

Tara Duncan, Book I:
The Spellweavers

By HRH Princess Sophie Audouin-Mamikonian

Translation : E. Gauvin

It was night. The moon shone on the sleepy towns and villages of southwestern France.

Tara, dressed in a nightgown, was floating half a mile above the ground. She gulped and twitched her toes. Much to her relief she stayed afloat.

She had been having a dream that was, to say the least, unusual. She had dreamt that she was flying over a highway. Suddenly she plunged, gliding effortlessly over a black limousine that sped along at her pace. Inside the limousine, four men remained quiet, cautiously respecting the silence of the fifth who unexpectedly burst into laughter, making them jump.

“At last!” the leader gloated. “What an honor and a pleasure it will be to destroy the mighty Isabella Duncan! We will be at Tagon in a few hours. Tomorrow night we attack. Be prepared!”

Tara grimaced and turned in her sleep. Her grandmother, Isabella? She struggled to wake up, faintly aware of the menace coming from the racing car, but already the dream had slipped away. While Tara tossed in her sleep, the limousine sped forward, drawing closer to the village. The hiss of the tires on asphalt whispered *soon, soon, soon...*

Chapter I

Powers and Lies

The magpie, with her gleaming golden, red-rimmed eyes, was late. Tara had escaped her surveillance yet again. She scanned the little village of Tagon beneath her piebald wings. If she didn't find the girl soon, she might end up roasted on a platter—and she wished to avoid *that* fate.

Suddenly, she dove. She had finally glimpsed her charge, the tiny figure running through the fields. Tara opened the door to a barn and quickly went inside. The magpie cursed. It circled twice before spotting a boy who was chasing Tara. He, too, entered the barn, but cautiously. The bird, taking advantage of his slowness, darted after him and perched on the biggest beam of the ceiling. Perfect. Ruffling her wings, she settled comfortably in. From there, she could watch the entire scene.

Hidden behind a large bale of hay, Tara held her breath. Her pursuer might arrive any minute. A creaking in the old barn tipped her off: he was there already. She flattened herself further against the bale, fearfully stifling the start of a sneeze.

Then a hushed cackle made her leap.

“I know you're there, Tara,” called out her pursuer. “I sense your presence!”

Above the scene, the magpie suppressed a nasty snicker. All was well. She had a first-row seat for the action. The boy would have a hard time finding Tara, though. With her light-colored clothes, she blended in with the hay.

Tara saw her pursuer turning on his heels, ready to give up, when a field mouse decided to scale her left sock. If the mouse let out a discreet little eek upon realizing the hill it was climbing was alive, Tara's “aaaah” would flood the entire barn. She sprang from the hay like a rocket. Right into her pursuer's arms.

Realizing she was trapped, her reaction was purely instinctive. The boy flew ten feet off the ground and remained suspended in mid-air, arms and legs flailing.

“Tara! You promised,” he yelled.

“It's your fault. You scared me!”

“Well that was the point!” a voice answered, startling her.

“Betty! Don't sneak up on me like that!”

The plump young brunette smiled. Although she was large, she moved like a cat, with astonishing lightness.

“Get me down” Fabrice yelled, still hanging in mid-air.

Tara grabbed the curious lock of white hair that stood out from the mass of her golden tresses and bit down hard on it.

“Umm... the thing is, I don’t know how.”

“What do you mean? I want to come down. Do something!”

Tara concentrated with all her might, fluttered her hands, frowned, held her breath, screwed up her dark-blue eyes. But nothing happened.

Betty valiantly bit her tongue, fighting giggles.

“What are we going to do? I can’t move him!”

The magpie was not amused in the least. Her eyes had almost popped from her head when she saw that Tara could levitate her opponent. By Demeridus the little one had the gift. Things were getting complicated, now. And her friends seemed to know about it. Fabrice stopped wriggling, resigning himself to floating and glaring at Tara with his long-lashed, large black eyes.

“Tara,” Betty said calmly, “try to think back.” “How did you feel when you sent him flying?”

Tara closed her eyes in concentration. “Fearful. Angry...and a little indignant at the mouse.”

“Great!” said Fabrice. “What if I told you you had to get me down right now or else everyone will discover your magical abilities and you’ll end up like a frog on a dissection table—what will you do then?”

Betty shook her head and pointed to a neat coil of rope hanging from a nail.

“How about using that rope? Then we’d just have to get Fabrice over to the hayloft. It’s not that far.” In fact, Fabrice was floating a few inches from the second story of the barn, where his father’s farmhands stored sacks of grain.

“You’re right,” Tara replied. “Let’s try.”

They grabbed the rope and, after a few attempts, managed to pass it to Fabrice, who tied it around his waist. Then, very carefully, they brought him to the hayloft. Barely had he touched wood when his full weight returned. Caught unawares, he almost fell. He scrambled down at top speed and planted himself in front of Tara who was chewing energetically on her poor white lock.

“Okay,” said Fabrice. “Let’s take it from the top again. What did we say at the beginning of the game?”

“No levitation, no telekinesis, nothing,” answered Tara meekly.

“So settle this nagging question. Me, floating ten feet above the ground—what was that?”

“Undeniable levitation,” Betty chuckled.

“Listen, Tara,” Fabrice continued, trying to maintain a reasonable tone. “When you found out you were *different* and told us, we all swore to keep it secret. But every time you’ve used magic, we’ve had problems. Like that time when you destroyed my father’s livestock barn and wrecked the tractor.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” she whined, “and anyway, you were driving!”

“Yeah—and I got punished for it. I’m all for exploration...to understand what’s happening to you, but not when we’re just trying to have a little fun!”

Tara sat down on the ground.

“I don’t know what to do anymore! I didn’t ask to be different, and most of all I don’t want to send people flying whenever I’m upset!”

“Okay, stop. You’re great. So you aren’t in control of this stuff. That will change. Look, how about daily practice sessions? Vacation ends in two weeks, right? If the situation isn’t better by then, we’ll go see your grandmother...and tell her everything.”

“Never!” Tara answered. “She’s the last person I want to know about me.”

“Why?”

“Do you remember Brutus?”

“Pascal Gentard, that bully? Yeah, he tried to punch me once. Why?”

“Back in fifth grade, he got his kicks cutting off girls’ hair. My white lock was quite irresistible.”

“So?”

“As soon as I felt him grab my hair, I let loose.”

“Like just now?”

“Not quite. Back then, my abilities were undeveloped. I was only nine. But he found himself on the ground, all the same.”

Fabrice laughed. “That’s why he always looks at you as if you’re going to swallow him whole!”

“Yeah, but the problem is I got punished for starting a fight.”

“Okay,” Fabrice sympathized. “And then?”

“Then I went to talk to my grandmother to explain what had happened.”

“She didn’t listen to her, of course,” finished Betty.

“She grounded me and she refused to hear my side of the story. I swore then that she’d be the last person I’d tell.”

“So, go see my dad,” Fabrice urged. “He’ll know what to do. That is, if we can’t help you first. Anyway, let’s head back to the château. You might flatten this barn too if we don’t get you out of here.”

The magpie preened her feathers, thinking hard. So Tara had known about her levitational powers for a while. She’d hidden the truth remarkably well for one so young. Well, it was time to deliver her report. Clucking at the thought of the surprise that would, thanks to her, be awaiting Tara, she sprang away and discreetly left the barn.

After a snack, Tara and Betty left the château belonging to Fabrice’s father, the Count of Besois-Giron. They made their way slowly toward the pink granite manor where Tara had lived since the death of her parents. Besides Tara and her grandmother, three other people lived at the manor: Deria, Tachil, and Mangus. Deria never let Tara out of her sight. She was impossible to surprise or throw off balance. And she was forever lifting weights, which made Tachil grimace. Tachil was the gardener, an artistic sort. And, then, finally Mangus. Short, plump, and almost bald, he laughed all the time. The official chef. If Betty and Fabrice thought it strange that the cook and gardener lived with them, Tara was used to it, so much so that she would miss them terribly if they ever left.

“How are things with your grandmother?” Betty asked.

“Same as ever.” “She only cares about my grades. If they’re good, she doesn’t say anything, and if they’re bad, she complains. Otherwise we never talk.”

“Oh,” Betty frowned. “Did you ever get her to talk about your parents?”

“No luck,” Tara answered. “Every time I try, she clams up. ‘They’re dead.’ That’s all she ever says. ‘They died from a virus while they were doing research in the Amazon rainforest.’ That’s the only answer I ever get. When I told her I wanted to become a biologist to track down the virus and destroy it, you know what she said? That I’d better work harder in math if I wanted to be a scientist.”

Betty didn’t know what to say, except good-bye, as she left her friend before the gate to the manor grounds.

But strangely, the conversation had left Tara feeling better. In a hopeful mood, she resolved to have another conversation with her unyielding grandmother and ran off toward the part of the estate where she knew Isabella was to be found: her office.

Behind her, the magpie flew to an open window and, turning skillfully, slipped inside a gymnasium where Deria was punching a dummy. The woman raised her hazel eyes to the magpie, who was waving and windmilling her wings, as though explaining something. What the woman understood must have surprised her, for she put a hand to her mouth at the very moment Tara hurtled past the doorway. Speeding along, Tara slipped on the black and white marble floor of the hall, regaining her balance at the last minute. She burst into her grandmother's study.

By chance, Isabella was alone in the large paneled room, which was usually filled with visitors from every corner of the globe.

When Tara charged into her grandmother's sanctum, she was in the midst of consulting a book which she quickly slammed shut. The young girl had just enough time to glimpse the title, *Pandemonium Demonicus*, before her grandmother put it away. Tall, with pure silver hair, Isabella had the green eyes of a cat and a youthful face despite her age.

"Well! What behavior, Tara'tylnhnm! I've asked you before to avoid running in the manor."

Tara scowled. She hated when her grandmother used her strange first name, which she'd carefully kept hidden from her friends.

"Sorry, grandmother. Can I talk to you? It's about my friend Fabrice."

"I haven't much time, Tara, but alright I'm listening. What happened? Did you have an argument?"

"No, no, I wouldn't have bothered you for that. Actually, we were talking about our parents. You know his mom is dead and he lives alone in the château with his dad."

"Yes. I know."

"Well, his dad talks to him about his mother, but you never tell me anything about my parents. It hurts."

Isabella seemed to be holding her breath. She gripped the edge of the table so tightly her fingers were white. And yet her voice seemed completely undisturbed when she coolly replied: "I've got nothing to hide from you, Tara'tylnhnm."

"Then why don't you ever discuss them? Every time I mention the subject, you send me to my room or you find a way of ending the conversation. I'm not four anymore!"

Isabella flexed her fingers, then began pensively tapping their tips on the magnificently inlaid surface. Tara saw that her fingers had left a burn mark on the wood that disappeared in a matter of seconds.

She turned her attention back to her grandmother.

“You’re only twelve years old, Tara’tylanhnem. I have my reasons which I do not wish to share.”

But Tara had inherited her grandmother’s stubbornness.

“Why? Sure, she was your daughter, but she was my mother. All I have of her are a few photos and no memories. Why won’t you share yours with me?”

Isabella took a deep breath, feeling a familiar sadness. Tara’tylanhnem was so much like her beloved daughter. She had the same set to her jaw, the same straight nose and intelligent forehead. From her father, she’d gotten a head of golden hair marked by his unusual snowy bang, and above all, his sapphire eyes. Each time she looked at Tara, she suffered, and her suffering drove out the tenderness she felt for her granddaughter, leaving only duty, responsibilities, and the pain of exile.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” she said coldly. “Go to your room.”

Tara felt miserable. She wanted to ask a thousand questions. Why did she have her grandmother’s last name when her parents had been married? Why didn’t Isabella want to talk about it? Why didn’t her parents have a grave? And what was her grandmother’s mysterious profession?

Tara had seen the trunks full of dollars and euros. Through the library window, she’d glimpsed not only villagers and VIPs, but also a constant stream of limousines and escorts and suspicious bodyguards with their poorly concealed revolvers. And her grandmother was often absent.

“I’m sorry, Tara’tylanhnem, I must see a visitor now. Go, child—I’ll be with you soon.”

Tara knew it was useless to insist. She shrugged and left, dragging her feet. She went up to her room and slumped onto her bed.

A restored former country house, dating back to the fourteenth century, the manor was spacious and comfortable. There were two chambers Tara especially loved. One of them was her room in the left tower. Large and well-lit, it overlooked the lawn that sloped gently down to the nearby forest. Sometimes, very early in the morning or at night, Tara could see bucks, stags, and even wild boar venturing along the edge. The other was the library. She had loved reading books ever since she was very young. Adventures and mysteries especially.

She was about to get up when her telephone rang.

“Tara?” whispered the voice on the other end.

“Fabrice?” Tara answered, instinctively lowering her voice to a whisper as well.

“What’s up?”

“You’re not going to believe it! You infected me!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your powers, your whatever it is—I’ve done it too!”

“Listen Fabrice, if this is a joke—,”

“It’s no joke at all. There was an accident. I went to the north tower to see the restoration the workmen had just finished. They hadn’t set up the scaffolding right and when I walked underneath, it fell on me.”

“Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“No, that’s just it! You must be contagious, because when I saw the scaffolding come down, I held out my hands. And it worked! The whole thing went flying. But I’ve got a headache now.”

Tara sat up on her bed.

“You—you really think I—”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand it any more than you. Look, we have to meet. Because my father saw it happen.”

Tara groaned.

“What did he say?”

“He hugged me and started crying, then he started yelling that it was the most beautiful day of his life and this was the best gift I could give him.”

Tara’s eyes opened wide.

“You still there, Tara? What should I do, should I tell him about you too?”

“No. Look, can we talk tomorrow? Meet me in front of my house at nine. And until then, not a word!”

“OK.”

From the tone of his voice, she could tell that Fabrice was disappointed but he didn’t argue. As soon as he hung up, Tara started to chew on her hair. What if he was right? What if she was contagious? She brooded for ten long minutes but deciding it was useless to worry. Useless, too, to stay cooped up in her room. She might as well go poke around the library a bit for a book to take her mind off things.

Like a shadow, she crept to the large partitioned room where her grandmother’s thousands of books were peacefully sleeping. Although in one part of the library the books were padlocked, Tara had access to the greater number of them.

Still quiet, she began to absent-mindedly browse the familiar titles when a shout made her stop.

To her surprise, she realized the sound was coming from a place above the chimney. It was her grandmother's voice, and in such a rage that the other side of the village must have been able to hear her. However, to understand what she was saying clearly, Tara had to get closer to the ceiling. Catching sight of the book ladder, she climbed up quickly. She leaned toward the mantelpiece, stretching as far as she could, and then, grabbing hold of the sculpted marble, pulled herself carefully onto it. She was squatting and not quite balanced, but could at last understand the conversation.

"You're the *Guardian of the Gate*, Besois-Giron!" her grandmother was shouting. "You were forbidden from revealing the truth to your son! This is unacceptable!"

Obviously the Count was getting a real tongue-lashing. He must have said something in reply, because her grandmother's voice lowered so much Tara had to make an enormous effort to hear her.

"What do you mean *he's one of us*?" Isabella hissed furiously.

The Count answered once more.

"He what? He *repelled* the scaffolding that fell on him? Emanations? What emanations?"

Yet again, the Count's words were inaudible.

"Let me see if I've understood you correctly. You've just finished telling me that *you*, who come from a long and loyal line of completely *unmagical* guardians, have begotten a *spellweaver*, your son Fabrice, because emanations from the Gate affected your wife? That hasn't happened for nine hundred years."

Tara stopped breathing. A what?

Her grandmother raged on: "But I've never said a word to Tara in order to protect her! So long as no one knows that Tara is potentially a spellweaver, she's safe. What's more, for the moment she hasn't shown the slightest trace of magic."

Tara failed to hear the Count's reply.

"Out of the question. To tell her the truth and introduce her to the High Council of Mages is out of the question. Before her father died, I swore to him that she'd be left out of all this and I will keep my word, even if I don't approve. Meanwhile, I want no more contact between the children. Fabrice must go to Otherreach. Oh yes, one last thing, Guardian: that isn't a suggestion, it's an order!"

The handset banged down, ending the conversation. Tara renewed her grip on the slippery stone, her ears still ringing with what she'd overheard.

Her grandmother *knew*! She was a—*spellweaver*. What was that? And clearly Fabrice was one too. But it seemed that it wasn't usual in Fabrice's case. And the Count was a guardian, the guardian of a gate. A gate that threw off emanations of some sort. But a gate to where? And what was this mysterious High Council?

Her grandmother seemed more a stranger than ever.

She needed to talk to Betty. She leaned forward and grabbed the ladder. Very carefully she stretched out her leg and began to shift her weight from the chimney to the rung.

She'd just forgotten one tiny detail: the ladder had been at one end of the track, but now that she was leaning toward it, it had an entire library's length of open track to glide along—which was exactly what it began to do.

Tara felt her foot slip. She quickly pulled her leg back, but instinctively gripped the ladder harder. As a result, her toes were on the chimney and her hands were desperately clinging to the ladder. Her body was a bridge in mid-air.

For a few anxious moments, she remained suspended, unable to move.

The problem was that the shelves had not been designed to bear the weight of a young girl wriggling around for a foothold. She raised her eyes to the top of the shelf and blanched. The hooks that had kept her suspended were coming out of the wall one by one.

Tara felt the sweat running down her spine. Before her widened eyes, the last hooks gave way and, with a cracking noise like the end of the world, the shelf swayed slowly and majestically. Tara was torn from the chimney; the books tumbling after her in an avalanche.

Oddly enough, Tara's fall was at once very short and very long. The air seemed to thicken to the point of supporting her. She felt the hair from her white lock stand on end, as if electrified. Miraculously, on her feet, she realized that a half-ton of books was headed for her.

She stuck out her arms to protect herself. And then the entire room was drowned in a wave of pages that stopped two inches from her, forming a perfect circle around her feet.

Still gaping at the disaster, the only thing she could think to say was "oops!"

And, then "Okay, better pack my bags. Grandmother's going to kill me!"

She heard a cough at the door and turned to see Mangus. The noise had brought him running, and he stood surveying the catastrophe.

Tara timidly smiled.

"I—I'm sorry, Mangus. I was climbing the ladder, but I slipped and everything fell."

“I—see,” Mangus calmly replied. He was having difficulty averting his gaze from the disastrous spectacle of books on the floor. “And did the young miss find what she was looking for?”

Usually, Mangus’ antiquated address amused her, but this time the portly, balding young man seemed more ominous than humorous.

“Yes, Mangus, I even found more than I expected. Look, I have to go to Betty’s, I forgot to tell her something. Then I’ll come back and clean this mess up. Promise.”

Mangus narrowed his eyes, glanced at the chimney where Tara’s sneaker prints stood out conspicuously, then at the mountain of books scattered all over the room.

“I’m sorry, young miss!” And, waving his fleshy hand he cried: “You I must paralyze!”

At once, Tara found herself totally immobilized. She could speak and move her head, but the rest of her body no longer responded to her will. She was breathing, but couldn’t control how she breathed. She remained on her feet, but couldn’t control her legs.

“What did you do to me?” she shrieked. “Grandmother, help!”

Isabella, to whom the crash of books sounded as if an elephant were jumping rope, was already mounting the stairs. Seconds later she burst into the room, her eyes ablaze. Ready to pulverize whoever was threatening her granddaughter, she brandished her blue glowing hands. When she saw Mangus, Tara, and the books all over the floor, she stopped short, dumbfounded.

“She climbed the chimney and overheard your conversation, my Lady,” Mangus explained calmly. “She was going to discuss it with her friend Betty. That didn’t seem proper to me. Furthermore, I believe she accidentally used her powers, for despite her fall, she wasn’t wounded.”

“Demiderus be praised!” Isabella exclaimed. “You did well. You cast a paralyzing pocus on her?”

“Correct, my Lady. I was afraid she’d escape, since she’s quick on her feet,” he observed.

During the conversation, Tara struggled to regain control of her body. Horrified at seeing that she’d gotten nowhere, she yelled at her grandmother.

“You lied to me! You’ve been lying to me since I was a girl. Well, me too! I didn’t *unconsciously* use my powers. I’ve been able to use them for a long time now and I know what we are. We’re not like everyone else, we’re different, we’re—spellweavers!”

If her grandmother's face had tensed in astonishment when she'd learned that Tara knew of her powers, Isabella's confirmation surprised Tara even more.

The match was tied.

Tara swallowed with difficulty.

"Wi-wizards?" she stammered.

"No. Not wizards, *spel wyveres*, which means 'weavers of spells' in the old tongue. The Unmagical, or the Unmages, we call them, must have heard talk of spellweavers and called their pale imitations wizards or witches instead of using the correct term. In short, do you promise you will not run away if I free you?" her grandmother asked.

"I won't run away if you swear to tell me the whole truth," Tara replied, determined to get the most out of it.

Her grandmother stiffened.

"I cannot tell you the whole truth, therefore, I refuse to swear. But I can reveal certain details that concern you. Take it or leave it. I will not negotiate."

Tara understood that her unyielding grandmother was in no mood for discussion, so she wisely decided to be content (at least for the moment) with what Isabella had to say.

"I won't run away. Free me from this thing, this pocus, please."

Mangus was about to obey when Isabella stopped him.

"Wait. Tara'tylanhnem, let's see what you can do. Close your eyes and picture a net of turquoise mesh around you."

Tara obeyed. In her mind she saw herself sheathed in a turquoise net that kept her from moving. Surprised, she opened her eyes and it disappeared. She closed them right away and saw it again. Suddenly all was clear. As though a voice had murmured in her ear. She knew what she had to do.

She took a deep breath and pictured the net disappearing.

A sharp crack made her jump, and she was once more free.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that Mangus and her grandmother were gazing at her in amazement. Her grandmother looked pleased.

"You didn't even need to incant! But a vow is a vow, and this one I must keep."

"That's one of my questions, Grandmother! We're spellweavers, but why, and how? We have powers, you talked about a gate, emanations, Fabrice and the Count, a council, and what vow?"

"Oh dear," Isabella forced a smile. "I hadn't known you'd overheard so much. I have thousands of years of history to explain and you're only twelve. There are so many things

you can't understand. Not because you're not intelligent," she added as she saw that Tara was about to protest, "but because you're still too young. I'm sorry. And what I do right now is for your own good."

Before Tara could react, Isabella made a motion as though she were erasing a blackboard and spoke: "By Mintus do I clear your mind; these memories you'll leave behind."

Tara swayed, then crumpled in a heap. Mangus caught her just in time.

Isabella, exhausted, leaned on the back of the sofa. Then she straightened and said "Mangus, ask Deria to put her to bed. The spell should prevent her from remembering what happened. I will put the library in order."

"My lady, you are tired. You work too hard. This child is very intelligent. To let her follow her path would be easier for you as well as her."

Isabella managed a sad half-smile.

"I don't have a choice, Mangus. I swore to her father that Tara would have as normal a life as possible. By sheltering her as I do, I have kept her from harm."

"My Lady, you cannot keep her hidden for much longer. Her powers are developed. Few spellweavers are able to free themselves of my pocuses so quickly, especially with no training. Her gift seems... instinctive."

"Yes, I know. That's what I wanted to test, and I was as surprised as you. Don't worry, everything will be fine. Leave her in Deria's care. When she wakes up tomorrow morning, her life will be normal again."

She made a gesture, and the bookshelves returned to the walls. "No!" she cried suddenly, "Not over there! Books on botany in B and cookbooks in C, please!"

For a panicked moment, rows of Bs and Cs collided and some books lost a few pages in the pileup. Then the rows regained their order and the orphaned pages wafted like white birds around the room, each trying to find its book. A few attempted to enter the section under padlock.

"By Demiderus," she sighed, "one might think books had a minimum of intelligence!" Finally, everything was in its place and soon no trace of the chaos was left.

"Mangus, go now, please" said Isabella.

"Yes, my Lady."

Chapter II

A Midsummer Night's Nightmare

Tara slept soundly. Next to her bed on the windowsill sat her stuffed dog, Taros, Kermit the Frog, and an enormous Winnie the Pooh.

Suddenly a violent gust flung the unlatched window open, fluttering the curtains. A white apparition slipped into the room. Slowly it revealed the features of a beautiful woman with long, brown hair. The apparition approached the bed and bent over Tara.

“My dearest.”

Tara smiled.

“Mother, is that you? Can it be?”

“Yes my love.”

Tara turned in her bed. Could her mother really be speaking?

“Now listen, my daughter. I was kidnapped by the Magister, the dreaded Master of the Bloodgraves. He convinced the world that I was dead, but I am imprisoned in the Grey Fortress on Otherreach!”

“I have to tell grandmother, and free you!”

“No, you musn't” she replied firmly. “The Magister has placed a deadly spell on me. Listen carefully, Tara. You are in danger. As soon as I leave this room, you must go to your grandmother. Tell her that you dreamt about an attack on the manor. I don't think the Magister himself is coming. It will be Treankus. Above all, you musn't tell her about me. I forbid it, do you understand?”

Before Tara could protest, her mother touched her forehead. Suddenly, she pulled her hand back.

“An amnesia spell! Your grandmother has cast a Mintus on you. You have come into your powers, then! You won't remember anything.”

The apparition tried desperately to undo the Mintus, but she was too weak and the spell too strong. With a heart-rending cry, she faded away, leaving a final warning.

“Remember!”

Tara suddenly awoke. Looking out the window, she saw a frightening scene. Beneath a waning moon, four dark shapes were fighting with Tachil and Mangus.

She bolted from her room without thinking. Isabella was already bounding down the stairs. When they reached the front yard, Tachil and Mangus were on the ground. The animal-like assailants, with their bulging muscles and misshapen silhouettes, were hunched on their legs. Suddenly turning from their victims, they hurled themselves at Tara and Isabella.

Isabella reacted instantly. Raising her blue-flamed hands, she called out an incantation: “By Retrodus, demons vanish!”

Blue rays struck the beasts, who tensed and twisted, howling in pain. Then the spell took hold. Just as their claws grazed the hem of Isabella’s white night gown, they disappeared.

But a fifth shape emerged silently from the shadows. He shouted, “By Rigidifus, the spellweaver’s life I end, and Carbonus begin on my command!”

Tara screamed, thus shattering her amnesia. Isabella collapsed and the ray that struck her changed color, becoming blood red. In a desperate attempt to deflect the crimson beam, Tara grabbed it with one hand and hurled it violently back at the attacker, destroying his face.

The man shrieked in rage and staggered to the limousine, which raced away, its tires screeching.

Tara reached for her grandmother. She was as hard and cold as marble.

Finally, having heard the commotion, Deria came running. Without losing a second, she passed her hands over the body of Isabella and then she did the same for Tachil and Mangus.

“Tara! Listen to me,” she ordered. “Stop crying, I’m going to need your help. I was tired and fell asleep. I have failed in my role as a protectress. Now tell me what happened.”

“A protectress?” Tara stammered.

“Yes. Your grandmother hired me to guard you.”

Tara softly laid her hand on her shoulder.

“Four clawed creatures attacked Tachil and Mingus. When grandmother and I reached them, a masked man struck grandmother with a ray. Then I grabbed it and flung it back at him.” “He must have used magefire. Do you remember the color?”

“White at first, then red. It was a red ray!”

“Well then. A petrifier-incinerator. He was able to turn your grandmother to stone, which kept her from casting a defensive spell. The spell could have reduced her to ashes, but you returned its force. His wound will never heal unless you undo the spell or die. I need to get help. I’m going to levitate Tachil and Mangus. Pay attention.”

‘By Levitus, arise!’ ”

The rigid forms of Tachil and Mangus rose from the ground and floated before Tara. Deria began to guide them toward the house, and Tara turned to her grandmother.

Knowing, from experience, just how *uncontrollable* her powers were, she cautiously made a command gesture, too. Suddenly, her grandmother's body took off. Not three feet above the ground, but higher than the treetops and speeding toward the moon.

It seemed her grandmother's body refused to listen; but then surprisingly, it began to descend and wound up floating gracefully before her. Trying to control her beating heart, Tara swallowed hard, then carefully pushed her grandmother toward the house. "Take your grandmother to her room," said Deria. "I'll be there as soon as I attend to Tachil and Mangus."

"Okay," Tara replied, concentrating very hard. She was afraid that her grandmother might slip over the banister as they went up the stairs.

She let out a sigh of relief when Isabella floated safely at last over the embroidered canopy of her magnificent bed and landed on the covered mattress. Her feet, however, were on the pillows and her head at the foot.

When Deria returned she smiled. "I'll help you," she said to Tara as she struggled to put Isabella right. She looked around. The palatial room was cluttered with books, papers, musical instruments, taxidermic animals hanging from the walls, crystals, vases, and messy piles on the two tables, the divan, and the three armchairs. Manitou, Isabella's dog, snored away in his bed.

"We aren't strong enough to revoke the spell. We must call on Chemnashaovirodaintrachivu."

"Chema?" Tara sputtered, not understanding the name.

"Chemnashaovirodaintrachivu. He is High Mage of the Council of the Wise. The High Mages are the most powerful spellweavers. But I have to go through the Gate to reach him, and I can't risk leaving you alone."

"Is the Gate in the Castle of Besois-Giron?"

"Yes."

"Please go Deria, and come back quickly. I'm not afraid."

"Very well, my dear," Deria bowed. "But I'll need five minutes to reach the castle, another ten to pass through the Gate and find Chemnashaovirodaintrachivu, and ten more to return with him. Now, come downstairs with me. We'll secure the windows and shutters. Then you must stay in your room and lock the door from inside. I'll leave instructions for Tachil and Mangus. As soon as they awake, they will guard the house."

Tara meekly followed Deria, who went downstairs and stopped before the front door incanting: “By Lucanus, all locks this house defend.”

With a muffled noise, all the doors and windows in the manor closed, the shutters slamming tightly behind them.

“There,” said Deria, “the house is safe now, except for the front door, which you must lock behind me. No one will be able to enter without your permission. Don’t worry, I’ll be quick as I can.”

Tara nodded bravely and, as soon as Deria had gone, turned the bolt. Once upstairs again, she did the same for the door to her grandmother’s room.

Now she was alone, or at least the only one awake in the manor. She felt totally abandoned.

Outside, the full moon cast a silver glow on the dark woods. Suddenly, she froze. Something was behind her. To dodge it, she leapt on the bed, sending her grandmother flying against the dresser .

“Manitou! You dumb dog! You nearly scared me to death.”

Manitou barked happily and, then, to Tara’s surprise, headed for a corner of the room and placed one paw on the Persian rug.

A large hole appeared and Manitou jumped in.

As Tara turned to her grandmother, who was floating peacefully in mid-air, she said, “I’m beginning to get tired of all these secrets and lies. Lies should be forbidden. You’re always telling me to tell the truth. And the only thing you can think to do is hide the fact that you are a spellweaver, and that Deria, Tachil, and Mangus are too. And why not Manitou, while we’re at it? No, not Manitou. You have not been honest. There are secret passageways in your room and probably in the Count’s castle, too. You can perform another amnesia spell, but it won’t work, because I’m powerful. I know something you don’t. My mother is alive! And I’m going to find her!”

All too soon her mood changed from anger to fear when she heard the engine of a car. Running she ran to the window, she peered between the lowest shutter slats. There it was again, the black limousine!

She saw a man emerge. A tall man who wore a shiny mask. His body was covered by a magnificent gray robe so dark it seemed black in the moonlight, and a great circle of lurid red adorned his chest. He stopped before the entrance to the manor. His voice of liquid velvet, unctuous and mocking, sounded in the air.

“I want Miss Duncan! I know you’re there, Tara. If you come with me, you’ll be handsomely rewarded.”

Tara gave a contemptuous snort. She grabbed her white lock anxiously and began to chew on it. What was she to do? Mangus and Tachil were asleep.

Suddenly Manitou leapt into the room. Overjoyed to see Tara crouched by the window, he ran up and stuck his cold nose cheerfully into the back of her neck. Tara grabbed him and held him tightly against her.

“By Trebidus, as grandmother would say, we’re in a fine mess. If Deria doesn’t come back soon with her High Mage, we’re doomed!”

She pressed her face to the window again. Behind the masked man, were a group of frightening beasts. She heard the man bark out.

“Mudjaws! Surround the house, quickly!” And then, “Well, what are you waiting for?”

The man took a deep breath, and shouted, “Tara, answer me! I will not hurt you. I am a spellweaver too. I am Master of the Bloodgraves. Your grandmother has lied to you. She deprived you of your birthright, Tara! She told you nothing. She claims she protects you, but this is not true. She simply does not want you to be the Empress Spellweaver.”

Tara hugged Manitou tightly.

The Master of the Bloodgraves realized she had no intention of budging, for he advanced toward the door and put his hand on the knob. There was a crackling sound and the mage swore. “I know you are there. Now watch!”

Raising his arms high, his cape giving him the silhouette of a giant bat, he cried out. An electrical current struck the front door.

As though connected to the house, Tara felt herself jolt. She rose and grabbed her grandmother. Then, she ran to the room where Tachil and Mangus were asleep.

She remembered what Deria had told her. She only had to imagine the bodies rising, and then do a levitation.

Success! The two bodies were floating in mid-air.

Now, how to hide everyone? Eyeing the curtains, she grabbed a pair of scissors, quickly cut the thin braided ties, and bound her grandmother to the two servants. Then she raced to the attic, dragging the bodies behind her up the stairs.

“Okay,” she muttered. “Up you go!”

She raised her hand and imagined Isabella, Tachil, and Mangus against the high ceiling. To her great relief, she saw the three bodies obey dutifully, disappearing into the shadows, completely invisible.

“My turn now!”

Quick as lightning, she went back down to her grandmother’s room and locked the door again. She felt the spell protecting the manor give way. She rushed toward the rug and touched the mysterious spot where Manitou had placed his paw. At that moment, the protective lucanus yielded with a crack.

“I’m coming,” shouted the Bloodgrave.

“Manitou, come here,” Tara seethed, “and open the secret passageway now!”

She dove for the dog and dragged him to the rug by the scruff of his neck.

Wriggling and writhing, the dog got loose. Believing this was just a game, he leapt onto the bed, slid under the table, and jumped back onto the rug, where he taunted her.

“Please, behave Manitou. Good dog, go, Manitou!”

The dog lowered its head, seeming to listen attentively. He placed a paw on the rug and miraculously disappeared at the very moment the lock on the door surrendered to the Bloodgrave’s spells. Holding Manitou tight, Tara fell with him headfirst into an endless passageway. Behind them, the opening disappeared.

Finally, she landed in the grass behind the house, right at the edge of the woods but a terrifying explosion made her look back. In his fury, the Bloodgrave had sent the roof flying. The manor was in flames. She began to sob. Had her grandmother, Mangus, and Tachil just died?

Manitou’s bark alerted her to someone’s presence. A small man bundled up in a blue robe studded with silver dragons approached. His golden eyes almost disappeared beneath the fantastic mop of white hair crowning his head. He resembled an old owl.

“Tara? Look at me, please.”

Was this man a friend or an enemy?

Then she saw Deria behind him and leapt to her feet.

“Grandmother, Tachil, and Mangus are dead,” she cried.

“I think the child needs a rest. We’ll question her later. By Somnolus, I bid you sleep, your slumber be dreamless and deep,” the old man recited, waving his hand.

Tara felt the spell settle over her but she resisted with all her might, reaching deep into her pain and anger for the willpower to counter the spell.

To the great surprise of Deria and the mage, Tara remained on her feet, continuing to defy them.

“It’s useless,” she raged, “I don’t want to sleep! Who am I?”

She was about to continue when an object passed the moon. A cloud... Tachil!

The bodies she had done her best to hide were now floating serenely on a breeze.

The old mage frowned when he saw the slightly singed Isabella come to a rest on the ground.

“Is she—?” asked Tara.

“Dead? No, the levitation field protected all of them. When the Bloodgrave destroyed the house, he unintentionally blew the roof off saving them. As did you, by hiding them.”

Gloomily, the mage bowed his tousled head and then, taking a deep breath, thundered: “By Elementus, Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

At once, the flames engulfing the manor assembled themselves at a single spot.

“A Fire Elemental!, exclaimed Deria”

“What?” Tara stammered.

“A *Spirit of Fire*. There are thousands of Spirits on all worlds. This one was summoned by the Bloodgrave to destroy as much as possible. Imagine an intelligent, malevolent fire: that’s a Fire Elemental!”

The flames began to take human form. Spotting the mage the blazing Elemental bent toward him.

“Ahhhh, Chemnashaovirodaintrachivu, what do you want, you little scrap of kindling? Why did you interrupt my dinner?”

“I did not sanction this,” the old mage cried. “Leave this manor at once!”

Without warning, the Elemental breathed fire at the mage’s small figure.

“You can’t make me, you silly little dungheap? There isn’t a Water Elemental in sight!”

“Water won’t be necessary. Vomitus Elementus!”

The Elemental was convulsed by a gigantic hiccup. Dozens of fragments flew from his mouth and returned to the form the manor’s walls. The more he threw up, the smaller he got.

“Stop it, please,” he hiccupped. When the creature had been reduced to a tiny gesticulating silhouette, Chemu muttered another spell and a small bottle of mineral water appeared in his hand. Calmly, he poured it over what was left of the infernal conflagration. Then bottle and Elemental disappeared with a muffled clap.

The mage rubbed his hands together, satisfied. “By Memorus, show me the past!”

Vague shapes and ghosts suddenly materialized. The events of the night reeled past. The images of monsters attacking Isabella wavered, then disappeared.

“I must see to your grandmother, now. Both of you attend to the servants.”

When Deria and Tara went into the manor, they found Tachil and Mangus sitting on the stairs, holding their heads with both hands. After hugging them both, Tara went to her grandmother’s room. To her great surprise, neither she nor the mage were there which meant, she supposed, that they were in the laboratory. Cut off from sunlight, the laboratory was dark and perfectly round, as was the furniture in it. An enormous pentagram glowed faintly in the middle of the room.

When Tara appeared at the door, the mage said, “ You must avoid contact with the floor while I heal your grandmother, so please sit on that table.” Carefully stepping outside the pentagram, he pushed Isabella’s rigid body to the center, then removed his shoes and socks.

“By Transformus I illuminate you, Isabella!”

The pentagram grew brighter.

“By Illuminus I transform you, Isabella!”

At that moment, the light burned pink. When it changed to crimson, he raised his arms and cried: “By Vivus, yes!”

“Would someone mind turning on the lights, please?” asked Isabella.

“Grandmother!” Tara cried, delighted, but still not daring to move until the mage had given her permission.

“Tara’ tylanhnem? Are you there?”

The old mage’s voice sounded in the darkness.

“A moment, my dear.”

At the mage’s command a light, diffuse at first but growing steadily stronger, illuminated the room. Isabella was sitting in the middle of the pentagram.

“Chem? What are you doing here?”

Tara jumped off the table and ran to her grandmother, hugging and kissing her.

Isabella patted her back. Rising, she tottered for a moment, taking Tara’s hand for balance, then pushed her away to walk by herself. The mage caught the young girl’s crestfallen look and sighed.

When Isabella was reassured that Deria, Tachil, and Mangus were alive and well, she went to her study. Tara and the mage followed.

“Tara’tylanhnem, would you please be so kind as to go to your room? Chem and I have important matters to discuss.”

Before Tara could respond, the mage spoke: “No, she stays. You know we’re spellweavers, right?”

“Yes, I think so,” Tara answered.

“Mmmm fine, yes, we’ll discuss that later. For now, let’s start at the beginning and cover the basics, shall we? There are, in the universe, a great many beings living more or less on good terms with each other. Just like humans, these beings have children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents. They share basic necessities: food, shelter...The Bloodgraves are self-serving spellweavers who believe themselves powerful enough to rule all beings, human and otherwise. They wear gray clothing and hide their faces behind masks. They are our sworn enemies and wage a constant war with us. We are the ‘weavers of spells’. That is what our primitive ancestors named us. Over time we shortened our name to spellweavers. And those who had no powers were called Unmagicals. They became the Unmages. Then one of us, Druidor Bloodgrave, decided that the Unmages should become our slaves. The Elven Rangers fought and killed him, but not before he had trained apprentices. They called themselves Bloodgraves in homage to him. Isabella, you might at least have warned her about the Bloodgraves!”

“I have not taught Tara’tylanhnem our ways because her father made me promise she would lead a normal life. To protect her, I was perfectly ready to hide her identity from the High Council.”

“That is unacceptable! Such a decision is forbidden!”

“I gave my word.”

“But what of our laws, Isabella. These laws were created to protect the Unmages, and ourselves. Do you realize the damage Tara might have caused?”

“But she didn’t!”

“Enough! Do you believe yourself above the law? Do you declare yourself Semchanach¹?”

“No, of course not! You know that better than anyone. But Chem, I gave my *blood word!*”

“A Blood Oath?”

¹ Semchanach: name for a sorcerer—not necessarily a Bloodgrave—who refuses to acknowledge the authority of the High Council. The Semchanach may wield magic as s/he sees fit so long as s/he does not harm another person. If s/he does so, s/he is hunted without quarter by the Elven Rangers.

Isabella rolled back the sleeves of her dress and pushed her bracelets aside. On her wrists gleamed two red glyphs. The mage grew pale, and stepped back.

“If Tara’tylanhnem becomes a mage, I will die.”

“Well that changes everything,” he said gravely. “I didn’t know. That happened when you—”

“Yes.” Isabella cut him off, with a nod of her head toward Tara.

“Then we have a grave problem,” sniffed the mage, gazing intently at Isabella. “How long will it take to protect the grounds?”

“If you lend me Padimo and Glivol, a dozen days at the most. But I don’t have adequate supplies here.”

“Well then, I suggest this: I’ll take Tara to the Royal Palace of Travia on Otherreach.

He made a gesture in the air, thrust his hand out before him, and raised his voice: “I have spoken! Let it be so.”

From nowhere chirped a voice so incredibly speedy and high-pitched its words seemed stuck together: “VerywellHighMage, theCouncilhasregisteredyourpronouncement. NoticewillbepublishedintheofficialgazetteoftheHighCouncil.”

The mage frowned.

“No,” he stipulated. “I wish this agreement to remain undisclosed. It is needless to inform everyone that the child will be on Otherreach. Simply warn the members of the Council—ah yes, and also Master T’andilus M’angil”

“Yeeeeessss Hiiiigghh Maaaaage, iiiit wiilll beee aaaaas yyyoooouuu saaaayyy.”

When he lowered his hand again, Tara glimpsed a bright flash, and realized he’d been communicating with the help of a crystal ball, which he slipped into his pocket.

Isabela took a deep breath and looked at Tara.

“The mage is right. I cannot protect you here.”

Tara’s eyes were full of tears.

“I love you grandmother.”

Knowing that Isabella didn’t like to be touched, Tara held back, but when her grandmother spread her arms, she rushed to be embraced.

“Good, good, good,” the mage nodded, satisfied. “That’s one thing taken care of. Now you need to go to bed, Tara. We’ll leave for Otherreach tomorrow.”

Chapter 3

A Whole New World

The next morning, as Tara dressed, she thought about her mother's visit and the horrible attack. But what if she had dreamed it all? She finished dressing and ran downstairs.

When she found the old magician in the kitchen, she sighed in relief. Seated before a large mug of hot chocolate, he was happily chattering away with Tachil, Deria, and Mangus. All was well, then. Spellweavers were *real*.

She plopped herself down beside him and filled her mug to the brim with hot chocolate.

"Morning Deria, Mangus, Tachil, Chemna—I mean, Master!" She greeted everyone in turn, remembering just in time that she was completely incapable of pronouncing the High Mage's name.

"Good morning, Tara. And how are you this morning? Not too stiff and sore, I hope?"

To her great surprise, Tara realized that she indeed felt worn out: muscles that she'd never known she had made her wince with her every move.

"Uh—a bit. I don't understand why."

"You used your own physical energy to accomplish last night's acts. You levitated your grandmother. You used your powers. Now your body feels the consequences. We—at least those of us who aren't as gifted—try not to use magic too much, because we run the risk of dying from over-exertion."

"But—," Tara protested, "—without magic I would never have been able to lift my grandmother! She's a lot heavier than me!"

"Ah, you are indeed your grandmother's child—looking for a logical explanation, aren't you? You're right, of course—but if you'd had a wheelbarrow, for instance, you could

have put her in it and wheeled her around. Magic works in very similar ways. It's a tool. With magic, a twelve year old girl's strength is multiplied tenfold. To use your powers, you unconsciously drew on the forces that exist all around us. A spellweaver is able to bend these forces to his own will—something normal humans cannot do.”

“So we're really kind of—engines, and the fluid forces all around us are like fuel, right? It makes us run, and it enhances our powers. The better the engine, the greater the power.”

The spellweaver gave Tara a hearty slap on the back so hard he almost sent her headfirst into her hot chocolate.

“Remarkable! Remarkable!” he whooped. “Tara, you have an amazing gift for simplifying the most complicated things. Oh, what a headache you'll give Padimo! He loves getting lost in the convoluted twists and turns of his own explanations about the nature of magic! Yours is precisely the metaphor we've been looking for! Engines and fuel!”

Isabella walked in, frowning at the hubbub.

“Well, what's all the noise about?” she asked.

“The noise,” replied the mage, still overjoyed, “is about your grand-daughter. She's remarkable, simply remarkable!”

Although Tara was flattered that the mage had liked her analogy, she thought he seemed to be overdoing it a bit. And there were other things she wanted to get clear.

“So... when are we leaving?”

“Soon enough. And you won't be alone. Deria will meet us in the Palace of Travia on Otherreach. She insisted on accompanying you. She is already trained as a mage and we've found a spot for her at court as a Weather Wizard. As for your grandmother's assistants, they will remain here to help prepare the manor's defenses.”

“So what should I do now?” Tara smiled. Her enthusiasm was a bit unsettling to her grandmother, who had been convinced the girl would refuse to go.

“First of all, finish your breakfast. Then Deria will help you pack. Next, we’ll head for the Gate and from there, Travia! By the way, I think it will be useful to have your great grandfather along. In his current state he’s undetectable to magic, and will make a perfect Familiar.”

The mage might just as well have been speaking in ancient Greek. Tara stared at him in incomprehension.

“By Demiderus, Isabella,” grumbled the old mage, “don’t tell me she doesn’t know about your father either?”

“No,” Isabella answered curtly. “Of course not!”

“Come here, Manitou!” she called out suddenly in a booming voice, startling Tara.

The very next second the large black dog burst into the room.

Isabella gave the dog a hug. Then, turning his muzzle solemnly toward Tara, she declared: “Tara, may I present your great-grandfather. Manitou, you are to accompany Tara to Otherreach by pretending to be her Familiar, which will allow you to stay by her side at all times and protect her. Do you feel up to the task?”

The dog wagged its tail and barked once.

“Mages alive,” sighed the old mage, “I see he hasn’t gotten any better. Let’s see if I can lend a hand. ‘By Interpretus, with this command, each other’s words shall we understand!’ ”

When the dog barked again, his voice changed.

“WOO—OF course I’ll go with her. I can’t help it—my dog instincts are always taking over. Still, I do my best. The air in Otherreach should help me hold on better to my human self—at least I hope so.”

Tara fell to her knees in front of the dog.

“Manitou? I—I mean, gra—uh, great-grandfather?”

“Call me Manitou—it’ll be easier that way. It’s great to be able to think and talk like a human being! If you knew how hard it’s been, during my rare moments of lucidity, not to be able to talk to you!”

Isabella’s face grew sad.

“I’m sorry, but no one’s yet managed to find on the exact spell you used. And the since the shock of your transformation gave you amnesia, all we can do is keep trying.”

Manitou hung his head.

“I know, I know—uh-oh, here comes another one of those canine urges. Tara, I’ll be waiting for you in the garden. See you in a bit.”

He gave the still astonished young girl an affectionate lick and left.

“B—bu—but—,” Tara stammered.

“A sad story,” the mage shook his head somberly. “He came upon a spell that would make him immortal. The problem was, it also turned him into a dog. So now he’s immortal, but also a Labrador. Unfortunately you can’t bring him along just as a pet—only Familiars are allowed in the Palace.”

“What’s a *Familiar*?”

“Every spellweaver has an animal companion called a Familiar. It becomes, in a way, his or her sign or symbol. The spellweaver and the Familiar can communicate. Isabella’s tiger Familiar died at the same time as your father and mother—and she’s never replaced him, you see.”

Tara’s eyes widened. “A tiger?”

“Don’t worry, Familiars pose no threat to spellweavers. Deria’s magpie Mani is her Familiar. It was her task to watch over you when Deria couldn’t follow you around. Well, I see you’ve finished your breakfast. Shall we go and pack our bags?”

Tara, who had been carefully watching the magpie to see if there was anything special about her, jumped back when the bird flew to the table, perched on a loaf of bread, greeted her with a flutter of her wings, and promptly stole a crumb of buttered toast.

“Did you see that? That was amazing,” Tara cried out. “Then she turned to Isabella. “Grandmother?”

“Yes, Tara’ tylanhnem?”

“Is there... anything else I should know?”

The spellweaver hesitated, then said, “No. I’ll be leaving in an hour. In order to protect the manor I’ll need certain magical items that I unfortunately don’t have on hand, which will necessitate a trip to Peru. Mangus and Tachil will stay here. But don’t worry, Chemnashaovirodaintrachivu will know how to reach me.”

Tara felt uneasy. Peru was far away. As she pondered this, Isabella went on. “I also want to tell you that I’m happy you’re under the *provisional* protection of the High Mage. And I’m sure you’ll enjoy the Palace. The rulers of Lancovit are charming people, and all should go well. In the end, it’s not that different from spending your vacation in another country.”

Tara was about to ask other questions, but her grandmother’s look deterred her. She satisfied herself with an innocuous reply, but her mind stayed busy the whole time.

“I hope so, Grandmother. See you in a bit.”

With Deria’s help, she was soon packed and ready.

She was just about to grab her suitcase and backpack when Deria stopped her.

“Leave them here for now. I’ll bring them to the castle later. No one must know where you’re going, and luggage will give the High Mage’s plans away.”

“So I should just go like this?”

“Yes, go on—I’ll be down in a moment.”

Tara headed reluctantly downstairs. The old mage was waiting for her with Isabella, who wore her sternest look, but now that her grandmother had admitted she loved her, Tara understood that her severity was a mask to hide her feelings.

Tara threw her arms around her grandmother and held her tight. Deeply embarrassed, Isabella returned her embrace, then pulled back and told her: “You are going to Travia, capital of the kingdom of Lancovit. Etiquette at the Palace is not—Demiderus be praised—as strict as at Omois, the largest human Empire on Otherreach, so I’m counting on you, Tara’tylanhnem, to do the name of Duncan proud. You are the seventh spellweaver of a long and glorious line—never forget this!”

Though Tara had solemnly sworn to herself that she wouldn’t cry, she was unable to do a thing about the tears that had begun to roll down her cheeks.

“Grandmother, I’ll miss you terribly. I love you.”

Isabella gave the old mage, who was dabbing discreetly at his eyes, a furious look and murmured: “Me too, Tara’tylanhnem. Now go.”

“Come,” muttered the old mage. He produced an enormous handkerchief with dancing dragons that darted aside when he brought a corner of it to his nose and blew. “It is time for us to depart.”

Tara looked at him warily. Until that moment all she had seen of magic had managed to rouse in her only a moderate enthusiasm. Thanks to magic, she had been deprived of her mother for ten years, and now she had to leave behind family, friends, and the place where

she'd grown up... And old Master Chem seemed to her but a feeble defense against the monstrous Master of the Bloodgraves!

She tuned to the old mage, waiting for thunder, lightning, a cloud of smoke, or something equally spectacular, but he merely took her by the hand and, together, they walked toward the Castle of Besois-Giron, followed by Manitou, who barked like mad.

“Confounded Isabella,” the mage muttered to himself. “She can’t let her guard down, even for goodbyes. Of all the blasted...”

Tara was quiet all the way to the castle of the Count of Besois-Giron.

She suddenly remembered everything she'd overheard while clinging to the chimney. Isabella had recommended—no, decreed that Fabrice be sent to Otherreach—so with a little luck, she'd see him again!

When they arrived at the castle, the mage did not ring. The gates opened by themselves.

“Magic?” Tara asked, ready to be impressed.

“Automatic,” the mage replied, pointing to the motion sensors to either side, and the security camera above.

The Count of Besois-Giron was waiting for them on the castle doorstep. Imposing and completely bald, he resembled, with his great, proud nose, an aging, featherless falcon.

“Welcome, High Mage!” he greeted them. “Going already?”

“Alas, yes,” sighed Chemnashaovirodaintrachivu. “A pity—I love your fine Bordeaux so much it pains me to leave it behind again so soon. But I must escort Tara and Manitou to Otherreach. I believe your son is already there?”

“Indeed!” exclaimed the Count, his voice bursting with pride. “He’s been there for two hours.”

“Excellent, excellent. Let us go to the Gate now—we have a long journey ahead of us.”

The Gate was in one of the chambers at the top of the tower overlooking the valley. Tara immediately began looking around for equipment, power generators, teams of technicians, and the Gate itself, but there was nothing, just a big empty room with five tapestries, each depicting some fairy tale tableau. One showed unicorns with dwarves. Another, giants sculpting (and... eating?) blocks of stone. A third was decorated with men in green with pointed ears. The next, spellweavers in gray or blue robes around a pentagram exactly like her grandmother’s, and the last, a scene of tiny creatures of all colors making merry beneath the shape of a scepter carved into the wall.

“Please—stand in the center of the room.” The Count gestured with his hand.

“Here, Manitou,” Tara called.

For once, the dog did as he was asked without fuss. The old mage felt Tara’s small hand tense up in his own, and gave her a reassuring smile.

The Count crossed the chamber and stood beneath the tapestry depicting the tiny creatures. He placed the scepter in his hand in the scepter-shaped hollow on the wall, where it fit perfectly. Then he gave them a quick wave, left the room, and closed the door.

As soon as the latch fell, the scepter began to glow. Rays of light, each a different color, from the other four tapestries formed a rainbow reaching out to the travelers.

“The Royal Palace of Travia,” said the old mage firmly and clearly—and they disappeared.

Tara felt an electric shock and a little nausea. She found herself in a room just like the one they’d left. But the being who stood before them was not the Count! He had only one eye, a mop of bright orange hair, stood at least six feet tall and was waving a sheet of paper at

the end of one of his four arms. Panicking, she drew back, but the old mage gripped her hand tightly.

Guards in silver and blue livery focused all their attention on her, their lances at the ready to skewer all unwanted intruders. Under their unyielding stares, Tara gulped hard and resolved not to move an inch without their permission.

“High Mage, what a pleasure to see you again!” proclaimed the one-eyed creature in a high, fluty voice, gesturing at them to step forward. “The Count of Besois-Giron informed us of your visit and I had only just enough time to ready myself to come and greet you. It’s really unbelievable how much I have to do!”

A bell rang, sending the one-eyed creature into a tizzy.

“Someone else is coming through already! Hurry! Hurry! This way, so I can clear the room!”

Tara had to keep herself from laughing. The one-eyed creature seemed to be utterly overwhelmed. He had not given the mage the chance to get a single word in and already was ushering them from the room, fussing like a hen over her chicks.

“Our steward,” the old mage explained with a sigh. “As soon as a guest arrives at the Palace, he panics. And as there are new arrivals every minute, panic has set in as a rather permanent condition. Come—I’ll introduce you to the housekeeper, Lady Kalibris, so she can sign you in.”

“Sign me into what?”

“No one is allowed to circulate freely the Palace without first having registered. As you are my temporary guest, you’ll get Level 6 clearance. You’ll be able to visit certain parts of the Palace, but not others. Lady Kalibris will explain Palace rules and etiquette, show you to your chambers, and tell you how to present yourself to their Royal Highnesses—”

Now it was Tara’s turn to panic.

“M-m-me? P-present myself to Royal Highnesses? Are you kidding? I—”

“Don’t worry,” the old mage said benevolently, cutting her off. “Even though the Palace is incredibly complicated—a sort of giant heart keeping the kingdom going—the rules of etiquette aren’t too strict and even if you say or do something stupid, just explain that you have just arrived from Earth.”

The old mage brushed her questions aside. He had decided to show her around the Palace. Everywhere people were bustling this way and that. Hovering in the air, young spellweavers cast spells that made tapestries float through open windows and dust themselves off. Suits of armor (some of decidedly strange shapes) shook with a great metallic din. The inside of the Palace was magnificent, but it was difficult to tell how it had been built because there was constant motion everywhere. On the walls and ceilings, landscapes appeared and disappeared, changing at the Palace’s whim. At the moment, the Palace seemed in a good mood, since it showed landscapes bursting with sunlight, tranquil fields, and the twitter of birdsong. It all seemed so... *real* that once or twice Tara almost walked smack into a wall trying to get a closer look. The old mage gave her a dark look when she tried to leap over a stream that didn’t exist. At the end of the hallway, she stopped, enthralled. All around her, horses, unicorns, and little animals danced and leapt joyously in the company of beautiful damsels blowing kisses at the spellweavers so convincingly that at one point Tara found herself waving back at the picture.

Suddenly she screamed, yanking her hand from the mage’s grasp, and jumped back. Beneath their feet was a dizzying chasm from whose depths a giant beast with hundreds of feet and just as many fangs lining its jaws lifted an interested eye at the young girl.

Tara barely had a chance to step back before the beast began to scale the chasm walls with terrifying speed. She opened her mouth to scream when the old mage seized her hand again, not worried in the least by the fangs threatening him and gleaming with venom.

“Well, well! I see the Palace is fine fettle this morning!” he grumbled. “Don’t worry, it does that to all newcomers. You’re in no danger, they’re all illusions. Come along.”

So—the Palace liked practical jokes. Tara decided she didn’t care much for the Palace’s sense of humor, but duly obeyed the old mage and followed. As a precautionary measure, she decided to keep her eyes completely closed until she was sure they had passed over the chasm. Carefully, she opened one eye a crack—and what she glimpsed made her jump again. A spellweaver had headed into a desert setting of spiky cacti—behind which was, ostensibly, a solid wall—waved his arm, and *walked right through!* The old mage was moving very slowly, so she took a chance to touch the wall. It didn’t move. Had she dreamed it, then? Two minutes later she saw a pretty spellweaver fly off nonchalantly and head right through the wall too.

OK, she understood. In the palace walls weren’t really walls. Some people could pass right through them without a problem. The trick was knowing how, of course. The Familiars who accompanied the spellweavers must also have known the secret, because the walls made way for them too. Still, Tara couldn’t help it: every time she saw a spellweaver or a Familiar headed right for what seemed like an inevitable and brutal impact, it set her teeth on edge.

All throughout their tour, ringing sounds had not stopped coming from the High Mage’s pocket. Tara was caught off guard when she saw him pull out a ball of crystal quartz big as a fist—apparently the local equivalent of a cell phone, one that would’ve driven electricians on earth mad with envy. For not only did the crystal ball transmit the voice and face of whoever was calling with perfect clarity, but the call didn’t get dropped every two minutes. Annoyed, the old mage turned the ball off by passing his hand over it three times. Tara stifled a grin.

They barely managed to dodge a group of brooms herding dust down the hallway, swaying to the the tune of a flute being played by a spellweaver dripping with sweat. Further

off, a young spellweaver was trying to tell a Water Elemental that it had to take the dirty water elsewhere, and began hollering when the Elemental, upset, sent a wall of soapy water crashing to the ground. This time, Tara knew better than to move. She'd already been tricked by the chasm—she wasn't going to be made a fool of again.

She was astonished, then, when hundreds of gallons of freezing, soapy water fell on her. Coughing and spluttering, she found herself sitting in the middle of a mass of fish and coral, face to face with an enormous shark who stared back with a famished look. Completely disoriented, she leapt shrieking to her feet. The Palace saw that she was frightened, and the marine environment vanished. A pretty field took its place. The old mage joined her there, bounding nimbly to avoid the puddles, followed by Manitou, who found nothing better to do than to shake himself off right next to Tara, drenching her all over again.

“Why didn't you get out of the way?” the old mage complained.

“I thought it was just another illusion!” Tara snapped back, furious, still spitting out a few bubbles.

“Sorry! I'm so sorry!” cried the young spellweaver who had started it all. “I'll take care of it right away!”

He waved his hands at Tara and bellowed: “Dry!”

The old mage frowned as a veritable tornado of hot wind blasted through the corridor, drying everything in its path.

“ ‘Dry’? ‘Dry’ “? he griped disapprovingly. “You couldn't come up with a slightly more stately incantation? Perhaps ‘By Dryus, begone this watery mess, leave our clothes neatly pressed!’ What will people think if we start saying ‘Dry!’ We're *spellweavers*, by Demiderus! Not washerwomen!”

Paying no heed to the young spellweaver's mortified apologies, he stalked off muttering to himself, dragging Tara behind him. She tried desperately to hold back a fit of giggles. Master Chem seemed so terribly angry!

As they turned a corner, a very affectionate washcloth wrapped itself without warning around the old mage's head.

"What? What?" he spluttered, trying to rid himself of it.

A red-faced, disheveled spellweaver rushed forward to free him. Tara could no longer restrain herself and erupted into hysterics. With his feathers ruffled—so to speak—the old mage looked even more like an owl.

They marched on. The Palace was apparently endless. Pages and squires ran about, threading their way through crowds. As they passed some statues of warriors in aggressive poses, the old mage quickly pulled Tara aside. Before her astonished eyes, a statue came to life. It stretched, upsetting two spiders who decided that this corner was decidedly too busy for their liking, then brushed the dust off itself. With great marble squeaks the other statues did the same.

A sudden noise drew her attention. Terrified, she watched people double over, as if seized by dreadful spasms.

Tara's heart stopped. The Bloodgraves were attacking!

"What should we do?" she cried at Master Chem.

The old mage gave her a surprised glance, abruptly convulsed by a fit of hiccups.

"Nothing special, hic! Just do what everyone else does when he gets to you, hic!"

The cause of the courtiers' spasms drew closer, and Tara saw that people weren't about to vomit—they were merely bowing respectfully before...? She trembled, not believing her eyes. The *thing* in front of them wore a hat adorned with a delightful yellow feather, and

a splendid blue cape clasped by a magnificent brooch of chased silver. The ensemble hung artfully from a creature with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a dragon.

The *thing* nodded solemnly at the old mage, who dipped his head; stared at Tara, then went on its way.

“What was that?” Tara whispered.

“You’ve never seen a chimera before? That was Salatar, First Consul to the King and Queen. A very clever old rascal. If he asks you questions tomorrow, be careful what you say. When it comes to worming information out of someone, chimeras are without peer.”

Too busy stretching out her neck to catch a final glimpse of the disappearing chimera, Tara made no reply. The old mage had to yank her hand to get her to follow him.

Still suffering from hiccups, the mage led Tara through a normal door into a normal-looking room. An impressive computer sat in one corner, a massive desk covered in papers took up half the available space, and two chairs that looked spectacularly uncomfortable faced a sofa.

The mage gestured for her to sit down on one of the chairs, taking the other himself. He wriggled for a moment, then roared, between hiccups, “Lady Kalibris, hic! We are not servants being reprimanded, hic! By Demiderus, we will have some armchairs, hic!”

“Oops! I’m so sorry!” came a voice from nowhere. “I was practicing. The more uncomfortable the chairs are, the more uneasy guilty people feel. Obviously, they’re not for you.”

“By Transformus, change these chairs, let my guests forget their cares!”

Tara felt something move beneath her, and she found herself sitting in a luxurious easy chair.

Lady Kalibris appeared, piece by piece: two legs, two arms, a torso, and—Tara caught her breath—two heads!

The two heads bent forward and studied her closely.

“So, this is—”the first head began.

“—the famous Tara’tylanhnem Duncan,” the second finished.

“Welcome, my dear—”

“—we’re delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“We are Lady Kalibris. I am Dana Kalibris,” said the first head.

“And I am Clara Kalibris,” the second added.

“How was your—”

“—trip?”

“It was—fine, thank you, my La—Ladies,” Tara stammered, fascinated.

“She’s very—”

“—well brought-up. I see Isabella—”

“—has taught her well.”

“Tell us, dear Chem: what—”

“—happened, exactly? Our infor—”

“Chem? Chem?”

Interrupting each other, the two heads turned as one toward the mage, who had turned a worrisome color. He was hiccupping ever more fiercely and Lady Kalibris barely had time to rush Tara and Manitou to shelter under the desk.

A powerful hiccup grew in his chest, and the mage began to swell. Before Tara’s horrified gaze, he puffed up and out. His face changed, elongating, and sprouting monstrous teeth. Blue and silver scales covered his body, a sharp ridged crest grew along his back, tearing his robe. Talons long as sabers shot from his fingertips, and he began to beat his massive wings, whirling papers about.

The mage had become a terrifying dragon. Neither Tara nor Manitou could hold back a fearful whimper. The dragon, raising his head, smacked it into the ceiling, dislodging a few bricks that hit the floor with a muffled thump.

“Ouch!” the dragon groaned.

“Tara? Lady Kalibris? Where are you?”

Its voice was so deep the walls trembled.

Tara was on the brink of tears. The enemy had cast a spell on the mage, and now he was about to devour them! Manitou tried frantically to burrow into the floor and hide.

Lady Kalibris emerged suddenly from under the desk, both heads braving the monster’s gaze.

“Really, now!”

“Such behavior!”

“Shapeshifting in our office—”

“—and trampling on half our work in the process!”

“Now change yourself back!”

“And be quick about it!”

The dragon hung his head sheepishly.

“I’m truly sorry,” he protested, “but you know what happens when I get the hiccups!”

“Indeed we do!”

“But Dr. Night Owl gave you a prescription—”

“—if I’m not mistaken?”

“Ugh! I hate how it tastes!”

“That’s all well and fine for you, but—”

“—look what it’s done to us!

“All right, all right, I’ll take it! Stand back, I’m about to change. ‘By Allakazam, dragon to man, take on a human form again!’ ”

The dragon shrank within seconds. Teeth, claws, wings, and scales vanished. The old mage reappeared, only just managing to fasten the blue robe that materialized around him. Tara came to the abrupt realization that she’d been holding her breath.

Lady Kalibris was satisfied.

“Good,” she nodded.

“We were saying—”

“—what exactly happened—”

“—on Earth?”

The old mage incanted and the two armchairs that had been flattened were good as new. He sat down and turned a tranquil gaze on Tara who, still cautious, had not yet dared to emerge from under the desk.

“Come here, Tara, I’m not going to eat you,” he commanded gently, paying Lady Kalibris no mind.

“Well, I was beginning to wonder,” Tara replied, her voice trembling. “After all, you just turned yourself into a dragon.”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean, not exactly?”

“I just turned myself into a human. I *am* a dragon.”

Tara decided she was doing quite well under the desk. It was well-built. Solid. Durable. She might as well stay there. It was clear the old mage was losing his marbles.

“Riiight.” She couldn’t keep the sarcasm out of her voice. “You *are* a dragon, and you turned yourself into a *human*. And of course everyone knows that.”

“You don’t sound like you believe me. I can prove it if you want.”

A trio of voices rang out in the room: “NOOOO!”

Tara and the two heads had shouted in unison.

“If you say you’re a dragon, you’re a dragon. No skin off my nose.”

“Then come out from under that desk and sit down beside me. And reassure Manitou.

I no more eat children than I do old spellweavers who’ve turned themselves into dogs.”

Shooting a sorrowful look at Manitou, who wisely and adamantly refused to follow her, Tara resettled herself gingerly on the easy chair, ready to leap to safety at a moment’s notice.

The mage contemplated the young girl, perched on the very edge of the easy chair, sighed, and explained: “I have presided over the High Council of Mages for centuries. I have trained generations of mages and spellweavers who needed my help to master magic. Your powers—the powers of human beings—are fascinating. We dragons live such a long time. Do you know what our worst enemy is?”

“Hunger?”

Tara was no beginner when it came to dragons. Except that the ones she saw were usually confined to books—not sitting right across from her.

The dragon mage gave her a dark look.

“Madness.”

She could hear the capital ‘M’ in his voice.

“We face the threat of going mad. Those of us who are afflicted fall like a plague upon other peoples, leaving devastation in their wake. Until they’re put down like rabid dogs. And as we’re a bit *bigger* than dogs—well, it can take a few years. When we were on Earth, some of these mad dragons literally decimated entire human races. They are the main reason your kind created armor and lances. Lances were the only weapon capable of slaying a dragon gone mad.”

Tara swallowed, feeling sick. How could you tell if a dragon had gone crazy? When it had gnawed off an arm or two? Great!

The dragon mage continued: “In order to prevent this sort of... problem, we do our utmost not to succumb to madness.”

“And if you don’t succeed?”

Tara was interested in the story, despite herself.

“Then we die.”

“But that doesn’t stand a chance—”

“—of happening here!” Dana and Clara chimed in sourly, bending to gather their papers.

“Because—”

“—this is a madhouse—”

“—in the truest sense of the word!”

“How right you are!” the mage smiled joyfully. “Here the humans are mad, not the dragons! Let us speak of our little Tara now. She was revealed to be—how old were you when you used your powers for the first time?”

“Nine.”

The High Mage looked surprised, but made no comment.

“Really? Well. Her grandmother Isabella was attacked by a—no, pardon me, not one but *two* Bloodgraves, one of which was their infamous leader and the cause of all our woes, the Magister! Tara did very well for herself. Not only did she manage to escape them, but she caught one of their rays, a ray that both petrifies and incinerates, and hurled it back at the Bloodgrave who cast it. Last but not least, her Familiar is no Familiar at all, but her great-grandfather, who has accompanied her in order to keep her from harm.”

“What—”

“—an incredible story!”

“I shall fill you in on all the details later. For now the only thing we’re sure of is that the Bloodgraves want to capture her. I have therefore taken her with me while Isabella puts the necessary protective spells in place. It is, for the moment, the best solution I have come up with.”

“But of course—”

“—of course! Here—”

“—those evil brutes wouldn’t dare try anything.”

“All bullying—”

“—and no brains!

“Ladies, ladies!” interrupted the mage, “settle down! Shall we register her, then, under the name she has chosen for herself—Tara Duncan? Will that do?”

“Tara? Short for Tara’tylanhnem? That’s—”

“—sound, a very sound choice. We like that name!”

The information was entered into the computer, which did not work like any computer Tara had ever seen. Lady Kalibris simply sat herself down before it and Clara exclaimed, “Computer!”

The computer turned itself on.

“Milady?” it replied, startling Tara.

“Registration, human spellweaver, Dana declared. Surname: Duncan. D-U-N-C-A-N. First name: Tara. Age: 12 years. Section: South Unicorn Wing.”

“Saved. Paying guest?”

“Guest of the High Council,” the mage replied. “Isabella has also entrusted me with some pocket money to last her the next few days. She will have 50 gold credits at her disposal.”

“Saved. Familiar?”

“A black Lab. Name: Manitou.”

“Clearance?”

“Level 6, blue, black, and yellow zones. Red and green zones forbidden.”

“Registration complete.”

The computer produced two cards of a clear, shiny material.

“Here is your registration. Stick out your hand, please,” Lady Kalibris ordered.

A bit suspicious, Tara stuck out her hand to receive the card, but Lady Kalibris grabbed her firmly by the wrist and incanted:

“By Fixus, give her access, through our walls now she may pass!”

Tara felt a tingling at her wrist and saw to her amazement that the registration had melded with her flesh. She rubbed at it, feeling nothing but skin, and yet there it was, a transparent rectangle. She saw, too, with surprise, that it bore her photo. Above her name, a wondrous unicorn reared just under a silver crescent moon. Lady Kalibris placed the other rectangle in Manitou’s right front paw.

“There,” Clara smiled, “you shouldn’t lose them now.”

“All residents of the Palace must have one, with the crest of Lancovit, the unicorn beneath the crescent moon. Anyone can go through doorways, but the walls won’t open for those without one. Don’t let it expire—”

“—or you’ll be trapped. The walls will close on you.”

“You can go anywhere you like, except in the red and green zones—”

“—which are reserved solely for use by the royal family, High Mages, the Royal Guard, and the Royal Treasurer. In your bedside table you’ll find a—”

“—guide to life at the Palace: the hours of breakfast, lunch, tea, supper, the infirmary, and the armory, and most importantly of all—”

“—the rules of etiquette. Caliban will—”

“—show you to your room. You should be careful—”

“—not to reveal anything about your adventure. He should be here—”

“—any minute now. We hope you enjoy your stay!”

The two had barely finished speaking when the wall opened on a young boy with disheveled hair (Tara wondered if all spellweavers had bad hair), all out of breath, followed by his Familiar, Blondin, a splendid russet fox. His great grey eyes opened wide as he took in the state of the room, then settled his gaze on Tara.

“Hi!” He smiled broadly. “I’m Caliban, but you can call me Cal.”

“Hi,” Tara murmured, a bit intimidated by the boy’s high spirits. “My name’s Tara’tylanhnem, but I prefer Tara.”

The smile grew broader.

“Yeah, I can imagine. You called, Lady Kalibris?”

“Tara is here at the invitation of Master Chemnashaovirodaintrachivu. She will be staying in the South Unicorn Wing. Can you show her to her chambers?”

“Certainly, I’m also in the south wing—it’s right next door. Tara, don’t you have any bags?”

“They will be arriving shortly,” the old mage replied. “Before you go, I’d like you to take down my quartzstone number, Tara. One never knows.”

At his command, a slip of paper appeared in Tara’s hand. “Please memorize it,” said the mage. (If Cal’s widened eyes were anything to go by, it was clearly unusual to have the High Mage’s private number.) “I’ll see you soon, Tara. Enjoy yourself.”

“See you later, Master, Lady Kalibris.” Tara bowed her head politely. Then she left with Caliban, followed by Manitou, who veered from his path to give the dragon mage a wide berth.

“The High Mage’s private number? That’s the first time I’ve ever seen him give it out like that!” Cal did not wait for Tara to respond.

“So,” he asked energetically, “as soon as the wall had closed behind them, what do you think of Lady Better-than-One?”

Tara almost burst out laughing.

“The housekeeper? Why does she have two heads?”

“She’s a Tattris. All the members of her race have two brains and one body—which makes their lives complicated, particularly if they disagree about something. So, you got an invitation from the High Mage just like that? Your parents too?”

The young girl hesitated before firmly answering, “No—they’re both dead.”

The young boy stopped short in the middle of the corridor, almost colliding with a courtier in a yellow coat covered with violet feathers and slippers of green fur.

“I’m sorry. Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of my brain.”

“No, you—you couldn’t have known. My grandmother Isabella raised me by herself, but she didn’t want me to be a spellweaver. So I didn’t know about any of this until recently.”

“Ooooh—so you didn’t know anything about Travia and Otherreach?”

“No, nothing at all.”

To Tara’s great surprise, a big smile lit up Cal’s face.

“That’s fantastic! Finally, someone who won’t put on airs and show off knowing this and that. You know something, Tara? I think we’re going to be great friends!”

Tara couldn’t have asked for more. But she had one burning question, and Cal seemed to know a great many things.

“What’s a Blood Oath?” she asked.

Cal gave her a strange look.

“A Blood Oath? What, been hanging out with warriors?”

“Uh, no,” said Tara, taken aback. “Why?”

“A Blood Oath is taken during battle, when two warriors are wounded by the same enemy. If one of them is dying, the other can take an Oath on their mingled blood to take vengeance, or anything else the dying one asks.”

“Oh.” Tara pondered this. “OK, so if one of the two warriors made the other promise that his son or daughter—the dying one’s—would never become a mage, since that was why he was dying in the first place, what would happen if the Oath was broken?”

“The one who took the Oath would die.”

Tara took a deep breath. Her grandmother had taken a Blood Oath! So if she fulfilled the promise of her powers, she would cause her grandmother’s death.

“Hmmm... would you know anything about a ‘gray fortress’?”

The boy thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“Nope, never heard of it. What is it?”

Tara was disappointed

“Oh, nothing—just something I heard.”

Suddenly, a strange feeling overcame her, a coldness between her shoulder blades, as though someone were staring at her from behind. She stopped abruptly and turned around.

There was a fleeting movement, and she caught a glimpse of gray cloth.

Taking Cal by surprise, she dashed after it, but when she got to the intersection of the two corridors, there was no one to be seen.

Cal, who had followed her, exclaimed: “What? What happened?”

“Nothing,” Tara replied, frowning. “Tell me something else: these robes, or tunics, or whatever it is people wear here—what color are they, usually?”

“No one color in particular, except for the High Mages. Then it’s red for Jaffar, green for Brandis, yellow and purple—the imperial colors—for Omois, and we’re blue, because the Palace colors are silver and blue. Why?”

“Just because. Good to know. So no one wears dark gray then?”

It was Cal’s turn to frown.

“Only the Bloodgraves wear that color! That’s why they’re also called the gray spellweavers. It’s not against the law to dress like them, but people tend to avoid it.”

Tara took a deep breath.

Am I going to get an explanation here?”

Tara turned her most dazzling smile on him and asked: “I forgot to tell Master Chem something—would you excuse me for a moment?”

Cal narrowed his eyes, curious, but did not object. “Go ahead—I’ll just wait here.”

Tara ran back to Lady Kalibris’ office, but it was already empty.

Darn! she thought. Why couldn’t these spellweavers sit tight for just a moment?

She went back to Cal.

“They weren’t there. Do you know where I might find him?”

“Well—in his office, I guess.”

“In his office! Of course! I should’ve known he’d have an office. I’d imagined a cave or something, for a dragon. Do you know your way around the Palace?”

“Every nook and cranny! For two years now I’ve been apprenticed to Master Sardoin, who specializes in mathemagic and spatial coordinates. He’s dematerialized and rematerialized me at least a thousand times to every corner of the Palace on the pretext that I must always know my surroundings no matter where I wind up. Apart from the forbidden zones, I know the Palace better than the inside of my pocket!”

“Perfect! Let’s go then—lead the way!”

The first time Tara passed through a wall, she was shivering for a good ten minutes afterward. Cal showed her how to spot the passageways, indicated by a crescent moon above a unicorn, the Lancovit arms. After that, all she needed to do was stick out her registration, and the unicorn would let her pass. The wall would fade away. Of course, there were doors too but on the whole they were far outnumbered by the passageways.

When they got to the wall in front of the mage's office, Tara noticed that he was identified not only by the statue of the unicorn, but also by a small dragon standing guard, both in niches set into the wall. Tara, unsure what to do, knocked timidly on the wall. The dragon and the unicorn came to life, startling her.

"Who goes there?" growled the tiny dragon.

"You can see quite well it's a young girl!" the unicorn retorted sharply. "What do you want, my child?"

"Uh—I'm Tara Duncan, and I have to see Master Chem as soon as possible."

"I'll pass it on," the dragon snorted.

"As for you," it told the unicorn, "don't let them in until I give the order."

"Yes, yes," the unicorn sighed, rolling its eyes.

Tara was so fascinated by the spectacle she didn't notice at first that the tiny dragon had returned, a surprised look on its face.

"The High Mage will see you right away. You may go in."

"Go ahead, Tara, I'll wait here," Cal offered quietly, not wishing to seem indiscreet.

Tara gritted her teeth and headed for the wall—which dutifully vanished before her. Whew—she was through, but how she missed the plain old-fashioned doors of Earth!

She smiled when she saw that the Palace had, for Master Chem's office, recreated a cavern setting with stalagmites and stalactites. The spot where the old mage retired between meetings was a pile of gold coins and precious stones.

A noise made her look up. She took a step back when she saw the mage had returned once more to his dragon form. From twenty feet up he smiled at her with hundreds of razor-sharp teeth. He swept his hoarded treasure aside with a claw. Like all dragons, he had a disproportionate affection for gold and jewels.

“Well, my little Tara, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” he said in a relieved tone when he saw that Tara was totally uninterested in his gold.

“There’s a Bloodgrave in the Palace!”

“OW!” roared the dragon, who, in his surprise, had smacked his head against the ceiling. “WHAT?”

“I said, there’s a Bloodgrave in the Palace, I just caught a glimpse of his gray cape.”

“WHAT?” Master Chem thundered again, making the walls shudder. “In the Palace of Travia? On Otherreach? In my domain? You mean to say those gray-nightshirted gnomes dare come and defy me on my own terrain? I WILL FIND THEM, I WILL BREAK THEM, I WILL HUNT THEM DOWN AND DEVOUR THEIR HEARTS! This is WAR!”

Tara decided to agree. She could be quite agreeable, in fact.

“Right. War,” she said calmly. “No problem.

“And if you could stop yelling—that would be nice too,” she said, pulling her hands from her ears. “So, while we wait for the fun to begin—you know, destruction, crushing, heart-*devouring*, all that—what can I do to help?”

“Nothing,” grumbled the dragon. “Just keep me informed of anything strange or unusual. And above all, if you see that little gray runt again, let me know right away.”

Tara nodded slowly. Anything unusual? Everything in Otherreach was bizarre!

“I don’t understand why the Bloodgrave would walk around in the Palace in a gray robe,” she observed. That’s a good way to get caught.”

“He’s mocking me,” the dragon rumbled, shrugging. His wings, each twenty feet, set off a small tempest. “The Bloodgraves are among us. We cannot tell which of us are members of this accursed breed. They also wanted to frighten you. To let you know they’re here—spying on you.”

Tara shivered. As far as she was concerned, they’d succeeded admirably: she *was* frightened.

“But you can recognize them, can’t you?” she persevered. “By their height, or their build?”

The dragon sighed, just managing to keep a spurt of flame from incinerating her.

“I see you don’t understand,” he said. “ ‘By Allakazam, dragon to man, take on a human form again!’ “

Tara went pale. Right in front of her, where the dragon had been, stood a powerful Bloodgrave whose broad shoulders stretched the gray fabric of his robe. He was larger than the old mage, and a glittering mask hid his face.

Before she could let out a cry, the Bloodgrave waved his hand, and the mask vanished, revealing Master Chem’s face... thirty years younger. Even his voice was different. His hair was no longer white, but brown, and his eyes were green, not gold.

“Now,” he said, “do you see why we haven’t been able to identify the Bloodgraves? It could be any one of us. With magic, we can change our bodies and appearance to fool others. Now do you understand?”

Shocked, Tara nodded. The dragon, satisfied, took his native form once more. The young girl momentarily wondered who she was more afraid of: the enormous dragon or the Bloodgrave. Right now she feared them both about the same.

“If the Bloodgraves wear gray, what’s their hideout called? Their headquarters?”

“No idea,” the dragon growled. “Believe me, if I knew, I’d have destroyed them long ago.”

So he didn’t know about the gray fortress either. She would have to find out about that on her own.

The dragon reminded her to be careful, and then, outside, she rejoined Cal, who was dying of curiosity.

“Did you get to talk to him?” he asked as he led her to her room.

“Yes,” Tara replied laconically. “Wow, this place is huge! Are we almost there?”

“OK,” Cal, who wasn’t stupid, scowled. “I get it. You don’t want to talk about it, I won’t ask any more questions, then—for now, at least. Here we are. If her ladyship would like to do the honors?”

Before Tara a wall opened on a comfortable salon. Light from large bay windows spilled onto sofas and armchairs grouped around small round tables. Tara was delighted to see there was also a drinks machine. And two chimneys! Despite the summer heat, the Palace had created a winter landscape in the room, all snow and pines, that made her want to curl up by a crackling fire smelling of woodsmoke—a fire that wasn’t real.

The room opened at either end on stairwells, one of which led to the Unicorn dorms, and the other to the Phoenix dorms.

“This is the common lounge—we chat, have meetings here. Your room’s this way, in the Unicorn dorm, c’mon.”

Tara was surprised. “Oh—you don’t have individual rooms?”

“We’re Apprentice Spellweavers—that means mages’ assistants, at their every beck and call,” Cal sighed glumly. “We don’t get our own rooms until we reach the next level and become mages. The higher your level, the bigger your room. In Master Chem’s case, it’s even bigger, since he changes back into dragon form when he sleeps.”

“Dragon form?”

“Yeah. What’s more, it annoys Better-Than-One because he sleeps on all these highly flammable old scrolls. She says someday he’ll snore and set the Palace on fire. OK—wave your registration at the wall and tell the Palace you’re inviting me in or I’ll be locked out. I can’t go into a girl’s room without permission.”

Tara did as she was told, and they entered her room.

The room was small and almost entirely taken up by a humongous canopy bed with blue velvet curtains and a wardrobe made from some kind of wood she had never seen before, pink with a turquoise grain. The furniture seemed to sit on a thick lawn of blue grass, dotted with small white flowers, and Tara could make out gentle rolling hills in the distance.

“The Palace likes you a lot,” Cal noted with satisfaction. “What you’re seeing is Mentalir, land of the unicorns. You’ll probably see a herd before too long.”

A few seconds later, in fact, young unicorns were gamboling around the bed. Charmed, Tara resisted the urge to caress their velvety flanks, knowing she would only touch a wall.

“You’re lucky,” Cal laughed. “One day the Palace took a sudden dislike to a Count from the Eastern Marches, between Gandis, the land of the giants, and Hymlia, the land of the dwarves. The Count was quite arrogant and had almost insulted the Queen. As a result, the Palace went looking for the most nightmarish settings on the planet. After sleeping among snakes, spiders, scorpions, and all the monsters of Otherreach in the midst of terrifying storms, he cracked. He left after three days!”

Tara, who didn’t much care for insects, shuddered. She wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes!

Gilt letters gleamed from a book bound in dark leather on the nightstand of bright-colored marble. On its cover she could make out *Handbook of Etiquette, Customs and Mores*,

Laws and Duties of the Royal Palace. The tall wardrobe, with its mirror, filled the remaining space.

“So you have to introduce yourself now,” Cal declared.

“Me? To whom?”

“Your bed, of course!”

Tara looked at the canopy bed and wondered if Cal was joking. But he seemed quite serious.

“I’m sorry,” he said with an apologetic smile, “I forget you’re not from Otherreach. All you need to do is stand in front of the bed and say your name. After that, it’ll recognize you. You’ll be the only one who can get in, apart from the housekeeper and the steward. Unless you invite someone else, that is. You’ll have to do the same thing for your wardrobe.”

Tara walked over to the bed and said, “Tara Duncan!”

With a silken rustle, the curtains drew back and she saw a fluffy comforter and fresh sheets.

“The curtains are drawn,” Cal explained, “because young spellweavers like us can’t always control their powers when they sleep. So to keep us from flying all over the Palace, we’re confined to our beds. The more advanced students have beds without curtains. I know a few who pretend they can’t control their powers so they can keep these beds a little longer! Now that it knows your name, the bed will only draw back its curtains for you. C’mon, I’ll show you the bathroom.”

The white-tiled bathroom was spacious. The Palace had conjured a placid lake at the center of which a beautiful undine sang as she combed her long green hair.

There was a noise from the room, and they headed back to check it out. Tara’s suitcases had arrived, floating one behind the other, to settle beside the bed.

Cal rubbed his hands together.

“Perfect! Let’s see if I’ve gotten the hang of it this time. Go stand in front of the wardrobe and say your name.”

A bit doubtful, Tara did as she was told.

The wardrobe obediently opened its doors, as well as its three drawers.

Cal called out: “By Arrangerus I say, may all your clothes be put away!”

He clapped and a veritable whirlwind of clothing sprang from Tara’s suitcase to fold itself neatly away in the wardrobe. In a few seconds, it was full, and closed its doors and drawers once more.

“That’s terrific,” Tara said admiringly. “What did you say? ‘By Arrangerus I say, may all your clothes be put away’?”

With this command, the wardrobe re-opened and there was something like an explosion. Just as the clothes were violently expelled, a small group of girls entered the room. The one in front got a night gown right in her face, blinding her, and she began shrieking with fright.

Horribly embarrassed, Tara rushed forward, stammering apologies. The brown-haired girl, taller and older than her, was flushed and furious at having displayed her fear.

She looked Tara up and down, her black eyes gleaming with hostility.

“You little twit,” she hissed, “tossing your clothes around everywhere! I’ll tell Lady Kalibris. You’ll get what’s coming to you!”

“I—I’m sorry, I didn’t do it on purpose. I’m sorry.”

“Out of my way!”

Tara, who did not dare use magic to put her things away, set to gathering her clothes beneath the other girls’ disdainful gazes.

The older girl saw that she had begun to move in and bellowed: “You! Come here!”

Tara, her arms full of clothes, turned. “Me?”

“Yes, you little imbecile, you! I want this room! So clear out or you’ll be sorry!”

“Oh, give it a rest, Angelica! You know she can’t leave.”

Cal was standing in front of the tall girl, whose eyes narrowed.

“What are you doing in the Unicorn wing, anyway? You can’t be here!”

“As a matter of fact,” the boy replied, “I can, since Lady Kalibris *and* the High Mage Chemnashaoviroadaintrachivu both asked me to show Tara to her room, *right here*, and to help her get settled in. You’re just an Apprentice Spellweaver, so you have to sleep in the dorm like the rest of us. Now who’d better leave?”

Tara saw the older girl’s fists clench in fury and, for an instant, thought she was about to jump on Cal. But she managed to hold herself back and threatened

“Just you wait, you little garden gnome! C’mon, girls, let’s leave these two losers to clean up their rags. In the meantime, we’ll go see my Master and tell him what kind of idiots I have to put up with. And *he’ll* give me this room!”

With one last venomous look, she swept from the room, followed by her small retinue.

“Whew,” Cal sighed, “I thought she was going to hit me!”

“Me too,” Tara agreed, still shaken by what had just happened. “Do you know her? Who is she?”

“She’s High Mage Brandaud’s daughter—daddy’s little girl. She thinks she knows everything and and can lord it over everyone here. She only came into her powers fairly late. She’s 16, apprenticed to Master Dragosh, the most powerful spellweaver after Master Chem. She’s a real pain. She got scared when your clothes attacked her. She wasn’t expecting it.”

“That makes two of us. What exactly happened? Why did my clothes jump out again? They were neatly put away!”

Cal looked at her with respect. “You reactivated the organizing spell. To put it more precisely, you ordered your clothes to put themselves away again, as though you were getting

ready to pack your bags. But since you didn't properly picture where you wanted them to go, they wound up flying all over!"

Now Tara was completely horrified. "You mean as soon as I say a magic spell, stuff happens right away? That's terrible!"

"Are you kidding? It's totally the opposite! You'll be able to do all sorts of things with your powers! Usually it's a great deal of trouble to make a spell work. It takes real effort, real willpower to succeed. With you, it was almost... instinctive. Listen, toots—you can't tell anyone about this!"

"'Toots'!? I forbid you to call me 'toots'! And I *can't* use magic—that's forbidden too!"

Cal was no dummy.

"A-ha!" he said, eyes gleaming with curiosity. "I see. That whole business with the Blood Oath—so you're the daughter!"

"Yes," Tara confessed, uneasy. "If I use magic, my grandmother will die. So be especially careful about using it in front of me!"

Pensive, Cal chewed on his lip. "But Blood Oaths aren't absolute, Tara. They depend a lot on the person who made them and, above all, on context. Have you ever used magic in your grandmother's presence?"

"Yes."

"And did she fall down and die?"

"No."

"So that means there are very specific conditions. Come with me to the library tomorrow and I'll show you a book about it."

Ah, the library. Excellent. There had to be maps and atlases there. It was the ideal place to start looking for the gray fortress.

“How long are you staying?” the young boy asked.

“About two weeks.”

“So don’t worry.”

“OK, but first—”

“What?”

“First help me put away my things.”

Side by side, they worked quickly. Just as they were finishing up, the sound of a bell startled them.

“Fantastic,” Cal whooped, “lunchtime!”

He grabbed her hand and dashed off with her in tow. In front of every wall, he waved his arm and his registration paved the way for him. When they arrived in the great hall, Tara saw (with tremendous relief) that it wasn’t where the king, the queen, and their court took their meals. Here, guards, grooms, gardeners, spellweavers, lower-ranking courtiers, washerwomen, and tailors gathered—in short, the entire small world responsible for keeping Palace life running smoothly under the leadership of Lady Kalibris.

Tara broke into a huge grin when she spotted Deria in animated conversation with a handsome guard. Deria gave her a wink. All at once, Tara felt much better with a friend on hand.

In one corner of the hall, dishes of different size and shape were set out for the Familiars. Manitou and Caliban’s fox Blondin dashed over at once, without a care in the world for their young masters.

Lady Kalibris called for silence.

“Good morning ladies, gentlemen, spellweavers. I have the pleasure of introducing our new Mages and Apprentices. Master Den’maril has *finally* selected an Apprentice, Robin

M'angil. Give him your thanks, for henceforth the High Mage will no longer be bothering you with this or that little favor: Robin will be running all his errands.”

At her gesture a tall, fine-featured boy with blond hair and pale blue eyes rose, blushed at the laughter, and quickly sat down again.

“We also have a new Weather Wizard. So if you’ve hung your sheets out to dry and it rains, you’ll have to take it up with Lady Deria.”

Deria rose, acknowledging everyone with her inimitable grace, and darted a sharp look at Lady Kalibris, not caring for her humor.

“That’s it for mages and apprentices. Onto the other occupations.”

Tara was listening to Lady Kalibris when someone squeezed in next to her, ignoring Cal’s complaints.

“Tara?” exclaimed the new arrival, surprised.

“Fabrice!” Tara whispered, overjoyed. “I was right, you *are* here!”

“You know each other?” Cal asked, amazed.

“Of course!” Fabrice replied, elated. “Tara, you can’t imagine how happy I am to see you. When my father sent me to Otherreach, I almost told him everything about your powers. But if you’re here, that means you finally told your grandmother the truth, right?”

“Uh... sort of,” Tara managed, troubled at having to hide the truth from her best friend.

Cal fidgeted, uninterested in the reunion.

“I wish she’d hurry up,” he grouched as the housekeeper droned on. “I’m hungry!”

As though she’d heard him, Lady Kalibris bowed both her heads, then declared it lunchtime. Tara thought the dishes might magically appear, but an army of young pages and squires sprinted forward and set out roasts, rotisserie fowl, creamy, savory soups, vegetables sautéed in butter, enormous wheels of cheese, pastries, and heaps of candy and chocolates.

“My friends—bon appétit!” said Dame Kalibris, smiling.

She incanted, and a thick slice of meat floated obediently over to her plate, where her knife and fork took it upon themselves to cut it into bite-sized pieces.

Cal had already stacked three such slices on his plate and was eating as fast as he could. No sooner did a dish come within his reach than he took one or two helpings (that is, at least, so long as it bore no resemblance whatsoever to a vegetable of any sort), and his plate was soon overflowing. Fabrice and Tara had a good time watching their friend stuff himself as if he'd eaten nothing for two days.

Tara briefly struggled with a spoon that was trying to feed her as though she were a child, but, nabbing a hovering fork instead, started feeding herself, the utensil quivering with indignation in her fist.

She asked Fabrice to tell her about his arrival in Otherreach. Her friend didn't need to be asked twice. He had also been astounded by the sight of Madame Better-than-One, though not by the one-eyed royal steward, whom his father had warned him about. He didn't really like the chimera.

Fabrice concluded by saying how utterly *enchanted* he was with magic. He could not wait to begin his training as an assistant to Master Chambrake, to whom he'd been assigned. Then it was Caliban's turn to tell his story. The youngest of a family of five—like their parents, spellweavers one and all—he was not at all eager to take up his duties as Master Sardoin's apprentice again.

“I don't get it,” he whined. “After all, my mom's the best of the Licensed Thieves. I don't need to slave away for a High Mage. I'm already an excellent Thief.”

“You're a what?” Tara couldn't believe her ears.

“I'm a Thief. I mean, I'll be one when I'm of age.”

“What do you mean, ‘thief’?,” said Fabrice, incredulous.

“Someone who steals,” Cal replied calmly.

“I know what a thief is,” Fabrice snapped, irritated, “but where I come from it’s not exactly something to brag about. It’s hardly a glorious profession. People who steal get locked up in jail.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Cal, “*those* thieves! No, no—we’re one of the robber clans. We work for the Lancovit government.”

Tara was totally lost. “What does the government want with a bunch of thieves?”

“Not any bunch of thieves! Licensed Thieves! We get sent on very specific missions. For example, what if some mage invented a very dangerous spell and a kingdom or empire decided that spell would help it conquer its neighbors?”

“I don’t know, what?”

“The government of Lancovit would call on my family to steal the spell! And give it out to all the other countries. Peace, and a balance of power, would be re-established!”

“OK,” Fabrice said. “So your mom’s a Licensed Thief.

“So why do you also call yourself a Thief?”

“Because I’ll be one,” Cal replied proudly, “as soon as I finish my training.”

“Your training?” Fabrice was impressed. “What kind of training is it?”

“You want a demonstration?” Cal asked.

“If you’d be so *kind* as to oblige us—sure!”

Tara could hear the skepticism in Fabrice’s voice.

“No problem!” Cal shrugged. “After all, you’d be the victim!”

At that moment his fox Blondin, who had been eating peacefully on the other side of the room, started acting up, leaping onto a table, provoking shouts from the women and curses from the men.

Fabrice turned back to Cal and said: “OK, go ahead.”

“I already did,” Cal said placidly.

Before his friends’ astonished eyes he produced, one after the other, three handkerchiefs embroidered with the initials B.-G. for Besois-Giron; several sticks of chewing gum, including one already chewed and wadded into a wrapper; a pink hairband; a golden barrette; a pencil with a broken tip; an eraser; two coins; and a small brown notepad.

“The barrette and the hairband aren’t yours,” I presume, Cal said mockingly.

“Amazing!” Fabrice exclaimed, then blushed. “No, those are Tara’s.”

“That wad of gum isn’t mine!” Tara protested, patting her pockets. “But the other stuff—that’s incredible! I didn’t feel a thing!”

“Me neither!” Fabrice chimed in.

Cal flexed his long, supple fingers.

“It’s something we’re taught quite young,” he said. “First, create an innocent diversion. Just now I used Blondin, but I could’ve used anything. Next, grab what you’re after. Piece of cake!”

Tara and Fabrice, impressed by Cal’s skills, plied him with questions throughout the rest of lunch, eager to know more about his life as the son of a Licensed Thief.

Half the adventures he related left them unconvinced (they didn’t for a minute believe in his battle with a flying serpent, or his theft of a forbidden scroll guarded by man-eating slugs, and other memorable confrontations), but a great many of his tales seemed plausible enough to them that they looked on the young Thief with new admiration.

From time to time, Tara felt Angelica’s icy gaze on her. The older girl had pointed at her when Tara had entered the hall, and since then had been whispering furiously into the ear of a red-headed girl beside her.

After stuffing themselves with cake and candy, they left the hall. Tara was at a loss for what to do next, but Cal advised: “Don’t overdo it here. If Master Cham says you’re on

vacation, then take a vacation. And if someone wants to see you, your registration will let you know.”

Tara’s looked puzzled. “What do you mean my registration will let me know?”

“The Masters can all communicate with us through our registrations. They can call us and tell us where to meet them. If nothing’s going on and they haven’t left us any instructions, that means they doesn’t need us for the moment. I usually use my free time to goof off, or brush up my Thieving skills. Do you want to take a walk in the park? Fabrice, are you free this afternoon?”

“I sure am,” said Fabrice. “I don’t start my apprenticeship with Master Chambrake till tomorrow.”

“Time’s a-wasting, c’mon! The park’s great!”

Tara had to admit he was right. Here, magic had painted the foliage brilliant colors. The trunks were red, and the blue and lemon-yellow treetops stood out sharply against the pink and black flowers where birds of so many bright hues frolicked it seemed ribbons were fluttering through the sky.

Tara drank in these strange sights greedily, chatting with her new friends all the while. Suddenly she saw a small red mouse with two tails dart by, followed by an orange cat with large green ears. OK, not *so* different from Earth, Tara thought. The mouse, trapped, made a funny little twitch, and—disappeared! Less than a second later, the cat disappeared too. The mouse reappeared ten feet away—right in front of the cat, who had reappeared, anticipating the mouse’s move. Furious, the mouse sank its sharp little teeth into the cat’s paw, and slipped away down a hole in a tree trunk.

Piqued, the cat perched on a branch, keeping a close watch on the hole. Tara sighed. So the animals on Otherreach could use magic. Great. There was no way she was going anywhere alone.

Cal led them to the edge of the dense and peaceful forest that bordered the Palace grounds

There were seven seasons on Otherreach, and the year lasted fourteen months. What with magic, atmospheric conditions could change in very dramatic ways, and it was always difficult to predict whether you'd wake up to ninety-eight in the shade or twenty feet of snow. All of which had made the flora and fauna on Otherreach quite adaptable. Animals could grow a coat of fur overnight, or change their color, going from brown, green, blue, or red to pristine white for the snow, which was not itself always white. In the Hymlian mountains, the presence of charmed iron, one of the metals that dwarves mined, gave snow an orange tint. The colors of the animals there ran from carmine to crimson during snowfalls.

None of the High Mages summoned them, which delighted Cal, who enjoyed taking it easy and introducing Tara and Fabrice to the wonders of life on Otherreach.

Fabrice, for his part, took the opportunity to try out the latest riddles he'd written. He read aloud from his notes:

*“My towers are tall, with bases round;
high guarded walls do my keep bound;
a court inside me can be found.”*

“Easy,” said Cal, “a castle.”

“Think you're so clever? Try this one, then:

*Horns? I may have one or two,
my skin is black but never blue;
brown or white as well, my hide*

was once believed an armored side.”

“I know!” Tara cried. “Rhinoceroses can be white, brownish, or black, have horns, and thick skins!”

“Not fair!” Cal objected. “I don’t know earth animals!”

Fabrice grinned at them.

“OK, OK! I see I’m up against a pair of experts. Wait a minute—I’ll come up with something more challenging.”

The three friends talked away the hours until dinner, which was in every way almost identical to lunch—a veritable smorgasbord.

When, after bidding the two boys good-night, Tara reached her room once more, she saw that the wall to the Unicorn dorm was open. Evidently Angelica had not gotten her own room, for the other girls were gathered around the bed where she was holding court.

As Tara walked by, the older girl spotted her and gave her a venomous look.

After brushing her teeth, Tara dove under the soft, thick comforter. She learned the High Mage’s number by heart, then opened the handbook on etiquette. Apparently, it was forbidden to tunnel through the Palace (she didn’t think it would much appreciate having holes scooped from it like a block of Swiss cheese), and to eat the walls (small chance of that, since she’d probably turn out allergic to Maliciosa, the magical material the Palace was made of). Levitation was permitted, except in the throne room. Weapons of all kinds, magical and non, were banned within the walls, including Dwarfish warhammers, enchanted Elven bows, and even the horns of unicorns, who were kindly asked to deposit these at the gate in special baskets made for the purpose (unicorns could take their horns off? Who knew?). Creatures with non-detachable claws and jaws were requested to avoid motions that might in the least be interpreted as threatening toward His and Her Majesty, as the Palace guard was known to be

slightly—well, *paranoid*. All tentacled creatures were required to keep a respectful distance of several feet, in order to avoid contact with Their Sovereign Highnesses, as most tentacles were venomous and could cause terrible rashes. Gnomes were not permitted to appear before His and Her Majesty via tunnels of their own making, but must come by *surface route* only, like everyone else. Pranks were not tolerated from imps, goblins, and leprechauns, ever since an imp had accidentally turned an ancestor of the current monarch into a pig. The King's forebear had lived to a ripe old age, but it had been impossible to turn him back, which was why one of the royal portraits depicted a plump, shaggy boar with a crown on his head. Running in the corridors, which tickled the Palace, was not advised, except in such cases of emergency as war, invasion, and surprise attack, magical or otherwise. This last possibility caused Tara some worry.

Luckily, the handbook was not very long and every line she read etched itself of its own accord into her memory. How handy, Tara thought. She was briefly annoyed at Isabella, who had made her slave over grammar and math back on Earth. She was done before the clock had sounded ten and she decided to turn out the light. The scene on the walls and ceiling changed to a peaceful starry night, while a warm, sweet-smelling breeze wafted over her, putting her gently to sleep.

Her last thought was of Angelica and her little entourage: I hope she snores a lot and keeps everyone else from sleeping all night!