

He knew that face.

Oh. My. God.

Grandpa's painting come to life. Long, slender legs and generous curves in all the right places. Vivid red-gold hair styled by an expert — and high-priced — hand. A little black dress with the unmistakable stamp of Chanel, the killer stilettos of Louboutin. In her young twenties, perhaps, but something in her eyes, in the way she carried herself, spoke of more experience than usual at that age. A woman expensively kept.

No, no man kept her. This woman kept herself.

She walked past Ian as confident as if she owned the building. Her perfume, a discreet but sexy fragrance, wafted behind her. She spared not a glance for any of the men drooling in her wake.

Ian himself suddenly remembered to breathe. Who was she? Watching her, he couldn't remember why he had come. He just ... had to meet her. He wanted to know her, to know everything about her.

Most important — why did she resemble the portrait in Grandpa's study?

Other Rowdy Girls Books by the author

*Writing as **Daphne Walter** (historical fiction)*

Tudor Series

BOOK 1: KING HENRY'S LAST DAUGHTER

BOOK 3: SPYMASTER'S WEB

The Edge of the Midnight Woods

Colette Maëlys



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The Edge of the Midnight Woods

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Chapter 1

7000 years ago, near the Great Sea in the middle of the world ...

The sacred day had come.

Sky-Watcher had decreed it. Today the day and night were equals, the wildflowers waking from the earth, the buds on the trees just breaking open after a long, dark winter. A beautiful day to dawn from a perfect starry night. The sun would shine bright in the bluest of skies. A day of great promise. A day of great solemnity and great joy.

Today, the people of The Place Where Two Rivers Meet would gather at the circle of holy stones and pray to the Goddess for a fine harvest and fertile animals.

Today, for the first time, Kiri would join them.

She took a deep, cheerful breath, trying to commit everything to memory. She had waited all her life for this day, prepared for it in earnest ever since the happy day the Elders had chosen her to serve the Goddess. She knew the incantation to the Goddess by heart. Her woman's blood had started last month. Now she was finally old enough to fulfill her destiny to ensure the well-being of her people.

Her *Amma* had wakened Kiri before dawn when the earliest birds began to sing and taken her down to the stream by star-light to wash. She must not present herself to the Goddess less than perfectly clean. Though the icy water made her shiver, she bore it and washed with special care. *Amma* watched her from the bank nearby, an odd look on her face.

She will miss me. We will not meet again.

Kiri would miss her mother, too, but it would not be the same.

Fear not, Amma. I am not afraid. All will be well.

Amma gave her daughter a trembling smile and straightened her hunched shoulders, yet the sad look lingered in her loving, blue eyes even as she lifted her chin. Kiri herself held her head high. When *Amma* held another babe in her arms next spring, she would be happy again.

On their return, the women of the village scented Kiri's body with *mucgwyr*. She blushed in the chill air as they rubbed the sharp, aromatic wormwood leaves all over her pale skin, leaving a warm, even stinging, sensation behind. Then they daubed fragrant oils into her hair before combing it out in waist-long, flaxen-blond strands. Last, they painted her small, bare breasts and flat belly with the sacred markings in red ochre, putting the most holy fertility symbols in the palms of her hands.

When the paints dried, the women enclosed Kiri in a warm, woolen cloth, wrapped twice around her body and tied over one shoulder. She was naked beneath it. The ceremony required it. Despite the cold, spring air, all the villagers wore nothing beneath their coverings of gray wool, even *Amma* and *Atta*, her father. Kiri's garment was white, the softest lamb's wool, symbolizing the important role she must play today, marked with holy symbols, two handfuls plus three, one for each year of her life.

Kiri was proud the Elders had chosen her to serve the Goddess. She wasn't the prettiest girl in the village, nor the tallest, nor the cleverest, nor were her family the best hunters, but *Atta* strutted among the villagers with his head held high at the honor. People offered *Amma* many gifts of thanks for her virgin daughter. Kiri herself they treated with the greatest respect as the Chosen One.

Her brothers were so jealous.

"Wait!" Kiri stopped *Amma* when her mother began to lead her from home for the last time. Kiri darted to her bundle of furs, where she kept her childish treasures, pulling out her favorite: a thin cord fashioned of thin strips of braided tree bark on which she had strung the pointed, brown-and-yellow striped shells of small snails. She twisted it around her wrist and gestured for *Amma* to tie it on. "I will wear this also."

"You must go to the Goddess, my daughter," said *Amma* with a frown, "untainted by earthly things."

Kiri crossed her arms over her chest. "Then let her tell me so and I will obey, but I cannot see how such a small thing would matter to so great a Goddess." She gestured at *Amma* again. "I wear this to honor her." Heaving a sigh, *Amma* surrendered as she always did to the greater will, tying the cord around the slender wrist. "Come, *Amma*," said Kiri to her mother. She kissed her sleeping baby sister farewell on the forehead and went to the entrance of their home. "We must not be late. They are waiting for us."

The dawn broke in a blood-red sky. Leaving the oldest ones behind to watch the children too young to come, the villagers filed two by two deep into the forest to the glade and the circle of holy stones, great chunks of rock hewn of granite and dragged from far away to make the worship circle. It was very old, built so long ago that no one from that time still lived. Kiri had asked.

Old Sky-Watcher led the way, wearing the skin of a red deer, the skull and mighty antlers crowning his head, fertility symbols painted all over his body in red and black. The villagers sang the song of supplication to the Goddess as they went. Kiri sang the words for the first time with them. *Let her bless her most faithful ones this day. Let their offering please her.*

Immediately behind Sky-Watcher, walking between her parents, Kiri glanced over her shoulder and had a brief stab of regret as she left the village. Over the years, many virgins had entered the holy circle, but no virgins ever returned to the village. Once they joined with the Goddess, they lived forever in Her service. Kiri shivered with excitement. That privilege would soon be hers.

What would it be like, serving the Goddess? She had often tried to imagine it. It meant a life of purity, holiness and innocence. A life without hunger, without cold, without sickness.

A life without men.

Her gaze caught that of Luko, a boy two years older than she. Brown-haired and blue eyed with a tall, well-muscled body and a firm, square jaw. A fine hunter. All the village girls wanted him, but he wanted no one but Kiri. He had wanted to ask Father for Kiri once he was full-grown and she would have liked to share his furs, but that was before the elders chose her. Kiri pushed away a pang of sorrow. She would never dwell in his house now. He would find another girl instead. It hurt — more than she wished to admit — to know so, but something greater called to her.

A damp mist wreathed the forest, cool and fragrant. The priest, the Sky-Watcher, had set up pots of herbs around the stone circle and burned them. The smoky-sweet scent filled the air. The dawning sun shed its earliest rays upon them. Surely the Goddess would look on their ceremony with generosity and grace.

Beneath Kiri's bare feet, the cold earth throbbed with power. Her heart sped up in anticipation. The Ancient Ones had felt its potency, built the holy circle in the clearing on the hill for that reason, to harness the power of the Goddess. At the holy circle, Kiri faced the sun as patient Sky-Watcher had taught her, lifted her hands to the sky holding her palms outward to show the fertility symbols, and repeated the incantation she had often practiced. "Great Goddess, look upon our village with your favor. Share your power with us. Bring life back to the land after the long days of cold. Let us prosper as we honor and serve you. Grant us many lambs and a good harvest." She smiled broadly at her mother, pleased she had made not even one mistake. The villagers murmured in approval. They, too, sensed the power of the Goddess smiling upon them. The village would thrive for another year.

The people struck up music, the bone flutes and the drums of animal skins, and danced the sacred dance to welcome the Goddess into their midst. Kiri stood alone in the center, closing her eyes and holding her arms up to the sky, immersed in the power of their prayers as it filled her soul and fused with the power

pulsing beneath her feet.

Her heart swelled to bursting with love for the villagers. *Yes, for the sake of my people I will serve the Goddess with all obedience and honor.*

At the finish of the dance, the Sky-Watcher gave the signal. Father presented Kiri a cup of carved wood. Knowing she must drink it dry, she had often practiced with water. She must not get this wrong. That would displease the Goddess and bring a curse down on her people. Today the cup held not water, but a dark, sticky, foul-smelling liquid the Sky-Watcher brewed from secret herbs and sacred roots. Taking the cup in both hands, Kiri raised it to the Goddess in praise and worship. She carried it to her lips and drank the bitter potion to the last drop without spilling any. She did not even gag. His jaw clenching hard, Father took the cup from her and handed it to the priest, bowing his head in reverence. Then he took Kiri in his arms for the final time, kissing her on both cheeks. "I love you, my daughter. Thank you for what you do for our people."

Amma kissed Kiri on the brow, caressing her jaw. Tears glistened in her eyes, a single drop seeping down the light brown skin of her cheek. Kiri wiped away the tear with her thumb.

"Weep not, *Amma*," Kiri said, kissing her. "Be happy. I am proud to serve the Goddess."

Amma squeezed her daughter so tight Kiri couldn't breathe. "Blessed be the Goddess." Her voice cracked, but she controlled it, adding. "Please Her well, Kiri. Do not be willful and stubborn." Her hands lingered, at last letting her daughter go.

The other villagers echoed her words.

Blessed be the Goddess.

With gentle hands, Mother unfastened the white cloth Kiri wore and slid it off her shoulders. It fell to the ground at Kiri's feet, exposing her bare body and the painted holy symbols. The nipples of her small, high breasts reacted to the chill air. She stood with shoulders back, proud and erect, though the Sky-Watcher's potion made her dizzy and sick to her stomach. She swallowed hard, trying to keep it down. She must not throw up. Against her will, Kiri swayed a little and stumbled. She put a shaking hand to her forehead at a sudden ache there.

It was time.

Father picked her up in his arms and laid her upon the great altar, releasing her only when his brother tugged at his arm. She wanted to speak, to reassure him, but her tongue had become thick and did not obey her will. She turned her head to look at him, but her eyes struggled to focus.

The Elders bound her upon the altar, her arms and legs spread wide apart, the sacred marks red like blood on her pale skin. The snail shells at her wrist clattered against the stone.

"Divine Goddess, look with kindness upon this our offering and grant us many years of peace and fertility. May this innocent girl please you and serve you. Blessed be the Goddess," intoned the priest, lifting a wide thong of leather to the sky as he spoke. With great care, he wrapped it around Kiri's neck and gave one end each to Father and Father's Brother. Beneath their golden-brown skins, the muscles of their arms and hands tensed, the knuckles blanching.

Kiri smiled at them both. She was not afraid. They would pull it tight at the last moment to spare her any pain. She would meet the Goddess with pride and courage, not weeping in fear as some unworthy ones had done. She would not cause a bad harvest. *I am strong.*

She looked in rapture up at the sky seeing one bright star still defying the dawn-light. "Blessed be the Goddess," she whispered, her lips growing numb. "Fill me with Your power." The star-light began to seep into her, flooding her with infinite peace. *Soon*, it sang. *Soon*.

The final moment had come. "Take the blood of her maidenhood, great Goddess. Grant us our prayer." The priest raised a crude *knyf* of stone high and plunged it deep into her flesh. The leather thong strained with the full strength of both men.

Burning in a blaze of white star-light, Kiri knew no more.

Blessed be the Goddess.

Chapter 2

SHE was born.

The unmoving body suddenly arched, touching the slab of hard stone only at head and heels. Empty lungs filled with air. The still heart began to beat, slow and weak at first, then with greater and greater strength. Energy raced along the muscles, bones and sinews, filling the body with light and power, burning away the poison in its blood.

I live.

SHE sat up abruptly, the bonds holding her down tearing apart like gossamer. Burnt to ash, the leather thong around her neck fell unheeded to her lap. SHE stared uncomprehending at her unfamiliar hands and the peculiar, red symbols on them. Stinging pain burned between her legs. Blood trickled between her thighs, anointing the altar stone. Her blood. Virgin blood. Virgin no more.

Who am I?

SHE touched her thigh with a glowing fingertip and the pain eased. SHE rose to her feet, shaking from the effort needed to control this, her new body. With a loud, collective gasp, the people surrounding her fell cowering to their knees, hiding their faces. More than a few ran away into the forest.

"Blessed be the Goddess!" the people cried in awe and fear. SHE gaped at them, cocking her head to one side. Or perhaps it fell there on its own.

A cringing woman with fading brown hair peeked up. "Kiri?"

SHE groped in her blank mind for language. The woman. Mother. *Amma*. The man kneeling beside her was *Atta*. Father.

What is Kiri?

The meaning came to her. The body. They called it Kiri.

SHE looked at the Mother. *Amma*. With an effort, SHE lifted her lips and bared her teeth. *Smile*. It seemed very strange. "Kiri is here." Her voice was odd and scratchy. SHE touched the sore place on her throat and the pain faded. "Kiri is in me. With me. Part of me." A small part.

Still holding the bloody *knyf*, the Sky-Watcher rose, quaking. "Great Goddess of Fertility, we plead with you to bless our harvest and our lambs."

SHE wrinkled her forehead. *God-ess*? They looked at her in trembling expectation. What did they want of her? She fumbled through her new mind. The human part of her understood. Once-Kiri made a great circle with her open hands, cupping them at the end in the shape of a bowl. "You will have many lambs and a plentiful harvest for this year and many years to come." The people seemed well-pleased at her words, relaxing and laughing to each other.

The power in the stone ring pulsed in agreement, great and intense.

Old Sky-Watcher set down the blood-spattered *knyf* on the altar and held his arms high. *Her blood*. "The Goddess has decreed it. Let it be done." He threw off his cloth, baring his body in the cool air. The other villagers did the same with great rejoicing. Men embraced the women, smearing the painted fertility symbols they all wore on their bodies, drifting away in pairs or threes to celebrate the good news and make the next year's babies.

The one called *Amma* lingered to pick up a white cloth from the ground and drape it over Once-Kiri's shoulders. "Great Goddess," she whispered, "may my Kiri serve you well." Then she took the man called

Father into her embrace and fastened her mouth to his. He wrapped his arms around her and took her into the trees. Once-Kiri tilted her head to one side, this time by her own intent.

How odd.

Once-Kiri shivered. This was *Cold*. She wrapped the cloth around herself, relishing the soft wool against her skin, the warm trace of the Kiri's life still clinging to it. Why was Once-Kiri here? How had she been born? Where was she to go? Once-Kiri did not belong with the village. She knew only that.

A young man stayed behind when all the others had left. *Luko*. It came easier this time. "Kiri?"

She observed him without feeling. A spark of liking made itself known. The body — the Kiri — had been fond of him.

"She is here."

His jaw thrust forward. "You speak as if you are not Kiri." He sounded accusing.

"I am not Kiri and yet she is here." It was all very curious. Once-Kiri used Kiri's body, knew what Kiri knew, yet Kiri was only a tiny part of her. Her brow wrinkled. *A mystery*.

"I want Kiri back," he said, with fine flashing eyes and manful shoulders. His fists clenched. "I love her and she loves me. Give her back."

She could not help him. She looked at him with true regret. "The Kiri is lost to you forever." Her head lifted as if to sniff the air. Already something drew Once-Kiri away from this place. She was not meant for this simple village. "I cannot stay. Where I go, you cannot follow."

With a fierce defiance he grabbed her with both hands and kissed her hard on the mouth, thrusting his tongue inside. She did not respond, passive, unmoved. His body sagged and he released her. "Kiri is gone."

She did not dispute him this time. He could not understand. Kiri was here but not here.

He was *Sad*. Her teeth worried her lower lip. Her heart twinged in sympathy, but what he wanted she could not give. With a sudden pull, she released the cord around her wrist, setting the shells to rattling. She thrust it into his hand. "Take this. For your next woman." He closed his fist around it.

He left her then, on laggard feet, to return to the village and the fertility rites going on there. More than just lambs would breed that day.

She looked over her shoulder. Something called to her, somewhere deep in the forest. Once-Kiri followed, stepping out of the stone circle, into the cool shade of an ancient tree. Such comfort to leave the limitless power of the stones, the intense rays of the hot sun beating into her pale skin. She stopped short, suddenly turning back. She stretched out a hand as if to call the youth back, forming his name on her lips. *Luko*.

She did not speak it. Her hand dropped to her side.

Once-Kiri turned her face away from the village. It was no longer hers. Her destiny lay elsewhere. She did not know the force that led her onward, following it only by instinct.

It led her into the trees, into *Away*.

Chapter 3

"Greetings, star-sister."

Once-Kiri looked up from where she crouched, hands cupped to drink from the stream. She didn't know how far she had walked since she left the village. She had walked for many days and nights under the trees, stopping now and then only for water and sometimes to eat tender, young fern fronds, following, always following, the thread of power pulsing in the earth. She didn't know where she walked, only that something drew her ever onward. Something she could not name.

Without fear, Once-Kiri tilted her head and scrutinized the one who spoke. The Other stood smiling across the stream, wearing a white cloth not unlike her own, but of a thinner weave. She held out an open hand in invitation to Once-Kiri. The hair of the Other was dark and her skin golden-brown like the Kiri's Father's, but unlike his, her eyes were also dark. She looked *Older*, perhaps three or four summers. Though she spoke the same tongue as the Kiri, her voice was strangely accented, as though her words tasted different. Nevertheless, Once-Kiri understood the meaning. She rose to her feet in a graceful motion. "Star-sister? Why do you call me that?"

"We are of star-light, you and I."

"You are like me?"

The Other nodded. "Yes. Created of starlight and mortal flesh just as you were."

"During the fertility rite, like me?" Once-Kiri asked.

The Other smiled. "No, we come from different ways. Those who were once my people prayed for rain when no rain fell for many months."

"Did it rain, then?"

The Other shook her head. Once-Kiri recognized *Sad* in it. "The land became a great desert. Many died. Those that did not die went away, but I was not told of this for many years."

Once-Kiri's brow creased. "What is 'desert'?" She searched the Kiri's mind, but her tongue had no such word.

"A land with no water, so dry that nothing grows there."

How could such a thing be? Once-Kiri gazed at the Other in wonder. The Kiri's people lived near two rivers and did not lack for rain. She could not picture a place with no rain. "You never went back?"

"I no longer belonged there." Once-Kiri understood this. She no longer belonged at the Kiri's village either.

"You serve the Goddess?" she asked. The Kiri had expected this, though not so far away.

The Other regarded her kindly. "Is that how you were born, sister?"

Once-Kiri nodded. "This one, the Kiri," she gestured down the body with one hand, "was given to serve the Goddess."

The Other looked down at her hands a long moment. "There is no Goddess, not as her people understand it."

A spark flamed — *Anger* — deep within Once-Kiri's chest. Her chin jutted forward. *Then Kiri sacrificed herself for nothing.* "But what they did..." *The great ceremony, all the gifts to the Goddess, useless?*

"They touched a power they cannot understand," said the Other wisely, "and you were made."

The villagers had taken other girls to the circle of stones. *What had become of the others given to serve the Goddess?* "There are others like us?"

"Yes."

"Many others?" Kiri's people had given many girls to the Goddess and if there were other peoples, other lands, other gods....

"Not so many," said the Other, reading her mind. "Mortal-kind do not often touch the power. When they do, another star-sister is born. As you were."

"Did the Others send you to find me?" The Other knew so many answers.

"Yes, to bring you to the Gathering Place. We have been waiting for you since the moment you were born. Come." The Other beckoned.

A sensation of warmth and friendship bloomed within her. This was what she had sought. *Belonging*. She too must have felt them. They drew her to them. The muscles in her shoulders eased. Making her decision, Once-Kiri walked through the stream to the other side, the shallow water cold against her bare feet. She grinned at the Other. "I will come with you."

They walked in silence deeper into the trees.

* * *

The trees thinned. Once-Kiri followed the Other into the glade. There were several other girls here under the shade, all busy with tasks: one carried a basket with tender, pale green plant leaves in it, another tended a clay pot over a fire, a third wove a strip of patterned cloth on a small loom. All of them were different, some tall, some short, some pale of hair and others dark, skins ranging from pale to brown, yet they were all also like her. The power beat in them, just as it beat in her. It drew her to them. *Star-sisters*.

All of them stopped work at once when Once-Kiri arrived, coming to welcome her, looking her over with as much curiosity as she did them. "You found her, Pala?" one asked the Other without need, since Once-Kiri stood there among them.

"I did, Suri," the Other called Pala answered. The one named Suri was even darker of hair than Pala with a flatter face and dark, beautiful eyes.

Suri stroked Once-Kiri's long hair, seeming fascinated by the pale color, so different from her own. She laid thick tendrils of each side by side, the fair and the black, smoothing them both over her hand. "So pretty."

Once-Kiri counted the Others around her: about twice the fingers on both hands. Not so many as she had thought. She searched their excited faces, but knew no one. She chewed on her lower lip. None of the girls given to the Goddess by the Kiri's village dwelled here.

"Are these all of you?" Once-Kiri asked. "There are no more?"

Before Pala could answer, a new star-sister arrived, flanked by two others, one tall and fair, the other browner and shorter by the width of two fingers. The new one was taller than all the Others, dignified head held regally high, her hair flaming like the dawn sun and plaited with sweet-scented lavender buds, her eyes greener than the forest leaves under thick, heavy brows. She too wore a white cloth, though hers sparkled like the sun through rain-drops. She looked *Older* — not old, just no longer young. The star-sisters all looked to her and bowed their heads in respect.

Once-Kiri's breath caught. Was she the Goddess? No, Pala had said the Goddess of Kiri's people did not exist. This must be the ruler here. Once-Kiri copied the Others, bowing her head. It seemed *Right*.

"The First One," Pala whispered.

"This is our new sister?" the First One asked. Hooking a finger beneath the chin, she lifted Once-Kiri's face, turning it from side to side. "This one is very young," she clucked. "Too young. Do mortals sacrifice their babies now? How old are you?"

Once-Kiri jerked her chin free of the unwelcome grip. *I am no slave girl offered for trade*. "Two handfuls

plus three. I was proud they chose me to serve my people.”

The First One frowned, her eyes narrowing. “They are no longer your people.” Her hard voice echoed through the glade and bounced off the trees. After a moment, more gently, she softened and added, “You are one of us, now.” She ran assessing eyes over Once-Kiri and the girl dropped her defiant gaze. This one might not be the Goddess the Kiri came to serve, but a deep-buried instinct suggested she pretend *Obey*. “What did they call you, when you were one of them?”

“I was once Kiri.”

The full lips pursed. “That name is no longer yours. You are no longer of mortal-kind. Now that you are one of us, I shall call you ...” First One put a finger to her lips and gazed up into the trees. Looking back at Once-Kiri, she finished, “I shall call you Nya.”

An ugly name and one not hers. Once-Kiri jerked her chin up. “I prefer Kiri.”

First One looked down her long nose, lips compressed tight. “It is not for you to choose. Your former life has ended,” she said in an edged voice. “You owe your obedience to me now.” She waved a dismissive hand. “If I say you are Nya, then you are Nya.” Not even Once-Kiri could mistake the command. First One’s bright green gaze scanned the Others. “Pala, you brought her to us. Teach her what she must know.”

* * *

“Is it forbidden to return to the village I came from?” A tiny piece of Once-Kiri begged to see it again. Had *Amma*’s belly filled with a new child? How many lambs would *Atta*’s sheep bear next spring? Would Luko find another girl to share his furs?

Pala paused on the footpath through the verdant forest where she walked with Once-Kiri. “Not exactly forbidden, but you no longer belong there. We leave our old selves behind when we are born as stars. You are not one of them anymore.” She sat on a moss-covered fallen log.

Once-Kiri had her doubts. A tiny part of the Kiri still flickered deep within her core.

“Do you even recall the way back?” Pala asked, patting the log beside her in invitation.

Once-Kiri joined Pala on the log, cool and moist beneath her, and considered the question. “No,” she admitted. She had wandered many days in the forest, blundering about like a blind animal, unknown even to herself. She could not guess how much time had passed since she had left the village. A month? A year? Much more?

Pala nodded, satisfied. “As it should be. You belong with us. In time, you will understand.” She sat with chin held high the same as old Sky-Watcher used to. Her teachings must be important. “There is much you must learn. The most crucial thing to know is this,” Pala shook a warning finger at her. “You must never, ever go out in the sun-light, Nya.”

Ignoring the despised name, Once-Kiri stretched her hand into the dappled light filtering through the leaves of the trees. It was nice, warm. “Why not?”

Pala pulled Kiri’s hand back into the shade, mouth pressed tight. “It is very dangerous. We are stars, you and I, born of star-light merging with the power pulsing under the earth. The sun destroys stars in the day and so the sun-light will destroy you.”

Once-Kiri shivered, remembering the power of the sun in the stone circle when she was born. Its intensity had been deeply uncomfortable, driving her into the trees before she had even learned to avoid it. “You have seen this?”

Pala shook her head.

“Then how do you know it is so?”

Pala chuckled. “You have many questions, little one. I did not have to see it. In the long-ago time, long before I was born, there was one who disobeyed the First One and went out into the sun-light. She was burned alive. She shrieked in great agony as she died. You would not wish such a death.”

Once-Kiri shuddered. She did not remember agony from the before-time, but it sounded unpleasant.

With a reassuring pat on Once-Kiri’s hands, Pala continued. “It is safe here, under the trees, or at dawn

or dusk when the light is weaker, or if the day is overcast, and of course, at night, but never walk in the full of the sun or you will surely die."

"I will not," Once-Kiri promised. "I would not want to die."

Pala gave her an approving nod. "I knew you would obey if you understood the reason." Pala stood and began walking again. Once-Kiri hopped off the log and hurried after her.

She fell into step beside Pala. "Then why did I not die when I was born? I stood in the full-sun then."

Pala gave a small huff of annoyance. "Did you seek the trees quickly?"

"I did."

Nodding in approval, Pala said, "That is what saved you. When we are born, there is a brief time when we are stronger than the sun. This great energy burns away the imperfections of our mortal lives, but it does not protect us for long. First One teaches us that those who linger in the sun-light will die if they do not seek the shade. We are not mortal-kind. We are Immortal."

Once-Kiri wrinkled her brow. "We live forever?"

"So many questions." Pala fidgeted with the garment she wore, untying and retying its sash around the waist. She called it a *drappos*. "Yes, we live forever."

Once-Kiri screwed up her face, seeking answers in the tree-tops. "Then how can we die in the sunlight?" she objected.

Pala threw her hands up in surrender. "We do not age as mortals do, that is true. We do not suffer from diseases, Nya."

A growling noise emerged from her belly. Eating young ferns had not appeased it long.

"You are hungry?" Pala asked.

Once-Kiri nodded. No one had yet offered her food, though they must eat. There had been a pot of stew cooking where her new sisters lived — Pala called it the Gathering Place. The delicious aroma of simmering meat and vegetables emanating from the pot there led her to hope that they would feed her soon. Given the chance, she could eat the entire pot by herself.

Reaching up a hand, Pala touched a blossom on a low-hanging tree branch. In seconds, the petals fell off and the pistil turned to a tiny green fruit which grew full-size in Pala's hand and ripened before Once-Kiri's eyes. With a grin, Pala plucked the purple plum and handed it to Once-Kiri with a grand flourish. "Here. Eat."

Once-Kiri took it with two fingers as though it might bite her. If there were a Goddess of Fertility — though Pala had assured her there was not — surely Pala would have been that goddess.

Squinting her eyes, Once-Kiri took a skittish nibble, testing the tartness with her tongue. It seemed safe. She took a bigger bite, the juice running down her chin. Never before had she eaten fruit so delicious and sweet. She wiped away the sticky wetness with the heel of her other hand, giving Pala a look of amazement. "How can you do this thing?"

Pala smiled at her, a little superior. "This is my power. I can make anything grow and ripen. This is how I serve, by making food ripen for my sisters to eat. Each of us has one or two powers, except First One, who has many." Before Once-Kiri could ask which powers, Pala rushed on. "For example, Dara can breathe underwater like a fish. Tegan can track anything, even in the dark of night. Frey can make the rain fall."

"Then we do need food," Once-Kiri hinted, licking her lips in anticipation. How soon would they eat? She swore she could smell the cooking stew even this far away.

Pala gave her a benign look. "Part of us does, the part of us that was once mortal-kind, but we also need the light of the stars to give us strength. You will learn about that at the next dark-moon."

Once-Kiri opened her mouth for another question, but Pala stopped her with an upraised finger. "You distract me. As I said, we do not sicken or age, but we can be killed."

Scratching her chin, Once-Kiri asked, "How? Do you often fight amongst you?" Her shoulders hunched. She was younger and smaller than the Others.

"No, of course not," Pala hastened to say. "We never harm each other. However, some have died since the Beginning of All Things. One, Reydis, was killed last year when she fell from a cliff." Pala's face darkened. She blinked away tears. "She was my friend."

Once-Kiri's face crumpled in sympathy. She too had lost someone to death — *Amma's* Old-Mother — in the time they wanted her to forget. She wormed her hand into Pala's. "I will be your friend," she said, fierce.

Pala gently clasped Once-Kiri's hand. "Then we are sisters and friends." Once-Kiri squeezed back and let go. Pala kissed her on both cheeks and gave her a brilliant smile.

Once-Kiri took another big juicy bite of the plum. "So I must stay out of the sun-light. What else must I know?"

Returning to her role as teacher, Pala said, "Always show respect and obedience to the First One. She is our ruler and our protector."

"Why?"

"Because she was born the first of us. Once, a very long time ago, a great star in the heavens exploded into many pieces which flew in all directions. A few of these pieces fell to Earth. One encountered a human woman and joined with her. This unhappy woman was a slave and had a very bad life. Her master abused her and beat her and sold her body to other men."

Once-Kiri frowned. Never once had the Kiri been abused or beaten. *Amma* and *Atta* had sometimes scolded the willful child Kiri had once been, but always that girl had known they loved her. The whole village had known she was special.

Pala and she had reached a small, clear pool with a spring bubbling in its center. "The man was evil," Once-Kiri remarked, eating the last of the plum and dropping the pit near her feet. Crouching she washed the sticky juice from her hands. Both girls sat on the edge of the pool to play with their bare feet in the cool water.

"Yes." Pala brushed a stray tendril of hair out of her face. "Every year she would bear a child, but he would tear the child from her breast. She would never see it again."

Once-Kiri wrinkled her nose. *How cruel*. How First One's empty arms must long for her lost little ones! Once-Kiri's heart softened. She forgave the First One her over-great pride and rude manner.

"One day, her master's people bound her down to a stone altar atop a high hill. Their priest plunged a *knyf* into her heart and presented her life-blood to their false god. An offering to win a war against a neighboring people."

"She died." Soberly Once-Kiri pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them.

Pala shook her head. "She *would* have died, had not the star just then joined with her. It filled her with its life and she rose again."

Just as a star had joined with the Kiri when she had died, becoming Once-Kiri. She understood.

"The bad man's people feared they had displeased their god," Pala added, warming to her tale. "They had never seen a star fall to Earth before, you see."

Once-Kiri tilted her head to one side. "What became of them?"

Shrugging, Pala said, "We do not know. First One never speaks of it. From what she does not say, I believe they are all dead." She touched Once-Kiri on the arm. "Nya, it is important for you to teach this tale to the sister who comes after you, but you must never ask First One about it, for she finds it painful to remember."

"I will not," Once-Kiri promised, earnest.

Pala smiled and squeezed her shoulder. "One day, when we have finished your lessons, I will tell you other stories about First One. There are many. How she saved Noma from a fearsome dragon. How she rescued Tegan from drowning. How she created this pool from dry land."

Once-Kiri hid her face against her knees. The tales of First One all seemed to portray her as a heroine,

worthy to lead the Others. "What was her name? Before she became First?"

Pala heaved a much-tried sigh and muttered "More questions!" under her breath. When she spoke aloud, though, her voice was patient. "She had none. Her master called her Woman or sometimes Slave. After she joined with the star, she named herself Atalaya. You must never use this name, however. It would not show respect."

Once-Kiri considered that, lips mutinously pursed. "I will show respect, but I do not like this name Nya that she has given me. I like Kiri best."

Pala winced, leaning forward to press Once-Kiri's knee. "You *must* use it, Nya. The First One has decreed it. You do not want her to punish you for defying her. It is a fearful thing." She shuddered in apparent memory, but refused to be drawn out further. "Forget your before-life as mortal-kind. Never speak of it again. To use the name Kiri will make it impossible for you to forget."

Once-Kiri considered the look on Pala's face. She wanted to ask if First One had ever punished Pala, but intuition warned her not to. "I will not defy her." Pala's tense expression eased and she sat back. Once-Kiri would follow her advice — for a while, at least.

"Always stay away from mortal-kind," Pala insisted.

"Why? Because it would be harder for forget?"

"There is more in it." Pala bit her lip. "They fear us. They would harm us if they could."

"Why?"

Pala huffed with impatience. "Because we have powers. We can do things they cannot."

"Why?"

Giving her eyes a sarcastic roll, Pala asked, "Were you this much trouble in your before-life?"

Once-Kiri gave her a helpless grin but did not speak, shrugging thin shoulders. *Amma* had never complained, had taken pride in a younger Kiri's curious mind. *Better not to mention Amma again to Pala.*

"I have the power to make food grow," said Pala. "What can you do?"

Once-Kiri looked down at her fingertips. She tentatively touched the flower bud of a nearby bush as Pala had, but nothing happened. They were just fingers, powerless. She let her hand drop. "I do not know." Taking up the plum pit, she tossed it into the pool. It landed with an satisfying plop, waves rippling outward. "Maybe I will have none."

Pala patted her other hand where it rested beside the pool. "Fear not, you are still very young. I'm sure you will discover it. In time."

They stood up and walked on in companionable silence.

"Pala?"

A weary sigh. "Yes? More questions?"

A deep, demanding growl emanated from Once-Kiri's belly.

"I'm still hungry."

Chapter 4

"Pala, will my power ever manifest?"

Pala, tending her plum trees beside the stream, chuckled at Once-Kiri, newly renamed Nya. She preferred the name of the human girl she had once been. At least the name "Kiri" had music to it and echoes of love. "Nya" was merely horrid and made her cringe inside every time they called her by it — and they called her by it with alarming frequency — but no matter she disliked the name the First One had given her, she must accept it. To herself, though, she would always be Kiri. *Inside*.

She sat hunch-shouldered on the bank, keeping Pala company, her arms wrapped around her knees, now and then tossing pebbles into the water. "It has only been a small number of days since you came to us. Be patient, Nya. It will come to you when it comes."

She had never been known for her patience. Scowling, Kiri selected another pebble, a pretty pink-and-black speckled one, and tossed it in, watching the tiny waves ripple out in ever-widening rings. "But I have been here almost a month already."

"Mine did not come until after my first dark-moon ceremony," Pala assured her.

"Nor did mine." Suri joined them, her arms full of white, sparkly cloth. "Meanwhile you can help us in other ways. The First One wishes you to wash her *drappos* in the stream." She dumped the bundle unceremoniously into Kiri's lap.

Hey! Why must she do menial chores? Kiri shot a darkling look at Suri's back as she walked away. Because Kiri was youngest and had no powers yet? Her mouth compressed into something very near a pout. She was no captive, no slave.

Her stubborn chin lifted. It was much different when she helped *Amma* with washing. Then all the women shared the toil for the good of the village, but First One seemed to take Kiri's service as her due. If First One had been the honored Goddess, Kiri would have served her willingly, even cheerfully, but First One was no goddess.

Atalaya was lazy. She idled all day while the Others labored. She demanded abject obedience to her will in all things, required Kiri forget those she loved from her before-life and even took away Kiri's own name. The Others might live forever, but this "forever" seemed more like captivity than a privilege.

Frowning, Kiri rose and held the cloth up in the air, stretching it out as if it held a disease. The pretty fabric was dotted here and there with bits of food and wine-stains. Her nose wrinkled at the unpleasant reek of body odor. A real goddess wouldn't stink. "Will she not be cold?"

Suri and Pala chuckled at her. "We are never cold," said Suri, indulgent. "We are stars. We keep ourselves warm. Besides, the First One has another draping cloth to wear while you are washing this."

Kiri hadn't discovered how to keep herself warm yet. At night she still wrapped herself in the white lamb's wool cloth from her old village, huddling under it like a blanket to retain her body heat. Tucking up her own *drappos* so it wouldn't get wet, she waded into the chill stream up to her knees though it made her teeth chatter, keeping in the dappled shade, and dunked the cloth into the clear water while Suri went to help Pala with the trees.

"Is this all the use I am?" Kiri grumbled. "Washing clothes?" She had come here seeking a greater purpose. With no powers, she might as well have stayed at her old home.

Pala smiled a little at the discontented tone. "Never fear. Yours is the most important task of all: to find

the next star-sister born and bring her to us. Then you will teach her all she needs to know, as I am teaching it to you."

Cheered, Kiri applied herself to her washing task with more vigor.

"Careful, Nya!" Suri said. "Don't tear it. It would not please the First One."

"I won't." Kiri handled the sparkly cloth more gently. She would like a pretty *drappos* like this, but all the Others save First One wore plain ones like her own. Kiri bit her lip. "Pala, when will the next sister be born? How will I know?"

Pala cut off the tip of a protruding branch with a sharp-edged stone. "I know not when. It all depends on when the mortals touch the power that creates us. It has been some twenty summers since I was born."

"More like thirty," said Suri, over her shoulder.

"So many?" asked Pala. She shrugged. "The time goes by so quickly sometimes, I forget." She sighed. "But I was the last one born before you."

"You forget: there was another after you," Suri pointed out.

Pala gazed up into the tree, thinking. "Yes, you're right. We felt her born, but she never reached us."

Kiri lifted the wet cloth and dunked it back into the stream, rubbing at the stains. A large purple blotch resisted her efforts. "Why not?"

Pala shrugged again. "We never knew. She just ... ceased. You know how it is when you are new-born, Nya. You are confused, alien, trying to understand the mind and body of the mortal where you reside."

A *dark time*. Grimacing, Kiri tilted her head to look high up in the trees where a small black and red bird seeking a mate called out a chip-chip-chip-trill. She barely remembered her early days as Once-Kiri, floundering her way through the forest on instinct alone. Odd, though, the days before her birth remained clear as water. The days they insisted she forget. On cold nights, she sometimes warmed herself remembering them: *Amma's* skilled fingers deftly working, *Atta* patiently teaching her brothers to hunt, even Old Sky-Watcher's gap-toothed smile. She sighed softly to herself. Did the villagers of The Place Where Two Rivers Meet ever still think of her?

"Perhaps the new sister wandered into the bright sunlight," Suri said, unaware of Kiri's thoughts. "She would not yet have known it would kill her."

"Or perhaps there was no shade where she lived," said Pala, stretching on tiptoe, straining for a half-broken branch just beyond her reach. She settled back on her heels with a disgruntled noise. "There are lands far away with no trees. She might have been born in one of them."

Kiri digested that. No trees? How odd. Just because she herself was born during a ceremony deep in a forest didn't mean the world was covered in trees. She'd never imagined such a thing. With one last rinse, she lifted the First One's dripping garment out of the water.

"Let me help you." Suri took the other end of the cloth and twisted it as Kiri twisted in the other direction, wringing the wetness out. When no more water drenched their feet, Suri pointed at a big bush. "You can drape it over that. The sunshine will reach it soon and will help it dry. Just don't collect it until it's in shadow again."

"I know, I know," said Kiri with a faint edge, doing as Suri suggested. "Pala taught me well. I know to stay out of the sunlight." She didn't want to burn to ashes and die.

"Don't let the *drappos* touch the ground and be soiled."

Kiri rolled her eyes where Suri couldn't see her and heaved a huge sigh. "I won't." Taking care to stay in the shadows, she started arranging the cloth over the thick, strong bush.

"Suri?" called Pala.

Suri rejoined her at the trees. "What is it?"

Pala pointed at the broken branch just out of reach and handed her the stone knife. "The branch. It's too high for me. Can you grasp it and take off the broken piece?"

"Of course."

Kiri lifted curious eyebrows. How could Suri reach it if Pala couldn't? Suri was half a head shorter than Pala. Kiri stopped her task to watch. To her surprise, Suri slowly levitated herself off the ground about three or four foot-lengths. A thrill shook Kiri. She took a deep breath, mouth agape. Oh, this was Suri's power, to fly. How marvelous.

If only she could fly, too. Kiri closed her eyes and imagined it. Her feet remained obstinately Earth-bound. *Not as easy as it looks*. Gathering herself and holding her breath, she tried to jump in the air next, but landed again a moment later.

Maybe she needed a head start. Climbing up on a fat, fallen log, she threw her body into it, falling ignominiously on her belly in some ferns. She grimaced. Obviously this was not her power either. Were Suri and Pala laughing at her? She dared to peek. They stood with backs to her. Heaving a giant sigh, part relief and part disappointment, Kiri brushed the dirt and green bits from her *drappos*.

With a loud shriek and a burst of leaves and feathers, a sharp-taloned bird suddenly flew out of the tree. Suri screamed, tumbling back to the earth in an untidy heap. Kiri forgot First One's draping cloth and ran to a wailing Suri. Pala reached her first, forcing Suri's hand away from her face. A nasty cut ran jagged across her cheek from temple to chin. Blood gushed profusely from the torn flesh, dripping down her arm and soaking the front of her *drappos*.

"There was ... a nest —" Suri gasped, rocking back and forth, tears of pain streaming down her cheeks.

"Stay with her, Nya," Pala ordered, yanking at the broad sash that tied her *drappos* at the waist. "I'll fetch some water." She ran several feet to the stream.

Water would do no good. They must stop the bleeding first. Kiri knew that much. The wound was deep. It would scar Suri's pretty face forever. Kiri didn't know what made her do it, but she crouched and reached out a tentative finger to touch it. A strange sensation, bright and hot, shot from her fingertip. Like the lightning of a summer storm, but on a much smaller scale. Suri squealed as if hurt. Recoiling, she protected the gash again, rocking more furiously than before. Kiri scuttled back.

Pala ran back with the sopping wet sash wadded up in one hand. "What did you do?" she demanded of Kiri.

"I'm so sorry," babbled Kiri. "I didn't think. I didn't mean to hurt her. I just —"

Pala gently compelled Suri to uncover the wound and gasped. Suri's cheek was unmarred. With care, Pala wiped away the blood with the wet sash, but the torn flesh had sealed itself.

"How bad is it?" Suri asked, but Pala only shook her head.

Pala regarded Kiri in wonder. "Nya found her power," she breathed at last.

"What?" Suri's fingers began to probe her cheek. "The gash —"

"Is healed. Nya healed you."

"I don't believe ... the pain ... it is gone." Suri struggled to her feet, bending over the stream to see her reflection. She gazed in silent awe for several long moments. "How did you do that?" Dipping cupped hands into the water, she rinsed the blood from her face and arm.

"I don't know." Kiri lifted helpless hands. "It just ... happened."

Pala grabbed her by the wrist. "Come. We must tell the First One."

Kiri looked back over her shoulder at First One's *drappos* where she had dropped it, one end trailing on the ground. "But —" she started to protest, but Pala dragged her at a run back to the Gathering Place, Suri hard on their heels. *What did I do?*

The Others stopped in their places as the three girls entered the glade.

"What is it? Do strangers come?" asked someone fearfully. Kiri stumbled to a halt, gasping for breath. The Others abandoned their work to gather around them.

"Where is the First One?" Pala shouted amid the babble of excited voices.

"She is not here," said one of the older sisters. "She has gone walking in the forest. What is the matter?"

Pala didn't answer. Instead she tugged Kiri over to a woman who bent over a clay pot of fish stew

cooking in a smoldering fire. "Neryn!"

The strong, brown-haired woman straightened and wiped the hair out of her face with the back of her hand. She looked uncertainly from Pala to Suri to Kiri and back in confusion. "Pala?"

"Show Nya the scar on your leg."

Neryn limped back a step, then in a slow, reluctant motion, she lifted the hem of her *drappos* up to show her leg to Kiri. An old burn scar marred the calf, searing a groove deep in the muscles and puckering the skin in tight bands. Such a bad burn, it must have once hurt very much. Kiri felt an echo of the pain of it now in sympathy.

Pala gave her a little push forward. "Heal Neryn."

Kiri fluttered. "I don't know if I can."

"Try."

Kiri gulped. She hadn't learned how to control the power yet. What if she failed? Worse, what if she hurt more than she healed? She didn't know how she'd healed Suri, just that she had. Kneeling, she covered Neryn's scar with both hands. Kiri focused her mind, held her breath and thought "Heal." Warmth filled her palms and light grew around the place where their skin touched. As the Others gasped, Neryn grunted, a strange sound between pain and surprise. Kiri gently smoothed out Neryn's puckered flesh with her hands. The damaged muscle beneath filled out as they watched. Neryn inhaled sharply, stepping away from Kiri, flexing her leg and pointing her toes as if she couldn't believe what had just happened.

Kiri stumbled to her feet, dizzy and lightheaded, though it passed almost at once. Happy tears pouring down, Neryn seized her and kissed her on both cheeks. "How?"

"Our Nya has the power of healing," Pala proudly announced to the vocal delight of the Others. Kiri's cheeks burned and she hung her head, shy at all the attention, but a tiny smile curved her lips, nevertheless. She *belonged* now. She had found her power!

"What else can she heal?"

"What about Lilis?"

Nya looked at the Others in confusion. She didn't know all of them by name yet.

Pala pointed to a girl who sat under a tree, playing with sticks like a toddler. Surrounded by a tangle of brown hair, a distorted face looked innocently up at them, a long pink tongue hanging out of one side of her mouth. Kiri guessed this one looked about Pala's age, but she didn't seem quite — right — inside.

"She has the mind of a child," Neryn said as if reading Kiri's thoughts. That wasn't her power, was it? Kiri didn't have time to consider it, not with everyone giving her expectant looks. "Can you heal her?"

Kiri licked nervous lips. "I will try." The girl looked up at Kiri as she came near and gave her a sunny smile before returning to her game. Kneeling behind Lilis, she thought about healing until her palms glowed, then she laid them on Lilis's head. The girl sat there, unmoved. Kiri gave a little push with her mind. Still nothing. She shook her head and took her hands away. With an incoherent squawk, Lilis got to her feet. She handed Kiri two of the twigs as a gift and shambled away from them into the woods. Kiri shrugged and stood, scuffing a foot on the earth. "I guess I can't heal everything."

Pala gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "You must practice more and try again. After all, you only just discovered it — and before your first dark-moon ceremony, too." Neryn gave Kiri a sharp look at that, but said nothing. *Jealous?*

"Heal me now," said another sister, offering a small rash on her arm. The work of a moment, a simple touch and the rash faded before their eyes. The Others babbled in wonder, jostling forward.

"Me next."

"No, me."

Kiri almost began to wish she had never found her power.

"What is all this? Idling? There is much work to do." The too-ebullient crowd around Kiri sobered and parted to let the First One into the center, bowing respectful heads as she passed. First One stood flanked,

as she always was, by two of the older sisters, the one darker, olive-skinned and lean with a woven band tied around her upper arm, the other fairer and stronger, her hair tied away from her face. Both carried the weapons of a man.

"Look what our new sister can do. Nya has discovered the healing power," Suri bubbled, floating a foot off the ground in her excitement.

First One's thick eyebrows soared. "So quickly." Though her face appeared pleased, her voice sounded less so to Kiri. "And the dark-moon ceremony is still two days away." She bent like a benevolent goddess and kissed Kiri on the forehead. "How clever you are. Come, walk with me."

Head high, Kiri obeyed, strutting beside the First One and following her into the forest away from the Others. She had never singled Kiri out this way before. Her two protectors trailed discreetly behind.

"How did you find this power?" First One asked kindly.

"Suri hurt herself. I touched the cut and it just — healed. Then Pala had me heal Neryn's scarred leg." Kiri looked down, twisting her fingers together. "But I couldn't heal Lilis's mind. It was too hard for me."

"That is a shame." First One spoke as if disappointed, yet something in her face told Kiri she wasn't, much. Rather than ask why not, Kiri planted her tongue in her cheek and kept her mouth closed.

First One stopped and sat on a small boulder, just large enough to serve as a seat. "Let us see how far your new power goes. Can you do more than heal? Make me younger."

Kiri shot her a dubious look. "How young? Like a young maiden?" First One looked the age of a woman who had borne all her children, perhaps, though Kiri expected she was much older, being Immortal. A hundred years? More? Her mind could not imagine someone so old.

"Not like a maiden. Like a woman who is a new mother. Can you?"

Hesitantly Kiri held her hands just above First One's face and pushed with her mind. She tried her best but nothing happened. No glow of power. Her head dropped in disappointment. "I cannot do it."

"A pity." First One stood and gave her shoulder a kindly pat. Kiri's head hung lower. "You can still be useful to us. It's unfortunate you are so limited, of course, but it was too much to hope for. Still, you can help my people in this way."

Kiri bit her lips. *Her* people? Kiri thought they were all sisters. They walked together in silence for some time. Kiri wanted to fidget but forced herself still. Had First One considered her unworthy until she had found her power?

"Pala tells me you have many questions." First One said, taking a seat on a convenient fallen tree. "Ask them."

A shiver of alarm slithered down her back as Kiri's mind blanked. Imperfectly hiding a smile, First One gestured for Kiri to sit at her feet and waited for her to speak. As the attendants took their places behind First One, Kiri sat cross-legged on the ground, not fully comfortable in this new role of worshipper. Pala had said First One was not the Goddess, not as the first Kiri knew her, yet First One now played the part of benevolent mother. Was Pala wrong — or not wrong, exactly, just that First One was not the Goddess Kiri's people had sacrificed her to serve? A different Goddess?

She refused to ask that question, particularly not with the two Others listening to every word.

"Why do you not speak?" First One asked when Kiri remained silent.

"I am not sure which question to ask first," Kiri said, playing for time and First One smiled. Start with something innocent, harmless, but what? She almost snapped her fingers when the idea came.

"How will I know when the next one like us is born? Pala said it is my duty to find her and bring her to us. How do I do that?"

First One pursed her lips. "We simply know. One day there is ... awareness ... in your mind that a new sister has been born. You feel her existence flicker like a tiny point of light in the darkness. Thus we know the mortals have again touched the power that creates us. It does not happen often."

"And how do I find her?"

First One made an airy wave. "By instinct, she is drawn to us, like a fish returning to spawn where it itself was born. Just as you feel her, she feels you, though in the beginning she does not understand it. As you move closer to her, you will feel her more strongly in your mind."

"But what if I make a mistake and go the wrong way?"

Smiling, the First One shook her head. "You could not. Not even if you wished. You are drawn to her as she is to you." She leaned down and gave Kiri a gentle pat on top her head. "Never fear. You will find her when the time comes."

Kiri absorbed that.

"What else would you know?" First One asked her.

"What was it like to be the first of us? You had no one to be drawn to."

Wrinkling her nose, First One looked up at the treetops before speaking. "Frightening. I was alone. Newly-born. How was it for you, when you were newly-born?"

"It was odd," said Kiri. "I had a physical body but it was unfamiliar to me and hard to control. I knew the people around me, yet they were strangers. They loved me, but I did not belong among them. A force I didn't understand tugged at me, taking me away."

First One gave her a superior smile. "And so it was with me. It was the same for all of us."

Kiri scratched her chin. "I was drawn to you and the Others, yet you had no Others. You were first. How did you know where to go with no one to summon you? What was it like to be Alone?"

The brilliant green eyes narrowed. "You do ask many questions." Her tone implied too many. Kiri flushed deep and hot. First One twined the fingers of one hand in her hair. For a long time Kiri waited in silence. "I suppose I only knew that I did not belong where I was. I wandered for many long days and nights until ..."

Her voice trailed off.

"Until?" Kiri prompted.

First One shook herself. "Until I stopped wandering." She settled herself more comfortably. "This place was warm with a cave to shelter in when the weather grew wet or cold, with plenty of clean water and food to gather nearby — and untouched. No men of mortal-kind had journeyed so far. For many years it was a pleasant time for me, but a lonely one, too."

"And then?"

"One day I knew I was no longer alone. I sensed the presence of Neryn, our next sister born." She gave a soft laugh. "Her presence touched my mind and I just knew. Just as we knew when you were born. You will understand, Nya, when you feel it for yourself."

She rose, a subtle indication that the audience had ended. First One shook out her garment in a stately manner. Kiri scrambled to her feet, lifting a hand to stop her. She hadn't finished yet.

First One ignored it, though her taller protector gave Kiri a glare. "Let us go. We must ready ourselves for the dark-moon ceremony in two days' time. It is a sacred occasion. A time of life and renewal, when we bare our bodies and absorb the light of the stars that gave us birth."

Kiri swallowed the rest of her questions. They could wait. Plenty of time to ask them. After all, she was Immortal now, too.

* * *

Tonight! At last, the moon had vanished from the night sky. For three nights, the stars would be at their brightest without the moon to steal their light. All the Others twittered like happy birds in their excitement as the sun finally began to dip below the horizon.

Kiri was most excited of all. This was her first. Tonight she would truly be one with the star-sisters. In the last pale rays of daylight, she eagerly threw off her *drappos* and joined the Others washing themselves in the pool, using a handful of sand from the bottom to scrub at a particularly dirty spot on her elbow. This was a sacred time and they must all be perfectly clean. Around her swirled the pungent scent from armfuls of fresh-picked herbs her sisters had thrown in the water.

Dunking her head underwater to rinse her hair, Kiri was reminded of the ritual when *Amma* had taken the human Kiri to wash herself and prepare her to serve the Goddess. It had turned out so very different from what they had expected.

Wading out of the water, Kiri gave her *drappos* a good shake before donning it again, glad she had washed it two days ago. What were they doing now, the people of her former village? She ached to know. *Amma* should be putting her brothers and sister to sleep, singing a simple song to bring them sweet dreams. *Atta* should be helping make sure the village was secure against danger before seeking his own bed. Had they thrived as she had promised or known only misfortune?

And Luko. *Does he still think of me?* She wanted to know. What was he doing now? Had he taken a woman to his furs yet? She stiffened, fingers clenched, seized by an impulse to tear the nameless woman's hair out.

The so-familiar voices sounded in her mind as if they stood beside her. Kiri dashed away a sudden tear, her throat unbearably tight, snatching a quick look over her shoulder to make sure none of the Others had noticed. She knew better than to ask about those she had left behind. Pala and the Others had told her time and again to forget she had ever existed as mortal-kind. She frowned. What was wrong with her? Why could she not give up her past as easily as they had?

Pala arrived late, casually dropping her garment on the bank before plunging into the pool, joining the Others laughing and playing as they washed in the cool, waist-deep water. Her skin was honey-colored all over but for a small, irregular brown mark on her breast. Kiri wondered about it, for had not Pala told her all their mortal imperfections were burned away at their birth? She shrugged. They must not consider it an imperfection.

"How are we to keep our feet clean?" Kiri asked her when she surfaced.

Pala had told her about this night's ceremony and what to expect but — she had added with mystery in her eyes — sometimes the unexpected happened.

"Fear not," said Pala, washing herself quickly. "Tonight the path to the sacred clearing has been strewn with reeds." She grinned at Kiri and Kiri grinned back, her spirits lifting. "You will see." Pala emerged from the water with the Others and put on her *drappos*.

Simple-minded Lilis splashed her hands in the water, laughing with the unrestrained glee of a child. Pala and the Others laughed with her, and Kiri found herself joining in. She shook off her melancholy, thinking of the ceremony to come. She trembled at the thrill down her spine. At last she would truly belong.

At length, Neryn fished Lilis from the pool and dressed her. Hand in hand, the two of them led the way to the clearing, the Others following two by two. Shivering, half from the night's chill and half from exhilaration, Kiri walked side by side with Pala at the very end of the file. She would never have dared visit the clearing in daylight, for it was so open to the sky, but by night it was the perfect place for them to assemble, near to the Gathering Place, far from the hunting paths of mortal-kind. Nothing but them and the stars.

"You are cold," Pala observed, rubbing the gooseflesh on Kiri's lower arm. Putting an arm around Kiri's shoulders, she enfolded her in her warmth, like a loving kiss. "Never fear, you will soon learn how to warm yourself."

At the clearing, the Others had started a bon-fire, which sent roaring heat in all directions. They threw more herbs into the crackling flames, sending up a spicy smoke into the air. Some of the women had brought instruments to play, bone flutes and drums. Pala sat on a hollow log and began to sing, adding the sound of her low-pitched voice to the Others' in a plaintive key. The First One stood upon a large, flat rock, arms uplifted, chanting a paeon of praise to the stars. Suri and Neryn joined the women dancing in a circle around her. Kiri hovered at the edge of the clearing, gnawing on her lower lip. She wanted to join in but didn't know what to do. Should she make music or sing?

Rhythm pulsed through the night. It called to her. It seemed only natural for Kiri to join in, drumming

with her hands upon her thighs. The magic entered her soul, rhyming with the beat of her heart, pure and powerful and true. So deep had she merged with the rhythm, Kiri found herself dancing before she realized it. Each girl danced however she wished, moving with the Others in an orbit around the First One like the Moon around the Earth.

Caught up in the music, Kiri threw off her *drappos*, suddenly unable to bear that anything come between her and the star-light. She held pleading arms up to the sky, though what she pleaded for she didn't quite understand. The power of the star-light entered her like a lightning bolt. Kiri gasped to her core at the strength of it, filling an empty place inside her she hadn't known had existed before. She breathed deep, lids narrowing to mere slits over her eyes. The power of the stars was almost painful in its intensity, sparking and crackling along her limbs. She wailed aloud with frenzied pleasure. Was it supposed to happen like that? Was it the same for the Others?

Kiri forced her eyes open. Yes, it was. Drenched in gold light, Pala moaned, her arms high, straining for more, mouth open like a hungry bird. Suri's back arched in ecstasy as her dance slowed, teeth gritted, breasts thrust forward. Even simple Lilis writhed and twisted on the ground, glowing brighter, ever brighter. Kiri looked down at her hands. She glowed, too, a light of pure blue-white, pure as the stars themselves.

She was star.

The potency of it slowly waned. She ran her hands into her hair as Kiri's human father had done the next day after drinking too much summer wine and pulled more than a few flaxen strands over her face as her breath slowed, puffing around her. Her heart slowed, too, and reason returned. For the first time since her arrival, she was warm of her own accord.

This was why no one had expected her power to manifest before now, when she was strong from the star-light. They should have told her so. It made so much sense now. If she jumped now, Kiri believed she could fly like Suri. She gathered herself to try.

One of the Others — was her name Dara? — shrieked in alarm.

The music jangled to a stop and the women still dancing tripped over each other in confusion. A dark-haired young man stood at the edge of the clearing, strongly muscled and dressed for hunting, bathed in the bright glow emitted from the bodies of the Others. Drawn by their music, so far from the human paths? He gaped at them wide-eyed, the spear he'd held dropping unheeded to the ground.

Luko? Had he sought her out? Hope unaccountably rising, Kiri strained to see. Another glance later, she sagged. No, he was not the boy she had known, though the two youths were of a similar build. This one was a little taller, a year older perhaps, and the downy beginnings of a beard had begun to darken his cheeks. Though his clothes were not unlike those worn by men of her former village, they were also different. Above the waist he wore a coarse woolen tunic, but on his legs he wore strange-looking coverings made of animal skins.

First One spun to face him, red hair flying around her at the movement and coming to a rest over one shoulder, curling around one generous breast. Her full lips curved, her eyes glittered. "Welcome," she purred. One hand beckoned the Others forward. "Sisters, bid him join us."

Kiri's brow wrinkled. The youth must be of mortal-kind. Should they not flee into the forest? They must stay away from humans. Or was this what Pala had meant by "unexpected"?

The youth surveyed the group of naked women and suddenly grinned at his good fortune. Suri and several others ran up to the youth and drew him into their midst. Clever hands divested him of his woolen tunic and leg coverings until he stood as naked as they, trembling with mingled fear and eagerness, the male part of him engorged and erect.

Now Kiri understood. *Mating*. In her old life, *Amma* and *Atta* had often done this. It had given them pleasure. She flushed, the light emanating from her tinting pink. Even after the village elders chose her to serve the Goddess, Kiri had once or twice guiltily tried to imagine it with Luko. So, Atalaya wished to mate with mortal-kind? Why?

First One reclined on the flat stone and held inviting arms out to the youth, spreading her thighs wide. He goggled a brief moment then scrambled on top of her, thrusting deep. First One wrapped her legs around his hips, holding him prisoner within her. Her head dropped back when he sought her mouth, so he found a spot against her throat and sucked on it as he fondled her breasts and worked his hips. He suddenly stiffened and shook, shouting aloud in a language Kiri didn't know, but close enough to hers she found the meaning. He seemed to be praising his gods.

She understood this, too. He had spilled his seed. First One must be trying to make a baby. Kiri scratched her ear. Would that even work? If it did, would the baby be of mortal-kind like its father or be stars like them? Or maybe half-star, half-mortal? How strange. She shrugged. She must ask Pala about it later.

First One's lips drew back baring her teeth, her face a mask, tight and strange. She leaned forward as if to bite him, but the youth collapsed, his seed spent. He rolled off of her, lying on his back on the stone, covering his eyes with one arm, his breath ragged. First One snarled like a hungry wolf and uttered a sharp, ugly word Kiri did not understand. First One reached clawed fingers toward the boy, but the sister called Tegan caught her by the arm and shook her head, falling to her knees in submission when First One looked about to back-hand her. Reason returned to the maddened eyes. First One gave Tegan a surly nod and vanished as if no woman had lain there. Kiri stared a long moment. Could she do that too?

Pala touched Kiri's shoulder and gestured with her head away from the clearing. Snatching up her *drappos*, Kiri ran into the forest with her sisters, leaving nothing behind in the clearing but the young man. Pala gave Kiri a mischievous wink, carrying her own clothes and the spear. "For First One," whispered Pala. Two steps behind her, Suri carried the boy's hunting knife. Kiri wrinkled her brow. Something to remember the youth by? Why, when he was mortal-kind? Atalaya would not be so sentimental. Last to go, Kiri slowed on the path and returned to the clearing, hiding behind a tree to watch him in secret.

His breathing slowed. The youth shoved himself up to sit on the rock. He searched around himself in the dark. "What happened?" he asked, his tongue still strange to Kiri's ears. He groped the top of the flat stone to no avail. "Where did they go?" No one remained to answer him. Kiri considered it but stayed silent. The night's chill closed in and Kiri donned her *drappos*, tying it closed with its sash. He must be cold, too, naked as he was.

The Others had taken his clothes, but someone had dropped the rough tunic outside the clearing, far enough away that he would not find it without daylight to see by. *Unkind*. Glad to see her body no longer glowed, she picked up the tunic and, using a long stick, set it down as near him as she dared.

He groped around in the dark and found the tunic, putting it on, but though he searched the glade for his leg-skins and weapons, he would never find them. He sniffled as he came close to her tree. He must be crying for his stolen spear and knife. Kiri's mouth tightened. The poor, lost youth would be so humiliated, forced to return to his village half-naked, without his weapons or food for them to eat, nothing but a tale too fantastic to believe. His people would laugh at him for the rest of his life, perhaps even give him a shame-filled nickname like Bare-Ass, so he could never forget his foolish mistake — assuming he even lived to return to his home without weapons for protection.

Kiri considered fetching the spear from Pala. She could give it back, at least. She nibbled on the tip of one finger. Pala had taken it as a gift for First One. Kiri doubted Atalaya would give it to her if she asked — and asking would take time. By the time she returned, the youth might be gone. She could steal the spear, but what if they caught her? She straightened her back-bone. She must try. Else he might die.

Back at the Gathering Place, her happy sisters lay in their sleeping places, many already asleep, others quietly chatting about the night's ceremony. Most had already gone dark, but a few still glowed in the night, winking out one by one. Pala beckoned to her, giving her a quizzical look when Kiri did not immediately join her. Pretending not to see her, Kiri scanned the glade. Shrugging, Pala curled up to sleep.

The leg-skins Kiri saw rolled up like a pillow under Lilis's head, but where were the weapons?

There they were. Someone stronger than Pala had embedded the spear deep in a tree next to the leafy

bower where First One slept. Now she thought about it, Kiri had seen three or four knives displayed there in the last few days. All signs of past “unexpected” visitors?

As Kiri stood there, wondering what to do, Neryn winked out, the last of the Others to do so, and fell asleep. To the sounds of deep breathing, Kiri tiptoed carefully over to the spear and tried to pull it out of the tree. Her muscles strained and she gritted her teeth, even braced her foot against the trunk, but she hadn’t enough strength to pull it free. A noise made her freeze. Had anyone heard her? Nobody stirred. She sighed in relief. Just First One snoring. Kiri found the knife more loosely embedded, so she took it instead. At least he would have something to defend himself. Dared she take the leggings, too?

Lilis made it easy for Kiri to steal them, rolling over in her sleep, pillowing her head on her arms instead. In a twinkling, Kiri snatched the leggings up and fled the glade, following the path of reeds back to the sacred clearing.

As she’d feared, it was empty, but the crash of stumbling through the underbrush told her the youth hadn’t gone far. “Wait!” she called, though the night twisted the sound, as if she were a unearthly being or sang from deep within a hole. The movement stopped. He must have heard her.

She found him easily from the sudden smell of fear. He stood still with arms outstretched, the forearms scratched and bloodied from using them as his eyes in the pitch-dark. With a quick motion, she wrapped his knife in the leggings. “Take this.” She threw them at his feet, too shy to reveal herself to him. The bundle unrolled as it landed, slapping him lightly on the shins.

He must have understood for he bent and fumbled at his feet, finding them both. She smiled to herself. He could return to his village now without losing all his pride.

Pleased with herself, Kiri retraced her steps, stopping at the clearing only to absorb enough star-light to generate a pale glow sufficient to see by. She hastened down the path back to the Others, creeping on silent feet to her sleeping place.

“Where did you go?” whispered Pala, sitting up. “Why did you take those human things?”

Kiri gasped. Her heart-beat sped up to triple its normal rate. *Caught*. Had anyone else noticed? She clutched her blanket to her chest. What could she possibly say?

“They belonged to the boy,” she confessed finally. “Without his weapons, he could die.”

Pala shrugged. “So? He is mortal-kind. They all die, sooner or later.” She gave a huge yawn, stretching her arms over her head. “Well, the thing is done now.” She leaned close. “I will say nothing to First One. If anyone asks, Nya, say you don’t know.”

Kiri blinked. *Lie to First One?* It went against everything Pala had taught her, yet she would protect Kiri by lying. *Why?* she wanted to ask. Instead, she reached out and squeezed Pala’s hand. Pala squeezed back and let go, lying down on her back to sleep.

Kiri did the same but her mind spun with all she had seen and done that night. “Pala?”

“Hmmm?” Her eyes stayed closed.

“This was not the first time a man joined the ceremony?”

“No,” Pala whispered. “It happens, but not often. I don’t know why they come.”

“It is what you meant by ‘unexpected.’ ”

Her mouth curved, just barely visible in the dim light from Kiri’s body. “Yes.”

Kiri wrapped herself in her blanket, more from habit since she no longer needed it for warmth. “Why did you take his spear? Do we fear their weapons?”

“No. First One keeps them as proof we are better than mortal-kind.”

Kiri sat up, drawing up her knees. “Do we also mate sometimes?”

“No, it is not for us. Only First One mates with mortal-kind. It is her privilege and hers alone.”

Kiri digested that, scratching her head. “That doesn’t seem fair. Besides, would it not be better if we all mated?”

“It is what is.” Pala rolled over. “Me, I am glad I do not have to. Go to sleep, Nya. We can talk in the

morning.”

Lying back down, Kiri tried to sleep but she couldn't. Power from the star-light fizzled in her bones and thrummed along her sinews like water burbling from a spring. She had never felt so alive. She never wanted to sleep again.

Sitting up, she looked at the Others lying around her, all fast asleep. Surely they all had experienced the same exaltation she had, the same rush of power. So, how could they sleep?

Perhaps they had simply become used to it. Kiri sighed, letting the sensations swirl again around her, enfolding her in their embrace.

May it never become so commonplace for her.

Chapter 5

Modern day, late March

"Grandpa?"

No reply. Where had the old guy gotten to? Ian pushed the house's heavy door closed and wiped his shoes on the mat. Taking off his winter coat, he tucked his key into the pocket and hung it on the brass coat-rack in the foyer. Grandpa had asked him to come out and see him today. Said it was urgent. So where was he?

"Grand-pa!" Ian called, his steps echoing on the polished, marble floors. Silence. His stomach growled at the smell of stew wafting from the kitchen, the luscious aroma of simmering beef and carrots making his mouth water. He pushed down a wave of home-sickness, checking the kitchen to no avail. "Someone must be here," he muttered, sneaking a quick taste and giving the pot a stir. "Hope Grandpa invites me to stay for lunch."

It had been months since he'd been out to the 'burbs to see Grandpa. Being a reporter for the Trib-Times Media Group in Chicago kept him busy. Too busy. Some days he barely had time to breathe, the competition was so intense.

Ian wandered through the first floor, searching for his grandfather. He always loved this house, designed by Grandpa himself. No dull, cookie-cutter floor plans, just large, airy rooms with lofty ceilings, rooms that seemed to bring the outdoors inside. Yet it was somehow intimate and friendly, too, with some of Grandpa's best landscape paintings and portraits decorating the walls here and there. Dozens more waited in protected storage in the basement.

Oh, Grandpa had taken down the one of the Chicago sky-line in the living room. A verdant landscape hung in its place, one Ian didn't recognize. New?

Maybe Grandpa was in his office? Mom always swore "Papa Bear" spent days sitting in there, just looking at Grandma's portrait.

No one there. Ian stepped deeper into the sanctum, as he thought of it, the office where Grandpa had created those unique architectural designs that had won him international accolades. Not to mention fame and fortune.

The wall to Ian's left was paneled in gray slate, small rectangles of varying sizes and shapes stacked to look like an English dry-stone wall. The wall always fascinated him. A younger Ian had tried to count them, but hadn't known enough numbers then to count them all. Ian resisted the urge to count them now. He chuckled to himself. Knowing Grandpa, he probably knew exactly how many there were. Heck, he probably knew where each individual stone had been quarried.

The sun broke through the clouds, filling the office with glorious sunshine and illuminating the rose garden sleeping outside, still covered in a layer of slowly melting snow. The best part of this room in Ian's opinion was the bank of large windows along the wall behind the desk and drafting table, ensuring that Grandpa had had the best natural light to create by.

In his early career, they'd called Grandpa the next Frank Lloyd Wright. How Grandpa hated that. He wasn't the next anybody, he always said. Just himself.

All of that would soon to come to an end, now Grandpa had finally decided to retire. Well, good for him.

Grandpa deserved some time to enjoy himself while he still had his health.

Across from the desk, above the mantel, hung Grandma's portrait, the one Grandpa spent hours looking at. Though Grandpa had painted it years ago, the subject's youth and beauty still looked luminous. Grandma always complained it didn't really look like her. Studying it now, Ian had to agree: more like an idealized form of her, more beautiful than the model, the artist's vision of perfection captured for all eternity.

"Beautiful, isn't she? The love of my life." A hand clapped affectionately on Ian's shoulder, making him jump.

"Grandpa!" Spinning around, he gave the old man a hearty, loving squeeze. "If you loved her so much, I'm surprised you let Grandma divorce you."

Grandpa shrugged. "Your grandmother wasn't happy with me. It was kinder to let her go." He scuffed a foot on the thick carpet. "How is she, by the way?"

Ian grinned. "She loves the gulf coast of Florida and the senior community she lives in. She spends her days swimming, golfing and shopping."

Grandpa gave him a tolerant look. "In other words, Nancy's having a grand time. I'm glad for her. Come on, let's sit down. I have something important I want to talk to you about."

Limping as he had as long as Ian had known him, Grandpa wheezed his way across the spacious office to a small, round table where a trio of leather-seated chairs waited. In older days, Grandpa would discuss ideas with customers there. Someone — Mom? — had added a vase of fresh flowers, now that it would be safe from getting knocked over by samples and blueprints.

He coughed, deep and phlegmy. Ian's brows drew together in concern. "Should've quit smoking twenty years earlier," grumbled Grandpa, taking one of the chairs, hooking his cane over the table's edge.

Ian took the other, next to the outside door clients used to use. "Are you OK? Can I get you something?"

Grandpa impatiently waved him away. "Got over this damned cold a month ago, but the damn bronchitis just lingers on." He dug in the pocket of his gray cardigan for a cough drop, unwrapped it and popped it into his mouth. Camphor and menthol flavored his breath. "It's nothing, not why I asked you to come." The old man measured Ian with his gaze. "Remember my friend, Rusty?"

Ian dug through his brain cells. Stout fellow, short with a florid face. Reddish-brown hair in his youth, long gone gray by the time Ian had known him. "Santa Claus!" When Ian was little, Rusty had put on the beard and red suit and come over with a sack filled with presents. Ian gave Grandpa a broad, genuine smile. "Mr. Friedrichs? How is he?"

"He died two days ago."

Taken aback, Ian blinked at the stark declaration, his smile slowly fading. "I'm so sorry." He meant it. Though Ian hadn't seen the man in years, Rusty and his wife, Susan, had been kind and generous to a younger Ian. His wife had even once mailed Ian home-made chocolate chip cookies at college freshman year so he wouldn't feel lonely so far from home.

Grandpa leaned forward, tapping imperatively on the table. "It's why I wanted to talk to you. He had colon cancer. Diagnosed three years ago. Damned doctors couldn't do a thing." Grandpa made a one-handed gesture, somehow both angry and dismissive at the same time.

"Susan's a basket case. Rusty handled everything, financially. She doesn't know what to do."

Ian rubbed the back of his neck. "That's a terrible shame, Grandpa, but what can I do? I can barely balance my own checkbook and don't have expertise to write medical articles." Ian loved his grandfather, but a story about an old man dying of cancer wouldn't impress his editor. Probably get relegated to filler or killed entirely. Ian frowned. He would become an office joke.

Grandpa's thick brows bunched together. "You're an investigative reporter, aren't you, boy?" Testy. "So investigate."

Bewildered, Ian asked, "What is there to investigate?"

"Fraud."

Ian touched the tip of his tongue to his upper lip. That sounded more promising. Fraud was something very different. He could work with that

"You're the only person I can trust with this, Ian. It's this woman, see?" said Grandpa, confiding. "Bitch calls herself Aimée du Soleil. God only knows what her real name is. She holds these phony revival meetings all over the country. Kind of like a cross between voodoo and *Elmer Gantry*." He lifted his nose and snorted in contempt. "You know, all gospel music and hallelujah and gimme money, money, money."

"I read the book." Ian rubbed his chin. "Never heard of this woman. Amy da Who?"

"Aimée du Soleil," Grandpa repeated, annoyed. "S-o-l-e-i-l. Started out on YouTube last year. Made enough to buy herself a private jet. She's going to get a weekly TV show soon on one of the networks. Believers flock to her by the hundreds and she 'heals' them," Grandpa made air-quotes, "but it's all fake."

"How d'you know?" Not for one minute did Ian think faith-healing was real, but he'd need more than just his gut to go on.

"She promised Rusty she'd cure his cancer, didn't she?" Grandpa said it with mingled triumph and disgust as though it was all the evidence anyone needed.

Ian smiled to himself. Grandpa never did suffer fools gladly. He got out his cell-phone and started making notes.

"With her herbs and her potions and her 'laying on of hands.' " More air-quotes and a sneer. "Sure enough, he felt better — till she drained his bank account. When he didn't have any money left, she dropped him like a stone and he died. Eaten by the cancer from the inside out. She hadn't cured a thing." Grandpa shook his head. "Not one damned thing."

Brow creasing, Ian leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table. "How much did she take him for?"

"Little over two mill. All his life-savings. He sold off his investments, mortgaged the house. Left his poor wife, Susan, in debt up to her eyeballs. Flat broke. Tell me, how's a woman of seventy supposed to find a decent job?" Grandpa demanded in outrage.

Ian bit his lower lip, thinking hard. He remembered a petite woman with a slim figure even in middle age and imagined her now, all bird bones, frail and old. No way could she hold down a 9-to-5 job. "She has children, doesn't she? Someone she could move in with?"

Is that all you've got? sneered his conscience. Rusty and she deserved better from him. She'd sent him cookies, for pity's sake.

Grandpa tapped imperatively on the table, glaring at Ian. "You're missing the point."

"You're right." He'd run the idea past the editorial board first thing Monday. "Do you know any other victims of this con-artist?"

Grandpa shook his head, shoulders slumping. "No one else I know." He straightened, suddenly a man to contend with. "Wait. Sue might know. I can't believe Rusty was the only guy she cheated. Her kind doesn't know when to stop."

Getting up, Grandpa huffed and puffed to his desk, rummaging in there for an old-fashioned, leather-bound address-book, much worn. He flipped it open to the middle and found the right page. "Here's Sue's phone number."

Ian jumped up and joined him, thumbing the number into his cell phone. "I'll call her Monday." He'd do a little internet searching tonight. What his editor didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Must be something he could find out about the fake faith-healer to make the story newsworthy.

No. Forget that. To hell with his editor. Ian wasn't going to let it drop. He would expose this fraud, whether Tim approved the story or not.

Because Rusty was Santa Claus.

The bitch was going *down*.



Colette Maëlys always loved books, ever since teaching herself to read at age three. She has been writing ever since her college roommate turned her on to romance novels. She could never get enough.

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