



Chapter Fifteen

Accidental Betrayal

When Zane returned to the barn, he brought food, a bedroll, a set of clean clothes, and a sword-- a sword that looked exactly like Veronica's. She had to check the one lying in the straw at her side to make sure that it was still there.

"Where did you get that?" she asked.

"It was a gift from the King," Zane said, placing the sword gently across both hands, presenting it for her examination. "He said I needed to practice with a sword that fit me if I'm going to be in his guard someday."

"Oh." Veronica hadn't realized her sword was but one of a matching set.

Seeing that his sword was a perfect match to Veronica's Zane said, "Whoa, the only difference is that your hilt stone is red, and mine is blue. I had no idea that mine was one of a set."

"Nor did I." Then anxious to move on and at the same time curious to learn more about this boy she added, "You said my dad offered to let you go to Karta for schooling?"

"Yeah, this coming fall. I'll turn twelve during winter season. He said he would be my sponsor so I could attend the Mythscola, so I could learn about and develop my Gifts, but I said no."

"Why?"

"My mom didn't like the idea, she needs me here to run things for her."

"What about your dad?"

“He’s my step-dad. He doesn’t think much of Gifts. Besides, I don’t need to go to some snobby elitist school. I can learn everything I need to right here.”

Dalminyo said, “That is absolutely true, especially since *all* you need to know is how to bring me some more food and water.”

Veronica shot her equidae a wicked glance then said, “You really should be honored you know; going to the Mythscola is a big deal. Lots of kids who apply are not accepted. Especially those who are not yet twelve.”

“Veronica will begin in the fall, though she is not yet twelve,” Dalminyo said. “It used to be that only the Demogeron, the nobles, were allowed to attend the Mythscola--”

“Until my mom changed it,” Veronica quickly added, giving Dalminyo another sideways frown. “Now, it doesn’t matter who your parents are, just what your Gifts are.”

“Yes, well, that is the Queen’s will.” Dalminyo snorted through a mouth full of oats.

“Still,” Veronica said aloud to cut Dalminyo off, then in her head added, ‘Enough! Don’t speak with your mouth full!’ Snapping his tail in her direction, Dalminyo rolled his eyes at V and thrust his head down in the trough to sulk. Then to Zane she continued, “You have to compete to get in, and I’ve never heard of my father wanting to sponsor anyone before.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong; I’m honored. The King is a great man. I pledged my allegiance to him with this very sword because of his kindness.”

“Why do you have it here now?” Veronica asked, still wondering why her father would give a sword just like hers to

a stable boy she had never heard of.

“Well, if you insist on staying here in the stables, then I’ll need it to protect you. The hobbyahs have been getting bolder and bolder these days.”

Veronica was admittedly a bit flattered but said, “I assure you, I do not need your protection, especially from a storybook creature.”

“Hobbyahs aren’t just in storybooks.”

“Well, yes, that’s true, but they are trapped in the Lower Tiers.”

“Not anymore, I’ve seen them.”

“You’ve *seen* them?” Veronica hopped up, leaving the partially eaten plate of food Zane had brought her lying askew on the straw.

“Well, I’ve heard them, and I’ve seen their handiwork, and it isn’t pretty. They’ve been tearing up our chickens and geese for more than a month. Even stole one of our calves.”

“Don’t be silly. Foxes and wolves do such things all the time.”

“Foxes and wolves don’t leave little sickles behind.” He grabbed a curved blade with a short handle from a workbench in the barn. “Take a look at this. I tell you, there is evil creeping around the tier, and it’s getting braver.”

Veronica recognized that farm implements of this type were used to harvest tall grass or grain by the un-gifted. But upon closer examination she also saw how razor sharp this one was and that it had strange markings etched into its blade and handle. Still.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Veronica stated in her best Princess-at-court voice, trying to disguise her concern. “The Lands are perfectly safe.”

Zane's face scrunched slightly on one side. "Oh yeah, then tell me, Princess, why are you hiding in my barn? And why did your father carry the Onoxmon with him when he came through here last week?"

"I doubt my father had the Onoxmon with him," Veronica said warily, seeing Julia look up from her food.

"Yes, he did. It was in his sword. Usually there's an oval hole in the hilt of it, but this time the hole was filled with a huge black stone. It fit perfectly. And it had the mark of the pinnacle sun etched into each side. I asked to touch it, but your father said absolutely not. Hey, does it really do what lore says it can do? Lay waste to entire cities and stuff?"

"Of course not," Veronica said, though in her heart she felt sure legends of the Onoxmon's immense power would someday prove true.

"Oh, is that because your dad can't make it work, or because the Onoxmon is a fake?"

"My dad can make it work! He's--"

"Veronica," Julia said, "you really should finish eating and get some rest. We have a long journey ahead of us in the morning."

"Where are you going, anyway?" Zane asked.

Julia replied, "Back to Karta."

"No, we're going to the Valleyridge," Veronica stated.

"I've seen that place," Zane said, "I dreamt about it the other night." Then almost to himself he said, "Same night when I was talking to Ember."

"Ember?" Veronica asked. How would Zane know Ember?

"Yeah, she's my hawken," Zane answered, raising his chin and resting his hands on his hips.

“*Your* hawken?”

“Well, more like a friend. She is a magnificent bird. Long feathers around her face look like some kind of mask. And I’d never seen an orange-ish red like that before I met her. It’s like her feathers were dipped in fire or something.”

“How do you know her name? I thought you hadn’t talked to magical creatures before now.”

“Well, that’s just what I call her. Wait, is that really her name? I thought it had just come to me... she must have told me. Maybe it was her who showed me the Valleyridge too? I thought it was just a dream, but maybe the place was real. I dreamt of it the night that crazy equidae ran off.”

“What do you mean?” Julia asked. She had left her bone and was now on the same side of the stable as Zane and Veronica.

Dalminyo’s ears were up and turned slightly toward them, listening, but his head remained down in the trough, making a show of greedily eating the additional oats Zane had given him.

“Well, it was the evening after the King and his men had left. I was cleaning up the stalls and talking to Ember. She had shown up earlier in the day. I really couldn’t understand her, but she always listens to my stories and keeps me company while I work. I was telling her about the King’s visit, how he must be off on some really important and dangerous mission because he had the Onoxmon with him. She started to act kind of funny, squawking and shaking her wings, and then I said I heard one of the King’s men say they would be traveling by way of Bellafons, which is at the tip of the Valleyridge, on their way to the Arch at Bedforda. That’s when that crazy equidae, Hellantae, busted down the barn door and ran off

into the night. And then Ember flew off too. It was biz-arre.” Zane fanned both hands out to his sides for emphasis, then added, “Later that night I had the wildest dream.”

“What was it?” Julia asked.

“I dreamt that I was flying over the Valleyridge. I was banking and skimming right across the tree tops at the leading edge of it. Then I shot up high over a big meadow. Below I could see that the King and his men were under attack. They’d been ambushed. The King had leapt from his horse and was now sitting on top of a dragon. It was spec! At first, it looked like he was going to ride it. Then he raised his sword up in both hands like he was going to slay it. But before he could slam down his blade, this really weird green bolt of light hit him in the back and took him out. I think it was navitas. The light came from this guy who was riding the crazy equidae, Hellantae. When the guy looked up, it was the same man who had left Hellantae here at my stable a few days before. Next thing I knew the green-light stuff was headed right up at me. That’s when I woke up, and man, was I glad it was just a dream.”

Veronica waited numbly for him to continue, but that was where Zane finished, utterly unaware of the horror that now threatened to completely overwhelm her.

“Have you seen Ember since that night?” Julia asked.

“No, she comes and goes all the time. Sometimes I don’t see her for weeks.” Zane glanced from Julia to Veronica. During his story she had collapsed onto her blankets previously laid out in a clean stall. As he looked down at her, his face darkened. The twinkle of excitement that danced in

his eyes during the telling of his tale was now replaced with concern. “Wait, this was just a dream, right? Nothing has really happened to the King has it? Has it?”

The stable was silent as Veronica choked back tears.

“We don’t know what has happened to my dad, but I do know that my sister has been kidnapped, and I’m going to get her back.” Veronica rolled away. Just in time to hide the hot tears that spilled onto her face. She shifted her head back toward the alleyway, but rather than face him, she peeked out undetected from under the arms now folded around her head.

Turning to Julia, Zane asked, “My dream was real? Well, was it?”

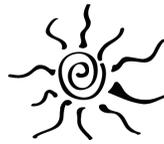
“It might have been a vision through Ember’s eyes. Hawken are known for being able to align with the minds of Gifted ones and let them see through their eyes, but perhaps not.”

“But if it was real, that means that equidae heard me. I told him where the King would be.” He bit his lower lip as his head began to shake ever so slightly. His hands slid along each temple and knotted into fists in his wavy black hair. “What have I done?”

He made a step toward Veronica, but Julia blocked his path. “It’s time to sleep now, Master Slayer.”

The cheetatarah moved to lie down protectively in the hay at Veronica’s back, leaving Zane to stand alone in the middle of the stable. He bowed his head and a wavy black lock fell across his face. For eleven going on twelve, he was taller than most. His frame was still that of a boy, but clearly, a life of manual labor had made him strong. It was also clear that

Zane liked to think of himself as being older than his years, both mentally and physically. Tonight however, the solitary figure Veronica saw standing in the barn was still a mere boy, a boy suddenly set adrift in the world of men. She knew how he felt.



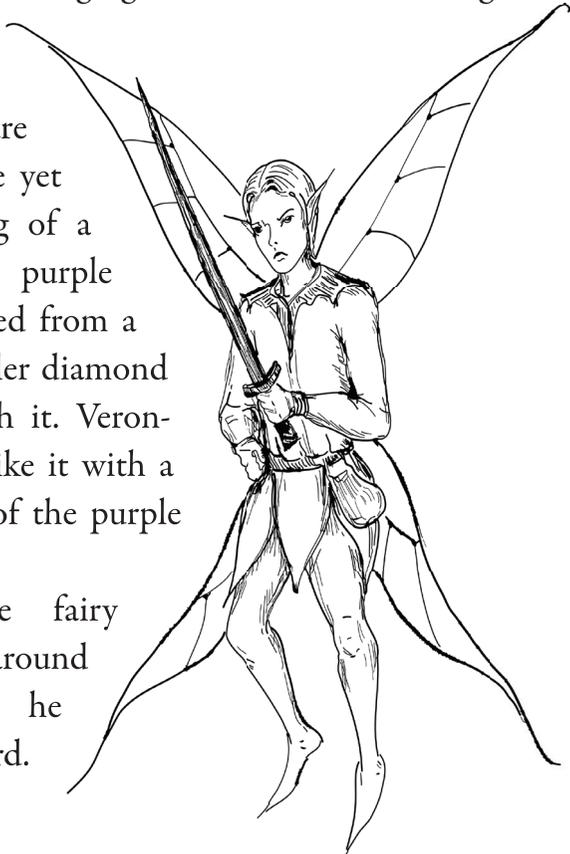
Chapter Sixteen

I So Believe in Fairies

The dragon's leg was warm and soft-- enough, so why was she awake? Sophia blinked hard, trying to clear her head. Then she saw a flicker in the dark. It darted from one part of the fairy castle to another. She didn't move as it approached her. Her eyes adjusted to the dark and she held her breath. A fairy! The first she had ever seen! And to her surprise, it was a boy. He had blonde wavy hair, deep purple garments, and golden wings. Yet he was not girly looking at all. In fact, as he hovered right in front of her, he scowled. Then when their eyes met, he drew his sword. Sophia sat up, and her blanket fell to her waist. Hanging below her throat dangled the necklace given

to her by her parents. The square setting was simple yet elegant, consisting of a large almost oval purple amethyst suspended from a chain with a smaller diamond suspended beneath it. Veronica had one just like it with a red ruby instead of the purple stone.

When the fairy saw the necklace around Sophia's neck, he lowered his sword.



Hanging from the belt around his waist was a pouch, emerging from the top of the pouch, a chain. The fairy put his sword away and began to pull the chain, first one arm's length, then another, then another and another until finally at the end of the chain a beautiful purple stone emerged from the pouch. The fairy grabbed the chain above the stone with his left hand while holding the rest of the chain looped like a lariat in his right. As he held it out toward Sophia, she reached down and saw the resemblance to her own and held it out just before the fairy. As the two stones became closer in proximity, both began to glow. A wave of what could only be described as power flowed through her. It started in her chest and rippled out to her limbs, until it tingled through her fingertips.

She jolted backward, falling against the dragon. The great beast shifted in response. The fairy darted to the back of the cave, and by the glow of both gems, Sophia strained to see what he was up to. Taking the stone in both hands, the fairy let the chain fall; he then placed the stone into the top of the Arch, just where the Alistone should go. The little Arch came to life and instead of a wall of stone, it became a shimmering, swirled-up rainbow. As the color dissolved away, Sophia could first see the black of Empty Space, then the light of other Tiers as they flashed by. Just as the Arch began to focus and form a path to its chosen Tier, the dragon stirred.

Reacting to the sound of rustling scales, the fairy shot a panicked look toward Sophia and the dragon, grabbed the chain firmly in his hands, and flew into the Arch. When he had passed beyond the threshold he turned, flew backward, and pulled on the chain. The Alistone, attached to the other end of the chain, popped from its stone cradle and disappeared into the pathway just as the Arch closed.

The dragon readjusted his position but continued to sleep. Reassured that she was not completely alone, that someone now knew where she was, Sophia was eventually able to find sleep too. As she drifted off she could not wait to tell Veronica that she had actually seen a fairy *and* a dragon.

She didn't have to wait long, she told her sister that night in a dream.