

THE RISE OF MAGICKS

PROLOGUE

On the shield, one of seven forged in the timeless past to hold back the dark, fell a single drop of blood.

So the shield weakened, and the dark, spider-patient, waited as the decades passed, and the wound spread under the grass and ground.

And on the last day of what had been, a good man, in all innocence, broke the shield open. The dark rewarded him with deadly infection, one that would pass from man to wife, from parent to child, from stranger to stranger.

While the dying world reeled, its framework—governments, technology, laws, transportation, communication—crumbled like bricks of dust.

The world ended with bangs and whimpers, with blood and pain, with fear and dread. A cashier handing change to a customer, a mother nursing her child, businessmen gripping hands over a deal—these and so many simple contacts spread death like a poisoned cloud over the world.

And billions fell.

They called it the Doom—for so it was—a murderously speedy sickness with no cure that killed villains and innocents, statesmen and anarchists, the privileged and the penniless with equal glee.

While billions died, those who survived—the immune—struggled to live one more day, to find food, to protect whatever shelter they might have, to escape and evade the unchecked violence unleashed. For some, even in their most dire hour, would burn, pillage, rape, kill for the sheer pleasure of it.

Through the poisonous cloud that enveloped the world, light sparked. Darkness pulsed. Powers, long dormant, awakened. Some bloomed bright, others black through choices made. But they bloomed.

Magicks began to hum.

Some embraced the wonders while some feared them. And some hated.

The other, the not-like-me, would always spark hate in some hearts. What came to be known as the Uncanny faced the fear and hate of those who hunted them. Governments, desperate to hold their own power, sought to sweep them up, imprison them, experiment on them.

Magickals hid from or fought against those who called on a fierce and bitter god to torture and destroy, from those mated to their own bigotry like a lover.

And from and against those who bloomed dark.

On a storm-lashed night, a child whose light sparked at the moment of a good man's death drew her first breath. She came from love and sacrifice, from hope and struggle, from strength and grief.

With that loosed cry of life, a mother's tears, the strong hands of the man who held her, the warrior, the leader, The One took her first step toward destiny.

Magicks began to beat.

In the years that followed, wars raged between men, between dark

and light, between those who fought to survive and build and those who sought to destroy and rule the rubble.

The child grew, as did her powers. With her training, her mistakes, her triumphs, she took the next steps. So a young girl full of faith and wonder reached into the fire and took up the sword and the shield. And became The One.

Magicks began to rise.

CHAPTER ONE

A storm raged. It crashed around her with wild, wind-whipped rain, sizzling strikes of lightning, bellowing booms of thunder. It whirled inside her, a torrent of anger she knew must be suppressed.

She would bring death tonight, by her sword, by her power, by her orders. Every drop of blood shed would be on her hands—that was the weight of command, and accepted.

She was not yet twenty.

Fallon Swift touched her fingers to the cuff she wore on her wrist, one she'd conjured from a tree she'd destroyed out of temper, and carved to remember never to destroy out of anger.

It said: *Solas don Saol.*

Light for Life.

She would bring death tonight, she thought again, but she would help others live.

Through the storm she studied the compound. Mallick, her teacher, had taken her to one similar enough on her fourteenth

birthday. But while that one had been deserted, with only the stink of black magicks, the charred remains of the dead, the dying cries of the tortured left, this one held more than six hundred—two hundred and eighty personnel, and three hundred and thirty-two prisoners.

Forty-seven of those prisoners were, according to their intel, under the age of twelve.

She had every inch of the compound—the containment center—every room, every hallway, camera, alarm, in her head. She'd made detailed maps, had spent months planning this rescue.

It would be, in the three years since she'd begun to raise her army, since she and her family had left their home for New Hope, the biggest rescue attempt by her resistance forces.

If she failed . . .

A hand gripped her shoulder, steadied her as it always had. She turned her head, looked at her father.

"We've got this," Simon told her.

She let out a breath. "Bespelling the surveillance cameras," she murmured, and relayed that to the elves mind to mind so they'd pass the word.

Now those at security monitors would see only the trees, the rain, the swampy ground.

"Take down the alarms."

She and other witches worked the spell, painstakingly, while the storm blew.

When the all clear ran through the ranks, she ignored the pang, gave the order. "Archers, go."

The guard towers had to be taken out, swift and silent. She felt Tonia, lead archer, friend, blood of her blood, nock an arrow, release.

With eyes gray and focused, she watched arrows strike, men fall, in the towers on the four corners of the prison walls.

Moving in, she took the electronic gates, using power to disarm.

At her signals, troops flowed through the opening, elves scaled the walls and fences, shifters leaped, tooth and claw, faeries glided with a whisper of wings.

Timing, she thought as she spoke to the elf commander Flynn, to Tonia in her mind. They would breach the three doors simultaneously, and each team leader would focus their troops on priorities. Destroy communications, eliminate security, take the armory, secure the lab. Above all, shield all prisoners.

After one last glance at her father, seeing the courage and determination in the face she trusted completely, she gave the order.

Drawing her sword, she blew the locks on the main doors, charged in, blew the secondary doors open.

Part of her mind overlaid the now with the prison on Hatteras, the visions she'd stirred there at fourteen. So much the same.

But here, soldiers lived, reached for weapons. Even as gunfire rang out, she struck, enflaming sidearms that left hands blistered and men screaming with pain. She struck out with sword, swung out with shield to cut through the enemy.

Fighting through, she heard the shouts, moans, pleading from behind the steel doors, and felt the fear, the terrible hope, the pain and confusion of those locked in.

Drenched in it, she cut down a soldier as he rushed to his comm, sliced her sword across the radio, sent a bolt of shock through the entire system.

Sparks showered, monitors blanked to black.

Boots clanged on metal stairs, and death, more death, met them as arrows sliced through the air. Fallon took a bullet on her shield, sent it flying back and into the shooter as she pivoted to the iron door someone inside the prison had managed to secure.

She blasted it open, taking out two on the other side, and leaping over the smoking twists of metal, cleaved her sword through a third before she rushed toward the stairs leading down.

War cries followed her. Her troops would spread out, swarm through—barracks, offices, mess hall, galley, infirmary.

But she and those with her surged toward the lab and its chamber of horrors. There, another iron door. She started to punch her power through, stopped a breath away from the blast as she sensed something more, something dark.

Magicks, black and deadly.

She held up a hand to halt her team. Forcing patience, she searched, tall in elf-made boots and leather vest, black hair short, eyes blurred with power.

“Stand back,” she ordered, and shouldered her shield, sheathed her sword to hold her hands to the door, the locks, the deep frame, the thick metal.

“Booby-trapped,” she murmured. “We push in, it blows out. Stand clear.”

“Fallon.”

“Stand clear,” she told her father. “I could unwind it, but that would take too long.” She swung her shield up again, and her sword. “In three, two—”

She shoved her power, light against dark.

The doors erupted, spewing fire, raining out jagged, flaming metals. Shrapnel thudded on her shield, whizzed by to impale the wall behind her. Into the torrent she leaped.

She saw the man, naked, eyes glazed, face blank, shackled to an exam table. Another in a lab coat flung himself back, sprang on his hands, then scaled the back wall in a blur of speed.

She flung power at the ceiling, brought the one in the lab coat down in a heap as Simon dodged the scalpel swipe by a third before taking him out with a short-armed jab.

“Search for others,” Fallon ordered. “Confiscate all records. Two to secure this section, and the rest move out, clear the rest of the level.”

She approached the man on the table. "Can you speak?"

She heard his mind, the struggle to form words.

They tortured me. I can't move. Help me. Will you help me?

"We're here to help." She watched his face as she sheathed her sword. Blocked out the chaos of fighting from above while she kept her mind linked to his.

"Got a woman over here," Simon called out. "Drugged, cut up, but she's breathing."

They hurt us, hurt us. Help us.

"Yes." Fallon laid a hand on one of the shackles so it fell open. "How long have you been here?"

I don't know. I don't know. Please. Please.

She circled the table to release the shackle on his other wrist. "Did you choose the dark before or after you came here?" she wondered.

He reared up, glee on his face as he struck out at her with a bolt of lightning. She simply swatted it back with her shield, impaling him with his own evil.

"I guess we'll never know," she mumbled.

"Jesus Christ, Fallon." Simon stood, the woman limp over his shoulder, his gun drawn.

"I had to be sure. Can you get her to a medic?"

"Yeah."

"We'll clear the rest."

When they had, the count was forty-three enemy prisoners to transport. The rest they'd bury. Medics moved in to treat wounded from both sides while Fallon began the laborious process of vetting those held in cells.

Some, she knew, might be like the ones in the lab. Others might have had their minds broken, and a broken mind could bring danger to the rest.

"Take a break," Simon told her, and shoved coffee into her hand.

“There are some shaky ones.” She gulped down coffee as she studied her father’s face. He’d mopped off the blood, and his hazel eyes held clear. He’d been a soldier long ago, in the other time. He was a soldier again in this one.

“They’ll need to move into one of the treatment centers before they’re clear to go. Why does that always feel as if we’re keeping them prisoners?”

“It shouldn’t, because it’s not. Some are never going to be right again, Fallon, and still we’ll let them go unless they pose a real danger. Now tell me how you knew that bastard on the table down in the lab was a bad guy.”

“First, he wasn’t as powerful as he thought, and it leaked through. But logically, the spell on the door, witchcraft. The other magickal in the lab was an elf. Bad elf,” she said with half a smile. “Elves are good at getting through locks, but they can’t bespell them. I felt his pulse when I released the first shackle, and it was hammering. It wouldn’t have been if he’d been under a paralytic.”

“But you released the second one.”

“He could’ve done that for himself.” She shrugged. “I’d hoped to question him, but . . . well.” She downed the rest of the coffee, and blessed her mother and the other witches who’d created *Tropics* to grow the beans. “Do you have the status of the woman they’d dumped off the table?”

“Faerie. She’ll never fly again—they excised most of her left wing—but she’s alive. Your mom’s got her at mobile medical.”

“Good. The faerie’s lucky they didn’t just kill her instead of tossing her off. Once our injured prisoners are cleared, I need you to debrief. I know it’s hard for you,” she added. “They’re soldiers, and most of them are just following orders.”

“They’re soldiers,” he agreed, “who stood by or even abetted while their prisoners were tortured, while children were kept in cells. No, baby, it’s not hard for me.”

“I could do this without you because I have to do it, but I don’t know how.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You’ll never have to figure it out.”

She spoke to magickal children who’d been ripped away from non-magickal parents, reunited two whose parent—by blood or choice—had been locked in another cell.

She spoke to those who’d been locked in for years, others who had been swept up only days before.

She checked each one off the very precise records kept by the—now deceased—prison commander, reviewed the horrific records of experiments done in the lab.

Both Dark Uncanny—the witch, the elf—who’d worked there had hidden their natures, so her intel hadn’t shown any magickals on staff.

Intel only went so far, she thought as she marked the witch as deceased, the elf as a prisoner of war.

The storm passed and dawn broke when she did a last pass through the building. Cleaning crews already worked to scrub away the blood staining the concrete floors, the walls, the stairs. The supply team had gathered everything worth taking—the rations, the equipment, the vehicles, the weapons, clothing, shoes, boots, medical supplies. All would be logged, then dispensed where most needed or held in storage until it was.

The burial unit dug graves. Too many graves, Fallon thought as she walked outside, across the muddy ground. But today they dug none for their own, and that made it a good day.

Flynn slid out of the woods, his wolf Lupa by his side.

“Seven of the prisoners need more treatment,” he said. “Your mom’s helping with their transport to Cedarsville. It’s the closest clinic that can handle their injuries. The rest are on their way to the detention center on Hatteras.”

“Good.”

Flynn, she thought, fast—an elf, after all—efficient, and solid as the rock he could blend into, had met her mother and birth father when he'd been a teenager.

Now a man, he stood as one of her commanders.

“We’ll need a rotating security detail here,” she continued. “Hatteras is close to capacity, so we’ll need this facility. And they may come and check when they can’t get through, or just bring in another load of prisoners.”

She rattled off several names for the detail, including her brother Colin.

“I’ll set it up,” Flynn said. “But Colin took a hit in the op, so—”

“What?” She whirled around to Flynn, grabbed his arm in a vise grip. “I’m just hearing this?”

“You’re The One, but the mother of The One is downright scary, so when she says keep it to myself, I keep it to myself. He’s good,” Flynn added quickly. “Took a bullet in the right shoulder, but it’s out, and he’s healing. Do you think your mom would go with enemy wounded if her son wasn’t okay?”

“No, but—”

“She didn’t want you distracted, and neither did your brother, who’s more pissed off than hurt. Your dad already shoved him in the mobile heading back to New Hope.”

“Okay, all right.” But she pushed her hands through the short crop of hair in frustration. “Damn it.”

“We freed three hundred and thirty-two, and didn’t lose anyone.” Tall and lean, eyes of sharp green, Flynn looked back toward the building. “No one will be tortured in that hellhole again. Take your victory, Fallon, and go home. We’re secure here.”

She nodded, and walked into the woods, breathed in the smell of damp earth, dripping leaves. In this swampy area of what had been Virginia, near the Carolina border, insects hummed and buzzed, and what she knew to be sumac grew thick as walls.

She moved through until she stood within the circle of the shimmering morning sun to call Laoch.

He glided down to land, huge and white, silver wings spread, silver horn gleaming.

For a moment, because despite victory she was bone weary, she pressed her face to his strong throat. For that moment she was just a girl, with bruises aching, with eyes of smoke gray closed, with the blood of the slain on her shirt, her pants, her boots.

Then she mounted, sat tall in the saddle of golden leather. She used no reins or bit on the alicorn.

“*Baile*,” she murmured to him. Home.

And he rose up in the blue sky of morning to take her.

When she arrived at the big house between the New Hope barracks and the farm where Eddie and Fred raised their kids, their crops, she found her father waiting on the porch, his boots up on the rail, a mug of coffee in his hand.

He’d had a shower, she noted, as his mop of dense brown hair still showed damp. He rose, walked down to her, laid a hand on Laoch’s neck.

“Go on in and check on him. He’s sleeping, but you’ll feel better for it. I’ll see to Laoch, then there’s breakfast for both of us keeping warm in the oven.”

“You knew he’d been hurt.”

“I knew he’d been hurt and I knew he was okay.” Simon paused when she dropped down. “Your mom said not to tell you until you’d finished. She said that’s that, and when your mom says that’s that—”

“That’s that. I’m going to see for myself, grab a shower. I could use that breakfast after. Travis and Ethan?”

“Travis is at the barracks working with some new recruits. Ethan’s over at Eddie’s and Fred’s helping with livestock.”

“Okay then.”

And now that she knew where her other brothers were, she went in to check on Colin.

She went inside, turned for the stairs in the house that served as home, but one she doubted would ever really be one. The farm where she'd been born, had been raised would forever be home. But this place, like the cottage in the woods where she'd been trained by Mallick, served a purpose.

She walked to Colin's room, where he sprawled over his bed wearing an old, fairly disreputable pair of boxers. He snored heroically.

She moved to him, laid her hand lightly—very lightly—over his right shoulder. Stiff, achy, she noted, but a clean wound already well healed.

Her mother had serious skills, Fallon reminded herself. Still she took another minute, touched his hair—a darker blond than their mother's and worn these days in what he thought of as a warrior's braid: short and fat.

He had a warrior's body—muscular and tough—with a tattoo of a coiled snake on his left shoulder blade. (Done at sixteen without parental permission.)

She stayed a moment in the chaos of his room—he still collected whatever small treasure appealed to him. Odd coins, stones, pieces of glass, wires, old bottles. And had never learned, apparently, to hang or fold away a single article of clothing.

Of her three brothers he was the only one without magicks. And of the three, the one who seemed born to be a soldier.

So she left him sleeping, walked downstairs, down again to her rooms on the lower level.

Unlike Colin's, her room was scrupulously neat. On the walls she'd pinned maps—hand drawn or printed, old and new. In the chest at the foot of the bed she kept books, novels, biographies, histories, books on science, on magicks. On her desk she kept files on troops,

civilians, training, bases, prisons, food supplies, medical supplies, maneuvers, spells, duty schedules, and rotations.

On the stand by her bed sat a white candle, a ball of crystal—gifts from the man who'd trained her.

She shed her clothes, dumped them in the basket for later laundering. And with a heartfelt sigh, stepped in the shower to wash away the blood, the sweat, the grime and stench of battle.

She dressed in jeans, worn at the knees and barely hitting the ankles of long legs, a T-shirt that bagged a bit over her slim frame. She pulled on her second pair of boots until she could clean the ones she'd worn to battle.

She strapped on her sword, then went upstairs to have breakfast with her father.

"Your mom's back," he told her as he moved to the oven to pull out plates. "At the clinic, but back."

"I'm heading over there after breakfast." She chose juice, as she wanted something cool.

"You need sleep, baby. You've been up over twenty-four."

Eggs, scrambled, bacon, crisp. She dug in like the starving. "You, too," she pointed out.

"I caught some sleep on the way back—and had a nice porch doze, as my dad used to call it, before you got here."

She shoveled in more eggs. "I don't have a scratch on me. Not a single scratch. Soldiers I led bled. Colin bled. I don't have a scratch."

"You've bled before." He laid a hand over hers. "You will again."

"I have to see the wounded, and they should see me. And the rescues. Then I'll sleep."

"I'll go with you."

She glanced at the ceiling, thought of the soldier who slept. "You should stay with Colin."

"I'll pull Ethan back to sit with him. Your mom said he'd likely sleep until afternoon."

“Okay. Give me a sense of the prisoners,” she said, and he sighed.

“A mix. Some hard-asses with a lot of hate and fear of magickals. They skew older, and it’s not likely we’ll have much luck turning them around. But we may be able to educate a few of the younger ones.”

“They need to see the lab recordings. They need to see people being drugged, strapped down, tortured, experimented on just because they’re different.”

Though what she’d reviewed at the prison turned her stomach, she continued to eat. She needed fuel to function.

“Let that educate them.”

He couldn’t miss the bitterness in her voice, rubbed her hand again. “I agree. It should wait a few days. A lot of them expect torture and execution from us. We show them we treat our prisoners humanely, decently.”

“Then show them proof of the contrast,” she finished. “All right. But some won’t ever change, will they?”

“No.”

She rose, took his plate and hers to the sink to wash. “There’s no point asking why, but I keep circling back to it. Twenty years ago the world you knew, Mom knew, ended. Billions died terrible deaths from the Doom. We’re what’s left, Dad, and we’re killing each other.”

She turned to look at him, this good man who’d helped bring her into the world, who’d loved her, fought with her. A soldier who’d become a farmer, now a farmer who lived a soldier’s life again.

He had no magicks, she thought, and yet he was all the light stood for.

“You didn’t hate or fear,” she said. “You opened your home, then your life, to a stranger, a witch, and one who was being hunted. You could have turned her away, and me inside her, but you didn’t. Why?”

So many answers, Simon thought. He settled on one. “She was a miracle, and so were you, inside her. The world needed miracles.”

She smiled at him. “It’s going to get them, ready or not.”

She rode into town with him, taking Grace to give her mare some attention and exercise. The hills rolled around them, green with summer and surging wildflowers. She smelled earth freshly turned and planted, heard the shouts, the clang of metal from the barracks where recruits trained.

A small herd of deer slipped out of the trees to crop their way along a steep ridge heavy with trees. Above, the sky held soft and hopeful blue after the night's storm.

The road, cleared of abandoned cars and trucks—all laboriously towed to an outlying garage for repair or dismantling, wound toward New Hope.

Houses, she thought, most in good repair now, and most occupied. Those that couldn't be salvaged had been—like the vehicles—scavenged for parts. Wood, pipes, tiles, wiring, anything that could be used. On the reclaimed land, beef cattle, milk cows, goats, sheep, a few llamas, more horses grazed behind carefully tended fences.

At a bend in the road, the pulse of magick thrummed from the Tropics her mother had helped create. There grew groves of citrus trees, olive trees, palm, coffee beans, pepper, and other herbs and spices. Workers on harvesting detail paused to wave.

“Miracles,” Simon said simply.

After passing the security checkpoint, they rode into New Hope, once, at the height of the Doom, occupied only by death and ghosts. Now it thrived with more than two thousand people, and a memorial tree honored the dead. The community gardens and greenhouses, a site of two vicious attacks, continued to bloom and grow. The community kitchen her mother had established before Fallon had been born served meals daily.

The Max Fallon Magick Academy, named for her sire, the New Hope schools, the town hall, the shops open for bartering, the homes lining Main Street, the clinic, the library, the life reclaimed through sweat, determination, sacrifice.

Wasn't all this, she wondered, another kind of miracle?

"You miss the farm," she said as they guided the horses to the hitching posts and troths.

"I'll get back to it."

"You miss the farm," she repeated. "You left it for me, so every time I come into New Hope I'm glad you left it for a good place with good people."

She dismounted, gave Grace a stroke before looping the reins around the rail.

She walked with him to what had once been the elementary school and now housed the New Hope Clinic.

They'd made changes over the years—Fallon had gone back through the crystal to see how it had all begun. The entrance hall held chairs for those waiting for an exam or checkup. A section held toys and books collected from abandoned houses.

A couple of toddlers played with blocks—one had wings fluttering in delight. A pregnant woman sat plying knitting needles and yarn over the mound of her belly. A teenager sprawled in another chair, looking bored. An old man sat hunched, his breathing a rattling wheeze.

As they turned toward the offices, Hannah Parsoni—the mayor's daughter, Duncan and Tonia's sister—hurried down the right corridor, a clipboard in one hand, a stethoscope around her neck.

She had her luxurious mane of dark blond hair pulled back in a long tail. Her eyes, already a warm brown, deepened with pleasure at the sight of them. "I was hoping to see you both. We're swamped," she added, "so I've only got a minute. Rachel has me working with the scheduled patients and walk-ins, but I helped with the first triage on the wounded. We haven't lost anyone. Some of the people you freed . . ."

Compassion rolled off her, so deep Fallon felt the waves on her skin.

“Some of them are going to need extended treatment, and counseling, but none of them are critical now. Lana—she’s amazing. How’s Colin?”

“Sleeping,” Simon told her.

“No fever, no infection,” Fallon added.

“Make sure to let your mom know. She does know, but it would help her to hear it.”

In the way she had of offering care, Hannah reached out to touch them both. “You look so tired, both of you.”

“Maybe I should do a—”

As Fallon lifted a hand to her face, Hannah took it. “A glamour? I wish you wouldn’t. They should see the effort. They should know what it costs, what freedom costs. That you pay the price for it, too.”

She gave Fallon’s hand a squeeze, then moved on. “Hey, Mr. Barker, let’s go back, have a look at you.”

He rattled, wheezed. “I can wait for the doctor.”

“Why don’t we go back to an exam room, just have a look? I can get you started for Rachel.”

Soothing, cajoling instead of insulted, Fallon thought. That was Hannah—Hannah who’d been studying, training to be a doctor, essentially since her childhood, and who’d served as a field medic on rescues for years.

Patience, Fallon realized, was just one form of Hannah’s magick.

She saw the girl in the office, working briskly on a computer—a skill she herself had yet to fully master. April, she remembered. Ferie, about her age. Wounded in the attack in the gardens two years before.

An attack instigated by Fallon’s own blood, her cousin, the daughter of her sire’s brother and his woman. Dark Uncannys who wanted her death above all.

The girl looked up, beamed a smile. “Hey, hi. Are you looking for Lana?”

“I wanted to see the wounded—any who are up for it.”

“We have the freed prisoners who were treated and cleared holding at the school auditorium, and the troops treated and cleared sent home or to the barracks. The rest are in the ward. Jonah and Carol are doing rounds, and Ray’s monitoring the ones we released medically. It’s been kind of an all-hands-on-deck morning. And right now?” She smiled her bright, faerie smile. “Rachel and Lana are delivering a baby.”

“A baby?”

“One of the prisoners—”

“Lissandra Ye, wolf shifter,” Fallon finished—she’d read every report. “She’s not due for nearly eight weeks.”

“She went into labor in the mobile heading here. They weren’t able to stop it.” As some worry leaked through, April pressed her lips together. “They’ve got a kind of NICU set up for it, as best they can. But I could tell Rachel was worried even though Jonah said he didn’t see death.

“He’d see it, right?” April reached out for reassurance. “Jonah would know.”

Fallon nodded, stepped out.

“Death’s not the only consequence.” She spoke softly to Simon. “Lissandra Ye was in that prison for fourteen months. She was raped inside there, and they kept right up with experiments on her after she got pregnant.”

“You need to trust your mother and Rachel.”

“I do.”

She walked down another corridor. Classrooms converted to exam rooms, treatment rooms, surgeries, storage for supplies, another for medications and drugs.

Labor and delivery. She laid a hand on the door, felt the power simmering. Her mother’s power. Heard Rachel’s calm voice reassuring, and the moans of the woman in labor.

“I do,” she repeated, and because that fate was in their hands, continued to the sprawling cafeteria set up as a ward for patients who needed continued treatment or observation.

Curtains—scavenged or fabricated—separated the beds and made an oddly festive show of color and patterns. The monitors beeped. Not enough, not nearly enough for so many patients. They would rotate them as needed, she knew.

She saw Jonah looking as weary as she felt hanging a fresh IV bag.

“Start on Jonah’s side,” Simon suggested. “I’ll start on Carol’s.”

So she walked to Jonah, and to the stranger with her eyes closed in the hospital bed. Under her eyes circles spread dark and deep. Her skin had a gray cast, and her hair—deep, deep black—had been shorn brutally short, like a skullcap.

“How is she?” she asked Jonah.

He rubbed tired eyes. “Dehydrated, malnourished—that’s common throughout. Burn scars—old and fresh—over about thirty percent of her body. She’s had her fingers broken and left to set on their own. Your mother worked on that, and we think she’ll get the use of her hands back. Her records show she was in there for over seven years, one of the longest in the facility.”

Fallon glanced at the chart. Naomi Rodriguez, age forty-three. Witch.

“The records listed an elf she’d taken into her care.”

“Dimitri,” Jonah told her. “He doesn’t know his last name, or remember it. He’s twelve. He’s okay, if any of them are. He finally agreed to go with a couple of the women we were able to release.”

“Okay. I want to—”

She broke off when the woman opened her eyes, stared at her. Eyes nearly as dark as the shadows dogging them.

“You’re The One.”

“Fallon Swift.”

When the woman groped for her hand, Fallon took it. Not

physical pain, she realized—the medicals had taken care of that. But they couldn't touch the mental anguish.

“My boy.”

“Dimitri. He's all right. I'm going to go see him soon.”

“We'll bring him to see you,” Jonah added. “As soon as we can. He's safe now, and so are you.”

“They held a gun to his head, so I had to go with them. They said they'd let him go if I did, but they lied. Full of lies. They drugged me, and my boy. He was just a boy. They wouldn't let me see him, but I could feel him, hear him. They kept us drugged so we couldn't find our power. Sometimes they kept us gagged and blindfolded and shackled for hours, maybe days. They'd take us to that jackal and his devils to torture us. Some looked ashamed, but they took us to him. And they knew what he did to us.”

She closed her eyes again. Tears leaked out, trailed down her cheeks. “I lost faith.”

“There's no shame in it.”

“I wanted to kill, at first I lived by imagining killing them all. Then I only wanted to die, just end it.”

“No shame,” Fallon repeated, and those anguished eyes opened again.

“But you came, even though I had no faith.”

Fallon leaned in. “Do you see me? Do you see the light in me?”

“It's like the sun.”

“I see you, Naomi. I see the light in you.” When Naomi shook her head, Fallon laid her free hand on the woman's cheek, let some of that light flow in. “They dimmed it, but I see your light. I see the light that shined, that took in a frightened boy, a small, confused, grieving boy, and gave him a home. I see the light that was willing to sacrifice herself for the boy. I see you, Naomi.”

Fallon straightened. “Now rest and heal. We'll bring Dimitri to you.”

“I’ll fight with you.”

“When you’re well,” Fallon told her, and moved to the next bed.

It took nearly two hours. She joked with a soldier who claimed being shot, then kicked and stomped on was just a day in the life. She comforted the distraught, reassured the confused.

Before she left she saw the boy, the bone-thin boy with dark skin, sitting on the side of Naomi’s bed. Haltingly, he read to her in a voice rusty with disuse from one of the children’s books in the waiting area.

She slipped outside for some air, saw her father had done the same and was currently kissing her mother.

“You know, you guys don’t need to get a room. You’ve got a whole house.”

Lana turned bluebell eyes on Fallon, and smiled. “There’s my girl.” She moved quickly, gathered Fallon up tight. “You’re so tired.”

“I’m not alone.”

“No, you’re not.” She drew back. “We didn’t lose anyone. Thank the goddess.”

“Including the premature baby?”

“Including. It was rough, but I finally got the baby to turn. Rachel wanted to avoid a C-section unless he stayed breech.”

“He.”

“Brennan. Four pounds, three ounces, sixteen inches. Rachel’s still monitoring, but she’s pleased with him, and his mother. She’s one tough lady.”

“So are you. Now go home, check on Colin, then get some sleep.”

“I’m going to. We’re about to rotate here. Let’s all go home.”

“I need to talk to the people in the auditorium, then I’ll be home.”

With a nod, Lana ran her fingers through Fallon’s hair. “You’re going to find some of them need more time to acclimate. Katie’s working on housing—there are so many, and many of those shouldn’t be left on their own yet.”

“We’ve got volunteers who’ll take some in,” Simon pointed out.

“Those who seem steadier can take some of the housing we prepped before the rescue. But some may just want to go.”

“They shouldn’t, not yet, but—”

“I’ll talk to them,” Fallon assured her, and guided her mother to the horses. “Wanna flash?”

“Actually, a ride would be good.” Lana waited until Simon mounted, held up a hand and swung up behind him, as if she—once an urbanite, a New York native—had been riding all of her life. “Come home soon,” she said, and nuzzled into Simon’s back, wrapped her arms around him.

Love, Fallon thought as they rode off. Maybe that was the biggest miracle. Feeling it, giving it, knowing it.

She swung onto Grace and rode toward the school hoping to convince the tortured, the exhausted, the sick at heart to believe.