

PROLOGUE

They said a virus ended the world. But it was magick, black as moonless midnight. The virus was its weapon, a barrage of arrows winging, silenced bullets striking, a jagged blade slicing. And yet the innocent—the touch of a hand, a mother’s good-night kiss—spread the Doom, bringing sudden, painful, ugly death to billions.

Many who survived that first shocking strike died by their own hand or by another’s as the thorny vines of madness, grief, and fear strangled the world. Still others, unable to find shelter, food, clean water, medications, simply withered and died waiting for help and hope that never came.

The spine of technology cracked, bringing the dark, the silence. Governments toppled from their perches of power.

The Doom gave no quarter to democracy, to dictators, to parliaments or kingdoms. It fed on presidents and peasants with equal greed.

Out of the dark, lights dimmed for millennia flickered and woke.

The rise of magicks, white and black, sprang from the chaos. Awakened powers offered a choice between good and evil, light and dark.

Some would always choose the dark.

Uncannys shared what was left of the world with man. And those—man and magickals—who embraced the dark struck, turning great cities into rubble, hunting those who hid from them or fought against them to destroy, to enslave, to bask in blood even as bodies littered the ground.

Panicked governments ordered their militaries to sweep up survivors, to “contain” Uncannys. So a child who had discovered her wings might find herself restrained on a table in a lab, in the name of science.

Madmen claimed God in their vicious righteousness, stirring fear and hate to build their own armies to purge what was “other.” Magick, they preached, came from the devil’s hand, and any who possessed it were demons to be sent back to hell.

Raiders cruised the ruined cities, the highways, and the back roads to burn and kill because they enjoyed it. Man would always find ways to wreak cruelty on man.

In a world so broken, who would stop them?

There were murmurs in the light, rumblings in the dark, that reached the ears of men—of a warrior to come. She, daughter of the Tuatha de Danann, would remain hidden until she took up her sword and shield. Until she, The One, led light against the dark.

But months became years, and the world remained broken. Hunts and raids and sweeps continued.

Some hid, skittering out at night to scavenge or steal enough to survive another day. Some chose to take to the roads in an endless migration to nowhere. Others took to the woods to hunt, to the fields to plant. Some formed communities that ebbed and flowed as they struggled to live in a world where a handful of salt was more precious than gold.

And some, like those who found and formed New Hope, rebuilt.

When the world ended, Arlys Reid had reported it from the New York anchor desk she'd inherited. She'd watched the city burn around her, and in the end had chosen to tell the truth to all who could still hear her and escape.

She'd seen death up close, had killed to survive.

She'd seen the nightmares and the wonders.

She, along with a handful of people, including three infants, found the deserted rural town they had christened New Hope. And there they made their stand.

Now, in Year Four, New Hope was home to more than three hundred, had a mayor and town council, a police force, two schools—one for magickal training and education—a community garden and kitchen, two farms, one with a mill for flour and grain, a medical clinic—with a small dentistry—a library, an armory, and a militia.

They had doctors, healers, herbalists, weavers, sewing circles, plumbers, mechanics, carpenters, cooks. Some of them had made their living on those skills in the old world. Most studied and learned them in the new.

They had armed security posted around the clock. And though it remained on a volunteer basis, most all residents participated in combat and weapons training.

The New Hope Massacre, in their first year, remained a raw scar on their hearts and minds. That scar, and the graves of the dead, led to the forming of the militia and to the rescue parties who risked their lives to save others.

Arlys stood on the sidewalk, looking at New Hope, and saw why it mattered. Why all of it mattered. More than surviving, as it had been for those first horrible months, more even than building, as it had been for the months that followed.

It was living, and it was, like the town, hope.

It mattered, she thought now, that Laurel—elf—came out to

sweep the porch of the building where she lived on a cool spring morning. Up the street, Bill Anderson polished the glass on his shop window, and inside the shelves held dozens and dozens of useful things for easy bartering.

Fred, the young intern who'd faced the horrors of the underground out of New York with Arlys, would be busy in the community garden. Fred with her magick wings and endless optimism lived every day with hope.

Rachel—doctor and good, good friend—stepped out to open the doors of the clinic and wave.

“Where’s the baby?” Arlys called out.

“Sleeping—unless Jonah’s picked him up again when my back was turned. The man’s bedazzled.”

“As a daddy should be. Isn’t today your six-week checkup, Doc? Big day for you.”

“This doctor’s already given her patient the all clear, but Ray’s going to formalize it. Big day for you, too. How do you feel?”

“Great. Excited. A little nervous.”

“I’ll be tuning in—and I want to see you in here when you’re done.”

“I’ll be there.” As she spoke, Arlys laid a hand on the mountain of her belly. “This baby’s got to be about cooked. Much longer, I won’t even be able to waddle.”

“We’ll check it out. Good morning, Clarice,” Rachel said as the first patient of the day came up the walk. “Come right on in. Good luck, Arlys. We’ll be listening.”

Arlys started to waddle—really, what other word was there—and stopped when she heard her name called.

She waited for Will Anderson—her childhood neighbor, current town deputy, and, as it turned out, the love of her life.

He laid a hand over hers on her belly, kissed her. “Walk you to work?”

“Sure.”

He linked fingers with her as they walked to where he'd lived during his first months in the community. "Okay with you if I hang around and watch?"

"If you want, but I don't know how long it's going to take to set up. Chuck's optimistic, but—"

"If Chuck says we can do this, we can."

As her belly pinged with nerves, she let out a breath. "I've got to go with you there."

Chuck had been her primary source during the Doom, a hacker and IT genius who now ruled over what technology they had. In the basement, of course. The man was a confirmed basement dweller.

"I want to see you at work," Will added.

"What do you call what I do at home with the *New Hope Bulletin*?"

"Work, and a boon to the community. But we're talking live broadcast, baby. It's what you're meant to do."

"I know some people are worried about the risk, about drawing attention here. The wrong kind of attention."

"It's worth it. And Chuck not only knows what he's doing, but we'll have the magickal shields going. If you can reach one person out there, you can reach a hundred. If you can reach a hundred, who knows. A lot of people still don't know what the hell's going on, where to get help, supplies, medicine. This matters, Arlys."

It mattered, a great deal to her, when he risked his life on a rescue.

"I was just thinking about what matters." She paused outside the house, turned to him. "You're top of the list."

They circled around to the back of the house to the basement door.

Inside, what had been a large family room now stood as a computer geek's wet dream—if he dreamed of cobbling together components, cables, hard drives, motherboards, gutting ancient computers, reconfiguring desktops and laptops, hanging various screens.

She figured Chuck did.

He sat at one of the keyboards in a hoodie and cargo pants, a backward ball cap on hair recently bleached white courtesy of the community beautician. He'd gone bright red on his pointed little beard.

In the theme of bright red, Fred's curls bounced as she popped up from where she'd been sitting with three four-year-olds and an array of toys.

"Here's the talent! I'm production manager, gofer, and assistant camera."

"I thought I was the gofer." Katie, mother of three, kept an eye on them from the arm of the sagging sofa Arlys knew Chuck often slept on.

"Co-gofer, and supervisor of the power boosters."

Katie looked at her twins, Duncan and Antonia. "They're excited. I just hope they—and everybody—know what we're doing."

"We make it go for Arlys and Chuck," Duncan said, grinning at his mom. "Me and Tonia."

"Push!" Tonia giggled, lifting a hand. Duncan pressed his palm against hers. Light glowed.

"Not yet."

Hannah, blond and rosy against the twins' dark hair, got up. She patted her mother's leg, as if in comfort, then walked to Arlys. "When's the baby come out?"

"Soon. I hope."

"Can I watch?"

"Ah . . ."

On a laugh, Katie rose to swing Hannah up and kiss her. "She probably would."

"I don't know about that, kiddo." Chuck swiveled around in his chair. "But you're about to watch history, and the debut of New Hope Broadcasting."

"We're up?"

He grinned at Arlys, gave her a finger salute. “We’re up. Definitely up with some help from our boosters.”

The twins jumped up, eyes alight.

“Not yet, not yet.” This time Arlys held them off. “I need to look over my notes, and . . . things. I need a few minutes.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Chuck told her.

“Okay, um, just give me a few.”

Rattled when she hadn’t expected to be, she walked back outside with her folder of notes. Fred walked out behind her.

“You shouldn’t be nervous.”

“Oh Jesus, Fred.”

“I mean it. You’re so good at it. You were always good at it.”

“I got the desk in New York because everybody died.”

“You got the desk when you did because of that,” Fred corrected. “You’d have gotten it anyway, later, but anyway.”

Stepping closer, Fred put her hands on Arlys’s shoulders. “Do you remember what you did that last day?”

“I still have nightmares about it.”

“What you did,” Fred continued, “when Bob held a gun on you, on live TV. You held on. And what you did when he killed himself right there, right there sitting next to you? You held on, and more. You looked straight into the camera and you told the truth. You did it without notes, without the teleprompter. Because it’s what you do. You tell people the truth. That’s what you’re going to do now.”

“I don’t know why I’m so nervous about this.”

“Maybe hormones?”

Rubbing her belly, Arlys laughed. “Maybe. Hemorrhoids, heartburn, and hormones. Having a baby’s an adventure.”

“I can’t wait to have my adventures.” On a sigh, Fred looked over the back garden. “I want a zillion babies.”

Arlys hoped she’d get through having this one—and soon.

But right now, she had a job to do.

“Okay. Okay. How do I look?”

“Amazing. But today, I’m also your makeup artist. I’m going to powder you for the camera and do your lipstick, then you’re going to be great.”

“I love you, Fred. I really do.”

“Aw. I love you back, I really do.”

She let Fred powder and paint, did a few tongue twisters, sipped some water, did some yoga breathing.

When she came back in from the bathroom, she saw her father-in-law on the sofa surrounded by the children. He had a way of drawing them.

“Bill, who’s minding the store?”

“Closed it for an hour. I want to see my girl live and in person. Your folks would be proud of you. Your mom, dad, Theo, they’d be proud.”

“Consider this your anchor desk.” Chuck tapped a chair in front of one of his many tables. “You’re going to face this camera. I’ve got the angle. What we’re doing here, boys and girls, is a fu—a freaking simulcast. We got the ham radio, the live-streaming, and the cable TV going. I’ll be monitoring you and doing what I do over there. But pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. It’s your show, Arlys.”

“All right.” She sat, adjusted. Opening her folder, she took out the photo of her last Christmas with her family. She propped it against a keyboard. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Fred’s going to give you the countdown. Okay, kids, let’s make it boom.”

“Don’t say ‘boom’!” Katie threw up her hands. “You have no idea.”

“We make it go.” Tonia wiggled her butt in delight. “We make it push, Duncan.”

“Push.” He grinned at his sister, they linked hands. Light shimmered through their fingers.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Chuck dashed from monitor to monitor, adjusted, let out a whoop. “That’s what I’m saying. We’re a go, and I mean *go*.”

“Arlys.” Fred moved behind the camera. “In five, four . . .”

She used her fingers to finish the countdown, and with a brilliant smile swept the last one forward.

“Good morning, this is Arlys Reid. I don’t know how many can hear me, or see me, but if you’re receiving this, pass the word. We’ll continue to broadcast as often as possible, to give you information, to give you truth, to report. To let you know, wherever you are, you’re not alone.”

She took another breath, pressed her hands to her belly.

“Four years after the Doom, sources confirm Washington, D.C., remains unstable. Martial law remains in effect through the metropolitan area while gangs known as Raiders and the Dark Uncanny continue to attack. Resistance forces broke through security at a containment center in Arlington, Virginia. According to eyewitness accounts, more than thirty people were liberated.”

She spoke for forty-two minutes. Reporting of the bombings in Houston, the Purity Warrior attack on a community in Greenbelt, Maryland, fires set, homes raided.

But she ended with stories of humanity, courage, and kindness. The mobile medical clinic that used wagons and horses to reach remote camps, shelters for the displaced, rescues, and food banks.

“Stay safe,” she said, “but remember, it isn’t enough to stay safe. Live, work, gather together. If you have a story, if you have news, if you’re searching for a loved one and can get word to me, I’ll report it. You’re not alone. This is Arlys Reid for New Hope Broadcasting.”

“And we’re clear.” Chuck stood up, pumped his fists. “Fucking A.”

“Fucking A,” Duncan echoed.

“Oops.” Roaring with laughter as Katie just closed her eyes, Chuck

jumped over to Duncan and Tonia, held out his fist. “Hey, totally awesome, kids. Fist bump. Come on! Fist bump.”

Their heads tipped together as they both lifted their tiny fists, knocked them against his.

His sparked. “Whoa!” He danced around a little, blowing on his knuckles. “Major power surge. *I love* it.”

Fred blinked at tears. “It was you-know-what A, and awesome.”

Will bent over, kissed the top of Arlys’s head. “You stagger me,” he told her.

“It felt . . . right. Once I got over the hump, it just felt right. How long was I on?”

“Forty-two awesome minutes.”

“Forty-two.” She swiveled in her chair. “I shouldn’t have kept the twins at it so long. I’m so sorry, Katie, I just lost track.”

“They were fine. I kept track,” Katie assured her. “They’re going to need a nice long nap.” She glanced toward Hannah, curled up and sleeping in Bill’s lap. “Like their sister. You look like you could use one. That had to take a lot out of you. You look a little pale.”

“Actually, I think about five minutes in, I think I started having contractions. Maybe actually before that. I thought it was nerves.”

“You—what? Now?”

Arlys gripped Will’s hand. “I’m pretty sure we should go see Rachel. And I think it’s— Okay!”

She braced one hand on the table, and squeezed Will’s hand—bone against bone—with the other.

“Breathe,” Katie ordered, hurrying over to lay a hand on Arlys’s rock-hard belly, and began to rub in circles. “Breathe through it—you took the classes.”

“Classes my ass. It doesn’t hurt like this in classes.”

“Breathe through it,” Katie said again, calmly. “You just did the first New Hope simulcast while in labor. You can breathe through a contraction.”

“It’s seasing off. It’s seasing.”

“Thank you, Jesus,” Will muttered and flexed his aching fingers.

“Ow.”

“Believe me, that’s not even close to ow.” Arlys blew out a strong breath. “I really want Rachel.”

“Me, too.” Will levered her up. “Let’s take it slow though. Dad?”

“I’m having a grandchild.”

Katie lifted Hannah from his lap. “Go with them.”

“I’m having a grandchild,” Bill repeated.

“Fred?” Arlys looked back. “Aren’t you coming?”

“Really? I can? Oh, oh boy! I’ll run over and tell Rachel. Oh boy! Chuck.”

“Oh, no, thanks. I’ll pass. No offense, Arlys, but, uh-uh.”

“None taken.”

“We’re having a baby!” Fred spread her wings and flew out the basement door.

Duncan walked to the door to watch them all go. “He wants to come out.”

Katie shifted Hannah. “He?”

“Uh-huh.” Tonia walked over to stay with Duncan. “What’s he doing in there?”

“That’s another story,” Katie told her. “Come on, kids, time to go home. Good work, Chuck.”

“Best job ever.”

Over the next eight hours Arlys learned a number of things. The first, and most urgent for several of those, was that contractions got a lot harder and lasted a hell of a lot longer as labor progressed.

She learned, not with any surprise, that Fred was a cheerful and tireless co-coach. And Will—no surprise, either—was a rock.

She got reports—a fine distraction—that her broadcast had reached at least the twenty miles out where Kim and Poe had traveled with a laptop on battery.

She sure as *fuck* learned why they called it labor.

At one point she dissolved into tears and had Will wrapping his arms around her. “It’s almost over, baby. It’s almost over.”

“Not that, not that. Lana. I thought of Lana. Oh God, Will, oh God, to have to do this alone. Without Max, without Rachel, without us. To be alone and doing this.”

“I don’t believe she was alone.” Fred stroked a hand down Arlys’s arm. “I really, really don’t. On the night—I could feel it. A lot of us could. The birth of The One. She wasn’t alone, Arlys. I know it.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart.”

“Okay. Okay.” When Will brushed her tears away, she managed a smile. “Almost over?”

“He’s not wrong. Time to push,” Rachel told her. “Will, support her back. Next contraction, push. Let’s get this baby into the world.”

She pushed, panted, pushed, panted, and eight hours after she made broadcast history, Arlys brought her son into the world that was.

She learned something more. Love could come like a bolt of light.

“Look at him! Look at him.” Exhaustion fell away in stupefied love as the baby cried and wiggled in her arms. “Oh, Will, look at him.”

“He’s beautiful, you’re beautiful. God, I love you.”

Stepping back, Rachel rolled her aching shoulders. “Will, do you want to cut the cord?”

“I . . .” He took the scissors from Rachel, then turned to his father, saw the tears on his cheeks.

He’d lost grandchildren in the Doom. A daughter, a wife, babies.

“I think Granddad should. How about it?”

Bill swiped fingers under his glasses. “I’m honored. I’m a grandfather.”

As he cut the cord, Fred swept the room with rainbows. “I’m an aunt, right? An honorary aunt.”

“Yes, you are.” Arlys couldn’t take her eyes off the baby. “You, Rachel, Katie. The New Hope originals.”

“His color’s excellent.” Rachel took a good visual study. “I’m going to need to take my nephew in a minute. Clean him up for you, weigh and measure him.”

“In a minute. Hello, Theo.” Arlys pressed a kiss to the baby’s brow. “Theo William Anderson. We’re going to make the world a better place for you. We’re going to do all we can do to make it a better place. I swear it.”

She traced Theo’s face with her finger—so tiny, so sweet, so hers.

This is life, she thought. This is hope.

This is the reason for both.

She would work and fight every day to keep the promise she made to her son.

Holding him close, she thought again of Lana, of the child Lana had carried.

Of The One who was promised.

CHAPTER ONE

On the farm where she'd been born, Fallon Swift learned how to plant and grow and harvest, to respect and use the land. She learned how to move through fields and forests, silent as a shadow, to hunt and fish. To respect the game, and take no more than needed, to take none at all for sport.

She learned to prepare food grown or taken from the land in her mother's kitchen or over a campfire.

She learned food was more than eggs fresh from the henhouse or a well-grilled trout. Food meant survival.

She learned to sew—though she disliked the time spent sitting still plying a needle. She learned how to tan leather, far from her favorite lesson, and could, if given no choice, spin yarn. Clothes, she learned, weren't simply something to wear. They protected the body, like a weapon.

She respected weapons, and had learned from a young age how to clean a gun, sharpen a knife, string a bow.

She learned how to build, with hammer and saw, to keep the fences in repair, to make repairs on the old farmhouse she loved as much as the woods.

A strong fence, a sound wall, a roof that held back the rain offered more than a happy home. They, too, meant survival.

And, though she often simply knew, she learned magicks. How to light the flame with a breath, how to cast a circle, how to heal a small wound with the light inside her, how to look, and how to see.

She learned, though she often simply knew, magick was more than a gift to be treasured, a craft to be honed, a weapon to be used with great care.

It was, and would be, survival.

Even with food, with shelter, with clothing and weapons, even with magicks, not all had survived. Not all would in the times to come.

She learned of a world that had existed before her birth. A world crowded with people, a world of huge cities with towering buildings where people had lived and worked. In that world people had traveled routinely by air and sea and road and track. Some had even traveled into space, and to the moon that hung in the sky.

Her mother had lived in a great city, in the City of New York. Fallon knew from the stories told, from the books she devoured, it had been a place full of people and noise and light and dark.

A wonder of a place to her, one she vowed to see someday.

She imagined it often at night when she lay awake watching the faeries dance outside her window.

There had been war in that world, and bigotry and cruelty, just as there was now. She knew of the wars that had been from the books, from the stories. And she knew of the wars that were still raging from visitors who stopped at the farm.

Her father had been a soldier once. He had taught her to fight—with her hands, her feet, her mind. She learned how to read maps

and how to make them, and imagined following them one day on the journeys she knew, had always known, she would take.

She had no attachment, as her parents did, to the world that had been before the Doom had killed so many. Billions, it was said. Many remembered when those great cities fell to the burning, the mad things, the dark magicks. The cruelty and greed of men still swam in the minds and the blood of those who'd lived through it.

When she caught glimpses of tomorrows, she knew there would be more burning, more blood, more death. And she would be part of it. So she often lay awake at night, cuddling her teddy bear, a gift from a man she'd yet to meet.

If those tomorrows weighed too heavy, she sometimes slipped out of the house while her parents and siblings slept, to sit outside while the little faeries flickered like fireflies. Where she could smell the earth, the crops, the animals.

Most often she slept the quiet and innocent sleep of a child with loving parents and three annoying little brothers, a healthy child with a questing mind and active body.

Sometimes she dreamed of her sire, the man her mother had lived with in New York, the man she'd loved. The man, Fallon knew, who had died so she would live.

He'd been a writer, a leader, a great hero. She bore his name, just as she bore the name of the man who brought her into the world, who raised her, who taught her. Fallon for Max Fallon, her sire. Swift for Simon Swift, her father.

Two names, Fallon thought, equally important. Just as her mother wore two rings, one from each man she'd loved.

And though she loved her father as deeply and truly as any child could love, she wondered about the man who'd given her the color of her eyes and hair, who along with her mother had passed powers to her with their mating.

She read his books—all books were gifts—and studied the photo of him on the back of them.

Once, when she was only six, she'd curled up in the library with one of Max Fallon's books. Though she couldn't understand all the words, she liked that it was about a wizard, one who used magicks and brains to fight against evil forces.

When her father came in, a stab of guilt had her trying to hide the book. Her dad had no magicks, but he had a lot of brains.

He'd plucked her and the book up, then sat to hold her on his lap. She loved how he smelled of the farm—the earth, the animals, the growing things.

Sometimes she wished she had eyes like his that changed from sort of green to sort of gold or just mixed those colors together. When she wished it, she felt guilty about Max.

“It's a good book.”

“You read it?”

“Yeah. My mom really liked to read. It's why she and my dad made this room for books. You don't have to hide anything from me, baby. Not anything.”

“Because you're my daddy.” She turned into him, pressed her face to his heart. *Beat, beat, beat.* “You're my daddy.”

“I'm your daddy. But I wouldn't have gotten the chance to be if it wasn't for Max Fallon.” He turned the book over so they could both look at the picture of the dark, handsome man with strong gray eyes. “I wouldn't have my most beautiful girl if he hadn't loved your mom, and she hadn't loved him. If they hadn't made you. If he hadn't loved her and you enough, been brave enough, to give his life to protect you. I'm real grateful to him, Fallon. I owe him everything.”

“Mama loves you, Daddy.”

“Yeah, she does. I'm a lucky guy. She loves me, and she loves you, and Colin and Travis.”

“And the new baby that's coming.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s not a girl.” This on a huge, sorrowful sigh.

“Is that so?”

“She has a boy in her, again. Why can’t she make a sister for me? Why does she always make brothers?”

She heard the laugh in his chest as he cuddled her. “Actually, that’s supposed to be my job. I guess it’s the way it goes.”

He stroked her long black hair as he spoke. “And I guess that means you’ll just have to go on being my favorite girl. Have you told your mom it’s a boy?”

“She doesn’t want to know which kind. She likes the wondering.”

“Then I won’t tell her, either.” Simon kissed the top of her head. “Our secret.”

“Daddy?”

“Hmm?”

“I can’t read all the words. Some are too hard.”

“Well, why don’t I read the first chapter to you before we go back to chores?”

He shifted her so she could curl up, then opened the book, turned to page one, and began.

She hadn’t known *The Wizard King* had been Max Fallon’s first novel—or perhaps some part of her had. But she would remember, forever, that her father had read it to her, chapter by chapter, every night before bed.

So she learned. She learned about goodness from her father, generosity from her mother. She learned about love and light and respect from the home and family and life given to her.

She learned of war and hardship and grief from travelers, many wounded, who came to the farm or to the village nearby.

She had lessons on politics, and found them annoying, as people talked too much, did too little. And what good were politics when reports claimed the government—such a vague word to her—had begun to rebuild in the third year after the Doom, only to fall again before the end of Year Five?

Now, in the twelfth year, the capital of the United States—which didn't seem united to Fallon, then or now—remained a war zone. Factions of the Raiders, groups of the Dark Uncanny, and those faithful to the cult of the Purity Warriors battled for power, for land, for the smell of blood. Against each other, it seemed, and against those who sought to rule or govern.

Even though Fallon wanted peace, wanted to build, to grow, she understood the need, the duty to fight to protect and defend. More than once she'd seen her father arm himself and leave the farm to help protect a neighbor, to help defend the village. More than once she'd seen his eyes when he'd come home again, and had known there'd been blood, there'd been death.

She'd been raised to fight, to defend, as had her brothers. Even as the farm basked in summer, as the crops ripened and fruit hung heavy, as the woods ran thick with game, bitter battles raged beyond the fields and hills of home.

And her time, her childhood, she knew, was counting down like the ticks of a clock.

She was The One.

On days when her brothers deviled her—why had she been plagued with brothers?—when her mother understood *nothing* and her father expected too darn much, she wanted that countdown to hurry.

Other times she raged. Why should she have no choice? No choice? She wanted to hunt and fish, to ride her horse, to run in the woods with her dogs. Even with her brothers.

And often she grieved for what something beyond her, something

beyond her parents, demanded she become. Grieved at the thought of leaving her family, her home.

She grew tall and strong, and the light within her burned bright. The thought of her thirteenth birthday filled her with dread.

She stewed about it—about all that was unfair in her world, all that was unfair in the world outside—as she helped her mother prepare the evening meal.

“We’re going to get a storm tonight, I can feel it.” Lana pushed at the butterscotch-blond hair she’d bundled on top of her head before cooking. “But it’s a perfect evening for eating outside. Go ahead and drain those potatoes I’ve got parboiling.”

Fallon sulked over to the stove. “Why do you always have to do the cooking?”

Lana gently shook a covered bowl. Inside slices of peppers fresh from the garden marinated. “Your dad’s grilling tonight,” she reminded Fallon.

“You made everything first.” With that stuck in her craw, Fallon dumped chunks of potatoes into the colander in the sink. “Why doesn’t Dad or Colin or Travis make it all?”

“They help, just like you. Ethan, too—he’s learning. But to answer the point of your question: I like to cook. I enjoy making food, especially for my family.”

“What if I don’t?” Fallon whirled around, a tall, long-limbed girl currently all stormy-gray eyes and defiant scowl. “What if I just don’t want to cook? Why do I have to do things I don’t want to do?”

“Because we all do. Lucky for you, on next week’s rotation you move from under chef to cleanup. I need you to season those potatoes for the grill basket. I already chopped the herbs.”

“Fine, great.” She knew the drill. Olive oil, herbs, salt, pepper.

Just as she knew they had the oil and spices because her mother and a witch from a neighboring farm had culled out three acres, and

had cast a spell to turn it into the tropics. They'd planted olive trees, *Piper nigrum* for pepper, coffee beans, banana trees. Figs, dates.

Her dad had worked with others to construct olive presses for the oils, dryers for the fruits.

Everyone worked together, everyone benefited. She *knew* that.

And still.

"Why don't you go ahead and take those out, tell your dad to start the chicken?"

Leading with her foul mood, Fallon stomped out of the house. Lana watched her daughter, her own summer-blue eyes clouding. She thought: More than one storm's coming.

They ate at the big outdoor table her father had built, using colorful plates, with bright blue napkins and wildflowers in little pots.

Her mother believed in setting a pretty table. She let Ethan light the candles with his breath because it always made him laugh. Fallon plopped down beside Ethan. She didn't consider him as much a pain in her butt as Colin or Travis.

Then again, he was only six. He'd get there.

Simon, his mop of brown hair streaked from the sun, took his seat, smiled at Lana. "It looks great, babe."

Lana lifted her wine, made from their own grapes. "Credit to the grill master. We're grateful," she added, with a glance at her daughter, "for the food grown and made by our own hands. We hope for the day when no one goes hungry."

"I'm hungry now!" Colin announced.

"Then be grateful there's food on the table." Lana set a drumstick—his favorite—on his plate.

"I helped Dad with the grill," he claimed as he added potatoes, vegetables, an ear of just-shucked corn to his plate. "So I shouldn't have to do the dishes."

"That's not going to fly, son." Simon filled Travis's plate as Lana did Ethan's.

Colin waved his drumstick in the air before biting in. He had his father's eyes, that hazel that blurred gold and green, hair a few shades darker than his mother's going bright from the summer sun. As usual, it stood up in tufts that refused taming.

"I picked the corn."

Travis, already eating steadily, elbowed Colin. "We picked it."

"Irrelement."

"*Vant*," Simon corrected. "*Irrelevant*—and it's not."

"I picked *most* of the corn. It should count."

"Instead of worrying about the dishes—which you will do—maybe you should eat the corn," Lana suggested as she helped Ethan butter his ear.

"In a free society, everybody has a vote."

"Too bad you don't live in one." Simon gave Colin a poke in the ribs that had Colin flashing a toothy grin.

"The corn is good!" Ethan, though he'd lost a couple of baby teeth, bit his way enthusiastically down the ear. He had his mother's blue eyes, her pretty blond hair, and the sunniest of dispositions.

"Maybe I'll run for president." Colin, never one to be deterred, pushed forward. "I'll be president of the Swift Family Farm and Co-operative. Then the village. I'll name it Colinville and never wash dishes again."

"Nobody'd vote for you." Travis, nearly close enough in looks to be Colin's twin, snickered.

"I'll vote for you, Colin!"

"What if I ran for president, too?" Travis asked Ethan.

"I'd vote for both of you. And Fallon."

"Leave me out of it," Fallon rebuked, poking at the food on her plate.

"You can only vote for one person," Travis pointed out.

"Why?"

"Because."

“‘Because’ is dumb.”

“This whole conversation is dumb.” Fallon flicked a hand in the air. “You can’t be president because, even if there were any real structure of government, you’re not old enough or smart enough.”

“I’m as smart as you,” Colin tossed back, “and I’ll get older. I can be president if I want. I can be anything I want.”

“In your dreams,” Travis added with a smirk.

It earned him a kick under the table, which he returned.

“A president is a leader, and a leader leads.”

When Fallon surged to her feet, Simon started to speak, to shut things down, but caught Lana’s eye.

“You don’t know anything about being a leader.”

“You don’t know anything about anything,” Colin shot back.

“I know a leader doesn’t go around naming places after himself. I know a leader has to be responsible for people, make sure they have food and shelter, has to decide who goes to war, who lives and dies. I know a leader has to fight, maybe even kill.”

As she raged, shimmers of light sparked around her in angry red.

“A leader’s who everybody looks to for answers, even when there aren’t any. Who everyone blames when things go wrong. A leader’s the one who has to do the dirty work, even if it’s the damn dishes.”

She stalked away, trailing that angry light into the house. Slamming the door behind her.

“Why does she get to act like a brat?” Colin demanded. “Why does she get to be mean?”

Ethan, tears swirling in his eyes, turned to his mother. “Is Fallon mad at us?”

“No, baby, she’s just mad. We’re going to give her a little time alone, okay?” She looked over at Simon. “She just needs some space. She’ll apologize, Colin.”

He only shrugged. “I can be president if I want. She’s not the boss of the world.”

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Lana's heart tore a little. "Did I mention I made peach pie for desert?" Pie, she knew, was a no-fail way to turn her boys' moods around. "That is, for anyone who clears his plate."

"I know a good way to work off that pie." In tune with Lana, Simon went back to his meal. "A little basketball."

Since he'd created a half court on the side of the barn, basketball had become one of his boys' favorite pastimes.

"I wanna be on your team, Daddy!"

Simon grinned at Ethan, gave him a wink. "We'll wipe the court with them, champ."

"No way." Colin dived back into the meal. "Travis and I will crush." Travis looked at his mother, held her gaze a long moment.

He knows, Lana thought. And so did Colin, even if anger and insult blocked it away.

Their sister wasn't the boss of the world, but she carried the weight of it on her shoulders.