

Chapter II

Nearly two lumnas had already passed. The forest was now in full leaf, the wood folk busy with food and frolic as the sun warmed the soil and brought forth plants and flowers in colorful profusion. The Dell, grass grazed short each night by the deer, was gemmed with wild violets, golden heartsease and primroses, and the startling blue of gentians. Delicate pale anemone and wood sorrel gazed from under the pink and white blossoms of tartberry and sweetberry bushes.

The srytes had little time to enjoy it.

Under the Mentors' stern tutelage, they were acquiring the foundations of magic and essential survival lore. Some training involved the entire pod; other instruction was done in small groups. No spell came without a history. No food without a caution. No effort without sore muscles. Danaí had never imagined how the beautiful hills and woodlands of Lampion could hold so much danger and power. There were moments she missed that innocence.

Clusters of friends bloomed. Danaí spent her free time with five others whom she had met at previous revels. Joson hailed from Glyffshado Glen towards the eastern foot of the Anlyn Hills, while Pook came from Firebaugh Vale along the eastern shore. Rhytha was from Darling Glen nestled in the southern Wynndowns, while Damon and Elánoria came from westerly Mireer Vale, known for its weavers.

"Who would ever have thought of using a holly leaf as a shield?" Damon commented as they trudged along the creek towards the clearing to continue defense training. "Although those edges are sharper than I thought. I scratched my hand when I shifted to edge-flinging it at Mentor Dilyn." He whirled,

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mimicking the toss, his bronze skin and coppery hair glinting in the sunbeams. “He told me at mid-meal that properly dried and flattened, the shield can take an enemy’s head off.” He shuddered. “Why would any féyree need to know that?”

“Don’t be a dim,” Pook snorted. “You get out of your dell and who knows what may think you’re a tasty tidbit.” He grinned, then ducked as Damon took a half-swing at him.

Rhytha rolled her eyes at Danaí and Elánoria. “Lads! Always at fisticuffs.”

Mentors Toron, Arlymyria, Asagíon and Dilyn were waiting in the clearing. Each was a member of the Guardian Guild, trained in the craft of weaponry, attack and defense. Toron hailed from Danaí’s vale, and often in the gloaming she had seen him circling the perimeter, riding his luminous nightwing. He was popular among the ladies and maids, darkly handsome with his jade skin, ebony hair, and eyes the deep blue of the sky just before dawnshine. Danaí found him reserved, slow to laugh or anger, and precise in his expectations of Orders being followed.

There were weapons everywhere, if one knew where to look. Already they had learned how to locate hardwoods and other readily available items and quickly convert them into protection.

Arlymyria not only showed them how to craft spears from oak and ash, but how they could double as staffs, useful in close combat. She had laughed at their startled looks when she selected Joson, the largest spryte, as her partner. She was slender, with creamy skin and hair the color of dandelion fuzz, and several of the lads had joked a feather’s touch would be her undoing. But with a few sure strokes, she deftly knocked Joson’s legs out from under him. The clearing had resounded with the clack of wood striking wood, and the grunts of the fallen as the sprytes practiced.

Asagíon had instructed them on which seed pods could explode and blind the attacker, or leave them helpless with sneezing. Properly dried, the spiny husk of a chestnut became lethal when dropped from a high branch, or wielded at the end of a thong. Even freshly plucked, its heavy weight guaranteed damage on impact.

They had chuckled at the sight of a Guardian pulling out a simple slingshot... until Toron split a beechnut at fifty feylengths. Washing the webs free of their sticky goo, and braiding them into flexible bands to be tied on forked twigs took patience. Elánoria was still trying to remove the last of a web that had gotten tangled in her copper curls the previous day.

Today they were making their first dirqs. “Select your wood from such hardy trees as oak, ash, and blackthorn,” Mentor Dilyn explained. “All are about this clearing. Look for twigs wide at the top or long pointed thorns. Then, if you can not break them off, call and we will cut them.”

“Do you really think a wooden dirq will be able to cut anything?” Joson muttered to Danaí as they hurried off towards a blackthorn bush dense with white blossoms.

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"I hope so. I guess we'll find out. We won't get our own first metal dirqs until after Krisály's. Triása told me that later we will receive guild dirqs, bestowed when we are trained in our Calling, along with our amulets. They are both specially crafted by the mastersmythes at the Metalworks Guild hall, and are to be cherished. Her guild dirq has a beautiful design on the blade, with wood folk among trees, symbols of her Calling."

A full head taller than Danaí, JASON was able to reach two wicked-looking thorns that snapped off when he hung on them. "See?" He patted his full belly. "Being a bit on the well-fed side has its advantages." Danaí laughed and reached up to ruffle his curly black hair.

"Oh, I simply delight in blisters, don't you?" Elánoria grumped as they squatted, each in front of a flat stone, slowly honing a cutting edge onto their dirqs. She popped a bronze thumb into her mouth with a grimace. "I bet they made us choose a hard wood, so it would be harder to do this."

"More likely so it wouldn't break when you poked it into something Ela." Damon remarked, wiping away sweat from his eyes. He grinned as she stuck her tongue out. They were born of the same father, by different mothers, but never failed to act like brother and sister.

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So much to digest, so much to understand. It was nothing like the Teachings, where the Elder or Skald would drone on about the Laws and the Tales as restless younglings twitched through the passing morn. You had to prove you could interpret and apply these lessons, not just dutifully repeat them. Some nights Danaí collapsed onto the soft turf of the Dell and was asleep before her second breath, too drained for dreams—or nightmares. When she occasionally awoke, she observed that there were always some Mentors about, standing and watching.

There were moments she wanted to quit, yet pride—or was it fear of failure? she wondered—kept her in place.

Foraging in the forest when the season was yet young proved surprisingly hard. Seeds and fruits had yet to form, and the sprytes learned with much unpleasant trial to select edible plant parts. Young hawthorn leaves became a common meal, although later in the season, they would become tough and hard to chew. Danaí gained new appreciation for the vale's Gatherers, realizing how she had always taken for granted the full *bionas* that stored the dried foodstuffs shared by all during the long cold days of winter.

During the second lumna, they commenced the First Tier Magics. This morning they had started on Fire magic, nine sprytes to a pair of Mentors. The contortions and gestures needed to control the elemental power resulted in aching arms and fingers. Mentor Mélarna made it seem so simple—until one had to emulate her.

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Danaí waved at Joson and Pook returning from Mentor Quenton's and Mentor Shanáron's groups, and they met and hastened to the trestles for evenmeal. Carrying their heavily laden trenchers—Joson's threatened to topple—they joined their friends under a tussock of sweet-scented white lily bells.

"I actually got a fire going!" exulted Damon, who had shown a talent for spellcasting. "Although I did singe my fingers a bit."

"Um," mumbled Rhytha through mashed dandelion leaves, "and how do you explain your Mentor's rather crisped looking cloak?"

Damon flushed. "No idea what you're talking about." He busied himself with his food, stuffing his mouth to avoid further speech.

"I did pretty well actually." Pook sprawled back, pushing his empty trencher aside. "It's a lot of fun. So much power bound up in words and gestures. I want to learn more about this fire magic—lots more."

Joson waved a piece of mallow root towards the Mentors, talking around a bit tucked into his cheek. "You know, it's hard to believe that all of them—and all those before—have gone through this. I mean we're all so different—even after the Rites. You would think that such intense training would grind the differences right out of us."

"Uh-uh." Rhytha shook her head. Her coloring was uncommon among the Folk—fiery red hair, topaz eyes, rosy skin with a generous handful of freckles sprinkled across nose and cheeks. One tended to look when she spoke. "Consider that even as we're learning, our individual strengths—and weaknesses—are going to appear. Remember that a part of this whole thing is to help us discover our Callings."

"What do you hope to be?" Danaí asked.

"I had really wanted to be a Charmer, but the wood folk just don't seem to like me. Charmer Eberle fostered me in Second Season, and I was such a disappointment to her! She released me to the easier craft of weaving. Even youngling wood folk won't let me approach. And I do so like them." She sounded wistful.

"So what?" Danaí countered. "Don't tell me that just because it didn't work under one Charmer, you're going to give up your dream?"

"It's not so much that." Rhytha looked down, seeking the right words. "It's that it just doesn't feel right anymore. You know what I mean? It's as if I'm being pulled in another direction—and I'm not even sure what that is—and I have to follow these feelings to find out what is right for me. Dream Council should open that passageway."

Her friends were silent, digesting her words and their meals. Eventide cast an indigo veil across the sky. Already a hem of stars twinkled on the eastern horizon, while bands of marigold, ruby and plum dimmed in the west. About them bubbled the soft chatter of other sprytes. The final evening calls of birds slowly dissipated, save for the clear piping notes of the nightingale, Danaí's

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favorite bird. She loved how it sang in the voices of all birds, at any time of night or day it pleased. Such freedom!

Pook contemplated the darkening skies. He was difficult to see in the gloaming, his skin just the right shade of amethyst, his tousled locks raven black. Only his glowing aqua eyes were visible, reflecting the burnished silver of Lúnasa's rising oval. "The fire magic puzzles me," he murmured. "Didn't you get the feeling that the Mentors were saying a lot less than they actually knew?"

"We're beginners. What do you expect?" Joson sucked on a bit of sweetgrass.

"It's not that. It's more of a, a reticence to say things, as if there's something else behind the basic spell."

"I repeat. We're only First Tier, you dim! There's a lot of stuff we're not being told, and they won't tell us until it's time. Quenton spent time with our group on how to do the basic spellcast—and with Balanoran having trouble—it took a bit longer. You're always the impatient one, Pook. Wanting to explore before you know what's out there. You can get into trouble that way."

"Well, why not? There's a lot of things we féyree don't know, all nestled snug as we are in our bowers. I was talking with an ael once—"

"You never!" exclaimed Elánoria, jerking upright. "You're just making that up!"

Pook's full-lipped mouth tightened into a thin line. "Not hardly, Ela. There are other folk out there, even if you've stayed hidden in your safe little glen all these years. I want to meet them. There's so much more I want to know about Lampion—and beyond." His eyes and skin shimmered brighter with enthusiasm.

"Isn't that unwise Pook?" Rhytha murmured with a slow shake of her head. "We don't know enough about our own folk yet, much the less interacting with others."

"But it's not like that, not like that at all!" Pook sat up and leaned forward with eagerness. "This ael was as startled as I was when we met near the Froth—that's the big pool where the Anlyn Falls spill into near our glen. It was eventide, and I guess he didn't see me in the gloaming, perched upon the branch. He was hard to see too—his skin was a silver like a pool of reflecting water." He paused to savor his rapt audience. "I called out a greeting, and it was actually pretty funny." Pook grinned at the recollection. "He was looking everywhere, and I had to call out a couple of times before he located my voice. When he leaned over me, his pale green eyes were so wide that you could see white all around them. He wore his gold-streaked green hair in a braid that ran half down his back; it showed off his pointed ears pretty well."

Elánoria gulped. "Pointed ears? Leaned over you? How big was he?"

"I'd guess about ten feylengths."

"As tall as that!"

"And?" prompted Danaí, well-acquainted with Pook's tendency to swagger.

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“He told me it had been long since he had seen a spryte. Actually asked to clasp hands with me to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Of course I let him.”

“You let a being ten times your size touch you?” Rhytha’s eyes shone like amber glowflies with amazement.

“Well, think on it. If he tried anything, I could have easily just let myself tumble off the branch, and disappear into the bramble bush underneath. Hard to reach for me in there! He couldn’t find me until I directed him, after all. And he was really very polite. Introduced himself as Rynok, and explained he was on a journey to somewhere he called High North, where the ael-lords hold summer court. He’s like one of our Orpheii, carrying songs and news among the hyells—I guess that what they call their bowers. He had the most beautiful lyre, all of beaten silver and strung with the glowing tail hairs of the alicorn, he told me. Would you believe he even strummed a melody for me? It wasn’t like any of our music. Want to hear what I can remember?” He proceeded, not waiting for an answer.

“Come memories gone in ancient past

Learn us of your grief and joy.

The peace of days is passing fast.

*The hooded ones unwitting teach the change,
sowing seeds that breed the last.*

Rising innocent the One

whom happiness with hate shall blast.”

“What a queer song.” Danaí felt a shiver crawling up her back from the discordant tune. “What does it mean?”

“Actually he hasn’t any clue.” Pook shrugged. “That’s why he’s headed up north. Several of his folk dreamed a similar verse, and they believe it’s a sending from the Mother—they believe in her too—and hope that their high Dream Loremaster can interpret it.”

A sharp clap from a Mentor prevented Joson from asking his question. It was time for rest, and silence was mandatory. Danaí found sleep long in coming.

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Mentors Majikian and Tarlokyn called a respite in the spellcasting of féyree dust, and Danaí’s little group gathered under the broad shade of a burdock leaf. The cool dampness was a welcome change from the warming sun—summer heat was starting early.

“I wonder if we’ll have the same problems birds do when they learn to fly,” said Pook. “You know, flapping about, falling off branches at the wrong time.”

Elánoria giggled behind her hand. Danaí had realized her friend was sweet on him. “Oh, I can just see you now Pook. Trying to look like a serious féyree poised on some branch, and an ael startles you, so instead of falling into the

shrubs, you flap right up into his face.”

“Face? No it would probably be his pointy ear,” chortled Rhytha.

“No, up his tunic, or whatever aels wear,” teased Aaron, who had ambled over to join them. He had a well-earned reputation for mischief-making, and already several sprytes had awoken to ankles roped with braided grass, chilly drops of dew descending without warning as they sat down to eat, a catkin bed suspended in a webber’s sticky net. One kept a wary eye on the golden lad when he was around. His humorous disposition refused to be quenched under the most weighty of circumstances, and more than once a Mentor had banned him from meals, or ordered him to stand alone during rest times. He winked at Elánoria.

“Ha, ha,” retorted Pook, miffed at being the butt-end of the joke. “You’re so graceful Rhytha,”—he knew her reputation for clumsiness—“you’ll try landing and wind up on your head.” He grinned at her discomfiture.

“Do you think you can damage wings?” Danaí turned the conversation to a safer path.

“Doubt it,” yawned Damon, his silver eyes half-lidded to dim out the sun’s glare.

“No, actually you can,” Joson paused his chewing on a bit of tang-grass. “Néhrani—she’s Glyffshado Glen’s Healer, and my *lirupai*—she’s had to fix torn wings a few times. Like for Cnonklan, who isn’t all there since being thrown from the back of his dragonfly. He misjudges distances all the time. Seems to forget his wingspread and just flies through areas that aren’t wide enough.”

“It must be nice to have a *lirupai* who’s a Healer.” Elánoria’s voice bore a trace of sadness. “At least their craft is to care about folk. My Second Season foster mother was a Messenger, and much preferred to be dragonflyback than biding with her sprytes. We were a lonely little bunch, those seven winters we had to live with her.” She brightened. “But my Third Season *lirupai* was a Skald, and Mánali was grand. It made up for those empty years.”

“I had a Scryer Third Season,” Danaí said, stretching to relieve the stiffness in her neck. “Harmona was, I guess, strange, though I always had the feeling she did care about us in her way. But her bower was so busy with féyree coming in and out, seeking advice and guidance, that we were usually running to get herbs for smoke trances, or fallwater for the scrying bowl, or whatever else she needed. We were more like thralls than fosterlings, but she fed us, listened to our problems, and tried to be there. Her craft just always seemed to get in the way.”

“Did you ever wonder why we don’t stay with our own birth mothers?” Pook asked after a contemplative silence. “I can understand fostering by choice, or if you have a mother who just doesn’t have time for you—or worse yet, doesn’t want you. But having to rotate among foster mothers every seven winters seems a bit hard.”

“It’s not like you can’t visit with them,” Elánoria said.

“Not the same thing. I mean you have her for the first seven years of your

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life—maybe—then get yanked away whether you want it or no. And then have to start all over again a second time.”

“We don’t do *lirupai* that way any more in Ardmoor Vale,” remarked Ayúlun, who had also wandered over. He blended perfectly with the greenish shade, and in tests of search, was hard to find in the woods. “I was with my birth mother until twelve winters passed.” He had their full attention. “After that, I was sent to serve in various guild halls, under the guidance of Third Tier masters, each for a period of three winters. We call it *mancebo* instead. I still lived at my birth mother’s bower, although after the first *mancebo*, I moved out. For various reasons.” He blushed. Aaron snorted.

“But I thought all féyree did things the same way.” Danaí was surprised.

“Well, you thought wrong,” Pook replied. “How long has your vale been doing this *mancebo* thing?”

“A ways before my birthing,” Ayúlun explained. “My birth mother said it grew from just what you were saying earlier. A lot of them didn’t want to give up their younglings. So they approached the Chief Tains and petitioned them to consider a change. Arímaria and Beriel are very open-minded, and spoke with every féyree in the vale. Arímaria is also a Charmer, so she consulted many of the wood folk to learn their thoughts on mothering. They decided it was unfair to separate mother and youngling, and with the vale’s approval, put into place *mancebo*. About seven pods ago, I think.”

Danaí wondered if the Chief Tains had consulted the Dolmen. She doubted it. It didn’t seem one that would approve of such changes.

“It sure shows that change is a good thing.” Pook waxed enthusiastic. “Instead of staying in the same dry creek bed hoping for water, they were willing to try a new approach for the better.”

“They didn’t just go and change things Pook,” Danaí objected. “They did a lot of thinking and consulted other folk before making a decision.”

“It might not have worked,” added Josen. “Then what?”

“Arímaria agreed it was a trial of one podspan of *sprytes*,” Ayúlun explained. “If at the end, it did not seem to be working—and sooner if need be—the trial would end.”

Josen spat out the grass. “What convinced them to continue?”

“Two things actually. Birth mothers were a lot happier, and so were their *sprytes*. And the *fa-mancebo*—the ones who mentor us—could instead focus on teaching us the basics of their crafts. Ardmoor Vale has become known for the clay warework our crafters produce. It has another benefit too, I think.”

“What?” Rhytha smiled at him.

“Helps us start to get an idea of what craft we may want to follow after Krisálys. I mean it’s all well and good to do the Dream Council, but I want to do something I like. What better way to find out enough about a craft than trying it out?”

“*Sprytes to me!*” Mentor Majikian shouted.

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The group emerged somewhat unwillingly into the bright sun. Danaí squinted, wondering how the Mentors could tolerate their cloaks in the humid air.

“You have all learned to create féyree dust,” Mentor Tarlokyn began. “A simple First Tier spell that can be used for pleasure—or protection. Now you must learn to direct it, to move it as an extension of your will, however it is needed. Yes Pook?”

“Why not just simply point to direct it?”

Tarlokyn released a thin smile that slit his gaunt copper face. “That is a part of the spellcast. But what if your hands are occupied elsewhere? Or bound? Or injured? It is not enough to learn a magic and then rough handle it to your bidding. Like any craft, it must be practiced, perfected. The loremasters each have their own special talents, and it is said you can tell which loremaster cast the magic from the way the spell transpires.”

“So you can become a loremaster as a craft?” Pook looked intrigued.

Majikian interceded. “Yes and no. You can be selected to become a loremaster by the Chief Táin, Guild Master, or even the Dolmen. But loremaster is not a craft that you choose at the outset. Most loremasters are found among those who show an unusual ability during the teaching of the Second or Third Tier spells.”

“When do we start learning those?”

“You don’t,” replied Tarlokyn with an impatient gesture. “Those are reserved for the members of each guild hall and are a part of their training. After Dream Council and Krisállys, you will take on the Calling of your Dream’s choosing, and then be involved in the rituals and ways of your fellow crafters. Only after you have learned the Second Tier spells of that craft will you be considered for Third Tier.”

“You mean it’s not a given?”

“Of course not. Not every féyree can lead a Guild or become a loremaster. Too many loremasters would be too many leaders. Some are needed to do the basics, others’ skills allow them to advance only to a certain Tier.”

“Do all crafts have the same number of Tiers?”

“Pook, Pook, you should know that answer,” chided Tarlokyn, glancing at the sun. “Recall the rhyme you were taught during fire magic. You were to memorize it.”

*“Seven are the Tiers of Spells
born of Twin-Gathered lore
taught by Crafters in their Dells
to bend beauty to their work.
One for sprytes unwingéd.
Two for Crafters new-fledged.
Three for those of special skills.
Four Guild Masters claim their own.*

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*The final Tiers that lie beyond
The Loremasters only know
learned in the master spells
born of Twins' lore long ago."*

"Does any féyree know all the spells that there are?" Pook remained unruffled by the Mentors' palpable impatience.

"Not even the Dolmen."

Pook's casual demeanor evaporated. "How is that possible? He is the Most High, the greatest of loremasters!"

"He knows more than any other féyree, yes." Majikian replied in the tone used with a small youngling. "But that does not mean he knows all. Did you not listen to what Tarlokyn said? Potential loremasters advance to a different apprenticeship after Third Tier. Fourth Tier spells are known only to the Guild Master and their chosen few. The Twins never again wanted all spells under the command of one féyree." He held up his hand to forestall further questions. "Enough! The day is waning, and we will not return until this final spellcast is learned. Since you are so eager and full of questions Pook, come forth and we shall begin with you."

Pook bounced up. A pleasurable tingle shirred down his spine. How he loved spellcasting! At Tarlokyn's command, he cupped his palms and concentrated on spelling féyree dust, envisioning the sparkling lavender flakes; the dust was always the color of its maker. He murmured, "*Pousyehr eteencel amoy*," felt a quiver scurry down his arms, then the prickly weight coalesce.

"Very good," nodded Tarlokyn. He pointed at a rounded gray stone that stood waist high beside him. "Now you will cast it over this rock. Point your arms towards it. As with making the dust, it is a blend of mind and murmur. Envision the dust striking the stone. Now, repeat after me '*Zjet achosa lasbas.*' Good. Go ahead. Try."

The dust exploded from Pook's hand with a tinkling hiss, cloaking the stone. The Mentor blinked and stared as the last particles cascaded down. "Excellent," he said after a long pause. "I commend you, young spryte. In my many years as Mentor, I have not ever seen a spryte strike that stone on their first try."

Pook gave a self-satisfied smile.

"So, as you already have this lesson," Majikian continued, his eyes narrowed, "let me give you the next, so you can practice both as we teach the others." He strode towards Pook, pulling a supple strand of woodbine from his sleeve pouch. "I will bind your hands behind your back. So." He ignored Pook's slight grunt at the awkward position. "Now you must combine the two spells, for no longer can you gather the dust in your hands. You must form and hold it in the air before you, then cast it forth. Your target shall be that fern yonder. Is something the matter?"

Pook shifted his shoulders, trying to get more comfortable. "I don't see how

you can do that. You have to have something to put something in.”

“Ah, but you do not. Watch.” The Mentor held his hands behind his back and seemed to gather within himself. The fascinated sprytes heard a rapid mutter, saw the gathering of shimmery dark blue dust before the tall figure, then watched open-mouthed as it looped twice, soared upwards, and dove down to burst just above Pook’s head in a flickering cascade. “I could as easily have knocked you flat with the impact,” Majikian said coolly. “Like all magic, it is a weapon that can increase in strength based on the skill of the user. Sohaín, come. It is now your turn.”

As the sprytes learned to fling féyree dust, the air became hazy with multi-hued sparkles, the ground more glitter than grass. Both Mentors’ cloaks were splotched with misdirected dust. Danaí kept trying to suppress the tickling sneeze that interrupted her spellcasting. Occasionally she would glance over at Pook, still struggling with the second spell. He was encircled by lavender dust piles.

Sandaí gave a shriek of excitement, causing the ball of bronze dust gathering before her to slump. She refocused and it rose, hovered a moment, then advanced with short jerks towards a birch tree to splatter at its roots. There were scattered cries of approval from sprytes not in the middle of a spellcast.

Danaí noticed Aaron, his face crumpled with concentration, form not just a golden ball but an almost petalled shape that drifted to dapple a nearby oak sapling. “Good, very good!” called Majikian. “You are seeing that you can control the shape as well.”

“Mentor, what am I doing wrong?” Pook’s tone was more respectful as he realized he was one of the few who still could not master the basic handsfree spell.

“Stop trying so hard.” Mentor Majikian approached with a smile. “Pook, you can not be perfect at everything the first time. But because you did so well on the first spell, you tasked yourself with the same achievement on the second. And when you failed—as most do the first round—you let your emotions rule your mind. Emotions and magic are a poor mix. Either the spell fizzles or, worse, it can pervert itself. Now relax. Close your eyes. Inhale. See the dust before you, see it gather, and now push it towards the fern, yes push, push, push. Ah, you’ve done it!”

Pook’s eyes flew open. The fern glittered lavender. “I did it!” He jumped with delight, lost his balance, and tumbled backwards into his piles of dust that burst upwards and scattered over his cheering podmates. The sun settled on the treetops.

“Time for us to return for evenmeal,” chuckled Majikian as he released Pook’s bindings. “Everyone will know what we have been doing, for you are one large pod of sparkles.”

“Mentor Majikian, what happens to the dust?” Danaí asked as they walked back towards the Dell.

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“The wind will push it about. Some will land in flowing waters and sink to gild the streambed. It is what the Gem-Dwarves call fool’s gold. Other will be caught up in the evening dew, and the next morn a field or flower or glade shall gleam more brightly than usual, even if the sun hides itself among the clouds. If it is a strong wind, some may even soar into the skies to gild the low-flying clouds. Wherever it goes, it is harmless. There are those who say it brings good luck.”

The sprytes bathed in the Trykle before evenmeal. Most rinsed quickly and headed back along the stream bank to the Dell, but Danaí and Aaron lingered in the cooling air. “Féyree dust it may be, but I’m sure not interested in eating it,” spluttered Aaron as he splashed about the small pool formed by a backwash in the slow-moving stream. The powdery dust lifted off him in a cloud of gold, caught a ridge of current, and slipped away.

Danaí sat on the mossy overhanging bank, fluffing her hair dry. It had grown a fingertip’s worth since being sheared, and now formed a spiky silver halo about her head. “How did you manage to create that flower?”

“Just saw it in my mind. Actually, I should have directed it to fall on you, but I guess I don’t have enough skill to get that far.” He grinned slyly up at her, shaking water from his golden hair as he emerged, then scrambled up to sit beside her. “I’ll get you yet with one.” His dark golden eyes were inviting.

Danaí blushed and got to her feet. Aaron was far too handsome for his own good, a lad of the sun, she thought. Anyway, what could he possibly see in her? “I doubt we’ll have any time for that. Shall we get back? I hear the Mentor’s reed pipe summoning us to evenmeal.”