

WASTES OF FAERNVORT

EAST

IRON HILLS

TOR BINDER

TOR MOHEN

RIVER SHAED

FAERSAVEN

MOISEHIEN

FORTRESS OF VORTINGEN

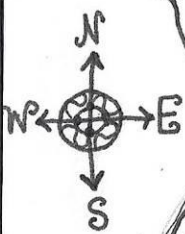
THE KING'S CITY

BLACK RIVER

SALBA RIVER

FURMA RIVER

RHIEMSAVEN



TOWN OF SELKYNSSEN

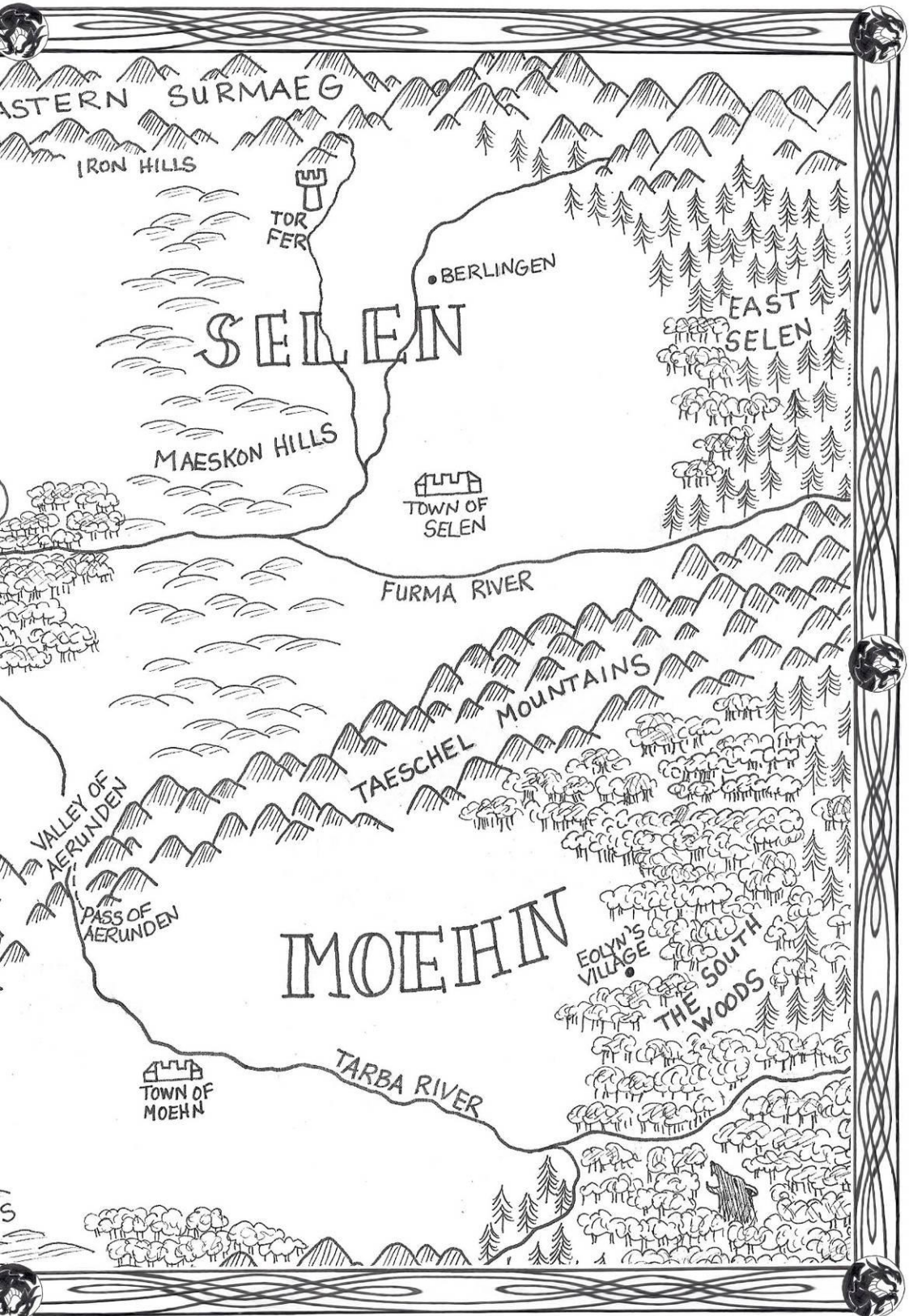
SELKYNSSEN

DOLORIAN MINES

FOOTHILLS OF THE PARAMEN MOUNTAINS

FURMA RIVER

TOR MER



EASTERN SURMAEG

IRON HILLS

TOR FER

BERLINGEN

SELEN

EAST SELEN

MAESKON HILLS

TOWN OF SELEN

FURMA RIVER

TAESCHEL MOUNTAINS

VALLEY OF AERUNDEN

PASS OF AERUNDEN

MOEHN

EOLYN'S VILLAGE

THE SOUTH WOODS

TOWN OF MOEHN

TARBA RIVER

Eolyn

A Novel

Karin Rita Gastreich

HADLEY
RILLE
BOOKS

EOLYN

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For Suzanne and Rafael

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Chapter 1

THE AUTUMN MORNING dawned cold and crisp, with the faint scent of winter death in the air. Leaves rustled underfoot as Eolyn ran into the forest, laughing. The rich aromas of pine and loam filled her senses. Fables told at the hearths of her village played through her mind, tales of man-eating trolls, mourning spirits, elusive Guendes and witches who devoured young children. Somewhere in the vast interior of the South Woods, the creatures of legend were lurking. Maybe today she would find one. She scanned the mossy green corridors, her eyes wide and alert.

“Eolyn!” Her brother’s anxious call alerted her to his approach. She had raced him through the mist-covered fields and—though he was much bigger—had left him far behind. With a playful grin she gripped her basket, woven from the waxy bark of a tallow sapling, and darted further into the forest.

None of the other children ventured into the South Woods with such ease of heart, but then none of them had a mother quite like Eolyn’s. Kaie had always laughed at the legends. She called them morbid entertainment designed to keep the unprepared from entering where they were not welcomed. It was Kaie who had taught Eolyn how to listen to the forest and use its gifts. The memory ignited a dull ache in the girl’s heart. The last time she walked these paths with her mother was months ago, as spring was warming into summer. Now the only place where Eolyn could feel Kaie’s presence was in the familiar company of these trees.

Eolyn wandered amid the towering giants, eyes directed toward the high canopy, a tangle of ebony branches silhouetted against the bright sky. Her natural enthusiasm was tempered by the respect her mother had instilled in her heart. She passed one small hand over the rough bark of a massive oak, then grasped the smooth bend of a low-hanging limb. A flash of ivory revealed a patch of fungus beneath the mottled leaf litter, a spot of ruby the last berries on a thorny shrub. As Eolyn gathered these simple treasures, she imagined her mother’s voice

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reflected in the flow of the stream across fine gray stones, and carried on the wind that rippled through the branches.

“Come look at this one,” Kaie used to call, and the girl would run to her mother’s side in time to see her pluck a delicate herb from the foot of an ancient tree. “This will bring down a fever in winter time.”

The plant bore a star-shaped yellow flower and tiny pointed leaves like a miniature fir. It pricked Eolyn’s fingers as she crushed it to inhale its bitter essence.

“And this,” Kaie gathered several fresh mushrooms bearing the sharp aroma of soft cheese, “will help fill our bellies tonight. . . A balm made from the leaves of this black nettle will heal an infection. But only use the black nettle, Eolyn, for the white will kill you faster than you can sneeze.”

Every time they visited the forest, Eolyn learned new foods and medicines from her mother, whose knowledge seemed boundless.

“You must guard all of this in your heart,” Kaie had instructed. “It is Simple Magic and it will serve you well.”

“It’s magic?” Eolyn’s eyes opened wide. She liked plants, but magic was dangerous. Last fall a woman had burned for witchcraft in Moehn. Eolyn’s friend Dels had seen it. Dels said the first thing to catch fire on a witch was her hair and the last thing to die was her heart. According to Dels, a burning witch smelled so bad even the rats ran away when the pyre was lit.

“It’s not real magic, Eolyn.” Her mother sighed. “Not the kind they would burn you for at any rate. Still, it’s better you don’t talk about what I’m teaching you back in the village, not even in our own home.”

“Why not?”

“Because the walls whisper.” Kaie had many sayings like this one, lyrical in tone and mysterious in meaning. “They hear what is said and repeat it at inopportune moments.”

Eolyn’s mother paused and sat on a large smooth rock. She loosened the ribbons that bound her hair, letting it fall in copper rivers over her shoulders. Her eyes, the color of spring leaves, disconnected from her daughter. Her fingers sifted through her tresses as if to alleviate the tension that hovered over her brow. After a long silence Kaie drew a deep breath and stood.

“It’s late.” She bound her hair and took Eolyn’s hand in hers. “We should start back to the farm.”

“But Mama, you haven’t explained anything about Simple Magic!”

“Nor will I. Not today anyway.”

“Why not?”

Eolyn’s mother did not respond. Her gait grew impatient and Eolyn had to run to keep up. “Why are you angry, Mama? What have I done?”

Kaie stopped abruptly. She bent down and placed a tender hand upon Eolyn’s cheek. “I’m not angry with you. I’m angry at the silence that has been imposed upon our lives.”

That was the first and last time Eolyn’s mother had mentioned Simple Magic. A few weeks afterwards Kaie went alone into the South Woods. She returned with a sturdy walking stick almost twice Eolyn’s height and a worn leather purse secured to a wide belt. Eolyn’s father grew angry, and Kaie’s last nights on the farm were marked by bitter disputes between them. Yet the morning she left he held her close and kissed her with a passion fed as much by love as it was by fear.

“Where is she going, Papa?” Eolyn asked as her mother departed on the road leading north.

He took her up in his solid arms, giving the girl one last look at her mother’s retreating figure. His earth brown eyes narrowed, and his voice was subdued. “Your mother’s allies are dead, but her loyalties are not. We must pray to the Gods for her safe return.”

Eolyn was not allowed past this evasive response. Still she had obeyed her father and prayed. The Gods proved slow in their answer. Spring slipped into summer and summer faded to fall, yet Kaie did not return. So this morning, when Eolyn and her brother raced toward the forest, they did so without their mother once again. This would be the last day of the season before winter set in and froze what was left of the forest harvest. The trees shook under a frigid northern wind. The fruits and mushrooms were cold to the touch, and Eolyn’s breath hung like a ghost in front of her.

“Come, Eolyn. Look at this one.”

Startled, Eolyn dropped her basket. Berries and herbs bled onto the forest floor. The woman’s voice was real, not a whisper on the passing wind, not a memory of months ago. Eolyn’s heart should have filled with joy, but she felt only fear. The forest was ominously still.

“Mama?” Shivering, Eolyn looked around for her brother, but Ernan was nowhere to be seen. “Mama?”

“I am here, Eolyn.”

The girl jumped at the touch upon her shoulder. Kaie stood next to her, tall and pale as the moonlight. Her eyes were opaque green and her hair fell unbound to her waist. Instinctively Eolyn reached toward her. Kaie shimmered and vanished, only to reappear a few paces away.

“What’s happening?” Eolyn whispered taking a step back.

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“Hush, my daughter, and listen to me. Find your brother. Tell him you must run. Tell him you must hide.”

With that she disappeared. A breeze rustled through the leaves. Eolyn heard an agitated squirrel in the distance, but its fierce chatter faded against the pounding of her brother’s feet on the forest floor.

“Eolyn!” Ernan came running from behind the trees. He stopped breathless and grasped her shoulders with such strength it hurt. “Where have you been? Why didn’t you answer when I called? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

Eolyn did not answer. She stared at where her mother had stood a moment ago.

“Eolyn, look at me.” Ernan put his hand to her chin and forced her gaze back to him. Five years her senior, Eolyn’s brother was a tall lanky boy with sharp features, red hair and intense green eyes like their mother’s. Ever since Eolyn could remember Ernan had been there watching over her. “What’s wrong? What has happened?”

“I saw Mama.” Eolyn’s voice sounded very small. She wondered if Ernan would believe her. “Mama said we should run. She said we have to hide.”

Ernan clenched his jaw and closed his hand tight around Eolyn. He stood up straight and sent his gaze like a lance toward their village. “Gods help us. They’ve found her.”

“Found who? Mama?”

Her brother’s face flushed red in anger. He spoke without looking at her. “Father was wrong to wait. We should have left a long time ago.”

“Where is she? Is she coming back?”

Without warning Ernan took off toward the forest interior, dragging Eolyn behind him. They dodged trees and jumped over logs and stones. Twice Eolyn tripped. Her hands and knees stung as they scraped against the harsh earth, but Ernan did not ease his pace until they came to a small stream that cut through a narrow trench. He pushed Eolyn into a hole concealed by bushes.

“What is this place?” Eolyn trembled on hands and knees, overwhelmed by the musty smell of damp earth. “Ernan, what’s happening?”

Producing an oil lamp from somewhere in the shadows, Ernan ignited its steady glow with a bit of flint. “I’m going to get Papa. You stay here. Don’t make any noise and don’t come out—no matter what happens—until we return. Do you understand?”

“No! No I don’t understand because you haven’t told me anything!”

Ernan slipped out of the hideaway and covered the entrance behind him.

“Ernan, don’t go! Don’t leave me here alone!”

But Eolyn’s brother had already left. A thick darkness engulfed her, broken only by the steady flicker of the oil lamp. The air felt stale and the earthen walls crowded her shoulders, threatening to suffocate her. She would not stay here. She would follow Ernan to find their father or hide in a tree where she could see and breathe.

Just as Eolyn moved toward the entrance, a tremor made her pause. Instinctively she pressed her hands tight against the damp floor and lowered her ear to the ground. A thin thunder ran through the earth, gathering strength and rising like an obsidian wave in the direction of her village. When Eolyn closed her eyes, the tremor sucked her in. Bloody visions engulfed her, roaring and receding like wild fire tested by the wind. Mounted soldiers swirled through acrid smoke. Her friends crumpled under flashing swords. Peasants lay scattered upon the burgundy dust, their homes collapsing into crisp flames. Eolyn screamed for help, but no one seemed to hear her. She ran through the choking smoke, and stumbled upon her father. His limbs were twisted in odd angles against the unyielding ground. His life faded in a crimson river that drained into the earth.

Eolyn’s eyes flew open and a nauseating emptiness ripped through her. She scurried backwards, knocking the lamp over and extinguishing its flame. The wall of the hideaway stopped her retreat. Hugging her knees to her chest she hid her face and wept. For the rest of that long day, and the tortuous night that followed, she saw no more.

When at last the next morning’s cold light peered through the entrance to her hideaway, Eolyn’s limbs were cramped and stiff. The damp chill had penetrated her bones. The girl crept forward and peeked outside. Mist hovered over the stream. On the opposite bank a mottled brown rabbit searched through the leaves for the last of the fall forage. Behind it a pair of flame-throated warblers chirped in a small bush. Thus reassured no humans were about, Eolyn crawled out of the entrance and stood up on shaky legs.

The animals melted into the forest leaving a silence so deafening she covered her ears to shut it out.

Ernan should have returned by now, she thought. Their farm lay on the very edge of the South Woods. It wouldn’t have taken him long to run there and back. He would be here by now if he had survived.

Eolyn bit her tongue against the urge to call her brother’s name, lest any sound bring mounted soldiers from behind the trees. She considered crawling back into the hole in hopes of capturing a vision

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that would reveal Ernan's fate, but the thought of that dank shaft made her stomach turn. She told herself she did not need another vision. She saw what they did to the others. Ernan would not have been spared.

The story tellers of Eolyn's village had shared numerous tales of such raids. It was said entire villages were destroyed by the King's Riders for treachery and for harboring subversive magic. It was said no one survived his wrath and nothing was ever left standing. But Eolyn had always thought such horrors happened in other provinces, in faraway places like Selkynsen or Selen, where rebellious subjects still clung to old ways. Her family lived in Moehn. Who among the peasant farmers of her home could have disobeyed the King?

It is Simple Magic, Eolyn. The memory of her mother's words returned like the whisper of a tiny serpent. *And it will serve you well.*

The ground lurched and she stumbled to her knees. Sour bile burned up through her throat and spilled onto the forest floor.

Was that it? Had Simple Magic condemned them all?

Terrible wrenching sobs shook her body, a torment of unbearable loss and guilt. For she, too, had indulged in the treacherous and the forbidden. She had learned the secrets of the plants.

The pale sun burned the mist off the ground and settled into the high branches long before she ran out of tears. Not until her sobs faded into exhausted silence did the sounds of the forest return, the rustling of dry leaves, the subtle murmur of the autumn wind, the silver gurgle of the tiny stream.

"Come look at this one, Eolyn."

The girl started at the voice of her mother, close again and very real. Sniffling, she wiped the damp from her cheeks and pushed herself to her feet.

"Mama?" she called as loud as she dared.

Only the stream replied with its liquid tones.

"Mama?"

A fluid movement caught Eolyn's eye, a subtle shift of light beyond the far trees. Eolyn thought she recognized the familiar sway of her mother's skirt, the sinuous confidence of Kaie's stride. She took a hesitant step forward.

"Mama?"

The shadow responded by slipping toward the heart of the South Woods.

Chapter 2

HER MOTHER'S ELUSIVE shadow continued ahead of Eolyn, never quite within reach, always beyond the next tree or around the bend. After leading her deep into the forest, the image of Kaie disappeared altogether. Loneliness descended upon Eolyn. Unfamiliar trees gawked at her, their thick bark twisted into expressions of loathing and disapproval. A strong gust rattled the high branches, sending a shower of auburn leaves fluttering to the ground. The birds did not sing. The squirrels did not chatter. The South Woods had never seemed so cold and heartless.

Frightened, Eolyn turned slowly on her feet, trying to identify the path that brought her here, but everything looked the same. For the first time, the forest made her tremble. What if the legends were true? What if werewolves and seven headed rats and child eating witches waited beyond the terrible faces of those dark trees? Yet Mama had always insisted she had nothing to fear from the forest. Though she often expressed the opposite opinion, Eolyn now remembered, about the King. Surely it was safer under the dense cover of these trees than out in the open, where soldiers and swords could find her.

If you are ever lost in the woods, Mama had once said, do not be afraid. Remember the trees are your friends, and they will receive you well. Remember the songs I taught you, and do not take anyone's path but your own.

"How will I find my path?" Eolyn whispered.

Your path will be made by wandering.

It was one of her mother's favorite sayings, and though Eolyn was not sure what Mama meant, these words were her only guidance now. She chose one of her mother's songs and with the tune wavering upon her lips, placed one uncertain foot in front of the other.

Days passed while Eolyn wandered. Although Kaie had taught her how to find late season berries and distill water from the thick moss, every morning the girl woke a little hungrier than the last. The further she traveled, the thinner the harvest. The scattered fruits that turned up in her path did not alleviate the emptiness that gnawed at her belly.

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One night the restless cries of a Blue Wing Owl startled Eolyn out of her sleep. Barks and yelps rose out of the shadows. A pack of wolves was bearing down upon her. Panicked, she scrambled up a trunk in the darkness, guided by some desperate instinct that pushed her so hard the branches stung her, raising jagged welts. For hours she clung to the tree while the pack snuffled about below, jaws snapping in the dark, barks and howls rising toward her. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She felt like a fool. Why had she strayed so far? Why did she not wait for Ernan? What if Ernan had survived? What if he was looking for her even now? She would die here before he found her, if not of starvation, then at the fangs of these terrible beasts.

But in the morning, they were gone. Her limbs cold and stiff, Eolyn climbed down the tree. She listened to the forest. Her sharp senses caught no sound or movement, and after some hesitation, she continued on her way.

After that, Eolyn took to finding strong high limbs in which to sleep. About a week into her journey, as the new moon drifted behind the forest canopy, she awoke to see two Guendes leaning over her. She gasped and they froze. They looked almost like children and bore the colors of night and forest. Their large eyes twinkled and their button noses twitched. One held a simple lantern glowing orange-warm. The other watched her with a curious expression of embarrassment. He held a blanket of woolly moss and spider silk, and gently laid it over her. The Guendes seemed little more than a dream, but they gave Eolyn a sense of companionship. It was as if the forest had at last stretched out a comforting hand. Exchanging a glance, the Guendes began to sing in soft whispery tones. Eolyn shifted her position, closed her eyes and slept again.

The next morning at the foot of the tree she found a leaf dish full of ripe golden juice berries and a wooden cup of fresh sap milk from the Berenben Tree. The generous breakfast delighted her. In thanksgiving, she gathered the brightest fall leaves and the shiniest brown nuts and left them as gifts for the Guendes, just as her mother taught her to do. From that day forward the Guendes kept her warm at night and fed her in the morning. They followed her with the invisible rustle of wind through dry leaves.

By the time Eolyn arrived at a large stony riverbed, she had lost track of the moon's passage. In a few months spring would fill the river's banks to overflowing, but now with autumn drying up into winter she crossed the water without wetting her feet, by jumping from one stone to another. She paused on the opposite bank and considered following the current downstream. Before she could decide on her next step, Eolyn saw another

Guende.

The creature stood but a few feet away, reflecting the hues of day and fall. It wore colored leaves in its cap and an evergreen vest embroidered with seeds and nuts. With smiling eyes peeking out from under bushy brows, it proffered its hand. Eolyn was surprised by the feathery lightness of its touch, as if it were not a real hand at all, but an impulse of energy that took hold of her and pulled her forward.

They left the river and walked for almost an hour, until Eolyn felt a subtle shift in the resonance of the forest. The woods did not look any different, with its old trunks, crusty bark and draped moss. Yet something had changed. Caught between curiosity and apprehension, Eolyn's heart beat so hard it pushed into her throat. The Guende tugged on her hand in reassurance. An intense drone filled her ears, as if she were passing through an invisible hive of bees. After a few steps the buzzing stopped, the Guende disappeared and Eolyn stood alone in a small clearing. The thick expanse of trees that defined her world moments before had melted away. Under a cover of soft grass, the ground sloped downward and then rose again. Beyond a low hill hovered a faint wisp of chimney smoke. Taken with a sudden enthusiasm founded on the hope of human company, Eolyn bounded forward. On the other side of the rise she saw a simple cottage surrounded by a thick garden.

“Good day!” she called out. “Is anyone home?”

The bushes rustled. A dark hood rose up and peered at her. “Well. Who is this mouse that calls upon my humble house?”

The hag's voice crackled and hissed like a night fire. Eolyn stepped backwards, regretting her boldness at once. How could she have been so foolish? She knew the stories about hags living in the woods. They were witches, all of them. They turned children into bread and ate them for breakfast.

Rising to her full and somewhat crooked height, the hag shuffled toward Eolyn. “Don't run away, my child.”

Eolyn had no intention of obeying, but her feet betrayed her and rooted into the ground like stubborn weeds. Locating a stump next to the girl, the old woman eased herself down. Several minutes passed in silence.

“You are not much of a talker,” she said at last. “All the better I suppose. I've grown accustomed to an existence without chatter in this place. How long have you been in the woods?”

“Nearly a moon, I think.” Eolyn's voice was subdued with dread.

“A full moon?” the old one repeated with surprise and interest. “How did you survive so long on your own?”

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“I know the late harvest berries and mushrooms and how to find springs and draw water from the moss. Then the Guendes found me.” And led her here. Treacherous creatures!

“I see. And what drove you into the forest in the first place?”

Eolyn blinked and looked away. Her eyes began to burn and her throat ached.

“Come, child.” The woman’s voice was quiet and gentle. “You can tell me.”

Eolyn was not going to tell her anything, but then words came spilling out anyway. “There were horses and soldiers and terrible fires and . . . they killed my father, and my brother never came back . . . and then I . . . heard my mother. I saw her, I swear! She told me to follow her, but it wasn’t her after all . . . and then I got lost.”

The hag folded her arms. “You’re a very courageous girl. How many summer solstices have you seen?”

Eolyn shifted nervously on her feet.

“Nine, perhaps?” The old woman asked.

The blood drained from Eolyn’s face. Proof of witchcraft! How else could she have guessed her age?

“Speak, child. A guest in my house must say what she thinks.”

“Are you the witch who eats children?” Eolyn covered her mouth with both hands, shocked by her reckless tongue.

The old lady’s eyes sparked in the shadow of her cloak and she reached up to remove her hood. Eolyn expected to see an ancient face twisted into a sharp warty nose, unkempt hair splayed like straw and inflamed eyes that would hex her on the spot. The truth proved oddly disappointing. The woman’s features were soft, lined with the many years that had bent her body. Her thick gray hair lay braided in a neat coil at the nape of her neck. Her nose was an unremarkable peak over narrow lips. She watched Eolyn with keen gray eyes. “Well that is not a question I get every day. Tell me . . . What did you say your name was?”

“Eolyn.”

“Nice to meet you, Eolyn. I am Ghemena. Tell me, why do you think I am a witch who eats children?”

“Because you are an old woman, and you live alone in the South Woods.”

“That is rather damning evidence,” she conceded. “What else do you know about this child-eating witch?”

“She lives in a house made of sweetbread and the children come to eat it. That’s how she fattens them up before she throws them into her great oven.”

“I see. . .” The woman nodded, her face a mask of careful reflection. “Well, young Eolyn, you can see my house. It does indeed bear the shade of honey-sweetened bread, now that I think about it. Why don’t you take a bite? If the legend is true you’ll be able to eat it. Even better, I’ll be able to eat you. But I will let you run first. I’ll give you a full half-a-day’s head start just for being such an astute little girl.”

This proposition horrified Eolyn, but she saw no other choice than to accept. Half a day was better than none. With half a day she might outrun the old hag, unless the hag could fly as witches were supposed to do.

Eolyn approached the house and ran her hands over the cinnamon-colored shingles. With sudden determination her hunger took over. Breaking off a splintery piece, she bit down. Pain shot through her teeth. Wood scraped her tongue. Her stomach growled, and disappointment set in. She would have given anything to eat the old woman’s cottage just then, even if it meant being turned into a loaf of bread.

A loud snort made Eolyn spin around. The witch had fallen off her perch wheezing. Tears streamed from her eyes.

“Don’t try too hard, child, or you’ll break your teeth!” It took several minutes for the hag to recover from her fit. “A house of sweet bread! Who would invent such nonsense?” Gasping for breath and clutching at her ribs, she pushed herself to her feet. “Why don’t you come inside, Eolyn, and have some proper food?”

Unable to resist the force of her appetite, Eolyn accepted the invitation. As she watched the hag stoke the fire in her meager kitchen, the girl considered her options. With winter standing restless at the gates of the South Woods, they were few and stark. She could starve in the barren forest before the first snows turned her into ice, or she could eat on Ghemena’s hearth until the witch turned her into breakfast.

“Come spring I could send you back to Moisehén,” the old woman commented after serving a meal of hot vegetable stew, fresh bread and Berenben cheese.

Eolyn’s face descended into the bottom of her bowl where she licked the last drops of Ghemena’s peppery brew. Cruel witch, she thought, to talk of sending me back when she has no intention of doing so.

“I know a forester who wanders near these parts. He could accompany you home.”

“I don’t have a home anymore. It’s all gone. I told you that.”

“You spoke of the deaths of your father and brother. But what of

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your mother? Where is she?"

"Mama went away last spring. She never returned."

Ghemena's fine gray brows furrowed. "Why did she leave?"

"I don't know." Eolyn's throat was aching again. "I think she went to look for her loyalties because her allies died. That's what Papa said anyway."

Eolyn reached for a thick slice of bread and spread it with pungent cheese. She felt Ghemena study her every move, though whether the witch reflected on her father's words or estimated the disappointing width of Eolyn's arm, the girl could not tell. It seemed a great injustice that Ghemena should have real eyes. In all the stories the forest witches had eyes made of wood. They could not know the width of their captive's finger unless they touched it. The cleverest children always proffered a stick instead of a finger, securing precious time to plan their escape. She wondered where Ghemena's great oven was, and shuddered at the thought of charred remains of children's bones inside.

"Was your mother the one who taught you about the forest harvest?"

"Yes."

"What else did she teach you?"

"I don't know." Eolyn looked away from the table, her bread forgotten as soon as she finished preparing it. Why did the witch keep asking about her mother? Now her stomach hurt too. Maybe the food was poisoned!

"Did she teach you medicines? Did she tell you how to use the plants to heal?"

The air shifted hot against the walls. "I'm not supposed to talk about that."

"I see. What was her name?"

"Kaie."

Ghemena sucked a sharp breath through her yellow teeth.

"I knew your mother," she exclaimed softly, the pleasure of her discovery evident in her face. "A long time ago. Of course. I see the resemblance now. She was a maga warrior, one of the best of her time."

"What's that?" Eolyn's gut lurched. It was not possible, not in the darkest of imaginable worlds, that this hag had known her mother! "What is a maga warrior?"

"A maga is a kind of witch. A maga warrior is a witch trained in the arts of war."

"Mama was *not* a witch!" Eolyn's anger billowed up and evaporated the stones in her gut. "Mama was *beautiful*!"

Ghemena inhaled as if to respond and then held her breath behind

pursed lips. A troubled sadness invaded her eyes. She pushed away from the table and shuffled to the front door. Her unspoken thoughts trailed behind her in wispy clouds. Eolyn's head sank into her hands. What was she thinking? She had just insulted a witch.

After a moment Ghemena announced, "It's a fine afternoon. One of the last of the season, I imagine. Why don't you wash the dishes, Eolyn, and meet me in the garden. We'll have a cup of tea together."

Anxious to undo her transgression before Ghemena laid a curse on her, Eolyn obeyed. After cleaning the table she went outside and found the old woman on a bench, her cloak pulled tight around her shoulders. The subtle aroma of dormant herbs drifted about her. Inviting the girl to take a seat, Ghemena gave her a cup of water with a neatly placed sprig of mint. "I want to show you something. Watch me."

Folding her hands around her wooden vessel, Ghemena closed her eyes, lifted the liquid to her lips and uttered a short verse in an odd language.

Ehekaht naeom tzefur. Ehukae.

In an instant steam began rising off the water.

"How did you do that?" Eolyn's curiosity shoved her caution aside. "How did you heat up the water?"

"Did you not see? Give it a try. I believe you can do it just like me."

Folding her hands around the cup, Eolyn repeated the verse as best she could, but the water did not heat up.

"That was very good," Ghemena encouraged, "but it is not just a matter of imitation. Stand up straight with your feet firmly on the ground."

Eolyn did as she was told, gripping the cup and keeping her eyes closed tight.

"Wait, child. Open your eyes. Give me that cup. Take off your shoes and stockings."

As Eolyn pressed her bare feet against the damp earth, the resonance of the night changed. A vaguely familiar energy coursed through her legs, opening her senses and bringing every subtle sound of the season to the forefront of her awareness.

"That's it." Ghemena returned the cup to her hands. "Now relax and close your eyes. And breathe."

The cold air filled her lungs, pressing sharp against the solid wall of her ribs. Eolyn had the distinct impression she no longer stood in the same spot, as if Ghemena's garden were replaced by another that looked the same but worked very differently.

"What do you feel at your feet?" The old woman's voice brought

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to mind the quiet songs of Eolyn's mother.

"The ground."

"Yes, but tell me what it feels like."

"It is solid and still. . ." Eolyn spread her toes against the cool soil.

"But also in motion. How can that be?" She opened her eyes.

"Keep your eyes closed."

Eolyn obeyed.

"Now take a deep breath and tell me: What do you feel in the air?"

Eolyn drew in the evening air and felt its passage down her throat, its expansion against her chest, its departure in a warm and humid cloud. "It carries life, like . . . like an invisible thread."

"Very good. Now think about the water in your cup, and tell me about it."

"It is still. Yet it flows . . . in the cup and . . . beneath my skin."

A slight tremor invaded Ghemena's words. "And finally your heart, Eolyn. What do you feel in your heart?"

This was the easiest question of all. "Warmth. My heart is warm. It burns like the hearth in your home."

"Excellent, my girl. Now here is what I want you to do. Pull together all the elements you just told me about, the earth at your feet, the air in your lungs, the water in your cup and the fire in your heart. Imagine all of that coming together into a single brilliant point of light, and when you see that light, repeat the verse just as I said it."

The night thickened with Eolyn's effort. The task was not easy. The air could be smothered by earth or the fire extinguished by water. Eolyn recognized this and worked with care until a small white glow illuminated her interior. She opened her eyes and exhaled the verse.

Ehekaht naeom tzefur. Ehukae.

The cup responded with a soft rise of steam.

"Very good!" Ghemena exclaimed.

The sound of chirping insects and shifting herbs returned. Eolyn looked around as if seeing the garden for the first time. She felt different inside. Warmer. More complete. As if she just found something she always wanted, something that had always eluded her.

"Now come and sit with me," said Ghemena, "so we can enjoy our tea together."

Chapter 3

EVERYTHING QUEEN BRIANA crafted in her life was destroyed on the twelfth night after her death. King Kedehen forbade his son Akmael from attending the rite, but the boy found a nearby corridor with a narrow window from which he could spy on the vigil. At sunset the High Mages assembled as Master Tzeremond cast a circle in a castle courtyard. All of the Queen's belongings were laid inside on a large stack of firewood: dark velvet dresses and fine linen undergarments, ribbons that had bound her thick black hair, jewels that adorned her pale throat, embroidered slippers, curtains from her apartments, tapestries, even the bed sheets. On top of these were placed countless objects of magical intent, her medicine belt and multiple potted herbs, a large box of fine colored crystals, a store of carefully gathered and separated spider silks, a shallow silver dish she might have used as a seeing tool, collections of furs and insects, glass vials filled with mysterious liquids, a few remaining books, her ebony staff. No detail escaped unnoticed. When the task was finished, Master Tzeremond raised his commanding voice.

Ehekahtu.

Naeom ehaen avignaes, reohoert.

Faeom dumae ehekaht daum.

Ukahe.

The High Mages took up the chant, Akmael's father included. Though Kedehen's face remained hidden in the shadows, Akmael imagined his father's countenance as solid and dispassionate as the stone foundation upon which their castle rested. Only in the presence of the Queen had Kedehen's hard black eyes occasionally softened. Long ago the Prince learned that this was not so much a sign of affection, as it was an expression of his father's unfulfilled desire to feel affection.

Master Tzeremond stood on the north side of the circle. Despite his many years, Tzeremond's carriage remained tall and his aspect striking. Close cropped, charcoal gray hair and a pointed beard framed his gaunt features. Raising his rowan staff, he sent a blinding shaft of orange light from the palm of his hand into the heart of the Queen's

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belongings. The pyre ignited in an instant, converting what was left of Akmael's mother into floating wisps of ash. The acrid smoke reached the Prince's hiding place, stinging his eyes and throat. He fought to control the rise of bile from his stomach. It was as if he were witnessing the murder of his mother all over again, except these assassins were bent on terminating the very essence of her existence. Akmael could see Master Tzeremond's keen amber eyes illuminated by the yellow flames. The wizard smiled as if the Queen's death were somehow his personal triumph.

Only two items escaped the pyre that night, both of them secure in Akmael's possession. One was an amulet woven with threads of silver silk, the other an armband etched with images of Dragon. The Queen had instructed Akmael not to wear the armband until he began his study of High Magic, so he kept it well hidden in his chambers. The silver web, however, he wore from the day he received it with the singular devotion of a loving son.

Months passed following the Queen's death and the destruction of her belongings before Master Tzeremond caught sight of the jewel at the boy's collar. Interrupting Akmael's morning lessons, the wizard grabbed the medallion and tried to yank it from the boy's neck. The fine silver chain held strong. Akmael bit his tutor's hand, kicked him in the shin and darted into the castle interior.

Not long afterwards, the Prince received a summons from the King. Knowing he would be punished for disrespecting the wizard, Akmael stalked down the winding halls that led to his father's chambers. He paid no mind to the guards that saluted him or to the servants that bowed and scurried out of his way. All he cared about was his mother's meager inheritance, which he was prepared to defend at any cost. When he arrived, he found King Kedehen seated at the long table where he often met with his Council. Next to him stood Master Tzeremond and Sir Drostan.

"Show me the medallion, Akmael." Kedehen's tone was sharp and his expression severe. He watched Akmael with intense eyes set in a war-hardened face. His chestnut brown hair had not yet grayed, and his beard was short and well kept. Akmael admired his father's imposing build and forceful presence. It was said Kedehen was the greatest warrior yet born to the line of Vortingen. Someday Akmael would be like his father, respected and feared by all the people of Moisehén. But until then, he was bound by duty to obey.

Akmael approached and drew out the silver web, though he did not remove it from his neck. Made of tiny quartz crystals woven into the shiny silk of a Dark Moon Orb Weaver, the medallion fit in the

palm of the boy's hand. As Kedehen took the delicate jewel in his strong fingers his expression changed, a subtle softening around the eyes that Akmael had not seen since before the death of his mother. "What kind of magic did you say this is, Master Tzeremond?"

"I do not know, my Lord King. I have searched for its image in our records but have not found it anywhere. I recognize the Queen's handiwork though. The object was crafted by her."

"Indeed," the King murmured, turning the web carefully over in his hand. "When did your mother give this to you, Akmael?"

"On my tenth birthday. Almost a year before she died."

"Did she tell you how to use it? Any spells, chants or rites that came with the gift?"

"No, Sir," the boy answered truthfully. "Just this and the silver chain. That is all."

"Drostan," Kedehen called to his best knight. "You knew the Magas better than any of us. Come have a look at this object and tell me what you think."

A mage warrior trained under the masters of the Old Orders, Sir Drostan had served the King faithfully in the great war against the Magas. Now he sat on the Council of High Mages and tutored Prince Akmael in the arts of war. Akmael was a tall boy, but Sir Drostan towered over him as he bent to examine the web. His jaw worked beneath his thick red beard, and the faint smell of sweat and leather rose from his body. After a moment he straightened and stepped away. "I have not seen anything like it, my Lord King. Not among any of the Magas I knew, not at any time during the last days of the Old Orders."

Kedehen nodded. "Then you may keep the gift, Akmael."

Akmael could hardly believe his luck. Was it really going to be that simple?

"My Lord King—" the wizard objected.

"It is but a jewel, Master Tzeremond," the King reasoned. "It will do the Prince no harm. Even if it did have some hidden power, I cannot believe the Queen would sabotage her son's glory from the grave. You know what she sacrificed to bear him. You understand the choice she made."

"I respect your faith in her intentions, my Lord King, but I cannot share your confidence. She was a witch after all, and a true daughter of East Selen."

"Yes." Kedehen set one solid hand on his son's shoulder. "And thanks to her, the legacy of East Selen is now mine. If this object so concerns you, Master Tzeremond, then continue searching your records. Should you find evidence the medallion contains subversive

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magic, advise me and we will take the necessary actions. Akmael, you are free to go.”

The Prince was sorely tempted to shoot a look of triumph at Master Tzeremond, but his father had already condoned one act of insolence, and Akmael dared not risk another. Not yet, anyway. He thanked the King, tucked the medallion back into its hiding place and took his leave. If the old wizard set his mages to the task of discovering the meaning of the silver web, their work must have borne little fruit, for Akmael was not threatened with its confiscation again.

Three more years passed while the jewel lay quiet against Akmael’s heart, until one night he woke up fighting for his breath and clutching at his mother’s gift. Another variation on the same nightmare had driven him out of his sleep, the appearance of the maga warrior, the death charge from her staff, his mother taking the impact. This time the King’s Riders had risen from the Queen’s corpse and chased Akmael across smoldering fields until he lost himself in a forest so black he could neither see nor breathe. He had escaped from the dream gasping, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. Pushing back the thick covers of his bed, he slipped into the cool air and passed barefoot through the shadows of his room to a large window overlooking the city. A waxing moon hung heavy in the night sky and illuminated the broad expanse of slate rooftops below. The thick panes of glass responded to his warm breath with a misty glow.

He had long since lost count of the number of times this nightmare visited him. Each variation played out a little different from the last, but all of them began with the same terrible event, the death of his mother. During his lessons Master Tzeremond always returned to this story as a concrete example of the treacherous hearts of the Magas. “So incapable of loyalty are they that they would kill their own sisters. This is one of the many reasons we no longer allow women to learn the arts of High Magic.”

Akmael fumed inside every time Master Tzeremond talked about her death. The wizard had not witnessed the event and always mixed up the facts. He claimed the maga warrior was the sworn enemy of the Queen. Yet Akmael’s mother greeted the red haired witch with affection, receiving her as an equal even though she arrived dressed like a servant. It was Akmael’s presence that turned the warmth of their initial embrace into discord. It was his resemblance to the Mage King that ignited the maga warrior’s deadly fury.

“You know the implications of pouring the blood of East Selen into the line of Vortingen!” the stranger berated the Queen. “This boy’s power will be unstoppable!”

But the maga warrior must have been wrong, for an unstoppable power would have prevented what happened next. An unstoppable power would have neutralized the death charge that flew from the Maga's staff toward Akmael. An unstoppable power would have kept his mother from flinging her body into its path. An unstoppable power would have brought the Queen back from the dead.

His heart heavy from the memory, Akmael lifted the silver chain off his neck. He held the amulet against the moonlight that streamed through the window and flicked the edge of the ring, causing the web to spin on its axis. Each tiny crystal came to sparkling life. The image relaxed him, dispelling the shadows that had pursued him out of his nightmares. A melody rose like a thin mist in his mind, a lullaby of his mother's that often returned to him in uncertain moments. He had never sung this particular chant while spinning the amulet in this manner, however, and as the words of the lullaby took shape on his lips, the stone walls around him melted into a completely different world.

Caught by surprise, Akmael ceased his song. Only the tenuous light of the moon had followed him from the castle, and now it filtered down through a thick forest canopy. Water rushed past him in a small river littered with large boulders painted in the ghost white colors of the night. Somewhere close by an owl called, followed by the throaty chorus of a large pack of wolves.

Pressing himself into the shadows of the nearest tree, he held the amulet up in a shaft of moonlight to have a closer look. Thrilled by the power of the object, he was nonetheless immediately preoccupied with the question of how to get back to his room.

Perhaps it was a simple spell, he thought. Spinning the amulet away from him had brought him here. Maybe if he spun the amulet toward him while singing the same song, it would take him home. He tried this and it worked. The forest melted away and the solid stone walls of his room returned.

It did have magic! Akmael's heart filled with excitement and he wrapped his fingers tight around the treasure. It was a transporting device!

But what had determined his destination? Could he control where he went and when? Did it have to be done by the light of the moon or could it work by day?

Overcome with curiosity the boy lifted the silver web to invoke its spell again, but caution stayed his hand. The web had taken him to a dark and unfamiliar forest where wolves wandered dangerously close. After a moment of careful thought Akmael decided to wait until the next day, when he could explore the potential of the device under the

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full light of the sun. He could take food with him, and a weapon perhaps, and a proper cloak in case his return were delayed.

Securing the gift around his neck once more, Akmael slipped back under the thick covers where the pleasure of his discovery kept him warm and without nightmares until dawn. For the first time since he began his apprenticeship with Master Tzeremond, the Mage Prince had discovered a piece of magic over which the wizard had no control.