

Part II Morwea Woods



Chapter 1

Life on the Other Side

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

"Awake finally. Nice long nap you had," an unfamiliar voice said.

An older woman with deep lines in her face and eyes an indiscernible color was sitting next to her. Connie blinked for a puzzled moment, wondering where she was.

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

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

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

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

"You'll understand soon enough. This is Ramla. She will nurse you back to health and teach you the wood ways if you care to learn. Listen to her."

"What about the tower?" Connie mumbled. It was difficult to speak and even more difficult to stay focused. There was something she needed to attend to.

"Right now, you need to heal. You have a deep puncture wound. You're on official sick leave. Your presence may or may not be what the increase in attacks of the wall are about, but to the relief of your fellow tower guards, you have been eliminated from the equation."

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

"Safe traveling," the old woman blessed.

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

That was all that Connie remembered.

Ramla walked Nada out to the porch, closing the door behind them so Connie couldn't hear their continued conversation.

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

Ramla shook her head. She couldn't see. There were some people that had their future veiled for one reason or another. Some through their own power and some by another's power. She couldn't tell with this one.

"Well, for whatever reason, she prevented our deaths. Funny that she didn't get injured by the explosion that was on her side of the cart. Her CO is going to wonder how she survived the explosion."

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

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

"You don't know that."

"She doesn't look like us."

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

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

"He's been through this before. It's nothing he'll be shocked about. Come back for a visit in spring. Your friend here will change for the better or worse."

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

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

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

* * *

Connie woke gradually to a sunlit room. Blinking at the unfamiliar ceiling, her thoughts slowly worked to identify what she was seeing. A mixture of herbs hung from rafters and fresh washed linen hung in front of an open window. She was not anywhere familiar. Turning her head slightly she recognized she was in a cottage. It was by no means a small room. A table blocked her view of a kitchen, and suspended from beams were bundles of herbs, confirming that she was in a healer's cottage, and not a big city hospital.

Carefully, she reached for her spirit guides, sensing the unfamiliar energies around her. If she was in a healer's cottage, it would likely have protection to keep unfamiliar spirits from entering until their possible danger to her had been judged.

Closing her eyes she concentrated on identifying the sounds from outside. Horses, sheep, dogs, cats, chickens, voices.... Patiently she waited for a repeat of the sound that woke her. What was it?

Opening her eyes she gingerly moved her limbs and then took a deep breath. It was not as painful as it was... yesterday? Clothing was folded neatly on a chair near her cot. Also, a cup of thick liquid that she could smell as appetizing, teasing her stomach in a low growl, was set on a small table near the chair. Guessing it was all for her, she drank from the cup first, feeling it's energy quickly refreshed her. Then she dressed, finding the boots fit comfortably as if measured for her. Now, her bladder needed emptying. One of the doors exited the building and within sight of the doorframe was an outhouse.

When she finished, she went back inside and stood in the center of the room, studying the herbs hanging from the ceiling and recognizing a few. Bags of various sizes, all filled with herbs, covered the table and reminded her of Mother's kitchen. Further in were four cots, a collapsed privacy screen beside one, four comfortable chairs

around a fireplace, several doors, and faded rugs over the wooden floor. The kitchen occupied most of one section. The doors she opened led to a basement she had no wish to explore, three storage closets, one filled with clothing for different-sized people and a locked trunk, and two nearly bare food closets. Connie guessed they would be full before winter. There were none of the modern conveniences she had taken for granted at home or in the tower barracks.

She crossed the front room and went out the front door. Stepping off the porch she moved her foot to the right a few inches at the last minute to avoid stepping on something she was peripherally aware of. Looking down, it was gone.

Voices she had been hearing stopped.

Connie paused, blinking in the bright sun. Breathing deeply, she stretched her back, listening to the pop of her vertebrae as they adjusted. The sun felt nice on her skin. It warmed her to her bones. She located the source of the buzzing as bees were busy collecting their nectar from three colorful flowered bushes. Horses were grazing in a nearby pasture. They were moving toward her. Without thinking, she moved toward them. The only horses she met belonged to the horse guards at the tower.

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

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

Connie quickly dropped her hand and turned to the voice.

"I'm Malinda. One of Ramla's students. You look better." She handed Connie an apple from her basket. "I can hear your stomach rumbling."

"Thank you. The cup of soup you left was enough that I didn't feel I needed to raid your cupboards," she laughed. Connie took a bite of the apple. It was delicious. She studied the young woman. She was dressed in the same style of clothing as a ranger; colored so that the wearer could blend in with the forest.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I don't know. Give it a try.

Connie squeezed her eyes shut and thought hard. Her grasp on the apple core tightened with the seeds being squeezed out and onto the ground.

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

Standing before them was the old woman she remembered that was taking care of her.

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

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

Connie nodded and handed the apple core to Ramla who held her hand out. She dropped it in her basket. "We'll plant what seeds you haven't dropped in our planting bucket."

Connie looked down where the seeds had dropped.

"Nothing is wasted. Perhaps in a year or two we'll have apple trees here," Malinda teased.

Malinda took one of the baskets Ramla had looped over her elbow. Ramla led the way and Malinda fell behind Connie.

Connie's experience as a tower guard taught her to follow the leader with care and attention, placing her feet where Ramla did. That experience didn't cover the differences she felt between forests. This forest was a new experience. Even the foliage was unfamiliar. Brushes of air against her bare arm, sounds that could be whispering were just inches from her ear. If Ramla and Malinda weren't near, she would have turned and ran back to the open area; instead, she kept moving, focusing on Ramla's back.

"This is the spot. While Malinda collects her herbs, Connie, come with me and I'll show you what I'm looking for," Ramla said. She walked into a darkened patch in the forest and then appeared on the other side under a beam of filtered sunlight.

For a moment Connie thought she saw movement around Ramla, but staring harder it was nothing. As she walked in Ramla's footsteps, a momentary bleakness was felt as she passed through the dark spot, and then she was out in the warm sun. Leaning down near Ramla, she stared at the plant cupped in her palm. Ramla pointed to the different coloring of the leaves, explaining that the color of the leaf was what determined the properties of the plant. Ramla's voice sounded as if it were coming from a long distance. Nothing felt the same around Connie as her mind drifted.

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

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

"You're in a different part of the forest, off the path. It's where you go only if you're invited or if you ask and your request is granted."

"What keeps moving where I can't see it?"

"Those are forest spirits. They belong here. To pick any herb or flower, you ask the spirit of the area for permission." Ramla tapped her arm to bring her attention back to the flower. Connie watched in fascination as a tiny light glowed and then disappeared.

"We are guests of the guardian of this part of the forest. Some guardians are very mercurial so they can be unpredictable in temperament."

"Who is guardian and who are spirits?"

Ramla took Connie's hand and guided her back to the path where Malinda was waiting for them. By the looks of her basket, she had been busy.

"Look there but don't stare. Just relax your eyes."

Connie looked where she was pointing and took a deep breath and let it out. It seemed like a long time, but a shape began to take form and then it disappeared when she realized she saw something. "I saw it!"

"That was Razel of the Broken River." Ramla pointed to the stream. "During the winter it's just a trickle and after the winter snow melts it's a roaring river that you don't want to cross. Razel protects the river and those that gain sustenance from it."

"And you?"

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

"What does he ask in return?"

"That is between him and me. Each visitor makes her or his own pack. Honor and respect are necessary, but don't forget wit and cunning."

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

Connie laughed, remembering a phrase she heard among some of the kids at school. "You never know when you'll have to make a bargain with the devil."

"Devil, as in evil?" Malinda asked.

"I guess. It's just something the kids at school would say when they wanted to beat someone at a game really bad."

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

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

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

"Yes. Some of the kids at school would say that."

"In some places, whipping up the devil means to pick an issue that will stir up their fellows. When the devil takes possession of a person or group is when hate based

issues take precedence. Issues that segregate, isolate, and demonize others so the person or group feels they need to go out and injure others."

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

Connie was wondering what had that to do with visiting the forest. "How do you meet the forest guardian or spirits?"

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

Connie gave the two women a puzzled look.

"You're not frightened, just curious," Malinda said as if that would clarify everything.

When they walked out of the shadowed forest the light was sudden and bright. Connie stopped before going on.

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

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

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

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

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

Her mother had never spoken of this directly, but Connie had always sensed it. By watching her, Connie had learned how to blend herbs and spices for different needs: easing a cold, calming anger, or warding off trouble—the small concerns of her young life. Under Lt. Hellene's guidance, she later developed a deeper feel for the healing herbs used by Hellene.

"I can see, but how do you know what you're fixing will be helpful to who you're serving it to?" Connie asked, thinking of more than the common ailments her

fellow tower guards suffered from. How to change a person's perspective of their ailment was something she wondered about.

"Ah," the two said in unison. "Practical questions."

Ramla pulled a drying sachet down from one of the hanging baskets. She reached for Connie's hand and turned her palm up. She dropped the sachet in her palm.

"What would this be good for?"

"Smells nice." Connie breathed in the aroma it released. "I would keep this in my pack, just because it makes me feel good."

The two women waited as if they expected more.

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

"I don't know, it's just right."

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

"What am I learning, exactly?"

"The Way of Galina."

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

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

"What is Galina?"

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

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

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

Chapter 2

Strange Places

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

In a cottage a figure sat in a chair and next to her was a wolf larger than the woman. The woman was saying goodbye. She removed a ring from her hand and held it out. Connie focused on the ring, not at first realizing that she reached out to take it to examine it closer. The woman looked up at her surprised. The moment Connie realized what she had done she was whisked so fast back into her body she rocked off balance.

"Steady there," Ramla cautioned.

"I...I saw a woman that looked like me." Connie leaned back trying to catch her breath. It was as if she had run a long distance.

"What have you in your hand?"

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

"I have her ring." She looked up at Ramla bewildered.

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

"The woman that looked like me was talking to a wolf and she took this from her finger. I wanted to see what it looked like and...I took it from her. Ramla, I need to return it to her. She didn't want to part with it."

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

Connie felt exhausted and full of questions, but her energy level was diminishing quickly.

"You need rest. You have accomplished more than most people do on their first voyage. It takes a lot of energy."

Malinda, who was in the corner, acting as a guardian, rose from her place and assisted Connie, whose legs were wobbly.

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

* * *

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

"Well, I will say, it has quite a story." Her eyes opened and she handed Connie the ring back. "It's not for me to know it. It's yours now."

"But how do I do that? I've been trying to dream about it, but I can't see anything but blurs and hear only muffled sounds."

Connie woke up dismayed. Holding up her hand, she was relieved that the ring was on her finger. Rolling out of bed, she quickly dressed. Her breath didn't create vapor, but it was cold. Snow that fell days ago piled high around the cottage, making the interior cold. Another storm was moving in, and the animals had to be taken care of. But first, the fire needed to be started. That was Connie's job.

Carefully she piled wood on her arms to stack it near the fireplace. Turning on the heater would have been her preference, but both mother and daughter preferred the fireplace.

Ramla joined her sitting in her chair. "Use your mind," Ramla said. She wrapped a blanket around her, waiting for Connie to begin making a fire.

"Start the fire with my mind?"

"I personally would pile the wood first. Just having the fire without fuel uses too much energy. You'll need half a day to sleep off the effects." She pointed to the chair Malinda usually sat in. "Sit."

Connie sat and stared at the wood, trying to get it to move. Beads of sweat were the only things she produced in ten minutes.

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

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

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

Connie resettled next to Malinda.

"Now move into the between state and just rest there for a moment," she said softly. Connie's breathing was slow and relaxed. "Now, pick a log and imagine it in the fireplace. You're thinking it. Relax. Inhale and pick it up and exhale and place it in the fireplace. Another..... Another."

When enough logs were stacked, "Now I know you can do this. Start the fire but remember, you don't need anything big."

A small flame started in front of the stack of wood and then moved around the stack.

"Inhale and then exhale and move back to the present."

"There now, that wasn't so difficult, was it?" Ramla teased.

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

"You're still using too much energy to think things," Malinda explained. "It takes practice. Come on. While the place is heating up, we can go and look in on the animals."

"Why can't you just do it from here?" Connie asked, not liking trudging through snow high enough to get into the tops of her boots.

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

"Why not? Bears sleep all winter."

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

However, Ramla took that seriously. "It's the wolf clan she is affiliated with. It's to them she must present herself to first."

"What do you mean?" Connie asked quickly.

"Those are things you must seek yourself."

"Why can't you just tell me?"

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

Connie sighed and went to grab her coat from the hook and put on her boots to begin her morning chores.

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

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

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

The two women laughed.

"Okay. Maybe she's ready."

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

As the two crunched across the snow Malinda watched Connie as her eyes searched the forest tree line. She sensed an uneasiness from her.

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

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

"Malinda, what's the purpose of being a snowflake? I mean, will I be able to do something with it, like help someone in the future?"

"You mean maybe like a rain cloud dumping a rain shower on someone?"

Malinda teased. Malinda laughed at the face Connie made at her. "It's the *practice* of shape changing. It's not the same as shapeshifting, where you change into an animal."

"Do you shapeshift?"

"No. I don't belong to that clan. Nor do you."

Connie looked relieved. "So, it runs in families?"

"Yes. One parent or both, but it doesn't mean it's a guarantee all the off-spring will have it in their blood. Why are frightened about shapeshifting?"

"Does the person lose control and become like the animal?"

"I haven't heard of anyone with that problem. What else scares you about it?"

"Do they ever get stuck and not able to change back?"

"Why are you concerned about shapeshifters?"

"I'm afraid of the wolf," Connie said.

"What wolf?"

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

"So, that's why you've been a bit distracted. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I don't know."

"We're here to help. Just ask. So, tell me about the wolf. Is he here?"

"He's usually at the edge of the forest and watches my dreams. I didn't see him this time."

"Ramla has protection spells around her farm. He hasn't asked or touched her boundary, or she would know." She tapped Connie's finger with the ring. "This is his entrance to your dream world."

"How can I give him the ring back?"

"You have to ask him."

"I'm afraid of him."

"Is he threatening you?"

"No. I just don't want him close to me," she said softly.

"You said the wolf you see doesn't approach you. It waits. The person you saw that looked like you in time traveling was one of your ancestors that," she picked up Connie's hand with the ring and angled it to show the family crest and then the wolf head, "formed a union with a member of the Wolf Clan. This Moore crest has a Raven right there in the upper left. It's tiny on the ring, but it's the only Moore crest with a symbol on the upper left. Wolf and Raven usually travel together as powerful transformation helpers. Wolf is a pathfinder and Raven carries the ceremonial magic that goes with searching for spiritual paths and paths on all levels."

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

"Tell me what you know about shapeshifters."

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

"The very night farmers plant their seeds for best growing. Let me tell you what little I know of the wolf." She paused a moment as she silently prayed for help in telling Connie just what she needed to hear.

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

"I didn't notice."

"I think he's waiting for you to invite him in. Let's finish up here and then we'll ask Ramla. She'll steer you in the right direction."

When the two entered the foyer, they could already feel the difference in the atmosphere. They stomped the snow off their boots, hung up their coats and entered the house. Ramla was sitting in the center of the room with all the furniture pushed back. In the center she had a circle drawn and it was closed. The air smelled of herbs used to call her spirit guides.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It is winter at the castle."

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

"Tradition..." began the Oath Taker.

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

"Are you changing the oath of your forbearers?"

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

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

"And I will continue their work to bring the change to fruition. It took generations to set the foundation and many more to bring it to what it is now. I accept the possibility that in my present lifetime I won't see the desired changes, but it won't daunt me nor shake my resolution to continue the process."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Spare me," Connie said. She took a deep breath of the herb tea's aroma, then a sip, feeling its properties strengthen her.

"A change of clothing is in the bathing room for you. Prepare yourself. When you return, we will start the ceremony to welcome you into the house of women."

Connie's mother had taught her what to expect in the way of what to do for her bleeding, and public schooling had taught her the responsibilities that came with it as well as the biological changes in male and female bodies. What she wasn't taught was the male attitude that went from friends to romantic partners and jealousy.

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

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

There were many women gathered whom she didn't recognize, and all had in their hand's herbs and fruits. There were no girls or older women.

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

Suddenly, Ramla, Malinda, and Connie were sitting in chairs around the fireplace, quietly enjoying the heat from the fire and the afterglow of their celebration.

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

"An hour."

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

"Let me start by explaining the royal lines. The Moores, Eameets, Anacons, Bocours are related and are old families from which the monarchy, royal bloodline is found. Royalty marries within the royal bloodlines, especially for the person next in line wearing the crown. If a future monarch marries and it's not from one of those families, then it had better be from another royal family and one that has bloodlines going back more than a hundred years."

"Why would they continue that today? What happens if one of them falls in love with someone not of royal blood?"

"As long as they don't marry, they can love who they want. The rules were set down to prevent wars between those who had money and power but not a claim to the

throne and the legal heir, who may not have the backing to pull off a war. Consider your stories of the past where such wars went on for generations, and the havoc to the farms and industry, just disastrous to the economics and lives of those caught up in it. If one did win over the other, the damage the war caused would take a long time to recover from. By then, another challenge to the throne would come and the killings and devastations would start again. This way, the killing is restricted to specific families with plenty of relatives ready to step in and no big shock to the realm's economy," Malinda explained.

"Queen Eloise, King Ken, Queen Gafna, Queen Bel, King Javas and King Blaz are the rulers of the six fiefdoms of Morwea. Queen Tina, whom no one has heard from for ages, is over Raven Moore Castle, the seventh fiefdom."

"Why the wall?" Connie asked.

"Fear," Ramla said.

"The Besardo," Malinda said.

"What is the Besardo? I think I heard that name somewhere."

"Hate mongers. Five hundred years ago family members that had royal blood but were not anywhere near the line of succession or weren't smart enough to get postings in the higher positions of government formed a group called Besardo. They started out as mean-spirited gossip mongers, causing a lot of friction between the houses that many times broke out into armed fights between royals, and usually the ones in line of succession. Then they added blackmail and other dark deeds with demands for favors. Arranged accidents became popular...too popular and a few found themselves sentenced to death. Anyone that threatens an heir is a traitor and death is the penalty. There are some that have been smart and learned to use others to spread their poison. As their power grew and under the leadership of a few clever people, they found that by creating fear in the populace, they could control the masses and get them to respond to mob action. First there were attacks against anyone from other countries, then public places for one reason or another, destruction of schools and libraries when there were people inside. Anyone seen as different was persecuted or killed.

"The group is outlawed and being a member is treason. But the damage had already been done by the time that was made into law in all the realms. Most citizens

know the Dark Ages as when the sky went black for years from the eruptions of volcanoes over the entire planet, but this was the Dark Ages of the Royal Houses. So much violence broke out that no one felt safe. Those with power stronger than hate gathered at the power sites scattered over the land and put a sleep over the people. Changes were made before the people were awakened. The wall had been erected to protect those that wanted to have a fair and open society for all, from those who were frightened of it."

"I haven't traveled that much or met that many people, but for the most part, people are nice on the other side of the wall," Connie said.

"A prosperous nation enjoys friendly and healthy relationships with their neighbors. But if life was poor and there was no hope for the future, people would become mean. The land radiates its wellness, gradually infusing anything that touches it. The river that separates the two lands, and then the land on the other side of the river. There are some who are frightened of this and there are some who welcome it."

"That's why there's so much poacher activity on the other side," Connie said.

"It is a distraction for something else. That brings us back to your wolf, a shapeshifter. Many see this as magic whereas we on this side of the river see it as another manifestation of life. The Besardo are causing those that are frightened of anyone that is different than them into mob action so they can go about their own business, which is forcing the royal family to do what they want."

"What do they want?"

"The same thing as they have always wanted. Power over the working class. They believe they are entitled to this because of their bloodline, only their version of power is of the worst kind."

"Cruelty without punishment."

"Exactly. However, they don't see it as cruelty. That would mean the working class has value. These are people who see themselves as elitists and anyone below them as just a means to their end. The working-class people are replaceable with another meaningless face. This group can't empathize nor is the word in their vocabulary, just like compassion or being sorry for injuring another."

"That should make them easy to spot."

"Not entirely. To join, a person must ask, have royal blood, conceal their true feelings well, and perhaps be accepted into the secret society. Disloyalty is punishable by death, and for all their self-importance, they follow the rules or die. Once accepted, there is no leaving and no refusing an assignment."

"What has this to do with me?"

"The Raven Moore's castle has disappeared. Some people blame that on Prince Jario, your grandmother's second husband, who had betrayed the Besardo. I believe it was the vendetta the group had against Queen Tess, ruler of Raven Moore Castle."

"Is the castle as deserted as it seemed in my vision?"

"I have never seen Raven Moore Castle. No one knows where it is. Either Prince Jario's death put a spell on the roads leading to it, or Queen Tess put a protective spell over it."

"What happened?"

"The Besardo has a contract out on the Queen's heirs because she renewed the ban on the group and reaffirmed the royal order to hunt any members down as traitors. Jario, who was a lowly member of the group, sought to rise higher by assassinating the leader of the Besardo rather than his new wife. Jario wanted it all; to be crowned king of Raven Moore Castle, which would never happen even if Tess died, and running a band of murders that crossed borders."

"What happened to the queen?"

"No one knows. I don't believe she is dead."

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

"When you turn thirty-five, you will take on the mantle of the Queen of Raven Moore."

"Why not my mother?"

"She chose another life."

"Living with the Brethren?"

"True Brethren are soldiers faithful to Queen Tess and are dedicated to protecting her royal heirs. Not all Brethren are knowledgeable of what they are protecting or are faithful soldiers, so beware of who you share that information with."

"What is your quest?" Malinda asked her.

"My quest?" Connie asked.

"When you met with your ancestors, you gave the Oath Taker a task you will complete in the name of the family. Yes?"

"I said I would rebuild the castle."

"It's a noble quest."

"Does that mean I will have to find the Besardo and put an end to them?"

Ramla gave a short laugh. "I don't know. As I said, people have tried for 500 years. Even if only one survives, that person begins recruiting almost immediately. And if they were all killed—the only sure way to stop them—jealousy and meanness can never be fully rooted out. Someone with that nature would start the group again. They're already branded as outlaws and traitors. When any are found, they are arrested and no one knows what happens from there."

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

"Begin with yourself. You have lessons still to learn. Your 35 year ascension is far away."

Chapter 3

The Change

Horses were coming. She could feel the ground tremble under her feet. It meant that whoever was coming either was going up to the Elden Mountain or coming back down. No one had passed for weeks so her guess was they were heading up to the mountain to see the Wise Ones that lived in the monastery near the mountain top. Usually, mid-spring was when groups of riders would begin their trek up and in late summer the last group headed back down. It was the overflowing rivers that many avoided at the beginning of spring.

You either rode up there by beast or you walked. There was no other acceptable way up to the monastery, according to Ramla. Modern vehicles were not permitted in Morwea Woods or Elden Mountain.

It was the end of autumn, and rain had already started. It would have to be a late group heading up to the monastery, Connie concluded. They no doubt intended on spending the winter up there because in two days, Ramla said the first of the heavy snow would cut off the bridge to the monastery. The passing pilgrims were a nuisance to Ramla though she greeted all that stopped by with an open heart and bags of herbs.

Ramla had also acknowledged her guides and gave them rules of what they could and could not inform Connie about since Connie only needed one guide for her stay under Ramla's care.

There is anger in that crowd, Bau said.

"Then they won't be welcomed on the mountain," Connie thought to her spirit guide.

Connie had been living with Ramla and her assistant/daughter for over a year, by the telling of the seasons. If Connie measured her stay with how much she had learned from the two women, she would have said a lifetime. Malinda called it an accelerated learning course, where her waking and dreaming time were filled with lessons and practice, and memories of past lives and clan memories were intermixed. Ramla told her that she knew all this already, she just had to be reminded. It was not something that she had ever imagined herself doing or knowing about until she met Ramla.

Connie looked out at the cottage to see if the visitors were going to stop and if Ramla was going to need assistance in greeting them. She could see Ramla standing on the porch waiting. Connie's shock at finding that Ramla was blind in the physical sense had since been forgotten. She didn't need her physical sight. It was Malinda that kept order to things that didn't concern Ramla. Connie's eyes searched for Malinda who had left for the city market the day before to sell herbs, poultice and mood pouches of herbs. Connie had hoped she would have returned by now. Her cooking skills had not improved and Ramla was preoccupied these days to think about helping to prepare meals.

Connie went back into the barn to put away the watering bucket. She would enter the cabin from the back and give whatever support Ramla would need, though she

doubted she would need it. As she looped the bucket rope over the peg a powerful force of energy hit her and as far as she knew that was that.

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

Either it was dark, or she was buried under something. Connie moved her limbs cautiously, feeling around her. She called for her guardians and reflexively reached for her medicine bag. She could feel the energy as if it were freshly awakened as energy moved through her fingertips that touched the bag, up her arm and then into her body.

She was unable to reach her guardians.

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

A tiny light bobbed in front of her.

"Who are you?" Connie asked startled.

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

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

I must have crawled in here.

You are safely hidden in the root cellar, Gem said.

Ramla and Malinda thought it best to move you here, so you all are separate for the time being, Sulu explained.

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

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

Nothing you should involve yourself in, Callie Can said.

That surprised Connie. Of all her guides, Callie Can had changed the most through Connie's practice in magic, perhaps because Callie Can had accompanied her on many journeys to strange, unnamed places. Ramla and Malinda insisted those travels were necessary so Connie could learn to protect herself. While they guarded her

physical body within a protective circle, her consciousness explored realms she had no names for. Ramla said names did not matter; what mattered was the energy Connie sensed during each journey.

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

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

Connie turned to see a tall woman in traveling clothes studying her. She turned her head to her companion, whom Connie couldn't make out. Her hair was long and braided behind her head. Connie admired her profile and then she was facing the piercing eagle eyes that she feared could see right through her.

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

"Galina." Connie blurted.

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

"It is polite to return a name," Connie said, acting bolder than she felt.

"Asiza and this is my forest."

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

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

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

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

Connie blinked at a tiny light that was eye level with her.

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

"What Queen?" Connie asked.

"The Queen of this forest." Asiza made a sweeping gesture forward, though to Connie's eyes it was nowhere.

"I thought you said..."

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

"You're the one that didn't stop me from crossing over here."

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

This was interesting. Was this Queen Elsa of Obella and if so, what was she doing on this side of the wall? The moment she thought of the wall Connie felt herself sucked back into darkness. She was lying on the hard ground back where she started, in the winter storage area. Squeezing her medicine bag, nothing happened. Feeling around her, she touched the herbs she had spread around her. She didn't need light to know her way around. Besides knowing the interior from having helped store winter goods Ramla had her sit for hours in the dark to learn discernment.

She broke the circle and following Malinda's directions made sure the herbs were collected to be burned later. Turning to the door she found what was blocking it no longer there. Slowly she lifted the floorboard and rolled out onto the barn floor. Lying flat she listened with all her senses to what was around her. It was too quiet. It was frighteningly quiet.

She rolled on her back and looked up at the hayloft. Nothing smelled right. Rising to her feet she moved cautiously to the side door. It would take her out to the corral on the south side. It was nearer to the forest. Softly she walked, fearful at not feeling Ramla or Malinda's presence. Usually the three had a connection, but not now.

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

were telling her to run as far away from the cabin as she could. It didn't occur to her until she was completely lost in the forest that she was not dressed for this adventure, nor was she experienced in traveling long distances without a pack. When fear was no longer driving her, she rested her hand on each tree trunk looking for one that felt right. As Malinda and Ramla had said, it was not necessary to explain what she knew instinctively or what she felt, just do it and see where it would take her. Looking up into the nearly denuded tree she could see an occasional star twinkle. It meant it was nearly morning. Cold and damp, she focused on the tree limb she wanted to leap on.

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

Connie turned to Asiza.

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

"You left rather abruptly. The Queen thought it was because you haven't been trained properly, but I think you don't know what you're doing."

"What do you want?" Connie repeated impatiently.

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

Be very still, Asiza warned.

Whatever passed them by was not seen by Connie who had a cloak over her, but she felt it. It was a stronger feeling of disquiet wrongness than what she felt at Ramla's barn. When the feeling left, Asiza dropped her cloak and tugged Connie's elbow. "The spirits are angry at the unwelcomed passage of the Besardo and will be exacting a payment. We don't want to be around for that."

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm one of the guardians of the forest and you are trespassing."

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

Three small lights appeared between the two.

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

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

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

Connie collapsed onto the dirt path.

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

Connie disappeared and Asiza was left alone.

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

Asiza set her hands on her hips, then quickly dropped them to her sides, remembering she was no longer a child who could get away with tantrums. She wanted to be included in adult matters, and her older sister had challenged her not to act like a child. They were now in the Queen's private audience room.

Connie was lying on a couch with one of the Queen's own pillows beneath her head. A blanket had been carefully arranged over her sleeping form.

"Because I can do what I want," the Queen responded.

Asiza looked at her mother, wondering if she could say what was on her lips.

"You're right. Think twice before you say it. Now, sit."

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

Quickly she rose to her feet in astonishment.

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

"Are you why those dark riders are about?" she asked.

"More like because of your guest here." She knelt next to Connie and touched her cheek. "She's more aware."

"Yes," the Queen answered. "Asi, serve everyone."

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

"Ensign Neda, or is it Ranger, " she acknowledged softly. "Oh, you're a lieutenant now."

"I'm glad you remembered."

"Are we leaving?" Even she could hear the disappointment in her voice.

"Well, we're here to discuss that. Can you sit up?"

Connie's eyes rested on Asiza and then moved to a woman who looked comfortable sitting in her chair, surrounded by pillows and... Connie's eyes opened wide. Chadies were stretched out on the arms of her chair and behind her. They were all looking at her with intelligence in their eyes.

Connie looked back at the woman, realizing that she was the queen she had disappeared on.

"I am Queen Eloise of Morwea."

Connie gulped in embarrassment. She had no idea how to greet royalty.

"Hello, Queen Eloise. Good health to you. I'm sorry about leaving so suddenly. Am I in some sort of trouble?"

"It's not often city dwellers from across the wall remember to ask if they can pass through my lands. Or for that matter, disappear from my sight, without giving forewarning."

"I don't know how that happened."

"Yes. We felt that. Neda explained you were in training."

"Is Ramla's farm on your land?"

"Yes."

"Is she and Malinda alright?"

"They are doing what they can, which is all that can be done," she answered cryptically.

"Are Besardo after me?"

"It's a small unskilled group that is looking for you. They should know better than to trespass in my forest."

"They shouldn't have sent dupes where they are easily identified and handled," Neda said.

"Locating the heir to Raven Moore means she must die immediately, least she get away....again."

"What about my mother, brother and sister?"

"You are an only child. Since you have left the compound and the tower guards, everyone is probably getting more rest."

"The two I've been calling my brother and sister aren't related to me?"

"Cousins. A Brethen agreed to take her under his protection."

"But he's mean to her."

The Queen looked at Neda who shook her head.

"I don't know the details of your mother's life now since my attention would alert someone to looking for the surviving heirs to Queen Tess."

"Well, he's not nice and a bully. He promised me in marriage to a boy that pushes me into walls and knocks me down at every chance he gets and threatens to lock me in a cellar if I don't do as he says," she objected vehemently. "These people aren't at all what you think they are. Why does mother remain there?"

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

"Who's Abanard?" she demanded.

"The man who agreed to protect your mother and the other royal children."

"The man she lives with goes by Kalen. Did he force her to marry that man? That means he's not my father." That was a relief. It also explained why she never felt a connection to anyone but her mother.

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

"How old was I when we came to the brethren compound?"

"Five," Neda said. "There were three daughters that unwisely fled protection of the Moore Castle. We learned they were discovered and perished within six years. Your mother's older sister was one of those. Rangers had interrupted the killing of the child she gave birth to hours before she died. That is the child you've been raised with like your little sister, Jennifer. Her younger sister's sons, Kel and Ottir were also rescued, and your mother agreed to leave Moore castle to shelter them. The boys were very young and frightened of the woods, due to fathers that were more into sports rather than politics. Not everyone marries wisely," she said sadly.

The queen rose and gestured Connie to follow. She led her through a long hall and then into a darkened room that when the lights were turned on was like a huge meeting room. On all four walls were paintings of people. Some were just profiles of an individual, while others were elaborate with a whole family scene captured.

"These are our ancestors. We are cousins."

Connie stared at pictures of people she had no resemblance to and for that matter, nor did the queen. A few had a resemblance to Neda. But as they moved to the front of the hall, she could see the resemblance to the queen in a few of the women who posed either dressed for battle or with horses dressed for sport.

There was a hall that led to other rooms and in this hall the queen stopped. Four women had their arms around each other looking like they were having fun. All bore a resemblance to Connie, with one woman looking like what she thought her mother would look like if she were younger.

"That is your grandmother with her daughters. All the men and boys in that family died young or before they reached forty. They were more daring than sensible and took up dangerous sports. This outsider, a fourth cousin, wed your grandmother years after her first husband, your grandfather was assassinated. Only your grandmother knew he was a Besardo, yet she married him because she knew she could read his intentions before he could put them into practice. You see, she had not just renewed the ban on the Besardo cult but had appointed a man who hated the Besardo for killing his wife and child as the head of the squad to hunt them down. He was very good at it. It angered Queen Tess that her people were being torn apart by the rumors and hatred the agents of the Besardo were planting throughout her city. One doesn't just sacrifice

oneself to justice, but she also knows as justice maker she will be vulnerable to retribution."

"Her family must have been brave to agree...."

Neda, standing behind them, laughed. "A queen may ask for what the others think on occasion, but she does not ask for permission to do anything having to do with her royal duties. The queen is not acting just on behalf of those that live in her castle, but all things that live in her realm, spirit and mundane."

"I would imagine she made enemies in her immediate family."

"Most of those in the royal household and the cousins only see their parents at dinner, and if there's no social function they are attending. I think they do that more out of avoidance. We children can be quite demanding when we realize our self-importance can be exercised only with the hired help."

"Hey, speak for yourself," Asiza said.

"You were a handful, Asiza," the queen commented dryly. "Always wanted to sit on my lap so you could anoint the people coming in with their petitions. We never knew when you would let loose the anointing rod and hit the poor unsuspecting petitioner on the head. I had to do away with the anointing from there and have it done by the bishops of the various religious societies as they walked through the door. I thought for sure you were going into a religious order."

Asiza glared at her mother and Neda broke out into loud laughter.

"I was only five, Mother."

"Yes, and you were too old to be sitting on my lap and demanded a chair of your own."

"Mother, do we have to reminisce in front of a stranger?"

"This stranger will be Queen of the Raven Moores some day, so you should start a nice relationship with her now."

Asiza shrugged her shoulders. "I knew that. I saw her ring."

The Queen gave her a stern look before moving to another side of the hall. She pointed at a young man who looked too pretty in his riding dress, posed before a huge horse that almost took over the picture.

"Striking, wouldn't you say," Neda asked dryly.

"He looks stupid. I bet he would rip his pants getting on that horse," Asiza said.

"The story behind the picture is that he was painted separately from the horse. I don't think Prince Jario ever saw a horse up close. His sole interest was power and that was after his marriage to the queen. He tried to arrange the marriages of his stepdaughters into families he wished to have influence over, but no one took him seriously, after all the queen decides on her children's marriages, and Queen Tess let her daughters decide who they were going to marry, unless it was really a mistake, like her first daughter."

"I still can't believe Elect came from Queen Tess and King Alvi. Someone must have switched babies," Asiza said.

"You have never met any of them," Neda told her.

"I've heard all about her. My nanny would keep warning me that I would end up just like her if I didn't be a good child. How boring."

"Shall we get on with this?" the queen said. "There are a lot of stories of Jario, but this one is the closest to the truth. He was a mere soldier of the Besardo. No one suspected him to be a member because he was just another lazy princely distant cousin his family flopped over to Queen Tess's house to train to become something worthwhile. It was after his marriage to your grandmother, small but nasty mishaps began to happen, but not to the queen's immediate family. To those caring for the household or to friends of the family. Jario had his own agenda, and he was seeking to isolate the queen.

"The Besardo didn't see this being in their best interest since her agents had stepped up their arrests of Besardo members, and told him to cease his actions, which he didn't. His worst mistake with his Besardo brothers was when he interfered with an agent of theirs. No member acts on his or her own. Prince Jario saw a chance to increase his fortune by delaying an agent that was to remove an adversary of the Besardo. He went to the marked man and told him what was going to happen to him and tried to talk the man into signing over his estate to him with a promise that he would see that his children were taken care of. Lord Milrod was not a man to be threatened, and he threw Jario out of his house with much public fuss. Naturally it saved his life but not Jario's."

"Queen Tess trained all her daughters and their daughters into the ways of the forest and how to return to it should they fear for their lives."

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

"Your mother didn't just have you to protect, she had two of her nephews and a niece. They would not have survived in the forest. Kel, Ottir and Jennifer. She took the responsibility to save her sister's children."

"Worse things have happened. Even now within the royal castle there are many factions that are plotting and hatching schemes to get something that is someone else's. It's a game to them, not caring about the lives and fortunes of others that they destroy," Neda informed her matter of factly. "We're taught that from infancy on many levels. Baby cries for something, it's withheld by nanny, and soon baby learns how to manipulate nanny for what it wants, and nanny teaches baby how to get what it wants from baby."

"Not all of that is bad!" Connie said horrified that what she saw in that was what she had used to teach her little sister, or cousin, how to behave. When she had left, Jennifer was acting like a spoiled brat instead of a sensible helper to her mother. It escaped her what she had done wrong.

"No. But it's how we all learn to survive. What I'm trying to show you is that it's all a game. The attitude we have toward it is how we perceive it as bad or good, but it's just a game. It shouldn't be taken personally. Once it becomes personal, you lose your advantage of seeing the big picture."

"What if I don't want to play the game?"

"That is not an option. As you find in the compound and the tower, whether you want to play or not, things happen and you're in the game."

"This group of killers, just why hasn't anyone removed them?"

"It's been a long process and when we think we have all the members identified and eliminated, another pops up and with a new group of members just as evil as the others."

"I'm not sure I understand why it's so important why I need to die."

"Revenge. Politics of the have nots. When you become thirty-five it is the age of your ascension to the throne. When you reach eighteen is when you began your official

training under another's tutelage, Lord Kelma. He will guide you to your further training in duty. The seat your mother left vacant is being overseen by me and I would like to turn it over sooner, but it has been agreed that you lack training at this time. You don't know enough about the forest and you must learn more of the life that you will be making decisions on behalf of."

"A guardian?" Connie asked hesitantly.

"In a sense, but not like the forest guardians of different areas of the forest. You can leave and not lose your power or sense of being. You are not bound to a spot like a forest sprite or spirit. As queen of the Moore Castle you have not just a forest to care for but all those that live in and around it."

"Is that why I'm able to see and feel some of the forest's beings?"

"In part. You have the blood of your mother's line of which was strengthened by your father who was a second cousin on your mother's side. It was unfortunate that your father did not live to see the fruit of his seed. Those who were plotting against the sacred bloodline thought killing your father a day before the wedding would put a stop to the plan, not knowing they were too late. Your mother had foreseen the death of her sisters and their husbands and what would happen to her lover, your father. She slept with your father before the marriage bed. She had cautioned him not to enter the forest with a group of people he thought was his friends, but he did anyway, thinking she was just being nervous about their marriage."

"Has anyone punished his killers?"

"There is no one to punish," Queen Eloise said softly.

"It's taking it personally when you want to seek revenge," Neda cautioned.

"So, they or he, she or whoever is responsible is still alive?" demanded Connie.

"No. The original leaders have since been replaced with others. The Besardo are made up of people that are easily spotted by those with sight. Their plots are foiled, and they kill their own, each lower level trying to get to the top with another's blood. Let those trained in uncovering the Besardo handle it," Queen Eloise advised.

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

"You will be trained to protect yourself, but my counsel, as your elder and I hope someday a friend, is not to get caught up in the drama of hate and vengeance. That

type of energy attracts energy and soon it will be so thick the light will find it difficult to shine in."

"Galina, remember?" Asiza said.

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

"It's the name you picked for yourself, without conscious involvement. It is your name of power," the Queen said.

"Don't repeat it to anyone outside of us. It will give others power over you."

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

"Well, shall we get to the school room?" Neda asked.

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

"Not me. You."

"Wait a moment!"

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

"You sound like mother," she replied crossly.

* * *

The aircraft dropped them off on the outer edges of the forest. This was not Morwea Woods, or not a part Connie had felt.

"This is the west side of the forest. Mother's aunt lives here," Asiza said. "She's short and not the teaching type, but this is where you start."

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

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

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

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

"Ha!" the child laughed as if she were told a funny story.

"She's one of mother's special projects," Asiza said in a mocking tone.

"Thanks," Connie told her in an undertone.

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

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

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

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

"Oh yes you are. Yep. It's not likely I'm going to be your maid, now, am I?"

Connie closed one eye to look at the child from a different perspective. Behind the child was an energy force that was as if it were around an adult, rather than a child.

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

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

"Ungrateful crone, she is," Asiza muttered.

The childish laughter came from all around them. It was confounding.

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

The child looked down at her surprised. "Did no one teach you how to cross charmed gates?"

Connie tenderly touched her forehead. "No. I've heard nothing of gates, or gates through trees."

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

"Just how old are you?" Connie blurted.

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

Connie's eyes opened wide and then her environment changed.

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

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

"Alright. Alright. Can we get this going? I have other things to do," Asiza said impatiently.

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

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

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

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

"Are you telling me my job? Do you want it?" The crone had a wide smile on her face, challenging Asiza.

"You're getting distracted. If you didn't drive everyone crazy, you'd have more visitors and wouldn't be talking our ears off."

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

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

Two heart beats later, the three were in the center of a small clearing in the forest and from crone she was back to the child form.

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

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

"No. I will do the first."

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

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

Connie jumped back, astonished.

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

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

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

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

His annoyance quickly disappeared as he concentrated on Connie.

Unconsciously she took a few steps back.

I won't harm you. You are under another's protection.

"Who are you?"

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

"Do I have a familiar?"

Both Asiza and Rozene laughed while Akeen transformed back into a black cat shape.

"You have to work for the privilege," Asiza told her matter of factly.

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

Rozene, still in her child form began to sort through her things. Once she had what she wanted, the other things and the bag disappeared.

"What I have here, is for particular protection. This," she pointed to a small stone, "carries the most powerful magic." She glanced at Akeen, "Not counting you, my friend."

So began Connie's lessons with another teacher; her childhood forgotten as she walked through new worlds and experienced new and bigger threats.

End of Part II Morwea Woods