

# THE LIGHTFIRE SAGA

*By Sandra Stewart*

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*Samples of:*

*Book 1*

*Book 2*

*Book 3*

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## Book 2, Chapter 1

“Kill him. Kill him now.”

The voice hummed in Alaysa’s ears. She did not fear the voice. Only its source. The Lightfire encased between her lungs and ribs. Alaysa felt her fingers flex. Saw her arms reach out over her horse’s back, across the smooth leather of the saddle toward Darsis. Unaware, he leaned over so that only the back of his skull and neck showed as he stuffed clothing into a knapsack. She knew her hands couldn’t reach him but why didn’t her fingers stop?

“The time is right,” the voice spoke, again. Its gentle undertones hugged her chest, her back bringing a warmth she had last felt the night before her parents had been massacred.

“Stop this.” Alaysa jerked her hands back to the saddle, clutching the saddle horn hard so that the leather bit into her skin.

“You don’t need Darsis.”

Alaysa shuddered. The Lightfire had changed tactic, withdrawing the warmth, leaving a thin spike of cold clasped to her spine. Alaysa drew in a ragged breath through both nose and chattering teeth.

“I do so,” Alaysa said, jaw aching. “We both need him.”

Darsis straightened, brushing dirty blonde hair out of his eyes. “Alaysa, you should...”

Her hands jerked forward at the sound of his voice. He jumped back and stumbled into a group of her soldiers. One of them spun around, grabbed Darsis by the arm and held a knife up to his throat. Then, just as swiftly, the soldier shoved him away. Alaysa heard him mutter about not wanting to dull his knife’s edge on an impotent god.

“Impotent?” Hands clenched at his sides, Darsis took a step toward the soldier.

“Darsis.” She spoke and he stopped.

She took a deep breath for she felt the Lightfire’s anger building, again. “Darsis just keep out of their way.”

He stepped away from the soldiers, studying her. Pity and understanding filled his eyes. “It has only been

two days. The Lightfire grows strong.”

“Is this how it was with the other Ladies?”

“You show none of the physical damage,” Darsis said. “No shaking hands or limbs. But I can see your weariness. I’ve watched you when you sleep.” His voice softened. “You do not rest well.”

Even with the sleeping tea she drank each night, Alaysa drifted in and out of consciousness. The Lightfire’s obsession with gaining its freedom filled Alaysa’s thoughts constantly. Once it became free, it would kill Darsis for having stolen it. Then it would return to the ether from whence it had first come. But it needed Darsis to find the rest of itself. Of course, that meant it tortured Darsis every chance it got.

To clear her mind, Alaysa walked away from Darsis and up a footpath. The sounds of the camp faded as she entered a grove of trees. No one followed but she knew all eyes at the camp had watched her leave. No one would bother to follow. She wasn’t going far.

The trees ended at the edge of a cliff. Alaysa stepped up to the precipice. The Lightfire became silent as if holding its breath. The cliff face dropped below to a river filled with frothing white caps bouncing over rapids. Mist rose, curling inward up into the air. A dense forest lined the other side carpeting the land for as far as Alaysa could see. The dull green ended abruptly at a glowing bar of orange that vanished at the horizon.

The orange. The beauty of a desert that should not exist and Alaysa’s destination. The Dead Lands that she had to heal.

Surrounding air shimmered with the rising mist. A faint tune, high and airy, not unlike a child’s aimless whistling floated through the mist. Alaysa leaned forward to try to make out the tune. It seemed familiar. The mist grew dense, blocking out the sky behind. A child laughed. The laughter became deeper as if an adult had joined the child. The voices multiplied.

Figures began to form in the mist. They stood very still among the wavering fog and faced Alaysa as if they wanted her to notice them. A breeze shifted, blowing tendrils of her long black hair across her face. She brushed them back behind her ears as she tried to see if the figures became men or women. The laughter died away. The whistling began but this time as a sad, mournful tune. One of the figures raised its arms, held out its hands beckoning Alaysa to join them.

Alaysa glanced around. The mist had moved into the forest and across the path. Wisps danced on her deeply tanned skin, warm and dry, not cool and damp as she had expected. When Alaysa looked up again, the fig-

ures had floated closer to the cliff's edge. Alaysa could no longer see the river below. In fact, she could barely make out where the cliff ended. When she looked at the figures, she did not feel threatened by their presence. In fact, she felt they needed to communicate. She could hear no words coming from their mouths but their hands had floated so close she could reach out and grasp them. Wondering what they needed to tell her, Alaysa raised her own hand.

A dark shadow darted through the mist. Teeth, fangs and claws ripped the mist figures apart. A loud screech filled Alaysa's ears and she stumbled, fell onto her back and rolled to the edge of the trees. The dragon landed where she had just stood, wings beating furiously. The mist shredded with each beat.

Alaysa lay very still, trying to become so small the dragon would not see her. His scales glittered blue as the sun appeared through the fading mist. Alaysa's head felt so heavy. She tried shaking it but it would not clear. The whistling filled her ears and a sadness overwhelmed her. She scrambled onto her hands and knees and reached out to the last remaining bits of mist. The dragon stepped in front, blocking her way. It lowered its head and gently touched her forehead with its snout.

'Ladyfire.'

Memories flooded back. The mist vanished from her head. 'Tay. Who were they?'

'Lochorians. Water spirits.'

'They needed to tell me something.'

'They are not to be trusted.'

'Do they not belong to Oseanus?'

'Yes, but not all who belong to your god of the water can be trusted.'

'I thought I could trust them. I felt I could.'

Tay tilted his head ever so slightly. 'They lure travelers to their deaths, Ladyfire. They wanted you to join them. To step out.'

Alaysa shuddered and tried to get the picture of her falling to the river below out of her head.

'Your Healer comes.'

Alaysa heard footsteps running up the path. She stood as Janek appeared between the trees. His reddish brown hair had been tied tight at the back of his neck. He still wore the priest's robe, splattered with dried blood – her blood. Darsis and another boy, Kir, followed

close behind. Kir held a book against his chest and clutched the strap of a satchel over his shoulder. His long, brown roughcloth robe had been torn up the side to show dried blood on his pant leg. His eyes, green, brightened up a face pale from too many days spent studying his trade indoors.

She held up her hand as Janek skidded to a stop, his eyes wide with fright. His hands, extended to start the healing, dropped to his side. "I...I felt you moving away from me."

"I'm still here, you can see." Moving away, she thought. Had the mist been another place? Maybe she would have been safe with the Lochorians. Maybe they hadn't meant her any harm. Maybe they had wanted to tell her about the plague. Maybe... Something struck her in the back, pushing her off balance so she had to take a few stumbling steps forward or fall.

'Ladyfire, the Lochorians are not to be trusted.' Tay did not bother to apologize for shoving her.

"Tay, I think I can judge who I can trust." She turned her back to the dragon to show her anger.

Janek cleared his throat. "Oh, really?" And jerked his head toward Darsis.

"We had all been fooled by him. No one was supposed to figure out his identity."

"Why did you go off on your own?" Janek asked.

"Can't I get some time to myself?"

"You know you shouldn't go anywhere without an escort."

"You were just down there." She waved her hand down the path. "You got here quick enough."

Janek lifted an eyebrow. Tay blew out a puff of air.

"Okay," she held her hands up defensively, "Tay got to me first. But I did not fall."

"You nearly did."

"I don't think I would have. They wanted to tell me something. If I'd only had a little more time."

"And where were you?" Janek turned to Darsis who leaned against a tree watching with mild interest, his dark curly hair overshadowing his eyes.

"You know I can do nothing to help her."

"I'm starting to wonder, Darsis. The Lightfire is glowing under her skin. The gods must be able to see it from wherever it is that they live. How is it that they don't put one and one together and guess that you, too, must

be close by? How is it that they haven't found you yet? That you are still here?"

Darsis shoved away from the tree, hands clenched and advanced on Janek. "How is it that you are not dead disowned, bastard son? Any one of the mortals here would be very rich if they removed your head from your neck and gave it to the Emperor."

Kir jumped between the two of them. "Stop this. You know why Janek cannot die. The Lady would die, too."

Darsis looked over Kir's head. "Yes, very coincidental, wasn't it? You saw it as a way to get out of that horrible library, didn't you?"

"It was an accident," Alaysa raised her voice but no one heard.

"You're just angry that you didn't make it in time," Janek met Darsis's eyes and did not look away.

"She needs my immortality to survive the healing. What can you give her?"

Janek opened his mouth, said nothing and closed it. He turned his head and stepped back from Kir.

"What by the gods is going on here? If we don't leave soon, we won't make Christentown by the end of the week." A red-haired boy strode up the pathway. His left hand clutched the handle of a sword riding low on his hips. No one responded. His eyes studied the group.

"I could hear you back in the clearing." He glanced at Darsis then at Janek. "If there is anymore bickering, I will personally let the gods know where you are Darsis."

"Then who will lead you to the other Lightfires, Eric?"

Eric stepped very close to him. "I didn't say when."

Darsis raised his fists, took a breath and then backed off. "I don't have time for this." He walked over to the dragon and jumped on his back. Tay hopped up to the edge of the cliff, spread his wings and dropped out of sight.

"We should get going," Eric stepped aside so Alaysa could pass but when she did not move, he prompted with "My Lady?"

"I wonder where they go." Alaysa watched as the dragon and rider glided over the distant forest.

"Let them go. As you can see, Darsis stirs up too many bad emotions here. The sooner we can find the rest of the Lightfire, the sooner we can get rid of him."

Alaysa nodded even though she didn't think it would be that easy to get rid of the god. She turned and led

the way back down the path. Darsis and Tay had been spending a lot of time together the last couple days. She wondered if Darsis felt the same. That he could hardly wait to be rid of them.

As she walked, the Lightfire sparked inside her chest. Alaysa ignored it. She didn't want to tell a star that it was right. That they should be rid of Darsis – one way or another. But Alaysa couldn't help feel pity for him. He had held the Lightfire for nearly a thousand years. It had eaten away at his body and his mind. Now, fully clear of the tiny star, Darsis had regained the use of his body. It was his state of mind she worried about.

Back at the clearing, they found their horses and mounted. The emperor's soldiers moved out first, then Alaysa with Janek close behind, followed by Kir and Eric. The Lightfire soldiers followed last. They had left the lower rocky trails of Mount Loris by mid-morning but still could only ride single file for most of the day through winding trails in dense forests. Whenever space allowed though, Janek moved his horse up beside Alaysa. They rode mostly in silence but Alaysa did enjoy the feeling of him so close. She thought maybe he did, too.

"Janek, even though it shouldn't have happened," Alaysa said during one such moment. "I am glad it was you I bonded with even if it is a wild bond."

"What? You're not a romantic? Don't you like the idea we get to die together?"

"That's not even funny."

"Don't worry. Kir will find a way to break the bond. I hear the Emperor's library has grown to be the largest in the Land. He'll find the answer in one of the books there."

"Eric's taken well to being in charge." Alaysa wanted to change the subject.

"He was born to it."

"Still, his soldiers respect him. He's had to take on so much because of me. His father's death. Having to take on the leadership so soon. If I hadn't been found, he wouldn't be in this position."

"Stop blaming yourself for his father's death. Sir Jackson died defending you. It was his job. It was his honour and privilege to die for you."

"What about my parents? Do you think they felt honoured when Zaren's soldiers stabbed them? And Jake." Alaysa stared at her hands. She had held her second oldest brother in her arms as he bled to death.

"Alaysa, you can't let the dead torment you."

She stared at him. "And what about you?"

"Me?"

“I can feel your anxiety.”

“I’m not anxious…” but his voice faded.

“I’m taking you back to face a father who no longer calls you son.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters very much now. Only because the Emperor has two sons. I got the heir and his wife kidnapped by Zaren because I didn’t have what Zaren wanted. Wait until your father finds out the next in line to inherit will die the moment I try to use the full force of the Lightfire.”

“Kir will find a way to break the wild bond. Right, Kir?”

Kir had his head down reading a book he managed to balance on the horn of his saddle and raised a hand to wave back at them. Alaysa figured he hadn’t heard Janek. He had probably just acknowledged the sound of his name.

Kir was another who had had no choice but to join. He had been trained in the art of messaging, sending mental thoughts across great distances, and was supposed to stay at the Keep to help the Doctor find answers while the Doctor accompanied Alaysa on her journey. The Doctor had died in the battle two days ago. Kir had inherited his position, no longer apprentice.

Kir’s family had sent him at a very young age to the Darsinnian’s Keep to learn a craft. Then they had left him when they had decided to cross the ocean in search of a new home, far away from the plague, like so many of Pen’nBru’s people. Kir’s fear of the ocean and its creatures had kept him from joining his family. He had been overjoyed when Alaysa had arrived at the Keep. Suddenly, he had become part of a greater family with a wondrous purpose.

Alaysa thought him too young to be so serious. No one had thought, not even she, that the final Lady of the Lightfire even existed. The fifth Lady had died over two hundred years ago. Her stories had become the stuff of legends. No one alive even remembered what she looked like. No one except Darsis, of course.

And then the last Lady, Alasya, had been found, living on a remote mountain ranch. From a young age, she had been able to warn the neighbouring village of changes in the weather so that they had had time to bring in their cattle, sheep and horses. Rumours, exaggerated by enthusiasm, spread of a little girl, a wind-seer, who could control the weather and the Darsinnians came to investigate. The day they arrived Alaysa’s life was destroyed. Within two days, her parents and one brother had been killed. Her younger sisters and brother had been kidnapped. The

Darsinnian priest and soldier, Sir Jackson, had died by the third day. Her oldest brother had been kidnapped, too, but only after suffering a mortal wound. Alaysa did not want anyone else to die but she knew of no way to stop Lord Zaren.

Alaysa tried to push those thoughts out of her head as the day wore on. By the time they stopped to set up camp that night, Alaysa's stomach was so twisted she could barely swallow the tea Kir brewed. Tay and Darsis had not returned by the time she pulled out her blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. She curled up on the ground close to the fire and fell asleep, the childlike tune of the Lochorians playing in her mind.

## Book 2, Chapter 2

Alaysa's face dripped sweat. The orange light of the rising sun glowed against her eyelids and even when she squeezed them tight, the light did not falter. Alaysa pulled the blanket over her head. The heat and light vanished but the air she breathed grew stuffy and she thought she would suffocate.

As the camp awoke, horses stamped their hooves and shook their heads, bridles jingling. Soldiers' feet shuffled along the forest floor as they moved out to find a private spot to relieve themselves. They spoke in hushed tones.

When Kir's tea had eventually put her to sleep last night, she had slept without dreaming. Still, she did not feel rested. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her fingers pushed damp hair out of her eyes. As her fingers brushed her skin, it felt solid and made of leather. Deep down she could feel the pressure of her fingers but nothing else. Kir's tea had deadened her nerves so that she could sleep and its effects were slow to wear off. Perhaps if she splashed water on her face, it too would wake up.

Alaysa pushed aside the blanket and lifted her upper body on her elbow. She seemed to be the last to rise. A depression had been left in the sand where Janek had lain his blanket. Close enough that she could reach out and touch his shoulder but far enough away that neither would touch each other by accident. So little had been written about the bond that they did not use it unless absolutely necessary.

Farther around the fire, two soldiers shook out their blankets. The sand drifted in a light breeze, creating a glittering fog as it passed through a patch of sunlight. She could feel them trying not to look in her direction. She knew it was hopeless to tell them to stop worrying about her. But it was their responsibility to keep her alive and she felt their frustration knowing she was more at risk because of what she carried inside her chest than from any outside enemy.

She drew her knees up beneath her body and stood. The ground spun and she closed her eyes. Her stomach lurched. Taking in a few deep breaths, she waited until the spinning stopped. Fabric scratched her hand. At least she had had the foresight to pull the blanket up with her so she wouldn't have to bend over and risk another dizzy spell. She lifted it off the sand and stopped as a voice called out, "Let me do that for you."

Janek, jogging around the firepit, held his hand out for the blanket. She saw the determination on his

face. If she didn't hand over the blanket, he would yank it out of her hands. He so wanted to help her, to make life easier. And she wanted him to make it easier for her, take away all her pain.

If only like Kir's tea, he could make her numb to the outside world. She could stop worrying about her brothers and sisters, about the fragility of her heart, about her land, Pen'nBru. But then, to stop feeling would be to stop caring. Without her feelings, she would fade into nothingness. She would become that which she feared the most. She would become nothing.

Alaysa let him take her blanket and watched as he shook it, snapping it in the air twice. He folded it lengthwise then hung it over his shoulder. "How did you sleep?"

"The tea worked." She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. "The Lightfire is quiet." She placed a hand over her heart. "For now."

"I thought the dose was too strong," Janek said. "I still feel woozy."

"Is it always going to be like this?" she asked. "We didn't even touch."

"The wild bond is a strange one. Not even Darsis understands it."

To hide her discomfort, she turned toward the river. "I need to wash up."

"I found a spot that will give you a bit of privacy."

She followed him down to the edge and they turned to walk up river. Soldiers swam in the centre of the river where the water rose to their shoulders. They laughed and splashed each other, diving and kicking water high up into the water. One of them turned and waved. She recognized Eric and waved back. He looked so young. But then he was barely a year older than she. They were all so young. Too young to have the responsibility to save the Land.

"One moment, they are so serious," she said, more to herself than to Janek, "the next, they play like children."

"They take their moments of peace when they can," Janek said.

They walked up a large, sloping rock. Janek continued down the opposite side but Alaysa stopped. Dense brush clogged the forest on the far side of the river. A tree, torn out by its roots, had snagged in the centre of the river. Its bare limbs, scraped of all bark and leaves, stuck up into the air, snapping whenever the current tried to drag it off its perch. Alaysa could feel through the soles of her feet, the grating of the trunk on the gravel floor. Yet, it clung, refusing to be budged off this spot.

“What is it?” Janek said, from so far away.

Alaysa turned and jumped. She had expected him to be farther up the riverside. He stood only a few strides away at the base of the rock. She glanced back at the water. Had Oseanus tried to speak to her? When Janek next spoke, his voice sounded closer, normal. “Did Zaren try...?”

“No.” Alaysa shook her head and jogged down the rock to his side. “No, I have heard nothing from Zaren. I just hadn’t had a good look at the river yet.”

“It was cold earlier,” Janek said, walking again. “I think it feeds from the mountain glaciers.”

She looked at him sideways and smiled. “You should try swimming in a glacier pool. That is cold.”

He smiled back. “You calling me weak?”

“No, no, not at all,” she grinned. “Just because you were brought up with hot water at the turn of a tap doesn’t mean your tender skin can’t get used to bathing outside.”

Janek held back a branch that leaned out over the river to let Alaysa pass. “I’ll have you know there were many times the water was not very warm in the winter. We actually had to shorten our bath time to an hour or so.”

She saw him trying to hide a smile then they both broke out laughing. Alaysa remembered the harsh conditions she had had to endure at the Keep. All water had to be carried throughout the cavernous halls and rooms from the underground river at the base of the mountain. If it arrived with any hint of warmth at all, the bather would consider himself fortunate. All plumbing had ceased to work centuries ago.

“This is the place.”

Alaysa stepped up beside Janek. He had found a small cove, really just a shallow part of the river that had formed where two trees leaned out over the water. She could still hear the soldiers swimming further down the river. Dropping her blanket on the stone beach, she tore off her jacket, blouse, gloves, boots and pants. She left her underclothes on not really believing the river was that private. She could already feel the cool rush of the water on her tired skin and hoping on first one foot then the other, dragged off her socks at the edge and tossed them over her shoulder. She ran into the river and dove in.

The frigid water made her gasp when she came up for air. She felt the current tug at her hair and turned to face the current so that her hair could flow away from her body. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Janek sit down on the stones. Her cast off clothes surrounded him. Her head quickly cleared of the remaining effects of Kir’s tea.

She swam a little up river, then turned over and let the current push her back toward the cove. When she touched the rocky bottom, she turned over on her stomach and swam out to the centre of the river. The sun warmed her head.

Her knees hit the rocky bottom again. She climbed up onto the sand bar and sat cross-legged, facing the current. She leaned back, her arms behind her and let the water wash over her shoulders. Distant laughter filled her ears. It seemed no one was in a hurry to leave this morning.

Alaysa sat forward when her wrists began to ache and let her arms float just beneath the surface of the water. In the bright sunlight, she could make out the tracings of the daisies in her palms and the stems and leaves circling her arms. Flickers of light sparkled here and there along the stem, the Lightfire reminding Alaysa it sat inside her body. The flickering light solidified and filled her arms with light.

A strained voice crackled in her head. She fought the sound but it broke through just as a dead fish whacked her in the chest.

“The plague. It comes.”

Alaysa jumped to her feet. The Lightfire encased her upper body. Bloated bodies of fish floated by, some even brushing her legs. The stench made her gag.

“Alaysa, what is it?” Janek called over the rush of the water.

She turned and pointed down river. “Get them out, Janek. Get them out now.”

His face had gone pale. He stared at the bloated bodies in the water. “Come out, Alaysa. Don’t...”

“Janek, this is what the Lochorians wanted to tell me. Zaren has put the plague in the river.”

“Come out, Alaysa. We’ll find a way to...”

“I have to stop it. Now.”

“No, this isn’t the time.”

“Janek, you have to go,” she said, pain filling her chest. She didn’t want him to go. To leave her alone. “Warn Eric.”

Still Janek hesitated.

“You know I’m the only one who can stop it.”

He glanced down at the river’s edge, to where the fish had begun to pile up then with a final glance in her direction, he ran toward the boulder and vanished over the top.

The water had turned a murky, brackish colour and swirled around her legs. Her feet had become buried in the dirt and when she tried to lift them, the suction pulled them even deeper down. Where her skin vanished beneath the river, she could feel it tingling as if tiny fish nipped at her legs. The Lightfire worked its way down to the water's edge and when it tried to enter the water, it seemed to lose its spark and fade.

Far away, she heard voices yelling. She hoped none of her soldiers had touched any of the fish. The plague could still be alive on them. The fish had probably died right away, but it would take a man a full day and night of suffering to die. She didn't want to see any of her soldiers die that way. The yelling had turned to cries of panic. Maybe they had become trapped on a sand bar, just like she had.

"If only I could stop the water from flowing," she said.

A sigh filled her mind, soothing her anxiety. She leaned a little forward against the current. She was supposed to be able to use the flower to contact her gods. They were the ones who had given her this gift.

"Oseanus, slow the current, stop the flow. Your waters carry death."

Had the water level gone down a little?

"Oseanus, hold back the flow and I will touch your waters with the Lightfire. I will heal your wounds. We must not let the plague advance."

She opened her eyes a crack and saw that the water had pooled around her feet. A roar began to fill her ears. Water splashed in her face. She looked up. A huge wave, stretching from either side of the river stood in front of her. She reached out with her hand and touched it. The wave curled back upon itself and as more water from the river flowed into it, the wave grew taller.

"Alaysa!"

She glanced at the shoreline. A crowd had gathered at its edge. Janek stood out in front and waved her to come to him. She tried to move her feet but they had become buried in the sand up to her shins. She dropped her arms to reach down to her legs and the wave shifted. Water splashed to the dry riverbed on either side. She yanked her arms back up and turned back to face the water.

"Alaysa, come now. While you can." She heard Kir's voice but she couldn't leave. Her feet wouldn't budge. Besides, she had made a bargain with Oseanus.

"I'll go get her," Eric said.

She heard a skirmish and turned to see Janek holding him back. "Don't. You'll break her..."

More water splashed around her feet. The wave's crest began to fold over her head. Alaysa turned back to face the water, leaned in to let her glowing arms touch the surface. It curled back, again. Her lungs ached and she let out the breath she had been holding. All right, Oseanus, she thought, let's see if I can do this. Alaysa let her palms brush the edge of the wall of water. She placed her whole body against the water, even letting her face touch it sideways. Light blinded her eyes.

Ripples of cold danced upon her skin. The Lightfire caressed the droplets that made up the water, measured each for its goodness and moved on. The droplets shifted, sorted and bent away until Alaysa felt a change in the water. Like the drop in the air's temperature before a thunderstorm, the water began to drop to an icy, prickling cold that bit at the Lightfire.

Alaysa felt the Lightfire reach out, darting against the water, touching the ice. The ice pushed forward. The Lightfire pushed back. The water began to warm and the ice to vanish. Alaysa's shoulders ached. She dared to open her eyes. The Lightfire danced on her skin, jumping against the surface of the water as if trying to leap off. Alaysa felt the daisy twist beneath her skin as if reaching out for the Lightfire.

Alaysa's arms began to shake. She let them droop against the water. The ache grew stronger. The glow seemed to add weight to her body, dragging her arms away from the wall of water. Alaysa struggled to hold her arms high. She begged the Lightfire to stop glowing. But the Lightfire did not respond. Alaysa realized she did not know how to stop the Lightfire. She had never learned how to control it. She tried to step back from the water but her feet had been buried so deep, they couldn't move.

Alaysa started to reach down with her hands toward her ankles. Water sloshed down on her back, over her head. The wall of water shifted forward. She jerked her arms back up against the face of the water. If she tried to free her feet, the water would crash down and drag her under. She would drown before she could wrench her feet out of the mud bottom.

A voice spoke in her head. *"Where is he?"*

She felt the familiar anger building inside.

*"Where is Darsis?"*

"Stop this. We're going to drown if you don't come back in."

Even as she spoke the words, she knew the mistake she had made. The Lightfire's laughter filled her mind. With Alaysa's death, the Lightfire would be free.

“You promised to help-”

The Lightfire’s laughter grew louder, pierced her skull. Alaysa grabbed her head with both hands. The water start to pour out of the curl but she couldn’t lower her hands. The pain radiated out threatening to burst through her skull.

*“You will die in the end, you know.”*

Alaysa shivered. Yes, she did know she would die before she could completely heal the Land. She had not the strength to carry the full Lightfire. Even now, she had not the strength to keep it quiet.

“If I die now, you will never become whole, again.” But Alaysa knew she had already lost the argument. The Lightfire would let her die today. She should never have trusted it.

*“He is coming.”*

Alaysa turned sideways. The water began to pour in streams all around. She saw Darsis walking across the riverbed, determination etched on his face. She wanted to cry out to him, to stop, to not come any closer but she couldn’t. She couldn’t make her mouth say the words. Alaysa did not want to die. Today or any day.

*“He comes to save you. He loves you. He is pathetic.”*

Alaysa felt the Lightfire glow brighter along her skin.

Darsis waded through the waist deep water and climbed up onto the sand bar. He stood behind Alaysa and held open his arms. “Let the water go, Alaysa.”

She glanced over her shoulder. All that water? Was he crazy? The force of it hitting them both would kill them. And there was the tiny problem of her buried ankles. She shook her head.

“Alaysa, I know it’s hard for you, but you must trust me,” the god said.

She glanced at his open arms. The Lightfire giggled in her head. *“Let it go,”* the Lightfire said. *“Let him catch you.”*

“But the water,” Alaysa said. “You can’t...” And she stopped her thought. Too late, the Lightfire realized what she had almost said.

Alaysa faced the wall of water. “Release.”

The Lightfire screamed in her head. Water smashed into her body just as Alaysa took a deep breath. Her legs wrenched beneath the water. Her head struck something hard. Her hands grabbed something warm and soft and hung on.

Pain erupted along her legs. Her body jerked then floated free. For a brief moment Alaysa thought she'd just float to the surface and swim to shore then water filled her nose and mouth and she couldn't breathe and she knew she was drowning.

The current pushed her down to the gravel bottom. Sharp rock edges dug into the skin of her back. But only for a second. Her body propelled upward and her head broke the surface. She tried to take a breath. Someone yelled in her ear then a wave crashed over her head and she went under again.

A dark shadow covered her eyes. Alaysa couldn't remember when last she had breathed air. Her arms and legs stopped moving. She felt her body floating with the current. A song, peaceful as a lullaby filled her head. Her hip struck a hard edge and she rolled over and out of the current. Her body rose and broke the surface. A wave pushed her high up on the rocky shore. The song vanished as the water receded. Alaysa lifted her head and coughed up water.

Beside her, someone else seemed to be choking. She could hear him wheezing as he struggled to breathe. Pain erupted in her arm. She looked up and saw Darsis's hands twisting the skin of her forearm. Her hand had become latched onto his throat. Her fingers had gone white with the pressure of squeezing. Immediately, she yanked her arm back.

Darsis lay back on the rocks, his mouth open, his eyes wide and frightened.

Alaysa drew both her arms beneath her body and rose to her knees. She dug her toes into the stone bottom to push herself farther up on the shore. The river rushed by, the current tugging at her still immersed feet. Her ankles burst into fiery pain. She collapsed on the rocks again. Darsis did not reach out to help.

He had saved her life and she had repaid him by nearly strangling him to death. And she hadn't even known she was doing it. She opened her palms and looked at the sparkles on the daisies. Alaysa had lost control of the Lightfire.

The sound of feet slipping on stones made her look up. Janek led the group in a run. Darsis leapt to his feet. He grabbed Janek just as he came within reach of her.

"No, don't touch her," Darsis said, dragging Janek backward. "Not yet."

"Let me go," Janek said and tried to shove the god away.

"Not yet." Darsis said in a voice that made Alaysa shiver.

The shivering turned into a shuddering. Pain shot through all her limbs. A scream echoed inside her

head. Her back arched. Rocks cut into her soggy clothing, biting into her skin. Then just as quickly as it had begun, the pain stopped.

“All right,” Darsis released Janek. “Now.”

Janek knelt down and placed his hands on her bare arms. Warmth flooded her body, giving it strength, taking away the pain. She pulled in the warmth and closed her eyes. The pain faded. Her exhausted body relaxed. Sleep filled her mind.

“Breathe, Alaysa, keep breathing,” Darsis said.

With each breath she grew stronger. She pulled on the energy radiating down her arms and throughout her body.

“Okay, Janek,” Darsis said. “She’s had enough.”

Janek lifted his hands. The warmth vanished. Cold sliced through her body. She groaned and reached out.

“She’s not ready.” Janek’s voice, tired and weak, seemed to come from so far away.

“No, Janek, no more.” Darsis’s voice, barely audible, carried a threat.

Alaysa didn’t want Janek to stop. She hadn’t felt this well, this strong in a long time. She looked into Janek’s face. He had changed. Pain etched his features. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. Janek, her Healer, was to give her strength but this was uncontrolled. Too much. Fear raced through her veins. She had nearly killed Darsis. And now she had nearly killed Janek. She had to give some of the strength back. Lifting her hands, she brushed Janek’s sleeve. Darsis shoved Janek away. “Alaysa, don’t undo what has been done.”

Alaysa stared at her hands, hanging in the space where Janek had just knelt. She couldn’t be trusted. Rising to her knees, she felt Darsis grab her elbow to help her stand. She lashed out and shoved Darsis away. The god fell back on top of Janek. Alaysa ran a few steps away. Darsis’s voice stopped her. “Alaysa, you won’t get far. Only the pain is gone, not the injury.”

Her ankles gave out and she fell onto her hands and knees. Kir and Eric ran toward her. She held up her hand.

“I don’t need anymore help,” she let her head sink onto the stones. “Just let me die.”

## Book 2, Chapter 3

A heavy desperation weighted down her back and shoulders. Alaysa turned over and sat cross-legged on the rocky shoreline. Janek sat staring out into the river, his chest barely moving. Blood had begun to return to his face but his eyes remained distant and unmoving. Occasionally, a grimace of pain flashed across his features but he seemed to have blocked out his surroundings. This was the second time they had bonded. And Alaysa had nearly killed Janek.

Alaysa drew her knees up to her chest and lowered her head so that no one could see the tears pouring down her cheeks. They flowed without control. Alaysa couldn't stop the overwhelming sadness.

"The Lady is cold." Darsis spoke and Alaysa realized her body had begun to shiver violently.

A blanket was placed around her shoulders. Cool hands touched her left foot. She looked up. Kir knelt by her ankles, a roll of white cloth lay on the stones beside him. His eyes met her's for a brief second, then he looked down again.

"I don't think it's broken," he muttered, slowly moving the joint.

Alaysa lowered her head again. The tears wouldn't stop flowing. Kir could do what he wanted. She had decided to leave. She would give Darsis back the Lightfire and go away.

Darsis crouched down beside her. "This will pass."

She didn't acknowledge his words. It didn't matter. She didn't have the strength to argue with him. She would save what little strength she had left for leaving.

Kir lifted her other foot. Pain shot through and she jumped.

"Sorry." Kir began to wrap her foot with the bandage. She noticed the other one had been thickly wrapped. She wouldn't be able to get her foot into her boots.

A cloud passed over the sun. Fog drifted from the river onto the shore. Several of her soldiers began to mutter. Some drew their swords. Eric moved close enough that his leg nearly touched her shoulder.

Within moments, the fog had covered the shoreline and surrounded their group, filling in the spaces between the people until each could barely see his neighbour. Lilted music drifted through the air.

Alaysa felt the warm, dry air caress her face. Shapes began to form in the fog. One stood just behind Kir. Close enough Alaysa thought she could make out a face of shadowed eyes, a thin nose and small mouth. The

mouth opened and the music changed to joy.

“Do you hear it?” Kir spoke nearly in a whisper. He had closed his eyes and lifted his face to the fog.

“Mmmhmmm,” Eric swayed on his feet. He too had lifted his face, eyes closed.

Another figure stood hunched over Janek. It lowered a hand to rest on Janek’s shoulder for a brief moment. Alaysa noticed Darsis stood frozen in place, one foot forward as if trying to walk. The figure lifted its hand, stood up and floated back into the fog toward the river. Janek’s shoulders relaxed and his head drooped as if asleep.

The figure standing near Alaysa placed his hand over his left breast where Alaysa guessed his heart sat if he had a heart and nodded his head once. She smiled and watched as his features began to dissolve into the fog.

Once the figures had lost their form, the fog drifted back to the river and floated up stream. Everyone else seemed to wake as if from a pleasant dream. Only Darsis let out an angry growl as he rushed to her side.

“What did they do to you?”

“Nothing.” Alaysa stood, gingerly balancing on her sore ankles. She grabbed Kir’s shoulders for support.

“It nearly touched you.” Darsis ran to Janek. “I saw it touch you. What did it do?”

Janek shrugged. “I felt very sad and then the sadness was gone.”

Alaysa noticed her sadness had disappeared, too.

Frustrated, Darsis waved his arms about in the air. “Then what did they want?”

“To say thank you.”

Everyone turned to look at Alaysa.

“But they kill people. They...” Darsis’s arms kept waving in the air, Alaysa noticed. She fought an urge to giggle.

“Darsis, let it go,” Janek moved up to stand beside Alaysa. He put an arm around her waist and she leaned against him.

“Did everyone get out of the water?” Alaysa asked Eric.

Eric nodded.

“No one’s sick?”

Eric shook his head this time. “It’s not right that you should be protecting us.”

She smiled, again. “It’s just the way it happened. If Janek hadn’t taken me upstream. If I hadn’t gone for

a swim just then. There will always be a lot of if's. Besides, you saved my life. I owe you."

"Then we'll just have to keep one-upping each other." He glanced around at the crowd of soldiers. "The Lady is fine. Let's break camp. Maybe we can find a village so the Lady doesn't have to spend another night in the open."

"Eric, a rider should be sent to the Emperor to warn him about the plague in the river," Alaysa said.

"Already done," he said, "The rider should be there just after midday."

As the guards ran back to the camp, Janek gave Alaysa back her clothes. As she dressed, a guard came jogging down the beach pulling Alaysa's horse. Alaysa slid onto the saddle, being careful to not put much pressure on her ankles, and followed Janek and Kir back to the camp. Darsis followed far behind as if he didn't want to be part of her group but he also didn't want to be separated from her. Janek noticed her constant glances over her shoulder.

"Did he, uh, do anything to you?" he said, jerking his head over his shoulder.

Alaysa shook her head. "No. Nothing. Why did you let him go into the water?"

"He's immortal. He was the best choice. Did you think we let him go on purpose?"

"I just want to make sure everyone remembers we need him."

"We don't have to be reminded," Janek muttered. "We know how valuable he is but we, and I mean all of us, still don't trust him. He may have his use but he still has his own agenda. Remember Saiven."

"It's hard to believe she can be brought back to life. I mean, what will she use as a body? Zaren had destroyed it after he had trapped her soul in the pedalmas."

"Who had ever thought a goddess could be destroyed?"

"Darsis never mentions her, does he?"

Alaysa shook her head.

"You don't think he's forgotten...?"

"Could you forget about the woman you loved?"

As they approached the camp, Alaysa noticed a lot more sideways glances her way. Eric walked past and as she leaned over her horse's neck, he stopped. "Why are the guards trying so hard to not look at me?"

Eric smiled. "They've never seen you use the Lightfire before. They don't know what to make of you."

"Me?"

“Yes, the stories described the Ladies as being more like gods than mortals.”

“They think I am a god now?” Alaysa studied the soldiers. “I’m still just me.”

“None of us can hold the Lightfire, nor call upon the gods.”

“I’m just glad I could ask Oseanus to help. We could have all died. As it is right now, I’m not sure how much of the plague I stopped. More could be on its way.”

Eric grinned.

“What?” she asked.

“It hasn’t sunk in yet, has it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just who you are? You are the Lady of the Lightfire. You hold one of the most powerful gifts inside your body. You will save Pen’nBru. And all you can think about is helping the few people who live downstream from here.”

Alaysa looked down at the reins in her hands. So much had happened to her, she had never really thought about what it all meant. The Lady of the Lightfire, using the star of the gods to walk on the Dead Lands, kill the plague and return life to the soil, so that the people could return to their homes.

Within minutes the guards had finished packing up the camp. They rode single file through the forest until near midday, they crossed plains filled with tall, waving grass. The trail led onto a two-rut road. Small farms dotted the landscape and the occupants came out to watch as they passed by. Three generations seemed to live together. Tired, aged beyond their years, the mother and father, would stand back in the shade of the cabins. Younger adults, often clutching hands of children, came close to the gates. At first, they seemed to stare without comprehension at the Emperor’s guards. But often it was one of the children who would notice Alaysa and then excitedly point her out to the rest of the family. Alaysa would smile and wave and the children would run around in dizzying circles. The adults would smile and wave back.

While moving through a cluster of cabins whose gates had been planted close to the road, a young girl dashed out among the horses straight to Alaysa. The horses scattered away from the child who ran around legs taller than she. The girl grabbed hold of Alaysa’s pant leg.

“Show me! Show me!” she cried out.

Alaysa stared at her, not knowing what she meant.

“The flower!” she said, staring at Alaysa’s neck. “The mark of the gods.”

Alaysa let the tied reins drop around her horse’s neck and stared down at her hands. The child wanted to see the flower. Alaysa felt her skin crawl. The flower had scarred and cut her skin, twisting beneath her flesh like a worm crawling through dirt. Alaysa always wore long sleeves and high necked shirts to hide the flower. It made her feel ugly and unwelcome.

A group of children now clustered around her horse. They waited in silence. Alaysa looked up in panic at Janek. He raised an eyebrow and nodded his head. He would not help her out of this situation. Alaysa didn’t know if she could accept the rejection from the children when they ran away screaming because of the nightmarish sight of the living plant embedded in her skin.

“Please, Lady,” the little girl said. Her eyes begged to be filled with hope. She reached one thin, bony arm farther up on Alaysa’s leg and clutched the fabric as if she would use all her strength to hold Alaysa back.

Alaysa felt tears stinging her eyes. “It is not pretty,” she said as she shrugged off her jacket. Then she rolled up the sleeves on her blouse. Might as well get it over with. Alaysa looked at the little girl. Wide, bright green orbs traced up Alaysa’s arm to her neck and then met her own eyes. The little girl sighed and turned to other children. “It is she,” she said loud enough for all and looked back up at Alaysa. She beamed with a smile wide enough to split her face. Her eyes shone. The other children drew forward and started to laugh. Alaysa felt relief flood her body.

A man hobbled forward, leaning heavily on a stick. He raised his hand and horses moved out of his way until he stood behind the girl. He studied Alaysa through eyes just slits. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded like the quietest of winds whistling through the trees. Alaysa had to lean forward to hear him.

“I did not think I would live to see the last Lady,” he said. “They all believed the stories were just that: stories. Rumours to give us hope.”

“What made you believe?” she asked. She, too, had been raised on the stories of the other Ladies and never really thought the Ladies had been real once. Not until now.

“I have always believed,” he said.

“Granda’s granda was one of them,” the little girl said and pointed to her Lightfire Guards.

Alaysa heard her guards mutter amongst themselves. Eric dismounted and worked his way back to the old man.

“Your family belonged to the Lightfire Guards?” Eric asked.

He jerked his head once up and down. “Yes, lived and fought for generations. After the last failure, the soldiers broke apart. Returned to their homes. They knew it would be another two centuries before the next Lady showed up.” He glanced at the riders. “How many of you can claim you were born at the Keep? How many of your fathers? Your fathers’ fathers?”

Alaysa had never before considered where her Lightfire Guards had come from. She had thought they had always lived there. But now, they all looked uncomfortable. Did not meet the old man’s eyes. All except for Eric. Eric’s father had been a Lightfire Guard. Sir Jackson had been the one to find Alaysa. And he had died protecting her.

“What does this matter?” Alaysa asked. She didn’t care whether the Guards were new recruits or had been at the Keep since birth.

The old man’s voice dropped suddenly. His eyes opened wide and clear. “Because My Lady, you will have traitors among you. Renites. Lord Zaren’s own spies.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“We shouldn’t stay here,” Kir muttered as he dropped his bedroll on the ground. It rolled close to the fire.

Alaysa reached out and stopped it before it got close to the flames.

“Yes,” Janek said, “None of us want to spend another night outside. It’s too dangerous.” Janek crouched beside Alaysa.

“Who would have thought he still knew about the old magic?” Kir looked toward the village.

“His name is Claren,” Alaysa picked up a stick and poked at the fire. Embers rose and fluttered in the light breeze.

“I remember his name,” Kir said. “I just wish I had brought along the records to check his identity.”

“You don’t believe who he says he is?” Janek said.

“Why hasn’t he come forward sooner?” Kir asked. “Alaysa had been at the Keep for nearly a month. If he had suspicions of the Renites infiltrating the Lightfire Guards, then why didn’t he come forward?”

“He wouldn’t have made it past the front gate, if he was right,” Eric said, carrying an armful of wood. He dropped it beside the fire and crouched down beside Janek. “If I were a Renite, I would surely know about the old magic and would stop the old man from coming anywhere near. No, I can see why he waited for us to come to

him.”

“Eric, why was it so important for him to ask who of the Guard have been living at the Keep for many generations and who are new?”

Eric ran a hand through his curly red hair. “I had thought what they said about us was only made up to frighten anyone, especially the Renites, into not trying to join our ranks.”

“You mean the blood markers?” Janek said.

“Blood markers?” Alaysa glanced at the scars along her arms where the daisy poked through. Tiny red dots formed whenever the flower grew agitated and scraped open sores.

“Shortly after the massacre at the Keep when your birth mother died, Alaysa, which we call the First Failure,” Eric began, “it was guessed the only way Lord Zaren had known about the plan was that he had planted a spy. Since everyone except Darsis had been killed in the massacre, the Darsinnians supposed the spy had died, too. So the Darsinnians set about to find a way to stop anymore infiltration.”

Eric began to roll up his left sleeve. On his forearm, the tattoo of a circle with a sword and a star in its centre appeared. “After a year or so, they devised this.”

“A tattoo?” Alaysa asked.

“It’s not the tattoo that is important,” Kir said.

Eric sighed. “Will you let me tell the story?”

“Well don’t take 1000 years to tell it,” Kir muttered and sat down on the ground.

“He’s right,” Eric continued. “It wasn’t the tattoo that was important, it was the ink. But I am a little ahead of myself. While the Darsinnians were doing the research, one of the priests began to ask a lot of questions. Where the girls had been sent. Where the priests had hidden Darsis. You see, no one but Darsis knew the girls had been sent ahead in time. At first, he was told he didn’t need to know this information. But he became quite persistent. He eventually did find out where Darsis had been hidden and the other Darsinnians stopped him in time from harming Darsis.

“The captain of the Guard took great satisfaction in learning much about the Renite spy through the interrogation. And the Darsinnians discovered what they needed to create the test. You see, Zaren chose his spies from a group of nomads who lived on his estate. These nomads never married outside their community so they had the same genetics. The Darsinnians created a virus which they put in the tattoo’s ink that would react when it mixed

with their blood.”

“Like an allergic reaction?” Alaysa asked.

Kir huffed. “Worse. The spy would have wished the plague got him instead.”

Alaysa shivered. “But why did Claren insist we go no further until he has performed his magic?”

“He thinks the priests did not add in the virus to the ink. He says the virus comes from a plant that grows nearby and he hasn’t seen any priests collecting the plant in the last decade.”

“And if we find a spy?”

“He won’t be interrogated,” Eric said. “We don’t have the time.”

A young boy ran up. “Claren says to come. He is ready.”

They rose and walked back to the village. A line up of ten soldiers stood outside one of the cabins. Most stood calm and still. A few shuffled from one side to the other. None looked suspicious or nervous. Maybe the Renites hadn’t planted a spy after all. Maybe Claren was wrong, Alaysa thought.

Tables had been set with food between some of the cabins. Eric veered off and ducked inside the cabin. The rest of her Guards had taken up all but one of the tables. They picked at their food and spoke in quiet voices. No one wanted to even consider the fact they had been living with a Renite spy.

As they approached the empty table, a shadow darted across the clearing. Children ran screaming for their mothers. Adults ran for the shelter of their homes. Some of the guards rose to their feet, swords drawn. Janek and Kir moved closer to Alaysa. Eric rushed outside the cabin and stopped. All looked to the sky.

A dragon, blue scales flashing, glided over the cabins once again, circled and landed on the road, the only space wide enough to handle his bulk. He kept his wings spread, walked up to the gates and hopped over them. Tilting his head this way and that, he studied the people huddled in their doorways. Folding his wings tight against his body, he dropped to all four legs and sauntered toward the tables. The guards sat down as the dragon approached. Alaysa walked out to meet him.

“Tay, you have been hunting?” she asked, speaking out loud even though it wasn’t necessary. The dragon read her mind and responded by placing his thoughts among her own.

*‘Hunting is poor. Had to fly far.’*

“This village doesn’t have much,” Alaysa said, her voice lowered.

*‘A sheep or two will fill me.’*

“Only if you are offered,” Alaysa said, “No disappearances, okay?”

*‘How about one of those?’* he pointed his head at a group of children slowly inching their way forward. *‘They make a lot of noise and smell. One or two won’t be missed.’*

*‘Don’t even joke about that,’* Alaysa said. *‘You were young once. How would you feel if your mother had eaten you?’*

*‘Don’t think she didn’t try,’* Tay said, trying hard to hide a smirk. *‘There are advantages to being small and thin.’*

Alaysa shook her head. She thought Tay was teasing her but she had met his mother, Maer. She wouldn’t put it past the older dragon to eat her own children if she grew angry enough. Maer had no conscience. She did as she pleased no matter whom she hurt.

Tay lay down on the ground, curling his tail around his body but did not put his head down. Instead, he stretched it out to Alaysa’s side and blew out a great blast of air. Giggles erupted and Alaysa spun around. The children had clustered behind her back. One of them sat on the ground, brushing at his face. As Alaysa stooped to lift him to his feet, the other children rushed at Tay and began to climb up his sides. Tay grimaced.

*‘Just one?’*

Alaysa shook her head and returned to the table.

The tattoo process took longer than Alaysa guessed. The sun had set and only half of the soldiers had been marked. So far, no one had had any reaction to the virus. She and the others had moved back to the fire as the sky had darkened. Tay had risen, slowly Alaysa noticed, and with children sitting between his back ridges sauntered over to the fire and lay back down.

“Are you really a thousand years old?” the little girl, named Lizzie, said, looking directly at Alaysa.

“A...a thousand?” Alaysa asked. She had never thought about it before. Yes, she had been born a little less than a thousand years ago but she didn’t feel that old. “I...I suppose I am. But I am only really fifteen years old. You see, Darsis brought me forward in time to here so I am not really so old.”

“What was it like when Zaren found you?” the girl asked.

“Were you scared?” a little boy asked.

“Or did you call upon your gods to help you?” another piped up.

“Tell us...”

“Tell us the story.”

“The story?” Alaysa said. Stories were told about people long dead. Great heroes and their adventures. She looked hastily at Janek.

Janek leaned over. “About you. They want to know about you.”

Alaysa didn’t know what to say. So much had happened to her but the wounds still hurt. She didn’t want to retell the death of her parents and her friends. “I don’t think I can.”

Lizzie looked downcast, tears brimming in her eyes. Alaysa wanted to reach out to her. Hold her close. She so reminded Alaysa of her own two sisters, Issie and Janey.

Janek leaned forward until the fire lit his face. “I will tell you the story of Alaysa, the last Lady of the Lightfire. I will tell you how she came to be lost, then found. How she has already died, not once, but twice. How she has faced her enemy and survived. I will tell you a story about courage, loss and victory. I will tell you a story which has only begun because the Lady sits here with you now and has so much more to accomplish.”

Alaysa stared at Janek. She had never known him to speak out so before. He had always been the quiet librarian. All those years copying and reading books must have taught him how to be a storyteller. She leaned back on her bedroll to listen to Janek tell her, no, their story.

A few hours later, when the fire had died to glowing embers and parents had come to collect sleepy children, Janek finished telling the story. The children complained saying they had so many questions and they weren’t at all tired and the story couldn’t be finished. Janek told them over and over, again, that he had told them as much as he could for now.

Alaysa could barely keep her eyes open as she watched the children disappear into the dark. Tay rolled onto his back and rolled in the dirt and promptly fell asleep. Eric appeared out of the dark and sat down. He rubbed his eyes, wearily.

“You found no one?” Alaysa asked.

He shook his head. “We tattooed everyone who had been marked in the last 10 years. They all passed.”

“That is good,” Alaysa said. “I didn’t want to see anyone dying today.”

“Was Claren wrong?” Kir asked. “He sounded so sure.”

“Why would he tell us we had a spy?” Janek asked. “Why would he make us stay here when we could

have been in Christentown by now?"

"Maybe that's it," Kir said, "Maybe he didn't want us to go to Christentown tonight."

