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TERRY
BROOKS



The DARK LEGACY *of*
SHANNARA
WARDS *of* FAERIE

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FAERIE

THE DARK LEGACY OF SHAPPARA

TERRY
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BALLANTINE BOOKS  NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Del Rey, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brooks, Terry.

Wards of Faerie : the dark legacy of Shannara / Terry Brooks.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-345-52349-5

1. Shannara (Imaginary place)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3552.R6596W37 2012

813'.54—dc23

2012020292

www.delreybooks.com

Jacket design by David Stevenson

Jacket illustration: © Stephen Youll

v3.1

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Excerpt from Bloodfire Quest



IT WAS ALMOST ONE YEAR TO THE DAY AFTER SHE BEGAN her search of the Elven histories that Aphenglow Elessedil found the diary.

She was deep in the underground levels of the palace, sitting alone at the same table she occupied each day, surrounded by candles to combat the darkness and wrapped in her heavy cloak to ward off the chill. Carefully she read each document, letter, or memoir in what had been taken on the attributes of a never-ending slog. It was late and her eyes were burning with fatigue and dust, her concentration beginning to wane, and her longing for bed to grow. She had been reading each day, all day, for so long that she was beginning to think she might never see Paranor and her fellow Druids again.

It was dark each day when she began her work and dark when she ended it, and aside from an occasional visit from her sister or her uncle, she saw almost no one. She had read through the entirety of the histories, including their appendices, and had moved on to the boxes and boxes of other writings donated by prominent families over the years. These papers were intended to supplement, embellish, or correct what was considered the official record of the history that stretched back thousands of years. She had found little that she didn't already know or was in any way useful, yet she had persevered because that was how she was. Once she started something she did not give up until the job was finished.

And now, perhaps, it was. A diary, written by a young girl, a Princess of the realm living in the age of Faerie, had caught her eye just as she was on the verge of putting everything aside and going off to bed. It was buried at the bottom of a box she had finished emptying, small and worn and stiff with age, and she had glanced at the first couple of pages, noted the girl's writing and the nature of the entries, and been prepared to dismiss it. But then something had stopped her—curiosity, a premonition, a quirk in the way it was written, and she had paged ahead to the final entries to find something unexpected.

23, MONTHS 5

Something both terrible and wonderful has happened to me, and I can tell no one.

Today I met a boy. He is not of our people and not of our moral and ethical persuasion. He is a Darkling child of the Void, but he is the most beautiful boy I have ever seen. I am hopelessly in love with him, and even knowing that it is wrong of me to be so and that nothing good can come of it, I want to believe that it might be otherwise.

I was down by the Silver Thread, deep in the woods seeking bunch lilies and ardweed seeds for the shelter, when he appeared to me. He came out of the trees as if born of them, a lovely miracle given substance and form. So striking was he, so perfect. Blue skin (I have never seen such

depthless blue), golden eyes, hair of midnight black and stars, his voice as soft as the ending of summer rain when he greeted me. I loved him at once, in that first moment. I could not help myself.

Even when I knew what he was and that he was forbidden to me, I could not turn away from him. I like to believe that there was something more than physical attraction that drew me to him. I had enough presence of mind to be able to warn myself against what I was doing. But after we talked and I heard what he had to say about himself and his people, I knew I could not change things. It is said that the most ancient of our race frequently found love at first sight and seldom through lengthy consideration. Perhaps I am a throwback, for that is what happened with this boy and me.

We sat in a quiet glade and talked for hours; I cannot say for how long. By the time our encounter ended, twilight was approaching. I left him with a promise to meet again. No plans, no details, but I know it will happen.

I want it to happen.

26, MONTHS 5

Today, unable to help myself, I returned to the forest to try to find him again. I was not back in the glade for more than the half split of an hour before he reappeared. Again, we sat and talked of our lives and our hopes for the future. I feel so free with him, so able to be open about my life. He is the same with me, and I am reassured that the love I feel for him is not built on a foundation of false expectations but on real possibilities. While the prohibitions cannot be changed, I see no reason why they might not be ignored for a time. So I tell myself. So I am persuaded.

28, MONTH 5

We met again today. Our conversations were of ourselves, but also of the strife between our people and the terrible toll it was taking on all our lives. He told me he did not see all of his people as bad or all of ours as good. It was not so simple in his eyes, and I was quick to agree with him. The war is ongoing, centuries old, a struggle that has its roots in the beginnings of all our Races and of the world itself, and it will not end in our lives. We are its children, but we feel so apart from the world when together and alone. If only we could keep it that way. If only we could shelter what we feel from each other so that no one could ever destroy it.

Before we parted, he told me how he had come to find me. He was delegated by his elders to spy upon the city from the particular vantage point into which I had ventured. He was not to interfere, only to observe and report. He hated what he was doing, but it was his duty and his parents would be shamed if he failed. Yet when he saw me, he found he no longer cared about anything else. He had to reveal himself. He had to talk to me.

By now I am no longer thinking of anything but how to hold on to him, how to make him mine forever.

2, MONTH 6

When he came to me on this day, our first day of meeting in the new month, I gave myself to him.

did so freely and with great joy. We did not speak while it was happening, did not even pause consider. We simply did what we had wanted to do from the first time we had met. It was wonderful, and the feelings I experienced while in his arms are with me still and will be so forever. was my first time, and he is my first real love. I could not ask for anything more wonderful. I have been made happy beyond my wildest expectations. Now that I have taken this final, irrevocable step, there is no going back, nothing more to consider.

I am his.

3, MONTH 6

We met again today. I couldn't help myself. Nor, I think, could he. We are so in love. We are so happy.

5, MONTH 6

Again. Another sweet time.

12, MONTH 6

Such agony! Mother kept me busy all this week with studies and housework, and I could not go to him even once. Today was our first time together again in an entire week. He says he understands, although it is hard for him, too. I will not suffer such separation again!

15, MONTH 6

Even three days is too long. I was in such despair, and he was so wild with worry and so in need of me when we met. Oh, how I love him!

17, MONTH 6

Just when I think matters have returned to normal and we will be left to our regular meetings, something else has intruded. I must go to visit my grandparents in the city of Parsoprey across the Dragon's Teeth and down onto the plains of the Sarain and so will be gone for two entire weeks. I cannot go to him to let him know—we are to leave at once! I think I shall die!

2, MONTH 7

Home again at last. I went straight to the glade and took him to our home and into my bed. It felt so right to have him there. I told him everything of where I had been and what I had been forced to endure and he, sweet boy, told me he understood and forgave me. He worried that I had forsaken him and would not return. But I would never do that. He must know this, I told him. I will love him

22, MONTH 7

I take him to my bed at every opportunity, no longer content with our time in the forest glade. I want him close to me. I want him with me always and constantly, but I must settle for what I can have. I choose times when I know the house will be empty. I live for those times. I am consumed by my need for them. I want them to go on forever.

10, MONTH 8

Today I did something that may have been foolish. I spoke of the magic that keeps the Elves safe. I revealed too much of what I knew in an effort to impress—though only after he had done so first, speaking of the magic that keeps his own people safe. We spoke in general terms and not specifics, but I am troubled nevertheless. We spoke of magic in the course of our frequent discussions on how the war between our peoples might be brought to an end. If there were no magic there might be less cause for fighting, we reason. He sees it as I do, and so we speak of it openly. It is only talk, and nothing much could come of it. When we are together, what does talk of magic and conjuring and endless conflict matter anyway? Nothing matters, save that we are together.

But now I wonder. Because even though we spoke mostly in generalities, I did once speak specifics.

I told him about the Elfstones.

“Aphen, are you still down there?”

She looked up quickly from the diary. Her uncle. “Still here,” she answered.

She shoved the diary under a pile of papers and took up something else as if she had been looking at that instead. She did so out of habit and instinct, aware not only that was strictly forbidden to remove anything from the archives but also that she was constantly watched. Her comings and goings and never certain who it was that might be doing the watching. Mostly, it was Home Guards stationed at the top of the basement stairs, but it could be anyone. She liked her uncle and was close to him, but to the larger Elven community she had been a pariah for so long that she never took anything for granted.

A candle’s dim light wavered its way down the steps from the level above, and her uncle appeared out of the darkness. “The hours you keep, dear young lady, are ridiculous.”

Ellich Elesedil was the younger of the two brothers who had been in line for the throne many years ago and, to her mind, the one best suited to the task. But his older brother, her grandfather, was the one who had become ruler of the Elves on the death of their parents. Now her grandfather’s son, Phaedon, was the designated heir apparent and, as his grandfather continued to weaken from his chronic heart and lung problems, increasingly likely to be King soon. Aphen’s mother was Phaedon’s much younger sister, and her refusal to become involved in the business of the court allowed Aphen to remain comfortably clear of family and state politics.

Not as far clear as she would have liked, however. Her choice to become a member of the

Druid order had put an end to that.

Her uncle took a seat on a stool she was using for stacking notes, moving the papers aside without comment. Though he was actually her great-uncle, Aphen found the designation awkward and called him simply Uncle, mostly as a term of endearment because they were so close. He was tall and lean and as blond as she was, although his hair was beginning to go gray. "It's getting on toward midnight, you know. Whatever's keeping you here could wait until morning."

She smiled and nodded. "Nothing's really keeping me. I just lost track of time. Thank you for rescuing me."

He smiled back. "Find anything of interest today?"

"Nothing." The lie came smoothly. "Same as always. Every morning I think that this will be the day I discover some great secret about the magic, some clue about a lost talisman or forgotten conjuring. But each night I return to my bed disappointed."

He looked around the room, taking in the shelves of books and boxes, the reams of paper stacked in their metal holders, the clutter and the scraps of documents and notes. "Perhaps there is nothing to find. Perhaps all you are doing is sorting documents that no one but you will ever read." He glanced back at her. "I'm not trying to discourage you, not after all the work you've put in. I am only wondering if this is a fool's errand."

"A fool's errand?" she repeated. Her blue eyes flashed. "You think I may have spent the last three hundred and sixty-four days on a fool's errand?"

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "That was a poor choice of words. Please forget that I spoke them. I don't know enough about what you are doing to be able to question it with any authority. I only ask because I care about you."

"You know why I am here, Uncle," she said quietly. "You know the importance of what I am doing."

"I know that you *believe* it to be important. But if there is nothing to find, if there is no magic to be found, no talismans to be recovered, then what have you accomplished?"

"I will have made certain of what you clearly suspect," she answered. "I will have eliminated the possibility that something has been missed. A lot of time has passed and a lot of history been forgotten or lost. We are an old people, after all."

He shrugged, leaning back on the stool. "Old enough that we are no longer the people we once were and probably never will be again. We have evolved since the Faerie Age. We can no longer rely on magic as we once did—or certainly not the same kinds of magic. We share the world now with other, different species. The Faerie that served the Void are locked away behind the Forbidding. Now we have humans to deal with instead, a less imaginative people, and the need we once had for protective magic no longer exists."

She gave him a look. "Some might question that. Gianne Ohmsford, for one, if she were still alive."

"Yes, she probably would. After all, she was the Ilse Witch."

"She was also Ard Rhys of our order after that, and she saved us all from the very humans you seem to think we no longer need protection from." She sighed. "Listen to me, engaging in a meaningless argument with my favorite uncle. To what end? Let's not quarrel. I have a job to do, and I intend to do it. Maybe I won't find anything. But I will make certain of that before I return to Paranor."

Her uncle rose, nodding. "I wouldn't expect less of you. Will you take dinner with us tomorrow night? You might enjoy a real meal for a change. Besides, Jera and I miss you."

Her aunt and uncle lived in a cottage just outside the palace grounds, preferring to distance their personal lives from his work as a member of the Elven High Council and adviser to his brother. For as long as she could remember, they had chosen to forgo the benefits they could have enjoyed as members of the royal family.

She gave him a warm smile, standing with him. "Of course I'll come. I miss you, too. And I promise not to forget this time, either."

He reached out and took her hands in his. "Whatever anyone else tells you, I am proud of the work you are doing with the Druid order. I don't think you betrayed anyone by accepting their offer to study with them. The betrayal would have been to your own sense of right and wrong had you refused. I will say, however, that when this task is done, perhaps you will think about staying in Arborlon for good."

He squeezed her hands once, and then turned and started back for the stairs, candle in hand. "Good night, Aphen. Get some sleep."

She watched until the candle had flickered out of sight and sat down again quickly. Digging under the papers where she had hidden it, she retrieved the diary.

She opened it and began to read anew.

14, MONTH 8

Something terrible has happened, something that changes everything. He has told me he has been ordered to return to his home in Rajancroft by week's end. His term of service as a watcher is complete. He wants me to go with him. He said it was necessary if we were to be together. My people might not accept him, but his would accept me. His Darkling clan is less disposed toward the exclusion of other Races, and I would become his bride and his people would embrace me. As he listened to him, I felt such a deep, abiding panic at the thought of leaving Arborlon and the Elven way that I could barely breathe. I asked him not to speak of it again; I told him we must find another way.

17, MONTH 8

It seems I know him less well than I believed. He is proud and insistent, and he has refused to change his mind. I must go with him, he tells me. It is our only chance for happiness, our only way to make a life. We could not keep meeting secretly forever even if he were allowed to stay on. Someone would find us out eventually. His recall merely requires that we act sooner rather than later. I must delay no longer. I must go with him.

To my surprise and consternation, I found I could not agree to this. I want to be with him, but I cannot leave my home and my people. I told him so. I begged him to reconsider. I pleaded. If we could not be together as often, we would simply be together when we could. But even as I spoke these words, I could detect in his expression his refusal to accept this and I knew he would never be satisfied until he took me away.

What am I to do? I know I am going to lose him and cannot bear it. Please, let him see reason.

18, MONTH 8

I am ruined. I am the most wretched and miserable creature alive. I have betrayed everyone by my foolish, selfish behavior, and I cannot begin to imagine the price that others will pay because of it.

My boy is gone. My beautiful, wonderful lover and friend has abandoned me and perhaps worse. I do not know what I should do. I am reduced to writing down what has happened in an effort to understand. But perhaps I only delay the inevitable recognition that in the end nothing can be done.

Earlier today, we met for the last time. I took him to my room and to my bed and spoke the words I thought I would never speak. I told him I could never leave my people and we must end our assignments and our hopes for a future life. What he wanted, I had already refused him. What he wanted, he would never accept. What point in continuing what was clearly doomed?

I did this in a misguided effort to change his mind, hoping that the prospect of losing me would be as painful for him as it would for me to lose him. I did so out of desperation but also with a clear understanding that when I told him I could not leave my home and my people, I was telling him the truth.

Amid tears of despair and hurt so deep I thought I would never be well again, we coupled a final time, and then he left me in my bed, sated and sleeping and thinking that perhaps I had won my victory and he would stay.

I was wrong. I had won nothing. He did not leave the house when he left my bed. What he did instead is the cause of my humiliation and despair. Because he was a Darkling, I knew he had used magic. Because I loved him, I never asked its nature. It seemed irrelevant to our relationship and our love. I knew it was there; I did not care that it was.

But when I woke later that afternoon, I found a note lying next to me. It read thus:

I cannot give you up.

You must come to me.

Use these Elfstones to find me

And to reclaim the other stones

Which I hold hostage.

I love you that much.

Lying beneath the note were the three blue Elfstones, the seeking-Stones of the five precious sets.

I rushed at once to where my father kept the Elfstones hidden and secured, dreading what I might find. Releasing the locks embedded in the stronghold by using the words of magic with which they were imbued, I discovered to my horror that my Darkling boy had not lied. The Elfstones were gone—all but those three he had left me.

At first, I did not understand. That he was gone and asking me to come after him was clear enough, the rest less so. The implications of his wording were dark and dangerous; I was unsure what conclusion to reach. Had he taken the Elfstones only for the purpose of persuading me to follow him, or had he stolen them for a different reason entirely—to aid his people, to give them the magic they lacked as servants of the Void? The first bespoke a rash and desperate act. The second

was purposefully evil. I could not believe that of him. But if I were wrong, what then? What did I know of the Elfstones? Did he know that he could not use them—that none of his Darkling kin could? Did he realize that it required a true Elf to make the magic come alive? Did he know that the Elfstones must be freely given if they are to serve the holder?

What was the true reason he had taken them?

I had told him nothing of where they could be found or how to get to them. Of that much, I was certain. Yet somehow he had known. How much more did he know of which I was unaware? How much that I thought I knew about him was false?

I am made very nearly hysterical by my uncertainty. I cannot see how to resolve the matter in any way that is satisfactory. I cannot go to him not knowing the truth about his intentions. How can I be certain of what he has planned? Has he betrayed me or does he honestly think that this theft will bring me to him?

If he is the boy I think he is—the one I fell in love with—it is the latter. But why hasn't he trusted me if what he wants is for us to be together? Why has he resorted to this desperate act? Surely he realizes the position in which he has put me? Does he think I can escape the blame that will attach for his theft or do I no longer matter to him?

What am I to do?

25, MONTH 8

Days have passed since I have written here, my thoughts too poisonous to be recorded. I have told no one of what has happened. Those who need to know will find out the truth soon enough. But not yet, it seems, for I have heard nothing of the theft. I know where he has taken the Elfstones, but I cannot think how I should go about getting them back.

So I wait. I sit for hours thinking on what I must do. The longer I deliberate, the less clear my course of action becomes. In spite of what I feel for him, I cannot trust my emotions to guide me. I must find a way to set things right, and to do that I need to make certain that my failures and judgment will not bring harm to my people. It is bad enough that my parents should suffer for my transgression; it is unbearable to think that the Elven people should pay for my foolishness, as well.

Perhaps even with their lives.

I could not bear that.

28, MONTH 8

I know now what I must do. I have considered long enough. I must risk all and use the Elfstones to go in search of the others and of my Darkling boy. I must know the truth about him and I must set right what he has made wrong. I leave in the morning with a small contingent of Elven Hunters, having given my father a false story of what I intend—a fresh transgression added to the others. But what is one more by now?

24, MONTH 9

I have returned empty-handed. In the course of my search, I found neither the Elfstones nor the boy.

No amount of effort or use of magic could help me recover my treasures. It is as if they had vanished off the face of the earth. Inquiries yielded nothing. Someone may know what has become of them, but no one is saying. I have given the blue Stones back and admitted all. I am disgraced and undone.

Yet events conspire to make possible a chance for redemption, and I will take the chance offered. Perhaps history will remember me for doing what was right and so provide me with a measure of grace.

I beg your forgiveness, my dearest Mother and Father. Let no one accuse Meresch and Pathi Omarosian of not sufficiently loving and embracing their wayward daughter. Let it be known here in these pages, that I will treasure forever the life I have shared with you. If you should read this, one day I hope you will, be not sad for me. Be happy that I have found peace. I have found my second chance and I go now happily to embrace it.

All Honor, Your Daughter Ale

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

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

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

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

It didn't matter that Grianne Ohmsford had been gone for more than a hundred years, or even that her successor as Ard Rhys was herself a member of the Elesedil family. The old King, Arling's son, held fast to his mother's beliefs where the Druids were concerned, and

was only because Aphenglow was an Elf and his granddaughter that she was allowed to conduct her study.

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

Head up, eyes sweeping the landscape watchfully, she left the palace grounds behind and moved down the pathway that led to the cottage she shared with her younger sister. Wherever she went in Arborlon, she paid close attention to what was happening around her. The city might have been her home once and it might be so again one day, but for now she was no better than a visitor from a foreign country. There were enough Elves who mistrusted her presence that she could not afford to take her safety for granted.

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

And if she were caught with it ...

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

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

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

She could hardly believe her good luck in finding it. Imagine, if they could recover the Stones! She smiled at the thought. Everyone knew about the power of the blue Stones. But no one knew the first thing about the other four sets; no one even knew their colors. No records existed that described them. Or at least, none that had been uncovered. It was all so long ago, so far back in time. It was as Ellich had said. The Elves were a different people then. The world was different. The other Races hadn't been born. Only the Faerie people were alive, imbued with various forms of magic—some of which they shared with creatures now consigned either to mythology or by powerful magic to the dark world of the Forbidding.

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

With a creature of the Void.

It didn't seem possible, but sometimes Aphen wondered if those viewed as evil were in fact

only those who had lost the war and were tarnished by the victors. She understood that reality wasn't as simple as everyone wanted to believe, not as straightforward or as easily explained. Not black and white, but mostly gray.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Coming to bed anytime soon?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The idea had just occurred to her, although in truth she must have known from the moment she had read the first few entries in the diary. She needed to consult the other Druids. A decision had to be made about what to do with this information, and where to take the search from here. She had promised her grandfather she would not take anything away, but the promise had been falsely given. She had always intended to take whatever she found. She was an Elf and loyal to her people, but not at the expense of the other Races. In that regard she was a Druid first. Magic was meant to be shared, and it was safest in the hands of the Druids, who would make sure that happened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aphen laughed. “I know what you mean. Go on to bed, now. I will be up shortly. I just

need to go through my notes one more time to be sure I've written everything down."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her sister bent close, examining her neck. "I hope I bashed his head in," she muttered. "Stay still. I'll bring cold cloths and ointment for the burn."

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

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

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

"I don't know," Aphenglow lied, already suspecting why, if not who.

"Did they take anything?"

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

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

"Or scare me. Wanting to send a message of some sort, maybe. We can't be certain."

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

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

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

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

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

But she would be keeping careful watch when she did.



WHEN APHENGLAW ELESSEDIL WOKE THE FOLLOWING morning, she ached everywhere. Moving slowly and stiffly, she went to the basin, dropped her sleeping shift, and washed herself gingerly. She was a mass of bruises and scratches, and the marks from the cord that had been wound about her neck burned at the slightest touch. She took time to reapply the ointment Arling had used the night before. Then she stretched to relieve the tightness in her body, dressed, and went down to breakfast. She ate standing up at the kitchen counter, staring out the window as the night's shadows receded and sunrise brightened the eastern sky.

Her sister had already gone. She would be down in the Gardens of Life with the other Chosen, gathered to welcome the Ellcrys to a new day and anxious to begin their assigned tasks. Her sister might say she didn't want to do the work of her order, but Aphenglow knew she took great pride in what she did. She was particularly suited to the position of Chosen and was looked up to by the others for her skills and instincts as a Healer and caregiver. Yet she wanted to be a Druid, and there were reasons to think that she would be a good one; she had talents that would lend themselves to the complicated and demanding work of the Druidic order. But as impatient as her sister was to join her, Aphenglow knew she was better off where she was. Arling was still young, nine years Aphen's junior, and she was not yet fully cognizant of what it would do to her life if she followed in her sister's footsteps.

Aphen finished her fruit and bread, but stayed at the window and continued to watch the day brighten. Something was troubling her, though she couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was.

After five minutes or so of staring at nothing much, she left the kitchen, walked to the front door, and stepped outside. No one in the nearby residences was in evidence, so she couldn't ask if they had seen or heard anything last night. Instead she began walking around the little cottage, picking her way toward the window where she had seen the shadow pass. Her tracking skills were good enough that she soon found footprints—a man's, by the size of them. She followed them a short distance. They stopped, backtracked a bit, and then, with an obvious change in the length of the stride, signaled that the man had begun running. She followed the prints to the end of the yard, where they disappeared out onto the pathway that led from her tiny neighborhood into the city.

She stood looking at the footprints, perplexed by what she was seeing.

And then she realized, all at once, what was troubling her.

How had her attacker passed by the window one moment and gotten behind her the next? The time frame was too short for that to have happened. Which meant there had to have been more than one—the first man, whose shadow had drawn her attention, and a second who had come in through the kitchen door and attacked her.

She stood looking down the pathway for a moment and then walked back to the window.

and around the house to the rear door. Sure enough, the clear depressions of a second set of prints, larger than the first, were outlined in the bare earth by the flower beds Arlingfant so carefully tended. The second man had lingered here, and then come through the door to attack her.

Or had he been inside already, waiting?

She felt a sudden chill. Her assailants had known what they were doing. One to distract her so that she wouldn't sense the other—a way of making sure her normally reliable Druidic senses did not warn her of the danger. Her instincts were good, but not infallible, and she was not always able to pick up on everything happening around her.

The other thing she realized was that her attacker had made it impossible to defend herself with magic. She hadn't thought of that last night, still shaken by the attack, but she saw clearly now. By cutting off her air he had throttled her voice and paralyzed her hands, preventing her from summoning any sort of magic. Her reaction had been instinctual—using physical force to get free. Perhaps subconsciously she had known that without her voice and hands she couldn't conjure any sort of magic anyway.

Everyone knew she was a Druid and had the use of magic. Not everyone knew how the magic worked: that voice or hands or both were needed to evoke it. Her attackers must have thought. The first man, the one at the window, would have been the leader, the one who thought it all through. The second, her attacker, was a skilled fighter and likely a trained assassin.

So now she had two mysteries. Who knew all this and would want to hurt her, and who knew about the diary and wanted to steal it?

She opened the back door and walked into the kitchen again. In truth she had more than two mysteries that needed solving, if you considered all the questions surrounding the diary entries and the unknown history of their author. But only two that mattered regarding the attack.

A course of action that might help resolve all this eluded her at the moment, so she returned to her plan regarding the lineage charts of the Elven Kings and Queens. Picking up her backpack with its notes and stuffing the diary into a deep pocket in the trousers she was wearing, she departed the cottage and headed off to the palace for more research.

The walk was short and uneventful, but she found herself on edge the entire way. The attack had left her shaken, even if she wouldn't admit it to Arlingfant, and she knew that for a while, at least, she would be looking over her shoulder everywhere she went.

Deep in the lower levels of the palace, alone once more, she pulled out the lineage charts and went to work. The charts went much farther back than the Elven histories, although nothing had survived that went all the way back to the beginning of things. She started at the place where the recordings of lineages began and worked her way forward, hoping that any reference to Pathke and Meresch would not be so long ago as to have escaped all mention.

It was tedious work. The charts were old and handwritten, and all sorts of smudges and discolorations marred the information. In addition, she had to translate the ancient Elvish language that was being used at that time in order to comprehend what she was reading. By far the most troubling of all was a tendency of the early Elven scribes to leave things out, not believing them important enough to mention—a deficiency that over time had become apparent to later chroniclers who had discovered such absences while reading other writings.

If that had happened here, she might miss what she was looking for without even realizing it.

In any event, it was slow going, and she had been at work almost the entire morning before she found the entries for which she had been searching.

She was still far back in the early years of Elven history, back before the advent of Meresch and the other Races—back when the Elves and their allies were still at war with the Darklings and theirs—when she discovered a Pathke Omarosian who had been King with Meresch his wife and Queen. Their reign had lasted for over forty years, and they had been together for eight or nine before that. Their daughter, Aleia, had been born after Pathke had been King for seven years, and she had died when she was only eighteen.

Aphenglow stopped reading. Only eighteen. That would have been about the time she met and lost the Darkling boy. Her voice in the diary and the impetuosity of her acts would be appropriate for that age.

So had her death been linked to that event?

Aphen couldn't tell. There was nothing written anywhere on that page or any of the dozen that followed to reveal what had happened. Pathke had ruled for another seventeen years and then Meresch had succeeded him and ruled for twelve more. Aleia had been their only child.

Aphenglow set down the records and stared off into the shadows. It was too big a coincidence to think that Aleia's death was not in some way connected with her affair, but it didn't look as if there were any way to determine the connection. Still, she wasn't ready to let go of the matter just yet.

Picking up the records anew, she began working her way forward through the lineages once more. She pressed on for the remainder of the afternoon and found multiple instances of other members of the Omarosian line who had become Kings and Queens. But oddly, all of them seemed to serve sporadically, with great intervals of time falling between periods of rule. Given that they were not in the direct line of succession, it was odd to see them appear so frequently—almost as if they were brought in as caretaker monarchs. It also appeared that they married and split off into other families; many of the lineages were interrelated.

It was nearing twilight, and she had worked uninterrupted all day. She had eaten nothing for lunch and was beginning to feel hunger's impatient tug when she remembered that she had promised to dine with Ellich and Jera. She had reached the place in the records where the Old World had destroyed itself, and the survivors of Men and Elves and their descendants had endured a one thousand-year journey to the coming together of the First Council of Druids, with no mention of the Omarosians for centuries. She was about to put down the charts and go off to dinner when a notation made shortly after the convening of the First Druid Council caught her eye.

She translated it twice, wanting to make certain what she was reading. But there it was: a clear reference to a marriage that linked the Omarosians of the past to at least one branch of the family that had survived to the present.

The Omarosians had merged with the Elessedils.

Which meant that, improbable though it seemed, she was related to Aleia Omarosian.

Dinner with her aunt and uncle that evening was a decidedly quiet affair. Jera answered Aphenglow's questions with brief comments, and Ellich didn't speak at all. Long silences were

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