

FlameSoul

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In Re' Jarl, magic is forbidden, and possession is punishable by death. Yet some secret villages still practise it, going out on raids to save those who have magic. After being shot, Meg the Sorceress is adopted by Gypsies, and a series of events beg

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1 - PROLOGUE

*Bound lands forever more,
Islands linked to each separated shore.
The People, the Gathering, over one land they rule,
Magic means death for both the wise and the fool.
Land from land, one shall part,
One with courage, faith and heart.
The Rulers shall fall, under this leader's hand,
While they have power and life, they shall heal the land...*

In the age of Nobles, Maidens and Knights-In-Almost-Shining-Armour, times were beginning to change; magic and evil were linked into one meaning, and rejected from many of the civilizations in the realm of Re' Jarl. Villages, towns and cities were bound to the law of the People and the Gathering, and when combined, known as the Rulers. Both were powerful groups of druids, but while the People handled political and mortal affairs like punishment and yearly harvesting, the Gathering dealt with the eradication of magic - and anyone who possessed it. The punishment for known or unknown possession, set by the People and supported by the Gathering, was to be put to death by burning at the stake like a common old-day witch, in Re' Jarl's capital city, Traceid. No one knew how the two groups had formed, but the citizens of Re' Jarl followed the laws that had been declared, and gradually grew accustomed to the new ways of the People and the Hoarders. Well, most of them did. Some small, tucked away villages, far from the notice of anyone but themselves, held out from the Rulers, practicing their magic, then travelling around to the other villages and towns secretly, posing as travellers or such, and trying to save those who looked like they possessed magic, taking them away before the Gathering did. Such people who lived in these isolated communities were mages, sorcerers and sorceresses, witches, wizards and even angels and demons had joined, fearing for their lives. One such of these raids was soon to take place at the village Seinsya, one of the oldest landmarks in Re' Jarl, and famous for Anakoe Forest, which was about a quarter of a mile away from the village, and contained some of the best game in the realm, and, the most species of half-creatures ever reported in one area. It was the day of the Full Moon, the time when Seinsya village was due to be searched for magic users, and, unknown to the raider, both People and Gathering armymen were on the watch for trouble, and, magic...

2 - Chapter I

The thunder of horse hooves rang through the village, mingled with the curses and shouts of the Armsmen, and the laughter and taunts of the (by her attire) Gypsy, Meg, whom was the object of the chase.

The villagers had long retreated into their houses or shops, preferring not to take their chances on the street, for fear of getting trampled underfoot by the riders. They did, however, jeer and mock Meg from the safety of their windows, their shutters thrown wide open to let their voices carry around the streets. They were somewhat angered that the cloaked Meg did not even flinch.

The Armsmen, half of them dressed in the green and silver of the Gathering, the other half in the red and gold of the People, struggled to keep up with her and her midnight black stallion. They were now racing flat out against a cool autumn wind that had picked up, to reach to village gates, and were not far from them and the open plains that lead to Anakoe Forest. Bows twanged, and arrows thudded into objects around her, always missing their target.

Meg and her pursuers burst through the village gate and out onto the grassy plains, kicking up a storm of dust which agitated the Armsmens' mounts, making the horses twitch and shake their heads, slowing the riding groups down. Their captain, out of pure frustration, began whipping his horse, driving his spurs deep into the chestnut mare's flanks, drawing a trickle of blood.

-I am sorry/grieving LittleMare for your pain,- Meg sent through Mind-Speech to the captain's horse, feeling what the mare felt. It was like blunt knives on her hips, stabbing over and over again.

-This is not the time/place for apologies mistress,- the mare sent back, rearing up and trying to unseat her rider, but to no avail.

-Littlemare is right Meg/FlameSoul; we must keep riding/running/fleeing. Can you not hide/illusion/magic us?- her horse asked, panting with the effort to keep his pace, but putting on an extra surge of speed, pulling away from the pursuing armsmen.

-I cannot weave an illusion/magic while we are riding/running/fleeing. I already tried, and I failed,- Meg sent quietly, wiping her teary cheeks with her cloak then staring blankly at the forest ahead, doing her best to ignore the stabbing pains that continued in her legs. Both captain and mare were putting up a good fight against each other.

Finally, Meg and her stallion came to the Anakoe forest, and disappeared into the dense green, gold, red, orange and brown foliage of the autumn trees.

The captain, after an eventful moment of holding on to his rearing horse, drew the others to a stop outside the forest.

"Sir, we can't go in there, the centaurs and naga will get us and rip us to shreds!" one of the Armsmen said as he stopped his horse.

"Hopefully they'll get the Gypsy as well!" someone shouted, earning a few weak laughs.

The captain regarded the speakers coldly after shooting the joker an ugly look. "I very well know that we can't go in after him, Jessins," the captain said icily, turning his horse around to face the other Armsmen. "I want half of each group to go back to the village and continue what we were doing before the Gypsy turned up," he ordered, and they obeyed, half of the group riding back to the village with Jessins and another man in the lead, both muttering darkly. "Now, the rest of you, come with me, we're going Gypsy Hunting."

There was a cheer and they started off around the forest, all senses on maximum alert.

After a while of riding through the forest, Meg slowed to a trot as the trees began to thin out and they came to the other side, and rode idly towards a village not far beyond.

-Well done Stealth/MoonRider,- she sent to her horse, patting his sweaty neck fondly.

-Thank you. I know/feel/sense that you are sad for Littlemare,- the black stallion replied, blinking his charcoal eyes and turning his head to give his mistress's hand a comforting lick.

Meg smiled. -Yes, I thought/knew you would. You know, I think they thought/saw me to be a man/male! Now, shall we ride faster/quicker?- she asked, and the horse obliged, switching to a comfortable canter. Meg's cloak fanned out behind her, creating a sort of mysterious effect as she pulled the hood farther over her head and face. Good riddance to those mad Armsmen, she thought.

Spotting another forest up ahead, not quite as large as Anakoe, but still big, she began to doze, closing her already heavy eyelids and letting the reigns, which were only finely twisted silks, loose, balancing on Stealth's back.

Something niggling the edge of the horse's mind made him uneasy, and he quickened his pace as the forest loomed nearer, careful not to tip Meg off.

Meg, despite the change of pace, slept on, sitting up straight as if she still rode Stealth, though the reigns were now totally out of her hands and hanging around the Stealth's neck.

She did not see or hear the remaining group of Armsmen, led by an angry captain, riding out from the side of the forest, or the archer among them pull his string taught, or the arrow he let loose until it thudded into her shoulder, making her fall forward onto Stealth's neck.

It all happened so fast, Meg's mind was blank to what had just happened. Then it was on fast-forward, and the pain started.

"Get us... to... the forest!" she gasped, abandoning Mind-Speech, biting her lip until it bled against the pain spreading through her body.

Stealth gathered his remaining strength and ran full speed into the forest, careful not to lose his rider as they entered, the bramble patch in which he had come through scratching his flanks and body, not stopping until he was sure they were somewhere near the middle of the forest.

Groaning, Meg felt for the arrow -which was wedged between her shoulder blade and spine- and, ignoring the intense pain, pulled at it, easing the arrowhead out along with the body. Looking at the arrow with pure hatred, she threw it, watching as it landed a little way off, bloodstained head wedged by the base of a tree.

"Holy Tansin," she said aloud, watching the blood blossom on her cloak and, after regaining her breath began stroking Stealth's neck. "I feel like lead Stealth," she said thickly, and with that, she slipped from his back, making Stealth rear in fright, and fell in heap by his hooves, unconscious.

Hawk sat by the deer mother, patting her chestnut head and watching her fawn wobble around in the fallen leaves, having sat by her mother for most of the day. He had visited the pair since his brother had killed the father, and the rest of the herd had left the pregnant doe behind. He had cared for her, and now he cared for the baby as well, teaching it to forage with its mother, and occasionally bringing a treat of mint leaves or apples, which were hard to come by in the forest.

Having not heard a name for the forest yet, he had named it Gypsies Forest, after the Caravan of Gypsies that now dwelt each spring in the forest, he with them, safe and elusive from the Armsmen of the Council, who would have loved to prosecute them for thievery, and murders, which, when put to the test, were not true. Not many, at least.

Hawk was a man of nineteen, but he felt, and most of the time he acted, like he was years younger, for which he envied the other boys in the Caravan, still in their boyhood...

The sound of horses' and shouting attracted his attention from his current activity of petting the deer, and he moved out to watch as a group of People and Gathering Armsmen chasing what looked like a Gypsy, out of a village and into Anakoe Forest. He watched as the Gypsy exited the forest and began to snooze. He watched as the Armsmen spring into action, going around the forest and fire arrows, one finding the Gypsy's shoulder and making him slump forward.

Hawk thought it strange, yet lucky, that the horse automatically sped up and rode straight into the Gypsies Forest, not far from where Hawk was hidden, though the horse must have taken his rider straight through the bramble patch on the way. He could even here the horse as it galloped deeper into the forest. Well, the lad will be safer once this lot move off, Hawk thought to himself.

"Hey! You there!" Hawk called, walking out, trying to look impressive and formidable with his chest puffed out, and dagger gripped casually in his hand, that happened to be behind his back; obviously he was born actor, headstrong at that.

The captain leered unpleasantly at Hawk, taking in his colourful woven clothing, long black hair, honey coloured skin and twinkling hazel eyes, spitting on the ground in disgust.

"We know your hiding the boy, Gypsy! You devil spawn always look out for your own!" he yelled, black eyes glinting like cold splinters of onyx stone. "Give him up here to us and we'll be on our way –"

"And leave me here alive to relay what happened? Come on, I'm not as stupid as I may look."

The captain continued as if he hadn't heard. "-you refuse, and we take you instead. No doubt the People will have its uses for you in the Slavery. Come on, he aint worth protecting."

Hawk raised an eyebrow. "Now, let us get this straight gentleman; you shoot a gypsy boy and accuse me for hiding him when I don't know where his horse took him in the first place. Now you threaten me that if I don't give the boy up you shall attempt to capture me and hand me over to the Council where I will be used or sold as a slave. Am I correct so far?" A few Armsmen nodded uncertainly, "So, how will you attempt to take me if I refuse you the boy?" he asked lightly, tightening his grip on the dagger behind his back, ready.

"Never you mind that Gypsy, just give us the boy," the captain said, his voice so dangerously low that the Armsmen shifted in their saddles nervously.

"Right, well, you have no manners so let me teach you some of my philosophy," and as Hawk said this, he hurled the dagger at the captain, his accuracy spot on as it pierced the captain's chest with a dull thud. The captain gave a cry of alarm, slid of his horse and lay still. The Armsmen were frozen with fear as Hawk bent over and dislodged the dagger from the dead man's chest.

"Now where was I? Ah yes, my philosophy; if a pack of hungry wolves are after you, and you kill off their pack leader, the rest will flee, and not stay to fight. Without a leader, they are merely frightened pups," Hawk said, then lowering his voice in a mock whisper, said "Let's put that into practice shall we?"

The Armsmen fled, gibbering nonsense about a man of the devil and such of the likes. "And take your captain with you! I will not be threatened by the Council or the Hoarders!" Hawk yelled after them, and after slinging the dead captain across his own chestnut steed, sent the beast after the others, laughing. That should teach them, he thought to himself. Pity about using the horse as a body carrier though, beautiful beast that one. Now, where did that lad get to?

Hawk had a hard time trying to find what he believed to be a Gypsy boy, according to the, now deceased, Armsmen. He set out of foot, talking out loud to remove the silence that lay within the forest. From what he had seen and heard, the boy should be somewhere near the middle of the forest. "Smart

horse to run away like that," he repeated to himself. "Now, let's try and find the damn boy so I can go back to the Caravan and eat. Holy Keltir defend me!" he yelled, swearing colourfully as he tripped over a tree root. Already in a bad mood for having to be out here, he went to kick the tree, but stopped; there was an arrow in it, and the arrowhead was layered with dried blood.

He walked in silence, eyes and ears straining for any sign of the boy. Moving forward, he swept some low branches away, and came face to face with the horse. It blinked at him, seemingly narrowing its eyes.

-What do you want/seek man?- a voice echoed in his head. Hawk took a step backwards.

"Nice horsy, umm, do you happen to know where I could find a wounded Gypsy?" he asked nervously. This is what I have sunk to - communing with horses, he thought privately. Have I gone slightly insane already?

The horse seemed to look him up and down, sizing him up. -You are a Gypsy. Good, come/follow me,- the voice said again and the horse stepped back into the branches.

Giving himself a shake, Hawk followed, cutting the branches back, then gaped at what he saw; a clearing, and a thick one at that, and in the centre, where the horse now stood, the cloaked body of what must be the Gypsy.

Hawk knelt by the body and examined the wound. An arrow to the shoulder, though it hadn't gone in very far, but the boy still had lost quite a lot of blood. He turned the body over, looking it up and down before blushing furiously, uttering a small groan. This was no boy, but a girl, no older than sixteen at least. He brushed the dirt from the girl's honey coloured cheek, then stared at his hands. They were now covered in a type of chalky dust. Brushing the girl's whole face, he discovered that she was no Gypsy, and her skin was not honey coloured, like his own, but a pale tan colour. All in all, with her hair tangled and coated with a mixture of dirt and blood, and her clothes in the same mixture, she was quite attractive.

-Can you help/heal/fix her?- the voice asked sharply, cutting into his daze.

Hawk had completely forgotten about the horse until then. "I suppose you're the one who's talking then horse?" he asked, sitting back on his heels, loosing some of his nervousness and becoming slightly business like.

-I am Stealth/MoonRider, not 'horse', and in answer to your query/question, yes, I am the one talking/speaking. It is a gift/talent we call Mind-Speech. Now, answer my query/question- the horse said, his voice somewhat irritated.

"Alright! Alright! For a horse you do demand quite a bit. Yes, I can help her, but I need to take her back to my Caravan. My Gypsy Caravan," Hawk said, answering the horse's last unasked question. "Come on, just follow me," he said, lifting the girl gently onto the horse and setting her long ways. "Make sure she doesn't fall off, because without a saddle, she'll slip if you move to fast," he warned as he started to walk deeper into the forest.

Shouts of welcome and surprise echoed through the Caravan as Hawk walked into the centre of the forest, the black stallion tailing behind him with the girl slung across his back.

"Bought ye'self home a lass have ye' Hawk? A nice Gypsy lass too!" someone yelled and the others around him hooted with laughter.

"Yes, yes, laugh if you want Alec, she took an arrow in the shoulder from some certain Armsmen just outside the forest, near Anakoe and Seinsya," Hawk said, opening the flap of a tent pitched near an ornately carved wagon, so that the horse could walk in. Following the horse he helped lay the girl on a pallet, and then both left the tent.

“Mari! Marietta! Sister!” Hawk called out, his voice carrying over those in the Caravan. “Mari! Hey! Oi!” “What?” A girl emerged from a wagon, green fire playing at her fingertips. “Don’t tell me you need me to heal you again brother!” she laughed, coming down and embracing Hawk.

“No, not this time, though I wouldn’t say no to a soothing massage.”

For a reply, the girl thwacked Hawk over the head. “No? Fine then. I have a patient who took an arrow in the shoulder.”

Mari frowned. “Show me then,” she said, and followed her brother into his tent. She inspected the wound while Hawk told her what he had seen.

“Tansin damn all Armsmen!” Mari hissed viscously, pressing her fingertips to the wound. Green fire threaded and spiralled around it, before the broken skin closed up, leaving a triangle shaped scar in its place. “Well, that should be good enough. Nothing I can do about the blood loss, better let her sleep it off.” She turned the body over, and examined her face. Like Hawk had first done, Mari stared at her hands then at the face. “She’s not a Gypsy,” she whispered, then glared at Hawk, her own hazel eyes seeming to spark.

Hawk met her gaze levelly, and then looked away. “Well, no, not exactly, but you could swear she was one, what with the disguise and everything,” he mumbled, twisting his hands.

“You say both People and Gathering armsmen were chasing her?” Mari asked, looking back at the unconscious girl.

“You can’t mistake their uniforms,” Hawk replied, his voice firm.

“I can understand the People chasing her, looking like a Gypsy and all, but why the Gathering? They’ve never concerned themselves with out kind before, why start now?”

Hawk shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. Shall we let Hasim have a look-see?”

Mari scowled. “Go get him then, and be quick about it. Don’t say anything to anyone else yet though, not even Hasim. Wait until he’s in here. You got that?”

Hawk nodded and left without a word.

Outside, a ring had gathered, consisting of most of the children of the Caravan. “Be off with you! Go on!” Hawk waved his hands at them and the children scattered, back to their discarded activities. He found the old man in his wagon, mouldy looking herbs lining the walls and creating an awful stink. Coughing at the sudden blast of smell, Hawk delivered the message.

“Mari wants to see you in my tent.”

Hasim raised a white eyebrow, but didn’t ask anything, following Hawk back into the tent.

“What is it?” he asked Mari in his creaking but deep voice, kneeling beside the girl and looking at the dust on her fingers, then at the unconscious body.

“Oh dear,” he said, bending over prodding the girl’s powdered skin with a wrinkled finger.

“Oh no, don’t worry about me! Just ignore the fact that I found and rescued her! Go ahead!” Hawk said from his corner in the tent, arms and legs crossed.

Mari silenced him with a look. “Stop acting like a sulking brat.”

Hashin straightened up and looked thoughtful. Using his index finger, he gently began pressing it on the girl’s forehead, frowning. As he pressed, a mark suddenly flared where he had touched, bathing them in faint, very faint, silver light.

A few minutes passed before he spoke again. “Go on Hawk, touch it,” he said.

Hawk looked startled, but moved forward and pressed his own finger to the mark. He could feel it pulsating slightly.

“What does this mean Hashin?” Mari asked, touching the mark after Hawk, redrawing her finger quickly as the mark faded into the girl’s skin, though spots of silver light remained in Hawk and Mari’s vision.

“It means, Marietta, that a powerful sorceress has joined our little jolly Gypsy Caravan.”

3 - Chapter II

Meg woke with a start, her head and body aching like she had just been rampaged by a herd of centaurs.

Groaning, she sat up and looked around. Now, where was she?

She was in a tent, lying on a pallet bed, much better than her own, she knew that much.

The flap of the tent opened and a girl of her own age, dark brown hair honey skin and hazel eyes came in holding a tray laden with food, an apron over her green and gold coloured dress adding a motherly, yet wonderful effect to the whole ensemble.

“Oh wonderful, you’re finally awake!” she exclaimed, her face breaking into a smile. After putting the tray down on a wooden table, the girl stuck her head out of the flap. “Hasim, Hawk! She’s awake!” Coming back inside she knelt beside Meg and began to examine her. Meg noticed the girl’s fingers were glimmering with green fire.

Soon after, two others entered; an old man with long plaited white hair and an indigo robe who she took for Hasim, and a young man wearing plain white shirt, tan breeches and boots and long black hair that had been tied back from his honey skinned face, who she took for Hawk.

“Now my dear,” Hasim said, his storm grey eyes kindly. “After four days of sleeping, I am sure you have many questions, but before then, you must eat and clean yourself. I shall leave you in the care of Hawk and Marietta.” He inclined his head, then left. Meg looked uncertainly at the two. They looked so much alike, that they could very easily be siblings, which she guessed they were.

The food that the girl Marietta had brought was wonderful and hot, sweetened with honey that Hawk had proudly said he had collected himself. After the food, Marietta showed Meg a place where she could bathe, and after seeing herself in the beryl glass she had borrowed from Marietta –and after getting over the amazement of seeing her reflection-, Meg agreed that she needed to wash thoroughly. Scrubbing the muck from her body took ages, but her hair took longer. It was tangled, knotted and had accumulated thick layers of mud and dried blood. The finishing effect certainly was better than it had first been.

Her hair, Meg discovered, was a fiery red colour, slightly wavy and waist length, though the red was interwoven with a collection of fine, gold-coloured streaks, rather unusual. Her skin, which she had admitted to have dusted with grounded rock, was now three shades lighter, and lightly tanned. Meg’s eyes however, unlike the rest of her, remained the same sparkling emerald green colour as before. The mark on her forehead she found out, when touched, stood out as a silver quarter moon with a star in its curve, before fading into her skin again. It was this, Hasim had said to Meg, which set her apart from those in the Caravan.

After bathing, Meg went back Hawk’s wrapped in a loose woollen tunic, and found Hasim sitting on the pallet, waiting for her.

“Now, I think you have some questions?” he asked her, and when she nodded, he said, “Good, as I do too. Now, what would you like to ask?”

Meg’s hand went automatically to the mark on her forehead, making it stand out again, pulsing steadily under her fingertips.

“Ah yes, I thought you might want to know. That mark is the sign of a sorceress. I do hope you know that you are a sorceress?” Meg nodded and Hasim continued. “Yes, well, all sorceresses and sorcerers, unlike mages who bare no mark of their power, are born with one, in many different places, though some never reveal themselves. You see, when a sorceress or sorcerer is born, they have only a limited part of

their power, but when the mark is touched, it will unlock its hidden magic, and return it to the them. Now, take Marietta for example; she a sorceress, though it is very rare that one with magical power and non-magical parents to be born, which is the reason we believe she doesn't have a mark, anywhere, so she has only a very limited magic type, the type to heal. You seem to already know a great deal of magic, I can sense it, and I think, that now the mark has been discovered, that you will have a great deal more power."

This seemed rather strange to Meg. She had known about being a sorceress, but no one had ever told her about the mark. Had they wanted to make sure she never got her full power?

"But how can I have a mark and not know anything of it? How can it have not been touched before?" she wanted to ask, but Hasim was now asking his own question.

"Can you tell me how you came about to be chased by the Armsmen of the People and the Gathering?" Meg's insides clenched. It wasn't as if she hadn't been expecting the question, no, she had know all along that it would eventually be asked, but she didn't count on it being so soon. And how did she know she could trust these people? Why should she tell her secret, and the secret of these who's lives were in danger?

She was being stupid, she knew. These Gypsies had taken her in out of their goodness. They had healed her, clothed her and fed her. Meg sighed and began her tale.

"Well, you know about the Rulers and everything, and how most of the villages have accepted their laws and kill those who possess magic. Well, there a few tiny villages who resist the rulers, and we have created a few full magic villages, places where we can practice and be safe. Many times, we have disguised ourselves and gone out to the other villages and searched for people with signs of magic, and we sort of abduct them before the Gathering can burn them. I was unlucky enough to come across a village that was currently being searched, by both the Gathering and the People, and, well, some are specially trained to sort of sniff out magic, and they found it in me, and I fled, and... ended up with an arrow in me," she ended, looking around her with eyes that were blank. The memories she had buried in the back of her mind resurfaced, teeming though her mind as she remembered back to when she had lived in the resisting village. "I'll have to go back at some point."

Hashin thanked her and left, his brow creased in thought.

I'll have to go back at some point...

Marietta came in some time later, her arms holding some of her own spare clothing, which she said should roughly fit her. "Come on, some of the others put a tent up for you next to mine," she said, leading Meg to a tent, which was indeed, right next to hers.

"Thank you Marietta," Meg said softly, taking the clothes and smiling timidly at the girl.

Marietta pulled a face, and then returned the smile. "Please, call me Mari, everyone does. Except Hasim." She giggled before leaving.

Meg changed into the clothes and looked at herself a larger beryl glass in Mari's tent. The red shirt –embroidered with gold by Mari and Hawk's mother, Shira- was open sleeved and a bit long, reaching her thighs, but the tan breeches and black boots fitted perfectly. She used her own black cloak which had been expertly restored by Shira as well, and now sported an oval gold clasp which held a smooth opal stone, believed to be a stone of power. She had acquired a beaded gypsy belt, a quiver with matching longbow and arrows, though Meg had yet to learn how to use them, and new riding gloves. Her daggers had been sharpened and tucked into her thigh-sheathes. Meg stared at herself, unable to believe that the reflection was her.

She looked so much like a true gypsy, apart from her skin and her hair, but that would tan in time, and

there was nothing to do about the red colour, unless she somehow coloured it.

Exiting the tent, she stopped to pet Mari's sandy mare, Sunny, when a memory forced itself to surface; Stealth!

Meg half ran half walked to Hawk's tent, where she found him whittling a staff.

"Do you like it?" he asked, then grinned at her attire. "Well, well, well! You scrubbed up nicely," he said, looking up and down. "Hang on, I made something for you."

He began to rummage around in a trunk in the corner, and then came back over, holding out a redwood box with the same mark on her forehead carved into the lid. Aral ran her hand over it, and, to her greatest embarrassment, a tear ran down her cheek. "Thank you, it's beautiful," she said.

"Open it," he encouraged, blushing a little.

Her hands shaking slightly, Aral opened the box carefully, and gazed at the objects within; five feathers lay on the smooth bottom of the box, wrapped in oilskin. On top of the feathers was a leather pouch; finely beaded like her belt, and when Rune unpeeled the pouch, a few beautifully carved and coloured beads tumbled onto her palm.

"They're gorgeous Hawk," Meg said, staring at the beads in her hand with awe. "Did you make them yourself?"

"Yes," he replied, his blush deepening. "They're a Naming Gift."

"Naming gift?"

"Oh yes, sorry, I forgot to tell you about the Ceremony. It feels like you've been here a lifetime, a true Gypsy." He looked at Meg for a moment, then began to speak again.

"On the first day of every winter, all the Gypsies who have already turned sixteen go through a Naming Ceremony to complete their rank as a newly made adult. We call these special names Soul names, and our ones we were given at birth Form names. I can't tell you what happens, as that is strictly forbidden, but I can tell you where the tradition came from." He paused, looked at Meg's encouraging face, and continued.

"The tradition came from a very, very old legend that has been carried in all Gypsy Caravan's for who-knows-how-long. The legend tells us that after we die, our soul leaves our body, taking the form of a living thing from earth, where they remain immortal until they choose to journey into true death. The naming ceremony, performed by Hasim, is a sort of inner quest to your heart to see what fire burns bright in you. Like mother, her soul is a Ring-Tailed Possum, which explains why she is so shy and dainty. Hasim's wife, Maple, is a Maple Tree, which is a symbolic sign of wisdom, and Hasim himself is rumoured to be an Oak Tree, and everyone knows they are the wisest and oldest living things on the face of the earth. Do you understand?"

Meg nodded slowly. "So, is Hawk your Soul name, or your Form name?"

"Soul," Hawk confessed. "My Form name is Jed, so you can see why I prefer my Soul name."

Meg held back a giggle. "Has anyone else kept their Soul name?"

"Oh yes, all the Caravan elders, a few of my friends and my twin brother, Lynx."

"So, why the gift?" she asked absently, mulling over the idea that Hawk and Mari had another sibling.

"Well, it's traditional to give the people who are going through the Naming Ceremony a sort of 'welcome to adulthood' gift, like a prize for getting through life so far." Meg must have looked alarmed at the prospect of giving gifts, because Hawk added, "Don't worry, it's only you and Mari this time. And besides, you still have a seven-moon until we leave for the glaciers and you have to give her your gift. I couldn't wait until then."

Turning her attention back to the gift, Meg examined the feathers. "Are they hawk feathers?"

Hawk grinned. "Oh, I wonder how you guessed," he said in mock sarcasm. "Now, what was the occasion that you came to visit me in the first place?"

"Oh yes! I nearly forgot! Have you seen my horse by any chance? He's a huge black stallion who thinks

himself to be superior-“

“You mean Stealth? No offence, but your horse is a pain in the neck. I think he’s talking to my gelding, Blitzen, out near where the wagons are kept. He’s become rather tetchy and won’t let me near him since I refused him entrance into my tent when you were sleeping during those first four days.”

“Stealth has been talking to you?” Meg asked in amazement.

“Not since I brought you here, no.”

“Well, he’s never talked to anyone before, other than horses and the usual animals you see in the country-side. Are you a Mind-Speaker?”

Hawk laughed, “Me? Communing with beasts? No way, that was the first time I ever had a convocation with an animal, though I do like to talk to Blitzen on long rides. Lynx though it was rather funny when I was arguing with Stealth outside my tent that first day. Anyway, your horse is near the wagons, as I said. Tell you what, grab your bow and I’ll teach you how to shoot an arrow straight!”

Meg brightened. “Alright then, I’ll just grab my bow and fill my quiver. Meet you there!”

She ran back to her tent, collecting her longbow and her arrows, slinging the quiver on her shoulder, winced as it bumped on the arrow wound, and started to walk in the direction Hawk had gone.

No sooner had Aral taken three steps, a voice spoke behind her.

“Well, if it’s not the sorceress Meg! Hawk and Mari have told me a lot about you.”

Meg turned and found herself face-to-face with a tall dark someone who was unmistakably Lynx. For one thing, he definitely looked the part; short, coal black hair that fell over his eyes, which were the same hazel colour as Mari and Hawk, though his skin was slightly darker, and he had the beginnings of black stubble on his face, and his attire, breeches, boots and a shirt and cloak, were all black.

“You must be Lynx then,” Aral said, holding out her hand to shake.

Instead, Lynx kissed her fingertips lightly, smiling. “A pleasure to meet you Meg. May I ask where you are going?”

“Hawk is going to teach me archery. I can’t say that I don’t need it either,” Meg replied, grinning sheepishly. She touched her fingers where they tingled from the kiss.

“Oh, wonderful, archery. You don’t mind if I tag along do you?”

“No, not at all,” she said. He was quite nice, this Lynx person.

As they walked, Lynx told her of the life that most Gypsies led, and how they would leave for the glaciers the next day, and arrive there in a seven-moon, just in time to prepare for the Naming Ceremony.

“Hawk mentioned the glaciers, and I’ve heard of them before, though in my travels I’ve never actually seen them.”

“It’s in honour of the Naming Ceremony,” Lynx explained.

“Yes, I thought as much. And, just so I’m sure, are glaciers are large bodies of ice moving slowly down a slope or valley and spreading outwards on a land surface?”

Lynx laughed, making Meg blush as dark as her hair. “You sound as if you’ve swallowed a scroll on the subject! Spot on!” In what little time they had spent walking together, Meg had grown accustomed to Lynx’s presence.

Finally, Hawk came in sight, but when he saw Lynx, he scowled. Meg raised an eyebrow and glanced at Lynx, but his face remained calm.

“Hello brother,” he said casually, leaning on a makeshift fence. “I’ve just been filling Meg in on some of the finer points of Gypsy life, which I believe you must have forgotten to do.”

Hawk’s scowl deepened, and Meg frowned at Lynx. “That’s a bit harsh Lynx-“ she started to say, but Hawk cut her off.

“Come on, I found Stealth and another clearing where I set up a target for us to practice on.”

Meg followed Hawk, Lynx tailing behind, as he led them to the same clearing in which Meg had fallen from her horse after being shot. She shivered despite the warm breeze, but neither men saw.

Stealth trotted over, swishing his black tail.

-I am glad/happy to see that you are healthy/well/healed Meg/FlameSoul,- the horse sent, licking Meg's hand.

-I am glad/happy to see you too Stealth/MoonRider.-

The stallion went over to stand opposite Lynx, who had slung himself in the low branches of the target tree.

“Alright,” Hawk started, helping Meg notch an arrow and guiding her hands on the bow. “All you have to do is try and aim the head of the arrow at the middle of the target, on that black dot.”

Taking as best aim as she could, she let the arrow loose and watched as it flew over Lynx's head, narrowly missing him.

Startled, Lynx cried out in surprise and tumbled out of a tree, where he landed promptly in a pile at the base.

Both Hawk and Meg doubled up, laughing, and by the time they could stand up again, tears were streaming down their cheeks.

“Try not to try and hit me next time,” Lynx growled, brushing the dirt off his dirt-smudged clothing.

“Try not to choose a tree which I am supposed to be aiming at, since this is my first time at using a bow and arrow,” Meg retorted, wiping her eyes and trying to stifle her giggles.

Lynx scowled and slung himself behind them, just above Stealth, who, in Meg's mind, and in Hawk's by the look of his face, was having trouble not laughing as well.

-The dark one is very amusing/funny- the horse laughed, or rather, neighed. Neither Hawk nor Meg commented at the name, but continued with the lesson.

By the time the sun had begun to set, Meg had hit the centre of the target eight times in a row.

“Come on then, let's match your skills with the might hunter of Gypsies Forest!” Hawk said, tossing an arrow and Meg's bow over to Lynx who caught them, and nodded, taking his place twenty paces away from the target. He aimed and let the arrow loose, smirking as it hit dead centre. Meg gulped. How would she beat that?

Wiping her sweating palms on her breeches, she walked twenty paces and notched her arrow, staring at the target for a moment before pulling the bowstring taught.

The arrow whizzed through the air, and Meg closed her eyes, expecting to hear the dull thud any moment. But it didn't come. Instead, there was a cracking sound, and when she looked, she whooped and jumped with glee; her arrow had split Lynx's straight down the middle, including the stone head.

“Nice shot sorceress,” Lynx said, forcing a lopsided smile.

“Come one you two, dinner should be ready now! I suppose I should warn you Meg. Mother will insist you have at least five servings of every dish, and we have a lot of dishes.”

“Oh, don't worry about me. From experience, my stomach can hold twice the normal capacity that's normal,” she said, patting her stomach, which growled, and set the brothers laughing.

“Goddess Tansin, my legs! I think my muscles have all seized up!”

-Hop/jump aboard then Meg/FlameSoul,- Stealth sent, and when Meg had mounted, bareback, they cantered back towards the bonfire and the smell of roasting venison.

“Hey! Wait for us!” Hawk called, running after the horse and rider.

Lynx remained behind, walking slowly, his eyes, now suddenly cold and emotionless, fixed on Meg. His mouth twisted into a sneer. “I shall see you in the morning, Meg.”

4 - Chapter III

I shall never eat again, Meg thought to herself as she rolled over onto her back. The sun had just begun to rise, and Meg, thinking on what had made her wake so early, realized that this was the perfect time to start on her Naming Gift to Mari.

Dressing quickly, Meg crept soundlessly from her tent and nearly bumped into Stealth, who had been chewing a patch of grass right outside her tent flap.

-What are you doing/being out here at this time?- she sent, doing up the clasp on her cloak.

-I could inquire/ask the same question/query to you. I was coming to see/listen/find if you were awake/risen yet.-

-And I was going to locate/find Hawk, Mari and Lynx's mother, Shira. As you can see/find, I am awake/risen,- Meg said absently, tying a red sash around her waist. The activities the night before had taken its dirty toll on her normal garments, so she had to wear a simple white dress with sandals and a sash, though Meg left the sandals, preferring to go barefoot.

-I saw/met her in her tent on my way here,- Stealth said hopefully, earning a scratch behind his ears.

-Thanks Stealth/MoonRider.-

Surprisingly, it wasn't hard to find Shira in the sea of tents, as hers had newly dyed and coloured cloths hanging outside, drying in the breeze.

"Shira?" Meg called.

"Meg dear, is that you? Oh do come in," came the reply, and when Meg entered, she found the mother seated on her pallet, chatting to two other women, one of them she recognized as Maple, Hasim's wife, the other, she did not know.

"Meg this is Maple and Isha. Maple, Isha, this is Aral, my children's friend."

Meg could see the look on Hawk's face if he heard his mother refer to him as a child, and had to swallow a giggle.

"Now, what brings you to my tent child, and so early in the morning, not that I mind of course. We were just sowing some winter clothing."

"Actually, I would like to learn how to sow myself. I never learnt it where I came from, and I want to make Mari something special for her Naming Gift," Meg said, aware that Isha's eyes widened slightly at the mention she didn't know how to sow.

"Well, you certainly have come to the right people," Shira said, smiling, and moved over to make room for Meg.

By the time the sun had fully come up, Meg had started the beginning of a rather lovely belt-scarf. Shira had provided with violet cloth and gold thread, and had helped her mark out a pattern to embroider. All in all, Meg felt quite proud of herself.

"Meg! MEG!" Hawk came running up to, clutching a stitch in his side, and stood there, panting and gasping for his breath for a whole minute, before he could deliver his message, which turned out to be from Hashin, to meet him in Mari's tent.

Thanking Hawk, Meg sped off, ducking into her own tent to hide the embroidery, then jogged up to Mari's tent, pausing a second to compose herself before going in.

Meg was surprised at the dimness of the tent. Normally, the flap was always thrown wide open, letting the sunlight stream in, but not, the flap was tied down, and Hasim and Mari sat waiting for her in the middle of the floor space.

"Welcome Meg, I am please you received my message in time." He motioned for her to sit next to Mari.

Both girls exchanged looks, and Meg could tell that her friend was as confused and excited as she was. "The time has come, and tonight, the Caravan will back the wagons, and we will begin the ride to the glaciers for your Naming Ceremonies. It is a sacred tradition, carried out since this Caravan came into existence. When we arrive at the glaciers, I will instruct you on what you must do, and until then, enjoy being a child, for after the ceremony is preformed, you will have entered adulthood."

Hasim's speech sent an uncooperative shiver down her spine.

"Now, Marietta, you may leave, but I would like a private word with you Meg."

Meg looked pleadingly at Mari as her friends stood, giving a sympathetic look that said 'sorry', and walking out, closing the tent flap once more as she left.

"Meg." Hasim's old face was lit by a single candle, and the lines that spread on his skin looked deeper.

"After this, you will have been accepted as a Gypsy. You will take on our responsibilities, our faith and our punishments if we are discovered by the Rulers. But you will also still carry your past identity as a sorceress, and you will have to go back to your original village. I have already spoken to Hawk, Lynx and Marietta about this matter, and they have agreed to take this journey with you. You will travel as Gypsies and take one of the wagons. The Elders also agree with this, and they say that once you have been named, you must go forth within a three-moon. Your responsibility is high, and so much risk is not always good for a young person, even one as talented as you. Do you want to take this on?"

Meg considered this, her insides clenching and unclenching. Hasim had spoken what she knew was the truth. She knew she had to return to the village, though to stay and continued her work as she had done before was hard to imagine, after all she had been through. She would make that decision when she came to it. Taking a deep breath, Meg calmed herself. "I will take on what you have said, and finish what I have started."

Hasim smiled. "I knew that would be your answer." He sighed, looked older than he was. "Take my blessing and those of your friends with you for the rest of your life, and good luck with you Naming." He stood, bowed and left with a sweep of his robes.

Meg was left in silence, before she stood and exited as well. Mari was waiting for her, twisting her small hands nervously.

"What happened? What did he say?" she asked, but Meg would not utter a word on the matter. Giving up, Mari returned to her tent to pack, and Meg to hers.

She pondered all that she had seen and heard in her time at the Caravan as she packed, folding her belongings -three spare changes of clothing, weapons, Mari's Naming Gift, Hawk's gift to her, and a few other objects- into Stealth's new saddlebags. Whistling as she came out again, she watched the other Gypsies chat and collect their possessions, tying them onto their own horses.

When Stealth trotted up to his mistress, he sensed her mood and kept quiet, standing still as Meg attached the saddlebags.

-You are/feel elsewhere/preoccupied,- the stallion said softly, braking the prolonged silence between the two.

Meg sighed, smoothing Stealth's smooth black mane that had been plaited like the other Gypsy horses.

-It is nothing/nothing,- she replied, shaking herself mentally and physically, mounting up and waiting.

Other did the same, a soon the whole Gypsy Caravan started to move forward. Cheer's erupted from the people around her as they exited Gypsy Forest, heading in the opposite direction of Anakoe forest, and cutting around Hergine village which accompanied Gypsy Forest.

The moon hung low by the time Gypsy Forest had faded into a tiny speck in the distance, and a cold wind swept over the grassless plains that the Caravan now travelled on.

Mari caught up to Meg on Sunny, and the friends were soon joined by Hawk on his pale grey gelding Blitzen, and Lynx on his own chestnut mare Tashi.

"Come on," Hawk said. He looked like he was enjoying himself. "Alec and his brother want to test how

fast Stealth is. Coming?"

Meg followed Hawk, trailed by Mari and Lynx, to where Alec and his brother Davyd stood, their mounts waiting quietly.

"So this is the infamous sorceress!" Alec cried. Like Hawk, he was jolly. Or maybe that's the effects of the tankard of ale he drank before we left, Meg thought, but grinned and nodded. "I first saw ye' when Hawk came walking into the camp wi' a black horse trainlin behind 'im. Slung across the horse's back ye' were."

Meg blushed, averting her eyes to the road ahead.

Hawk gripping Blitzen's reigns. "Ok, ready, set go!"

Both Alec and Davyd jumped ahead, their mounts springing into action, followed by Lynx, Mari and Hawk, and lastly Aral.

-Come on Stealth/MoonRider show them you acceleration/speed!- Meg sent, and Stealth thundered joyfully head, lengthening the distance between her and the others. "Each my dust!" she called over her shoulder, laughing.

"Alright! We forfeit!" Hawk's voice carried to her ears, and Meg turned Stealth around. She dodged Hawk's hand as he took a playful swipe at her. "You should know I would rather each mud than forfeit to a girl!" he yelled as he and Blitzen raced ahead of them.

"Cheater!" Meg called after him, and she and Stealth began to move again, catching up in no time at all. "I win! I win against a sorceress and her devil horse!" Hawk yelled, raising his fist in the air with triumph.

-Dump him,- Meg instructed Blitzen.

-Gladly/Happily- the horse sent back in good humour, rearing and shaking Hawk off, dropping him on a grassy patch by a stream.

"No fair!" Hawk complained. Sitting up, and glaring at Meg, then wagging his eyebrows.

"But I still win don't I? Oof!"

Meg jumped on him, and probed for his ticklish spot. She found it at the back of his neck, and began to tickle him furiously.

Tears of laughter were running down Hawk's face.

"Alright! Alright! ALRIGHT!" he gasped between breathing and laughing.

"Do you yield?"

"Yes, yes! I yield! Now stop it!"

Laughing, Meg let go of him. Both lay panting on the grass, Hawk on his elbows watching as the Caravan began to catch up to them.

"Have you ever thought what would have happened if no one had found you?" he asked suddenly, turning on his side so he could see Meg's face.

"Yes," she said softly. "I wouldn't be here today."

Hawk smiled, reaching up to brush a strand of her hair behind her ear. His hand was calloused, yet warm. Why am I thinking of his hands? Meg thought, and looked away, watching the Caravan to give herself something to do.

Hawk gently took her chin and turned her head. There was a moments silence as Hawk looked into her emerald eyes, and she into his hazel ones.

"You shouldn't have ridden off like that! Mother's been worried!"

Lynx rode up, so suddenly, he could have just appeared out of the air. Meg and Hawk sprang apart, startled.

"Why would mother worry? It's not as if I never did it before," Hawk retorted, stretching and getting to his feet.

Meg followed suit, but remained silent. If Lynx had noticed anything, he made no sign of it.

"Come on," Lynx said, holding out Stealth's and Blitzen's reigns.

Mounting Stealth, Meg asked, -You were watching/looking I suppose/guess,-
-I was actually speaking/talking/chatting with Blitzen/SnowDancer,- the horse sent back, sounding amused. Meg accepted his story, and didn't harp on it.
The threesome and their horses waited by the stream as one by one, the Gypsy wagons pulled up, and riders dismounted all around.

Shira didn't seem worried, and Meg wondered what Lynx had really been doing. She and Hawk had been so close...

"We'll stop here for the night," one of the Elders called out from his wagon. Judging by his smooth voice, Meg guessed he was the one Hawk had said was Eel. When she thought about it, it was funny how alike the Gypsies were to their Soul names.

That night, there was dancing and music as the first snowflakes fell. Winter had truly begun.

"Would our sorceress grace us with a song from her homeland?" Lynx asked, handing her a harp. Meg nodded, settling herself down amongst the musicians, consisting of Hawk on the fiddle, Lynx on the lute, Alec on the flute and Leon, yet another friend of Hawk and Mari's, on the pipes.

Meg noticed that throughout the night Leon and Mari kept glancing and smiling each other, and Meg drew to the notion that Leon and Mari were sweethearts. She kept this to herself. Mari's love life was none of her business.

Meg thought back. Her home village... no, she had long ago given up her identity from that time. Her mind drifted further forward to the place where she had learned to control her magic, and she began softly, a ballad, so much like her past in some words;

"All she ever wanted was freedom
To fly on high
With wings of silver
And a soul of gold

"All she ever wanted was love
To love someone
And have them love her back
An eternity together

"All she ever wanted was light
To hide from the darkness
And the jumping shadows
From an endless tunnel of doom and death"

Lynx picked up the sad tune, plucking a melancholy harmony.
The song went on for eleven more verses, until the final one came.

"All she ever wanted was gone
Lost forever
In the dark
In the depths
Without a trace
Without a gift
Leaving her alone
Leaving her

Alone
Alone..."

Her voice faded, and a cheer went up from the Gypsies, and Meg smiled, though her heart was heavy. The song always had that effect on her, but it was her favourite. Biddings of farewell followed her to her make-shift tent, and without getting undressed, she lay down on her pallet, and fell into the rivers of dreamless sleep.

The next days of travel passed in a blur for Meg, too tired to do anything but ride, eat and what was required of her. She had finished Mari's She felt drained of all strength. When she told Hawk this, his face creased in worry.

"You should see Hasim, or at least Mari," he argued, but Meg kept on refusing, until on the last night she relented, and allowed Mari to see her in her tent.

Mari could find nothing physically wrong with Meg. "I think the journey is just taking its toll on you," was all she could say. "If I transferred some of my power into you, would you accept it?"

Meg nodded, partly because she would hate to sit through the lecture Hawk would give her about 'being ignorant' and 'too brave' for her own good, and partly because she felt too terrible to protest.

Mari rested a soft hand on Meg's forehead, and Meg let out a sigh of relief as coolness flooded her body, replacing the fatigue with energy, and, restlessness.

"I have to walk around, I can't just lay here!" Meg protested when Mari suggested she should sleep.

"No," Mari replied, her voice firm. "You must restore yourself to your full strength. Sleep, I will take care of your duties."

Her voice echoed in Meg's head, the command of sleep seemingly taking over her senses.

The rivers of sleep trickled through Meg's mind, and she found herself sleeping, deaf and numb to the world around her.

"We're here! We're here!"

Meg was jolted awake, startled to find herself in a wagon, and that the sun was halfway across the sky.

"Did I sleep that long?" she asked, amazed, but no longer tired and washed out. She felt alive again!

Not that she was ever dead.

"We're here!" Mari repeated, popping her head into the wagon, exclaiming, "Meg, we've finally made it to the glaciers! Come and look! Don't forget the cloak," before popping out again.

Meg looked beside her, shrugging on a fur-lined cloak that had been neatly folded on the floor next to her pallet. As she stepped out from the wagon, she pulled it tighter around her body, shivering as the chilly wind bit into her skin, but it was an exhilarating feeling.

"It's like a Land of Ice!" Meg yelled to Hawk, who was turning cartwheels in the snow, laughing.

"It isn't it? Maybe that's what we shall call this place; the Land of Ice! Has a nice ring to it too."

Meg laughed, scooping up some snow and throwing it at Hawk.

"And so the journey to the Glaciers ends," Hasim's voice carried from the lead wagon. "We have arrived!"

And so the Gypsies called into the air, amid their laughter and songs, "We have arrived!"

5 - Chapter IV

Meg sat inside Hasim's wagon, holding Mari's hand with a firm grip. She could feel the other girl shaking. Hasim sat opposite them, his back against the end of the wagon, though he was nearly hidden behind a large trunk. What was inside, Meg had yet to find out.

"As I had said in Gypsies Forest, I shall instruct you in the naming, which takes place tonight, when the full moon will be high into the night sky and the Sacred Pool in which the ceremony is preformed is at its calmest. In this trunk are two dresses, both to be worn from now until the next midnight. Marietta, your dress has been passed down through each of your own family lines for generations, as the tradition hold. Meg, my wife, Maple, has taken them time to make you a dress, and hopefully, if you decide to come back to our Caravan, it will begin its journey from there. Please meet me by the bonfire at midnight." Hasim inclined his head, stood, and swept out of the wagon, descending the steps gracefully, before turning out of sight.

Meg and Mari looked at each other, and it was a while before either of them dared to move towards the trunk.

With trembling hands, they lifted the lid.

"I'll freeze in this!" Mari exclaimed, holding up the grey-blue dress to her front.

Meg burst into a fit of giggles, which became full laughter as she rolled about the floor of the wagon.

Mari coloured, grinning. "Oh, wait till you see yours!"

Meg stopped laughing abruptly and Mari showed the dress. Meg blanched, looking utterly dismayed.

What Mari held up could hardly be classified as a dress. Both girls muttering, they changed into the dresses, looking at themselves in the full-size beryl-glass.

"I look like an overly-large snowflake," Mari commented dryly, but Meg was dumb with horror at her own dress; the crimson silk fell to the floor in graceful fold, but the back came down extremely low, as did the front. The silk was decorated with gold thread on about the waist, hem, and cut off sleeves.

Mar whistled. "I'm impressed with old Maple." Looking down at her own dress, Mari sighed enviously. It was a simple grey-blue silk dress, but the silk, unlike Meg's, was near to becoming lace-like.

Meg swiped at Mari. "Come on. Grab a cloak and let's go."

When both had wrapped themselves in furs, hey stepped out the wagon, to be greeted with applause and whistles.

Mari's face became darker than Meg's hair are a particularly loud whistle came from Leon, who was grinning and clapping like and idiot. Meg watched as Mari went shyly over to Leon, giving him a small kiss on the lips, before both disappeared. Leaving her alone. Damn Mari for leaving, Meg thought.

"Meg!" Lynx called, pushing his way through the people to come up beside her. "You look beautiful!" he said, peeling back the furs.

"Thanks," Meg replied, huddling deeper into the warmth.

"Come on, I have something to show you," Lynx said, gripping her hands and pulling Meg into the snow, towards the glaciers. She laughed, following.

From a distance, cloaked in shadow, Hawk watched with an ugly expression on his face as the two slipped away.

"Oh Lynx, it's beautiful," Meg breathed, huddled in Lynx's arms. She shivered as the cold bit through

the cloak, and her breathe came in iced clouds.

Looking down at the clear glacier, everything was silent.

Lynx smiled. "I thought you'd like to see it. Every time we come here, I always slip away before the Naming starts, and I sit here for hours, just watching the ice. Sometimes, if the moon is late to rise, I can catch it behind the largest piece, like now."

Luminous light shone through the clear chunk of ice, bathing them in eerie light.

Bending over, Lynx pressed his lips to Meg's neck, and the kiss lingered there as he moved to her cheek, and then to her eyelids, and then to her lips. Turning Meg around, he held her tight, lips pressed against hers.

"I leave tomorrow," Meg whispered, laying her head on his chest, feeling his warm breathe on her neck. "And that is why I am coming with you," he whispered back, holding her close again.

"Where is she?" Hawk asked pacing around and around the bonfire. The moon was almost centre in the sky, and still Meg had not come. And now Lynx was missing, and only Hawk knew where he had gone. With Meg.

The murmuring of apologies drew Hawk's attention as Meg hurried up to the fire, depositing her cloak next to Mari, who stood shivering, trying to draw in the fire's warmth.

"Your late," Mari growled, and Meg replied lowly, glancing at Hawk.

Hawk kept his face impassive, and concentrated on Hasim, who had come silently towards to the two girls.

"It is time," Hasim said gravely, beckoning Mari forward.

Hawk watched as his sister walk into the snow-covered forest, followed by Hasim, and was hardly aware of Lynx coming to stand beside him, until he spoke.

"Our little sisters growing up," Lynx sighed.

"Where were you?" Hawk asked coldly, watching the place where the two had entered.

"I was with Meg, down by the glaciers, showing her the sights," Lynx replied, equally as cold, though the edges of his mouth lifted into a smile.

Hawk was conscious of Meg's eyes on him, but he kept his face still, resisting the urge to turn and face her. "You seem to have taken quite an interest in her," he mused.

Lynx laughed softly. "And why shouldn't I? She's a beautiful young girl, soon to be woman. What is it to you?"

The silence that followed seemed to last for an eternity. The Gypsies stood still, the only movement that of the dancing flames of the bonfire.

Meg stood, shivering and waiting, dreading her turn.

Branches moved, and a sodden, quivering Mari stepped from the trees, greeted with cloaks and hot food and drink.

"What is your Name? What is your Name?" Gypsies called, clambering around her.

"My- my- my-" Mari stuttered, shaking from cold violently. "My- my name- is- is- Heron. My name is Heron."

Cheering erupted.

"Meg, it is time," a voice spoke quietly in her ear, and Meg followed Hasim into the forest, unnoticed by anyone, not sparing a glance back as the forest closed around her.

Hurrying to keep up, Meg walked quickly, the snow numbing her bare feet and skin, a slight wind whipping her hair around her face.

-Stop.-

Hasim stood at the edge of a pool, its waters eerily black and still. The full moon was reflected on its glassy surface, a luminous globe of silver.

-We must not speak like mortals in such a place. Speak as you would to Stealth/MoonRider,- Hasim sent.

Meg, startled, almost cried out, but caught herself in time. -I shall remember WiseHeart,- she replied, and was surprised at Hasim's Mind-Name.

-Step into the water Meg/FlameSoul,- Hasim commanded, and Meg could do nothing but obey, lowering herself into the pool.

She was unaware of Hasim's low chanting, as the coldness struck her full on, knocking the breathe from her, numbing her and making her sink into the water.

Full of fear, Meg tried to swim up, but found she was unable to move. She was trapped in a water prison. The world around her was silent and black, and it seemed an age that she had been falling. Would she never hit the bottom?

A vision flashed past her closed eyes; a vision of a fireball, and the fireball shaping itself into something with wings...

She concentrated harder, and found that she could make the shape out. The creature spread its crimson wings, flying towards her, green eyes flashing-

The vision ended, and Meg found herself able to move, lungs aching for air.

Fumbling with numbness, she slowly kicked her way towards what she hoped was the surface - she had lost all sense of direction in that endless blackness.

Braking the surface, Meg drew in a shuddering breathe, and one look at Hasim told her that he had seen her vision.

-You may go now,- he said calmly.

Shaking with cold and dripping with water, Meg dragged herself from the pool, and stumbled blindly through the forest, almost falling head-first into the snow as she burst through the trees into the open. She was greeted like Mari, given warmth and food, but nothing could warm her, and she refused to eat anything. How could she after what she had seen?

Lynx hurried over, bundling Meg into his warm arms. Looking over his shoulder, Meg could see Mari leaning against a grinning Leon, half asleep.

The familiar question rang once more from the Gypsies.

"What is you Name? What is your Name?"

Meg took a gulp of air, whispering into Lynx's ear.

Lynx blanched. "Her name is Dragon."

Murmuring took over the Caravan, and Leon called out from his place, "Hasim is it true? Is Meg's Soul Name Dragon?"

A weary Hasim brushed the snow from his white hair as he came through the forest towards the bonfire. He nodded.

"Meg," Hasim said, turning to her. "You are now not only a sorceress. You are Meg the Sorceress and Gypsy. Now, sleep. Your journey begins tomorrow."

"Not before the gifts are presented!" Davyd said jokingly, making Meg smile.

"Lynx, in Stealth's saddlebags, there is a scarf. Can you get it?"

Lynx nodded, sitting her down next to Maria and Leon before pushing his way towards Stealth, who still wore his saddlebags. Rummaging in them, he pulled out the waist-scarf she had made, presenting it to Mari.

"Oh Meg, it's beautiful," Mari sighed, running her hands softly over the stitching. "Your present is out in the open."

After being gathered into Lynx's arms, and Mari into Leon's, they made their way towards where the

horses were.

“Oh Mari, she’s beautiful!” Meg gasped, holding back tears. Tethered to Stealth was a white-grey mare.

-Hello/Greetings mistress,- the horse sent. -I am Pilgrim/LoneMoon.-

-Hello/Greetings Pilgrim/LoneMoon. I am Meg/FlameSoul.-

“Thankyou Mari, thank you thank you,” she breathed, and a tear slid down her cheek.

“I knew you couldn’t ride Stealth all the time, what with such a journey planned by fate. The mare will carry you when Stealth is tired-”

-When have I ever been tired/weary/exhausted?- Stealth sent indignantly.

“-and she looked so lonely with no owner, being a spare for the other Gypsies. I hope you like her.”

Mari began stroking Sunny, who had trotted up for attention.

“I adore her,” Meg declared. “Now, take me back. I feel like I could fall asleep at any moment,” and she did, still in Lynx’s arms.
