

Awakenings

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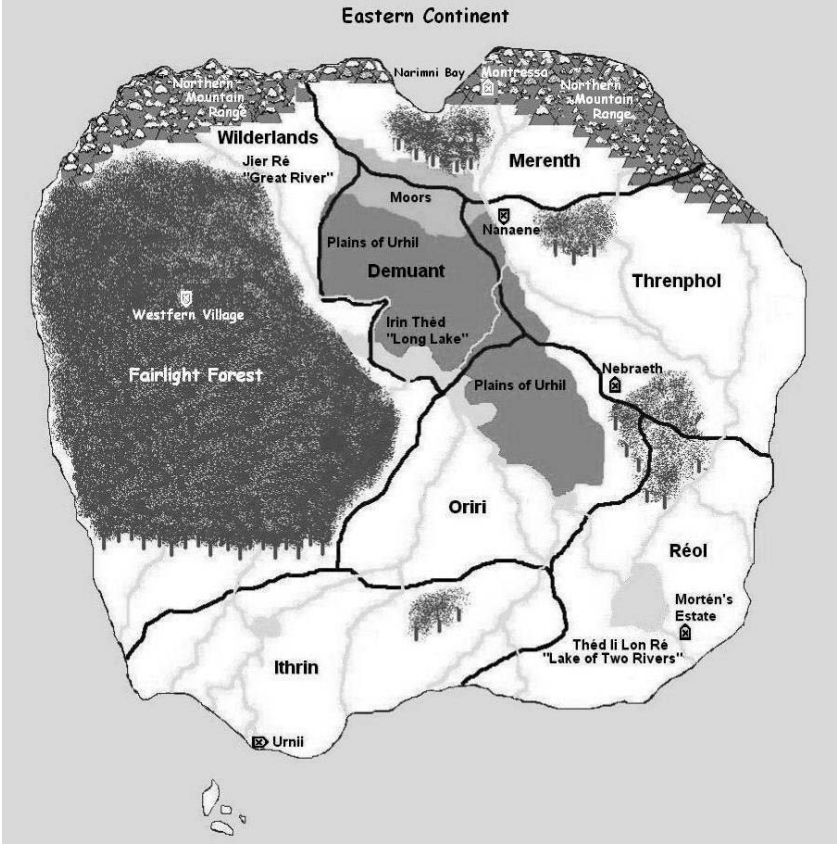
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Prologue

Lornesse was unaccustomed to this kind of darkness. At home, safely tucked behind well-guarded walls each night, there were no reasons for the evening shadows to frighten her. But now she found herself in quite another kind of night, one utterly alien to her comfortable upbringing. This was the least of the reasons her advisors had used when they had urged her not to come. In truth, she could hardly blame them; it was their duty to caution and guide her. In the end, though, even they had conceded there was nothing else to be done.

The streets were very quiet, and she wondered if they always were at this hour. Most of the windows were shuttered tightly closed, a meager ward against the chilly autumn wind blowing in from the south. Occasionally, she recognized the faint pulse of light coming between the cracks of the shutters that bespoke a candle still flickering behind. Not everyone in the city was asleep. As she progressed further into the poorer sections, she saw increasing signs of poverty—shanties in disrepair, vicious, underfed dogs wandering freely on every street, and huddled, shivering human figures. She pulled her cloak more closely around her face, wishing she'd had the foresight to bring something plainer. She very much wished to avoid attention.

Strictly speaking, the responsibility for the poor of Nimal did not rest with Lornesse Myron, but with the city's governor. Lornesse was a speaker. It was a position highly revered and respected to be sure, but her duties fell far outside the bureaucratic arena. Still, her father had always tried to make some of the city's concerns his own. He pointed out that Nimal had come into existence almost entirely because of House Leviathan. Therefore, despite not being its official rulers, the city's welfare should also be their concern.

When she was young, Lornesse had suspected her father's passion for charity was a means to stave off boredom. It had seemed to her that,

unlike the other eleven speaker families, House Leviathan was distanced from the beast it represented. Her father's ventures to speak with the great sea creatures had been so rare during her childhood that she could count them on one hand. Years often passed between visits, and Lornesse had felt, growing up, that there was really little need for House Leviathan at all, despite her father's assurances to the contrary. Now she knew he had been right.

The wind gusted again, cold, but as ever smelling of salt. Nimal was an isolated city, set on an island many leagues from the mainland, and ever burgeoned by breezes from the sea. Lornesse shivered and hastened her steps, as much from the urgency of her errand as from a desire to escape the cold. At least it was not raining, as it was wont to do on any given night this time of year.

Drawing her fine cloak more tightly about her, her fingers brushed its clasp, an heirloom from her father, and so much more. It was a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, made of heavy, polished pewter, and shaped as a twisted leviathan with two small, perfect diamonds for eyes. It was a symbol of all she had inherited from him—a keen sense of honor and charity, the leadership of an ancient and wealthy household, and the legacy of a speaker, complete with all the gifts and duties that role implied.

It would be difficult to fill her father's shoes, both as a speaker and a philanthropist. As a very young child, Lornesse had cared little about either role. Certainly she had prepared for the possibility, almost from the moment she had taken her first step, but in truth, it had come as something of a surprise when the relic had chosen her upon her father's death. The power of speaker was passed down from generation to generation within the twelve families, and while there was nothing saying it *couldn't* pass to a second or third-born child, most people had expected it to pass to her older brother Kurin. He had certainly seemed to better fit the role. Still, there was no contending the Master's decision, although many of the people had been skeptical thus far of her abilities. She was going to have to work hard to prove herself worthy.

The moon, at least, was very bright, helping her to find her way among the haphazard lanes and alleys. The directions she'd been given were extremely detailed, and both she and Phenni had memorized every last one of them. They'd even traced portions of them together earlier

that afternoon to help Lornesse get a sense of bearing in the dark. They had only dared go so far, though, because Lornesse was reluctant to alienate the kidnappers in any way. For the moment, they held all the power in this matter, and if they read any of her actions as being uncooperative, there might not be another ransom offer for months—or maybe ever.

It was now four days since her younger sister Emmaine had disappeared. The Governor's forces had been out searching for her without end since that time, and Lornesse had barely gotten three hours of sleep all together. It seemed heartless to do any normal day-to-day activity. She was desperate to take some action on her sister's behalf. She had managed to send a message to Kurin, who had been attending the university on the mainland, but she had yet to hear a reply. In the meantime, all search efforts had proven fruitless, and they'd had no sign or word of Emmaine until that morning.

The letter had arrived as did all others directed to Lornesse. She'd been sitting at breakfast, making an attempt at a semblance of normal life, but her eggs remained untouched. As for the letters, it was only for the fact that they might contain a ransom that Lornesse even bothered opening them.

The parchment was very plain and coarse—the least expensive that could generally be found. The handwriting was strong and precise, and the language correct, indicating that whoever had written it had some degree of education. It said that if the family wished to see Emmaine alive and safe again, Lornesse must meet with the kidnappers at the appointed location, alone, and they would discuss a ransom.

Phenni had been highly against Lornesse leaving home tonight, the most insistent of any of her advisors. He said it was too coincidental—the timing of the kidnapping, the insistence that Lornesse be alone.

“If anyone were to have some design against you, my lady, he could not pick a better time to act upon it. You are new to your powers, you haven't your father's experience, and—” He left off, pressing his lips together.

“And I have no guardian,” she had finished for him.

“You should have departed immediately,” he'd said quietly, tightening his fingers around the edge of the tabletop where they'd been

studying maps of the city. He was standing at a stoop, leaning forward slightly, his hands on either side of him. “You should have left for Fairlight right after your awakening. You should have accompanied—”

“How many times have I told you?” she’d snapped. “It wasn’t a good time. The city was just recovering from that huge storm, and then we had the outbreak of red fever to get through—”

“Lornesse, I know it seems like a small matter to you, but I cannot stress how critically you need your guardian.”

“For magic, right?” she’d pointed out. “For protection? I’m not saying it isn’t important, Phenni. Far from it, but really—I have a little magic of my own now. For Emmaine’s sake, I am going to this rendezvous, and that’s my final word on the subject. I’ll get a guardian at the speaker’s summit next month, and then you can sleep easier.”

She had to admit, however, as she stepped around a rather deep puddle in the middle of a dim alley, that Phenni was absolutely right. This whole affair would have been considerably less unpredictable if she’d had the benefit of a guardian’s wisdom. For as long as the speakers had existed, the fairies had been assigned as their protection. Her father’s guardian, Mothberry, had been a cranky little thing, and he and Lornesse had never really gotten along. Perhaps that was the reason she had put off acquiring a guardian of her own. Nevertheless, Moth had been clever and extremely loyal to her father, and she found herself wishing she’d had his advice on this matter. Were he here, he might have accompanied her despite their mutual friction. He’d always been very fond of Emmaine.

But Moth had departed for his home in Fairlight Forest with the Grand Magi who had come to perform the rite of awakening on Lornesse. By all rights, she should have accompanied them, and now she sincerely regretted her decision to delay the journey. Still, she wished Phenni would not keep reminding her so frequently of her folly. There was nothing to be done about past mistakes here and now.

She cast her gaze about, searching for the next landmark that would guide her further to her destination. She was getting closer. Looking up, she spied it—a scratched, faded tavern sign creaking in the chilly breeze. Muffled sounds of ribald leisure-making came from within, and weak torchlight filtered out between the building’s clapboards. Lornesse swallowed a little, tightening her hand on her cloak and adding a spring

of confidence to her step as she continued into the alley past the tavern.

She had not gone three steps within when her path was blocked by the swift shadow of a man, a couple of inches taller than her. A strong hand darted out and grasped her upper arm, causing her to gasp in fright. Then the figure whipped her around, bending her right arm painfully behind her back with one hand and placing his other around her throat.

“Now, listen here, lass,” said a strong voice, surprisingly less gruff than she had been imagining, considering the grim surroundings. “I don’t know where you’re going in such a terrible hurry, but if you want to get there alive, I suggest you hand over whatever coin you’ve got underneath that fine cape. And don’t bother trying to say you have none. I’m not a fool.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it, sir,” Lornesse replied, standing very still, and feeling unexpectedly calm. Maybe she’d feel more afraid when it was over. She did have money with her—probably more than her assailant ever dreamed. She’d brought a small fortune in gold and diamonds, hoping she might be able to appease the kidnappers on the spot if she found them, but she was not about to yield either the valuables or the information to this ruffian. “I would suggest, however, for your own good, that you release me unharmed.”

He laughed. “Says what army?” he taunted softly in her ear, his breath sour. Of course, she hadn’t really expected him to take her seriously. Certainly if she’d been in his position, *she* wouldn’t have taken her seriously, but she felt honor-bound to warn him nonetheless.

Without another word, Lornesse reached up with her free arm and seized the sinewy wrist clutching her neck. She clenched her small hand with relatively little effort, and the feeling of small bones crushing beneath her fingers was grimly satisfying.

The man cried out in horrified pain and released her, whereupon she spun around, seized his neck in turn with her right hand, and lifted him three inches off the ground. It was a good thing he wasn’t much taller than she was, or she’d not have managed reaching up that high. Her free hand she clamped over his screaming mouth. “Now *you* listen here,” she hissed quietly, “I am on *very* important business tonight, and do not wish to be bothered. Do you understand?”

He nodded, and she released her hand from his mouth. “Leviathan,”

he whispered hoarsely. His good hand was cradling his broken wrist, and his feet were dangling limply. Although he was a thick and solid man, Lornesse could have been lifting fresh bread dough for all she noticed.

She regarded him a moment before slowly nodding. “You said you weren’t a fool; I suppose you were telling the truth.” She lowered him until his toes touched the ground but tightened her fingers around his throat warningly. She could feel him try to swallow beneath them. Fumbling with her left hand into her dress pocket, she managed to retrieve two or three rather hefty gold coins and slipped them into his belt pouch. “I must continue alone, or I would have you arrested for attempted robbery,” she continued, narrowing her eyes at him. “As it is, I’ll speak of this incident to no one else, and there’s for your silence. If you betray my presence or impede me in any way, I assure that you will regret it. Don’t think I won’t remember your face. Are we agreed?”

He nodded slowly, and when she released him, he gave a brisk turn and headed back to the safety of the street, not bothering even to glance back at her. Lornesse watched him a moment more, her brow furrowed with worry. She really had no way of knowing whether or not he would honor his promise. It would be best not to linger.

Through the alley beyond the tavern sign, past a green door in a brick wall.

As part of her mind concentrated on finding the correct landmarks, another was mulling in unease over what had just transpired. It still felt odd, having these newfound powers. The strength of the leviathan was her gift, and through the bond she shared with them she could feel it—simple, steady, and forcefully strong. Her father had often said that, of the twelve brethren, the leviathans were the foundation and the bedrock. She’d never been more grateful for it, but the raw power in her hands still left her feeling small and uncertain. After all, the unnatural brute strength was hard enough to believe in a man, much less a small, frail-looking woman like herself.

When she’d first come into her inheritance, she’d tested her gift by hefting great sacks full of bricks out in the practice yard where her father’s guard worked on their swordplay and other skills. She also found she could swing maces and heft swords built for men almost three times her size. She had yet to find a limit to how strong she was. It was the only comfort that Phenni and the others had taken in allowing her to

come on this nighttime escapade.

Down a flight of stairs to a footpath along the canal. Follow the canal to the second stone bridge and cross it.

She had not inherited the strength of the leviathans directly upon her father's death. It was not until she had been awakened by the visiting member of the fairies' Grand Magi council that she had come into the full scope of her abilities. First, she had sensed the presence of her eleven fellow speakers, most of whom she had met at one time or another, including Namoné of the eagles, Rhian of the ictus, Emeris of the dragonflies, and her neighbor across the sea, Rastin of House Dolphin, a close friend and confidant. All seemed as vague impressions in her mind, for the most part unheeded, but whenever something important happened to one speaker, all the others immediately sensed the change.

More important than this, though, was the ability to sense the leviathans. Lornesse loved them—much more than she'd ever believed possible, and in a way that was most difficult to express. From the instant of her awakening, she'd felt their presence rushing in like a wave of colorless sight and voiceless sound. She'd gone out to sea the next day, instinctively knowing they would be waiting for her. The size of the sloop she had sailed on paled in comparison to the sight of the great sea serpent that surrounded it when she directed the boat to be stopped. The creature's skin was thick and hard, like gray stone encrusted with smoky crystals. Its voice, when it spoke, had rumbled so deeply that the planks beneath her feet had trembled, and the water had rippled for spans around them. The sailors had gulped and shuffled, some muttering prayers of protection. They stayed well distant from her as she conversed with the beast.

"Welcome, daughter of Edain. I am Sedviruus. You are strange to us."

"I am nonetheless of my fathers," she replied. "I will serve you as the Master has ordained."

"Yes, the Master is wise. I sense your honor."

They spoke for a considerable span of time, and Sedviruus told her of many wondrous things—caves beneath the sea no human eyes would ever behold, stretches of perfect sand and water never touched by sunlight, hidden colors and worlds and treasures—places of peace and

serenity, quiet, timeless, protected from the folly of the world that Lornesse knew.

“Tell me, Sedviruus, why is it your kind visits us so rarely?” she asked at last. Now that the mantle of speaker had fallen to her, she dared to voice the question she had pondered since childhood.

“It is the charge of my kind,” he said, “to guard and oversee this great hidden dominion of which I have spoken. The leviathans are long in years and slow to change. It is not our intention to neglect the speakers, yet it may seem as if we do, for our sense of time is not as yours. But I come to warn you, Lornesse, daughter of Myron. Change is coming.”

“What sort of change?”

“The foundations of the earth are shifting. Soon the water and land will shake and split. Your city will sink into the sea, and the house of your fathers will rest with the ones it fought so long to protect.”

It had been a warm day, but Lornesse had shivered. “An earthquake? When?”

“Soon.”

He had not been able to tell her more. Lornesse pushed back a burden of worry. This secret she had not shared with anyone, though she must do so soon. The trouble with leviathans was that they could have a very different sense of “soon” than a human. It might very well be years before the earthquake, yet it was a gamble she didn’t want to make. It was a matter of some delicacy, though, and she’d been pondering best how to handle it. The city would have to be evacuated, but how could she convince the people? She wasn’t sure they would believe her. It had been known for the leviathan to predict disaster before, but an earthquake that could submerge all of Nimal? It would certainly feed the flames of her critics’ fire.

But it was still her duty. Lornesse clenched her jaw, steeling her resolve along with it. There was nothing to be done at this moment, but she promised herself that as soon as Emmaine was safely restored, she would advise Phenni of what Sedviruus had told her. They would begin to make plans for what to do. For now, she needed to focus on the problem at hand.

Her journey’s end found her at a ramshackle doorway on the opposite side of the canal. Three large scratches were embedded in the

door's frame, just as her instructions had said there would be. She paused, her hand hovering over the latch, afraid of what she might find within. Sounds from the street behind made her turn, and she saw two darkly clad figures step out of the shadows, blocking any means of retreat. Lornesse swallowed. Perhaps Phenni had been right, after all. Perhaps she should have found a way to obtain a guardian before she came here. Power she had, but she was not invincible. At this juncture, however, she didn't have much of a choice. Bracing what little courage she possessed, Lornesse pushed the latch and ducked into the dismal room beyond it.

The flame of a single, steady candle sent faint pulses of light into most of the room, but the corners remained shrouded in shadow. Lornesse straightened herself, pulling her hood back from her face, and waited.

"So you have come, after all," said a quiet voice. "I must confess, I thought perhaps you wouldn't."

"I have come. What is it you want?" Lornesse replied. She hoped they wouldn't waste time with taunting games. "I have money."

The man—whoever he was—did not reply for a moment. At last he spoke. "Compared to power, wealth is merely an afterthought. You of all people ought to have learned that."

Lornesse shivered. There was something so disturbingly *calm* in the man's voice. She would have expected that speaking of power and wealth in such a cold way should have made the man sound mad, but he spoke as though he were merely commenting that it had rained that morning. "Where is my sister?" she asked.

"She is well and safe; do not worry."

"Do not mock me, sir. Were she well and safe, I would not be here." Lornesse had pinpointed the corner of the room where he was sitting, and she turned to face it fully. "If it's humility you seek on my part, you have it. I am at your mercy. Will you please let me know how I might reclaim my sister unharmed?"

"You are so rigid, Lornesse," he said thoughtfully. "The people of Nimal underestimate you." She heard a shuffling sound, a wooden chair being scraped against earth, and saw movement as the man arose.

"Who are you?" she whispered fiercely.

He took a step into the candlelight. He was shorter than she'd expected, his features unremarkable but for piercing green eyes. "Since you asked so politely," he said with an odd little smile, "my name is Maehdron Vittes."

A firm footfall behind her prompted Lornesse to glance back. There was another man emerging from the shadows—one who looked much more as she had imagined a typical villain than Vittes. He leered at her with greedy eyes and tried to seize her forcefully by the arms. With little more than a grunt, she shrugged him off, slamming him back against the wall by the door. The thug made another lunge for her before he was stopped.

"Don't bother," called Vittes coolly, holding out a commanding hand to stop the man. "I already told you, you won't be able to hold her. But she won't be going anywhere soon. She's here of her own volition, aren't you, Lady Myron?"

"Where is Emmaine?" Lornesse snarled, brushing her hair out of her eyes as she regained her footing.

Vittes jerked his head at his accomplice. "Bring the girl," he ordered. The brute crossed the room and disappeared through the far doorway, and Vittes turned back to Lornesse. "Very well, my lady. No more skirting the shore." He leaned casually against the wall, beneath the room's only window, and crossed his arms. "What I want is your power. A speaker's power. It's the greatest to be had in this world, and I don't see why you should have it and I should not."

Despite the gravity of her current circumstances, Lornesse emitted a short, disbelieving laugh. "I'm afraid I can't help you there. You can't *choose* to have a speaker's power. You must be a descendent of the twelve families. A *direct* descendent. Everyone knows that."

Vittes seemed amused. "Do they?" he asked quietly.

The door opened again, drawing Lornesse's attention away from Vittes's perplexing question. The thug re-entered the room, this time dragging behind him a small, filthy figure that caused Lornesse's stomach to jolt with sickening fear. It was Emmaine, but the sight was not encouraging. She was disheveled and ragged, with dark circles under her eyes and a large bruise on her face. Lornesse gasped, unable to find words.

"Lornesse!" Emmaine cried upon seeing her. She reached out a

pleading hand, and Lornesse instinctively moved to help her, but Vittes's thug was too quick for her. He had a knife pressed to Emmaine's throat before Lornesse could take two steps.

"Don't move, my Lady Myron," warned Vittes, now standing up straighter and observing the scene with casual interest. "Or she will die, I promise you."

Lornesse could feel her courage dwindling. "I won't move," she promised. "But I still don't know why you've brought me here." She could feel her voice quaver. "I can pay you, whatever I'm able. My whole family's fortune, if you want it," she added desperately.

Vittes sighed. "Have you been listening to nothing I say? If riches had been my sole object, Lady Myron, I would not have requested *you* here. Any underling would have sufficed. I thought I had made my wishes abundantly clear."

Lornesse bit her lip to keep from crying. He *was* mad. What he asked was impossible. "And I told you," she repeated, "only a descendent of the twelve families can be a speaker! And even if you were, you couldn't have the power unless the relic chose you, and that will not happen until I am dead." As soon as the words left her mouth, a chill spread over her body. Did he think—?

"Why?" he demanded. From the ground beside him, Emmaine made a small, pleading sound from her throat, and he held up a warning hand before turning back to Lornesse. "Why should I bother with being chosen? From what I've been led to believe, the awakening will succeed regardless."

Sickened, Lornesse glared at him. "The choosing is a testament of the Master's will. It is the means by which *he* appoints his speakers," she said defiantly, holding her head very straight. "It is not your place to challenge it."

He clapped his hands once, laughing triumphantly. "Ah, yes. The Master. No one's ever challenged any of the precepts before, have they? We've always just assumed they were exactly as we've been told by those bothersome little fairies, but you know as well as I that even some of the fairies questioned the mandates. Surely you are not blind to the dissent among your precious little guardian race. Or does the word *shvri* mean nothing to you?"

A little thrill of anguish ran through Lornesse. She had, of course, heard of the group of fairies who had broken away from their kindred and betrayed their own precepts, but she failed to see what they had to do with her situation.

“I admit it has been to my advantage,” Vittes continued. “The fairies have always lorded over humans with their magic and their supposed knowledge of the Master’s ways. They think themselves superior to us, and we’re just supposed to take their word for it?” He smiled in satisfaction. “I highly doubt the Master even exists.”

Tears sprang into her eyes. First he had kidnapped and harmed Emmaine, and then he had taunted and insulted Lornesse. Now he was attacking the very core of her faith. And Emmaine still had a knife at her throat. For the first time all night, Lornesse felt completely helpless.

“You asked what it is I want?” Vittes finally said. He snapped his fingers, and two more men came through the door. One held a sword, the other a small crossbow. “I’m afraid, my lady, what I want will require your departure from this world.”

Before Lornesse had a chance to even breathe, Vittes nodded at his henchman, and the crossbow fired. She fell to her knees in shock, hitting the dirt floor with a painful slam, and then crumpled to her side, the short, stiff arrow protruding from her ribs.

There were three things Lornesse was aware of as she died. Emmaine’s screams, loud in her ears, the shock from her fellow speakers through their bond, and far beneath the tide, Sedvirus’s unmistakable surprise. His last impressions filled her mind.

“Change is coming, Lornesse of Myron. But this change was unexpected.”

1

The village of Westfern was in the deepest heart of Fairlight Forest. Here, the trees grew tallest and the streams flowed deepest, the coolest and the most secret. The summer was past, and the forest was making its preparations for its long, cold sleep. The last of the stubborn leaves were losing their battle with the wind, one at a time breaking free and fluttering lazily down to the chilly forest floor.

Flute tried not to let them distract her.

This spell was one of the hardest she had ever done. She was nervous; her whole class was watching breathlessly and Elder Hawthorne seemed ready to jump in with his usual bossy criticism at any moment. He wanted them to make a ball out of the water of the stream, which was difficult because it involved combining elements of water and air magic. The water didn't hold together well if it was stagnant. She needed to make it move, the way the air moved when the wind blew. If the water was nudged into motion in just the right way, the sphere would practically hold itself together.

She was deep in concentration, her eyes narrowed, trying to resist the urge to use her hands. Magic had nothing to do with gestures, but for some reason every fairy sprout had the instinct to try to use them. Flute wanted to impress her instructors. If she was still using her hands with *water* spells then they would never, ever let her proceed to the advanced magic of earth and fire.

Flute prayed silently that she wouldn't have one of her famous clumsy disasters. She could practically hear all of her elders in her head, reminding her that this wouldn't be a problem if she simply kept calm and held onto her concentration. She narrowed her eyes, and the slowly shifting mass of water wavered slightly, almost rejoining the brown stream beneath it. Berating herself, Flute tried to regain her focus. She had a tendency to let her excitement get the best of her.

Flute was always being scolded for her daydreams. Since before she

could remember, she had been fascinated by the old stories her elders told her about the great speakers. She had especially loved hearing about the speakers' mighty guardians—fairies who'd had adventures, performed powerful, untold magic, even seen the world outside Fairlight Forest!

Flute's best friend, Jesper, closest to her in age of all the other sprouts in the nursery, told her that if she wanted to be a renowned fairy some day, she should pay more attention to her magic lessons. She knew that Jesper was right, but try as she might, her imagination always wandered back—back to a time nearly nine-hundred years lost, when speakers had existed, and when fairies, humans, and the brethren had all lived in harmony.

There were no guardians anymore. The best Flute could hope for was to become a Grand Magi, but Grand Magi today hardly even left their own villages! The elders were equally boring. Sometimes it seemed to Flute that their only remaining purpose these days was to scold her from dawn till dusk:

"Fluttermouse, you eat more winterberries than you bring back home!"

"Fluttermouse, you would try the patience of a leviathan!"

"Guardians always ate their chinosa seeds when they were sprouts."

"And if Taley tried flying through a tree, would you do that too?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Flute caught a glimpse of Elder Hawthorne's face. He was watching her handiwork with a speculative expression. "Remember how much water lives in the sky, Fluttermouse," he advised. "Use it to strengthen your connection."

Flute took a careful sigh, trying yet again to collect her focus. She could do this. Closing her eyes, she called to the water inside her and to the water in the air as Elder Hawthorne had recommended. Then she called to the water she'd taken from the stream and tried to show it how it was not so different from the air around, how it could move in this new place as it had moved over the ground below for so long.

She could feel when it started working. The water was misshapen, but it was beginning to tighten into a pleasant shape—wobbly, but starting to be recognizable as to what she intended it to be. She smiled. She was doing it!

Without warning, something happened. A strange flare of magic, like a cold shiver on a hot summer's day, rippled through her insides. It

was completely different from anything Flute had ever felt before—magic she knew she was a long way from understanding. She gasped, promptly releasing her water spell and drenching her classmates in a cold shower.

“Oh, no!” Flute whispered under her breath, a twinge of desperate panic overcoming her as she thought of what a setback this would prove in her studies. She looked down at Elder Hawthorne and the other sprouts, who were all sputtering and shaking themselves free of the cold water. She darted down to Elder Hawthorne. “I’m so sorry, Elder!” she said excitedly. “I don’t know what happened! I felt something. It was—”

To her extreme surprise, he didn’t seem to care. In a heartbeat she knew she wasn’t going to get in trouble. “It’s all right, Fluttermouse,” he said distractedly. He looked to the east, and she followed his gaze. Instinctively, she knew he was right to look that way. Looking around, she saw all the other sprouts were looking east as well. “I felt it, too,” he said.

“What does it mean?” she asked fearfully.

“I don’t know.”

Over the next few days there was much whispering and speculating between the young fairies in the nursery. Flute and her friends were berated by Elder Wisteria several times for keeping the littler sprouts awake when they all should have been sleeping.

Finally, the council of Grand Magi convened in Westfern, as it was the center of all the fairy villages, and their own Grand Magi Asheford was the greatest and most powerful of the Magi in the forest. Many other visitors came to Westfern, too. Flute was kept busy helping watch the very youngest sprouts that had been brought from all the other nurseries. This had been frustrating, but it did not prevent her from hovering around the council’s great meeting tree as much as possible, hoping for some hint of what was being discussed within.

The council consulted the few old scrolls that remained, preciously guarded and preserved for centuries, and debated long into the night for many days, until even Flute grew weary of waiting. At long last, however, they were ready to discuss the results of their deliberations.

“Most of us are of the opinion,” Magi Asheford said, “that somewhere in eastern Réol, a new speaker has been chosen.”

There was a uniform gasp from the fairy kindred that had gathered

in the meeting circle, followed by the low hum of whispers and murmurs. Flute was so excited at these words that her wings snapped open and she jolted several inches in the air, poking Jesper painfully in the side of his face with her elbow. But as usual, her friend was patient and understanding. He simply rolled his eyes and grabbed her by the tunic, tugging her back to sit beside him.

“How do you know?” asked a stranger from another village.

“A speaker?”

“What’s Réol?” Flute whispered to Jesper.

“It must be a place, if it has an east,” Jesper pointed out knowingly.

“There hasn’t been a speaker for almost a millennium!” Elder Heath said. “How can you be sure the surge was a choosing?”

“We can’t,” said Magi Marinavae wearily. “But it only makes sense.”

They proceeded to explain that, according to memory and the old scrolls, a choosing was just about the only thing that could be felt by every fairy, everywhere. The fact that they had sensed the focus of the magical surge in a specific place was another clue.

After that, it was very hard for Flute to keep up with what happened. Fairy sprouts still in the nursery weren’t usually told what their elders were doing in important matters, no matter how desperately they wished to know. Asheford and several elders departed Fairlight Forest, journeying to the place called Réol. Flute settled in to wait for their return. Her thoughts were never far from the travelers, and her imagination was more alive than ever with possibility.

The emissaries were gone for a long time, and when they finally returned, all the sprouts could tell that something was wrong. They did not bring a speaker, as Flute had hoped, but they did bring a relic—a ring with a blue stone that was the ancient token of the House Otter.

Once again, the elders cloistered themselves away. Instead of excited, though, they were all worried and grave. Distracted and agitated, they dismissed Flute’s questions and those of her friends. By the end of the fourth day, she was so angry about being forced to teach the littlest sprouts new chores that she inadvertently made all her charges disappear in a burst of uncontrolled magic. Fortunately, all the little ones had been safely discovered in the nursery at Autumnleaf, the next village west, but this lack of control had earned Flute two days of weaving baskets with old Henna, her least favorite task of any. And she was forbidden to use

magic for a week.

It wasn't fair, she thought, furiously poking the thick, knotted rope of grasses in and out of the basket frame. If she was old enough to care for her small fellow sprouts, why wasn't she old enough to know what was happening about the speaker? And she hadn't *meant* to make the little ones disappear. She loved them as much as anybody else; it had been an accident!

"Flute!"

Startled from her self-pity, Flute looked up to see Whisper, Boisen, and Taley, the three oldest after her and Jesper, flying quickly across old Henna's nest, their eyes wide. She looked over at Henna, who had drifted off to sleep, slumped over her own basket. Flute wondered how long she'd been out. She wasn't usually very talkative, even when she was awake, which was part of the reason Flute found this punishment so horribly boring.

Henna sniffed loudly in her sleep but did not wake. Flute turned to her friends and put a finger over her lips, urging them to be quiet. Taley nodded.

"What's wrong?" Flute asked, forgetting her chore and leaning close to them.

"It's Magi Asheford," said Boisen.

"What about him?"

"He's gone!" Taley said.

"Gone?" Flute asked, confused. "Why? Where would he go?"

"No one knows! He ran away!"

"He took the *relic*, Flute!" Little Whisper's brilliant blue eyes were wide, and sparkled with silver flashes, betraying her shock and fear. "That's what I heard Elder Heath tell Elder Osprey."

Flute's own eyes grew larger, and she stared at her young friend in shock. "The relic?" she repeated, appalled.

"It's true." At the sound of another voice, the four sprouts turned to see Jesper, also entering Henna's nest, albeit a bit more cautiously than the other three.

"How do you know, Jesper?" Flute asked urgently as he drew nearer.

"At least I think it's true," he amended, looking grave. "I went to the place where they were keeping the relic. The only thing I found was Elder Hawthorne, and he was very angry. He chased me away."

“The relic,” Flute breathed again. The precious otter relic.

“Poprinay said Asheford was a traitor,” added Boisen, two seasons older than Whisper. He seemed puzzled. “I thought he was a Grand Magi. What’s traitor, Flute?”

Flute frowned. She remembered hearing the word before, but only to describe one other kind of person. “I think it means,” she said seriously, “that he’s a shvri.”

All the young ones gasped. “Magi Asheford was a *shvri!*?” Taley asked in shock.

“Maybe he wasn’t before, but he is now,” said Jesper slowly. “Only someone as horrible as a shvri would do something like steal a relic from the fairies.”

“But Magi Asheford has always been a very wise leader of the Grand Magi, and of Westfern village,” Flute said, confused. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Fluttermouse!”

All the sprouts turned around. Elder Hawthorne stood at the entrance of the nest now, and he had that look on his face —the look that was always bad news for Flute. “Jesper, you know better,” he said, looking at Flute’s friend severely.

“Please, Elder,” Flute said boldly. “Is it true that Magi Asheford took the relic?”

“You don’t need to—”

“Please,” she interrupted him urgently, something that would undoubtedly earn her more punishment, but at this point she figured it didn’t really matter. “Elder, all we want to know is what happened. Just tell us. Please?”

“Please?” echoed the three younger ones. Jesper seemed stuck trying to decide whether to look respectful, apologetic, or hopeful.

Hawthorne sighed heavily. “You three,” he said, waving a hand at Whisper, Taley, and Boisen. “Go to the nursery. Wisteria is looking for you. She is very worried. Go!”

Crestfallen, the sprouts turned and flew dejectedly away. Hawthorne looked thoughtfully at Elder Henna for a moment, then turned to Flute and Jesper. “You two, come with me.”

Flute and Jesper followed cautiously, both wondering what sort of new trouble they’d landed themselves in. Hawthorne led them away

from the village, to the edge of the stream, where the long, low willow trees made green curtains around the deep, dark pool where the big fish liked to hide in the summer. The winter had come and gone since they had first felt the choosing. Now the new green of spring was pushing out of the tree buds.

“I suppose,” Elder Hawthorne said at last as they settled down beside the water, “that you might as well hear the whole truth, rather than try to build stories from scraps of conversation and frighten the younger sprouts.”

Flute stayed very still and quiet. She was afraid that if she talked, Elder Hawthorne would forget himself and go back to *not* talking about things.

“Magi Asheford and the others,” he began, “myself included, went to Réol. We found the human the relic had chosen. His name was Darius Mortén.”

“How did they find him?” Flute asked.

“What do you remember of your history lessons about the speakers?”

Jesper looked at Flute expectantly, and she was proud to answer. Nobody remembered speaker history better than Flute. “The speakers were all descendent of one of the twelve great families,” she said. “Upon being chosen, the human was given the ability to see fairies. This was the proof the Master provided to let the fairies know who had been chosen.”

Hawthorne nodded. “And so it was with Mortén. He knew when we came.”

“So Magi Asheford awakened him, yes?”

Another nod. “Asheford was the one who had studied the awakening the most.”

“It is the most powerful magic any fairy can perform,” Jesper said knowingly.

“That’s right. Magi Asheford was unconscious for two days after it was finished.”

“And this Mortén became the Otter Speaker?” Flute asked. “But where is he? Why did you bring back the relic and not Mortén?”

This time Hawthorne shook his head, and he was sad. “Sprouts,” he said, “something has happened that I do not understand. It was not the otter relic to which Asheford awakened Mortén. It was that of House Leviathan. He was able to show us, when we asked, that he had indeed

descended from that great line—from the last of the daughters of Myron who escaped both the persecution of Maehdron Vittes and the earthquake of Nimal.”

“The leviathan *and* otter relics?” Flute repeated, awed.

“He had them both,” Hawthorne said.

“How?”

“I do not know.” He looked at them both seriously. “Fluttermouse, Jesper,” he said, “you are both growing up, but you are still sprouts. You must understand why we have been trying to protect you from all of this. The only reason I have decided to tell you is that I do not yet wish the littlest ones to know anything is wrong.”

“What *is* wrong?” Flute insisted. “Why did Magi Asheford go away?”

“Because Mortén was not what he appeared to be,” Hawthorne said, his voice fierce. Flute blanched a little, looking over at Jesper worriedly. Elder Hawthorne was very upset about something, but he didn’t seem angry with the sprouts. He stopped and collected himself a moment before he continued. “Mortén was very careful before he was awakened, but afterward we began to realize he was not a person who should ever have been given the honor of being a speaker.”

“How did you know?”

“Many things. Attributes of his personality which he found increasingly difficult to conceal. Small cruelties to those who served him. Insatiable, selfish ambition. Suffice to say he is a very undeserving human, but as you know, an awakening cannot be undone. It lasts as long as its recipient lives. We abandoned Mortén, but Asheford first managed to steal the otter relic from him.”

“So Mortén is still alive?” Flute asked.

“Yes.”

“I don’t understand,” she persisted. “Speakers are supposed to be good and kind people, faithful servants of the Master. If Mortén passed the tests of the choosing, how could he possibly be unworthy?”

“That is something your elders do not understand.”

“But why is Asheford gone?” Jesper asked.

“The revelation of Mortén’s true character has made us cautious, and for good reason.” Now Elder Hawthorne seemed more himself, which meant perpetually annoyed. “Most of the Grand Magi feel we should be very careful with the otter relic. Guard it, keep it safe here in Fairlight

Forest until we understand better what went wrong with Mortén. Asheford does not agree. He believes our best hope of correcting this wrong is to take the relic out among the humans and hope it will choose someone who could work against Mortén. The rest of us believe this hope to be foolhardy and irresponsible. Asheford's plan was voted down by the Grand Magi council.

"This morning, Asheford stole the relic and disappeared. He has forsaken his privileges as a Grand Magi and a leader of our people. He cares more for his own pride than what is best for the fairies. He must never return."



The street fair came to the city of Nebraeth once a year. It was a time that the children in the local orphanage looked forward to, and none more so than Xari. She loved watching the brightly-colored acrobats perform mind-boggling feats, and hearing bards sing tales of history long past. Most of all, she loved watching the sword-fighters execute flawless routines. She was entranced by the way they moved and the way the swords flashed through the air like an intricate dance.

When the fair was in town, she almost didn't notice that the other children went away and left her by herself, or that none of them seemed to like her. She could almost ignore the whispers and rumors that surrounded her.

"I heard that when she grows up, the Westerlons are going to come back for her and burn down the orphanage!"

"I heard they left her because they wanted her to finish their work for them!"

"How can you sleep in the same room as her? Aren't you afraid she'll do something to you in your sleep?"

"Westerlons killed my parents."

She could almost, for one day, be normal.

The one time Xari had approached Madam Grenni, the matron who ran the orphanage, and confessed that most of the other children avoided her, Madam Grenni had sighed and looked at her. "You're a Westerlon, Xari." That was all she would say, as if those simple words would explain

everything.

They did not explain everything, but the longer Xari was at the orphanage, the more she learned. The Westerlons were fierce warriors from the Western Continent across the sea, and they had staged a ferocious attack on the Eastern Continent not too long ago. They had swept through Xari's home country of Threnphol and had even managed to get over the border into Réol before they were forced back. The Easterlings were still recovering from the war.

One day, Xari overheard the cook telling the milkmaid that Xari was most certainly spawned from one of the invading warriors during that time. "Evil creatures that the Westerlons were! Most likely one of them forced himself on some poor maiden, and there's the result. She's at least half-Westerlon; just look at that face. It's no wonder her mother left her on the orphanage doorstep. It's a good thing for Xari that Madam Grenni has such a kind heart."

Xari had spent an hour that evening looking into the cracked mirror in the hallway outside her room. She didn't understand what made her face so horrible. She was small for her age; she had heard that the Westerlons were short, but that didn't make them any less fierce. Her face was thin, with slanted brown eyes framed by high cheekbones. Her skin was slightly darker than most of the other children's, and her straight black hair was hacked off at her shoulders. Madam Grenni didn't let any of the girls grow their hair long. She said she wasn't going to deal with more lice and fleas than was necessary.

Even then, at such a young age, Xari had realized the unfairness of it all. What did it matter what she looked like? If her father had been a vicious savage, did it mean that she was, too? Why did everyone judge her by who her parents had been, especially in a place such as this? The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. Was it so much to ask for a friend? For someone to love her? She didn't think so.

As time passed, Xari began to lash out at the people around her. She often found herself in trouble with Madam Grenni for causing disturbances throughout the orphanage. "*If you don't get your temper under control, you're going to find more trouble than even you know what to do with!*" the matron told her, time and again. She was constantly putting Xari on discipline, which meant extra chores. Xari didn't care. At least it kept her busy. At least it kept her from thinking

about how lonely she was.

Xari had almost not been allowed to go to the fair this year, because she had hit Nara during dinner the week before. Madam Grenni had threatened to keep her in her room the whole time the fair was in town, even though Xari had explained that Nara had called her a funny looking savage. She finally agreed that if Xari was good the whole week, she could attend the fair. It had been very, very hard to not yell at the other children, and to keep from kicking Navir when he called her a bad name, but she had done it.

Every ounce of self-control she had exerted was made worth the effort when she was taken to the city square with the other orphans and released to sightsee for the day. Not even the cloudy skies could dissipate Xari's happiness.

"Don't leave the square!" Madam Grenni said sternly, passing out a few coppers to each of the children. As she pressed them into Xari's hand, she gave her an extra hard look. "*Behave, Xari.*"

Xari nodded eagerly and carefully tucked her coppers into her pocket. This was the only time she ever got money, and she wasn't about to lose it. She would probably buy some hard candy from the street vendors later, which would be a treat to last for several days.

Most people were so busy that they didn't pay attention to her, and even when they did, she ignored their stares and whispers. She made her way through the crowds to the sword-fighters, pressing to the front of the throng. They had already started one of their routines. Two men were facing each other, their hands moving in a blur as their swords clashed and clanged.

Time was lost as she stood watching them. It wasn't until someone knocked painfully into her side that she moved her eyes.

"Like the sword fighting, barbarian?" Navir was leering at her. At thirteen, he was four years older than Xari, and much larger. He was with Lillia, who liked her just as little as Navir. "I bet you'd like to learn how to do it. Then you could cut us all up in our sleep."

Xari's mouth tightened, and she thrust out her jaw defiantly. "Leave me alone."

"You must be joking, Navir," Lillia said scornfully. "No one would be crazy enough to give Xari a sword, let alone teach her to use one."

Xari turned her eyes back on the show in front of her, an angry buzz

in her ears. She couldn't do anything to them, or she would get in trouble and be sent back to the orphanage. She wouldn't let them ruin this one special time for her.

Navir grabbed Xari's dress from behind and lifted her a few inches off of the ground. "Got any money left, barbarian?" He gave her a hard shake, and Xari heard the jangle of the coins in her pocket.

Xari screamed in fury and swung her foot backward. She felt her heel connect with Navir's ribs, and he promptly dropped her. She landed hard on her side and glared up at Navir and Lillia from the ground.

Navir grinned at her and waved three coppers in front of her face. "Thanks for the money."

With horror and rage, Xari realized that, somehow, her coins were missing out of her pocket. "Those are mine!" she yelled, hurtling to her feet and throwing herself at the older boy. "Give them back!"

If Lillia hadn't been there, Xari thought she might have stood a chance. As it was, she knew she managed to do some damage before Navir finally threw her off. Without fully realizing it, their scuffle had moved backwards. She didn't know what a disturbance they had caused until she heard the dead silence of the crowd and looked up to see that she had bumped into one of the sword-fighters.

Ten minutes later, it was all over. Madam Grenni arrived in a fury, grabbing both Xari and Navir (Lillia had somehow managed to disappear) and dragging them forcefully back to the orphanage. Xari was locked in her room, and when Madam Grenni finally came in, her face was white and pinched with anger. Xari opened her mouth to speak, but Madam Grenni held up a hand. "What you did today was inexcusable."

"But Navir—"

"You punched him. And kicked him. And he has several nasty—"

"He made fun of me and took my money!"

"Then you should have come and found me, and I could have taken care of it!"

"I—"

"I don't want to hear it, Xari! You and Navir upset an entire show at the fair today! Someone—yourself included—could have been seriously injured by those sword-fighters. I don't know what to do to get you to stop this disruptive behavior. Until you can prove you can exhibit some sort of self-control, you will not be attending the fair again—not this

year, or any year in the future. I don't care if it takes until your sixteenth birthday when you're of age to walk out of here."

Giving her another fuming look, Madam Grenni turned and shut the door behind her. As if punctuating her punishment, the gray skies opened and poured out their heavy rain. While some of the rich homes in the city of Nebraeth had glass windows that had been brought up on the southern caravans, the orphanage was not one of them. Here, only cheap strips of thick paper separated the small rooms within from the elements. The one in Xari's room wasn't holding up very well, as water quickly poured through it and formed a puddle on the floor.

Xari sat numbly on her bed, her arms wrapped around her knees, listening as the other children began returning from the fair, escaping the downpour. Slamming doors were followed by joyful shrieks and giggles.

None of the girls who roomed with Xari came in. They probably knew she was in trouble, but nobody cared. They didn't want anything to do with her, and now Xari didn't even have the fair to look forward to anymore. Everything had been taken from her. Madam Grenni was going to keep her locked up forever, because how was she going to keep from losing her temper if everyone was mean to her?

She watched the puddle of rainwater slowly become a stream that trickled through the girls' room. If she was such trouble to have around, why was she staying? Nobody would ever want her. She had been living in this place for nine long years, and she was tired of it. She was tired of being teased, ignored, bullied. Why should she put up with it anymore?

She should just run away. That would solve everybody's problems, wouldn't it? Madam Grenni wouldn't be angry and disappointed all the time, the other orphans would be able to have fun by themselves, and Xari would be free from it all. Madam Grenni probably wouldn't even bother to send the local lawmen out looking for her. It wouldn't matter if a tiny half-Westerlon girl vanished. She could escape over the border to Oriri, and cross Oriri into Fairlight Forest. The forest was said to be a magical and dangerous place, but Xari was sure that anything had to be better than this. She didn't care if it was dangerous. Maybe if she had magic in her life, she wouldn't be so miserable.

That was how Xari found herself leaving the orphanage late that night, carrying nothing but an extra dress and a parcel of food stolen from the kitchen. It had stopped raining, but there were mud puddles

everywhere. The bottom of her skirt was soaked and dirty within minutes. She didn't stop to wonder how she was going to find her way into Oriri, let alone how she would survive on her own. Fairlight Forest couldn't really be *that* far away, could it? It was west; she knew that much.

As it turned out, she didn't need to worry about trying to find the magic in Fairlight. The magic found her first.

Very few people were out as she trudged through Nebraeth; the fair was closed for the day. Those few who were out were headed for the local taverns, and they were easy to avoid. No one noticed her slipping through the shadows. Once she was out of Nebraeth, she stopped and looked back at the city that had been her home. *Ha!* she thought in exhilaration. *I did it! I left, and I'm never going back!* She struck out down the road toward the west.

She had only been walking for a few minutes when something fell out of the sky and hit her on the head. Startled, Xari looked up, but didn't see anything except a half-moon peering through thick, gray clouds. Rubbing the crown of her head with a scowl, she bent down and scooped the offending object out of the mud. It was a silver ring. A smooth, round blue stone sat in the middle of the ring, and imprinted upon the stone was an otter. As soon as her fingers touched it, a strange, tingling sensation washed over Xari, from her scalp all the way down to her toes. She shivered and closed her fist around the object.

It was at that moment that she realized a tiny little creature was buzzing before her face. *Fairy*, her mind told her in wonder, as she recalled tales she had heard through the years. He was a perfect little person, with wings and dark hair that, upon closer inspection, she saw was actually feathers. His face was miniscule, but he was so close to Xari's nose that she could make out his expression. He looked rather baffled.

"You can see me?" the fairy asked in a tiny voice.

Xari opened her mouth, a bit surprised he was actually talking. "Um—"

"I'll take that as a yes." He studied her for a long moment. "Well. Well, how very interesting." He flew backwards in the air, away from Xari's nose. "The ring was not supposed to go to you," he said, half to himself.

Xari crossed her arms, the ring still clutched in one fist. "Well, you

shouldn't have dropped it on my head!" she told him, as if it was perfectly normal to have a conversation with a fairy in the middle of the night.

"I didn't intend to drop it on your head, you silly sprout!"

Sprout? I'm not a vegetable! Xari thought indignantly. "Well, I don't care if it was an accident. You can't have it back." She knew it was rude—it wasn't her ring, after all—but something in her wouldn't let her release it. In the brief minute she had held it, it had become part of her.

The fairy made a sound very much like the cook did when she caught one of the children sneaking food out of the kitchen. "Are all human sprouts so precocious?"

Xari made a face. "What's pre...shockis?"

The fairy sighed in exasperation. "I don't want it back. It isn't mine. Don't you understand? I didn't drop it. You were chosen to have it, and it pulled away from me."

"What do you mean?" Xari asked.

The fairy groaned and pulled at his feathers. "It's no use." He zoomed around her head several times and finally stopped decidedly. "Well, you'll have to do. I must admit I wasn't expecting a human so young, but the Master has chosen you, and he must have a reason for it. All that's left is the awakening, which I can do. However, I was under the impression that human children did not go wandering the streets by themselves so late at night. Where are your parents?"

Xari's brows snapped together in a frown. Was she ever going to get away from that? Did it *always* come back to her parents? "I don't know," she huffed. "I never knew them. I'm an *orphan*." The word was as bitter on her tongue as always. "What's awakening?"

"Hmm...I'm not sure if that will make things easier or more difficult. What is your name?" he asked, without bothering to answer her question.

That annoyed Xari—Madam Grenni had done that all the time. Not answered her questions. Pursing her lips, Xari retorted, "You tell me your name first."

The fairy appraised her. "You do have spirit. That's good. You may call me Ashe." Muttering, so Xari almost couldn't hear, he said, "We're going to be spending a lot of time together." And louder, "Hold still! I have to bind us so I can keep track of you; you have no idea the dangers

you could face.”

“I *am* holding still,” Xari said haughtily. “And you still didn’t tell me what awakening is. And what is a ‘bind’? What dangers?”

To her surprise, the fairy chuckled softly. “Precocious,” he repeated, shaking his feathered head. “An awakening will make you a speaker.” Before Xari could ask for clarification, *something*, some kind of invisible force, struck her, and she stumbled backward, tripping and landing on her bottom in the mud.

“Now look what you did!” she said angrily. “It’s bad enough that the *bottom* of my skirt was wet and cold and muddy!”

“There are worse things, sprout, trust me. Now, what is your name?”

Xari stared at him obstinately for a minute, and then relented. “Xari. What did you just do to me?”

“I cast a binding spell,” Ashe said.

“What’s a binding spell?”

“It is a spell that ties me to you,” he said with exaggerated patience. “It ensures that I cannot lose you, and that I can protect you.”

Xari pursed her lips. “I don’t want you to protect me. I can look out for myself.”

“Oh, yes,” Ashe replied sarcastically. “I’m sure you can. A young sprout of your age is perfectly capable of caring for herself.”

“I ran away from the orphanage,” Xari said, glaring at him fiercely. “And I won’t go back.”

Ashe considered her carefully. “We can discuss our options. For now, you had better come with me. You have a lot of learning to do.”

2

Eight years later

Some called it the Misty City. Considering how often its streets were veiled in milky curtains of fog, the name was not without merit. Its rightful name, however, was Montressa—city of wind and sky, boldly carved out of the peaks of the mountain upon which it stood.

On the highest pinnacle was Par Auspré, the ancestral home of Montressa's ruling family. The edifice was magnificent, heavily favoring towers and balconies and crowned with thin, golden spires upon which the city's brightly-colored banners were always flying. Upon occasion, violent winds had been known to tear the banners from their moorings and carry them away, but this happened rarely. It was said that a traveler who came upon a lost banner of Montressa was favored by the paré with good fortune.

The remainder of the city fell away below Par Auspré in layers of tight, winding streets and tall, narrow houses. Long ago, when men had been more inclined to respect the purity of nature's landscape, the city's builders had striven to conform to the mountain rather than subdue it. Primary city junctures had been built on the largest ledges. Many of the most grand and ancient noble estates had portions that extended into the mountainside itself, giving their masters larger holdings without compromising the limited space available on the surface. Meandering pathways, tunnels, and staircases connected the various portions of the city.

There were no stables in Montressa. Many of its residents had never even seen a horse unless they ventured to the foot of the mountains to their sister-city, Valedyne. There, any traveler on pilgrimage to the Misty City was forced to abandon his mount and proceed on foot, for the road became simply too treacherous. Light-footed mules could make it about halfway up, but before long, even they were forced to turn back. This

degree of inaccessibility was a marvel to passing strangers. Who would build a city atop a mountain all but impossible to reach? What purpose did it serve? Whom did it even benefit?

Those that expressed such sentiment had never seen the eyries.

Honeycombed throughout the surrounding peaks—great nests sometimes big enough to hold a small hut, tucked in cliffs and large crevices all over the mountains' faces—the eyries were the pride of Montressa. The greatest cloister could be found in the city itself, just below Par Auspré on a ridge where the strongest drafts in all of the mountains blasted up from the canyon below. In the eyries dwelt the eagles of Montressa and their famous Windriders. Couriers, hunters, sentinels—the Windriders served many purposes. It was because of the Windriders that Montressa was one of the most important cities in Merenth, and, consequently, why High Lord and Lady Kavela were so greatly regarded as its masters.

Anathriel Lelaine, handmaiden to Lady Rillandra Kavela, was pleased to have secured duties that allowed her to venture out of doors. The sky was a clear and perfect blue, the early spring air fresh and crisp, and she breathed deeply, grateful that winter was behind them for another year. Winter was harsh and lonely in Montressa. The Windriders were the only ones able to clear the snowbound passes, and sometimes it was so cold that even they could not make the journey.

Spring was a time for festivals. The Freedom Feast was held first, in honor of the opening of the passes. A few weeks later, when the flowering shrubs were in the height of brilliant bloom—the time when the eaglets began to hatch—the city celebrated the Festival of Winds.

For many weeks, the Windriders had been testing and training a new batch of hopefuls. The duties and status of a Windrider were held in high honor, but it was a difficult and dangerous job, and not just anyone was accepted into their ranks. The next day's ceremony, when the new riders would be named, would culminate the hopes of many, and leave others with sorest disappointment.

This year something else of note was to take place. It was common knowledge that after nearly three decades of service, Captain Brennen intended to retire from the Windriders. There was much debate over who would be chosen to replace him, but Anathriel was satisfied that she knew the answer.

“Anathriel, slow down!” Her companion, Taryn val Argon, the newest and youngest of Lady Rillandra’s ladies, scurried to catch up behind her. “Your legs are longer than mine.”

Biting back a sigh of impatience, Anathriel slowed her pace slightly, but not the purpose in her step.

“How often have you been to the eyries?” the girl asked when she’d caught up. She was always asking questions.

“Often.”

“I’ve never been. Is it frightening to be so near them? The eagles, I mean.”

Anathriel had been afraid of the eagles too at first, but was not about to confess this to Taryn. “No,” she said firmly. “There is no cause for worry. The Windriders have them exceptionally well-trained.”

Taryn gave a small sigh. “I know I should probably be used to them, having grown up here, but I’ve only ever seen them flying from far away. They’re so big!”

It was true. The people of Montressa had, perhaps, become accustomed to the sheer size of the great eagles—so great, in fact, that most trees could not even support them, which was one of the reasons the birds were most comfortable dwelling in the mountain passes. Anathriel’s father had told her that in places far enough away from Merenth, people refused to believe such creatures even existed.

“You’ll become accustomed, Taryn,” Anathriel said. She wished the girl would stop prattling. Anathriel had wanted to come on this errand alone, for reasons that had little to do with the errand itself, but Lady Rillandra wished the older girls to take turns teaching the younger, by example, various aspects of their expected duties. At twenty-two years of age, and still unmarried, Anathriel was one of the oldest.

She was very well aware of the whispers and snide comments that were made about it. Anathriel Lelaine, the proud and brilliant merchant’s daughter, was unable to secure a husband. Some said it was because of her humble origins, some said her vanity. Very few bothered to think Anathriel might have purposefully avoided marriage. She had actually had several suitors that she might have done well by, but long ago she’d decided upon the man she wanted.

She reached into her pocket as she walked, fingering two special items inside it that she had brought with her on this outing. They were

gifts—gifts intended for one very special Windrider. Her confidence faltered a little, but she kicked it back up resolutely. She'd hinted at her regard for Immen Corper once or twice in the past, and had always been met with a polite and friendly response. Her gesture today would be next door to outright declaration. She was reasonably sure she would not be denied.

Reasonably.

It was not a long journey from Par Auspré to the eyries. The palace was situated on the uppermost pinnacle of the mountain, and the journey to the great hall of eagles required only descending to the second-highest summit, which commanded a view of the vast peaks to the north of the city. The eyries were, however, considerably larger than Par Auspré. The main building was tall, but twice as wide—the largest construction in the city, with an expansive corridor running clean through its length, giving the eagles plenty of room to land.

Descending the last set of stone stairs, Anathriel and Taryn walked straight through the vast southern doorway on one end of this corridor. Immediately Anathriel wrinkled her nose in disgust. She'd always hated the way this place smelled. It was worse in the wintertime, when the perches and stalls went the longest without airing, but there was always a faint smell of droppings and carrion and greasy feathers. She was relieved it was such a fine day, so that the doors were wide open, allowing bright sunshine and fresh air to combat the unpleasantness into submission.

It sounded odd in here, as well. The vastness of the building made sounds and voices sound fragmented and detached, with an overriding echoic quality. This haziness was often pierced by squawking screams of the eagles, and right now, it was almost overwhelmed by the far more insistent sound of their screeching young.

While Taryn gaped, open-mouthed, at her side, Anathriel cast her eyes quickly up and down the two rows of nests, one on either side of the corridor. She was looking for two men. One was the purpose of her errand; the other was the reason she had wanted to come. Just now, she saw neither.

“Anathriel!”

A young man about her own age, dressed in Windrider daywear, was heading towards her, smiling. She smiled in return. “Regen!” she called back. “I can't believe you're indoors on a day like today.”

Regen Feldstone only grinned as he trotted up towards her side. She offered her hand when he reached her, and he took it unhesitatingly, kissing it with all the grace one would expect given his pedigree. “If you’d visit me more often, Anathriel, perhaps you’d know I’ve been named assistant honor guard of nesting this season.”

“What a privilege, Regen, congratulations,” she said with a sincere smile. Every spring a select contingent of Windriders was chosen to act as honor guard to the young eaglets.

“Yes,” he said. “A privilege.” He cast a longing glance at the patch of blue sky visible through the far door at the corridor’s end. “A privilege that keeps me conveniently grounded.” He sighed.

Like many of Montressa’s young noble sons, Regen Feldstone had chosen to spend the prime of his youth as a Windrider. It was a traditional practice; many of the noble families felt their sons should understand the origins of their city’s success. However, nobody ever expected an heir to make a career as a Windrider, something Anathriel secretly suspected that Regen resented. He would be coming into his inheritance soon, and would likely be a Windrider for only one or two seasons more.

“So what brings you out to us this fine day, Miss Lelaine?” Regen went on, swiftly recovering from all signs of regret.

“Lady Rillandra wishes me to deliver a message to Captain Brennen,” she replied. Noticing Taryn standing patiently at her elbow, she shook her head, adding, “I’m sorry, Regen. I trust you remember Taryn val Argon?”

Regen feigned surprise. “Surely you jest, Anathriel. Taryn Argon is no doubt still playing with dolls in her mother’s bower, not this handsome young lady all grown up.” He threw a wink toward Anathriel before turning his most rakish smile on the younger girl. Anathriel rolled her eyes.

Taryn held up her chin, hands on hips. “Oh, stop it, Lord Regen. I know you recognize me,” she said, her nose in the air. “Besides, I am uncommonly tall for my age.”

“So I see. Well, welcome to the eyries, Miss Argon,” he said, taking her hand to kiss it as he had done Anathriel’s.

With the introductions satisfied, Anathriel took Regen’s arm in her own, smiling coyly, and began leading him down the rows. Taryn

followed a few feet behind, her attention once again captivated by the novelty of her surroundings.

“What is your errand with the Captain?” Regen asked.

“The other ladies and I have finished the sashes of rank for the new Windriders,” Anathriel said. “Her Ladyship wishes Captain Brennen to call upon her this evening to choose which he would assign to tomorrow’s honorees.”

“And she needed to send you?” Something in Regen’s tone caused Anathriel to look at him sharply. There was a hint of mischief in his eyes. He leaned down next to her ear. “I know what you’re about, Miss Lelaine. Half the court is abuzz with speculation that you’ve cast your eyes upon our future captain.”

“He is to be the captain, then?” Anathriel blurted eagerly, before she realized her mistake.

“Ha!” Regen exclaimed, grinning again. “Now the secret’s out, isn’t it, my scheming friend? You’ve given away your heart at last.”

Anathriel’s cheeks flamed, and she tossed her head proudly. “Just you be quiet about it, Regen, or I might have to twist your ears off,” she said in a low voice, glancing around to make sure no one would overhear them. “I wouldn’t say I’ve given away my heart just yet. I’ve only settled upon my intentions.”

“You mean what most people call ambition?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. Then he shook his head, smiling. “Your secret is safe with me—for however long it remains a secret, at least. And to answer your question, most of us suspect that yes, he will be the next captain. I don’t know absolutely, though.”

Anathriel would have liked to continue this vein of conversation further, but Regen now seemed keen to steer her away from it. “Captain Brennen is in his office, working on last-minute preparations of his own. If you wish, I could convey your message for you.”

“No, thank you, Regen, I think Lady Rillandra would prefer if I—” Anathriel paused as new activity at the end of the corridor claimed her attention. An indistinguishable cry had come up from the end of the corridor, and the men who had been working there were clearing a broad area by the end of the far door.

“Incoming,” Regen said knowingly.

“Thank you, Regen,” said Anathriel wryly. She rather thought she

could have figured that out on her own. They paused in their walk, and a moment later Taryn stepped up beside them to watch the new arrival.

Despite the unpleasant smells and sounds of the eyries, it was still a thrilling sight when, with a speed almost blinding, a great eagle swooped gracefully into the corridor and sailed halfway down its length before cleanly landing on the great perch at its center. Anathriel gave a satisfied smile upon seeing it, for if there was any eagle she knew on sight, it was this one.

Her name was Zephyr. She was easily distinguishable, for although she was by no means the largest of her kind, she had a peculiar silver coloring that was very rare. More importantly, though, she was Immen Corper's mount, which explained Anathriel's interest.

"Are you sure you don't want me to deliver your message to Captain Brennen myself?" Regen said quietly into her ear, his voice full of teasing.

Anathriel sucked in her breath. "Yes, Regen, that would be lovely, thank you," she said distractedly. After a moment's inspiration, she added, "Actually—" She turned to Taryn. "Taryn, please accompany Lord Feldstone to the offices and deliver Lady Rillandra's message to Captain Brennen. It would be good practice for you, I think."

Taryn merely gazed at her curiously. "Yes, Anathriel," she replied.

Regen detached himself from Anathriel's hold and offered his arm instead to Taryn. "My lady?" he prompted, smiling broadly.

Taryn giggled and accepted it.

Then Regen looked back at Anathriel. "Behave yourself," he chided, giving her a small wink.

Anathriel didn't bother watching the pair retreat. Her attention was now fully captivated by the sight of the tall, handsome young man who had just dismounted from Zephyr's back and was now standing by the great bird's head, scratching the area around her beak and whispering something to her with a smile.

Since the day he'd come to the eyries as a hopeful initiate, Immen Corper had been the rising star of the Windrider ranks. He had an uncanny talent with the great birds, able to soothe even the most riley of them with a few quiet words. He was talented, serious, steady, and extremely good-looking, with brilliant blue eyes, unruly light brown hair, and fine hands. In Anathriel's opinion, he was the perfect catch, and

she was determined to have him.

Her father had been a bit disgruntled when Anathriel had first told him of her intentions. After all, the whole reason they had fought so hard to get her into court was the hope of a noble marriage. With an astonishing gift for trade, Ricco Lelaine had traveled the world and acquired a fortune, settling at last in Montressa to marry Anathriel's mother. Desiring a title worthy to match his wealth, Ricco had seen to it that Anathriel was given a place as one of Lady Rillandra's maidens. Anathriel had come to court at twelve years of age, the youngest in living memory.

Anathriel's father had long harbored hopes that she would be able to use her talents to secure a husband from among the aristocracy, and she had not opposed. She had the necessary wealth and education, and she knew she was very pretty too. Her plans had shifted, however, when she'd met Immen....

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Awakenings

Faith King & Laura Josephsen

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About the Authors

FAITH KING lives in Canal Fulton, Ohio and works as an accountant, which comes as a surprise to a lot of people who don't know her professionally. She also has a second degree in Spanish. Faith began writing fiction in college as a stress-reliever, which didn't always work out as planned, but was nonetheless gratifying. She loves movie soundtracks, science fiction television shows, and traveling. She advises everyone to visit Mont Saint-Michel in France at least once in their lives, if they can.

LAURA JOSEPHSEN spent her early childhood in upstate New York before moving to Tennessee, and then eventually to Ohio. She is married and is a stay-at-home mother. She has worked as an editor. She enjoys music, reading, rainy days, and sci-fi and fantasy tales. She's been writing since she was old enough to form words on paper.

LAURA AND FAITH met in a writers' forum on the internet, where they discovered they had a mutual passion for many of the same books, mostly of the fantasy genre for younger readers. In very little time, they also discovered their shared Christian testimony. *Awakenings* was born of a desire to see more fantasy stories written for young readers with a deliberate inspirational bent.

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