

THE LIGHTFIRE SAGA

By Sandra Stewart

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Samples of:

Book 1

Book 2

Book 3

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Book 1, Prologue

“I come to you,” Darsis spoke, his voice barely above a whisper, “as agreed,” echoed off partitions of black ebony, monoliths that blocked off the distant light of stars. His footsteps also echoed as he approached the globe suspended at chest-level by an unseen force. Starkly glistening, an object inside the globe shrank as the young god, walked toward it, drawing in, preparing itself. He held his hand out flat, palm up.

The tiny light grew smaller.

“I am not afraid,” he said, close enough now to touch the side of the globe. His hand did tremble a little. But it was not fear that caused his reaction. Instead, anticipation. And hope. Together they would save a world and its people, he had grown to love.

He halted his hand just a hair’s breadth from the clear rounded edge. Why did the light act fearful? He had made a bargain with it. Did it not trust him? Still? He was the one risking everything. This star, captured by the older gods, kept as a treasure, a trophy, only wanted to be released. Given its freedom. It had told him so.

His hand dropped ever so slightly and the star jerked downward. Startled, he bent his face closer to the crystal ball. Was it truly afraid? The light shot toward his face, blinding his eyes. The globe rocked. Reflexively, he grabbed the ball to stop it from falling.

Blinding light pressed where his hands made contact. He felt warmth and boundless joy, then nothing. Darkness filled the globe. He spun around the room. Where had it gone? The walls seemed to lean toward him.

“Where are you?” he spoke aloud.

‘Here.’ The voice, tiny and strong, came from inside Darsis’s body.

He felt a stab of pain in his chest. His heart fluttered. Blood rushed through his ears.

‘Do not be afraid, Darsis.’

‘I know. I am not afraid,’ he said, repeating it more to convince himself.

‘I am grateful for what you must give up.’

His knees began to shake. His feet felt as if stuck in mud. He reached out to a wall to steady his body but the walls wavered and shifted as he tried to focus his eyes on the indefinable black.

‘You are beginning to lose your abilities; your contact with this place. We must return to Pen’nBru. We have much to do before I can rest.’

“I...I...”

‘Darsis, quickly. We must go.’ There was a sudden urgency in its voice. ‘The plan has already begun to fail.’

“Do you have a name?” Darsis asked as he stepped between a slit in the cold monoliths. He drew upon the last of his powers as a god, thought of Pen’nBru, green and lush, waiting, as this world darkened and vanished, he heard it speak.

‘I am the Lightfire.’

Book 1, Chapter 1

It began as a whisper, swept up the mountain across trees, grasses then moss-spotted rock to slam tepid against two structures made of the surrounding boulders and fallen logs. The house and outbuilding leaned against the land anchored only by tufts of long grass that now wrapped its strands protectively against the wind but not against the dirt and residue carried from below.

Alaysa woke abruptly, her heart pounding. The wind had taken her by surprise. She winced as grit struck her window almost feeling it bite into her skin. She rubbed her arms beneath the soft blanket but soon her legs itched, too. She wanted to burrow deep into her soft bed but as the third oldest child in a family of six and a wind-seer, she had responsibilities. Her two older brothers and father needed to be fed the morning meal so they could get out on the mountain back up to the livestock. Then she would attend to her own chores working outside so that she could feel for the changes in the weather that came from the mountaintop. Her family and the village below counted on her abilities. But this day, this unknown wind left her feeling unsettled. She should have felt it coming. She had not.

Alaysa rolled out of bed and, while washing her face, stubbed her toe on a floorboard that popped up of its own accord as she reached for a towel, making her hop around blindly feeling for the same towel to wipe the soap out of her stinging eyes. Her face looked red and puffy in the hall mirror as she passed by on the way to the kitchen and her older brother, Jake, asked if she had not slept at all. She smirked at him and turned to the large wood-burning stove.

While stirring the porridge, the fire had flared suddenly, scorching the bottom of the pot which gave her older brothers, Andrew and Jake, more fuel to tease her mercilessly. Then, to shame the best actors in the region, after completely consuming their porridge, bread, jam and tea, they had dramatically tramped outside, grumbling about not risking eating anything more and perhaps risk starving to death on the mountainside. Alaysa rose to throw the oatmeal-encrusted serving spoon at them but as she stood, she caught her sore toe, lost her balance and dropped the spoon on the floor. Clumps of oatmeal shot across the floor, into the warming fire and onto chair legs.

“Alaysa,” her mother handed her a towel, gently smiling, as Alaysa reached to pick up the spoon. “When you’re done, we’ll need berries for pies this afternoon. Take Issie with you.”

“Right. Ooof.” Alaysa started to rise but her head met the corner of the table and she promptly sat back down on the floor. She felt hands on her arm, encouraging her to stand.

“This house wants you to leave,” her mother said, trying to hide the laughter in her voice.

Alaysa rubbed the rising bump on the back of her head, feeling more frustrated than comical. “I think I will be much safer out in the open.”

Issie, 12 years-old, and already as tall as Alaysa, slid off her chair, grabbed four wooden pails from beneath the sink and piled them by the door. “I’ll keep watch for any stray boulders or loose bushes,” she said, barely hiding a smile and handed Alaysa a heavy wool cloak.

Alaysa responded with another quick smirk and wrapped the cloak around her shoulders. Issie did the same, pulling her hair, as white as the tiny flowers that grew all over the mountain, from beneath the cloak. Alaysa reached for her own hair but stopped and left it tucked in. She had always been self-conscious about its dark colour. It did lighten somewhat in the longer sunlit days of the warm months but not as white as the rest of her family’s hair.

Issie opened the door and sunlight spilled onto the bleached floor. Alaysa stepped across the threshold onto the porch letting the bright light wash over her body, closed her eyes and let the sun warm her face. A breeze played with the loose hair around her face. The scent of sweet flowers and freshly-cut hay filled her lungs as she took several deep breaths. She could almost hear the cows’ bells as they clanked in the upper meadow; see her two brothers prodding them with their staffs, edging the large animals toward fresh grass. Issie brushed past, disturbing her reverie, and pushed the handles of two buckets into her hand.

“Eyes open,” Issie giggled, and then broke into a jog, “or you’re really going to have problems.”

Alaysa laughed, too, her frustration vanishing and jumped down the porch’s two steps. She followed in a half-jog, half-skip trying to keep the weight off her sore toe. Issie’s ability to see the funny side had stopped many an argument from getting physical in their family. Alaysa tended to take things very seriously. She couldn’t help it. Her intuition was correct so often that she couldn’t afford to make light of any situation. People always expected her to be serious.

The sisters climbed in silence to the woods above the house. No sooner had they arrived but Alaysa felt a change. Shifting her body to face the rising wind, she felt more than saw boulders, lichen and stone trembling. A forest of trees, thick with needle-covered branches, bent beneath the sudden onslaught, cones shivering. The wind

leapt off its edge to drop onto another plateau of grass and scrub brush, flattening blades as the wind swept down toward the bramble of bush, heavy with purple berries.

The wind struck her body, forcing her cape open and back over her shoulders, putting pressure on the clasp at her throat, making it difficult to breathe. The rest of her clothing offered no protection against the sudden chill. Prickles of water struck and froze on her skin. Her body grew stiff and numb, coated in freezing rain, the ice solidifying her joints. Her heart slowed its beating. She couldn't remember when she had last drawn a breath. The wind pushed against her body. She saw the ground tilt. All this happened in a matter of seconds. Then Issie reached for Alaysa, wrapped her arms around her chest and stopped her from falling. Warmth flooded Alaysa's body. Her lungs filled with warm air. Her air expelled in a cloud of vapour.

"Is it snow, Alaysa?" Issie still held Alaysa against her body. Her voice had risen a little, anxious.

"Water on wind that bites." Alaysa shivered. "I think ice comes after dark." She stepped away from her sister. She spotted the concern in her eyes and looked away.

"That was a bad seeing," Issie said.

Alaysa nodded. "I felt I was covered in ice."

"You weren't breathing."

"I am now." Alaysa spoke harshly, was immediately sorry, and looked down at her hands to hide her embarrassment. She expected to see dangling icicles. Instead, her fingers flexed easily. She brushed at her clothing. Even her shirt felt warm to the touch. Alaysa never could understand how all of a sudden she could be freezing to death and the next moment, be warm and normal, again.

"Maybe it is a severe storm."

Alaysa could tell Issie was trying to help.

"This seeing is the strongest yet. Even the blizzards I had felt last month didn't make me pass out," Alaysa said, speaking quickly as she thought about what had almost happened. "If you hadn't been here, I would have died, up here. Alone."

"You were only affected for a little bit. Will the storm come soon?" Issie asked, changing the subject.

"No, not until tonight. We don't have to rush."

The wind had subsided enough to allow them to get close to the bushes, again. They finished yanking the berries from the branches then started back down the plateau. The weakening wind pulled at their loose clothing

and hair. As they made their way between jutting rocks and scrub brush, Alaysa thought her mother must have seen the signs of impending weather change when she had said the house was trying to get Alaysa outside.

“Your foot, Alaysa,” Issie said.

Alaysa stopped, then took another step. Her toe no longer ached. She nearly laughed out loud. “It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“Well, that’s one good thing to happen to you, today,” Issie said, “And look. We have visitors.”

Alaysa looked down at her house. The wind had struck the buildings, tearing off a few loose shingles. The trees in the forest leading to the village bent under the strain as the wind continued down the mountain. Three men rode into the barnyard, their cloaks swirling in the wind. She recognized one of the men as the mayor of their district. The horses bent their heads against the wind. Dirt rose in swirls. Alaysa lost sight of them for a moment before the dust fell back to the yard. She gasped and reached for her left shoulder. A sharp pain lanced through her upper chest.

Alaysa couldn’t stop staring at them. One of the men held a raised hand, palm-outward, in front of his face. His head dipped toward his chest. The pain intensified. Alaysa dropped her buckets, berries spilling around her feet, and pressed the heel of her hand against her shoulder. Felt the bump of an old scar. Her chest constricted. She could barely draw a breath. He lowered his hand. The pain became a dull throb. He looked up the mountain. She took a step backward and stopped, wanting to hide. Felt she had done something wrong. And he knew.

Alaysa felt a tug on her sleeve.

“Your arm?” Issie asked.

Alaysa shook her head and pressed again with her hand. “Here. It’s only a little pain, now.” She glanced back down at the yard.

The men had dismounted. The larger man of the two Alaysa didn’t recognize straightened a sword at his side as he walked up to the two youngest children sitting in the settling dust. He stooped to pick up the small girl, Janey, and held her out at arm's length. He studied the child for a moment then shook his head at the second man. They glanced at the little boy, Jessie, but didn’t approach him. They looked at the mayor as if listening to him then together they all looked toward the cabin as if someone had gotten their attention.

“Who are they, Alaysa?” Issie asked, kneeling to pick up the scattered berries.

“I don't know,” Alaysa said, stooping to pick up her bucket. “Mam will surely invite them to stay. We’ll find

out then."

"They look like soldiers," Issie said, "Andrew and Jake will be so impressed."

Alaysa smiled. Ever since Andrew, her oldest brother, had returned from school in Christentown, many days walk away, and told stories of his life in the city, Jake had been asking their father to let him go. Even she had felt the pull toward something new, something exciting. Maybe Andrew knew this soldier. Andrew seemed to have met a lot of people even though he said that a lot more people lived in the city than he could ever meet in his lifetime. Alaysa couldn't imagine a city that large.

The second man did not dress like a soldier. His robe seemed more like what a holy man would wear. But who was she to know what a soldier dressed like. Hudson's Creek, the village, a half-day's walk south, was the farthest she had ever been from the ranch. She had never seen a soldier before. Why would a soldier and a holy man come to their ranch?

The ache returned to her chest. Alaysa pressed her palm against her sweater. The scar pressed back. Issie looked, her eyes narrowed. Alaysa continued to look down the mountainside. The men approached the cabin and stepped onto the porch, disappearing from view.

"The white and the red flags?" Issie asked.

"Huh?" Alaysa asked, darting a glance at her sister. She had been so engrossed with what was happening at the cabin, she had forgotten about Issie.

"You'll want the white and red flags?"

"Yes, but we don't have to hurry," Alaysa said, shaking her head to clear it.

The flags were a warning system she and her father had devised ever since they discovered Alaysa sensed changes in the weather. She predicted what type of storm would hit their farm and when. Whenever she felt the weather change she would raise different coloured pieces of cloth on a pole at the back of their house to warn her father and brothers up on the higher plateaus to either seek shelter or come down with the cattle.

A white flag meant freezing temperatures. A red flag meant ice. Blue was used for snow and yellow for high winds. If the storm approached quickly, then she would double the flags. This afternoon she would hang only one set.

The sisters entered the yard. Alaysa took Issie to the barn for the flags. They would hang the flags and then start on their chores early so they could give Mam help in the kitchen. As Alaysa passed by the horses ridden by the

strangers, she noticed they both stared at her.

"Why are they looking at you?" Issie asked.

"I don't know," she replied.

The black horse nickered in her direction and shook his head. His reins jangled. Alaysa heard bells ringing in the distance. Horses carrying soldiers marched in front. Her own horse nickered loudly, shook his head and leaped onto his hind legs to pay the air. The closest horses scattered out of the way, their riders swearing but also laughing. Her horse was known to have a very large ego. They knew this right away as her horse had actually chosen Alaysa as a rider, not the other way around.

"Alaysa, come here, please," Mam called from the porch. Alaysa shook her head. The image vanished and she stared at the black horse. He shook his head and neck, thick mane flying, and looked away. She swore she saw him wink.

"Alaysa?" her mother called impatiently.

"Yes, Mam." She and Issie crossed the yard and paused in the doorway. "A storm is coming."

"When?" Mam asked, her voice subdued.

"Tonight."

"Tell her," Issie said, squeezing Alaysa's hand.

Alaysa jerked her head toward the interior of the house. "Not now."

"Tell me what?" Mam asked.

"Alaysa nearly-" Issie began.

"-it can wait until later," Alaysa interrupted her sister. Frustration filled Issie's face so Alaysa quickly added, "I feel fine now. Besides Mam is busy with the visitors."

"We'll talk later then," Mam said, concerned, "Since you have a few moments before setting the flags, come in." Mam nodded her head toward the kitchen.

Alaysa stood in the doorway while her eyes adjusted to the dim interior then stepped inside. Mam sat in her rocking chair and held Jessie on her lap. The mayor, Len Castleton, stood up and nodded toward her. Alaysa nodded back. Len was her Mam's second husband. Second and third husbands lived with their first wives but were allowed to visit. Pa didn't like Len so Len didn't come to visit very often. Mam didn't mind even though she did have final say as to who could come calling and who couldn't. She preferred Pa's company to that of her other two hus-

bands – the third one, a trader, only came to visit every few years – and Len was very busy with his own first wife and large family and being mayor and all. Alaysa glanced at the other two men.

The taller of the strangers leaned against the mantle. He stared into the fireplace. He had removed his cloak to reveal a glistening armour breastplate. A long sword hung from his waist. Andrew would be excited to see the sword. The soldier's eyes, buried deep in a face wrinkled and scarred from years of fighting and living out of doors, glanced at her, then back to the stewpot. It had been a quick glance but she felt she had been studied, judged and found wanting in that moment.

The other stranger sat in her Pa's massive armchair. His thin, stringy body seemed overwhelmed in a chair meant to hold her father's large frame and several children at one time. He had removed his cloak and draped it over the back of the chair. His intense scrutiny made her face turn red, so she turned her back to him and placed the two buckets of berries next to the kitchen sink. She could feel his eyes continue to study her.

"Alaysa, these gentlemen would like to meet you," her mother said, "Come here."

Alaysa looked at her feet as she walked over to stand beside her mother.

"This is Dardon of the Darsinnians."

Alaysa raised her eyes. *A priest*, she thought, *why is a priest here?* She had heard of the Darsinnian Sect. Their Keep sat at the top of one of the distant mountains, Mount Loris. The sect had been created over a thousand years ago. Their priests prayed to one of the younger gods, Darsis.

Her family worshipped the ancient gods who protected the forest and the mountains. They offered gifts at the turn of each season in hope that the gods would honour them with fertile land and healthy livestock, but they did not worship their gods in such a formal fashion with prayer and meditation. She nodded her head, wondering if this was how one paid respect to a Darsinnian priest.

"And this is Sir Jackson of Netharley," her mother said, "Dardon's escort."

Alaysa nodded, again, but the soldier did not look at her. Instead, he crouched down in front of the fire and held his hands out toward the flames. A long scar ran from his wrist and twisted across his arm to the underside. She noticed strands of orange throughout his gray hair. Perhaps he was not as old as he seemed. The Darsinnians were not the only sect to have their own army but this soldier looked like he had fought in many battles. She wondered when and where. She had not heard of any recent fighting. Her father always brought news up from the village, but he had not mentioned any wars. Alaysa glanced at her mother, but her mother had turned her attention

back to the priest.

"Alaysa, it is good to meet you," Dardon spoke, his voice sounding younger than he appeared. "I apologize if we have taken you from your chores."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, fearing to look him in the eye. "It is still a little early."

"Your mother has only praise for you. She says you are a hard worker and a quick learner."

"Thank you, sir," she said, not knowing what else to say.

"How old are you, Alaysa?" he asked.

"Almost fifteen years, sir."

"And you are not married as of yet?"

"No, sir," she replied. A sick feeling grew in her stomach.

"I've kept you too long from your chores," he said and dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

Alaysa ran to the barn, her pounding heart making her feet swift. *This is it*, she thought, *this is how it's done. They're here to take me away to be married. And Sir Jackson. He's here to be my first husband.* She stood just inside the door where pieces of cloth hung, trying to catch her breath. This wasn't right. Someone should have told her. Warned her. She couldn't catch her breath. The scar ached. She didn't know whether to scream or cry.

Book 1, Chapter 2

“Here, Alaysa.” Issie’s voice startled her. Her sister stood just inside the barn door holding out white and red pieces of cloth in her hand.

Alaysa took a deep breath and filled her lungs with the familiar, reassuring smell of hay. Her heart slowed. She always felt better surrounded by the smells of Pen’nBru and now it soothed her fear. She took the flags from Issie and left the barn. Her father had planted the pole just behind the house. He didn’t want her to become lost in a storm. She had laughed, saying that she probably would not go out in the storm to warn them of it because it would already be happening. Now, Alaysa wished the pole had been planted far up the hill so she’d have an excuse to get away from the strangers inside the cabin. From her future husband.

She pushed the wooden toggles on the white flag through the rope hoops dangling from the pole and pulled on the rope until the next set of hoops came up. When she had slid the last toggle of the second flag into the hoop she hefted the rope with quick, long strokes, raising the flags to the top. The cloth unfurled in the steady breeze. Alaysa returned to the barn.

She grabbed a pitchfork and dug its long forks into the hay pile. She figured hard work would keep her mind off her marriage. Issie climbed up onto one of the stalls, her legs swinging bump, bump against the wood. Alaysa struggled under a heavy load of hay that she dumped in the middle of the barn floor. She carried a small pile of hay to the front of each of the stalls to feed the cattle her father would soon bring down from the mountain.

‘He’s so old.’ The thought jumped into her head all of a sudden. She nearly tripped over her feet. The twines of the pitchfork dug into the soft dirt, stopping her from falling. All she could see was his battle-scars and his gray hair. *‘Why did they pick someone so old to be my first? He won’t live long enough to see if one of his children grow to be the Chosen One.’*

Cowbells jangled in the distance as she walked outside for another load of hay. She shielded her eyes against the setting sun. Three dark figures, her father and brothers, followed a herd of brown and white cows past the bushes where she and Issie had collected berries earlier. The cows ambled down the hillside. She stuck her pitchfork into the crisp pile of straw and lugged it back inside. Issie had fallen asleep on a pile of blankets just inside the door. Alaysa finished filling the last few stalls at the back of the barn then strode outside, covering her eyes against the lowering sun.

Arms wrapped around her waist and she felt her body lift off the ground. She squealed as fingers found a ticklish spot at her waist. The pitchfork slipped from her hand.

“Has the world come to an end?” a voice spoke in her ear.

“Andrew, put me down,” she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Tell me,” he said, squeezing her tighter against his stomach, “Has the world come to an end?”

“What do you mean?” she giggled. He lowered her to her feet. She picked up the pitchfork from the ground.

Andrew smiled, “The world must be ending if you are doing our chores.” He brushed a lock of curly white hair back from his face. He had a way of smiling that made any girl’s heart melt, but Alaysa always saw through it. She could see when he teased her and gave it right back to him. Her father called them the twins even though Andrew was two years older.

“Just thought I’d help,” she said, then looked at her father. “We have guests.”

“Saw the horses,” her father said. He pulled off his heavy outer coat and hat and hung them on a peg just inside the barn door. He glanced at Jake who had been sidling over to a fence post. “Don’t sit down yet. You’re not finished. Go let the cows in.”

With a groan, Jake angled away from the fence and headed toward the inside of the barn. As he walked past Alaysa, she heard him mutter beneath his breath. Jake did not like farm chores. He wanted to go to the city like Andrew had last year, but his school grades did not warrant his turn at the college. If he could bring his grades up, then their father would allow him to go. He, too, had the thick, white hair of his father, but he wore it cut short around his head.

“Alaysa, we can finish up here,” her father said, “Go see if your mother needs any help.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, “I could-”

“Inside,” he said, holding out his hand for the pitchfork. His stern eyes betrayed concern. “Tell your mother we’ll be in soon.”

Alaysa handed the pitchfork to her father. She walked past Andrew. “Just who are our guests?” he asked.

She stopped to respond.

“Andrew,” her father called. “Here. Now.”

Alaysa stepped back inside the barn, nudged her sleeping sister, and they walked across the yard together. She didn’t want to go into the cabin, but she had no where else to go. No other chores to do. Quietly opening the

door, she slipped in and moved over to the cook stove. Issie woke in the heat of the kitchen, and when Alaysa set her down, she went around to the bedroom. Sir Jackson had sat down close to the fire on a bench. It groaned each time he reached forward to stir the coals. Dardon still sat in Pa's chair. He and Mam chuckled over something he said. He had barely glanced at Alaysa as she entered. Sir Jackson continued to stare into the flames.

Baked pies cooled on the counter top. Issie brought Jessie and Janey out of the bedroom and all three sat down at the kitchen table. Alaysa smiled at them. She remembered the joy in her parents' eyes when Issie, then Jessie had been born. They could not believe more children had come into their lives. They gave thanks to the gods, and when Janey came along a year later, her parents gave thanks again but added that the gods could cease their generosity.

Alaysa pulled out two small plates. She dished out some of the stew from a pot hanging over the fireplace. Sir Jackson had pulled out the hot iron spindle and held the pot in place so Alaysa could dish out the food without getting too close to the fire. She noticed calluses and scars on his hands. *Why couldn't it be someone younger?*

She mumbled her thanks and returned to the table to place the plates in front of the children. Jessie dipped his spoon into his food. Alaysa sat beside Janey to feed her. She tried to listen to her mother's conversation with the two men, but her father and brothers chose that moment to arrive.

Mam introduced the visitors. Pa politely nodded at the mayor and spoke a welcome. Andrew started to ask Sir Jackson a question but Mam stopped him, saying dinner would be burnt by the time they actually sat down if they kept pestering their guests. Pa took his spot at the head of the table and Mam gave up her spot opposite Pa to Dardon. Sir Jackson sat to Pa's left and Mam to Dardon's left. The mayor sat on the other side of Jake, his son.

Alaysa had put the two young children in Pa's chair where they curled up and fell asleep. Alaysa sat beside Andrew opposite Sir Jackson, Jake and Len as if his protection would deter these strangers from their errand. Andrew smiled and winked at her. Andrew, the oldest, had always kidded her about her straight black hair with its streaks of red, where the rest of them had short, curly, white hair. But too nervous to acknowledge his teasing, she only looked at her plate.

After a brief prayer of thanks to his god, Dardon accepted the platters of food Mam passed to him. Alaysa, normally famished, took very little of the steaming potatoes, fresh carrots, roasted lamb and hot bread. She picked at her food and listened to the conversation around the table. Dardon spoke mostly about the court gossip and mentioned how the prince enjoyed his father's lavish dinners that would last until the sun rose the next morning. Dar-

don tried to bring Alaysa into the conversation, but she only smiled and spoke a few polite words in response.

Pen'nBru continued to suffer from the plague that killed every living thing on the land, and each day the estates of more and more barons shrank. Those who had lost all of their property had come to live in Christentown until they could arrange passage across the great ocean to the new land. It was a sad time as the Emperor lost more and more of his people and his kingdom shrank. Alaysa thought that the prince should be spending less time in parties and more time trying to help his father and his people. She spoke her thought out loud and was answered with silence. She squirmed thinking she had been impolite. She opened her mouth to apologize, but the priest interrupted her.

"He is still young," Dardon said. "About the same age as Andrew."

"But does he not feel any responsibility?" she said, looking at Dardon.

"No, I don't believe he does yet," Dardon said, leaning forward. "What would you do if you were the prince?"

"Well," she said, glancing around the table. Her family all looked at her, especially the mayor who studied her through half-closed eyes. "I would try to find the next Lady of the Lightfire, for she would help the prince." She remembered the stories she had heard at the festivals about the ancient Ladies of the Lightfire and the magnificent battles they had fought against Lord Zaren.

Jake chuckled, "The Ladies are not real. They are just part of a story made up to give us hope. Everyone knows the plague will destroy Pen'nBru and that we'll all have to move far away someday." He reached for another slice of bread.

"Not in our lifetimes," Pa said, his voice feverish, "I will see that my grandchildren will live on this ranch."

Alaysa glanced at her father. She had rarely heard him speak in a harsh tone, and for him to do so in front of guests made her feel uncomfortable. Mam said nothing but did look at him with a warning tilt to her head that warned him to be careful.

Dardon spoke, glancing at Jake. "They say there is one more Lady to be found yet."

"One more?" he asked, "It isn't a story?"

"No, not at all. There were six in total. Only five have been found," Dardon explained.

"How would you know her?" Andrew asked.

Alaysa put her fork on her plate but did not take her hand away. She held her breath. Maybe they weren't here to take her away to be married. Maybe they were here to seek out the Chosen One, maybe even the Lady. But they couldn't be here to test her. She was too old. Issie? Her sister was the right age.

"Through tests," Dardon said, "We are always searching for any young women who may show a unique talent."

So they were here to seek out the Lady. Alaysa thought of all the girls she had met in the village. Could they mean Jessica who could sew clothes for anyone with such skill that she had become the mayor's favourite tailor? Or perhaps Nellie, who had shown healing skills at a young age? Or could it be Lizan, Andrew's girlfriend, who spoke up for anyone who had been wronged and settled all arguments quickly and successfully? She thought of many of the other girls in the village and realized they all seemed to have a unique ability for something. Any one of them could be the next Lady.

"Ready for pie?" Mam spoke, breaking Alaysa's train of thought. She rose to help clear the dishes while her mother served dessert. She sat as Mam poured steaming tea into mugs.

"What kind of talent?" Jake asked, taking and passing a mug to Sir Jackson.

"Oh, anything that seems a little out of the ordinary," Dardon said. "Just last month we had heard about a girl who could fly about in the air. When we arrived at the village, we found a girl who could fly with the help of ropes. Seems her family wanted to start up a fair and someone had spied on their act."

"A flying Lady," Andrew chuckled. "Wouldn't that have been something?" He nudged Alaysa with his elbow. She grunted, her mouth full of pie.

"So what has brought you here?" Jake asked. "Ouch!" He reached beneath the table and shot a look of hatred at Andrew.

"Well," Dardon said, "we've heard about your sister."

"Which? Ouch! What?" Jake cried out.

Alaysa glanced up and met Dardon's eyes. His gaze did not waver. She looked down at her mug of tea and wished someone would say something. Her own voice had vanished.

"My brother speaks without thinking," Andrew muttered.

Alaysa could feel her heart pounding in her throat. Neither Issie nor Janey had shown any extraordinary ability. Only she had. And now she wished she could hide under the table.

“We will discuss this further,” Pa spoke up. “Later. The children have to be put to bed.”

Alaysa jumped up from the table and gathered up the children. They protested as she hurried them into the bedroom, promising to read to them only if they’d hurry. Andrew and Jake went out to the barn to sew up some of the harnesses. She wished she could go out to the barn with her brothers. Anything to get out of the cabin, away from Dardon. She curled up with Janey to read the book and didn’t mind reading it a second time when Jessie asked.

And when they fell asleep, Alaysa lay still so she could eavesdrop on the conversation in the kitchen. She could make out very few words. The door opened and Andrew and Jake returned. She heard them hang up their coats, bang their boots on the floor as they pulled them off their feet and pull up chairs next to the fire. Jake made a comment about the rain having started. Her father muttered something and Andrew grunted. A chair creaked and her oldest brother appeared in the doorway.

“You can’t hide in here forever,” he said. He leaned his long body against the inside of the door.

“I’m not the one, am I?” she asked, “I mean, I don’t feel any different. And I can’t do anything special. Anyone can tell when the weather is going to change.”

“Then come out,” Andrew said. “Let’s talk to the priest.”

She rose out of bed and paused to tuck the blanket around the younger children. As she walked past her brother, he said, “You’re probably not special at all.”

Book 1, Chapter 3

The family sat around the fireplace. Flames leapt tossing sparks onto the hearth. The fire lit the faces a dark red. Alaysa's shaking legs threatened to collapse as she walked into the main rooms so she placed a hand on the wall to hold herself upright. The roaring flames made her forehead break out in a sweat. Mam sat in a chair staring at the fire, Issie stood behind pulling at a stray thread peaking from the top. Sir Jackson sat on a bench beside her father. Jake and Len leaned against the mantle, both trying not to look at her. Andrew joined him. He glanced at her, then toward the kitchen table. She followed his gaze.

Several glass balls sat glittering in a row on the table reflecting in the firelight. Soothing colours danced in front of her eyes. Her legs stopped shaking. She raised both hands wanting to touch, to hold the delicate orbs. She took a step toward the table but stopped, looking up at Dardon, afraid she had broken some Darsinnian rule of etiquette. Dardon stood at the opposite end of the table. His lips curled up at the edges ever so slightly and he waved his hand, motioning her to come close.

"I've never seen anything like these," she whispered, leaning forward, the need to touch them growing stronger.

Eleven balls sat in a row. Each a different colour: red, blue, green, yellow, orange, purple, black, gold, silver, white and clear. All appeared to be the same, except for the clear ball. It seemed so delicate yet so much more solid than the other balls. Dardon spoke but she couldn't hear his words. Her hand shot out. Something cold and hard filled it and when she turned her hand over and opened her palm, the clear ball winked back at her. She held it up to the firelight and felt it grow warm in her hand. The warmth spread down her arm and throughout her body.

Alaysa could see the pink of her flesh through the ball. A small pinkish cloud formed inside the ball. It grew larger, then smaller, larger, smaller, almost as if matching her beating heart. Mesmerized, she felt a weariness settle over her mind. Her eyelids drooped. She rested her free hand on the top of the table to keep from collapsing. As she did, she turned the ball ever so slightly, so the other balls reflected in its surface. Their colours leapt toward her ball, surrounding it, stunning her fingers, freezing her hand.

A burning sensation raced down her arm and up her neck. Fire burst in her head. Flecks of colour whirled in front of her eyes. She tried to call for help but she couldn't draw a breath. Dardon reached out and covered the ball, his fingers intertwining with hers. She wished he would take it out of her hand. Instead, she heard him speak in a

language she didn't understand.

The room began to spin. Lamplight and firelight swirled as flecks that blended into a silver haze. She felt dizzy. Falling. The haze darkened. Cold air shocked her body. She stopped abruptly. The darkness lightened and formed into a rock floor. Razor sharp pain shot through her knees and palms. She found herself kneeling face down on cold stone. Child-sized arms and legs began to shiver. She rolled over and pulled up her skirt. Blood from her skinned knees seeped through holes in her pants. *My father will be so upset.*

Her father's eyes lit up whenever he saw her in this dress. She liked to see her father smile. She liked it even more when he laughed. His whole body rocked. She had to cover her ears with her hands because he laughed so loud. Then he would pick her up and hold her so tight to his chest that his beard would tickle and she could feel his heart beating and her mother would tell him to put his daughter down, that she would never grow up to be a proper princess if he kept spoiling her and her father would say there would be time enough to teach her to be a queen and her mother would say-

“Run!”

She heard the panicked voice and scrambled to her feet. She gasped as the cuts on her knees burned as they reopened. She looked around. The room looked like any one of the tunnels beneath the castle. They led everywhere. To the cellar with the many dusty bottles of wine. To Cook's pantry with the sweet smelling jars of herbs and spices. To the cold storage with its piles of cheese. She didn't like that room. It smelled musty. Cook would always say that smell meant the cheese was getting better tasting. Sometimes mould is good. She would giggle out loud and Cook would sit her on a stool by the dusty baking table, give her a bit of pastry to knead and say-

“Run, Princess, run now!”

Cook's voice had become a familiar, raspy voice. The sound came from a dark shape on the floor. A glow from a silver cloud in the wall made his face look so white. She knew him. He was a close friend of her parents. His robe had a large dark stain on the front. The liquid had leaked onto the rock floor. She turned to run but stopped. Her father wouldn't leave a wounded man so she shouldn't either. Besides, she couldn't see anyone else in the tunnel. Why should she run? She stepped close to him and her feet squished in the puddle.

He had prayed with her parents and lived in a tower at the castle. She saw him every week. He and her mother spoke for long hours. They spoke often. She thought he was maybe a cousin or someone close. She couldn't remember. She reached out to his face and he grabbed her wrist. His hand was ice cold.

“You must leave this place, Princess,” he whispered. His eyes drifted to the front of her dress. “Are you hurt?”

She looked down. The dark liquid had stained the front of her dress, too. The fabric clung to her skin. She tried to pull the fabric away. A sharp pain made her gasp. She felt her torn skin give way. A rush of warmth soaked the top of her dress. The walls began to tilt.

The priest yanked her arm. How dare he touch her so? Her head cleared with her sudden anger. He was reaching toward her shoulder, but the silver light began to fade. His eyes wandered as if he couldn't find her. Fear and pity replaced her anger. He was hurt and she should be helping him. Her father would want that.

The priest's arm dropped to his side. He looked at the silver fog with regret. She heard him mutter, “Too late-”

They had stepped through that fog. He had carried her, but someone had pushed him at the last moment so they both had fallen. She had only skinned her knees but he had hurt his chest. Badly. She could tell by the way his face had gone so pale. She had seen this before.

Her father had come back from a battle once, his arm hanging at an angle, blood all over his clothes and face. The red of the blood made his white face look so pale. She had been afraid to touch him and the priests had rushed him into a room and closed the door and told her she couldn't come in. She had stayed outside the door because no one ever told her where she could and couldn't go and besides her father was in there and she had to take care of him. She had heard a snap and her father's cry. She had burst into the room and run up to her father, wrapping her arms around his legs. She had kicked the closest priest in the shin, saying that if anyone else hurt her father she would kick them, too. Her father had placed a hand on her head and chuckled. She looked up at him, confused. “Sometimes a person has to feel pain in order to get better.”

She blinked away tears. She only wanted to take care of him, to take away his hurt. She marveled at her father's courage and hoped she would be that brave one day. The silver fog began to swirl faster, growing larger as it spread out across the rock wall. She didn't feel brave at all right now. She wanted to run away.

The priest struggled to rise but fell back with a groan. His lower body didn't seem to want to move. She crouched down beside him. She couldn't leave him alone. He struggled to breathe and a dark liquid trickled out of the corner of his mouth. She wiped it with her sleeve. He opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her.

“Princess,” he whispered. She leaned close. “I am so sorry. I cannot come with you. You must be very brave

and do as I say.”

She nodded her head. Brave. Just like her father.

“You have to leave this cave.”

She glanced down the tunnel to where it curved and she couldn't see any further. “No, I-”

“Yes. Outside a man is waiting for you but you have to run down the mountain to meet him. It will seem you are running for a long time and you may grow very tired but you have to keep going.”

A musty smell filled the air. She put her sleeve up to cover her mouth and nose. Her stomach rolled. She thought she might be sick. Shuffling footsteps came from the other side of the glowing fog.

“Go, Princess,” the priest said. He glanced at the fog.

She looked, too. Then she wanted to run very fast but she couldn't make her feet move.

A soldier stood in front of the fog. His uniform hung in tatters. She thought she saw a bone through one of his pant legs. She looked up to his face quickly, not wanting to know for sure. The soldier swiveled his head, his nose high like a dog sniffing the air for a scent. She recognized him. Her breath caught in her throat. He had been the one who had pushed them through the silver fog. But he hadn't pushed them with his hands. She remembered. He had pushed with his sword. She could feel the tip of the cold steel in her skin as it slid in and then out.

He stared in their direction through empty eye sockets. A flap of black flesh hung from his face and neck. His jawbone flashed white whenever he moved his head and the skin flapped open. Every time he moved the musty smell wafted over them. She had never been around dead people. But how could he be moving? He raised his arm and lifted the sword. In the silver light, she could see its red stain.

Her mother's blood had been red, too. Only a few moments ago in the sanctuary, held in the priest's arms, she could see her mother standing on the other side of the altar. Five other women stood just behind her, having already seen their children off. She smiled reassuringly at her daughter. They had already said their good-byes. Her mother, so pretty in her black dress, her long, black hair glistening in the torch light, flashes of red sparkling. She hoped she would have hair as pretty when she grew up. Then her feet jumped on the floor as it shook.

Small swirls of fog formed on the rock walls, floor and ceiling. Soldiers poured out of the fog. Her mother drew her sword as the soldiers spread out in the room. Her father's soldiers fought the dead soldiers. She lost sight of her mother as the priest turned to look around. She kicked and screamed, making him turn around again, just as a dead soldier advanced on her mother.

Her mother raised her sword. The soldier stepped right up and pushed his body onto her sword. He kept walking. He didn't stop until he fell against her mother. She struggled to shove him off. One of the other women grabbed his shoulder and together they pushed him away. He fell at their feet, unmoving. More soldiers lunged at the group. She saw some of the women fall, swords sticking out of their bodies.

Her mother glanced toward her and yelled something at the priest. She raised her sword ready to stick it in the next soldier. The priest looked confused and took a step toward her mother. She turned sideways and yelled at him. Her mother didn't see the next soldier.

"Mama!" she yelled and pointed.

Her mother turned but too late. The soldier thrust his sword into her stomach. Her body stiffened. The sword cut through the back of her mother's dress. He pulled his sword back and her mother fell to her knees her hand against her stomach. She turned her head, sadness in her eyes.

"Mama." She struggled to get down from the priest's arms. She had to get to her mother. She had to protect her. The priest's grip on her waist was too tight. He wouldn't let her climb down. She tried climbing over his shoulder. That's when she saw him.

He stood behind the priest, his sword pointed at the priest's back. He thrust it forward. She saw it slide into the priest's robe. He stiffened and she felt a pain in her shoulder. Then she was falling backwards. The priest's arms loosened and she fell away from him, twisting in the silver light. The rock floor came up hard beneath her knees. Her hands and head hit a second later, and she blacked out.

"Run, Princess!" the priest's voice cut through her reverie, bringing her back to the cave. She took a step backward. The soldier turned his head. He reached out with his free hand.

That's all for now.

