

TWELVE YEARS AGO:

She never suspected magic would be the death of her.

Magic—which had always shivered in her veins, sparked on her fingertips, sang all around her—was now a wheezing breath.

And it was going to get them killed.

Skeletal trees pressed close on every side, clutching at her like threatening strangers.

The sorceress staggered forward, gulping the chill night air, her precious bundle pulling on her aching arms. Her teeth chattered, as frigid winds slipped cruel fingers through the thin fabric of her dress.

Shadowy forest walls loomed. Beseeching black branches reached skyward.

Her sense of direction deserted her, leaving only 'away'. Away from the hunter's angry thoughts, away from the single-minded hounds.

She concentrated on sensing the dogs behind her, though it hurt, forcing her weary mind to focus. Could she send a confusion of messages to the lead hounds?

I should make them attack each other. Dark temptations beckoned. *Or overwhelm their handlers.*

She shuddered, appalled.

How can I consider deliberately hurting another living creature?

She closed her eyes, ignoring the gale madly whipping her long hair, and *pushed*.

Magic oozed forth... a pale green trickle of power. Slow... thick... methodical as frozen sap—where it usually surged warm and flowing, like melted butter.

With fierce urgency, she sent its sinuous grace twisting through the trees in search of its target. Her spell landed, pressing the bewildered dogs to overlook her scent, sending them chasing false trails instead.

It bought time, and she'd need every precious second.

Glowering clouds overhead held the faint light from the first moon tight in their billowy embrace. Frustrated, she curled the toes of her shoeless feet, as she squinted, trying to decipher a path, wishing the second moon would hurry and rise.

Still, plunging blindly into the night, her mental distress outweighed the physical.

Days long past, achingly distant yet hauntingly close, recalled her apprentice training. Huddling in front of the fireplace with other Novices, on long winter evenings at the Citadel in Galahar. Scaring each other with whispered tales of Healer Empaths who'd gone into battle. Wide-eyed insinuations, sharing rumors of how those wizards suffered anguish, even death, alongside their patients.

How would it feel to endure their pain? To share their last gasp for air? To experience their lives slowly fading from my consciousness?

To imagine such things... worse, to seriously consider them, went against everything she thought she believed.

A brutal protectiveness filled her. She hugged her sleeping youngling tighter, shocked by the intensity of her feelings. She'd never loved anyone as deeply... not even his father.

I'd do anything to save him. She faltered, imagining her brother's voice murmuring a censorious reply... *Anything?*

... But my son... What can I do? My beautiful boy... There must be something... everything hurts... so tired... can't think... Shards, I need to rest...

Fatigue ate at her remaining strength.

She staggered through the unfamiliar woodlands, shaking with cold, barely feeling the tattered hem of her dress dripping icy trickles atop her bloody footsteps.

Though it was her they wanted, she sensed her newborn son's potential. Compared to him, she was a spluttering candle beside a blazing bonfire.

Their hunters seemed relentless. Would they murder her youngling, or wait to execute him when he came into his power? Did it matter? Either way, they were both dead if she didn't lose the trackers.

I'm not important, but I must hide him from them.

Branches clutched at her, scratching her face and arms as she pushed deeper

into the dark forest. Except for the boy, it would almost be a relief to be hunted openly. She'd lived in fear of discovery for months.

A woman's sudden cry pierced her mind, cutting through her fragile protections, making her wince. Startled, she instinctively turned towards the source.

[The problem with being an Empath,] she whispered in her sleeping son's thoughts, *[is that feeling their misery, you're drawn to fix the hurt of others.]*

Yet this pain was familiar.

She stretched her senses, scanning the minds hovering about the bed. The attitudes of those around the woman made it clear she was someone important. With her own youngling only hours old, she recognized the pangs of an imminent birthing.

Blessed saints and crystal shards! It's their Queen... it's Amabel!

A weird, absurd, unthinkable idea leapt fully formed into her mind.

Torn by indecision, she glanced down at her boy. Her mouth tightened, and she headed towards the source of the commotion.

A short time later, she broke out of the underbrush onto a thoroughfare. Cautiously opening her mind, she could sense a large population in the distance, and the Queen's women reaching to her from the opposite direction.

She stood at the crossroads, hopping from foot to foot, wiggling her toes to warm them. *What is the point of being a sorceress, if I don't even have enough strength to cast a warming spell?*

Sensing her uneasiness, he awoke. He stared up at her. His deep blue eyes held too much wisdom for a newborn. She felt his untrained mind trying to reach out and ease her troubled spirit.

[You're less than a day old, and already a telepath!] Pride filled her. *[It's rare for any to manifest before their eleventh Name Day.]*

She marveled at the power already evident in him. *HE* was all that mattered.

[You have a powerful gift.] She frowned, sensing his mind reaching out again, disturbed by the turmoil in hers.

[Much too powerful. You won't have the years of safety another, weaker wizard might. To hide, you must become one of them. You cannot frighten them. I'll do the best I can to suppress your abilities, but you're going to be so strong... nothing I do will

contain you altogether.]

She placed her hand on his small head and channeled her power into building a wall in his mind. Her energy was dangerously low, but this was important. It was easier than her recent *sending*, because of their existing connection.

The faint green glow of her magic surrounded his head. His eyes widened. He cooed, gurgling in delight.

Picturing a thick, sturdy barrier surrounding his glowing blue core, a stone wall faded in and out, until she forced it into permanence. The boy made fussy little sounds of protest.

The spell devoured her small store of strength. She sank to the road before she dropped her youngling. Cradling him, she *sent* soothing.

[It'll hold for a few years before it dissolves. By then, you should have learned what they fear. I only hope it's enough to hide what you are.] She forced a smile. *[Perhaps rescue will arrive before then, and hiding won't be necessary.]*

He grew increasingly agitated at being cut off from her. Knowing it was unwise, but unable to stand his distress, she chipped a minor breach into the wall.

She continued speaking mind-to-mind, knowing he couldn't understand her words. Hoping he'd absorb the emotion. There was so much she wanted him to know about his father...

As their bond leaked through the tiny opening, the youngling quieted.

Every wizard was precious, yet her son's strength made him unique. The Kingdom of Galahar needed him.

Aware she was justifying unthinkable actions, she gathered her strength, and turned towards the castle.

Afterwards, as she floated down, her eyes remained fastened on the dim light from the tower window overhead. She waved her hand, releasing the women from her thrall. They'd be on their feet before becoming fully aware and remember nothing.

Glancing down at the sleeping prince in her arms, she spared a humorless smile. *I wonder what the midwife would think of the baby's curly hair. Perhaps she wouldn't notice.*

Though it plagued her remaining vitality, her feet didn't touch the ground until she'd floated a league from the fortress. She landed cat-soft on the trail she intended the hunters to follow. The important thing was to lead them away.

Part of the released energy snapped back to her. Aided by the brief rest she'd managed, she even ran a short distance with renewed strength. As she scrambled deeper into the forest, she glanced down at the sleeping youngling.

Reminding herself she'd had no choice didn't relieve her guilt. The weight of the small body seemed to grow heavier. Her arms trembled as she fought not to drop him.

Hours later, and miles southwest, the first moon was below the horizon and the second moon waned. A soft lightening of the night from black to charcoal hinted at the rising sun's approach. Still, she scrambled through the thinning forest.

Roots, hidden in the tangled grass, snagged her long skirts, tripping her frozen feet. She stumbled often, almost falling. The noise of her passage caused the woodlands to quiet, though once or twice she frightened something that scrambled away into the underbrush. Anything being afraid of her seemed laughable... if she'd had the energy to waste on a laugh.

A callous wind flirted with her hair, caressing her face like a brutal lover. Gasping for breath, the sorceress sank to the ground at the base of a large spreading tree to catch her breath. She placed the small still body beside her, wiping her hands on her skirts.

Her head fell back against the trunk. She jerked forward before her traitorous eyes could close. *I can't sleep.*

Giving herself a shake, she sat up straighter. *There's no time!*

She stared at the silent bundle laying beside her. *Shards. I wish I'd known...*

An echo of baying hounds cut her regrets short. She wrenched her head around with a gasp.

The dark night hadn't slowed them as much as she'd hoped. Would they never stop? She dragged herself to her feet, snatched up the baby, and staggered onward, exhausted, and cursing her growing infirmity.

As the excited dogs drew closer, she panicked. Wild-eyed, she reached for the

hounds' minds... to confuse them... throw them off the track again.

It didn't work.

Noses locked on her scent, they ignored her faint buzzing in their heads.

With a frustrated cry, she stumbled into a shambling run. Spots danced before her eyes.

Her only choice was to turn and fight, but weak as she was, it would be a brief skirmish. She needed her back against a tree or bluff, so they couldn't surround her.

A desperate search for somewhere to make a stand, ended when the trail suddenly widened. But there was no clearing.

The land dropped away in a sheer cliff. She'd been hearing the pounding of waves against the rocks below, without noticing it.

A proximate howl jerked her around. The dogs were almost upon her.

If she didn't try something—anything—it would be too late. This close to exhaustion, such efforts might burn out her abilities.

It didn't matter.

She had no choice.

Clasping the still infant to her chest, she dug deep into reserves she'd never dared tap. Her sluggish heels lifted. Her toes dragged across the grass to the rim of the cliff. For a moment she hovered there, then she hung in the open air.

The descent was slow, too slow. Afraid to rush in case she lost that fragile hold on her residual power, she couldn't help picturing energy pouring from a jug. Farther and farther, the vessel tipped. Soon it would be empty.

Only a little further...

Behind her, dogs broke into the clearing. They ran back and forth along the cliff's edge, baying their outrage at their prey's escape. One backed up, preparing to run and leap, but the arriving men grabbed it before it made that fatal mistake.

"The witch FLIES!"

"If she escapes, no one will be safe!"

She heard their cries, knew they were close, but dared move no faster. She concentrated on floating to safety.

Just a bit further...

A hard thud jolted her back.

Agony radiated through her chest.

She cried out, her eyes widening in alarm. Staring down in shock, she discovered an arrow's tip sticking out of her ribs. The arrow missed her heart but punctured a lung.

Every breath hurt.

Warm fluid trickled down the curve of her spine.

Her control slipped. She plummeted towards the jagged rocks.

Desperately, she twisted in midair, landing on her back, shattering bones and forcing the arrow through her.

Winded and gasping for air, her scream of anguish became a breathless groan. Broken and bleeding, she held the lifeless bundle against her chest.

In those final seconds, the sorceress threw her thoughts outward. As the frigid water lifted their bodies, pulling them into its relentless embrace, she poured her remaining strength into a desperate call.

It was the strongest *sending* she'd ever attempted...

Her mind fled her dying body, surging over forests, crossing rivers, faster than the wind. Feeling her life force dissipating, she thrust forward with her final gasp of life...

... and in Galahar, she touched her twin's mind... felt his startled response.
[Viola?]

[My son...] She mouthed...

As everything went black, she *touched* her boy's mind, in the castle. For an instant, she saw his blue eyes fly wide in distress and he began to cry. She longed to comfort him... but it was too late.

The dark monk walked to the cliff edge alone. Waves crashed over the barren stone below, washing the broken bodies out to sea. Moonlight gleamed off his shaved head as he watched the water claim the witch.

The swaddled blanket sank from view.

It's a shame about the baby, of course. A son, the midwife said.

He understood abominations often had normal offspring. He would have taken responsibility for raising the boy to abhor his mother.

An obligation he'd have enjoyed.

The men, clumped together on one side, annoyed him with their restless murmuring. *Cowards. If I managed the hunt at my age, they should have no complaints. Why, without my persistence, they'd have given up their pursuit, allowing her to escape.*

It was his command that let the arrow fly.

"We have cleansed the abomination." He announced, turning to face them. "Our duty is done. All Praise."

"... all praise..." Their obedient reply was subdued, but he ignored them, busy rehearsing his version of events for his superiors. If managed correctly, this should bolster his stalled career nicely.