returned. Without any sort of prelude, he just said, "Frayda admitted that she was not supposed to be in your room, or playing with your stones. She has also admitted that she owes you an apology."

"I owe her one too," I said. I held out a very slight hope that that would be the end of it, but I knew better.

"You owe her more than that. You violated her trust. You hurt her. The bruises and the bump will heal, but the deeper hurt . . . we will just have to see. You hurt her trust, Hale. She gave you her heart and you have practically ripped it to shreds and thrown it in her face. You can hardly hurt anyone more than that. You may or may not ever be able to get her to trust you again. If you care about her at all, your most important task now is to find a way to reconcile with her. Maybe, just maybe, she will trust you again. With what

you have done today, you very well may have ruined forever any chance of being Frayda's friend any more."

There was once a time when I would have said "Why would I care. She's only seven," but that day had passed. When, I wasn't sure. At that moment, I knew it hadn't been true for quite some time. "What do I need to do?" I asked in desperation. I suddenly realized I wanted Frayda's friendship, that I wanted her trust.

"I have no idea," he replied. He shook his head from side to side. "I have no idea at all." He turned and left.

■ ■ ■

I stayed in my room, trying to find a way that I could build a bridge between Frayda and me, some way to bridge the gap of my own making. I had been a complete fool. I had lost my self-control. I had let my anger toward my mother and stepfather ruin what was possibly the most fulfilling and meaningful relationship I had managed to have in my life, seven-year-old girl or not.

For the rest of the day, Frayda actively avoided me. I didn't see her, and I resisted the temptation to seek her out. She would need more time, I realized, and just because I wanted to reconcile with her did not mean she was ready to reconcile with me.

When I came down to supper that evening, Frayda's place was empty. We usually took our meals in the kitchen, even though there was a fully-apportioned dining room on the floor above. Our little table in the kitchen was big enough to seat six, but it had long ago been pushed up against the wall on one of the long sides, leaving room for only four chairs. When the family sat together, Uncle Cyrus and Aunt

Lyra took the two end chairs, and Frayda and I sat beside each other.

Realizing that Frayda's absence was because she did not want to sit next to me at supper, I told my aunt and uncle, "It's not right that Frayda has to eat alone or wait for me to leave. Just dish me up a plate and I will come back for it later. You can tell her I won't be here, and that way, she will be able to sit with you and eat." I didn't wait for any kind of reply; I just turned on my heel and went back up stairs to my room, where I knew I would be out of Frayda's way.

For the large part of the next day, Frayda continued to avoid me. If I happened to enter the same room where she was, she just quietly got up and left, without even looking at me. I hadn't fully appreciated what Uncle Cyrus had said the day before, about how deeply I had hurt Frayda, but it was becoming quite clear to me by then. I was also realizing that I wasn't going to enjoy life nearly as much without her as I had been enjoying it with her. I was preparing to inform Aunt Lyra that I was going to skip the family supper again, when suddenly, I had an idea.

Is it still too early? Will it work? I thought. *Only one way to find out.* With a sudden burst of hope and courage, I returned to my room, scooped up my stones, which were still scattered on the floor, and dropped them all in their carrying bag. With bag in hand, I walked over to Frayda's room. Her door was mostly closed, which usually meant that she was in there, so I knocked lightly with a *tap-tap-tap* on the door and stuck my head in through the gap as the door opened wider.

Frayda was sitting on her bed, holding a book but staring off into space. At the sound of my knock, she glanced up and looked at me. Just as quickly, she turned away and sat up on the edge of her bed, her back to me and the rest of the room, facing the wall next to her bed. *Well, at least she didn't tell me to leave*, I thought, so I walked in and sat on the braided rug that filled the center part of the room.

I knew Frayda loved to watch me tickle my sunstones, so I poured everything out of the bag onto the rug. My bag was a mix of stones, some magic and some inert. I sat down next to the pile, picked up one of the magic stones, and gently coaxed it to emit some light. I made sure to point it and spin it in such a way that she would see the sparkles on the wall in front of her.

Even with her back to me, I could tell she was succumbing to the desire to watch, but I decided to be patient. Saying nothing, I continued to play with the stones, doing my best to encourage colors and sparkles. Finally, *finally finally finally*, I thought, she turned around. She wouldn't look at me, but she was smiling just a little bit but frowning as well.

“I want to show you something. I've never shown it to anyone else, ever, and you have to keep it a secret. Just between us, you and me,” I said softly.

With her eyes still on the stones, I heard a very soft “okay.”

“I can't show you if you're over there. You need to come over here, with me,” I said, patting the rug right next to me. She didn't say anything, and for a few long seconds she

didn't move, but her curiosity won out and she came over and sat down, right where I had been patting the rug.

"When I lived on the street, I thought I had to make sure the other kids couldn't figure out which stones were magic and which ones were just stones, so I learned to do this." I picked up one of the stones and gently coaxed it with my magic ability. Right in front of our eyes, the stone slowly morphed, losing its color somewhat and changing its shape. "This is what the stone really looks like. If I tell it to, it will change its shape and color to look like this one." I picked up another stone which had been the twin of the sunstone I had just changed. "I think the magic stones think it's kind-of funny to look like another stone, so they just stay that way once they change until I tell them to change back. Here, watch this." Again, in front of our eyes, the sunstone slowly morphed and changed colors. In no time, it was the identical twin of the other, non-magic stone.

Frayda's eyes were large and round. "I thought some of the stones looked the same, but I didn't know it was magic!" she exclaimed. "Now that I've seen you do it, though, I can tell them apart, even though they look the same."

"Oh really?" I asked, not believing her but not wanting to spoil the moment. "We'll see about that." I took both stones, now indistinguishable in appearance to anyone but me, and hid them behind my back. I mixed them up a bit and then brought them back around and showed them to Frayda. "Which one is the magic stone?"

She pointed to one. "This one."

"You're right. That's it," I said. *Lucky guess*, I thought. So I did it again. Again, she pointed to the correct stone. We

tried it a third time, and a fourth. Eventually, after ten tries (I was counting), I believed her. She had gotten it right, every time. I had never met anyone who could do that, and I was astounded.

On a whim, I “introduced” Frayda to each of the other seven magical stones I had, along with each stone’s “twin.” While she watched, I coaxed the stone to reveal its natural appearance and then revert to matching its twin. She was delighted. Whenever I tried to repeat the experiment of choosing the magic stone, she got it right, every time.

“I want to try something. Help me get them all into my hands.” I scooped up as many as I could. Frayda picked up the rest, one at a time, and dropped them into my hands with the others. For what I was about to do, I would have to rely on my magical energy and not just on the stones. Because of that, the effect would be temporary, but I was sure I could hold the spell in place for at least ten or fifteen minutes. I summoned some of my own innate magical energy and manipulated it, sending it into the stones. Then, I opened my hands and let the stones tumble down onto the carpet. Slowly but steadily, every stone began to change its shape and coloring. I couldn’t force them to assume any *particular* shape or color, but I could encourage them to somehow find an appearance that they could all agree on, or at least that’s how I described it. I was sure no one else would be able to tell them apart, because even I couldn’t tell them apart, except to rely on my magical abilities. Soon, all sixteen stones looked exactly identical. Then, one by one, I picked them up off of the carpet and dropped them into the

bag. I shook the bag, and then poured all of the stones out onto the carpet. They were well and truly mixed.

“Which ones are the magic sunstones?” I asked her.

She very quickly picked up a stone and moved it away from the others. One by one, she picked out seven more stones. “There. These are the real ones, and these over here are just stones.”

I could tell with my magical senses that she was right. One pile had eight inert stones; one pile had eight magical sunstones.

I put all the stones back in the bag, shook it, and poured it out again. Again, Frayda correctly separated the magic sunstones from the inert ones.

We did the routine a third time with the same result. I was astounded. The odds of being able to do what Frayda was doing just by guessing alone made the task nearly impossible to do once, much less three times in a row. Something was going on here. “We need to tell your dad about this. He needs to know.”

“You mean you're not just telling me I'm right to make me feel better?” Frayda asked.

I shook my head *no*. Then, I said, “But first, I have to tell you . . . I was wrong to hit you. I was wrong to yell at you. Frayda . . . I . . . will you forgive me? As long as I live, I will never, ever, ever hit you or yell at you again, and if you can find it in your heart to *mmmmffffffffff*” The last bit was me trying to talk with Frayda's hair filling my mouth while she gave me a ferocious bear hug.

“I forgive you, Hale,” she said very softly. “I shouldn't have been playing with your stones. I knew you didn't want

me to, but I did it anyway. I'm sorry.”

“There's nothing for you to be sorry for. It was just a stupid rule I made up, and it doesn't apply any more.” I sat very still, enjoying the feeling of Frayda forgiving me and holding me tight. “All right, I'm going to stand up. Don't let go. You have to hang on, and then when I'm all the way up, you have to try to work your way around to my back. If you get there, you can have a piggy-back ride while we look for your dad.”

“Okay!” she said, giggling. This was the kind of game Frayda loved—silly for the sake of being silly.

True to her word, Frayda hung on while I stood up. With her feet dangling off of the floor, I tried to shift my weight to gently sling her around from in front of me to behind me. Then, with her squeezing with her knees and with me trying to hook my arms under her legs, she was finally in piggy-back position. “Hang on, I have to get the bag of stones,” I warned her. I slowly bent over at the waist, grabbed my stones, and stood up again. She, of course, had to hang on or slide off over my head, so she hung on, laughing all the while.

■ ■ ■

We found Uncle Cyrus in the workshop on the basement level below his shop.

“Daddy Daddy Daddy!” Frayda yelled when she saw him, “Hale says I can do magic and we want to show you!”

Uncle Cyrus found a crate and turned it upside-down next to his workbench for Frayda to stand on. I dumped the stones out on his workbench and explained what we had done. I showed how I had eight pairs of stones and how one

of the two was a magic sunstone that could change its appearance. Then I showed him how I could make all 16 stones look identical to the others. Frayda then separated the magic stones and the inert stones, just as before. Then, I refilled the bag and we did it once more.

Uncle Cyrus was clearly enjoying our little performance. “And you assure me that you are not just saying she is right for her own benefit? She is really doing this?” he asked. “I don’t have the ability to manipulate or understand stones the way you do, so I have to rely on you. If you say it is so, then it is so.”

“It is so,” I assured him.

“Can we tell mom?” Frayda asked.

Uncle Cyrus replied, “Sure. Why don’t you run upstairs and find her. She will love it.” Quick as a flash, Frayda spun around, jumped off of the impromptu stool and ran up the stairs.

“From our math lessons, Hale, what are the odds of Frayda being able to do what she appears to be doing by choosing the correct stone when you show her two apparently identical ones?” Uncle Cyrus never let a teaching moment go to waste. He and I were going to have a math lesson, evidently. “I’ll give you a hint. It’s very similar to trying to predict a coin toss before it happens.”

I had to think for a minute. “I remember from the coin-flipping exercise that you have a one-in-two chance of predicting a coin toss because there are only two possible outcomes. Each time you add another coin toss to the problem, you double the number of possible outcomes. If I do the math in my head, ten in a row would be . . .” I

scrunched up my face while I tried to do the math. Math wasn't one of my strong points. ". . . about one in a thousand, I think."

"You are correct. Over a thousand, in fact. More than a thousand ways to get it wrong, but only one way to get it right." Uncle Cyrus was good at math. I knew he had calculated the exact number, not just an approximation.

"How about the bag of 16 stones, knowing that only eight are magical. What are the odds of that?" I asked.

"That is actually a form of the classic problem of how many combinations you can make when you start with sixteen distinct items and choose only eight. We can use combinatorics to—" He stopped. "I'm boring you, aren't I? No matter, I won't explain what I'm doing or how I get the answer, but . . ." He glanced upward for about two blinks of an eye while he did some complicated math in his head. Then, he continued, "There are over 12,000 unique ways to combine eight stones if you start with sixteen. So, 12,000 ways to do it wrong, and one way to do it right. Do it three times in a row, and now there is only one right answer and 36,000 ways to do it wrong. 38,610 to be precise." He said this with a knowing look as if I was checking his work and doubting that he was doing anything more than guessing. "When you consider that you and she did it twice more for me, that makes it more like one in 64,000. Based on the odds, I would have to conclude that she is either very, very lucky, or, she has some kind of magical ability."

There was a long pause. "I must say, as thrilled as I am about the fact that she has some magic ability, it is nowhere near as thrilling as the sight of seeing her clinging to your

back with the two of you smiling. Whatever you did . . . I'm proud of you. This may very well be the best day of my life." He smiled, then, his eyes grew very wide. "Don't tell Lyra I said that." Then, we both laughed.

"When she finds out, Aunt Lyra might very well agree with you," I said.

Uncle Cyrus did not appear to have heard me at all. "When Oscar died . . ." he said, and then stopped, his smile falling away while his eyebrows went up, "We've never told you about Oscar, have we. Well, it's time you knew. Oscar was our son. He was two when Frayda was born. As soon as Frayda could crawl, she tried to follow Oscar around wherever he went. When he was five, and she was but three, we had a bad winter. Oscar got sick first, then all of us were sick. We all recovered, except for Oscar. He kept getting worse. When he died . . . Frayda was crushed."

He pursed his lips and stared at the floor for a while. "It wasn't fair to you, but not long after you came to live with us, I began to hope that somehow, you and Frayda would bond, and that she would have someone to help fill the empty place that Oscar left in her life. Today . . . I never dreamed . . . today, I am a happy man." He punctuated this comment by laying his hand gently on my shoulder, looking into my eyes. "Yes, today, I am a very happy man."

From that day on, Frayda and I were practically inseparable. As often as not, I would seek her out. We went to market together, we played games together, some nights she would come and sit in my room or I would go to hers, sitting on the floor while she was in bed, and we would just talk. We shared our hopes, our dreams, our hurts. Slowly,

slowly, I began to stop hating my mother and my step-father. The memories still hurt, but my desire to get even and lash out faded.

In the fairy tale stories, the gallant hero always rescues the princess. In my story, Frayda rescued me.

Chapter III

It was a dark and stormy night.^[1] The day had dawned bright and clear, but storm clouds had blown in by mid-morning, bringing with them a drop in temperatures and a steady rain. Lightning had pierced the sky at frequent intervals, and the roll of thunder seemed to come from all directions throughout the day. By nightfall, the lightning and thunder had moved on, but the steady rain remained.

Of course, that was the day that we had not one, but two requests to come out and visit, and by the end of our second session, which required a long walk each way, Frayda and I were thoroughly cold and wet by the time we returned home. Aunt Lyra had insisted that we get out of our wet clothes as quickly as possible. Under her supervision, we set up a drying rack of sorts for our wet clothes in the kitchen next to the stove. The family took supper up to our formal dining room, which was almost never used for the purpose of dining, but it gave us a place to sit and eat without being surrounded by wet clothes.

After supper, we as a family had adjourned to the living room where there was a nice large fireplace. Uncle Cyrus had seen to it to have a fire lit before supper, and by the time we gathered in the living room, the room was warm and toasty.

On one of his recent trips, Uncle Cyrus had procured a book of stories that he thought Frayda would enjoy reading. We as a family had accidentally discovered that we all enjoyed listening to him read aloud from this book to her and, for a little while, it had become our nightly routine. On

that particular evening, I had stretched out on the sofa and had procured for myself a wool blanket and was covered from chin to toe. Frayda and Aunt Lyra were sharing a chair and a blanket together. Uncle Cyrus was sitting alone and had positioned one of the lanterns beside his chair so he could see, and he was reading aloud to us.

I had been cold all day, or so it seemed, so it felt wonderful to be in a warm room and to be lying underneath the wool blanket. Memories of the night we paid a visit to Whistle Tree Farms and Mr. Jubilant briefly intruded my thoughts. It had been about a month since that night, and, although not forgotten, our encounter with the dark entity was starting to feel like a distant memory. I had no expectation of meeting it again, and I had hardly thought about it at all for days. With a small effort, I pushed the thoughts away, having had enough of “work” for the day. Instead, I let the words of the story captivate my imagination, and I was conjuring up mental images of the scenes in the story. Right about the time I felt like I was floating through the air, I felt a warm hand on my shoulder, gently shaking me.

“Hale, wake up. Someone’s coming.” There was a short pause. Then, the shaking resumed. “Hale, wake up. Someone’s coming.”

“I heard you the first time,” I said groggily, trying to reacquire the ability to move my limbs. My lips didn’t feel particularly functional either.

“I said it five times,” Frayda replied. “You were asleep.”

“Oh,” I mumbled. That was the extent of what my brain could conjure up to say. I shifted my weight and spun my

body around so that my feet were on the floor and I was sitting up. I looked at Frayda. She looked at me and then glanced at the window. Although it was dark outside and there was nothing to see, we could hear the rain hitting the glass. Instead of saying, “Yuck,” I made a face. *It figures*, I thought. I looked back at Frayda, who was normally unflappable. She was wincing, as if the thought of going back out into the weather was already causing her to be in pain.

I took a deep breath and let it out. “Oh, well. We can’t help the weather,” I said.

Aunt Lyra realized that Frayda and I were not eager to don wet clothes, or go out in the rain, but she gave directions anyway. “Frayda, go to your room and get the pants and shirt that used to belong to Andrew down the street. They are wool and will keep you warm. Put the dress from Regina on over that. It’s too big for you, but it will fit better as an outer layer. And get your new boots.”

Without a word, Frayda left the room and headed off to follow her mother’s instructions. Aunt Lyra watched Frayda go and then realized I was watching her. When our eyes met, Aunt Lyra smiled and said, “That child. When she was learning to crawl, she wouldn’t get her hands dirty for anything and demanded that I wash her hands the instant they touched anything dirty or cold or sticky. Now, she’s going out in the rain with you and doesn’t bat an eye. What have you done to my little girl?” She laughed for a second.

“She’s girly enough when it counts,” I replied. “She still likes dressing up and doing her hair and looking pretty. I think she’s just really dedicated to our work.”

“It's you, not the work,” Aunt Lyra insisted. “She doesn't dare complain because she believes you will make her stay behind.”

“I wouldn't. I need her. I can't do this alone.”

“Well, then you better go get dressed, or she might leave without you,” Aunt Lyra said with mock seriousness.

Uncle Cyrus stood up and said, “How about I go with you this time? I've never been out with the two of you, and with this weather, you might appreciate an extra pair of hands. And now that I think of it, I have some weatherproof lanterns and some oilskin cloaks that might come in handy tonight. I will go get them and meet you in the parlor.”

He went his way and I went mine. I found dry clothes and got dressed, coming down the stairs in time to find Frayda unlocking the front door in anticipation of our visitor. I sat down to deal with my boots.

“Do I look all right?” Frayda asked. “I'm wearing trousers. I don't want to look like a boy.” With Regina's dress covering Andrew's boyish clothes, she just looked like a girl wearing a dress. All I could see of the boyish clothing was a short swath of cloth below the hem of her dress and above the boots.

“You look just fine. No one is going to think you are a boy,” I replied.

“Do girls wear boots?” she asked.

“You'd better, if you don't want wet feet,” I replied. “Besides, it will be dark, and no one will be able to see what you are wearing anyway.”

I took a mental inventory of my sunstones. With the cloudy weather, I knew I would not be able to rejuvenate

the stones, so I had made efforts to economize the use of the magical energy they had. On our previous visits that day, I had used three of my stones, where I might usually have used four. Using three meant I had five stones left. Five was enough, as long as we did not have too many more cases before the next sunny day. What could I do, though? Five was better than none; it would have to do.

Frayda opened the door as our visitor approached the building. If he was surprised, we couldn't tell, because of the dark and the rain. She called out to him a cheerful greeting and added, "Come on in out of the weather."

He got as far as the front step and stopped. There was an awning that covered the front of the building, and under the awning there was shelter from the rain. In response to Frayda's greeting, he just replied, "Thank you, but I'm soaked to the skin and will drip all over your floor. I will just stay right here."

Frayda stood at the threshold and leaned against the doorframe. She didn't say anything. Our visitor looked at her, and then at me, and said, "I'm looking for the animal healer. Is this the right place?"

"Yes!" Frayda replied cheerfully. "What is the trouble?"

"I have a horse that needs looking at. We were traveling through town and he was fine all day and then all of a sudden he just went down and won't move. It's not like him. He never does this."

Right about then, Uncle Cyrus came in, carrying two weatherproof lanterns and a pile of oilskin cloaks. Our visitor saw him and said, "Ah! Just the man I was looking for." Then, he repeated his story.

Uncle Cyrus stood and listened, and then politely replied, “It's not me you are looking for; you're looking for them.” He pointed to me and Frayda. “She's the boss,” he added, tipping his head at Frayda.

Our visitor made a face, and then said, “Seeing as how you came highly recommended, I'll keep my comments to myself about how you don't look like what I expected.”

“Everyone says that. I'm Frayda,” Frayda said.

“I'm known as Steppan,” our visitor replied.

Frayda turned to me and said, “Hale, this is Steppan. His horse needs our help.” Translation: *I don't sense any Dark Magic at play; so far, he appears to be who he says he is.* With that, Frayda and I began following our script.

Aunt Lyra came down the stairs and offered to help us put on the oilskin cloaks that Uncle Cyrus had conjured up. Each cloak had a drawstring in the hood, so we would be able to cinch the hoods up to help seal out the rain.

For a moment, I marveled at my aunt and uncle. They were acting like Frayda and I were somehow engaged in a task so important that the whole family had to get involved, and yet, she and I practically gave our services away. I realized that it was just their love for us that motivated them to get involved, and I felt a wave of gratitude that I was a part of their family.

Uncle Cyrus suggested that we light the lanterns before heading out. “It's dry and out of the wind in here,” he offered. “It may not be wherever we are going.”

While he and I got the lanterns lit, Frayda asked Steppan, “Where are we headed?”

Steppan replied, “Just about two blocks from here. Like I said, we were on our way through town, and we just happened to be close by. Lucky for us.”

I looked at Uncle Cyrus. Like me, he had quickly done the math in his head. Frayda had warned us someone was coming at least fifteen minutes ago. He had walked maybe two blocks. She knew he was coming even before he had started out, even before he knew himself he was coming. “How does she do that?” Uncle Cyrus asked, as if reading my mind. I just shook my head back and forth. As an afterthought, I just shrugged and said, “Magic?”

Frayda was speaking to Steppan, and I heard her say, “We will need water. Do you have water?”

He gave her a look as if to say, *It's raining, isn't it? Isn't that enough?* She added, “We can bring our own, but it's better if you have some to give to us.”

That seemed to satisfy his curiosity, as he simply replied, “I have some. More than enough, I expect.”

We were about to head out the door when Aunt Lyra walked up to Frayda and planted a kiss on her forehead. “You stay dry, and do whatever Hale and your father tell you,” she said. She turned to Uncle Cyrus and kissed him in the way husbands and wives do and then said, “You keep her dry and do whatever Frayda and Hale tell you.” The two of them shared a laugh. She turned to me and said, “You don't want a kiss, so go on and get out of here.” This was accompanied with a laugh, and I smiled at her.

I had put my jacket on before putting on the cloak. As was my habit, I checked my jacket pocket for my stone kit, finding it where it should have been; then, I checked my

pocket for my mother's sunstone ring, and it was there. With that, I was ready to go.

As we walked out the door, Aunt Lyra said to our backs, "When you return, come in through the kitchen. We will hang your clothes there to dry overnight. I'll keep the fire going in the living room too, so you can get warm." After saying that, she shut the door.

We followed Steppan. From our building, he turned left and began walking determinedly back the way he came. Frayda and Uncle Cyrus walked together, and I brought up the rear. Uncle Cyrus had a lantern, and I was carrying the other one. It was raining, but the wind had died down, so it wasn't quite as miserable as I expected. We were going to get wet, though, and I was glad Aunt Lyra would be awaiting our return.

We walked as far as the second intersection. As Steppan had said, it wasn't quite two blocks. There was enough ambient light that I could see a covered wagon parked at the edge of the street, close to the curb. In front of the wagon was a large shape, which I concluded was the horse. As Steppan said, the horse was off its feet. Somewhere I had learned that it was unusual for a horse to do that, and I became concerned that the animal was dead. As we got closer, the light from our lanterns was sufficient for me to see steaming vapor coming from the horse's nostrils, so I knew at the very least it was still breathing.

Steppan went to the back of the wagon and unfastened the canvas cover and said something to the effect that he was back and that everyone should stay inside and out of the rain. Then, he joined us at the other end.

“What is his name?” Frayda asked.

Steppan smiled and replied, “His name is Endurance. He never quits. He's good with the kids and he puts his heart into everything he does.”

“How long has he been like this?” Frayda asked.

Steppan replied, “No more than an hour. He just stopped and dropped. I didn't even have time to get him out of the harness.” He started wringing his hands. “I don't know what I will do without him.”

Frayda knelt down next to Endurance's head and stroked his neck several times. “Hi, Endurance. I'm Frayda.” Her face adopted the far-away appearance that I recognized as she focused on her magical senses to carry out an initial examination. After a second or two, she looked up at me and said, “I don't see anything.”

Up until that moment, having another encounter with the darkness and emptiness that we had seen in Mr. Jubilant had never crossed my mind. I felt butterflies in my stomach and a wave of fear washed over me. Almost immediately it was followed by a different feeling, accompanied by the realization that we had dealt with this sort of thing before and that Mr. Jubilant had recovered.

Frayda closed her eyes again and remained very still for a few seconds. Then, she looked at me again and said, “It's like with Mr. Jubilant. That same sense of an emptiness, of a darkness. It's there. I stayed away from it this time.”

She stood up. “Same as last time? I'll get water and we'll make sunwater and give it to Endurance.”

I nodded my head up and down and said, “Okay.” I was only halfway listening to her, focusing instead on the

previous encounter, when I had burned through my entire arsenal of sunstones trying to fight the darkness that was infecting Mr. Jubilant. That night, I had used one stone at a time, not one of them being strong enough, until Frayda suggested that I use two at once. That had worked. This time, I would start with two.

What to do? I had a total of five stones. I needed one stone for sunwater. I could probably use it to help find the entity if I didn't use all of it for the sunwater. Then what? Should I use three stones all at once? If I did that and somehow miscalculated how to exorcise the darkness, I would be out of commission as I would have only one stone left, which under no circumstances would be enough. If instead I used two stones, and that wasn't enough, I would be left with two more, which might or might not be enough.

If I used three stones, I would have to get it right the first time. If I used two, I would get a second chance, if I needed it. I decided to go with two, and hope that two was enough, as it had been with Mr. Jubilant. I still did not want to use my mother's ring. Would I need it? I would have to wait and see.

I looked up at the wagon. There were three faces peering out from the inside. The family had untied the canvas on the front end of the wagon so they could watch what was going on, yet remain out of the weather. Frayda and Steppan were standing just below the open canvas flaps, and Frayda was showing them the vial and explaining how we were going to use it.

Steppan's wife said something like, "Hand it to me. I have some water right here," and took the vial from Frayda.

Moments later, she handed it back, having filled it with some water from within the wagon.

I knelt down where I was and unrolled my stone kit, using my lap as an impromptu table. I selected three stones, and rolled the kit back up. I was trying to decide whether to lay my stone kit on the wet sidewalk or not when Uncle Cyrus said, “Give it to me. I can hold it and keep it dry.” I stood up and handed the stone kit to him and then worked my hand inside my cloak so I could drop two of the three sunstones into my trouser pocket.

I walked up to where Frayda and Steppan were standing and used the third sunstone to create some sunwater, being careful to reserve some of the magical energy for later. As always, the vial began to glow, and the refracted light emanating from it cast interesting patterns on our faces and the nearby wagon.

Frayda explained to Steppan about holding the vial and thinking about how much he loved Endurance. The whole family expressed an interest in being involved with this, so Frayda passed the vial up to Steppan's wife so she and Steppan's sons could hold the vial and add their love. By this time, the vial was glowing brightly with vivid colors. Frayda took it back from Steppan's wife and said, “Oh, this is very nice. It's just what we need.”

Frayda and I returned to kneel next to Endurance's head. Frayda poured the sunwater out of the vial, and as always, not a drop was spilled. After a few seconds, I could tell that Endurance had swallowed it. She and I stood up. She very unceremoniously dropped the vial back into her purse and addressed the family. “We need to wait a few minutes for

the sunwater to take effect. We always do this, so don't be alarmed."

I started looking around to assess our surroundings. Last time, I had been knocked away from Mr. Jubilant and had ended up on the floor of the barn, dazed and staring up at the rafters. If that was to happen this time, I wanted a clear path and a soft landing, but we were in the middle of the city and all I had to choose from was a cobblestone street and a cement sidewalk. I decided to orient myself such that I wouldn't end up being thrown into the wagon or a nearby wall. I would kneel out in front of Endurance, facing the wagon, and hope for the best.

I informed Uncle Cyrus of what was going to happen and added, "Don't get behind me." He nodded his head yes and moved off to one side. I knelt down next to Endurance's head and placed one hand right between his ears. Using my magical senses and the energy from the sunstone, I began my search. With Mr. Jubilant, I had found a wound between his shoulders, and based on that knowledge, I started there. Right away, I saw a similar wound, from the inside, and a trail that began there. I followed the trail. Like with Mr. Jubilant, it was haphazard and seemingly without purpose.

When I realized I was at the other end, I quickly pulled back, not wanting to alert my adversary of my presence. Somehow, I was certain that it was not aware of me yet, and I wanted to keep it that way, thinking that a surprise attack from me would be more effective, and perhaps not require as much magical energy. I was still thinking of having to make two attempts, and I wanted to make sure I was leaving myself that option.

I stood up and dropped the one sunstone into my pocket and grabbed the other two. I was about to kneel down again when I had a sudden thought. I turned to Uncle Cyrus and said, “If it’s like the last time and I get knocked backward, I won’t be able to see what happens. If you can, try to keep your eyes on Endurance and what happens here, rather than on me.”

Uncle Cyrus nodded his assent and I knelt down again. With a quick glance over both shoulders to confirm that I was not going to hit any solid objects behind me, I focused on my magical senses again and returned to the site where I had found the darkness. I imagined myself staying out of range while I prepared myself mentally for my attack. As before, I would summon as much of the magical energy from both stones as I could handle and direct it toward the darkness, imagining myself performing a punch to its figurative gut.

I willed the stones to feed me their energy. As before, I felt the power of both stones, and it hurt. I imagined the punch, and I directed all of the energy at the darkness. It was caught by surprise, and unable to form an effective resistance. I thought I felt and heard a CRACK! followed by blinding light, and then my mind seemed to shut down. Slowly, I became aware of the feel of cobblestones against my back and a sharp pain on the back of my head. I felt like I was spinning, or that the city around me was spinning while I remained in place.

I didn’t think I had lain there all that long, but I was suddenly aware of Steppan and Uncle Cyrus standing over me and asking me if I was all right. *If I was all right, would*

I be lying here so long that it made you wonder? I thought to myself. I couldn't get up, apparently, but it seemed I could still be irritable.

Steppan and Uncle Cyrus worked their arms beneath me and lifted me into a sitting position. For some reason, that seemed to help. I had a ringing in my ears, and it looked like shooting stars were crossing my field of vision, but I was able to sit up without help. "I think I'm all right now," I finally managed to say. The two of them pulled me to my feet and I stood there, unsteady, but unassisted.

I glanced over to where Endurance had been lying in the street. He was on his feet. Evidently, he recovered more quickly than I had. In spite of the rain, Steppan's wife was beside Endurance, patting him lovingly on the neck and talking to him the way people do who love their animals. Frayda was on his opposite side and doing much the same thing.

My first few steps were a bit unsteady, but I felt stronger with each step. By the time I walked back to be next to Endurance, Steppan's wife had started trying to untangle his harness, which had been partly pinned underneath his inert body while he was lying in the street. With nothing but the light of the lanterns to see by, I couldn't really determine how he looked, but as far as I could tell, he was fine. Frayda smiled at me when we made eye contact, and I concluded she was pleased with his condition. It was only then that I realized I still had a tight grip on the two sunstones. Somehow, I had managed to hang on to them, even though I believed I had been unconscious for a little while.

Steppan spent a few minutes working with his wife on the harness. They knew what to do, and I did not, so I just decided to stay back and let them work. Meanwhile, Uncle Cyrus walked up next to me, and with concern in his voice, said, “Are you sure you are all right? You took quite a crack to the head. I heard it from where I was standing.”

I nodded my head and then wished I hadn't. I winced. Then, I replied, “It hurts. I think I'm fine.”

Without being asked, Uncle Cyrus unrolled my stone kit and held it out to me. I put the two sunstones away, then, retrieved the other one from my pocket and put it away as well. Then, he rolled the kit back up and tied the tie around it and handed it back to me.

By this time, Steppan and his wife had done whatever they had to do. He was standing next to Endurance and said to Frayda and me, “You'll be wanting to be paid, so tell me what I owe you.”

Frayda gave me a concerned look and said, “Hale, ask him about a wasp. That's what happened to Mr. Jubilant.”

I did a mental variation of slapping my forehead. In my misery, being wet and in pain, I had not even thought to follow up with Steppan as to whether he had seen a wasp sting Endurance. It would be useful information, and I was very grateful to Frayda for reminding me.

Instead of answering Steppan's question, I said, “Before we get to that, did you see any kind of wasp in the last few hours that might have stung Endurance?”

Steppan's eyes got large, as if I had read his mind. “Yes! Probably two or three hours ago. Something big. I thought it was a horsefly or something. It could have been a wasp I

suppose, but it was getting dark and the light wasn't real good. It seemed fast and determined, but it didn't even appear to land, although if it were quick enough, I suppose it could have bit him or stung him."

"Thank you," I replied. "That helps. We've had other cases like this, and a wasp sting seems to be one thing they have in common."

Steppan put a half-smile on his face and replied, "Well, then, I'm glad that what I said helps. Now, about your fee . . ."

As was her habit, Frayda just turned her back to him and walked away. He looked surprised, as almost everyone did, and then looked at me. I simply said, "She doesn't like talking about getting paid. Don't take it personally." I went on to explain how some people would make something for Frayda, or pay us later, but that we usually let people decide what they wanted to pay us.

Steppan took a moment to think and then said, "Well, we're transients. We go from place to place. We won't be here tomorrow, so I have to pay you now. I always pay for what I use. Let me think." He stayed silent for half a minute or so and then said, "If I had to buy a new horse, that would have cost me a fair piece, you can be sure. You've saved me that much. How about I pay you half?" He mentioned an amount.

I shook my head *no* and said, "That is very generous, but I think it is far too much." I made a counter offer, of about a tenth of his offer.

He frowned, and then said, "You'll not get rich bartering like that, but if that's all you'll take, then I will agree to it."

He looked to his wife. She had a money pouch in her hands, and she counted out some coins and handed them to me. In a soft voice, she said, "You don't know how much it means to us that you helped us. Thank you."



With business concluded, we bid each other good-bye. Uncle Cyrus had offered lodging to Steppan and his family, but they politely declined. They were used to the outdoor life, and it suited them, and the weather did not bother them. I found it hard to believe, but I didn't think they were being dishonest. *To each his own*, I thought.

I was cold. I was wet. My head hurt. I felt like I had a cobblestone-street-shaped bruise on my back. The outdoor life didn't suit me that night, and I was glad to be headed home to a warm fire and a soft bed.

I followed Frayda and Uncle Cyrus home. The weight of the lantern in my hand was enough to make me wince if I moved my arm too much. I think Uncle Cyrus and Frayda were talking, but I was too tired and sore to pay attention. I focused on trying not to drop the lantern and putting one foot in front of the other.

At the next intersection, instead of proceeding straight ahead to the front of the shop, Uncle Cyrus and Frayda turned to the right. After a short walk, we arrived at the alley that ran behind the shop and turned left. Normally very dark at night, the alley took on an other-worldly appearance with the light of our lanterns. It almost seemed alive as all the shadows moved and changed shapes because of the movements of the lanterns in our hands. With the constant rain, everything was wet and dripping, and some of

the drops caught the light and appeared to sparkle. If I hadn't been cold and in pain, I might have appreciated the beauty of it.

We crowded into the kitchen and began removing our oilskin cloaks. Uncle Cyrus was mostly dry underneath, except for a short portion of clothing right above his boots. A sizable part of Frayda's dress had gotten wet when she knelt down in the street, but her boyish trousers had stayed dry. I, on the other hand, had been lying in a wet street and the falling rain had found its way past my cloak as I was lying on my back. The front of my clothes were soaked from my neck down to the top of my boots. My feet had stayed dry, though.

Aunt Lyra heard us enter and was in the kitchen almost right away. When she saw my wet clothes, she said, "Get yourself upstairs and into some dry clothing. Then, bring the wet clothes down here and let me hang them up to dry. Then, get yourself up to the living room and next to the fire. I will have some tea ready for you shortly." She smiled at me. "And thanks for taking care of Frayda."

■ ■ ■

Some time later, we had reconvened in the living room on the second floor. True to her word, Aunt Lyra had kept the fire going and had brought a teakettle and cups up to the living room.

She spent a few minutes examining the back of my head. I let her look and cluck her tongue at me while I sipped a cup of hot tea. She said I had a small abrasion and a knot the size of a hen's egg from where my head had hit the street. The wound was clean because the hood of my oilskin

cloak had kept my head from coming in direct contact with the dirt and grit of the street. Clean or not, it hurt, and I had a throbbing headache.

With the examination complete, I took a seat on the sofa. Frayda took a flying leap from about two paces away, wrapping her arms around me as soon as she landed. “Your head will feel better if you let me snuggle with you,” she explained.

“Will it,” I said, sounding dubious.

“No. But I will feel better.” She giggled. “Besides, I can tell you really want to help me get warm, and this is how I’m helping you do it.”

There are worse things than having your ten-year-old cousin snuggle up to you when you’re cold and have a headache, I decided. My wool blanket was within reach and still where I left it, so I grabbed it and started to spread it over the two of us. Frayda made sure she was completely covered, except for her face, and then wrapped her arms around me again. I covered myself as much as I could using my one arm as I had put the other one around Frayda.

I looked at Aunt Lyra and said, “You would have been proud of Frayda tonight. She handled herself very well, and she really helped me. She helps me stay calm.” Hearing this made Frayda smile a big smile. Surprisingly, though, she didn’t say anything.

“I was proud of her,” Uncle Cyrus said. “Like Hale said, she handled herself very well. She kept everything running smoothly, and put everyone at ease. I was worried when I saw Endurance lying in the street, and her calming effect even worked on me.”

Frayda smiled a shy smile and replied in a soft voice, "Steppan and his family were all worried. I wanted them not to worry. It always seems to help when we make the sunwater. I think that's my favorite part. It seems like that's when people stop worrying so much."

Aunt Lyra wanted more. "So, tell me what happened. I want to hear all about it."

Frayda and Uncle Cyrus took turns narrating our adventure to Aunt Lyra. I stayed silent, content to leave the story-telling to them. I found myself wondering about what we had dealt with. It was a remarkably similar case to the one involving Mr. Jubilant weeks before, identical in fact except for the location and kind of animal. Was it an affliction of some kind? Doubtful. It had intelligence. It had reacted to us. Frayda had sensed emotions emanating from it. Was it the same adversary as the last time? I did not know, and it bothered me.

Someone had evidently asked me a question, because I became aware of everyone's eyes on me. "I'm sorry," I said. "I was thinking. If you're waiting for me to answer a question, I didn't hear it."

Aunt Lyra laughed a short laugh and said, "What I said, was, 'Hale, why are you frowning like that'. So, why are you frowning like that?"

I told them what I had been thinking, about the two cases being similar, finishing with how with the first case Frayda had said she had sensed rage and hate and fear coming from whatever it was.

"I don't like the sound of that," Aunt Lyra said, looking at her husband. "What do you think it is?"

Uncle Cyrus shook his head back and forth. “I do not know. It’s too early to tell, I suppose. There have only been two cases. Perhaps that will be all. Perhaps not. We will just have to wait and see.”

I added, “I’m thinking whatever intelligence is behind it, it is the same entity that we ran into last time. Frayda, what do you think?”

Frayda didn’t respond. “Who is the one who is not listening now?” I said a few seconds later, teasing her. As I glanced down to see her response, I realized she was completely limp next to me and that her breathing was very slow. I looked from Aunt Lyra to Uncle Cyrus and back and said, quietly this time, “I think she has fallen asleep.”

Uncle Cyrus looked at his sleeping daughter with a fond expression on his face. With his eyes on her he said to me, “Let me take Frayda from you. I will put her to bed.” He came over and gently uncovered Frayda from beneath the wool blanket and then he worked his arms underneath her to pick her up, telling her softly, “To bed with you, my precious Frayda.”

Frayda replied, “I love you, Daddy,” but she was not really awake and it sounded like “I ruv you raddy.” Uncle Cyrus smiled a big smile and said softly, “I love you too,” and carried her out of the room.

Aunt Lyra fixed her gaze on me and said, “Cyrus said that the gentleman offered you a lot of money, and you turned it down.”

“He was willing to pay half of the price of a new horse. I thought it was extravagant, especially as how he and his family were living out of their wagon.”

“Is that the real reason?” she probed, arching her eyebrows as she said it.

I thought for a short while before replying. “Two reasons, I guess. I don't want to get in the habit of expecting high fees. I want the average person to be able to do business with us, not just people with a lot of money. I'm afraid I might get hardhearted toward people who don't have a lot of money to spend. I also wonder if by charging higher fees I may accidentally teach Frayda to value money too much.”

She smiled a big smile at me. “That sounds like three reasons.” Then, she turned serious. “There's nothing inherently wrong with money. Money is a tool, like magic, which you can use for good as well as evil.”

I thought for a few seconds. I had always been able to be honest with Aunt Lyra, so I replied, “Perhaps I'm projecting my weaknesses onto Frayda. I think it would be too easy for me to start using money the wrong way, so I'm better off avoiding it. Like with magic. If I stay away from Dark Magic, then I'm not likely to be tempted by it.”

She nodded her head yes to show she understood. “I respect that. If I wanted you and Frayda to be able to live off of your earnings, I would be disappointed, but there are bigger lessons in life than how to make money. I am proud of you, Hale. You are good for Frayda. You really are. You are teaching her how to avoid Dark Magic, and how to value people more than wealth, and how to serve others. That's how I see it, and I am proud of you both.”

“I've learned a lot from her, too,” I admitted. “Back when we started, Uncle Cyrus said I would. I didn't believe him. I do now.”

Uncle Cyrus returned and sat down in his favorite chair. Knowing that he wouldn't take me seriously, I asked him, "So how much does Frayda and Hale Enterprises owe Rarities and Oddities for the rental of oilskin cloaks and weatherproof lanterns?"

"Nothing!" he replied without hesitation. "It's free advertising. When people find out how these implements were used, and who used them, I expect they will pay double." He wasn't serious, and it earned him a small chuckle from me and my aunt.

"I asked you to try to keep your eye on Endurance instead of me," I said, changing the subject. "Did you see anything? I know it was dark."

Uncle Cyrus replied, "I did keep my eyes on Endurance, although I wouldn't have if you hadn't advised me. What I saw was a stream of black smoke coming out of his body, somewhere around the shoulders. It took a few seconds; it wasn't just a puff. In the lamplight, it was hard to tell very much about it. I thought it gathered into a small cloud above the horse, but that may have just been a trick of the light. Regardless, it very quickly just blew away. Endurance appeared to recover right after the smoke finished coming out." He gave me a small smile. "I know that isn't much. I don't know if it helps."

I looked away from him and stared at the fire in the fireplace for a few seconds. "Frayda and I didn't see what happened at the last case, but Farrick did, and what he described matches what you just said. That, and the fact that both animals were stung by some kind of wasp. It really

sounds like whatever we dealt with tonight was the same thing we dealt with a month ago with Mr. Jubilant.”

Aunt Lyra had a questioning look on her face. She had been looking at me while I spoke, but she turned to her husband and said, “Cyrus, you've been to a lot of places over the past few years. Have you dealt with anything like this before? Is this something that came here from one of your far-away places?”

Cyrus adopted a thoughtful expression and started shaking his head back and forth. Without looking at either of us, he said, “No. I have not seen this before, nor have I heard of such a thing. Frayda said it wasn't Dark Magic. That's probably the biggest clue. There are . . . agents of evil that inhabit the world around us. I think somehow people grant them access to our physical world, thinking they can be controlled, like with Dark Magic. This might be one of those.” He looked right at me and added, “I really don't know.”

“Don't you think Frayda and Hale need to be careful?” Aunt Lyra asked. “Shouldn't you tell them to keep away from such things?”

“They are being careful, Lyra. Like it or not, if this is some kind of evil, it has found them, rather than the other way around. We should take comfort in the fact that the two of them have so far been able to subdue it. Beyond that, I'm not sure that there is anything else we can do, except to wait and try to be prepared for another encounter.”

“You think we'll see it again, then?” I asked. I didn't like the idea, but trying to avoid reality was not an effective way to avoid trouble.

Uncle Cyrus made a face and nodded yes. “You said it has intelligence. That means it has an objective, and maybe even a plan. You may or may not be part of its plan. Perhaps you are interfering with its plan. If that is the case, it would be reasonable to expect retribution. It’s hard to say.”

“Oh dear,” Aunt Lyra said, clearly not liking what she had heard. “Have we put Frayda and Hale in danger? Should they stop treating animals and just stay home?”

“Lyra, it’s not enough for good people to try to be good. If we isolate ourselves, evil will still find us. People intent on seeking their own objectives will come and try to take what we have, or try to make us serve them. Even if we hide, we will still be in danger. At least this way, we are taking the attack to the enemy, rather than being on the defensive all the time. The attacker makes the rules. We can’t just sit by and wait to be attacked. No one ever wins a battle by being defensive.”

Aunt Lyra sighed a big sigh and looked at me. With a smile in her voice, she said, “Hale, I know you would do whatever you could do to keep Frayda safe and to protect yourself. I trust you. I don’t wish for you to face this, but Cyrus is right. Trying to hide from it just lets it get stronger.”

I smiled at her, and then yawned, and then stretched. “I will try my best to keep Frayda safe. I will also try to be more aware of danger, if I can, so we don’t get surprised by it. I think the darkness did not detect me or Frayda tonight, so at least we know it is not some kind of all-knowing, all-powerful entity. It has weaknesses too.” I yawned again.

“Get yourself to bed, Hale. I don’t think Cyrus is going to be willing to carry you,” Aunt Lyra said, with a laugh in her voice.

“I hear and obey,” I said, using a lighthearted tone. I stood up. I walked over to my aunt and kissed her cheek. “Good night,” I said. Then I waved at my uncle, who casually returned my gesture. We each said “good night.” I turned and walked out of the room and headed straight to bed.

■ ■ ■

Roughly three weeks later, we encountered the strange evil darkness again. Frayda and I had taken to calling it the Empty Darkness, because of the way it appeared to our magical senses. There was nothing there, except an emptiness that somehow still felt like Something. We still couldn’t explain it, but we began to recognize it.

And it began to recognize us. The next two cases after Endurance were much the same, with Frayda and me being able to seemingly catch the Empty Darkness by surprise. It was learning about us, though, and it had the ability to adapt. We suspected it was intelligent, and unfortunately, we were right.

One evening several weeks later, Frayda had answered the door ahead of the arrival of a boy a little younger than myself by the name of Rollin. He and his family lived some blocks away and ran a tavern and a small inn as they had a few rooms to let for travelers. He and his father raised pigs, mostly as a hobby, but when the pigs were of an age, they would be slaughtered and the various pork products became ingredients for the tavern menu. Rumor had it that theirs

was some of the best bacon in the city, but I had never had any of it for myself.

Two of the pigs had names, Roly and Poly. Roly was a male and Poly was a female and from them, the family would raise broods of piglets and either sell them off or turn them into various food products which were for sale in the tavern dining room.

The one who needed our attention that night was Roly, and his size fit his name. In spite of being quite large, he was evidently quite even-tempered and was a family favorite. Regardless, there was money to be lost if Roly did not recover, as the family would either have to do without food or future income from the pork products they sold in their tavern.

Initially, Roly appeared to be just another Empty Darkness case like the previous ones. Frayda had knelt down to do her initial examination, like she always did, and she reported that she didn't see anything. We both knew at that point what, or who, we were dealing with. I prepared in the manner I was accustomed to in these cases, by grabbing two fresh sunstones and mentally rehearsing my attack with my magical energy before the Empty Darkness was aware of me.

Perhaps I should have been prepared for it to adapt to us, but we had encountered the Empty Darkness four times and I had unconsciously fallen into a routine. My habit had become that I would stay out of range, collect my magical energy, and dispense it in a single burst and the Empty Darkness would be driven out. This time, however, my attempts at surprise were met by a vicious initial attack. I

had hardly located the darkness before it shocked me with a burst of magical energy of its own, which both stunned me and knocked me off balance.

Not only had my magical senses shut down, my physical senses did as well. For a few seconds, I felt like my mind was disconnected from my body. I couldn't see or hear anything. I couldn't even feel my hands or my feet or any other part of my body. Slowly, my vision returned, and, apparently, my other senses. At that moment, I realized I was still kneeling on the ground next to Roly. I was leaning backward at an awkward angle and had both hands behind me to hold myself up. Somehow, even without being able to see or feel, my reflexes had still functioned, causing me to catch myself on my hands instead of falling on my back.

The first thing I became aware of once I could see and hear was Frayda's face, very close to mine. Her mouth was moving and she was staring intensely at me. Eventually I realized she was talking. "Hale, are you okay? Hale? Hale? Hale, can you hear me?"

I shook my head a little, thinking that would help. It didn't, and I wondered why I thought it would. When my vision fully cleared, I looked into her eyes and said, "It attacked me." I realized I was blinking rapidly. "I wasn't ready."

I pushed off of the ground with my hands to bring myself to a more upright position, which is when I realized I no longer had the sunstones in my hands.

I started looking around on the floor of the barn for my sunstones. Right away, Frayda's hand appeared in the center

of my vision, holding two sunstones. “You dropped these,” she said.

“I was looking for them. How did you know?”

Frayda just smiled a tight-lipped smile at me. “What are you going to do now?” she eventually asked.

“It’s learning from us,” I replied. “It knew I was coming. I have to face it again, but this time I will be ready for an attack. Maybe there is a way I can deflect it, or resist it.”

“I thought you were going to say that.” She smiled at me again, and added, “I will be right here. If you need more stones, tell me, and I will get them for you.” She punctuated this with a soft pat on my shoulder, accompanied by a blip of magical energy. Almost immediately, I felt better.

“Thank you,” I said. “I needed that blip, and didn’t even know it.”

I took a deep breath and gripped my sunstones in a tight grip. I gave Frayda a *Here Goes* look, putting my other hand on Roly’s head between the ears, and closed my eyes, allowing my magical senses to take over.

I knew the element of surprise was no longer on my side, but I knew where the Empty Darkness was, so I performed the magical equivalent of a full-speed charge and approached the enemy, drawing the full magical energy from the two sunstones at the same time. To my surprise, the Darkness did not even put up a fight. It must have expended the full amount of its magical energy during its attack. There wasn’t even a recoil this time. For that, at least, I was grateful.

With the exorcism completed, the stream of black smoke came gushing out. I jumped to my feet and walked

backward several paces, not wanting to be close enough to the smoke to smell its foul odor. I turned around and grabbed Frayda's hand and pulled her out of the barn into the open air. "Let's just wait out here until the smoke clears," I said.

"It's learning," Frayda said, without emotion when we came to a stop several paces away. It was just a statement of fact. "It attacked you, which means it expected you, which means it recognizes us, which means it's learning."

I nodded my head *yes* a few times. "Your father said there would be retribution if we were interfering with its plans. I think that was retribution, which means—"

"We are interfering with its plans," Frayda said, completing my sentence. We stared at each other for a few seconds. "What do you think those plans are?" she asked me.

I just shook my head *no* a few times. "I have no idea." I stared off into the distance for a while, and then returned my gaze to Frayda. "What I need to prepare for is next time. It is going to learn from this encounter as well, and next time, it will be better prepared. It expended all of its energy in its attack, which was not effective enough this time, but it knows that and it will not make that mistake again."

"We won't be able to surprise it any more either, will we?" she said.

"I don't expect so, no. Things are likely to get worse from here."

Roly made a full recovery rather quickly once the smoke cloud dissipated. Rollin insisted that as payment we accept a few pounds of the family's legendary bacon, and I didn't

object. My mind was occupied with trying to anticipate next time. Retribution indeed. To what lengths would our enemy go to achieve its objective? Like it or not, we were going to find out, and we were still playing defense.

■ ■ ■

In the subsequent weeks, winter gradually faded as spring established its hold on the city. I always enjoyed spring, and even our encounters with the Empty Darkness were unable to dampen my enjoyment of the spring weather.

Uncle Cyrus had been away on one of his excursions to far-away places, buying, selling, acquiring, and trading as only he seemed to be able to do. How he knew where to go, or what to use to barter for the things he wanted was above my ability to comprehend. Give me specific instructions, and I can carry them out. He, on the other hand, seemed to thrive on the possibilities that came with vague guidelines.

At any rate, he arrived back home in good spirits early one afternoon, in plenty of time for Aunt Lyra to change her meal plans and come up with something special to celebrate his return. It was our habit to eat in the kitchen, using the table-for-six that we had pushed against the wall to make a table-for-four, and he was regaling us with some of the stories from his most recent trip.

Uncle Cyrus met a lot of interesting people in his travels, and many of his stories were funny, so he had us laughing a number of times while we ate. Eventually, as he often did, he wanted to hear about whatever Frayda and I had been up to.

I usually liked to let Frayda do most of the talking, not just because she was his daughter and I wanted them to stay

connected, but because it was interesting to hear Frayda's perspective. Even though she and I had been in the same place at the same time, we saw and heard different things, and I enjoyed having a glimpse of what our exploits looked like through her eyes. Frayda was like her father in that she could tell a good story, and especially a funny one. I often marveled at her maturity. Even in her story telling, she often sounded like someone so much older than she really was.

On this particular evening, though, her usual enthusiasm was quite subdued. Uncle Cyrus was persistently probing for details, and Frayda was giving him short answers, sometimes a single sentence, sometimes just a few words.

At one point, Uncle Cyrus glanced at me with a *What's Going On* expression on his face. I gave him an *I Don't Know* response accompanied with a sideways shake of my head. Frayda's behavior was as mysterious to me as it was to him.

Eventually, he hit the proverbial nail on the head with a particular question. “This mysterious darkness—have you encountered it again?”

“I hate it!” Frayda said, her voice full of emotion. I looked to Aunt Lyra and Uncle Cyrus. Their faces must have been a mirror-image of my own, showing shock and surprise. Frayda never hated anything—even her professed hatred of worms was just for her amusement—and rarely, if ever, showed any kind of anger. “I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. It ruins everything. It is mean to the animals, and it fights with Hale, and it tries to be tricky. I wish it would go away.”

I put my fork down on my plate and reached around Frayda, pulling her to me. “Hey, kiddo. Don’t get so upset. You’ve been doing a great job. You’ve been a big help to me. And you’ve stayed with me. Don’t be upset.”

She reached her arms around me and just buried her face into my shirt. I looked at Aunt Lyra, who was on the other side of Frayda. I was thinking that, perhaps, I should have let Aunt Lyra comfort her daughter, but Aunt Lyra had a small smile on her face and, when our eyes met, just nodded her head up and down a few times. She wasn’t jealous, and she wasn’t supposing that I had supplanted her role as Frayda’s mother in comforting her daughter.

“Uncle Cyrus,” I said, in all seriousness, “I want you to know how brave your daughter has been. She is very clever, and she is like a glue that keeps our little business together. I would not be able to do any of this without her. She reminds me of stuff that I forget, she helps the customers relax, and most of all, she can identify the presence of the Empty Darkness before it is aware of us, and this gives me a fighting chance. If she quits, I’m done.”

“I’m not quitting,” Frayda said into my shirt.

“I can’t hear you,” I said, teasing her a little.

She pulled away from me and wiped her eyes with her hands. “I said, I’m not quitting.”

“I know. I heard you.”

She made a face, and then smiled, trying to look angry, and shook her head back and forth at me. Then, she laughed and wrapped her arms around me again for a few seconds.

When she let go of me, she sat up straight and looked at her father. “We have dealt with the Empty Darkness a few

more times. It is not fun. It is learning from us, and it changes how it behaves. Hale now has to use three of his stones all at once. It used to take only two. It is getting stronger.”

Uncle Cyrus raised his eyebrows and adopted a very thoughtful look for a few seconds. “Well, that is not good news, is it. You said during our previous discussions that you thought it was intelligent, and now we know that it is. We believed it to be evil, and we have no reason to change that assessment either.”

I was nodding my head *yes*. When he finished, I said, “You speculated earlier that there would be retribution if we were interfering with its plans. Twice now, it has tried to ambush me in what I would call a surprise attack. You were right about that, too.”

Again, Uncle Cyrus raised his eyebrows. “Is there anything else you have learned?”

I shook my head *no*. “We still don't know where it comes from, or what it is, or what it is trying to do.”

Uncle Cyrus stayed quiet for a few seconds and squinted his eyes in thought. “Its tactics are changing. How about its methods. What kind of animals does it target? How does it invade them? Are those things changing as well?”

Again, I shook my head. “So far, every case has been late in the day, or at night. Every case has been initiated by a wasp sting. The animals are never the same kind, or in the same place. I can't tell if these animals are chosen at random, by being at the wrong place at the wrong time, or if there is some method behind it all. If there is a pattern, it is not evident to me.”

Frayda looked at me, and with sympathy in her voice, added, "Hale always gets knocked backward. He calls it recoil. Sometimes he is stunned for a little while. I always feel so bad for him, because there is nothing I can do."

"I like seeing Frayda's smiling face peering down at me when my vision clears up," I said, trying to sound lighthearted. "That always helps."

"That's not what I meant," Frayda said, rolling her eyes. *Cousins can be so stupid*, she didn't say, but I heard it anyway. At least she was cheering up.

I turned my attention back to Uncle Cyrus. "We seemed to have arrived at a stalemate of sorts, neither of us being able to overpower the other. We are not making progress against the Empty Darkness, and it is still not able to resist us. At least as it has grown stronger, I'm able to throw more at it." I didn't mention it, but I thought about how the first few times I had tried to use two stones simultaneously, it had hurt. Now, I could use three, and it didn't hurt. My ability to manipulate magical energy had grown. Should I be grateful? Maybe, but I would never be grateful to the Empty Darkness, no matter how much more energy I learned to manipulate.

Aunt Lyra could not hide her concern. I knew she wanted us to stop grappling with this unknown entity, but we had talked about it before and she had agreed with Uncle Cyrus: we simply had to keep fighting. What she did say was, "Cyrus, on your last trip, did you come up with anything, anything at all, about this thing? Does anyone know anything about it?"

Uncle Cyrus leaned away from the table and shook his head *no* energetically. “About the only thing I can come up with is that there were a number of cases about a decade ago that involved some black smoke, but apparently, whatever records exist have been put behind lock and key. One person even insisted King Briar himself gave the order. Outside of that, I have learned absolutely nothing.”

He leaned forward and put his elbows on the table on either side of his plate and looked at me. “Run through the list of similarities again for me, if you would.”

“Okay,” I replied, and then I went through the list again.

“Have there been any wild animals that were affected?” he inquired.

“Not that we are aware of. It's unlikely that anyone would come to us for help for a wild animal, so maybe there have been cases like that and we just don't know anything.”

He asked, “Strays? Feral cats? Rats? Anything?”

I simply said, “No.”

“Is there any common factor about the families, or owners, of these animals?”

I searched my memory for a few seconds. “Not that I can see. Regular people is all. I mean, it always seems like what I would call regular people. Families. Now that I think of it, always families. We've never worked on a case where there weren't kids of some age. I don't know if that matters, but it just occurred to me.”

Uncle Cyrus took a breath and let it out. Then he shrugged. “Maybe. Let's keep it in mind. Anything else you can think of?”

I shook my head *no*.

“Frayda?”

She shook her head *no* as well.

No one spoke for a minute or so. Aunt Lyra looked from one to the other of us and checked the status of our plates. “I hope everyone saved some room for dessert,” she said, once she realized the discussion was over.

I looked at Frayda and she looked at me. We smiled at each other and, with wide eyes and raised eyebrows, shook our heads *yes* in a very exaggerated fashion. Then, we both turned to Aunt Lyra and said, “I did!”

Chapter IV

There came an evening one Sixth Day where each of us had somehow decided to do his own thing rather than playing a game or otherwise spending time together. I had gone up to my room and was doing a little casual reading with the idea that it would help me relax and make it easier to get ready for bed. It was already dark, and I was reading by lamplight.

My reading was interrupted by the familiar sound of Frayda making her way downstairs to the parlor below. I heard the match, and the chimney of the lamp, and the *snick* of the latch on the door. I hadn't yet gotten out of my clothes, so I didn't have to get dressed. I merely extinguished the lamp and went down stairs to join Frayda.

I was tying my boots when Frayda opened our door and greeted our visitor. Being right there, I had no problem hearing either Frayda or our visitor. Even with her back to me, I could hear the smile in Frayda's voice as she greeted someone outside. "Hi! I'm Frayda."

"I'm Rhyme," replied our visitor, "and this is my brother Hubert." She took a moment to point to someone behind her who I couldn't see from my vantage point on the stairs. "Are you the animal healer? Did we come to the right place?" By this time, I had a clear view of Rhyme, who was too intent on looking at Frayda to notice me. She looked to be younger than I, but older than Frayda. I decided she was fifteen, because that was about in the middle of the age difference between Frayda and me. She was tall, and quite pretty. I imagined I sensed some amount of goodness or

gentleness in her, and it set me to thinking, *I wonder if this is how Frayda does it. Can she sense such things in others?*

I scolded myself. It was so easy to give attributes to people based on what they looked like. Because she was pretty, I wanted her to be nice. Had I really sensed goodness in her? There were a couple of times that I had tried to start a relationship with a girl based on the fact that I thought she was pretty. I thought I sensed goodness in each of them, too. What I found out was once they figured out that boys would compete for their attention, they would drop me like a rock as soon as someone else caught their eyes. I was never the one that caught their eyes, and I was always the one that got dropped. If that was goodness, then I didn't want it.

After these thoughts, I couldn't help laughing at myself. I had barely met the girl, and I was already breaking up with her. Besides, I imagined I would be better suited with someone a little older. This allowed me to pretend to be virtuous, instead of setting myself up to get my feelings hurt.

“You're in the right place. I'm the healer,” Frayda said, in response to Rhyme's questions, bringing me out of my reverie. “He is too,” she added, pointing at me. “We both are.”

Rhyme's face transitioned from a questioning look to a troubled one. “I'm here on behalf of my next-door-neighbor, Miss Anna. Her dog Max is not doing well. He hasn't been eating and he's not really walking and we don't know what to do.”

Frayda turned to me. “Hale, this is Rhyme and Hubert. Miss Anna's dog Max needs our help.” Translation: *I don't sense any Dark Magic at play; so far, she appears to be who she says she is.*

“Hi, Rhyme! My name is Hale,” I said, trying to sound cheerful. Whether or not I had really sensed goodness in her, I still sensed her anxiety and I wanted to put her at ease. I kept my gaze directed toward her shoes and asked, “We are just about ready to leave. How far away is it?”

“Just a few blocks,” she said, her voice breaking. “I would like to hurry, though. Can we please hurry? I'm really quite fond of Max.”

We hurried.



We arrived at the home of Miss Anna. Hubert wordlessly peeled off from our group and went next door, presumably back to his home. Rhyme obviously felt right at home at Miss Anna's place as she opened the front door without knocking and marched right in. “Follow me, please.” Then, to the house beyond, she said, “Miss Anna, we're here!”

I was bringing up the rear, so I made sure the door closed behind me and then turned around to follow Rhyme and Frayda. Straight ahead of me was a hallway, half of which was filled by a staircase going up to the next level. Farther back, I could see glimpses of a kitchen. To my right was a parlor or formal sitting room. Rhyme went to the left into a large and comfortable living room, furnished with a sofa and some stuffed chairs.

The front wall that faced the street had a bay window with a bench beneath that fit the contour of the window. It

was there that we saw Miss Anna, seated on the bench. At her feet was a golden retriever. His muzzle was completely gray, as were his feet and the lower portion of his legs. Even his fur was speckled with patches of gray. Not a young dog, not any more. At one time, he must have been quite a sight—rich, thick, golden fur everywhere, and with the gentle disposition of the dogs of his kind, probably just as warm and affectionate as he was stately and majestic. As soon as he saw Frayda and me, there was that familiar thump-thump-thump sound as his tail hit the floor, the universal greeting of dogs everywhere that meant You Should Just Come On Over.

“Come in, come in, come in,” Miss Anna said as soon as we entered the room, rising to her feet. She turned to look at Frayda, and then at me, saying, “I’m Anastasia. Everyone just calls me Anna, or Miss Anna.” Miss Anna had a very wrinkled face. Were she to smile, I expected all the wrinkles would fit together nicely as they were probably remnants of thousands of previous smiles from years and decades past.

“Thank you so much for coming out at this hour,” she said to Frayda and me.

She looked at Rhyme, who without hesitation had come in and sat down on the floor right next to Max and was petting him affectionately. Max was lying on his side, with his head on the floor, and did not respond to Rhyme at all except for a gentle, rhythmic thumping of his tail.

“Max is very old,” Miss Anna said, her eyes on Rhyme, “and Rhyme has been very concerned.” I got the impression that Miss Anna was resigned to a certain fate about Max

and that Frayda and I were here more to help Rhyme than either Miss Anna or Max.

“You come very highly recommended,” she went on to say, dividing her gaze between Frayda and me, “although you’re not what I expected, either of you.”

Frayda and I smiled. In her gentle style, Frayda replied, “We get that a lot. My name is Frayda, and this is my cousin Hale.”

“Frayda and Hale. I am pleased to meet you both,” Miss Anna replied with a smile, letting me see I was right about the wrinkles. With Max between us, it would have been awkward to shake hands, so I didn’t think it rude that Miss Anna didn’t attempt to offer either of us her hand.

I turned to Frayda and with a lift of my eyebrows asked her the question that would return us to our script. “What do you see?”

Frayda closed her eyes and stood still for the few seconds she needed to do her examination. Miss Anna resumed her seat. Then, with a smile, Frayda said, “I see . . . I saw . . . a real pretty color, but I forget its name right now.” Translation: *no dark magic at play*. I didn’t expect there to be any Dark Magic involved, but we always checked. We always had to check.

I knelt down a short distance from where Max and Rhyme were positioned, intending to unroll my stone kit and lay it out on the floor. On a whim, I looked up at Miss Anna and said to her, “Tell us about Max. He’s not so young any more, is he.” She was startled for a moment when our eyes met, but she recovered quickly. I proceeded to untie

my stone kit and unroll it on the floor at my feet as though nothing had happened.

Her eyes lit up and adopted a faraway look. "Max has been my only housemate for the last four years or so, since my dear Leopold died. We picked him out together, Leopold and I, when Max was just a puppy. That must have been . . . goodness! could it be fourteen years ago now?" To Max, she said, "You're fourteen years old, aren't you Max."

Thump-thump-thump, Max's tail said.

Miss Anna continued, "I always tell Max that he must not really know how old he is, otherwise he would have wanted to pass on already." She stopped and gave Max a fond look, then continued. "Ever since Rhyme and her family moved in next door, every time Rhyme comes over for a visit, Max just follows her around everywhere. They are inseparable!" To Max, "You and Rhyme are buddies, aren't you, Max."

Thump-thump-thump, Max's tail said.

"I know he's old, and I want to believe he's lived a good life. Some people would say, 'What do you expect from a dog his age. Don't waste your money on him,' but I say . . . he's still my Max. Please do whatever you can. I don't have much, but I can pay you."

■ ■ ■

While Miss Anna was speaking, Frayda removed the vial from her purse and set her purse down near my stone kit. For some reason, at that particular moment, I found myself thinking back to how we had acquired the vial in the first place. Uncle Cyrus had actually been the one to find it, bringing it back with him after one of his trips to some far-away place. The vial itself had come from an even-farther-

away place. I remembered the day he showed it to us. We were in his workshop, Frayda and I, and Uncle Cyrus had placed the vial on a bench. The three of us had formed a sort-of semicircle around it while he explained what it was all about.

“I am confident that if you make use of this vial, it will make it far easier for you to avoid the temptations of Dark Magic. It's reasonable to conclude that by offering magic in some liquid form, it would give the animals you want to help the opportunity to make a choice. Do they want to be helped, or not? If they swallow the liquid, then you can proceed with the assurance that you are not acting against their will, and you won't cross over into Dark Magic.

“I suspect there is far more to this vial than meets the eye. I'm going to leave it up to the two of you to discover and make use of whatever it has to offer. I have no doubt that you will discover things about it that even I cannot discern right now.”

Discover we did. Frayda and I played around with it for a while. She was the first to discover how it never spilled, even if you knocked it over. I came up with the idea of mixing light from a sunstone with water. Later, Frayda conceived of using water given to us by someone who loved the animal we were to help.

Uncle Cyrus had also told us, “I think Frayda should have the responsibility of keeping up with the vial. You, Frayda, need to make sure it comes with you on each visit, and you need to make sure you bring it back when you return.” He never explained to either of us why he gave us that advice, but I suspected he did not want his eight-year-old daughter

to feel like she was somehow not a critical part of our partnership. With our age difference, she would do as much or as little as I allowed her to do without complaint. As Keeper of the Vial, she had a purpose.

With the purpose and responsibility that came with it came a burst of creative ideas. I think even Frayda was surprised by the ideas and improvements she contributed to our routine; Uncle Cyrus and I certainly were. She was the one that had added the parts about having people hold the vial and think loving thoughts about their beloved pets.

The fact that every part of our routine involved people freely giving what they could, never taking anything that was not theirs and never forcing their wills on anyone or anything else, made sure that we would never even come close to crossing that oh-so-tempting boundary into Dark Magic. The people freely gave us the water we used as the base of the sunwater potion. I freely gave a drop from a sunstone to enhance the water. People freely held the vial, and they gave freely of their love which added the color to the sunwater. When we gave the potion to the ailing creature, it had the freedom to accept the gift or not. Most animals swallowed the sunwater; occasionally, some did not.

If the animal accepted our help, I freely gave of my gifts and magical power to try to help the animal in the best way I knew how. Afterward, people were free to pay us or not. Some people gave us money or foodstuffs right away. Usually it was something thoughtful that they knew we would make good use of. A few of our customers promised to pay and never did. Others said they had nothing and then,

days or even weeks later, brought us something along with a heart-felt “Thank you,” but always freely given.

■ ■ ■

Frayda explained to Rhyme and Miss Anna what the vial was for and that we needed water. Rhyme offered to run into the kitchen to get water from a pitcher on the counter. She took the vial from Frayda and hurried off, was gone for a few seconds, and then hurried back. She gave the vial back to Frayda and took a seat next to Miss Anna.

Frayda and I went through our routine of making the sunwater and having Miss Anna and Rhyme think about how much they loved Max. They were both leaning forward slightly, holding the vial between them with both of their hands. When the colors appeared, Frayda asked, “Would one of you like to give this to Max? You can't spill it, and you can't give him too much.”

Miss Anna looked at Rhyme and said, “Why don't you do it, dear. You and Max are best friends.” She gave Rhyme a compassionate look that, once again, made me believe that we were here for Rhyme and not just Max.

Rhyme took the vial from Miss Anna and stood up carefully. She was holding the vial tightly with both hands and staring at it very intensely, trying to maneuver herself over to where Max was on the floor.

“You can't spill it, remember?” Frayda said, gently, to Rhyme to remind her.

“Okay. I forgot,” she said with a nervous smile. I stepped out of her way and knelt down near Max, leaving plenty of room next to his head for Rhyme to kneel there.

When she was close enough, she knelt on the floor where Max could see her and ever-so-gently placed the vial next to Max's mouth before turning it upside-down. The fluid came out of the vial and went in. Max waited for a few moments, and then, with somewhat of an effort, he swallowed, and then opened his mouth a little bit, panting. Meanwhile, a small thread of bright and sparkling sunwater started spreading out from his open mouth on the floor. It was devoid of color and fading as it spread.

Rhyme noticed the trickle of water and looked at Frayda in alarm. "Did I do it wrong?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

Frayda and I looked at each other. We knew what this meant. Frayda made a frown and her face became very sad. The two of us had decided a long time ago that we would never hide the truth from anyone, even when it hurt to say it, and this was one of those times it was going to hurt.

"Miss Anna . . . Rhyme . . ." I looked first at Miss Anna and then to Rhyme and then back to Miss Anna to make sure I had their full attention. "We do the sunwater like we do because it gives the animals a choice. They can choose to accept our help, by swallowing the sunwater, or they can choose to be left alone."

I paused to let them think, perhaps to even anticipate what I was going to say next. "Max accepted your love. Max declined your help. That's why the sunwater came out clear. The colors . . . he kept your love."

Rhyme's eyes teared up, which surprised me. She was apparently quite fond of Max, more than I had realized. "He

doesn't want our help? But . . . but . . . does this mean he is going to leave us? I don't want him to go!"

Miss Anna, from her perch on the window seat, spoke softly, but with authority. "Rhyme, he doesn't want to go, but he has to. Every living creature eventually comes to the end of his journey. Max is so much older than most dogs ever get to be, and he has had a good life, and he has enjoyed every minute of your company. So, he doesn't want to go, but he can't stay. His body just isn't capable of holding him in any more."

Rhyme had been looking at Miss Anna while she spoke, but then, she turned back to look at Max, stroking his fur, with tears running down her face. "I wish he could stay. I wish he didn't have to leave."

"No, sweetie, no you don't. Not like this. He can't run any more, he can't eat any more. We don't want him to be like this if that is the only way he can stay with us, do we?"

Rhyme shook her head *no* a few times, then eventually said, in a whisper, "No." She shook her head a few more times, and in a louder voice said, "No, not if he can't be happy. It's not fair to want him to stay if he can't be happy."

Miss Anna managed a smile, even though she, too, was wiping away some tears. "That's right, Rhyme. Not if he can't be happy. We want Max to be happy, don't we."

Thump-thump, Max's tail said.

Miss Anna continued to speak, and I suspected she was talking to all of us, not just Rhyme any more. "I have had to say good-bye a number of times. It's never easy, and it always hurts. It wouldn't hurt so much if you didn't love the

ones who leave you, but that's no way to live, loving no one. No way to live at all."

I can certainly attest to that, I thought to myself. With a start, I realized everyone was looking at me. "Did I say that out loud?" I asked, feeling embarrassment.

"You did," Frayda replied, with a small smile.

Miss Anna was smiling at me. "Even at my age, it's tempting to judge people by what I see. I would not have expected you to say that, not at your age. I'm sure that there is a story in there. Would you care to tell it?" Her mannerisms were gentle, and for some reason, I really felt like she was the kind of person I could confide in, one who would keep a confidence and who would not pass judgment.

I glanced at Rhyme for a moment. She had her attention on Max, although I was sure she was listening attentively. Did I care if she knew about my childhood? I was ashamed of it, and I usually didn't want people to know. I decided that Rhyme wouldn't be here unless Miss Anna found her trustworthy in some way, so I decided I would give Rhyme the benefit of the doubt. I briefly told the story of being an orphan, and how my Uncle and Aunt had taken me in, and how I had tried to hate Frayda. I finished by saying, "I realized it was harder to hate people and keep my distance than it was to love and risk being hurt. Like you said, Miss Anna, it was no way to live."

Frayda had heard my story before, and of course she and I shared almost everything about ourselves with each other. She had a smile on her face because she knew she had pulled me out of an existence that I thought I wanted. I was

too blind to admit I was miserable. She had loved me in spite of how I mistreated her. I was grateful to her for that, and the way that she never tried to use it as leverage against me, or that she in any way felt I had to pay her back. As an afterthought, I said, “Now, Frayda is my best friend in the whole world, and I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

Frayda had been watching Max while I spoke, and she kept her eyes on him but her face formed a big bashful smile. She was my best friend in the whole world. We had a special bond. It wasn’t just due to the age difference, with her looking up to me—there was more to it. Furthermore, I knew that being my best friend meant a lot to her. If I had persisted in trying to keep her at an emotional distance, I would never have experienced the richness that came from having a loyal and trusted friend, even if she was just slightly over half my age.

Surprisingly, Rhyme spoke up. “I’m amazed you’re not bitter about your step father kicking you out like that. You’re so kind and gentle. I would never have known that about you.”

“I *am* bitter,” I replied. “I’d like to say I have gotten over it, but I’m still bitter. It still hurts, being rejected, even though he wasn’t really my father.”

“Do people ever tell you to just get over it?” she asked, sounding a little irritated.

“Yes!” Frayda said, with passion. Then she looked around. “Sorry!” she added. No one said anything for a few seconds, all of us looking at her. “I get that a lot, is all,” she said softly.

“Not from your parents, I hope,” I said.

She shook her head *no*. “Not Mom and Dad. Other people. Kids. The girls down the street.”

I knew Frayda was talking about losing her brother, but I didn't think it was my place to explain. I watched Frayda for a few seconds and I realized she was considering whether to share her story with Rhyme and Miss Anna. Eventually she did. “I had an older brother. His name was Oscar. I was only three when he died, and it feels like a long time ago, but it still hurts. Sometimes I still miss him. Some people have told me I was too young to really love him very much. My friends tell me I should be over it by now.” She shrugged and then went silent.

“I get that advice too,” Rhyme said, “although my story is different. After hearing yours and Hale's, I almost feel like I haven't really suffered, at least compared to you two, but it still hurts.”

Miss Anna adopted her authoritative tone again and said, “Each heart knows its own sorrow, and no one can share its joy. It doesn't matter if what you went through appears to be as bad as what someone else went through. If it was hard on you, then it was hard on you. Your struggles are your own. Don't try to dismiss it because you imagine someone else had a harder time.”

“Okay,” Rhyme said. “I fell in love, or thought I did. I thought we were going to get married one day. He told me he would wait for me, because I'm not going to be eighteen for another year-and-a-half or so and my parents didn't approve. Then, I found out he was already engaged, and that he was older than he had led me to believe, and that he was just using me to get even with his betrothed for some

reason. I thought I could trust him, and he broke my heart. That was six months ago. It still hurts, and my friends tell me to just get over it. It makes me not want to fall in love ever again.”

Rhyme was a little older than I thought, I realized. Until she turned eighteen, she would have to have her parent's permission to be married. Once she was eighteen, she would be legally entitled to marry with or without her parent's consent. Such was the law in the Leviathan Empire.

Furthermore, she acted a lot more grown-up than her age would indicate. I could see how someone quite a bit older than she would either find that attractive or be willing to take advantage of her, and I found myself getting angry at this guy, even though I had no idea who he was.

I didn't get much time to think about that before Miss Anna spoke up. “Someone who truly loves you will not want to hurt you, but if you are not vulnerable to being hurt, then you are not really loving. You have to be vulnerable before you can love. That's just the way it works.”

“I don't think it is worth the pain,” Rhyme said.

Miss Anna gave her a knowing look and said, “You say that now, on this side of a loving relationship. I was married to Leopold for over fifty years. It hurt terribly when he died. Four years later, it still hurts. But it was worth it. If I had never become vulnerable to being hurt, to having to say good bye, I would never have experienced the joy and fulfillment that comes from really loving someone, and really being loved. It was worth it, and it will be worth it for you.”

Rhyme shook her head back and forth. “I don’t think I’m ready yet.”

Miss Anna replied, “There is no need to hurry. In time, you’ll be ready to love again. There is no time frame in which you are supposed to get over it, as people say. You will heal at your own rate. No one can tell you how long you need, or how long is too long. Anyone that says that isn’t really your friend, because people who really care about you won’t say that.”

■ ■ ■

No one had spoken for a while. We were watching Max. His eyes were closed, and his breathing had slowed down. He would breathe in, breathe out and then stay very still. After what seemed like an overly long interval, he would do it again. The intervals between breaths were getting longer and longer and longer.

There was another intake of breath, and then he breathed out. With that last breath, there was a subtle change in his body, like every part of his body, not just his lungs, had participated and was now spent. His dog body still looked like a dog, but somehow, it no longer had a dog in it.

“He’s gone, isn’t he,” Rhyme said in a whisper.

Miss Anna leaned over and began gently rubbing Rhyme’s back with one hand, dabbing at her eyes with the other. “He’s gone, dear. He’s gone.”

We sat in silence for a good while, each of us unwilling to break into anyone else’s private thoughts. Finally, Miss Anna said, “Hale, you and Frayda need to be going home. I will walk you out.”

“We can see ourselves out,” I told her.

Miss Anna rose to her feet. “Nonsense. You're my guests, and you've been more than generous with your time and conversation. Let me see you out.”

Rhyme was gently stroking Max's fur, looking like she was staring at her own memories. At Miss Anna's movements, she appeared to focus on her surroundings again. She looked at Miss Anna and said, “Hubert and I can take care of Max tomorrow, once it's light. If you like, I will fetch a blanket and cover him up.”

“You just stay here with Max, and I will see them out the door, and then I will get a blanket for Max and bring it to you,” Miss Anna said.

Rhyme nodded her head in assent and continued to gently stroke Max.

I quickly rolled up and tied my stone kit while Frayda retrieved her purse and we followed Miss Anna to the front door. In a quiet voice, she said to me, “Hale, I'm so glad you were here. Who knew? I couldn't have planned it if I had tried. You and Rhyme are of an age, and she needed to see someone like you dealing with emotional pain. Thank you for being open with us. I think our conversation tonight will really help her, especially as she was so very fond of Max.”

I must have made a face, because Miss Anna reached out and patted me on the arm. “Don't worry, Hale. I'm not trying to play matchmaker. Rhyme won't see it that way either.”

“Rhyme seems like a really nice girl. I'm glad we met,” I replied. I meant it. “I misjudged her.”

“There was plenty of that going around tonight. Don’t trouble yourself over it. Now, you must let me pay you. I know you don’t work for free.”

“Not tonight,” I said. “Frayda and I never charge anything when we can’t perform a full recovery. There was nothing we could do for Max. We don’t want you to pay us.”

“Oh, you must. You’ve been here a long time.”

“We enjoyed it,” I insisted. Frayda nodded her head *yes* in agreement when I said this. “I think we all benefited from the conversation we had.”

Frayda surprised me by suggesting, “Perhaps one way you could pay us would be to let us come back and visit sometime. I know I would like that.”

“And so would I! You must come back,” Miss Anna replied. Frayda gave her a hug. I opened the door and stepped out, waiting for Frayda to join me on the front porch. There was a chorus of “it was nice to meet you” comments, and then Miss Anna gently closed the door.

■ ■ ■

After setting foot on the sidewalk, we turned toward home. We walked about ten paces and then Frayda just abruptly sat down on the curb with her feet in the street. “I don’t like death, Hale. It’s always so sad.”

I sat down beside her. She turned to face me, tears streaming down both cheeks. “Sitting with Max reminded me of sitting with Oscar when he was sick. When he died, I felt so sad, and I wanted the sadness to go away.” I reached around her and pulled her close. In response, she wrapped both arms around me.

Without pausing, Frayda continued to speak. “People said the same kind of things to me as they did to you and Rhyme, about everything getting better over time or about it getting easier. I was starting to think there was something wrong with me because I wasn't getting better and it wasn't getting easier. I thought I was weak. After what we talked about tonight . . . maybe there was nothing wrong with me after all.”

With that, she tightened her grip around me and pressed her face against my chest. “I know I was young, but it still really bothered me. It helped to talk about it. You started the whole discussion by being honest with us. Thank you,” she said softly.

As well as I knew her, sometimes she still surprised me. I marveled at the way that my ten-year-old cousin could express herself and understand things.

After a few seconds of silence, I said, “Frayda, you're not like other people your age. As long as I've known you, you have always been able to act and understand in ways far beyond your age. I often forget that you're as young as you are. Other people don't understand. Miss Anna was right. Don't listen to people who don't really love you. They don't really know enough or care enough to help, even if they think they do.”

Frayda tightened her grip on me for a few seconds, making a noise that sounded like “Mmmmm.” I responded by pulling her a little closer. Then, we both relaxed.

We sat in silence for a while. Eventually, I realized the silence was largely due to the gradually increasing weight pressing against my side. Frayda had fallen asleep with her

arms still wrapped around me. “Frayda, dear, wake up,” I said, gently shaking her. “You’ve grown and you’re heavier now and I can’t just pick you up and carry you all the way home like I used to. I will give you a ride on my back, though, but you have to help me and then try to stay awake enough to hang on. Okay?”

“Okay,” she replied sleepily. We shifted positions and made adjustments and eventually, with her securely placed on my back, I stood up and began walking toward home.

Frayda whispered in my ear, “You get to carry me home again. Lucky you!”

“Lucky *us*, Frayda. Lucky *us*,” I replied. I don’t know whether she heard me or not; I suspected she had already fallen asleep.

Chapter V

The next morning was Seventh Day. Most people worked First Day through Sixth Day and took Seventh Day as a day off—a day to enjoy being with family, pursuing hobbies, or just resting. Most of the holidays and festivals that took place throughout the year in Levithanos fell on Seventh Day, so the fact that I had slept in a bit was just as much in accordance to tradition as it was to how late Frayda and I had been out the night before, sitting with Miss Anna and Max.

I had come down the stairs to the kitchen to see if I could scavenge from someone else's leftover breakfast. I was in no condition to try to conjure up a meal on my own, especially with the way Aunt Lyra insisted that we were not to make a mess of her kitchen. “I don't go where you work and make a mess there, so don't come in here where I work and make a mess here,” I had heard her say on numerous occasions.

I didn't realize that Aunt Lyra was still in the kitchen, so she startled me when she greeted me right before I stepped through the doorway, standing in my way and pointing to a chair at the kitchen table.

“Sit! Don't come any closer. You sit, and I will get you something to eat.” She said it with a smile on her face, so I didn't feel like I was being scolded. I sat.

I stared absently at the table for a while until a plate with eggs and toast appeared in front of my nose. “Eat! I'll sit here and make sure you don't mess up my table either!” she said with a grin. The plate went to the table in front of me

and Aunt Lyra sat to my right. I was in the place she usually occupied at supper, and she was in Frayda's. After she sat down she asked, with obvious concern, "Did I hear the two of you going out last night?" I nodded yes, my mouth full of eggs. "You must have had a late night. I never heard the two of you come back."

"You wouldn't have heard two of us because I left Frayda there," I said. "She said she was too tired to walk."

"You *WHAT!*" she shrieked, the pitch of her voice steadily rising. Aunt Lyra was halfway out of her chair and was looking at me with an intense glare. I was soon to be strangled.

"I'm *joking*, Aunt Lyra," I said soothingly, "although the part about being too tired to walk home is true. I had to carry her." I stopped long enough for Aunt Lyra to process what I had said. "If she feels like I do, she's probably still in bed." I felt a twinge of guilt about teasing my aunt. I didn't want to be mean, but sometimes she was just so stinking *gullible*. My self control that morning was apparently not at its peak.

"I *know* you would not leave her, and yet somehow I still believed you when you said that," she said, laughing a little bit now.

"I shouldn't have teased you. I'm sorry." I said, rubbing my tired eyes. "Our case last night . . . it was hard, but it wasn't *hard*, if you know what I mean."

"My eyes see Hale, but my ears hear Frayda," Aunt Lyra said, laughing gently. "That child is rubbing off on you. You are even starting to talk the way she does, what with those

changes of inflection and all. Please explain what you mean.”

“We . . . helped an old dog pass into . . . whatever comes after.” I gave Aunt Lyra a summary of how things had gone the night before, and then finished with, “We were both worn out. I gave Frayda a piggy-back ride home so she wouldn’t have to walk.” Then, I added, “Again, I’m sorry about teasing you.”

“No harm done, young man. What you have also done is given me fair warning that your charming cousin will have reverted to her natural, unenchanted, grouchy-bear form that I usually find in her bed each morning. ‘One should never enter the bear’s cave,’ ” she said, as if quoting some ancient wisdom.

“Is she really that way with you?” I asked. “She’s always so . . . pleasant . . . courteous. . . cheerful around me. She’s also really, really good with our clients.” I grew thoughtful for a moment and added, “Truthfully, she always seems so much older to me than she is. I often forget that I’m working with a ten-year-old and not someone my own age.”

“*You* get the best of her, and *I* get what is left over.” She was looking at me intensely, and then her mouth turned up in a little smile. “It’s not *your* fault, Hale. She *thrives* around you, and she can’t *stand* it if she thinks she has disappointed you in any way. I don’t understand it, but I know it to be so. Your Uncle Cyrus noticed it before I did; that is part of the reason he put you two into this pet healing business you have.”

Aunt Lyra turned thoughtful for a few seconds and then continued. “It’s almost like she needs you nearby in order

for the best of her to come to the surface or something.” Her face adopted a bit of a sheepish grin while she said, “I’m a bit of a romantic. The way her face lights up sometimes when she sees you reminds me of the way the moon lights up when it’s in the full light of the sun.”

“Oh, please, Aunt Lyra, that’s a little thick, even for you. In spite of the way my eyes look, no one has ever confused me with the sun before,” I said wryly. Her point had struck home, though. I had to admit to myself that there was more to what Frayda and I shared together than could be explained by the age difference alone. Up until that time, I had thought she just admired me because I was so much older and that one day she would grow out of it.

“Don’t try to figure it out. There is just something . . . something *real* between you two. It’s *deep*.”

“Deep thinking is not something I’m good at, especially not this early in the day,” I said. “I have to admit, though, that I can see that Frayda and I have a . . . what should I say . . . a unique bond. There is a real thing between us. It’s a fun thing, too.”

“It’s a special thing. It won’t last forever; we need to treasure it while it lasts,” she said, sounding thoughtful.

“Don’t say that, Aunt Lyra!” I said, with anguish in my voice. “What could possibly happen to separate us?”

“Oh, Hale, I don’t mean you will grow to hate each other or something. It will change. You’ll get married, she will get married . . . you can still be precious to each other, but not necessarily in the way you are to each other now.” She paused, shaking her head from side to side. “I’m probably not making sense, and I’m keeping you from your breakfast.

Let me check to see if our resident hibernating bear is ready to emerge from her cave.”

I didn't have anything to say to that. Her earlier words were ringing in my head. “ . . . you'll get married, she will get married . . .” *I'll never be married*, I thought. *Who would have me?*

Aunt Lyra stood up and turned to leave the room. With a start, she said “Oh!” and turned around to face me. “I nearly forgot. What did you decide to do about going to the festival with Frayda today?”

My eyes turned to saucers as I gaped at her. Fortunately for her, she caught me before I had filled my mouth again. “Is that *today*? I thought that was *next week*!”

“It *was* next week when I asked you about it *last* week, but it is *today* now,” she said, laughing. “You are just like your uncle.”

I took a deep breath and thought for a moment before saying, “If you tell the bear that I will take it to the festival to greet the princesses, do you think the bear will turn back into a little girl again?”

“Very likely,” she said with a smile. “I will go upstairs right now and find out.”

■ ■ ■

Around two hours later, Frayda came down the stairs with Aunt Lyra right behind her. Uncle Cyrus and I were standing by the front door having already been made aware that the ladies were finally ready to leave.

Frayda skipped the last step, choosing instead to jump from the one above and land with both feet on the floor below. “Daddy! How do I look?” she asked. She was

beaming from ear to ear. Aunt Lyra had tamed her curls into a pony tail and had pinned it with a cute bow that was the same color as her dress. Frayda then stuck her arms straight out and spun in a circle, making the hem of her dress flare out as she spun around.

Uncle Cyrus too was beaming. When Frayda stopped and looked up at him, he said, “You’re the prettiest girl in the world!”

“Pretty enough to greet a princess?” she asked.

“I think the princess will want to keep you for her very own!” he replied.

Aunt Lyra meanwhile leaned in toward my ear and whispered, “Our cave bear has become a little girl again.” Then, she looked back at her daughter and just smiled.

It was going to be a good day.

■ ■ ■

Our very first order of business upon arriving at the fairgrounds on the other side of town was to get Frayda registered for a timeslot for visiting the Princess Pavilion. After what was probably centuries of practice, the palace staff had developed a system that efficiently and successfully allowed hundreds of ten-year-old girls to have a brief but once-in-a-lifetime minute with a real princess. Things had to be done precisely if everyone was to get a chance, and the staff was well-rehearsed at their respective roles.

Each ten-year-old girl could register upon arriving at the fairgrounds at any one of a number of tables located throughout the entire fairground area. Upon registering, each girl was given a precise time, separated from each

other in one-minute intervals, at which she would be granted exactly one minute to greet and be greeted by a princess. I surmised that each table had some set of times to give away and that no two tables could give away the same timeslot. Random chance would largely determine whatever time any girl got.

During Frayda's registration, she was told by the clerk in a stern tone, "This is your registration card. Bring this card with you to the Princess Pavilion no later than five minutes before your appointed time. If you are not in line by that time, you will forfeit your slot. You will get exactly sixty seconds, that's one minute, to greet, and be greeted by, the Princesses here today. You must not try to touch any of the Princesses, even to shake their hands, unless they extend their hands to you first. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Frayda said quickly, nodding her head as well.

The clerk went on to say, "You are not required to behave in any *particular* way, but if you want to make the best impression that you can, give a quick curtsy and say 'Your royal highness.' If you know the name of the princess, you can append her name to your greeting if you wish." The clerk stopped and smiled. "These young ladies, today, will not hold it against you if you forget their names. A lot of the girls get nervous, so don't worry about that. If you think you made a mistake, don't worry about that, either. You only have a minute, and I promise you they won't get upset with you. Do you understand?"

"Yes!" Frayda said. If she was intimidated at all by the level of detail she had to remember, it did not show in the least.

The clerk continued, “Your time slot is for 3:00 precisely. Remember: do *not* be later than 2:55 or you will forfeit your slot. I hope you enjoy it. Next!”

■ ■ ■

After registration came lunch. For me, it was largely forgettable. I probably ate some roast duck, since it is one of my favorites. I do not remember what either Aunt Lyra or Uncle Cyrus chose, but I distinctly remember that Frayda had opted for some kind of hot-and-spicy finger food, popular in some other part of the kingdom, that came in bite-sized pieces. She was enjoying herself and started making an exaggerated eye-roll with every bite, moaning “Mmmmmmm” in equally-exaggerated pleasure. It got to where she would giggle every time she did it, so the rest of us started saying “Mmmmmmm” every time too, which just made it all the funnier.

Once lunch was finished, we all got back on our feet and turned to look at Uncle Cyrus for direction. He was the planner, and as the head of our household, he was also the leader.

He was all business right away, saying, “I want to look around for some items for the shop, and, maybe something special for breakfast tomorrow.” We all groaned, but with smiles on our faces. His food choices that we just Had To Try because You're Just Going To Love It were never successful. We had to go through this every year and he never seemed to lose hope in his abilities to please us. Uncle Cyrus wasn't phased by our lack of confidence; he just went on to say, “Lyra has her eye on a few things as well. You and Frayda,” he said to me, “need to be in line by

2:55. How about we just go ahead and split up now, as I'm sure you and Frayda don't want to be anchored by your aunt and me."

I looked at Frayda. She was grinning widely and shaking her head vigorously to say yes.

"That's settled, then," Uncle Cyrus said. "It will be hard to find each other after we split up, so let's agree to meet at sunset by one of the gas lanterns out on the boulevard. Whoever gets there first just waits for the others." Hearing this, we all smiled and nodded at each other, after which Uncle Cyrus turned to Aunt Lyra, and with a twinkle in his eye, said, "My lady!" and extended to her his elbow. She in turn hooked her arm through his, looked him straight in the eye, smiled a huge smile, and away they went.

Frayda and I watched their retreating backs for a minute. "What do you want to do?" I asked her. "We have about an hour or so before you need to be in line."

She replied, "I want to make a deal. If *I* pay for something, *you* have to do it, and if *you* pay for something, *I* have to do it. Deal?"

"You mean I can choose anything to eat, and you have to eat it?" I asked. She gave me a vigorous affirmative nod in reply.

"And if you want to buy two flowery hats, I have to wear one?" I asked.

"I would not make you wear a flowery hat," she said, and then restarted. "I *might* not make you wear a flowery hat, but I might . . . I might . . . *you* might have to help me do some painting." The last part was blurred out in a bit of a hurry.

“All right,” I said, as if I were considering a matter of considerable importance. “Since you already know what you want me to have to do, how about we wander around a bit so I can figure out what you are going to have to do for me. We can work our way toward the Princess Pavilion and get you in line right on time.” Her response to me was a big, toothy grin.

■ ■ ■

The subsequent hour passed quickly enough. I had determined we would report to the Princess Pavilion by about 2:45, and we arrived just a minute or two later than that. I had not yet decided how to fulfill my end of the Frayda Challenge, but that would come later. *This* was what we had really come here for; it was the only reason I had for coming to the festival at all.

Ahead of us, another patient clerk was calling out the names of the girls and their time slots, getting the girls in line in order so each could have her turn.

“Betsy! 2:58! Where are you! Oh, good, come here now. Stand here. Connie! 2:59! You get right here behind Betsy. Frayda! 3:00! Okay, honey, you’re here . . .”

I was allowed to stay with Frayda as far as the roped-off area ahead. When it came to be her turn, Frayda would be allowed to step behind the rope line and walk up to a table, behind which sat the three princesses here today. I would simultaneously stay outside the rope line and work my way to the other side, the exit as they called it.

Since we had a few minutes yet to wait, I began reflecting on what I knew of the royal family. King Briar had married Queen Sapphire. Where she was from I had

never heard, although it would hardly have been a secret. Officially, they had five children, in this order: Flint, Slate, Beryl, Carnelian, and Diamond. Prince Flint, who was 19 years old that year, would one day take the throne as King Flint. His younger brother Prince Slate was 16. Princess Beryl was 15, while Princess Carnelian and Princess Diamond were 13 and 12, respectively.

Unofficially, there was another daughter somewhere, if rumors were to be believed. No one seemed to know for sure. The most popular rumor was that sometime between Flint and Slate, a daughter had been born. Whether this daughter was still alive varied according to who was telling the story. Slate, therefore, might actually be the *third* child. Making the story even more juicy for gossipy tongues was that the second child and eldest daughter, name unknown, was so repulsive that no one could bear to look at her and might even, through the sheer power of her degree of being repulsive *force you out of her presence*. No one bothered to explain how this could happen, of course, or what it might look like if you saw it. Rumors being what they were, people added more and more repulsive qualities to the unknown daughter: her gaze would turn you to stone, just a touch of her finger and you would shrivel up, mean and angry all the time. People loved to hate this girl, and their love-hate name for her was The Ugly Princess.

These jokes and stories seemed to be refreshed and renewed from year to year, never losing either their fascination or popularity among the general population of the city. Naturally, with a great gathering of people or an

event like the festival we were attending today, these jokes, new and old alike, circulated like wildfire.

When I was new to the city, I tried to fit in by repeating jokes that I had heard and even tried to make up a few of my own. The novelty quickly wore off, and instead, I found I resented these jokes rather than finding them pleasurable. It just didn't feel right to me and, without really telling anyone, I just decided I did not want to do it any more. Eventually, I even got irritated by the nature of the jokes themselves. If some poor girl had actually been born with some condition or appearance that made her ugly, it wasn't her fault, was it? Why did so many people derive so much pleasure at the misery of others? I decided that the most repulsive thing about The Ugly Princess was the way people treated her. What had she ever done to them?

Tragically, Queen Sapphire passed away when Frayda was around two years old. Princess Diamond would therefore have been about four. Although there had been a massive memorial event and much mourning throughout the kingdom, the exact cause of the Queen's death remained a private family matter. King Briar remained a widower, even though he was regarded as being ruggedly handsome by many female admirers. With the Leviathan Empire being one of the most powerful kingdoms in the world, he could have had his pick of any number of princesses and royal daughters from nearly anywhere. No king in his right mind would pass up on an opportunity to have King Briar and the military might of the Leviathan Empire as a political ally; most would gladly offer up their daughters to secure King Briar's favor. Yet, he remained a widower. Most people

believed, or wished, that he was still so much in love with Queen Sapphire that he didn't have any room for anyone else but her.

■ ■ ■

I came out of my reverie with a start when I realized they had called Frayda's name. It was her turn to meet a real princess. As if in testimony to the precision of the palace staff, at the exact moment that Frayda was about to take her first step toward the princesses, the fairground clock tower began to strike the hour. It was designed to play a short tune, after which it would sound out the hour with the appropriate number of clangs of a bell. It was just now three o'clock, so everyone knew there would soon be three DONGs from the clocktower. Frayda, being Frayda, managed to time her steps perfectly with the tower bell, making fists with each hand and stomping each foot into the ground. DONG-DONG-DONG went the bell tower. DONG-DONG-DONG went Frayda's feet as she took three steps toward the princesses. With her third step, she planted herself directly in front of Princess Diamond, the youngest and the first in line to be greeted. To everyone that saw her, it had really looked like it was her feet that were making the bell sounds, not the clock tower. Everyone was laughing, including the princesses.

True to form, I could hear Frayda greet each princess by name as she performed a cute, but evidently well rehearsed, curtsy. Without fail, each princess extended her hand for the coveted handshake. Unlike the other girls, who spent a little bit of time in front of each princess before moving to the

right, Frayda very quickly greeted each one, and then stepped back to the middle in front of Princess Carnelian.

With most of the girls, one of the princesses would engage with her and the other two would just look bored. Frayda, however, had everyone's attention. All three sisters had their eyes on her the whole time. There were smiles, laughter, and more smiles for nearly the entire minute. Finally, I heard Princess Beryl, the eldest say, very distinctly, “ . . . and you work with *pets*? That is so *neat*! And is he . . .” I could tell she was about to look directly at me, so I hurriedly glanced down at the ground as she pointed directly at me “ . . . this cousin of yours?”

Frayda quickly replied, “Yes! Isn't he cute?”

“He IS!” Princess Beryl said, giving me a little wiggly-finger wave. I didn't look up or wave back. *She can't possibly really think that; it's just the Frayda Effect*, I thought to myself. Princess Beryl was just being polite because to do otherwise might hurt Frayda's feelings. Right then, another clerk announced, “Frayda, dear, time to move on.” Frayda's minute with the princesses was over far too soon.

■ ■ ■

We had to thread a crowd as we worked our way back outside the Princess Pavilion. I kept a firm grip on Frayda's hand so that we would not get separated. Once we had cleared the crowd a bit, I stopped and turned to look at her.

“So, was it worth it?” I asked.

“It was!” she exclaimed. “I've never before been able to see a real princess, and today I got to see three all at once!” A short pause, and then, “Did you hear what she said?”

referring, I was sure, to Princess Beryl and the he-is-cute comments.

“You mean about the pet business being neat?”

“No, silly. I said 'isn't he cute' and she said 'he IS'!”

I laughed. “She doesn't think I'm cute. She was just being nice.”

With all sincerity, she said, “But *I* think you're cute.”

“The prettiest in the world?” I asked, teasingly.

“Oh *stop*,” she said, blushing slightly and then beaming me one of her irresistible smiles.

■ ■ ■

I had finally settled on what I was going to pay for and what Frayda was therefore going to have to do. One of the tents featured a coffee vendor who was expanding his markets in the city. I had heard of coffee, but it was a seasonal beverage and not usually available all the time, and it tended to be very expensive. He was promising lower prices and year-round availability and wanted to attract new customers by offering samples at the festival.

Outside of his tent was a sign that read

*Farmer Edwin's Mountain-Grown Coffee
refined people of distinction prefer Farmer Edwin's
coffee to any other coffee the world over*

~ now available throughout the year in Leviathanos ~

“This is it!” I said when I read the sign. Inside the large tent were a number of tables, almost every one of them occupied by people in groups of twos and threes and fours. “Let's be 'refined people of distinction' for a little while and see what all the fuss is about.”

I won't deny that at first I was tempted by the nature of our challenge to try to find the yuckiest thing available (worms, anyone?), because Frayda had agreed in advance that she would eat it no matter what it was. I quickly realized I would not enjoy that nearly as much as I would enjoy finding something new for the two of us to try together; hopefully, it would be something new for her to like. Frayda was the more adventurous of the two of us, and I was determined to find something *good enough*, whatever that was going to be. Maybe this coffee stuff would be something we could enjoy together in the future, assuming we could afford it.

It was failing miserably.

To my surprise, the beverage was served hot, like tea. I burned my mouth with the first sip; apparently Frayda had as well because her first sip had been followed by, “Ow!”

Subsequent sips were not much better. People of distinction we were not, unless we were to be judged by the magnitude of our distinctive frowns.

The duration between our sips was growing longer and longer. Eventually, Frayda looked up at me. Until then, she had been gazing at her quaint little porcelain cup. “Why do refined people of distinction prefer *this*?” Frayda asked. “If it tasted like it smelled, I might like it. But it's bitter, and I burned my mouth when I sipped it the first time.”

“What do you mean 'why do refined people of distinction prefer this'?” I replied in a mocking tone. “We are refined people of distinction, are we not, and we prefer it, do we not?”

“We most certainly do not!” she said forcefully as she plonked her cup down on its matching saucer. “Let me know when you’re finished.” She could tell I was disappointed in the whole experience, so she added, “Maybe it would be better if it had more worms in it.”

I had just tried to take another sip. What she said caught me off guard, so when I laughed, my mouth was closed and I ended up with coffee squirting out of my nose. That, then, made her laugh, and we shared a few moments of mirth together.

While I was busy trying to dab my face and see if I could undo the effects of a nose full of coffee, I tuned in slightly to the conversations of the people around us. As one would expect, there were a lot of Ugly Princess jokes. Probably because I was already a bit frustrated, this made me feel an intense wave of anger welling up inside. I leaned toward Frayda to reduce the possibility of anyone overhearing what I was about to say and said, somewhat hotly, “I’m really tired of all the Ugly Princess jokes. I don’t like them any more; I haven’t for some time.”

“I don’t either!” she said, looking like I had been reading her mind. In a quiet voice matching my own, she added, “I never understood why so many people think it is so funny.”

“These people are getting on my nerves,” I said as I too plonked my cup onto its saucer. I sighed. Coffee was not going to be a success, after all. “Are you finished?” I asked, as a courtesy. I already knew she was.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I know you wanted this to be something special. Thanks for trying.”

“Well, I’m finished too,” I replied. “I was finished before you were, actually. I just didn’t want to admit it.”



Frayda’s part of the Frayda Challenge proved to be a real success. She had chosen a tent that featured artistic canvasses with a thin outline of a picture on each. For a small fee, one bought a canvas. For “just a little bit more,” the vendor would provide an easel, some paint brushes, and as many colors of paint as you wanted, limited by current availability, of course.

Frayda had always loved animals and spent some time looking though the vendor’s inventory to find the one she wanted, ignoring anything that was not an animal. She finally settled on an attractive picture of a dog’s face, some kind of shepherd by the looks of it, and quickly settled in to her work. I had declined Frayda’s offer to buy a painting for me. “It will be enough for me if you let me watch,” I said honestly.

She was in her element. They had given her an apron so she would not get any paint on her dress, but that didn’t stop the paint from ending up on her fingers or in her hair. Most of it, though, was ending up on her canvas. During the entire process, she was muttering things to herself: “let’s mix *this* and *that* and put it *here* . . . she needs some brown here . . . this little spot on her nose . . . and her ears like this . . .”

At first, I was surprised by the way she was mixing and applying her colors—she had an eye for it. Then, I thought to myself, *well, silly, of course she does*. Did we not rely on her ability to sense colors in order to detect, and sometimes

avoid, Dark Magic? Yes, we did. While her ten-year-old brush strokes were not up to the standards of a portrait artist, her colors were beautiful and incredibly lifelike.

“There!” she said, with a final flourish of a brush. “What do you think, Hale?”

“Frayda, that is *good*. It’s *really* good. Your mom and dad are going to be real proud of you!”

“I know *they* will,” she said, and then in a shy voice asked, “What about *you*?”

“I am too. I really am.”

When the paint dried, the vendor offered to wrap the painting in some rough, brown paper to keep it from getting damaged and, I presumed, to keep paint from getting on Frayda’s dress. I had her painting tucked under the arm on one side; my other arm resting lightly across her shoulders as we walked leisurely toward our next objective, our meeting place with Uncle Cyrus and Aunt Lyra.

Along the way, Frayda stopped to admire some leather goods that one of the merchants had on display. There were some tables under a tent of sorts. The first thing I noticed was the various purses, and I supposed one of them had caught Frayda’s eye.

Much to my surprise, she quickly lost interest in the purses and started examining some of the other wares. I would have called them messenger bags. Simply put, they were like pouches with a shoulder strap; big enough for rolls of documents or maybe even small books.

“Are you thinking of replacing your purse?” I asked her.

She shook her head *no* a few times and said, “You need one of these.”

I leaned toward her ear so I could speak to her without being overheard. “I don't have the money for one of these, and I don't really need one anyway.”

She turned to face me and said in a similar tone, “If I pay for something, you have to do it, remember? You didn't paint, so we still have a deal.”

I stood up straight and shook my head *no* a few times. She kept her eyes on me and said, “Hale, you need one, and I want to do this. Besides, we can use some of the money we have earned from our business. How many times have you heard Dad talking about reinvesting in his business? You can use it for your work. It gives you a place to put your stone kit instead of carrying it in your hand all the time.”

I made a face and replied, “I don't need it, Frayda.”

“Then do it for me,” she insisted. “It has an extra pouch in the front where you can keep cookies to trade with me, and it frees your hands up, so I can walk on either side of you and hold either hand instead of just the one all the time.” Maybe not the best logic, but I found it convincing me nonetheless.

There was a man and a lady working the vendor's stall and the lady came up to us. *She must be the wife*, I thought. She smiled at us and looked at Frayda. “Is there anything I can help you with?” she asked.

Frayda held up the messenger's bag she had selected. “We want this one. What do you want for it?”

The lady looked pleased. “Let me get my husband. He does the bartering. He says I tend to give everything away.” She added this last bit with a self-deprecating laugh.

The husband came over. Frayda asked him what he wanted for the bag. He named a price. Frayda countered with something about half as much. He came down. She came up. They did this a few times until Frayda said, “That will be fine.” She was smiling from ear to ear. I hated bartering, and she seemed to enjoy it. Besides, she had negotiated a fine deal and I was impressed.

The wife took it upon herself to write a receipt. Meanwhile, I pulled our money pouch out of my pocket and counted out the necessary coins, which I handed to the lady. Frayda handed me the bag, and took the receipt.

The husband looked at his wife until she met his gaze. Then, he smiled at Frayda and said, “I would have sold it for less. You should have bartered some more.” This earned him a little laugh from his wife.

Frayda smiled back and said, “I would have paid more, and besides, we had reached a fair price.”

He laughed a little. “You’re a lot older than you look.” She smiled her Frayda smile at him, pleased at his compliment.

Meanwhile, I opened the flap of the bag. It had magnets sewn into the leather, so it would snap shut and stay that way. I dropped my stone kit into the bag and slung the strap over my shoulder.

Frayda stepped back about two steps and sized me up. “You look very professional,” she said, with an affirmative nod of her head. “I think we made a good choice.”

“You are really something else,” I said affectionately. She stepped up to me and embraced me. I took a second to marvel at how much I cared about her. “I love you so

much,” I said while we held each other. “Do you know that?”

“I *do* know. But I still like to hear you say it,” she replied.

“We probably need to find your parents,” I said as we released each other. I held out my right hand to her. Normally, I carried my stones in my left hand, leaving my right hand free. Frayda shook her head *no* and said, “This time, I choose. Give me your other hand.”

I laughed and did as she said, and we started walking.

After a while, Frayda and I could see her parents just up ahead at the corner in the light of one of the lanterns. They were standing together, her with her arm locked through his, waiting patiently as we approached. They were talking softly to each other, but both of them were keeping their eyes on Frayda and me.

When we got within about four paces of Uncle Cyrus, Frayda sped ahead of me and ran up to her father, giving him a big bear hug. “Daddy Daddy Daddy!” she was saying, “I got to see not one but three princesses and one of them thought Hale was cute and I painted a painting and Hale said it is really good and I want you to see it.”

I still had the painting tucked under my arm, so when I caught up to Frayda, I gently unwrapped the brown paper from around the painting and held it in the light of the gas lantern so everyone else could see it. Her mother and father began talking at the same time, saying, “Frayda, that is just wonderful. Frayda, that's great. Frayda, you did such a good job. I love those colors.” This went on for half a minute or so before Uncle Cyrus finished with, “Frayda, your mother and I are both very proud of you. Let's get Hale to wrap it

up again and maybe when we get home we can find a place to hang it up or something.”

“Do you mean it?” Frayda asked, her eyes growing enormously round.

“Of course I mean it. I might even have an empty frame lying around the shop somewhere. We can make it look really nice.”

Frayda was pleased and couldn't hide it. Uncle Cyrus tousled her hair and said, “If I do that, though, I expect you and everyone else to try something new at breakfast tomorrow. I just *know* you are going to love it. Look!”

With a small flourish, he showed us the package that he had been carrying under his arm. On the side, in big letters, it read, *FARMER EDWIN'S MOUNTAIN-GROWN COFFEE*. Underneath in smaller letters, it read, *the Finest in the Kingdom! Refined People of Distinction prefer Farmer Edwin's Coffee to any other Coffee the world over!*

Uncle Cyrus was pointing to the package and saying, “See? Refined people of distinction . . .”

I looked at Frayda and she looked at me. On her face she had one of the biggest *Oh, No!* expressions I had ever seen, and I'm sure my face was a mirror image of her own. Then, we just started laughing uncontrollably. “What is so funny, you two?” Uncle Cyrus asked us. Then he turned to Aunt Lyra and asked her, “Was I being funny? What did I say that was so funny?”

When I could catch my breath enough to speak, I said, “It's not what you said.” Then I closed my eyes and shook my head from side to side, remembering our experience

from earlier in the day. “How about we tell you later. Maybe after breakfast tomorrow.”

He gave me one of his I'll-hold-you-to-your-promise looks and said, “Very well. Shall we go?”

We turned to walk toward a grouping of carriages a short distance away. Uncle Cyrus matched his pace with mine and leaned over to me. “One of them thought Hale was cute?” he asked with a wink, as if sharing a secret.

What could I say? I just gave a shrug and laughed.

Chapter VI

Uncle Cyrus was out of town on one of his visits to far-away places. It was a beautiful day, and Aunt Lyra had suggested that we have a simple lunch up on our rooftop terrace. Frayda and I had readily agreed. It had been a lot of fun, and very relaxing besides.

Aunt Lyra and Frayda had long ago left me sitting alone, lost in my thoughts. The circumstances surrounding the Empty Darkness cases were troubling me, and whenever I was not otherwise occupied, I found myself reviewing what we knew and trying to find anything that helped make sense of it all. We were making no headway at all in trying to figure out who or what our adversary was, or its objective. We still seemed to be in a sort-of stalemate, each of us trying to circle around behind the other, with neither being able to obtain any kind of tactical advantage.

In the several weeks since the festival and Frayda's visit to the Princess Pavilion, we had encountered the Empty Darkness another half-dozen times or so. Cases still seemed to be occurring in random places to random animals. The only real difference was that some of them had occurred in daylight.

"Hale, are you still up here?" The sound of Frayda's voice calling jarred me back to reality. She caught sight of me and said, "Oh good. I found you. We have a visitor coming. I'm headed to the door right now."

"Okay, I will catch up to you as quickly as I can. I have to gather up my sunstones, so I might be a little slow."

She smiled and nodded in reply. Almost immediately, she turned and was out of sight, heading downstairs to be in position to greet our next customer. I walked over to where my collection of sunstones was laid out in a sunny place on our terrace and started gathering them up and putting them away.

It had long been my habit on beautiful sunny days to unroll my stone kit and lay all my sunstones out in the sun to make sure they had an opportunity to rejuvenate themselves. Magical sunstones are funny things—sometimes, they absorb sunlight at a rapid pace, becoming fully rejuvenated in a few hours; other times, they might take all day. *Maybe they don't like getting out of bed either*, I had once told myself. *That would give us something in common, wouldn't it?*

I didn't move slowly on purpose, but I didn't hurry either. I spent a little time with each stone, gauging how fully rejuvenated it was, before placing it back into a carrying slot in the stone kit. I didn't keep the stones in any particular place, and the fact that Frayda had no trouble discerning the real stones from the powerless ones meant I didn't have to resort to some pre-arranged pattern. I let whimsy determine where each stone went.

By the time I had finished with the stones and navigated my way down from the rooftop to our parlor and the front door, Frayda had already done her vetting and was just quietly waiting for me to join her. I performed a quick examination of our customer, never looking him in the eye, of course, and noticed he was dressed in a very snappy military-style uniform.

As if reading my thoughts, Frayda announced, “Hale, this is Captain Pylant of the Palace Guard. Her Majesty the Princess Diamond is requesting that we attend to her pet rabbit.” *I don't sense any Dark Magic at play; so far, he appears to be who he says he is.* Although he was undoubtedly unaware of it, Captain Pylant had passed the first test.

I made a half-shrug in Frayda's direction. “Well, then. Let's be off.”

“If you would both be so kind as to follow me . . .” the Captain said as his voice trailed off. Then, with a smart about-face, he turned and led us to an ornate and well-maintained carriage that was obviously kept in waiting for members of the Royal Family. *The rides keep getting better and better, I thought. If nothing else, at least that is one thing in our favor.*

Captain Pylant helped Frayda up into the carriage. Once I was inside and seated, both Frayda and I facing forward, Captain Pylant climbed in with us, closed the door, and took the seat opposite.

We traveled in silence for a while. Eventually, I looked at the Captain and asked, “What is the nature of the issue with Princess Diamond's rabbit?” The long silence had been a little uncomfortable to me, and while I thought my question was a little impertinent, I felt like I just needed something to do.

In a very formal fashion, he replied, “Begging your pardon, sir, but I am not at liberty to say anything about that. I was tasked with delivering the message. The Princess herself will tell you.” Then, his face softened, and he said,

looking mostly at Frayda, “Don’t worry. The Royal Family are good people—humble, even—and when they are at home, they like to dispense with the stuffiness of all the royal titles and palace protocol with all the bowing and such.” With a wink, he added, “Although, you didn’t hear that from me.”

I suspected that was all we were going to get from Captain Pylant, and I also suspected it was more than he had originally intended to tell us. *It’s the Frayda Effect*, I thought. Apparently, even members of the Palace Guard were susceptible.

■ ■ ■

I had never been to the Palace before. It was literally a city within a city—blocks and blocks of streets, buildings of all shapes and sizes, names of departments and administrations grandly etched in marble or stone above ornate doors, tree-lined streets—it could just as easily been a public park or a very well-to-do neighborhood in a wealthy part of town. *It isn’t just A Wealthy Neighborhood, it’s THE Wealthy Neighborhood*, I thought. *It has to be fit for a king.*

The Royal Residence was itself walled-off from the rest of the palace complex. Somewhere behind a high wall and what looked like an old forest would be the King’s estate house where he and his family lived.

Sure enough, after a time we came to a gate in the wall. Our carriage made an abrupt turn and we were inside the Royal Estate.

Within a minute or two, we got our first sight of the Estate House, a grand structure, sprawling, at least two or

three stories, surrounded by exquisite gardens, footpaths, and wooded copses. Our driver steered our carriage toward the right side of the house where I saw a portico and a circular drive; it was under this portico that our carriage came to a stop.

Captain Pylant was on his feet in an instant, opening the door and hopping to the ground. I stepped out and down, then turned to give Frayda a hand as she stepped down.

“Now, remember,” Captain Pylant was saying, “just be polite, but none of that your-highness and bowing and stuff. I have been instructed to lead you around the side here to the back of the house to where Princess Diamond will be waiting for you. Please follow me.”

I extended my right hand to the Captain. “Thank you, my good fellow. You have been most kind,” I said.

“My pleasure,” he said, touching the brim of his hat with his right hand. To Frayda, he said, “It’s been a right pleasure to meet you, young lady. I have a daughter about your age. You remind me of her.” Frayda flashed her charming smile and I swore I could see Captain Pylant melt, just a little, like a candle that gets softened in the sun.

“Now, please, follow me,” he repeated. We followed Captain Pylant along the path as he led us through the aforementioned gate and to the back of the house. After that, we turned slightly and walked parallel to the back side of the house. At this point, the path sort-of faded away as it transitioned to match the lawn behind the Estate House.

We could see a few people a little ways off, some sitting in chairs and some kneeling on the ground next to what looked like a rabbit hutch that was raised off of the ground.

Captain Pylant stopped, and made a gesture with his hand, and said, "This is as far as I go. You see the family is waiting for you. Please continue. I bid you both a very good day."

Frayda and I thanked him again and resumed walking. I did a quick survey—three men, in the chairs; three girls and a white puff near the rabbit hutch on the ground. *Dad, both brothers, and all three sisters*, I thought. The whole family had come out to watch. *No pressure—none at all*, I added mentally, wishing it were in fact true.

I had never seen King Briar before, but he needed no introduction. I would have known him anywhere. He just . . . looked like a king. I knew he knew we were approaching, but he and his sons appeared to be talking. *Probably to put us at ease instead of just staring at us while we approach*, I thought. When we arrived to within three paces of where he sat, he jumped up, and with a big smile, said, "It is so good of you to come. Please . . ." and waved us toward his daughters. "I do believe you know Beryl, Carnelian, and Diamond. These two fellows here," he said with a quick gesture toward the sons, "are Flint and Slate."

I gave Flint and Slate a polite nod, and then looked over toward where the girls were kneeling around the rabbit. Beryl must have sensed my gaze. She looked up, right at me, made a sort-of startled expression followed by a frown, and then recovered her composure, giving me one of the wiggly finger-waves that the princesses had used back on the day of the festival at the Princess Pavilion.

Flint looked at Frayda with a twinkle in his eye and said, "It's the girl with the bells on her shoes. There has hardly

been a day gone by recently without at least one of my sisters saying DONG-DONG-DONG and stomping her feet as she walks around the house. However, please do tend to the rabbit. We can talk later.”

It was evident to me, and apparently to Frayda as well, that Captain Pylant had given us good advice. The Royal Family was going out of their way to tell us that Palace Protocol did not apply here, not today. We just smiled and mumbled some kind of greeting as we made our way to where Princess Diamond was kneeling on the soft, lush grass beside a lovely white rabbit. Slightly behind and to either side were Beryl and Carnelian, her older sisters, obviously wanting to be moral support but letting Diamond take the lead.

“My sisters and I remembered you from the Princess Pavilion and Daddy said we could ask you to come,” said a somewhat tearful Princess Diamond, without being prompted. “This is my rabbit. Yesterday, he was limping and I thought it was just a joint out of place, but now, he’s unconscious and it looks like it is hard for him to breathe.”

The rabbit wasn’t looking well at all. Sensing the urgency of the situation, Frayda and I just slipped into our respective roles, the animal healers, here to render whatever aid we could. Without hesitation or even bothering to give any kind of greeting, Frayda merely asked, “What’s his name?”

“I call him Carrot Hop. It’s kind of a joke. There was a red-headed girl at school who was sometimes called carrot top when people wanted to be mean and I thought Carrot Hop because it sounded like carrot top and it might be a funny name for a white rabbit.”

“Carrot Hop looks to be a fine animal. I'll bet he likes his name, too,” Frayda said. I saw the Frayda Effect at work as Princess Diamond seemed to relax and calm down. “Hale and I need a minute to get set up, and then we are going to go to work on him right away. Okay?” Princess Diamond just looked directly at her, forced a smile, and nodded her head yes.

Without actually waiting for Diamond's response, Frayda closed her eyes and focused her magical abilities on Carrot Hop. After about two seconds, she opened her eyes and shook her head from side to side. Then, she closed her eyes and repeated her magical exam.

“Hale,” she said apologetically, “I did it twice. I didn't see anything. I know you don't like the bad news. I didn't want to tell you unless . . . I had to.” My heart sank. I was hoping for a color, and Frayda said there wasn't one. As was now my habit in these cases, I just sighed and shrugged.

Frayda went into action. From her purse, she extracted our crystal vial and asked for water. Meanwhile, I removed the stone kit from my messenger's bag and unrolled it, waiting for my next cue. Once the sunwater was mixed and Princess Diamond had infused it with her love, Frayda cautioned the three girls: “With these cases, it sometimes gets a little messy. There's smoke, and it smells and stings your eyes and makes you cough. I would like you all to back up a little bit.”

Thinking back to our recent encounters with the Empty Darkness afflictions, I was well aware that, by this time, I would have to use at least three sunstones all at once if I had any chance of forcing the darkness out of Carrot Hop's

little rabbit body. I moved over to my stone kit and selected three that I knew to be at full strength. Then, I returned and knelt down at Carrot Hop's side. I tried not to think about how unpleasant the inevitable recoil would be, nor how embarrassing it would be to have the entire Royal Family watch me slowly come to my senses and stand up on wobbly feet. *All in a day's work*, I reminded myself.

Belatedly, I noticed out of the corner of my eye that the King and the two sons had gotten out of their chairs and formed a loose semicircle behind me, probably wanting to watch but also remain out of sight so as to avoid being a distraction to me. As Frayda had done, I gave them a gentle warning, saying, "Sometimes, I get knocked backward rather quickly. I would prefer that you all come around to the other side, just in case. I'll be all arms and legs and you may not have time to get out of the way." I waited, and they moved around and stood behind the three sisters, who were kneeling about two paces away.

With my stones in one hand, I laid my other hand in between Carrot Hop's soft and rather picturesque ears. I did what I normally do, which was to gently explore the rabbit's body to look for a wound. I didn't find one, but instead seemed to locate the inevitable evil mass without a substantial amount of effort. Maybe it was getting sloppy, or maybe I was getting better. Either way, I was happy to avoid the additional time and labor of doing a longer search.

"I've found it," I whispered to Frayda. "Here goes." I went through the procedure of preparing and then executing my signature punch. Instead of feeling like I was striking an inert object at full force, it felt like I hit it with a glancing

blow on its backside as it was running away. With a start, I opened my eyes. I wanted to say “that was too easy” but I didn’t get the chance. There were wisps of black smoke coming out of Carrot Hop’s mouth and nose. The smoke slowly built into a steady stream and began gathering above Carrot Hop’s body, about at eye level to me since I was kneeling.

Frayda and I both leaned back a bit, because neither of us wanted to smell it or feel it burning our eyes. Instead of blowing away, the smoke continued to gather, slowly growing and slowly rising. From within the shadows of what was now a fairly large smoke cloud, I imagined I could see the faint outline of a head. It slowly grew more refined. I glanced at Frayda. Her eyes were wide open, and her gaze was fixed on the apparition. She saw it too.

I looked back into the smoke cloud. The head now had a body, or at least a shoulder and one arm. The one arm had a hand that looked like it was clinging to Carrot Hop, as if the head and shoulder were relying on the hand to keep the apparition from blowing away in some unseen wind in the magical dimension.

The head turned its face to me. There were no facial features whatsoever, except for two dark spots in roughly the position you would expect to find eyes. When the apparition held me in its gaze, I felt like I was on the edge of some bottomless abyss that would draw me into it and never ever let me out. The apparition then shifted its gaze to Frayda. Then, it stared at King Briar for a time. From him, it turned its gaze on Flint, then Slate, and then Beryl,

Carnelian, and Diamond, as if it was following the birth order of the children.

When at last it was finished with its scrutiny of Diamond's face, it whirled around and faced Frayda again. Then, it whirled to stare at King Briar, and then whirled back to Frayda. By this time, I could tell that it had come to the end of its endurance—its grip on Carrot Hop was slipping. I discerned an attitude of frustrated hatred emanating from the apparition as, with its hold on Carrot Hop severed, it began to be carried away by the unseen magical wind. Shortly thereafter, the smoke cloud itself began to dissipate, rising ever higher above the ground, fading and spreading out.

I looked at Frayda. “I'm never awake for this part. Is that what always happens?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She just shook her head from side to side. Then, she added, “That has never ever happened before.”

My mind was racing. How much should we reveal to the family about what had happened, and how much should we keep to ourselves? I made a snap decision and told Frayda, “Let's try not to make it look like anything here was out of the ordinary, but if they ask questions, we tell the truth. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” she said, with a serious tone in her voice.

I stood up and took a step or two back from Carrot Hop, so I wouldn't accidentally step on him if he woke up and started moving around. Without looking anyone in the eye, I told the knees and hands of the people gathered around us, “Usually, I have to pick myself off of the ground because I

get knocked backward there at the end, but today, it was a bit easier, so, we are finished.” Not eloquent, but good enough.

Carrot Hop took that as his cue to open his eyes and start looking around. Soon, his nose was twitching in normal rabbit fashion. “Oh, look! He’s coming around,” Diamond exclaimed. With that, the attention of the three sisters was focused on Carrot Hop and, for the moment at least, Frayda and I were forgotten.

We began “cleaning up,” which meant, I returned the sunstones, largely unused this time, to their respective storage places and rolled up my stone kit while Frayda gathered the vial and tucked it away in her purse. Carrot Hop began hopping away from us, albeit slowly, and Frayda and the sisters were following him. “He’s hopping! He’s hopping,” Diamond was saying, smiling. King Briar and the brothers were smiling as well and following along with their eyes.

Frayda had her attention focused on Carrot Hop as well. I walked over to her and said quietly, “Frayda, I need to think a bit. I’m going to walk back to the driveway and I will wait for you there, okay?” She gave me quick glance and an affirmative nod, and then returned to her observation of Carrot Hop and family.

This case was troubling me. It had been too easy—far too easy. I wanted to think, and sometimes I think better when I walk, so I turned back to the way we had come and began slowly making the return trip. I had hardly gone more than five paces before someone caught up to me and matched my pace, walking to my left.

“One does not stay King very long without learning to hear more than people are actually saying. This case troubles you, does it not?” King Briar asked.

“Forgive me, sir. I wasn't trying to be rude,” I stammered. It hadn't occurred to me to say good-bye to any of the family members. “I meant no offense.”

“None taken. So, what troubles you?”

I heard my own voice in my head: *if they ask questions, we tell the truth. Agreed?* So I told him the truth. “We have had other cases like this, facing the same . . . adversary. This one was too easy.”

“Too easy? In what way?” he asked.

“Usually I have to expend an enormous amount of magical energy to force this . . . parasite—whatever—we have been calling it the Empty Darkness—to leave its host. Normally I end up stunned, flat on my back, waiting for my senses to return to normal. You saw today that it didn't happen that way. It's not normal, and it troubles me.”

“And what of this rather spectacular, theatrical cloud of smoke? Do you usually include that, or was that just for me and my family today?” King Briar asked.

“That was not our doing. I had to ask Frayda whether it was normal or not; she had never seen it before either,” I replied. I frowned while I gathered my thoughts before continuing with, “That is just part of what troubles me. It seems to me that our adversary wanted us to go through the usual routine of forcing it out—it actually *wanted* to leave so it could do whatever it did in the form of the smoke cloud. I feel like I was a pawn in its game. It was calling the

shots today.” Not knowing what else to say, I just shook my head from side to side.

“They told me you were honest, you and Frayda,” he said. We walked several more paces and then he asked, “Would you have told me any of this if I had not asked?”

Would I? I asked myself. “Honestly? I don’t know. Frayda and I try to avoid troubling people with burdens that are not theirs to bear, but we do not withhold the truth from those who ask. You asked. I don’t know what I might have done otherwise.”

We had arrived at the gate during our conversation and had come to a stop, facing each other. I had no recollection of stopping or turning; I had been that engrossed in our discussion. For a short while, neither of us spoke.

King Briar broke the silence. “Now, then, regarding your fee. I have been advised that you never charge for your services, that instead, you merely ask people to give out of whatever abundance they have. Is this also true?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“And is this the way to get rich from performing your services?” he asked, with a twinkle in his eye.

“This is not about getting rich, sir. It’s about . . . helping people, giving to people what we can, and . . . it’s very much about teaching Frayda to stay away from Dark Magic. My mother dabbled in Dark Magic. I lost my parents because of Dark Magic. My Uncle Cyrus and I pledged to each other that we would both do all we can to keep Frayda from following in my mother’s footsteps.”

He thought this over for a considerable time. Then, he said, “How, then, do I reward you for your help today?”

What do you suggest?”

“I love it when people give Frayda something that they somehow know she will like. When given the freedom to choose something, they come up with the most wonderful ideas. You won't get her to tell you, though. If you ask her, she will just turn her back on you and walk away,” I said.

Again, the King thought this over. “Challenge accepted,” he said, smiling.

By this time, Frayda had nearly caught up to us. I heard a crunch-crunch of feet on the path, accompanied by Frayda skipping her way toward us. With a huge smile on her face, she announced, “Carrot Hop is recovering nicely. He is breathing normally, and it looks like the out-of-place joint is no longer troubling him. He is hopping without pain.”

I had forgotten about the out-of-place joint, and had neglected to check it before determining we were finished. It couldn't have just fixed itself. If, in fact, the whole event had been a subterfuge to get Frayda and me to play along, the out-of-place joint would merely have been another piece of misdirection. That, in turn, would be further proof that we had just been pawns in whatever had occurred today.

King Briar fixed his gaze on Frayda, saying, “So, young lady, I don't suppose you might give me a little hint to help me find a way to reward you for your wonderful work today?”

For once, Frayda didn't just turn her back and walk away. To my astonishment, she became suddenly very bashful. I had never seen Bashful Frayda before, and I was totally surprised. Her eyes kept dancing back and forth, looking at me and then looking at the King. Finally, she leaned toward

my ear and whispered to me what she wanted the King to know. Then, she just stared at me. *Go ahead, tell him!* her stare said. I looked at King Briar and started to repeat what Frayda had said and then stopped myself. “I really think it would mean more coming from you,” I said to her.

Frayda screwed up her courage for a few seconds before saying, “I was a really little girl when Queen Sapphire died. I don’t think I even remember anything, but, even so . . . I always wanted . . . could I . . . would you . . . may I please have an opportunity to see a portrait of Queen Sapphire? I have always wanted to know what she looks like.”

I caught Frayda’s turn of the phrase. Not what she *looked* like, what she *looks* like. What was Frayda up to? Even being nervous, she would not have misused words accidentally.

“Now how in the world could I refuse a request like that?” he said with sincerity. “You two are just full of surprises, aren’t you?” In response, Frayda just flashed one of her charming smiles. “We will do this right now!” he continued. “We will have to go into the house, but we can go through here,” he said, pointing at the side door under the portico where we had been dropped off. “I will take you to our Library Rotunda. It is pretty much everyone’s favorite room and my favorite portrait of Queen Sapphire hangs there. That’s the one I want you to see.”

He guided us toward the side entry and into the house. I tried not to be too curious, or at least not too obvious about being too curious, but I couldn’t help looking around as we walked. We were in a long, broad hallway, with doorways along both sides. Some of the doors were open, some were

closed, but it appeared we were walking past various rooms that one would use when entertaining guests—a smoking room, a billiards room, things like that. Eventually, we came to an intersection. Looking to my left, I could see the interior of the grand front entrance some distance away. To my right, the hall extended toward another set of grand double doors that apparently led out to the lovely back yard and gardens.

We crossed over the main hallway and continued until we arrived at a set of double doors to our right. With a quick “Here we are, just follow me,” the King turned and walked into the room.

To say it was the grandest room I have ever seen would be misleading. It wasn't grand in the sense of being ornate, but it was grand to me because it was full of natural light. It was round. It had a domed roof. Large windows across from us filled a rather sizable length of the opposite wall. After a closer look, I realized the wall was nothing but windows—floor to ceiling windows, curved to match the curve of the room. The dome above had a cupola with windows of its own, letting in even more light. The floor was covered in carpet; decorative banners hung from the walls and at strategic places above our heads, no doubt to help reduce echoes.

To our right was a massive marble fireplace, also curved to match the curve of the room. One could imagine the room being comfortably warm on even the coldest winter day. For the most part, every other section of the wall was covered with bookshelves—tall, and full of books. Every so often, there was a rolling ladder attached to a rail which

could be moved as necessary to facilitate reaching the upper shelves which were out of reach, even for me.

At the very center of the room was a very large and ornate round table, complete with ten equally-ornate but comfortable-looking chairs, obviously very old and yet in very good condition. The table was large enough that the ten chairs had a considerable amount of space between them. I imagined there was easily room for ten more.

Throughout the rest of the room were numerous groupings of chairs and sofas, suitable for conversations or reading or even taking a nap. The various groupings were arranged in non-repeating patterns, some looking ideal for four people; others which might easily handle ten or more. I did a quick mental estimate and imagined fifty or more people all being comfortably seated here and there, all at the same time.

Across the room from us, in a seating group next to the wall of windows, I caught a brief glimpse of a figure reclining on a sofa, reading a book. Just as my eyes locked onto the unknown person, I was distracted by King Briar, who was gesturing to our left and saying, "This is the portrait I was talking about." I realized Frayda and I had forgotten to keep moving once we had entered the room because we were admiring it so much. We were still at the doorway. King Briar was several paces away to our left, headed toward a portrait on the wall. It was the only portrait in the room. After several more paces, he glanced around the room and his eyes settled on the figure by the window.

"Oh! Amy! There you are. Where have you been all day?"

The figure named Amy looked up as though she had not even been aware of our presence. She must have been so engrossed in her reading that she had not even heard us come in. At the sound of King Briar's greeting, she jumped to her feet and said, "Daddy!"

King Briar's response was to open his arms in preparation for an imminent hug. I imagined the beloved Amy running up to him and vigorously embracing him. Instead, the mysterious Amy walked about three paces and, suddenly, became aware of Frayda and me. Just as suddenly, she grabbed her skirts on either side, hiked them up above her feet, and ran as quickly as she could, away from us, away from King Briar, and out of one of the room's other doors.

Frayda and I exchanged *What Was That About* glances, but chose to say nothing.

King Briar watched Amy leave. Then, he turned to us and said, "You'll have to excuse Amy. She's a little . . . reluctant to meet anyone new." Then, acting like nothing unusual had happened, he resumed walking toward the portrait and stopped in front of it, staring at it, smiling fondly.

Spontaneously, he began telling us, "She and I didn't hit it off so well at first. We were both strong-willed people, both of us from royal families, and used to telling everyone else what to do. For a while, I was resigned to being one of those unhappily-married kings, but what was I to do? Slowly, but steadily, we began to appreciate our differences, recognizing each other's strengths . . . we fell in love. I fell madly in love." He paused for a long time. "Even after all this time, I think about her every day. I miss her terribly."

By that time, Frayda and I were standing next to the King. He was on the right, and Frayda was in the middle, and the two of them were intent on looking at the portrait. I was a little more interested in the two of them being interested in the portrait. None of us said anything for a time.

“She was . . . she looks . . . I think she must have been the kind of queen everybody wishes a queen would be like. I can see . . .” Frayda was uncharacteristically at a loss for words. I think both King Briar and I still understood what she wanted to say nonetheless.

Maybe another minute passed, maybe two, when Frayda starting jumping up and down, clapping her hands together. “Hale, do it. Do it do it do it do it. Do that thing you do. Do it for Queen Sapphire,” she said, all the while staring at the portrait. *Was this what Frayda had been up to?* I asked myself.

“Frayda, no. I would have to use up a whole sunstone, and . . . no,” I replied.

“Oh, Hale, please? You still have plenty of other sunstones. Please?” she begged.

King Briar, being completely in the dark as to what Frayda was asking for, remained a polite host. Rather than demanding an explanation, he said, “Obviously, Hale, whatever your cousin wants you to do is not something you are eager to do. I will not obligate you to do it, but would you at least do me the courtesy of letting me know what it is?”

Thanks, Frayda, I thought to myself. I collected my thoughts for a few seconds, and then explained,

“Sometimes, my Uncle Cyrus restores paintings. A few years ago, Frayda and I accidentally discovered that, with the right encouragement, a sunstone can be coaxed to emit some light in a way that makes the picture appear more . . . realistic or . . . lifelike. It can be especially fascinating with portraits. It almost seems like the portrait transforms into a more accurate likeness, as though compensating for the artist being either not quite skilled enough, or deliberately changing a person's features, or maybe lacking the right colors while he painted the portrait.” Then I added, “It doesn't hurt the painting in any way.”

“Would you, then, be willing to make that happen here? Now? I would rather like to see it,” King Briar said.

Instead of answering verbally, I unrolled my stone kit and laid it on a conveniently-placed coffee table of sorts that was nearby. Then, I selected a sunstone and took position next to Frayda. True to form, after some gentle coaxing, the sunstone began to emit a faint light which quickly grew much brighter to the point that it was stronger than the light coming in from the windows behind us. At the same time, the painting seemed to undergo a transformation of its own —shadows softening, highlights becoming more vivid, and even a slight change to the shape of Queen Sapphire's face. It was hard to be certain, but things like the position of the eyes, or the shape of the chin became ever so slightly . . . different.

“Ooooohh,” Frayda said.

King Briar was transfixed. He just stared, without a word. I saw him dab a tear from one eye, but he never looked away from the portrait. After about a minute, the sunstone

had given all it had to give. The light slowly faded, and the portrait slowly resumed its previous appearance.

“She looked like I remember. I always thought this portrait artist didn't quite get her features right, but for a moment there, she looked exactly like I remember. And so alive again,” King Briar said. He had tears streaming down both cheeks by this time, and he made no effort to wipe them away. “She was the best thing that ever happened to me. I loved her so much, but I betrayed her. I didn't mean to, but I still did. I killed her. Not directly, but because of what I did. It killed her. I killed her and I ruined Amy's life and it was all because I thought I could control Dark Magic. I thought I was the master and that it would serve me and instead, I lost two of the people I loved the most.”

■ ■ ■

King Briar was lost in his thoughts. I felt like Frayda and I were intruding on what should be a private moment for the King. He did not need the indignity of having to explain his circumstances to two perfect strangers, so I decided Frayda and I should leave. I very quietly put my sunstone away and rolled up the kit. I caught Frayda's attention and tilted my head toward the door, and then started walking quietly away. Frayda silently followed. I didn't think the King had intended to open up to us like that. I considered it to be just another example of the Frayda Effect.

■ ■ ■

On the ride home, I was lost in thought. Frayda and I hadn't said anything since leaving the King's side. Finally, she broke into my thoughts by asking, “You're thinking about her too, aren't you?”

“Who. Queen Sapphire?” I asked.

“No.”

“You mean, Princess Beryl?”

Frayda rolled her eyes. “No, not Beryl. *Amy*. You’re thinking about *Amy*, aren’t you?”

I *had* been thinking about Amy. Who was Amy? Why had she fled the room? How had King Briar ruined her life?

“All right,” I said, “I admit it. I was thinking about Amy. I was trying to figure out . . .” I stopped. *What would Uncle Cyrus do? How would he engage Frayda in a discussion like this? He would ask questions!* I thought. How many times had I heard him suggest to me, “Let’s reason it out!” So instead of telling Frayda what I thought, I decided to ask her to tell me her thoughts instead. “What do you remember about Amy? What did you see?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes upward, lost in thought while she replayed the evening’s events in her mind. “She was sitting over by the window. She jumped up. She saw us, and hiked up her skirts, and ran from the room.”

“What else do you remember?” I asked.

“Hmmmm.” Then, her eyes grew huge and round as she asked me, “Hale! How could she read? How could she see us? How could she see at all? Her whole face was covered with a veil! Not like a bride wears, like you can see through, but . . . solid. Like her dress. How could she see where she was going? How could she see where to run?”

“I was wondering that as well,” I replied. “And what about this? Do you remember what she said when King Briar greeted her?” Frayda shook her head *no*. “He said, ‘Amy! There you are!’ Then, she looked at him and said,

'Daddy!'" I waited for Frayda to connect the dots, then prompted her with, "Who would call the King 'Daddy?'"

"One of his daughters! A princess!" she replied.

"Right. So which one of his daughters is named Amy?" I asked. Again, I waited for her to catch up to me before adding, "We have meet three daughters, Beryl, Carnelian, and Diamond, who are named in alphabetical order with Beryl being the eldest. If there is a fourth daughter whose name starts with the letter 'A', where does she fit in?"

"She would be the eldest," Frayda said slowly, because the wheels in her head were spinning. She started speaking faster as her thoughts solidified. "You would *start* with the letter 'A.' The daughter whose name started with 'A' would be first. She would be the eldest daughter."

I was nodding my head up and down as I said, "I agree with that, too. We don't *know* that Amy is the eldest daughter, but it makes sense. What doesn't make sense is why she would wear a thick veil, even while at home. We both saw the veil. Have you ever seen anything like that before? Have you even heard of such a thing?"

Frayda just shook her head *no*.

I said, "I don't want to say The Ugly Princess, but it sure makes sense."

Frayda shook her head *yes*.

"Remember," I said, "we don't really know anything, except that the King has a daughter named Amy who is apparently very bashful and doesn't want anyone to see her face."

Even without proof, I felt certain that we had arrived at a rather shocking set of facts: Frayda and I had seen the Ugly

Princess. She was real. She was the King's eldest daughter. Her name was Amy. And for reasons I couldn't fathom, practically no one in the entire kingdom even knew she existed.



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