

A snowy mountain peak with a brightly lit building at the top, set against a sunset sky with a star trail.

*A Magician's Duty*

**JOSHUA AASGAARD**



# **A Magician's Duty**

by

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## Chapter One

“Om, it’s time to come in!”

“Just one more row, and I’ll be in.” she called back. Om gave Lucy-Anna a pet on the neck, and led her to the last of fifty rows being prepared for the autumn planting season. *Good girl*, Om communicated to her favorite *volatilis equus*. She had raised Lucy-Anna since she was a hatchling. As she wiped sweat from her forehead, she thought sadly how she’d miss being able to do chores like this. Om put her hands behind her head and sighed. Lucy-Anna

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stretched her neck up to Om's face to return affection.

“Om, get in here. Now! Your stew is getting cold,” her mom said with the tone of the Empress' executioner.

Om removed Lucy-Anna's saddle, pulled the cord of the raised showering device, and let Lucy-Anna enjoy the sun-warmed water wash the sweat, dirt, and loamy soil from her wings and claws.

“Coming,” Om yelled as she ran all the way from the barn to main ranch house. Before entering, she stopped, looked at the purple orange sunset, and caught her breath. After three deep breaths, she felt calm and ready to face her mother.

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Heat. Bend. Pull. Heat. Bend Pull. Heat. Bend. Pull. Loop. Loop. Roland started to drift off in his imagination as he continued to practice making loops with the silver—making as intricate a design as he was capable. He looked at the drawing of the pendant he was creating, looked back at the pendant, looked at the pool of silver, and the thin intricate loops as they cooled in place. He knew he could do better, as Master Ira had taught him. Still his mind was always thinking of far off lands and other Masters and the chance to show his skill, not with silver, but with gold. He also felt drawn to the dark green emeralds that came from the mountain forests of Everwood. Something was calling him.

“Roland, please finish up in here. Then, come see me. We need to talk.” Master Ira turned, and hobbled out of the room, holding tightly to his cane. Click, shuffle, click, shuffle,

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click, shuffle in a decrescendo out of the room.

Roland took all his scrapings and put them in the Extras Box, grabbed two almost-finished designs and gently dropped them into a purple velvet pouch. He then stacked the artwork for the designed jewelry, and folded it neatly. Within three minutes he was finished. He ducked through the low door, and said, “Yes, Master. I’m here.”

“Roland, I’m really proud of you. I know you weren’t expecting to be a journeyman until next Spring, but you’ve already learned more than I’ve taught you. While the guild requires you to work as a journeyman under at least one more master, I believe you are far better than I.” Master Ira then burst into a fit of coughing, his eyes red and watering.

After clearing his throat a couple times,

he continued, “Roland, your care and daily practice has paid off. Even when you daydream while you work, you maintain an attention to detail that sets you apart from an ordinary silversmith or goldsmith. I’m giving you this letter to verify your journeyman status. You may stay here until Spring if you like, or you may take your 75 gold crowns, and make the trip before Winter arrives.”

The old Master, leaned over and grabbed a worn journeyman’s travel pack. “Roland, I’m recommending you to Master DeWeye. He’s the best there is with gold, but he keeps a low profile, so you may not find his shop easily. I’ve included a map to get you there. I’ve also recommended you to the Faeries Traveling Association to help a young faerie earn his or her wings on your long trip to Master Deweye. Here’s a map first to the Faerie camp, then to the village where Master Deweye lives.

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“Thank you, Master Ira,” Roland said, sitting up straight, eyes brightening, and smiling widely. “I will show the world how great a teacher you are, Master Ira. I will serve my journeyman time well, and make you proud.”

“That you will, I’m sure, Roland. Think on the map. Commit it to memory so that no enemy can steal it and discover our location or that of Master Deweye. The roads won’t be safe. You must stop first at Faerie Camp for a guide, an Unwinged guide,” putting an emphasis on *unwinged*.

“Yes, Master Ira.” Although he’d been told numerous times to call the friendly silversmith “Ira,” Roland always held onto the courteous and formal way of speaking his grandfather had taught him. Grandfather said to only be familiar and informal with the person

or faerie you intended to marry. Roland always remembered and honored his grandfather's wish. As a male, he could never expect wings or to become a citizen faerie. He'd be human with faerie blood, as his father, grandfather, and great grandfather had been. But Roland intended to be the most renowned silversmith (or if fortune met him, goldsmith) in the Elise's Empire.

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“Om, I know you love plowing, tending the volatilis equuss, and talking with our insect friends, but you're getting of age. It's time for you to go to first circle school, and prepare to take your place serving at the Caring Doe Empire. Your first duty will be at the old fishing village. First circle starts in two weeks, so I want you to get prepared. That means, heads

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up, shoulders back, and looking forward to the joy of Service.”

Om slumped over, made a big pout face, then looked up. Her frown turned to a smirk. Then she started laughing and laughing. Her mom's straight-forward approach was the L'ett family way. Her family had served the empire for sixteen generations, at all levels, and her mother had served as Left Hand of the Empress. When her mom, saw Om's expression, she remembered Om as a four year old, red-head with amazing sky-blue eyes encircled in a golden ring. So little and yet so much had changed. The fresh smell of Om's lavender soap perfumed skin wafted in the air.

The Left Hand helps the Empress balance her responsibilities to the empire with her personal and emotional growth. The Left Hand lends multiple perspectives to the Empress

and helps the Empress maintain a sense of love and enjoyment toward her family as well as her difficult responsibilities. For the last four generations, the Left Hand, kept the important stories of the empire. The Left Hand also helped an Empress accept decisions that would cause death of some for the benefit of others. The Left Hand helped the Empress process the potential results of any given action. Om didn't love the idea of having to serve as a consoler or a co-responsible bringer of non-peace. Om preferred to work the land, keep things in balance, and learn from the hive perspective of the bees and insects she kept meeting. She loved the feeling of the communication with a hive in its mutuality and individuality. She didn't want to deal with issues of power, fighting over territory, or anything at all to do with the accounting and taxes that took up so much of the "family's" time. In short, Om wanted to play and learn, not work or serve.

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Om longed for great granny's position: Ranch tender. Om loved sticking her hand into the rich loamy soil. She loved watching crops, plants, and flowers grow, most especially irises. She loved coaxing butterflies and bees into pollinating the really delicious maidenberry groves. It was easy to get them to pollinate flowers and wheat crops, but for some reason which they hadn't yet communicated, her friends were hesitant to go to the maidenberry trees. Some seasons there'd be less than one barrel full.

And Om knew how happy maidenberry brandy made her uncles, and grandfathers. Putting the berries and sweeteners into the barrels made her back ache but there was something about all the complex smells that made her cheeks flush and a smile rise to her face.



“Om, I want you to start preparing yourself for your trip. You will need due care. You will be able to take Lucy with you, but she won’t be able to stay in the fishing village. You’ll have to board her with the faeries before you take the last leg of your journey. You shouldn’t need a faerie guard escort, so turn one down if it’s offered.”

“Yes, Mother.” Om twisted a curly piece of her coppery hair around her right index finger and stared out the window at the afterglow of the sleeping sun.

Her mother reached up to the cabinet above the hearth. On her tip-toes she closed her eyes and felt for a lever. With clunky-clink, a hidden panel opened. Her mother grabbed a purple velvet pouch. Sitting down, her mother said, “There’s one more thing. Along the path

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to Ors Hue Lake, you'll 'accidentally' run into an acolyte magician/thief/assassin named Tomi. She's still apprenticing with one of our operatives. She hasn't made the choice for the Darkness or the Light yet. I'd like you to show her some of the benefits of the Light. I'd like her to accidentally see you talking with the insects in order to help or heal. Make sure she identifies her true thoughts to you before you teach her."

Om's mom opened the pouch, pulled out what seemed to be over-sized picture cards which had been wrapped in a dark purple silk. She continued, "Om, remember this. If you find that she's inclined to the light, she'll be your secret project over the winter. At the same time, give full respect to the elders on the council, but don't be afraid to speak up when it comes to protecting the food stores for the winter. We've foreseen a bad event. It's imperative that you

use your skills to increase the fish caught late in season. You must also insure that the storage areas for the village are safe and secure. I trust you, Om. You are wise for a young woman of 14, and many will dislike that such a young adult as you is on the council. Remind them that you are D'Let, and Gifted. Also, talk to Lady Plaegrund about methods of guiding the Council through gentle persuasive techniques. You will learn much from her.”

“You will also do your best in learning circle. I expect you to take away from it additional ways to learn and understand things. The basics you’ve known for years.” She re-wrapped the cards, took some herbs from the jars laying on the table, added them to the pouch. Then reaching behind into her white and copper cascading hair, she pulled a golden hair pin that had a large emerald volatilis equus at it’s top. She handed the intricately looped

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jewelry to Om. “This is yours now.” Om had seen it a few times on her mom, even though it was usually hidden beneath a bun and covered by spans and spans of hair that if not put-up would reach 12 hands beyond her feet.

“Now, I expect you to apply what you know to the knowledge the teachers are passing. While you are already a reasonable mage in your own right, remember always to tie positive intentions and thoughts of successful results with any of the elemental magic you begin. Remember, these intentions when gathering herbs, mushrooms, and spices for any spells or vision quests.” Her mom stopped, leaned forward to Om.

Looking deep into Om's piercing golden-ringed, sky-blue eyes, she whispered, “This is even more important in your dealings with Tomi. She hasn't decided on Light or Dark.

Remember this, and let your Light shine around her. If she chooses Light, aid her. If she doesn't, and this is very likely, make sure she leaves you feeling well and positive about the Light. We have allies among those of the Dark, and that's my second choice. If she chooses the Dark, we aim to make her our friend and ally. If she chooses the Light, she'll become our family and fellow mage."

Her mother stopped talking, got up, and walked up behind Om, placed her hand gently on Om's cheek and whispered, "Know always that I love you. All good will flow your way as long as you ride the white lights and avoid entanglements in the grey. Darkness can work for the light. But those who play in the grey rainbows of uncertainty and chaos find it difficult to learn from mistakes. I love you, Om." She paused. Her mother's strong demeanor changed dramatically into the mother

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who was looking at her new born baby, “I’m scared. I’m going to miss my little girl.” Her mother turned, wiping the corner of her right eye as she left the room.

Om thought about her love for her mom. She’d always been easy to talk to, but lately she was so distant. Mom was constantly worried about this and that, from the mundane day-to-day stuff to problems of the empire and the decline in civility everywhere. Om knew it was a little of everything. Then she heard it. Coughing, coughing, and more coughing came from the direction of the master bedroom. It was dad. It seemed as if dad had been ill for weeks. Again, dad had spent all day in the bedroom, refusing to allow any light in.

She decided to enter his room. She tiptoed into the room. “Dad,” she whispered.

A bright smile came to his face. His eyes widened, “Yes, sweetie?”

“You are dying.” She looked at his shrunken body, and swallowed the smell of the strong mint aroma of his chest medicine.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and smiled. When he opened his eyes a few seconds later, he responded, “We all are. But only the body dies. Our indwelling spirit is immortal. And our Immortal Spirit is the Divine. We don’t teach this to our children, because we think you should discover it yourselves. You already know this, I know, because I’ve seen you talk with your volatilis equus and the insects. You have many higher ‘powers’ for a human, even gifted as you are with magic--my precious mage. Remember, all magic flows from awareness and appreciation of our unity. Yet, it is our problems or conflicts,

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the dark, disconnecting activities that make life interesting, and that cause us to want to improve ourselves and our world. Sure, loving hugs, growing food, making music, creating sculpture and paintings are wonderful, and that internal Sound of All motivates us to become united with our inner self as well as to work to experience our oneness with All That Exists. But we have to live with the shadow, and soon it will be time for you to fulfill your duty to our family and our empire. And this means that dreaded responsibility to someone other than yourself. Or a better way to look at it is, is to be responsible to your higher self, which is the rest of the multiverse in which you find yourself traveling. I have always loved you, and I will always love you. But realize this is an illusion. We are one. I am not dying. Only this temporary container will pass away.”

“But, Dad, it’s YOU who I will miss:



the person I can smell and hug. I only worry about living up to your expectations.” She smelled the mint he used in his shaving foam, and the mint gel he used for his coughing, and smiled softly.

“Om, listen, I miss your grandfather, too. So, I understand a bit of how you’re feeling, but don’t be angry. Everything thing has its time and its season, and not always a reason. Change, though scary, frustrating, and sometimes more work than we want, helps us grow.” Dad began another coughing fit.

His whole face was red; he squeezed his eyes shut as if in great pain. Then, he took a deep breath, and smiled. With a tear in his he eye, he whispered, “Listen, your mom is having a tough time of things right now. We have sheltered you from the dark, bad things that are of the world. Perhaps, meaning to do

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well by you, we have inadvertently not prepared you for what will come. I disagree with your mother on this. I think your inner light and loving kindness will shield you from many evils that befall others. I think you will make the hard choices should you come to the role of Left Hand of the Empress. Remember, when you are in doubt. Stop, and look within. That is where the empire of heaven resides always. Trust your heart, your head, your feelings, your urges, your appetites, and your connection to the Divine, which is in all, through all, and for all.”

“Mom is making me serve on the council.”

“Trust her. She will prepare you. Hug her, and love her. I love you.” He closed his eyes, and with a quiet gasp his spirit left his body.

Om sat, holding his hand until it became cold. Tears of grief and joy flowed freely.



## Chapter Two

“Can you remember it?”

“Remember what?”

“That sky.”

“What sky?”

“The flawless sky from two nights ago.”

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“Ah,” Tomi thought out loud, “The full moon.”

“Oh, no, the full moon was three nights ago. But I was talking about two nights ago. The flawless sky happened two nights ago. The strange happening which made me notice it was the complete lack of clouds, the artistic rendering of the Milky Way, and how the moon flew gently and silently across the sky.”

“I’m not sure I understand you. Doesn’t the moon always cross the sky that way, and aren’t the stars always fixed?” Tomi replied.

“Yes, and no. Of course, nature is nature. But without my looking glass, you could see distinct pin points of light, not cloudy as is normally the case. There were also multiple flashes from the hunter’s brightest lights. And

when I talked about the silent travel of the moon, I meant that there were no clouds to obscure my view. I tend to put a tune in my head when observing the sky and make up variations when clouds cross the moon. But that night of the flawless sky, my mind was made silent, calm, different.”

“Master, you speak in a funny way tonight. I’m still confused.”

“It’s okay, Tomi,” Master Junesun said. “Let’s get to work. Here are the plans.”

Tomi grabbed the papers, studied them, and frowned. “Already? This will mean war.” She slowly shook her head from side to side, and said, “or worse.”

“We do as we’re commanded, Tomi. I trust you to gather the appropriate team of men,

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women, and priests. I want humans and dark elves only. No fairies. You know what we need. I'll give you two weeks."

"Yes, Master. Is there a star favored plan for us?" she asked as she twirled a piece of hair, then put it in the right side of her mouth.

The Master turned slowly toward the fire, and whispered, "Tomi, don't be superstitious. The stars favor those who act with resolve, those who act by surprise, and those who have overwhelming forces. Seasons and weather matter. Stars do not. Except as beautiful displays to be enjoyed and appreciated, the stars serve little purpose in our day-to-day lives."

Master Junesun paused a moment. Through his thick, red and grey beard, scratched his chin and continued, "Stars should, instead,



remind us of how insignificant we are in the vast multiverse. Pay attention to the future tellers, and mark my words. They read signs of seasons, of weather, of the faces and postures of their clients. They don't ever *really* consult the stars. They use the ancient metaphor to create wonderful, helpful, effective myths for their clients. 'On earth as it is in heaven' or 'as above so below' and then based on relatively simple geometry they create charts that help them weave beautiful, therapeutic instructions for their clients. So remember, belief and intention, especially focused attention, and intention married with the firm belief in success (whether justified or not) can make positive result happens: Results that, to the untrained eye, resemble fairy magic."

"Magic, Master," Tomi asked "Do you know about magic?" Tomi's eyes brightened as she looked at the master.

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“Of course, doing or creating magic is like cooking or creating a delightful meal. If you follow the appropriate steps, use the right ingredients, whether ritual, candle burning, poetic rhyming spells, or simply harnessing the powers of the elementals, you will create results. These results are magic to the untrained, but natural science to those of us who know the recipes or spells.”

He adjusted his how he was sitting.  
“There are many types of magic, Tomi. I will teach you some of those that will help you make people feel better, and those that will help you get people to help you. Just as there are words of power, there are sounds, colors, and vibrations seen and unseen that we can make, direct, and be effected by. I will teach you those you need as you need them.”

Master Junesun paused again, and

looked deeply into Tomi's eyes. Almost whispering he resumed his teaching, "There are other, darker magic uses which I won't teach you unless the need is great. Some magic is very dangerous. It's why I don't trust the fairies. But let me tell you, if you free elements from their proper structures, some substances—smaller than one tenth the size of the pupil of your eye—could kill everyone in the largest of large cities, and leave the land and water destroyed for 100s of generations. Luckily, this dark magic, or natural science, is known by only a few, and the substances are deadly to gather, so many who try to do dark magic in order to gain power (or control through fear) die before they're finished. There are three empires, and one small kingdom who still have this power. And they are a danger to the world and themselves."

"I will remember, Master, but I am eager to learn. I've seen mind healers and spirit

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healers. I'd very much like to learn to use that magic. This business of theft and assassination is not to my liking."

"That's good to hear. It's a sick person who would enjoy theft or assassination. I would never hire such, but as third counselor to the Empress Who Cannot Be Named, I must follow her orders or commit san-shi-maki-dombu-gu. And I intend to die of old age. Thus, I—and you—must follow these orders. Keep in your mind the knowledge of the power and trust we have received from the Empress. We can prevent many more deaths by planning well. Sometimes committing a small evil will bring about a greater good. If you start to hurt from the consequences from our orders, come to me and I will show you some ways to keep the pain or sadness away."

Master Junesun stood up and lit a bundle

of wrapped sage. He walked around the fire, seemingly in prayer, his head was bowed, but his eyes were focused intently on some point in front of him and above his head. When he completed his short circuit around the fire, he looked again directly into Tomi's eyes. With a fatherly warmth, he continued. "Right now, I'm going to give you a beginning practice so you might come to use magic and learn magic. You must first master yourself before you can hope to master the elements that aid a proper magician who is respectful of the Great Master, creator of the universe. For true magic is a spiritual pursuit open only to the worthy."

He continued in almost a whisper, "Listen. I want you to sit straight. When you begin sit with your back supported by a chair or a tree. But you must sit straight up, with your spine straight and your head straight, as if the top of your head extended all the way

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to the heavens. Next, I want you to take your left hand and feel the top of your head. Feel for the top and then down just slightly to where there's a turn in the hair. Consider the top of your head as a straight path upward from your spine. Now, I want you to notice the very bottom of your spine, at the tailbone. And if you are balanced from left to right you are on what I will call for ease of purpose your 'sit bones.' It is from here you are to imagine a hollow tube extending from the base of the spine all the way to the top of your head.

“Now, as you breathe in, imagine you are breathing from the base of the spine all the way up to the top of the head. Breathe in softly... and slowly up... the spine... from the base of the spine... to the top of the head. It should take a slow count of six. As you are breathing in say to yourself mentally, ‘One love... two love... three love... four love... five love... six love.’ Then hold for a six count,

then breath slowly out, again to a six count, and as your breathe out, imagine your breath going from the top of your head, straight down slowly to the bottom of your spine. Practice this when ever you find yourself having to sit and wait. You may also be aware of breathing up your spine on each in breath and down your spine on each out breath as you walk, ride or do the other activities which I have assigned to you.”

Tomi practiced in front of the Master for a while, and he checked that her ways of breathing and concentrating were just right. He whispered other things about “locks” and gently took her head in his hands as he tilted her head just slightly forward. When she “got it” he smiled.

“Thank you, master. I’m off with the next high tide.”

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“I trust you, Tomi. I know you will succeed. At your task, as unpleasant as it is, you will take your first step toward mastery of yourself and becoming my apprentice as a mage. Consider it well. And love the Creator at all times, may the empress be blessed.” There didn't seem to be a bit of irony in the lead assassin's quiet voice, as if these assigned murders were ordained from above.

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Lucy-Anna took flight. As she scanned the horizon she noticed a movement far below her. She extended her feeling senses. It was a large wild bird sitting near the top of a tall pine tree. Lucy-Anna went into a dive, just as the large bird noticed her, it was too late. With a fierce grab of her claw, the bird was trapped, hanging limp within seconds. Lucy-Anna flew back up toward a cliff peak she enjoyed. She



sat, and consumed the large bird.

*Ah this freedom, eating, enjoying, I am so blessed to be the volatilis equus of Om,* Lucy thought happily to herself, pulling a slice of meat from the large bird. The smell of blood, and the juices all around aroused her senses. She could hear some human men about 1 kilometer away. She took flight in the opposite direction they were traveling, keeping low and out of sight, until she spotted Om's ranch. *It's good to be home.*

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## Chapter Three

Only two weeks had passed since her father's funeral, but Om woke up refreshed from a good night's sleep. She knew it would be two hours until sunrise. The birds had not yet begun to sing, The Hunter stars were still in the sky. She quietly and quickly dressed. She started her oatmeal and cinnamon breakfast on the cooking hearth, went out to Lucy-Anna's stable, and

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saddled her. Om grabbed a chicken from the pen, and let Lucy-Anna eat it. *Don't worry. We'll go hunting later. Eat this one now. We're leaving soon, and I want to fly to Our Place this morning.* She smiled at the warm thoughts of *okay her volatilis equus* sent back to her.

Running inside, Om grabbed her oatmeal off the stove and started to gulp it down when she remembered. *Slow down.* She took in a deep breath, enjoying the smell of cinnamon that filled the small kitchen. So, she grabbed the bowl and went outside, walking slowly, as she ate her breakfast, she mounted Lucy-Anna with the bowl in one hand. *Let's fly.* Lucy-Anna trotted three steps then took flight, she flew due east toward the brightest spot in the night sky. Orion the hunter turned in the south eastern sky, the scorpion a little farther off. Om took her last bite as Lucy-Anna banked right to the south, and started coming to the bluff overlooking

the river. *Our Place*, Lucy-Anna thought. The bluff had been blocked from other citizens' view by thick forest, only from the river could the landing be seen. Om loved doing her morning martial arts practice/exercises her. Om would practice the fundamentals until the sun rose. Then Om would hurry to check on the crops, feed the chickens, and oversee that the cows had been milked by Freddi and Sunni.

But this morning, Om stopped her energy-flow practice after the first round, the slow moving form. She turned, and sat looking directly up into Lucy-Anna's eyes. *Lucy-Anna, I love you. You are my closest friend. I'm going to bring you into some dangers you haven't faced since that brown bear you had to fight when you were young. But these dangers are worse. There will be human and faerie who may wish to bring us harm. Many oppose my family's influence in the Empire. And I don't entirely trust the Empress. Only you know this.*

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*But my fears about her, and about the plans toward war, are why I had to come here today and prepare you for our journey. I'm going to let you fly free today and hunt. Take any wild prey you see. Avoid human hunters. Once I remove your saddle, they will treat you as wild. I know you prefer being unsaddled. Be careful. Eat. Enjoy yourself. Have fun. But also, keep your eyes open to any things going on. Talk with the wild Watchers. If the trees will communicate, find out their thoughts. But most of all enjoy your day of freedom from duties. Return to the barn tomorrow at two hours before sunrise. We'll come back here tomorrow and talk then.*

*Yes, my love, my master, my friend. Your compassion feeds me. Your compassion energizes me. I will do as you wish. Thank you for giving me the hunting day. You know I prefer not to eat the domestic chickens. They are kind, and understand their sacrifices. But*

*I've always preferred beans and berries to domesticated food animals. Now, if I hunt a wild turkey, a wild duck, a wild goose; that's a fair exchange in the chain of life. Just as human hunters are justified in eating my meat if they can kill me, I recognize you as Master and also Great Love because you have tamed me, cared for me, but also freed me from the dangers of wild. Of course, I like freedom and danger, sometimes. But know when Winter snow arrives, I'd choose my life of labor and less-than-total freedom, because the warmth of my barn, the guarantee of food—even a domesticated chicken—beats any week of cold and hunger in the wild. I will do as you wish.*

Lucy-Anna then sent her warmest love emotions directly into Om's thought processes. Om smiled and sighed.

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“I’m heading out now, Master. I’ll miss you.”

Master Notsogut pressed into Roland’s hand a map, and a pouch filled with 150 gold pieces. “I’m giving you more than double what’s required by guild rules, but you’ve given an old silversmith great hope. And I’m never going to spend what I have. I’ll keep making my wares, and dreaming of how far your talent will take you. May the fortune of love and well-being follow you all your days!”

“Thank you, sir.”

With that exchange, Roland smiled widely and began his trip, taking broad wide bounces, carrying his bedroll and pack lightly, leading a young mule loaded with silversmith and blacksmith supplies, and his sword



*Kindness-Bringer* was tucked into the top, where it could be accessed quickly. Roland practiced his martial arts every morning, but spent 20 minutes before bed practicing his defensive use of the sword. Roland didn't have the heart to fight to a death. He'd spent years learning how to disarm one to three opponents. He'd cut off a man or woman's wrist in seconds, but he'd not intentionally kill a human for any reason. He'd thought and read much on the arts of love and peace. He considered himself a follower of Love-Force, the pacifist branch of the Empress' religion of Compassionate Action. He didn't really believe in the myths or superstitions of the religion, but he liked the stories which showed love and non-violence winning against, violent, hateful opponents. It was his mother who gave him *Kindness-Bringer* and convinced him of the necessity of learning martial arts and self-defensive sword play. Roland had never faced any real opponents,

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so he wasn't certain of his skills. Worse, he knew his self-doubt was as debilitating as his imagined lack of skill. Nonetheless, he set off with a smile on his face, a bounce in his step. He would walk north and west with the River Times until he came to Empress's watchtower. From there he'd go due west into the forest, seeking the Faerie Lands.

About five minutes later, a girl of seven came running from a side path. "Roland, Roland stop!!!"

Roland turned toward the girl, "Yes? How may I help you?"

Out of breath, she panted, trying to regain her normal breathing. "Wait." She took a long deep breath, and an aura of calm passed gently over her whole body. "You don't know me, but I had a dream about you. I was told to find you here. And when I came over the hill, I realized I was late. I wanted to meet you,

and tell you a story that is supposed to help you. I don't understand it. But when I have these dreams, I listen to them and see if they fit anything the waking world.”

She continued, “In my dream, there were two eagles, two chickens, a grove of Birch trees, a breath goddess, a rain god, and a hunter. The eagles were perched on a bluff near a river. The two chickens were in a pen. The grove of Birch trees were imprisoned in a row overlooking passing rolling poison blowers. Inside the poison blowers were humans and faerie who looked like they were filled with fear, jitteriness, and dread. A few of them looked at the Birch trees and saw their pain. But they were humans and fairies who had forgotten how to talk to or be taken care of by the Birch. These humans saw the beauty of the trees. But they failed to see the pain, or the imprisonment; instead, they felt as if they had breathed in the poisons. Later, the breath goddess came to the

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trees and said a rain god would make everything okay. And suddenly there was a hunter. But the hunter wasn't a human or faerie. The hunter was super small, about the size of the pupil of your eyes. And he was assisted by thousands of other hunter-beasts he was releasing, all of them one-thousandth the size of himself. He released these beasts, and suddenly the human and faerie began acting differently. The chickens started speaking perfect Empire 'ets Common language. The eagles flew by, listening to the chickens. The chickens were captured human and faerie who had been cursed and transformed.

“But the curse was failing. Next, you came into the picture. You held an amulet that used the design of life, a double helix spiral with a white snake coiling upward and a red snake coiling downward with a Birch tree-like structure going through the middle. There were twenty two paths you'd put throughout this structure, and there were fine filigree structures

emphasizing and crossing the whole. The amulet formed on the outside of the central work a frame of the ancient six element circle of earth, air, wind, fire, spirit, intention.”

“After this, I saw you walking your mule, dressed as you are. With a great silver-gold aura around you, I knew I had to find you. Then the eagle talked. It said, ‘Go to Roland. Tell him to create the Amulet of Life. Convince him he must give it to a woman named Om on her seventeenth birthday. For Roland, it will bring him enhanced senses. He’ll see more clearly. His hearing will become easy to direct at great distances. He will have great control over his hearing, filtering out anything not wanted, but using intention and focus of will, he will be able to hear most speech—of humans, faerie, and many animals whose thought-sight-patterns are similar. Further, he’ll be able to feel the vibrations of the people, and be able to sense their feelings. He’ll also be able turn off

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this power simply by removing the amulet. The amulet amplifies power people already have inside themselves. Om can already do many of the sense practices Roland will discover. When she receives the amulet, she will choose the Light, the Dark, or the Grey. Roland must decide on that day whether to give it to her. If she is still of the Light or of the Dark, she is to receive it. If she has chosen the grey, Roland should destroy the amulet. The fate of the trees and of the health for 200 generations of humans will depend on this choice.

“Now, you need to know this is what I dreamed. My dreams come true or close to true. They don't read the future. They give advice for the future. And when people have listened to my stories, and applied them to their lives, they've found them to ring true. But not all, my aunt listened to one of my dreams, and two days later she drowned. My dream told her that great life would be found in the river. Instead she

died in the river. I tell you this because I want you to know this.”

Roland was sitting, flabbergasted, at all she said. He pulled out a design he had been working on—a design that was frighteningly close to the one she described. The design he had involved a spiraling silver dragon and a spiraling golden dragon, but the rest of the amulet design was the same. “In your vision, did the amulet look like this?”

”Wow, that’s it exactly! I thought snake, but those dragons seem more alive, more thoughtful, than what I saw. Only the coloring is different. And you have 22 stars and 22 paths while there were no stars in my vision.”

Roland took out his charcoal and started sketching a drawing until it matched the girl’s vision. When he’d perfected it, he then drew a picture of the little girl, but older, and on her head he placed a crown. On the crown he drew

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each of the elements of the amulet in different places, but put a 9 pointed star at the tip of each point of the crown. Next, he drew her wearing faerie clothes, with stylized faerie wings.

The girl gasped, “No, I’m not a faerie. I am just a girl who dreams.”

“You will be a faerie princess before your 80<sup>th</sup> season. I don’t know how I know this, but my drawings have a power. Where or what it’s about I don’t know. I do know that I didn’t expect any of this. I just wanted to be a famous silversmith or goldsmith if fate shined on me. Now, I’m certain my goal will be attained and more. Little Girl, you know my name. May I ask yours.”

“I don’t have one yet. I was told it would be chosen by my husband.”

“What do your parents call you?”

“Little Light.”

“Little Light, I will remember your vision, and will do as instructed in making the



amulet; I'll resist invading people's privacy with my powers. I'll give the amulet over to this Om woman at the appropriate time if she's on the side of light or dark, but I'll destroy the amulet if she seems to be choosing the grey. Go in peace. And thank you."

Little Light smiled, opened her arms as if she were going to hug him, and faded into invisibility. She leaned forward and kissed his hand. Then she, still invisible, ran away."

In one moment the girl stood. In the next flew hundreds of butterflies of myriad varieties. Yellow, white, chartreuse, baby blue, and deep orange, all flew in spiraling patterns of the amulet design. Then a few seconds later they were gone. The mule let out a honking sound, and Roland continued down the hill.



## Chapter Four

The hair on the back of Tomi's neck was standing on end. Her heart was beating faster than Tomi thought it should. She was usually calm before a job. *Something's wrong*, Tomi thought. She sat down, closed her eyes, and began breathing slowly, clearing everything from her mind. Slowly, as she found a nice flow in, and out, she let her mind return to planning

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day's activities. Her heart slowed she felt, calm. Tomi sprung up, took three deep breaths. *I'm ready for this.*

Dressed in black, Tomi knew the sun wouldn't rise for another two hours. She would finish and be out before then. She put on her climbing gear, and began scaling the upper section of the advisory council's chambers. She found Counselor Powermoore's private stock of maidenberry brandy. There was an open flask on his desk, about a quarter full. Tomi took some 'medicine' from her pouch, and let 4 drops coalesce with the brandy. Four drops would be enough to send 5 men to their sleep. Tomi would let the poison knock out Powermoore and anyone with him, and then she'd slide in and slit his throat. It was important the Council know he was assassinated. His positions advocating extending the war in order to profit from selling more food to troops and to refugee

camps could not be tolerated. Tomi's Master's employer even felt Powermoore might be supplying weapons to both sides. Tomi knew she should do her job, and not concern herself with the reasons of her employers. It could just as easily have been a job to kill Powermoore's opponents.

After returning the top to the cask, she hid herself behind a writing desk in the corner of the large working office. She knew Powermoore had a meeting with the Left Hand of the Empress at sunrise, and he'd take a bit of his maidenberry courage before facing her. Powermoore had also followed the same pattern every week in his meetings with her, so it was easy to predict his movements, knock him out with the poison, and finally, make that deep slit into his jugular. The smell of the warm thick blood was also not intoxicating as she'd been told by her grandfather, an assassin in his youth.

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She did not love to watch as what was living simply became an empty vessel. No, it made her sick, and as soon as she was far enough away she'd retch and retch.

Master said the spirit of those who are assassinated will have a better next life, and learn from the mistakes that caused them to need to be killed. Master said we always killed with purpose, fulfilling a 'higher' purpose, but Tomi started to think he might be saying 'hire purpose.' It was no different than culling the herd, he claimed; in fact, that must be how to view it. Some must die, so the many can live. Value your life, he taught Tomi, for it can be taken at any time. And he was teaching Tomi all the methods of quickly taking life in service of the Greater Good. Tomi felt exhilarated at each killing, but she also felt sick, and sad. She sometimes grieved and imagined the family's loss. She caused it. Well, not really, she was just

an instrument of a higher/hire power. But the tune she played, caused tears for the families, even as it might have brought comfort to the Employers.

Tomi quietly wiped her blade, returned it to its sheath, and began the careful climb, out and down the building. Ten minutes later, she was sitting next to her favorite pond, watching the sunrise, and practicing the breathing techniques her master taught her. When she reopened her eyes, the sun was reflecting off the water in a dazzling sparkling light show that she'd never know before occurred. Logically, she knew that this must happen any time the sun was at certain angle and the wind caused the right angle of ripples. But it was so dazzling that she felt that her just completed mission was somehow blessed. She didn't try to understand it, but instead, felt calm and comfortable with herself. It was such a beautiful morning, she

decided to practice some of the breathing and mental techniques her Master had begun to teach her.



## CHAPTER 5

Roland stood at the edge of the forest. He looked back over the rolling hills and crop land behind him. The sea of un-harvested wheat's waves filled him with a joy he didn't understand, but it felt good. Soon, he would be leaving this light and entering the darkness of the forest. He looked up at the wall of trees, as tall as forty people high, and densely packed one next to the other. The smell of pine and a loamy forest floor greeted him gently. Turning toward the forest he could see the secret faerie signs, noting the entrance to their realm. Directly in front of him was a shimmering

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yellow and black barked tree. He took a step forward, warily, when suddenly, everything shifted. The fabric of space in front of him shimmered. It resembled the look of heat rising from the ground on a hot summer day. Five seconds, which felt like a lifetime, passed. Before Roland realized what was happening, more than ten thousand butterflies had taken flight in a display he promised himself he'd try to capture on canvas some day. Down a subtle trail into the darkness of the forest, he could make out a dim glowing green light. He carefully stepped forward, and started walking at a brisker pace than he thought he was capable of. Twenty minutes later, he turned and looked back. Behind him was total darkness. In front he followed the increasingly bright green glow.

At once, everything went black. Roland felt afraid and moved his staff into a defensive position. He took in two long breaths, just as his energy movement teacher had taught him.

He closed his eyes, saw his inner light, and concentrated on *Ohng-nah-moh-bah-gah-ba-tay-vah-sue-day-vah-yah* as he followed his breath up his spine and down across his heart energy continuing downward in one slow breath down the inner subtle path of flowing energy/knowledge to the base of his spine. He let his awareness hover there at the base of his spine for a moment or two, then continued the slow rhythmic segmented inhale path up the spine feeling a buttery, melting feeling within each energy center as it lit him up from the inside.

A small lightshow shimmered across his inner mind's screen, like sunlight reflecting off water on a windy morning, shimmering and dancing flashes of white and golden yellow liquid floating like the aurora borealis, but settling down into a golden ringed pool with a pyramid atop it, and single loving purplish golden eye above it. Roland blinked his eyes open, disappearing the vision altogether. A less

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clear memory would remain.

When he opened his eyes, he saw nothing, but he thought he could hear a voice. Again, he closed his eyes, but this time he strained his ears to hear. Yes, he could hear breathing, a deep yet smooth breathing, which made a mellow flute like sound on the inhale. Then in his mind, as if someone was talking to the still, quiet heart within himself, he heard, *Be calm. If you are worthy you shall enter. If you are not, you will be trained. Open your heart, your mind, and your soul to my queries. If you resist, you will be banished from here forever.*

For a few seconds, Roland started sweating and forgot his breathing. He was breathing as if he'd just finished running. Touching his thumb to his index finger with his left hand and licking his index finger of his right hand, he brought his index finger to the space between his eyebrows. He concentrated his attention here and took 4 long breaths. Then

he decided. He opened his mind, and the voice said inside his head: *All will be well. Relax, and think of a happy memory from your past. See what you saw. Hear what you heard. Feel what you felt. Yes, that's right. Now, take that feeling and double it. Then, double it again. Yes, that's right. And when you feel good, really good, let yourself drift... to a time... when you were confident... and successful. Yes, that one. And now... again, see what you saw. Hear what you heard. Feel what you felt. But this time... you can... let yourself drift yourself out of yourself, and look at yourself from above, seeing that confident, successful you. I want you... to see... what you learned... from that situation. When you... remember clearly what... you learned... let yourself float back down into yourself... That's right. Good, very good.*

Everything was silent for what seemed like 20 minutes. Roland felt calm, relaxed—confident. When Roland opened his eyes, he

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saw a short, bald man whose copper-orange and grey beard cascaded to 5 centimeters from his toes. An enormous smile beamed on the man's face. "Greetings, Roland. I have been waiting for you for 234 years. May I see the amulet on which you've been working so hard?"

Roland hesitated. He strained to get a better look at the man, but there was so little light here, just a faint glowing purple 6-centimeter fog around the man's head. The little man then fell backwards, laughing and rolling around on the forest bed. The laughing and tumbling and kicking feet up and down antics continued for a few minutes. Roland thought that the man said he'd been waiting for 234 years to meet him, and now he's rolling on the ground laughing like a child. After few minutes the man composed himself, sat back down, saying, "Chris Cross Apple Sauce. That's the secret you know, to staying young, being like a child. It's actually the secret of most

things, but that's not why you're here. You need an unwinged faerie escort, and I'm going to see you that you get one. And she will teach you much if you will forget that you think you know everything and will be like a child when you're with her." The little man then leaned forward, and exhaled. A mint fresh breath filled Roland's nostrils. When the man sat back up, he pulled a small Birch wand from his cloak, drew a doorway in the air, and said, "Enter, my friend, Roland The Untrained." Roland took a step through the purple outlined door, and felt as tired and worn out as if he'd traveled for weeks.

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The light of the place was comparable to the sky ten minutes before the sun rises. Here the light didn't seem to change. The green, like

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the fresh one-week growth of a sprouting spring green oak bud, was everywhere. The trees seemed impossibly ancient—some would take at least two hundred people hand-to-hand to circle them. And flying about were sprites, adult faeries, and a quiet but pleasant laughter seemed to punctuate the air with a heated pleasurable rhythm. And the temperature was so odd. It seemed to adjust to whatever he engaged in. During exertion it would become cooler, during relaxation, warmer. Similarly, though the light seemed a mysteriously lit source, it seemed to get brighter if Roland needed to focus on something. He thought about how this would help him in his intricate gold-smithing work. About five hours passed in a day-dreamy sort of way. The childlike man had disappeared. Roland looked around this weird unfamiliar place, but felt so much at home. *There's no place like home*, he thought.

Suddenly, a smiling young faerie with



no wings approached. She kneeled at his feet, “Lord Roland, it would be my honor to serve you and aid you in your journey to your next Master.”

“Please, please, don’t kneel toward me. And I’m no Lord; I’m just a journeyman silversmith (*goldsmith*, he thought to himself). Thank you for your offer. I accept it humbly. But may I ask what I should call you?”

“Call me. ‘HebbaEwe.’ It’s what my family calls me because when I was young I’d always say ‘help you’ following everyone around trying to do what they were doing. One day the name just stuck. My real faerie name can’t be revealed except to the one I marry. We need to visit Lady Leesa, and get some supplies before we leave. Hebbe, though young for a faerie, seemed to have eyes that bespoke wisdom and far more years than her small frame, and ultra-smooth pale-rosy skin would tell.

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The next few hours passed in a whirl of greens, yellows, and neon purples. They left with two fairly well packed, but amazingly light bundles attached with carriers to our backs. Lady Leesa assured us we could carry a larger supply when necessity demanded it. She somehow emphasized the word *when*.

Hebba led me through the darkness of the forest, and when we started to see the light at the edge, I was amazed at the snow. It was too early. Then Hebba explained that while it seemed that we were only in faerie for less than day, two months had passed in the empire of humans. It's dangerous to humans to spend time in faerie because humans can return and find their friends old or passed, humans living such blindingly fast, short lives.

The cold wet path led toward a smoky valley. "We'll stop there," Hebba said. As I walked down into the valley I could not help but seeing the trails of rabbits and other small

creatures criss-crossing our path. We wound down the mountain, back and forth in curving Zs along the surprisingly steep rise. The way the shadows fell suggested it would be dark before too long. I tried to walk a little faster, and keep up with Hebba, who was clearly slowing her natural pace. She was quiet, and left surprising little trail behind her two small feet. The muscles in my legs ached, my feet were sore, and I had never felt so tired in my life. But I had to keep up.

The shade from the white blanketed trees was darkening, and it was so quiet, so cool, you could smell a piney freshness. From behind a cropping of trees jumped three armed men, brandishing daggers. “Give us your packs, and we’ll give you your lives,” a burly short black bearded man said.

Time moved in slow, slow-motion.  
*“May vestri intention animadverto ipsum in speculum. Vobis vobis. Verus Mos”* Hebba

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chanted! Suddenly, all three men fell to the ground covered with stab marks, and blood. Then slowly from their pockets floated coppers and silvers, and floating ever-so-slowly up. from the small one's tunic, suddenly, appeared a gold sovereign.

Hebba laughed. "If the young one had just shared his wealth, the rest of you wouldn't have been freezing in pain. So sad, your intentions backfired," she said as she led me away from the groaning men.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Karma, Roland. Karma is what happened. They wished to harm us and take our things, and well, their intentions backfired on them."

"Yes, but what did you say, how did you do it? I heard you say something."

"Roland, keep up your breathing and visualization practices I've taught you. Practice

the way you used to practice bending and looping with silver, the way you practiced your drawing when you were still a wee one. Practice. Practice. Practice. When you are able to breathe in for a count of sixteen, hold at the top for a count of sixteen, breathe out for a count of sixteen, and hold at the bottom for a count of eight, then, assuming you are worthy, I will begin teaching you the words of *making*, the words of *transforming*, and the words of *instant karma reflection*. Those were the words you heard, in human spiritual language, not in *true faerie*, which I won't speak in front of you until you've passed your initiation.

In his mind, Roland repeated the words of instant karma reflection, *May vestri intention animadverto ipsum in speculum. Vobis vobis. Verus Mos*. He had somehow easily committed them to memory using a trick his uncle taught him: he put a common word in place of most

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of the difficult ones so I could recall it quickly. As Hebba had been dealing with men, Roland had been committing it to memory. *May Violets Intended Asking Ippe in Special Vote Vote Very Much. May vestri intention animadverto ipsum in speculum. Vobis vobis. Verus Mos.* After repeating the mnemonic to himself twenty to thirty times, he owned it. Then I would practice saying it with the tone and rhythm he remembered Hebba using. Roland then thanked the Hebba for protecting him.

She replied, “It wasn’t me. It was the Creator working through me.”

Hebba, then walked back to the men writhing in pain in the snow wet with blood. First, she went to eldest. She put her hand to her heart, touched it to her forehead, then touched it to the forehead of the old one. A yellow-golden liquid light flowed from her first two fingers

into the space between the eyebrows of the man. He regained himself, find himself absent of any wounds. “Go home, and do good work the rest of your days.”

The man nodded, and walked off like a man ten years younger. Next, she turned and kneeled next to the younger two men. This time touching her groin area and then their foreheads, a reddish-orange light came from her fingers into their foreheads. When they came aware, Hebba, looked at the youngest, greedy one, and said, “There’s a job at an inn not far from here. Wink twice at the redhead, and she’ll put you to work.”

“Yes, mam,” the delirious young ex-thief/ex-murdered replied.

Turning to Roland, she said, “And that was a Grace of Forgiveness tinged with soft

justice, not karma. Or it was karma, but of a different sort. You'll see, just wait, you will see." The old man will return to his family and resume a life worthy of his own highest aspirations. These other two are under a light love-and-work spell. They will work many years for redheaded woman until one of them forgives themselves for their evil deeds or until they have changed from within. But I will neither help them nor hurt them any more.

Roland re-adjusted the pack on his back and felt cold from the wetness underneath his cloak from the sweat of just watching Hebba do her magic. Balancing himself carefully, he walked toward the town's light. The darkness was falling fast, falling past. She saw the "big persimmon tree, turning white, as white could be." Hebba knew she needed to make it to the temple yard.



## CHAPTER 6

“Come in, come in, get out of that. Here’s a towel, lie your shoes by the fire and let them drive.

”Ma, put on a kettle of that spicy cocoa for our wet travelers.”

“We’re much obliged, Sir. I am Roland Ondar. We’ve come from the other side of Caring Doe L’ett empire. I’m seeking the master goldsmith Faren DeWeye. I was told he was in these parts, but I didn’t see a goldsmith or any type of jewelry or silversmith shop in town. I’m

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a journeyman from Ors Hue Lake, and finished my apprenticeship with Master Ira Nottsogut. He recommended Master DeWeye.”

Roland handed the gentleman his wet shoes, and started to dig through his traveling pack. “Here’s my letter of introduction.”

“Well, there not be any goldsmith’s in town, lest that I know. There is an old man who goes by Weyemann. Maybe he’s a relation to ‘im that you seeks.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“I’m no sir, son. I’ve always worked for a living. You can call me ‘Blissbee’ or ‘Pa.’ Everyone else does.”

“Yes, sir, I’m okay, Mr. Blissbee.”

“Not Mister. Just Blissbee.”

“Okay, Blissbee. Thanks for the hospitality. It sure feels good in here. That’s the most beautiful hearth stone set I’ve ever seen.”

Roland pulled off his overtunic, stuffed it in his pack, and instinctively felt for his

traveling purse that hung under his shirt like a necklace.

“As soon as the storm let’s up, we’ll not impose on your hospitality any longer. Can you point us to an inn that’s not too expensive.”

“Course I can. You’re here. First night is free. And cuz you’re looking for work. The cost will be two silvers per week. This storm’s gonna be here for at least a week. Farmer’s Almanac said so, and it’s been right for nearly three generations straight. You and your wife’s room is just up the stairs.”

Looking embarrassed, Roland said, “This isn’t my wife. She’s my good friend, Hebba.” Roland’s heart started beating like a drum before the announcement of Champion on game-day.

“I ain’t got no other rooms; you’re gonna have to share. I hope that’s no insult on your propriety.”

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“Thank you, Pa,” Hebba said, face turning red, “We’ll make do.” She looked at Roland hoping he didn’t notice the warmth in her recently freezing cold face.

Roland was looking through his pack, and barely noticed her reaction. “It’ll be okay. We’ve been sharing a tent and meals for months now. She knows I respect her honor.”

Hebba’s face flattened and she turned toward the kitchen. “Can I help you, Mam?”

Ma pushed the kitchen door open, carrying a steaming pot of spicy cocoa, with four large empty mugs. “This’ll warm you young ones up.”

Taking her first sip, Hebba, let out an uncontrollable gasp, “Wow, this is by far the greatest cocoa I’ve ever had.



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