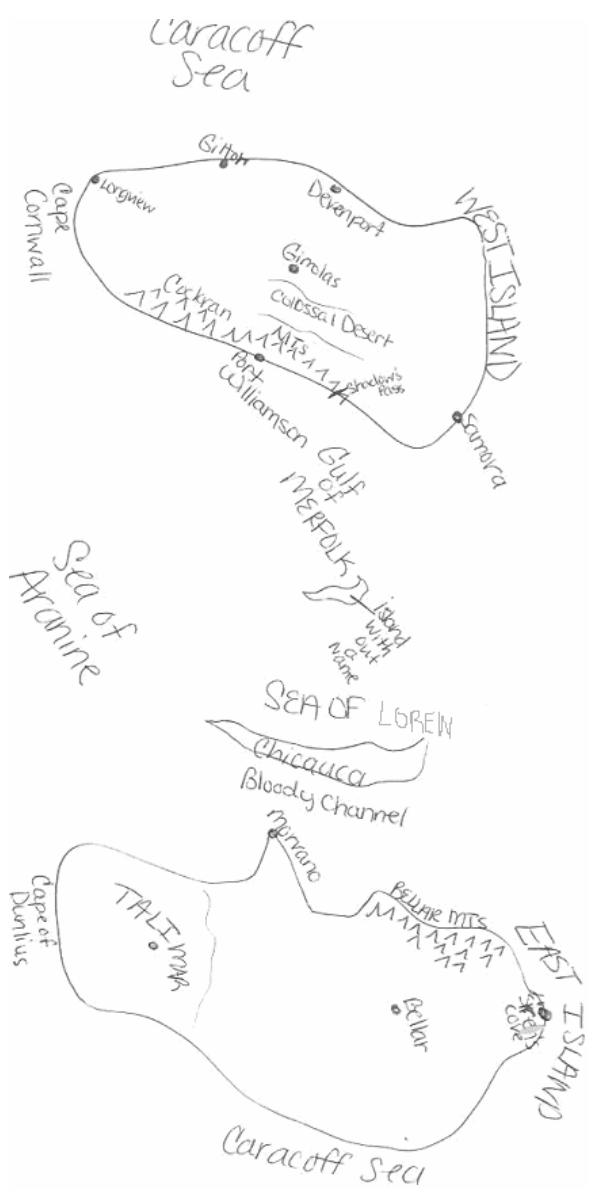


The Substance of Knowledge

By Racquel Drumm



Part 1

The Substance

A girl from Mheriche

At the foot of a tall rolling hill was a garden, a secret garden known only to the planter. The planter was Marie Prince. She had built this garden so that all of her worries and stress would be relieved as she admired all the many plants and trees and flowers. It was not uncommon for Marie to visit this garden twice a day. In the mornings she sipped a hot cup of coffee and sat on the bench in the middle of the garden. It was more than pleasing to Marie to take in the soothing smells of the dew-covered flowers. She adored the sound of the bees buzzing and the rush of the fountain into the narrow stream of sparkling pebbles. The warmth of the summer sun rose and sat on the shoulders of the earth painting the sky with a ray of color. At night she would lie on this same bench staring into the heavens marveling at the moon and stars. Night brought a whole new feeling to the garden. The sounds were now of distant crickets and the whistling of owls. The moon's reflection lit the narrow stream as though it were a spotlight on a gleaming dance floor. This garden was a place of peace for Marie. It was a work of art; it was her masterpiece. The lack of friends and abundance of time allowed her to plant flowers and take time to respect them.

Home was not the happiest place for Marie. Her father worked most of the time so she was left alone with her three brothers: William, Peter, and Jack. William was the oldest and was in charge when their father wasn't there--which was quite often. Peter was two years younger than she. Jack was the youngest, two years younger than Peter. Jack and Peter were very close. William was always occupied with getting into a school somewhere far away. She had no one to befriend, no one to confide in, and no one, it seemed, who even cared.

Marie Prince and her family were outcasts. They lived on the far edge of a city called Gimolas in a world called Mheriche. They stayed far away from people. Marie never truly understood this. It was something of an unwritten rule that she nor her brothers ever ask about this strange isolation their family had from the rest of the world.

She and her brothers were home schooled. They grew all of their food and only went into the city if it were an emergency. People didn't seem to like the Princes. The only thing that led Marie to think that people even knew they existed were their frequent whispers to each other as the Princes walked by--otherwise they ignored them completely.

So, years went by with this unnatural seclusion of the Prince family. On the day of which our story begins Marie was just awaking from a wonderful dream and was getting ready to head down to her secret garden to think. She quietly dressed herself and made her bed. She, then, tiptoed downstairs and headed out the door careful not to wake her father and brothers. She walked toward the stables where she kept Kana, her horse. Kana nuzzled Marie's arm as if to say good morning. Marie placed a saddle on Kana and rode out. She took one last glance at the small vine-covered cottage to make sure she wasn't being followed and then set out for the horizon. She had to pass the brilliant green prairies of West Gimolas before entering the forest. There was now almost a clear path in the middle of the wood where Kana trotted daily. IT was a ten minute ride through the woods and she thoroughly enjoyed this part of the ride the most. Here it was quiet and shady. The canopy of towering trees blocked most of the harsh sunlight. But the little light that shown through illuminated the forest almost as if it were smiling.

At the end of the forest was a path leading down a steep cliff. This path led right underneath a gorgeous waterfall and luscious green plants. The roar of this enormous waterfall was deafening but none the less beautiful. Behind the waterfall, the path continued through a cave and into a kind of secret hill. The hill was surrounded by walls of trees and impassable woodland. This was the perfect spot for a secret garden. Most people never stop to appreciate nature, but Marie wasn't one of those people. She took pleasure in every minute--every ounce--of nature that she could take in. Here, she wouldn't be bothered. Here, she would be able to enjoy herself.

She sat on the ever-wearing bench and sipped her coffee through a thermos she had brought with her. The chirping of the morning birds and the buzzing of the bees around the calming rush of the fountain were not the only noises to be heard that day. Marie also heard a sound that brought happiness to her heart. For, hearing this noise allowed her to remember the happiest times of her life. These times were the only times she had ever been into the city unnoticed. Every year Gimolas played host to the cultural parade. This was a time when every race came together to enjoy and learn about the others' culture. It was a time of fun, games, and laughter. It was something Marie looked forward to every year. For five years, now, she had disguised herself underneath a cloak to attend the parade, so that no one would notice who she was. This would anger her father more than words could say if he ever found out. So, she made sure it was always very secret. At the first sound of the cheering and the music Marie jumped on Kana and left her peaceful garden and galloped into the city.

There it was! The cultural parade was here. Downtown Gimolas was a wonder. There were tons of people and happy faces cheering and waving flags of every color.

The architecture of its cathedrals and museums and universities--the fabulous statues and fountains--they were amazing. Just seeing Gimolas was an adventure in itself. When the infatuation of the sights subsided she turned her attention to the cultural parade. She decided she would start with the witch and warlock booth and work her way around the square. The witches had a kind of traveling apothecary, which sold potions and disgusting (yet interesting) ingredients to add to them.

"Come on, dear; buy some frog liver, how about dragon's blood?" Pleaded the witch.

"I don't think so, thanks." Marie and her horse walked away from the booth. Next were the Elves. They were selling shoes that they had made on their own. They all bragged about how much time and soul was put in each shoe and how fine and rare the leather was. Next were the merfolk. They were swimming in a pond--that's funny that wasn't usually there. (Perhaps the warlocks had bewitched the ground to turn to water) Marie made her way through the booths of all sorts of characters including gnomes, giants, talking animals, centaurs, several Greek mythology entities, and vampires (which she completely ignored since vampires were her greatest fear). The last booth she visited, however, was the one that mattered most. Gypsies were giving out palm reading sessions and telling fortunes. Marie was brought up never to believe in this sort of thing, but, nevertheless, she *was* curious. She walked into the trailer--no, this couldn't be a trailer. The inside was gigantic. How could all of this fit into a trailer? There were all sorts of different fabrics and colored beads hanging from the ceiling. It was very dark in this room which was somewhat crowded. She sat by a lamp which was the only source of light in the room. She waited patiently staring curiously at the customers who walked

from behind the curtain where ‘Madame Cortez’ told her fortunes (which were probably really fake). All the same, she was going to do something unexpected of her for a change. She stepped into Madame Cortez’s “office” when her name was finally called. She noticed several books lying chaotically around the room--all with titles like: *The gift of foresight* or *Seven days with the oracle*. Marie’s eyes were now transfixed on the mysterious crystal ball in between her and Madame Cortez.

The Truth

“So you have come to find out the one thing no one else will tell you.”

“Yes, actually!” Marie was less than shocked. Isn’t that why anyone came to a fortune teller?

“Your mother, is it?” Madame Cortez asked even though she seemed to know the answer.

Had she said that out loud? She hadn’t really expected to talk about her mother but she was curious to hear what Madame Cortez would say. She had never really discussed her mother with anyone. Her father hated to mention her. “Yes. I wanted to know who she was, what she was about, and why--“

“Why you’re such an outcast and live so separately from every one else?”

“That’s right.”

“Well if I’m not mistaken, Marie Prince, you have many secrets that even *you* do not know. I don’t know that I’m the one to tell you this. After all, it is a burden that we seers keep as much knowledge as possible to ourselves. If I were to tell you all that I saw in my visions then you may do everything you can to change that. If you were to change that then the destiny of all people would be undone. Well it’s difficult to explain but let me tell you...it would be *terrible*.

“But, you did come all the way down here and you didn’t pay for me to tell you why I can’t tell you the future so I will do my best. Do not be angry if there is a question that I cannot answer--you know the whole *I can’t tell you too much because you might change too much of the future* rule.

“So are you ready for this?”

“I think so.” Marie said not knowing for sure if, in fact, she *was* ready for this.

“Well I think I’ll start with the substance of knowledge. It all began when--“

“But I thought that was just a myth. There’s no such thing as a real substance of knowledge is there?”

“Marie, don’t interrupt...and yes, there is a real substance of knowledge. No one knows its origin--of course we all have our theories. This substance of knowledge knows all. It can see all past, present and future. It knows every answer to every question. And it knows every fear and desire in every being’s heart. The substance contains powers beyond measure. It was very much wanted by all. This, Marie, is where greed stepped in. People no longer cared about anything but getting their hands on the substance.

“Now it all started when there were nothing but humans and regular creatures. There were none of your vampires (Marie shivered at the thought of this) or giants or elves or merfolk or centaurs or anything of the sort. Animals were animals. They didn’t have the power to speak or transform or possess any magical power. And humans were humans. They, too, had no power at all. That was until the substance of knowledge was created. Everyone had questions that couldn’t be answered and everyone wanted to know what the substance knew. But there was one thing people didn’t know until it was too late. For every question asked of the substance the person wouldn’t receive their answer like they expected, but they would receive a curse. This curse was never good. That is what created all the breeds you see before you.

“This was troubled times for the world. War and battle broke out and not even the world leaders could control it. It was out of their hands. Desperate times called for desperate measures. These measures that were taken meant that a wizard by the name of Jean Zuloft was hired to destroy the substance. So he formed a secret council and they

discussed how to destroy the substance. This substance was not destroyed as it should have been. Instead it was hidden. Jean Zuloft hid the substance in another dimension--another world that he eventually called his home. Here all those who had been cursed would live. All those who had received immortality, or were forced to live as an unnatural being, or whatever their curse may be, they would be able to hide from the mortal world. But before the substance was truly hidden it prophesized. It told of the heir of Zuloft and her mortal-world lover and how they would come to destroy the substance and end all the curses ever bestowed on the unfortunate souls living in Mheriche. With all the souls that had ever been cursed living in this other world--Mheriche--the mortals in the *true* world eventually forgot about the substance of knowledge. It is now nothing more than a fairy tale to them."

"Are you saying," Marie now looked overwhelmed with interest, "that this is not the true world?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying. People in this world have forgotten about the mortal-world and the substance of knowledge too. But, yes, it does exist. Now I believe the questions you had when you walked in here can be answered." Madame Cortez adjusted the glasses so that she could see Marie above them. "Your mother was very adventurous. I believe you'll be happy to know that this isn't just a vision from my crystal ball--no, I knew her....very well. She was brave and bold and she had your sense of curiosity. She and I were best friends. We grew up together in Chicauca. But of course that had been way before all of the war that's over there today. Anyhow, she had done some research on her family's heritage and found that she was the last living female heir of Zuloft. This meant that she had power running through her blood. This power

was some what of a shield against the curse of the substance of knowledge. With this power she would be able to find the substance and cure all the souls of Mheriche with out being harmed herself. This was a power that no one in the entire universe possessed. When she met your father, she began to strongly believe that she was the one the substance of knowledge had prophesized about--“

“My father is from the mortal-world?”

“Yes he is. He is from Portugal, in fact.”

“Where is that?”

“That’s beside the point. And the *point* Marie is that your mother was not the heir in which the prediction meant. This meant that the whole entire world of Mheriche had to continue in their suffering. When this incident happened everyone had lost hope that the prediction was even true. Most believe that the heir and her mortal-world lover will never rescue them from their horrible fate. This of course led the people to have a terrible grudge against all descendants of Zuloft. I cannot say I am definitely sure about what I’m going to say next, but I believe that your father keeps you hidden from the people because he’s embarrassed. He doesn’t want you or your brothers to make an even bigger fool of him. He doesn’t want you to find out about those dreadful memories of his that he refuses to relive. He keeps hoping that after a few years everyone will forget all that had happened with your mother and he can finally live in peace. But if that is what he believes and why he is so keen to keep your family away from people then he has failed to overlook the fact that no one will forget a curse that stares back at them every time they look in the mirror.”

“So does that mean that now, I’m the only living female heir of Zuloft?” Marie asked waiting impatiently for answers.

“That’s exactly it. You are the only female heir meaning that you are the only one who possesses that power to resist the substance of knowledge’s curse.” Madame Cortez glared at Marie hoping that Marie would understand what she was saying and that she was asking Marie to pick up where her mother left off.

“So you think I should--but I couldn’t--It’s like you said, my father doesn’t want to be embarrassed again. Can you imagine if it were to happen to him twice? I couldn’t. I mean I don’t even know where to look for it.”

“I can tell you this. The honor would be restored to your family if you did break the curse. And if this interests you, which I can tell that it does, then I can also tell you the substance of knowledge is never found in the same place twice. It has been found on the places marked with an ‘X.’” Madame Cortez handed Marie a map. Several cities and places were marked with X’s.

“So where do I even start, *IF* I were to do this?”

“Well I’d look for clues in the last place that it was found.”

“Will they have clues there? Well, I mean what kind of clues? What do I look for?”

“Ah, now we have finally come to a question that I cannot answer--you know, the rule. But I do wish that you would consider this quest as a duty to all the people (and creatures) of Mheriche--God Bless their souls.”

Marie walked outside of the enormous trailer and found herself back in the square with all of the many booths. She glanced down at her watch knowing that she had wasted

a lot of time in there and her father would surely wonder where she had been the whole time. But as she looked at her watch she saw that it hadn't even been a minute. This was impossible. She knew she had been there for at least 40 minutes. In fact her watch seemed to show the time that she left the garden. Her watch simply had to be wrong. She decided to ask someone who had a proper watch. But after asking six people, all of them replied with the same answer. It seemed that no time had passed. As much as this puzzled Marie, she didn't complain because it meant her father would not be suspicious of her whereabouts. She was interrupted from her thoughts by the screaming of a man.

"Please, don't do this, please!" cried the man.

Soldiers from the aggressive country of Morvano had stationed themselves in Gimolas and were taking over the city with their taxes. This man it seemed was being punished for not paying the taxes and refusing to ever pay them. They were beating the man with clubs and sticks. He screamed with agonizing pain with every strike. Bruises and discoloration appeared on the man's body and tears clouded his eyes and voice. "Please!" he cried. But apparently it was not the beating he was upset over. He reached out his hand to his wife that was being taken away in a carriage by the Morvinian soldiers.

"Marie, having no regard for discipline and holding of the tongue quickly protested. "EXCUSE ME!" She helped the man up to his feet. "How can you do this to the poor man (she turned to the man) Are you alright?" the man simply threw his face in his hands and cried hysterically.

"Who are you, woman, to question the authority of Morvano?"

“My name is Marie Prince and I don’t question the authority of Morvano, I *demand* that it end.”

“You will hold your tongue woman or you will be dealt with.”

“Deal with me as you will but I will not silence my tongue, for I speak for all the people of Gimolas.” She looked around knowing that everyone was happy that she had spoken up, but no one supported her or stood up for her. The Morvinian soldiers began walking toward Marie with handcuffs. She ran to Kana and rode off.

She was enough ahead of the soldiers to lose them in the forest. She knew it would be safer to run to her garden but she wanted to run to the familiarity and comfort of her own home. The soldiers were catching up so Marie took a few paths that led them far enough from the main road to be lost in the forest for a good 45 minutes. After they could not find her and realized they had traveled to far off course they simply gave up on her and tried to find a way back.

She took the same broken-in path through the forest bringing her to the still vibrant green prairies of West Gimolas. The small cottage was now in sight. One would hardly know a cottage was there what with all of the plants and flowers surrounding the place. An arch covered in roses accented the cobblestone walkway to the cottage door. She opened the door quietly to find William, Peter, and Jack sitting at the table eating breakfast. It was clear that Peter and Jack had just wakened. It was obvious by their messy blond hair and sleepy eyes. Mouthfuls of warm, buttered pancakes were interrupted quite often by yawns and stretches. William, however, looked very neat as he always did. His hair was combed and he was already in his most sophisticated attire for some meeting he was having that day. He was too responsible for an 18 year old. Their

father, Marie guessed, had already left. She sighed at the thought of this and sat down to join her siblings for a delicious breakfast.

Her decision

Marie mostly stared at her chocolate chip pancakes. William noticed that she wasn't eating her favorite meal. "Marie, can I see you in the den, please?"

"Right now?" She asked wishing deeply that she could get out of another William lecture.

"Yes, right now." They walked into the hall to the room at the end. He shut the door and William sat on the sofa. Marie sat on the sofa opposite William.

"So..."

"So, where have you been? You sneak out every morning and now you're back later than usual."

"Haven't you ever wanted to ask about our isolation? Doesn't it ever bother you that we're not like other people?"

"Marie you know it would be rude to ask such things. This is how father wants it for us. He's only doing what's best. Besides, I like it quiet. Who would want to live in the city with all of that noise?"

"You sound just like him. Never mind."

"I am *not* just like him! Don't you ever say that again. He doesn't spend time with his family; he's a workaholic drunk who cares about nothing but himself. I am NOTHING like him!" William got up and turned away from Marie. His hand was now rested on the door frame leading to the hallway. His head was hanging low.

“Look I’m sorry! I know you’re nothing like him,” said Marie apologetically, “I’m just so angry with him for never being here and keeping us locked up like animals.”

“I know okay. I mean I’ve been locked up too, ya know? What I wouldn’t give to just be out there, being a part of everyone. I mean what’s everyone got against us anyway?”

“William, just between me and you, I found out about everything today. There was a woman at the cultural parade--“

“You snuck out to the cultural parade? Is that where you’ve been?”

“Yes. But it was the most extraordinary thing. She was like a gypsy or something. She knew mom and...” Marie continued to tell William everything that had been said while she was with Madame Cortez. William seemed more than shocked about this. Marie, however, failed to mention the fact that Madame Cortez thinks she could be the answer to the prediction and she didn’t tell him about the uproar she had caused with the soldiers. She didn’t want to give William more information than he could handle.

Dinner that night was even more quiet than usual. William wasn’t arguing with their father about going to fight in the Chicauca-Morvinian War like he usually was and Jack and Peter weren’t fighting over whose turn it was to wash the dishes. Even their dog Stanch seemed to bark less often. Tension was definitely rising in the Prince cottage. With all this quiet, their father didn’t even seem to notice that the normal chaos wasn’t there.

That night after dinner when everyone had finally gone to sleep she slipped outside the cottage door and rode on Kana to her very secret garden. There staring at the stars as usual she thought about a lot more than just her fairy tale dreams of wearing a

white, flowing dress dancing on the water with her soul mate. Tonight she thought of the prediction. Could she in fact be the answer to the prediction? What if she was? What if in the end she brought peace and happiness to her world? What if she could restore her family's honor? These things all sounded very worthwhile. But then again she might not be the answer to the prediction. Her father would have to relive the humiliation yet again. Marie so desperately wanted to see the world and meet people who didn't know who she was. This, she thought, was a sign. This was a sign that this was her chance to do just that--to get away from her cage--to break her chains that gripped ever so tightly on the cottage in Gimolas.

She decided on her ride back home from the garden that she would indeed go on this journey or this quest--whatever it was. She needed some adventure in her life. Though she was risking future mortification for her family it seemed worth it somehow. The fact that the Morvinian police were after also influenced her decision a bit. She decided she would get some sleep tonight and then head out in the morning. This way she would have plenty of time to pack and to give Kana a good rest before a long ride.

The next morning, Marie realized that she had slept a lot longer than she meant to. This meant that when she reached the Colossal Desert on the other side of Gimolas it would be midday. Midday meant extreme temperatures--dangerous temperatures. She groaned at the thought of how hot it would become. After packing a few clothes, some food and a little bit of money, Marie sat down at the kitchen table and wrote a note to her brothers and her father (who probably wouldn't even notice she was gone until he read this).

Dear family,

I've decided that I need to get away from here. This cottage can no longer be my prison.

I'm tired of living in secrecy. Hopefully this journey will lead me to getting back our family honor. I want nothing more than to make you proud. I shall do my best. Wish me luck. I'll try to keep in touch as much as possible. May God be with you all.

Love always,

Marie Prince

She left the note on the table right in front of the freshly picked sunflowers from her garden where she had been the night before. She covered her eyes when she walked outside the cottage. The sun was rising fast and it would soon be 10:00. This road--well path since she was the only one that every really used it--was more than familiar to Marie. She had traveled down this path twice a day for years. But this time she wouldn't go underneath the waterfall and head for her garden. Instead she would continue down the cliff until she reached Gimolas. So off she rode on the back of her beloved companion into the city. She traveled down the all too familiar path and finally reached the end of the wood. She stood, for a moment, on top of the cliff, glancing down at all the buildings and all the specks (which were people and shops and houses). At the sight of the city she smiled and continued down. This was the city that seemed so inviting and yet had such a dark side the Marie felt obligated to change. The laughter and music she had heard from her garden sounded like the people lived in so much joy and excitement. But Marie had finally realized what it was like "in their shoes." For the past year Morvinian soldiers

had occupied the city of Gimolas and God knows where else. The reason for the occupation--Marie didn't know.

So it begins

When Marie reached Towne Square of Gimolas she was surprised to see that Madame Cortez's trailer was still there. She looked around to be sure Morvinians didn't see her. She knocked on the door and walked in. She was happy to see all the different fabrics and colors hanging from the ceiling and all the books lying unorganized all over the room. "Madame Cortez? Are you here? I really need to talk to you. Madame Cor--"

"Marie, I'm so glad you've made the right decision. What was it that you needed to ask me?" She let Marie ask the questions even though she knew what Marie was about to ask.

"Well...yes, I have decided to go on this...quest. I was just wondering; let's say I do find the substance somehow with the clues I find. What...I mean how...well how do I ask it to cure all the curses? I mean...do I say some sort of incantation or what?"

"I hate to tell you this dear, but that is another question I can't answer. But I will tell you this. The substance of knowledge knows who you are. It will only answer to one that is worthy of its answers. But, when you decide how to retrieve its powers do not abuse this privilege. No one was intended to know all--"

"But you do."

"Well, honey, that is my curse. I myself tried to retrieve the powers of the substance with your mother. She died instantly instead of bearing a lifelong curse. I on

the other hand asked for the gift of foresight. Well that wish ended up coming true but it has been a great punishment. I am unable to speak of important things of the future. It's like I told you if I or anyone else changes the future in any way the destiny of all will be undone. I have more fear and less happiness than anyone because I know of all the catastrophic disasters that will soon come to take place. Do you see how this has cursed me?"

"Yes." Marie had never thought the gift of foresight would be such a bad thing but the way Madame Cortez had put it seemed pretty awful. Madame Cortez had given Marie some advice: "I wouldn't tell *anyone* about what you're doing. It's a dangerous task and you could get in a heap of trouble if the secret were to get out. Promise me you'll be careful." Marie indeed did promise and had good intentions on keeping that promise. After receiving some hot tea and bagels from Madame Cortez she fed a little to Kana and rode off. She was now farther away from home than she had ever been. Behind her was her past and everything she had ever known. She was now stepping into the *unknown*. It was almost frightening and exciting all at once. She ventured on taking a deep breath and opened her eyes to the new sights she would soon encounter. She was in East Gimolas and the Colossal Desert was only a few miles away. This ride had not been the least bit boring for Marie. She saw all sorts of people and creatures walking in different shops, seeming to be quite happy. If she didn't know better she would think people didn't mind the sort of being they were. But she knew deep down they hated the way they were.

Little did anyone know that she was off to...well hopefully...save them. She felt proud that she was doing something so big for all the people in her world. She just hoped

that she was the right person for the job. Now, it was only an hour ride until the desert came upon her. All around her Gimolas culture flourished. There, to her left was a little boy playing a flute by a narrow stream. On the right were two women hanging their clothes out to dry. A few miles later there was a dance floor where couples were dancing to Celtic music and soaking up the sunlight. But when she entered the desert, this is when all the scenery seemed less dense. Every now and then there was a little café or stable out in the middle of nowhere. The animated green grass that had covered most of Gimolas was now fading into bright yellow sand. The occasional wind felt cool on her sweaty forehead. But with the wind came miniature dust storms which made it difficult to see or to figure out her direction.

An hour later and very tired of riding, she was now in the middle of Colossal Desert. It was now 12:000--exactly midday. This was the hottest part of the day. She was already starting to feel overheated and dehydrated after only two minutes. Kana was beginning to be quite exhausted herself. She had never been ridden this much at a time before and was very out of shape for a horse. She was quite fat but still one of the most beautiful palominos you've ever seen. Ten minutes went by....twenty...an hour...two hours....and on and on she traveled through the desert. The blistering sun was bright and felt like it was scorching her mangled body. Sweat had come from every inch of her and fatigue had struck her as quick as lightning. The air was so thick that she could barely breathe. Her whole body ached, for she had never ridden on Kana so long. She wanted to be out of the sun and somewhere cool where she could drink and rest. She thought about this wonderful daydream and she hadn't realized that she was almost out of the

desert. She would definitely be in the mountains where trees were abundant in about 35 minutes. So she trudged on.

Somehow...she had no recollection of anything after that first sight of the distant mountains. She awoke from a restful sleep in a tent. She had no idea where she was or where Kana was and how they gotten here. She heard faint drums and some sort of singing. She opened the tent very slowly to peek outside. These were natives. She had read about the natives of the mountains: how they looked, how they dressed, how they sang and danced (and played drums). This had to be the Cockran tribe.

“Nawotep.” a native said to her.

“Huh?” Marie replied having no idea what the man had said.

“It means hello in Cockranian.” said another man looking quite like she did (meaning he wasn’t a native or a creature of any sort but a regular human).

“Where am I?” She had meant to say hello but ‘where am I’ sort of slipped out.

“You are on the tallest of the Cockran Mountains. You are in the realm of the Cockran Tribe. My, my, my...” Marie looked puzzled by his intrigue of her. “How remarkable.”

“What’s remarkable?”

“It’s just that you’re...well...you’re normal.”

“Thank you...I guess.”

“Oh, I’m sorry that came out wrong...I--“

“Never mind it, my name is Thomas...Thomas Warren.”

“Hi, I’m Marie....Marie Prince.” She shook his hand. He was very handsome...VERY HANDSOME! “So how did I get here?”

“Oh yes, that. You and your extraordinary palomino were found in the desert. Your horse was sort of just standing there with her tail in your face, while you were unconscious.” He told her of how she had been found very weak in the desert sand and how she had been brought here by Thomas himself to the tribe so that they could nurse her back to health.

It was nightfall now. The stars in the sky reminded of her of her garden. It sort of made her feel better to see the same thing she saw when she was happily lying in the grass in her garden. She could almost hear the sound of the waterfall and the crickets...the smell of the baby rose buds blooming in the spring. She missed home now.

But she *was* happy to be away from home. “So Thomas what brought you here?” She asked him while enjoying a delicious meal of turkey, potatoes, and corn.

“Well I was on business. I was coming from the west and I needed to get to Chicauca and I, like you, needed food and water after traveling through the desert and these people gave me care.”

“Oh you’re from the west? Where about?” she asked.

“I...am from...,” he looked down at Marie’s map very quickly, “Gimolas...yes that’s where I’m from.”

“Oh. Really? Me too.” She wished she hadn’t said that. If he was from Gimolas he surely knew about their family. But maybe he didn’t. He didn’t seem to have a curse. But that wasn’t possible. The only ones who didn’t have a curse were....well her family...and the royalty of Talimar. Either he was somehow related to her or he was an heir to royalty. This made her wonder not only if he were a future King or not but also, she had never asked Madame Cortez why she hadn’t had a curse. Usually the curse of

the one who sought the substance of knowledge passed down to their descendants. That meant that every child, grandchild, great-grandchild, etc. would have this curse. But she nor her brothers, nor her father had this curse. Then she remembered. Jean Zuloft was her ancestor and he never received a curse. Her mother's curse had come to her after she and her brothers were born so the curse couldn't have been passed genetically. This was all so confusing to Marie, and yet it made since in a lot of ways. Marie had obviously been staring out into space for a long time because Thomas waved his hand in front of her.

"Oh sorry." she came back to reality.

"So what brought you to this side of the world?" Thomas asked.

She knew she couldn't tell him the truth so she made up an answer. "I...I'm traveling the world." she answered.

"Hmm. That's sounds fun. So where ya headed next?"

"Um...I don't know, just wherever ya know?"

"Right." he didn't seem convinced. "Well since you and I both are heading east-- well that's assuming you were heading east; I mean...I don't think you'd want to go back through the desert-- why don't we go together. I hate traveling on my own."

"Oh...um...I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Well for starters I don't even know you."

"Oh that. Well how about I just show you the way out of the mountains and then we could both be on our way. The mountains are very treacherous, mind.

"Well I think I can handle it by myself thanks."

“Your independence is admired but pride is a sin.”

“It’s not pride its truth and truth is definitely not a sin.”

He laughed. She in turn laughed as well. It was true even though she didn’t know this man, she didn’t know the way to Port Williamson, and that was the only way to get to Chicauca. Chicauca was the last place the substance was found. She needed to look there for clues. So, she knew she might regret this later she asked him to come along. He seemed quite excited to being going with her.

One thing she noticed in the whole hour that she was with him is that he seemed to be a bit arrogant. He always talked of how respected he was at home (even though Marie had never heard of him--well she never really heard anything as far away from town as she was). He told her heroic tales of how he slayed many ferocious beasts and fought the best fighters and had lain with the most beautiful women.

She was nonetheless annoyed. She was mostly quiet because Thomas had a lot to say, nevertheless, she enjoyed some company over none. Kana and Thomas’ beautiful white horse Serena were walking down the snow-covered slopes ignoring all of Thomas’ tales. How Marie wished she could be so unaware.

The view from the mountains was breathtaking. The icy peak of the mountain held large amounts of pure white snow that sparkled in the sunlight. Down below was a large city with tall buildings, but beyond that was a massive beach that entered a crystal clear sea. There was the city of Port Williamson where (she had read) all imports came and all exports left. It was the largest city on the west island. And now Marie Prince was about to experience it for herself.

Port Williamson

When Marie and Thomas reached the bottom of the mountain pass, they headed to a café. The journey from the tallest of the Chicaucan Mts. had taken almost 12 hours. They had stopped twice to rest and taken short naps, but they hadn't eaten since the feast they had had with the tribe. They were starving. They walked into Café de le Mare after tying up Kana and Serena. She was glad to be out of the blistering cold and next to a warm fireplace. The cozy cottage-like feel of the café warmed her up immediately. Marie had little money and Thomas had strange foreign money. He didn't order anything; instead, he pulled out some wine and cigars from his back pack, while Marie ordered a bagel and a cappuccino.

"Why do you carry wine and cigars in there? I mean I'm no traveling expert or anything but shouldn't use your space wisely. Where do you keep your clothes and food and money? You must carry some sort of weapon, some rope, maybe--just incase?" asked Marie.

"No why would I need all of that?"

"I'm just wondering why you don't carry something useful in that bag of yours."

"It's all useful, you see, what would my day be if I didn't start with a brandy or a nice glass of wine with some sweet smelling cigars?"

“They’re both terrible for your health. They’ll kill you, ya know.” she protested with the knowledge she had learned from her books.

“Thanks for your bit of knowledge, but they’re both good for the soul. This reminds of that time when I was but a mere tyke. I was strolling along minding my own business when all of a sudden a dragon started tormenting the city. But I knew what I had to do. I stepped right up to that dragon and--“

“That really is enough Mr. Warren. I’m sick of your fairy tales!”

“What do you mean *fairy tales*?”

“Look, you escorted me to perfect safety down the mountain pass. It’s time we go our separate ways right?”

His jaw dropped. He seemed offended. “Fine, then you can find Chicauca on your own.”

“That’s the way I intended it.” Marie retorted.

They did not speak the entire time Marie ate her breakfast and Thomas smoked his own cigars.

“Excuse me, ma’am! I believe we’re done here.” Marie yelled. “I don’t want to have to stay with you longer than I have to.” she glanced at Thomas with evil eyes.

“Well you don’t have to be so rude about it. I understand that you’re jealous of my bravery and courage but you don’t have to be so--“

“Hold it right there! I’m NOT jealous. Why would I be jealous of someone so pathetic that he has to make up stories so he can feel better about himself? Sorry jealousy is definitely not the feeling that’s arising here. It’s more like irritation, need of separation, you get the idea?” Marie said sarcastically.

“UH! Somebody’s got something stuck up her--“

“Here is your bill Miss Prince.” said the waitress.

“Thanks.” Marie said staring at Thomas with fixating eyes.

They were eager to get away from each other. They tried their best to stay as far away from each other as possible but this was hard since they were going in the same direction and there was no different route. They agreed that they would board two different ships and head for two different ports of Chicauca.

When they finally reached the harbor of Port Williamson it began raining. Marie took off the blanket under Kana’s saddle and held it over her head. Kana and Serena ran underneath a large tree. “Great! This is exactly what I need--a good storm to keep me here next to you for even longer.” yelled Marie. She wrung out her soaking hair and attempted to brush off the excess water on her dress.

“Well it’s no picnic for me either, *sweetie!*” Thomas turned and walked away.

“Oh and where are you going?”

“Well technically it’s none of your business, but if you must know I’m going to find a hotel.” he said.

“Well so am I. Where’s a different hotel than the one you’re staying at?”

“Sorry, Honey, there’s only one hotel in Port Williamson.

“You’re joking. Fine I’ll just stay on a different floor.

“Fine. You’ll have a hard time finding a room on the second floor.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because there is no second floor.”

“Well I can stay in a room far away from yours.”

“That, you can, and I hope you do.”

When they arrived in the hotel lobby they were unfortunate to hear that there was only one room available. But they both had to stay somewhere so they agreed almost unwillingly to stay in the same room. So they walked to room 67 and opened the door. It was obvious that this room was very cheap. There was one bed and a table next to it. In the corner was a lamp and a broken wooden chair. The bathroom was in the hall to be shared by everyone on that side of the hotel. Gross!

Marie sat her backpack on the bed and flopped on the bed.

“What makes you think you get to sleep on the bed?” Thomas exclaimed

“I paid for the room! What do you expect?”

“Yes well I would have paid for the room had they accepted my money.”

“What is that money anyway? Where is it from?”

“It’s...it’s just really...ancient.”

“Right! You know what I really don’t even care what you have to say. Oh and here are some blankets and a pillow--enjoy the floor.”

Marie was so angry. She had never met anyone other than her family. But she was starting to understand why her father was keeping her from the rest of the world. If all people were this arrogant and idiotic then she was quite glad her father had spared her this aggravation. It wasn’t hard for Marie to go to sleep that night. The rain on the tin roof of the hotel was like sweet lullabies to Marie. All was quiet; all was calm. This was so relaxing. This was the most relaxed she had been since she left her beloved garden. That was until the silence was broken.

“Marie, are you still awake?”

“Yes, now I am thanks!”

“I just wanted to apologize. Believe it or not all those stories I told you were fake.”

“Imagine that!” Marie said acerbically.

“I just...well I mean you’re just really pretty and....well...really nice and I’m nothing. What would you like about a plain old guy like me?”

Marie thought hard. The only thing she liked about him was the fact that he was amazingly handsome and he had a muscular body and a really cute butt, a charming accent and--oh she had to stop thinking such things. This was a complete stranger. She was on a mission. She had no time to lust over Thomas. Oh but he was so attractive and he liked her. Well it seemed like he liked her.

“Thomas, I haven’t really been given the chance to get to know you. I just hated it when you made up those dumb stories. But You’re kind for bringing me to the Cockran Mts. when I fell in the desert. Which I don’t think I properly thanked you for. So....thanks.”

“Is that a way of saying we’re on speaking terms again?”

“Yes, I suppose...since we are stuck with each other, we should speak.”

“Well goodnight, I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Alright, goodnight.” They both fell into a deep sleep until they awoke at 9:00 the next morning. Marie stretched as she realized it was morning and paused for a moment to remember where she was. As she glanced around the room noticing the moth-eaten curtains and stained carpet, she remembered. There on the floor curled in a ball

was Thomas. She remembered that they were on speaking terms again, which she was glad about. You have no idea how hard it is stay angry at someone that good looking.

“No, don’t kill...innocent.” He jerked and tossed and turned. “Please, sir, she doesn’t deserve it.” Thomas woke up as if frightened by a nightmare. He looked up to see Marie staring at him. His face was pale and he was covered in a cold sweat. The look of shock was stressed by his heavy breathing and aware eyes. Marie wondered what in the world he was dreaming about that made him sweat like he was. But, she shrugged her shoulders and went into the bathroom to shower and change clothes. When she finally was ready she saw that Thomas was still in the same state as he sat on the edge of the bed staring out the window. The only thing it seemed he had done while she was in the bathroom was change shirts. The look of terror was on his face. When Thomas saw that Marie was looking at him he tried to pretend like nothing was wrong but Marie could tell something was terribly upsetting him.

They checked out of the little inn and fetched the horses from the stable behind the hotel. They headed once again for the harbor of Port Williamson. When they were halfway there Marie asked Thomas if they could have a look around. After all she had never seen this place and was instantly intrigued by it when she saw it. They went to Williamson Square where all the action of the city took place. They saw all sorts of different clothing shops and candy stores and restaurants. They had spent a couple of hours of window shopping at all the fascinating displays. Marie had no idea that things like fashion existed. Thomas was amused by her amazement with the displays. It wasn’t long before they were once again heading to the harbor. On the way to the kennel where

Kana and Serena were staying at--which the horses seemed to fully enjoy their stay at this place--Marie's backpack was stolen.

"Hey you, come back here with that." She jumped on Kana and Thomas jumped on Serena. They charged after the robber. Kana and Serena went from a trot to a fast paced run in a matter of seconds. The robber was very far ahead of them and he was able to go through alleyways that were too narrow for the horses.

Almiley McKanne

From out of nowhere a horse was passing them. A girl with long red hair and some sort of uniform (she probably worked at one of the shops) rode on a horse as fast as lightning. It wasn't long before Marie and Thomas were coughing as they inhaled the dust from her trail. She was fast! The robber would soon regret ever stealing Marie's backpack. When he was caught not only was he arrested but he received an awful beating by the girl. She was a remarkable fighter.

The girl handed Marie her backpack. "Thank you so much. Where did you learn to ride like that? That is a fabulous horse." Marie stated

Thomas added, "Yes that is a fabulous horse, but that fighting you did back there was it Karate?"

"You're welcome. I learned to ride right here in Port Williamson from my father. Thank you, I love my horse too. And yes, it was Karate."

"Wow," Marie and Thomas both whispered in awe.

"The name's Almiley McKanne." She stuck out her hand.

"Hi, I'm Marie Prince and this is Thomas Warren. They both shook hands with Almiley. Almiley, Thomas, and Marie all walked back to the animal care shop where

Kana and Serena had been kept. “So this is where you work?” Marie asked as they passed to Morvinian guards look at them like they were guilty. Marie hid her face from them.

“Yes, unfortunately,” she sighed. “I used to be a horse racer. I was in all sorts of prestigious races but they all take place in Chicauca and ever since the war broke out they’ve been cancelled. It’s rotten luck for me since that was my only way of making a living.”

“Oh, how awful.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve been dying to leave this place but I’m afraid to leave the only job I have.”

“Well come with us. We’re going to Chicauca, now. Maybe you could persuade the people over there to host the races somewhere else.”

“YOU’RE GOING TO CHICAUCA? ARE YOU INSANE? THERE’S WAR AND WELL...WAR! YOU CAN’T GO THERE!”

“Well we’re only going to be there for a little while, unless Thomas’ business is going to take long.”

“No, it’ll probably take...as long as you’re going to stay there. Yeah, I think it will work out fine.” Thomas said not too convincingly.

“Well, I do admit, I wish more than anything to be back in the races again. Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“We’re quite sure.” Marie said as she searched through her backpack for some money. “Oh no!”

“What?!”

“You’re not going to believe this. That awful robber stole my money. We have nothing! NO MONEY!”

“It’s alright, Marie I have an idea.” Thomas walked toward the pier and talked to the captain of the ship.

“Oh great. Not another idea. I swear he could hurt himself thinking.” Almiley laughed when Marie said this. Thomas turned back with a depressing expression.

“Well what did he say?” Marie asked even though she knew the answer. This must be what Madame Cortez feels like.

“He was going to Longview. Said he wouldn’t be going back to Chicauca for a few days. I told him we wouldn’t mind riding an extra day or two, but he said that he’s going to have an extremely full load. Soldiers he said.”

“OH. They must be going to help Gimolas and Chicauca. Morvano will definitely be stomped out this time.

“Hey, there! You kids need a ride?” A captain called out from his ship.

“Yes, we do!” Cried Marie.

“I heard your proposition with that other fellow. I’ll be glad to give you a ride for some chores. Lord knows this boat needs some cleaning.”

“Excellent!” exclaimed Marie.

“Uh...Marie....I don’t know about this.”

“Are you serious? This was your idea. Are you now disagreeing with yourself?”

“It wasn’t my idea to ride with a pirate. Pirates are known for their cunning and sly--anyway he’ll back out on the bargain somehow.” The pirate gave a shrewd smirk. Thomas looked horrified but Marie didn’t understand why he was so worried about a

pirate. They had nothing that could be stolen--besides clothes. She had put her horse back in the kennel knowing that no ship would allow Kana on if Marie couldn't offer money.

"Thomas, look, I've got to get to Chicauca. Pirate or not, this is a ride." Thomas obviously understood that this word was final because he did not continue to argue. The pirate showed them to their rooms below deck. The ship was very old and the rooms were even shabbier than the rooms at the inn she and Thomas had stayed in. The rooms had gray walls and old, filthy wood floors. The beds were clearly hand made with bedspreads out of the same material that the curtains were made of. "Wow, this is really nice." Marie said rolling her eyes.

"Well I guess we'd better get started." Almiley declared. They walked up the stairs until they reached the main deck. Marie scrubbed the deck with a mop, while Thomas was polishing the masts and the steering wheel and wiping down the windows that led to the offices. Almiley was preparing food in the kitchens. This gave Marie and Thomas a lot of time to talk.

"So what business do you have in Chicauca?" She saw a strange look in Thomas' amber eyes. "Well, it's okay if you don't want to tell me."

"That's the thing, Marie; I do need to tell you something."

"What it is it?" she asked, so curious that she stopped mopping.

"Well we've spent a lot of time together this week or so. I've really liked getting to know you. I realize how great you are and how you deserve to live until you're an old woman because you deserve life. You've never done anything wrong. You're...you're just really great."

“Thanks, Thomas.” Marie went back to her mopping thinking that what he had to say was a little more important than what he had just said.

“That’s not it. See, I’m not from Gimolas.” Marie once again stopped mopping. “I’m not even...well from here at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Miss Prince, the captain wishes to see you.”

Watery grave

“Right now?” Marie asked the crewman.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“To be continued?” asked Marie looking apologetically at Thomas.

“Marie I know you don’t like when people tell you what to do but I really don’t think you should go see the captain.”

“You’re right. I do hate it when people tell me what to do.” she walked with the crewman to the bottom deck. This deck was much nicer. The walls were a cream color accented with golden light fixtures and lovely red carpeted floors. The doors on this floor were made of radiant cherry wood. A sign over the last door down the corridor said ‘Captain.’ She and the crewman walked in after knocking.

“Marie Prince. How nice it is to see you again. That will be all Cornelius.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How many times do I have to tell you Cornelius my name is not *sir*; it is John. You make me sound so old.”

“Yes, Mr. John Armstrong, sir.” The pirate rolled his eyes and Cornelius left the room.

“Well, well, well. Please, have a seat.” His cold gray eyes were intently gaping at Marie. He had the same familiar sly grin on his face as if he were up to something.

“So what brought you to Port Williamson? Better yet what *is bringing* you to Chicauca in such terrible times?”

“Please, sir, my business is my own.”

“Very well, then I should tell you that you should be very careful with whom you tell your secret to.”

“What secret?” The tone in Marie’s voice was panic.

“You know very well the secret in which I speak. You, though, probably didn’t know that Thomas knows this secret. He knows that you are after the substance of knowledge. He is from the mortal-world and was hired by my cousin Benjamin Armstrong to track you down, to follow you, to kill you and then bring the substance of knowledge back to him.”

“You lie! Thomas is from Gimolas,” she yelled. But then she remembered what he had said right before she left him on the deck. *‘I’m not from Gimolas.’* Tears began to fill her eyes. She couldn’t believe that this was true. She had been traveling with a murderer. Cornelius and another crewman walked in holding Thomas by the wrists. He was in chains.

“Hello, Thomas, glad you could join us. We’re all learning a lot more about each other aren’t we Miss Marie?”

“How could you?” Thomas said with anger.

“So it’s true then. You were going to kill me. That’s what you were trying to say before I came down here. Why? How could you do something like that?”

“Marie I was trying to tell you that my original plan had been to kill you. I was trying to say that I wasn’t going to do it. I really care about you and I don’t want to hurt you. I wasn’t thrilled with killing an innocent girl in the first place.”

“I’m supposed to believe you. You’ve been lying to me this whole time and I’m supposed to believe you and return to your custody. I can never look at you the same way, you filthy son of a--“

“Marie, look, I’m sorry. I’m not proud of this. I’M NOT PROUD OF THIS AT ALL! I just...I just want...I don’t know. I just wish you’d forgive me. I could never harm you.”

Marie ran from the room into the corridor and back onto the main deck. She stared at the deep blue waters as her tears fell like rain. How could this have happened? How could she not know that he was a killer? She remembered looking into his soft amber eyes and glaring at his smooth cinnamon skin. She remembered wanting to be *with* him. But he was a killer. She knew she had to get away from him some how. She wiped her wet face and slowly her vision was becoming less blurry. She slid down to a sitting position on the floor. She thought how stupid she was for ever disregarding her father’s rules. She now understood that the reason her father was keeping them locked up was not all because he was afraid of embarrassment. It was because he wanted to protect them from people--people like Thomas. She looked up when she heard footsteps growing louder. She saw Thomas as pale as a ghost and the Pirate John Armstrong had the unforgettable sly grin which was growing larger by the minute.

“Marie. I’m sorry. Please!” Thomas cried as he fell to his knees.

“I can’t stay on this ship anymore.” she whispered.

“Hey, any of ya’ll hungry?” shouted Almiley as she emerged from the kitchen still in her apron and oven mitts. Her long red hair was blowing in the wind. A storm was approaching. Almiley looked up and saw the overcast and then looked down. It was in that second that she noticed something was not right. Thomas and Benjamin were standing just a few feet from her and Almiley was standing on the edge of the ship. “Is something wrong? This cake....I guarantee, it’ll make you feel better. Mmm...mmm...delicious. Any takers?”

“Stand back, Almiley, this man is a killer.” Thomas now bent down until he was crouched into a tiny little ball, his face in his hands crying hysterically.

“Pull yourself together, mate.” said the Pirate. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say you actually had some kind of feelings for this young lady. Oh...I see...you do.” The pirate laughed as Thomas got to his feet. He slowly walked toward Marie.

“Don’t come near me! I mean it.”

“Marie, please; don’t hate me. I wasn’t ever going to do it. It’s just I wanted to see this world so badly--to prove to everyone that it does exist. I just got my head cloudy about what was truly important. It came down to choosing how badly I wanted to see this world. It was either live in the mortal-world forever where no one believes in this place or come here and rid of some girl I don’t even know. At the time I wanted it that badly. But coming here and meeting you face to face--admiring how absolutely beautiful you are--you’re smart, funny, interesting, and exactly what I want. I’ve never felt like this about any girl before.”

“I’m sorry Thomas, but I can’t bring me myself to believe you. I can’t stay on this ship.” Marie slowly walked onto the plank.

“Marie, what are you doing? Please oh, god, Marie, don’t do it. PLEASE, MARIE, NO!” he ran to the plank.

“If you take one more step forward you will regret it.” she replied.

As afraid as she was, she jumped in. She felt it harder than usual to hold her breath. Her troubled eyes closed as she remembered all of things in the world that mattered to her. Her mother’s portrait over the fireplace, her brothers, her father (which she had a new kind of respect for), her beloved garden (that she would never again see), and bringing the world out of its wretched curse. She did not want to admit that she did see Thomas’ face. It was crazy to think she might have had feelings for a complete stranger--from the mortal-world-- that she’s only known for a couple of days. It was stupid. But, however hard she tried to push him from her mind, he was always there. His messy auburn hair and amber eyes were hypnotizing her so that she almost forgot she was drowning.

“HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?!” Thomas yelled with fire raging behind his eyes and his voice.

“Calm down dear boy. Look at the bright side at least you didn’t have to kill her. I mean of course you could consider yourself the blame for it--any who, you now have a clear path to the substance of knowledge.”

“I DON’T CARE ABOUT THE DAMN SUBSTANCE YOU BASTARD!”

“Language, Thomas!” But Thomas didn’t stick around to hear this last bit of advice of the pirate’s. He jumped into the raging sea yelling out:

“Marie, I won’t let you die!”

Almiley responded to all of this action by yelling out, “Well they’re doing it; what the hell!” she dropped her platter of cake and jumped in the water after Thomas.

“That’s my apron,” yelled the pirate. “You’ll have to pay for that!”

Meanwhile, Thomas frantically searched and searched until he could not swim anymore from exhaustion. His eyes were burning from the water. He had no breath left to hold. He had to find the surface. But it was too late his eyes closed and the air was let of his lungs and he slowly sunk to the bottom. His last thought was that he failed in rescuing her. She was surely dead now. And now, he would die with her.

It wasn’t until he awoke that he noticed he was lying on a sandy beach. He spat out the excess sand that had piled into his mouth and nostrils. He ran his fingers through his hair to rid of the sand and bugs there as well.

When everything came into focus He saw nothing but ocean ahead of him. At first he was glad that his life had been spared somehow but then he remembered that awful thought that raced through his mind right when he fainted. The lump in his throat grew stronger. He had tried to hold back his tears. It was no use. He yelled and cried for all of Mheriche to hear. He just couldn’t accept that she was dead.

Marie wasn’t dead though. She too had been washed upon a shore. Upon awakening her first instinct was yelling for Thomas. She couldn’t help but think of him. He had been planning to kill her. He was a murderer for crying out loud. She felt guilty for thinking of nothing but him when the whole world’s fate was in her hands. She felt naïve for believing Thomas when he said that he wasn’t going to kill her. She wished now that she was with him and that they were laughing and talking and flirting. She had

stronger feelings for him now than ever before. Maybe it was true what they say.

Distance makes the heart grow fonder! It had to be true.

Reunion

She had no idea where she was. She was on a white beach surrounded by thick, impassable bushes. She carried a Machete in her back pack and used it to cut down as much bushes as possible. She was going to search every inch of this island for civilization. She would search as long as necessary until she could find a way to get back to Thomas. So, hours went by with her chopping away at the bushes. She came to a large area that was quite clear of uncontrollable bushes. But she was not alone. There was someone sitting there by a campfire. She was relieved that there was some light other than the full moon shining on her. The infinite calls of the animals of the wild were beginning to frighten her. She was more than relieved to have some place warm to sleep, that was if this person would allow her to.

“Excuse me. I was wondering if you would allow me to sleep here for tonight. I swear I’ll be gone tomorrow morn--Oh my God, Almiley?”

“Marie, thank God you’re okay.” she hugged Marie. Then she punched Marie in the shoulder.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“Because you’re an idiot. Who in their right mind would jump of the back of a ship?”

“It was a plank, Almiley.” Almiley gave her a stern look. “Um, you wouldn’t happen to have seen Thomas, would you?”

“Oh my lord you two are crazy. First you’re getting along fine then you hate him and now you miss him. Please strike me dead if I ever fall in love.”

“I don’t love him.”

“Oh yes you do! And he loves you too.”

“Really? You think so?”

“No, I know so. Not even a professional could perform that kind of acting. That was real--that whole falling to your knees and begging forgiveness thing. And plus if all he cared about was the substance of knowledge then why did he jump in the ocean after you and risk his own life trying to save yours?”

“He did that?”

“Yes, he did that. You know...I’ll bet he’s on this island right now.”

“Seriously! Let’s go.”

Almiley grabbed Marie’s wrist. “Hold it, sister! Why not rest a little and look for him in the morning?”

“Because I’ve got to see him now!”

“You’re not gonna find him with it being this dark and you being as tired as you are. You look dreadful--I mean that with the utmost respect.”

Marie laughed and they sat down by the fire talking about their lives and what they were going to do when all of this was over.

“So,” Marie went on, “you’re an only child?”

“Oh no, I have two older sisters. You?”

“An older brother and two younger brothers.”

“Wow...and your dad’s like a workaholic?”

“Yes!”

“Hmm. So where’s your mom?”

“She died.”

“That’s awful. How?”

Marie trusted Almiley enough to tell her the secret. She went on telling Almiley about Madame Cortez and that her mother had died while trying to retrieve the powers of the substance.

Then it was Almiley’s turn to explain what was going on with Morvano’s aggression. Morvano’s dictator--Albar Duvesk--had taken over almost all of the East Island. It was his mission to take over Mheriche and put Talimar out of power. Morvano originally had a lot of respect because everyone was fed up with the rule of the Talimar Kings. They imposed ridiculous taxes and unjust laws and cruel punishment for innocents. But when Duvesk gained power he took advantage of the people and became an even worse dictator than the Talimar Kings. Morvinian soldiers now occupied every major city of Mheriche. Albar Duvesk had his thumb on their entire world. And it was up to Longview, Chicauca, and Gimolas to stop them.

Marie and Almiley took turns yawning and finally fell asleep. The next morning they woke up and lit another fire to cook some fish Almiley had piled up. “You sure do know a lot about the wilderness and fighting and stuff.” Said Marie.

“Yeah it’s come in handy. I was kind of a loner when I was kid so I just read all these books about survival and self-defense. One day, I ran away from home and my mom was so worried. But she was so surprised at how good I looked after being in the wilderness for two weeks. She was worried that I hadn’t eaten or slept or kept warm.

But I was in perfect condition. That was probably my proudest moment...well, until my first victory in the races.”

After they ate breakfast, Marie and Almiley headed toward the other side of the island, still cutting their own path with a machete. When they had just reached the other side of the bushes, they found an empty bottle of Chardonnay.

“It’s Thomas. I know he’s here. This is his.” Sure enough they found a trail of footsteps and stumbled upon the opposite side of the island Marie had been on. They found Thomas sitting on the beach allowing the waves to splash on him. Marie and Almiley noticed the closer they got to him that he had not shaved and was growing a beard. When they were almost 10 feet from him they noticed he was sobbing quietly.

He yelled out into the sky. “I’m so sorry Marie,” he hid his face in his hands and then wiped away his tears. “If I could just get you back...If you’d just come back to me I swear, I’d make it worth your while!”

“Really, how?” Marie asked him. Thomas’ head jerked around to see a smile and tears on Marie’s face.

“OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD....OH M’GOD! MARIE! IT’S YOU...OH M’GOD!” He ran to her and took her in his arms lifting her into the air and spinning her around until they fell onto the sand. He ran his fingers through her long, curly brown hair. “Marie, how can I ever apologize and prove to you that I care about you and that I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I think you just did.” He smiled and kissed her. Marie’s stomach turned into a gigantic knot and it was as though butterflies were flying all around inside her. In her

mind she saw fireworks bursting and the passionate kiss that was so fulfilling and so satisfying.

“Wow!” they both whispered. That whole night they could barely keep their eyes off of each other (needless to say they couldn’t keep their lips off of each other either).

“Well this is rather awkward.” said Almiley as she prepared dinner.

“Sorry,” Marie laughed. “Thomas, do you think you could tell me about the mortal world? I’m dying to know about it. I only just found out that our world is not the real world.”

“It’s not?!” asked Almiley so completely shocked that she was allowing the fish to burn.

“Well the mortal-world is boring compared to this world. Everyone is so caught up with T.V. and cell phones and Five-Star hotels andwell, money.”

“What’re a T.V. and a cell phone and what do they mean by ‘Five-Star’ hotel?”

“Well they’re just inventions of a later time. See our world is much more advanced than yours but that’s definitely not a bad thing for you. I mean your skies...they’re not polluted, your oceans...they’re not filled with oil and toxic waste. The people here...they really care about family and morals--well most of them (he considered John Armstrong). There are so many interesting creatures here and it’s like the ‘Lord of the Rings’ has come to life?

“What’s the Lord of the Rings?”

“It’s just a mortal-world book.”

“Oh. So where did you live?” Almiley asked.

“I live in a town in Surrey called Walton-on-Thames.”

“I bet it’s gorgeous there.”

“Well not to someone who’s lived in England his entire life.”

“So how did you come across the substance of knowledge?” asked Marie who was dying to know the answer to this question.

“Well, I’ve always been interested mythology. I was actually studying it at Cambridge University. My professor seemed to believe that the substance of knowledge was real. I thought it nonsense at first. But there were so many accounts of it in ancient books from completely different people who’ve said they’ve come across it and received a terrible curse. After doing a lifetime worth of research I started believing in it myself. I only needed to find the portal to this world. Then I could find it. Who wouldn’t want to ask the substance a few questions? But I had read about the curses it gives out so, the substance of knowledge was no longer my target.

“No, now I only wanted to find this world. I interviewed people, descendants of these people who wrote the accounts. I had gotten a job as a teacher assistant in a high school teaching a mythology class. A student in my class asked me about the substance of knowledge. Although I wanted very badly to tell him everything I knew about it right there on the spot I told him that he’d have to wait until class was over and then I’d answer his question. It was difficult to keep my mind on my lesson when all I could think about was why the child wanted to know about it and how he had ever even heard it.

“Finally when the class was over, he stayed after to ask me. I summarized everything that I knew about it. But, when I asked him why he was so curious, he told me his grandfather knew a lot about it but wouldn’t tell him much. He told me his

grandfather wouldn't mind if I dropped by to interview him. So I did. This man by the name of Benjamin Armstrong--who looked almost identical to the pirate John Armstrong--told me he would show me portal to this world if I did him a favor."

"He wanted you to kill me."

"Yes! He said that you were a threat to everything he was planning. He asked me to follow you and learn where the substance was, kill you, steal the substance and then bring it back to him."

The Secret powers and the Sea of Loren

"So why am I threat to him?" she asked.

“Well, he knows that you’re the heir of Zuloft. He knows that you possess powers that are able to stop whatever it is that he’s planning. All that I know is that it can’t be good. If he’s willing to risk an innocent girl’s life then he’s up to something and that something isn’t nice.”

“What is the power that runs through by blood? I mean I know--*if* I’m the heir that the substance’s prediction suggests than I have some sort of shield against the curse but if that’s the power that he’s talking about then he’s dumb for wanting to kill me. I’m the only one who can retrieve the powers from the substance without receiving a curse. If he wanted something from the substance than he would need me.”

“Well, I can assure you, he’s not dumb, mind you. He is very clever. You must possess some power other than just a shield. Perhaps you have powers like Jean Zuloft. After all he was a powerful wizard.”

“So what powers did he possess?”

“All I know about Jean Zuloft is that he had the power to create a whole other world. He had the power to destroy the substance for he and his council were the only ones who knew how.”

“But I have no idea how to destroy the substance. If I am indeed the answer to this prediction then why haven’t I noticed that I have all of this power?”

“I don’t know.”

That was the end of their long discussion about the secret powers of the heir of Zuloft. Marie felt more powerful even though she wasn’t sure if she was the heir in which the prediction spoke of. Almiley was obsessed with how excellent the wine from

the mortal-world was. She drank almost half of Thomas wine stock that he kept in his backpack.

“Go easy, there, Almiley, that’s all I’ve got.” He laughed.

“You are ssssthoow pwitty?” Her speech was now so slurred from her drinking that Thomas and Marie could no longer understand her. After a while Almiley had passed out and Thomas had carried her to a hut he had built.

When he came back, he sat down by Marie. The fire was slowing dying so he added another log. The sun was setting. It was so beautiful. The strokes of color were dancing in the sky and the reflection of the sun on the water was so tranquil. If only she could stay in this moment forever. Marie and Thomas were talking about how they grew up and about their families and pretty much every thing under the sun. When the sun went down they still weren’t very tired but he poured water over the fire and lie next to each other.

“I’m really glad I met you.” Said Thomas as he caressed her face.

“Yeah, me too!” Thomas kissed her and the same magic from the last kiss arose in her. Yet this time it was somewhat different. The moon was shining brightly on his face and nothing could take her eyes off of him. His bare chest was warm and inviting. She kissed his chest and his stomach and marveled at the muscles that were cut into his sun-kissed body. Thomas’ hands had moved up her thigh to her waist. It wasn’t long before both his hands were searching every inch of her body. The waves were crashing against their sizzling, exposed bodies. As his fingertips touched her she almost left sanity. His lips and tongue danced on her skin, moving from her lips to her neck. Not knowing what he would do next was more than exciting to Marie.

The intense pleasure he was giving her caused chills to race down her spine. She could barely breathe. This night, she hoped, would never end. But like all things it did after an amazing and exhilarating climax. Their hot and sweating bodies stayed merged as they slept.

The next morning luckily they woke up before Almiley. This gave them time to find their clothes and fix breakfast. There was an uncomfortable silence among the three of them that morning. "So what did *you two* do last night?" asked Marie, smiling.

"What do you mean?" asked Marie as she walked away. Almiley smiled at Thomas. She knew. And she'd never let it down.

Thomas, Marie, and Almiley had started that day building a raft out of logs and vines.

Day three on the island had finally come. The three of them were sitting beneath the shade of a palm tree nibbling on fruit. "It's so beautiful out here." Marie's eyes were transfixed on the horizon ahead and on the thought that she could not be happier sitting with two people she cared so much for. These were her first real friends. Thomas on the other hand was something she had never felt before. She had no idea that love on that level--that intense--could exist. Her very being seemed to rest on his shoulders. His existence was her existence. His breath was her breath. His soul was her soul.

Thomas was also in a trance after a long hard day's work. He sunk his feet in the depths of the sand and enjoyed its coolness. His auburn hair was growing longer with everyday and now it was annoyingly in his eyes. He thought about his world and how different it was from this world. The girl sitting beside him was exotic and beautiful. He was trapped on an island with this girl. He had made love to her. Everything that he held

in that moment, he knew, was all he needed. He ran his fingers through Marie's long curly brown hair and stroked her soft sun-kissed skin. His eyes were drifting from the sunset to the darkness that was swiftly approaching. The faint trace of the moon was visible and the three of them began preparing a fire.

They sat on logs around the fire they had built discussing plans for the raft. Thomas was amazingly intelligent and new precise formulas for buoyancy and velocity from the effects of specific winds.

"I can obviously see you have a big head Thomas," Almiley continued, "but how is it that your brain can hold so much knowledge?"

Thomas gave a sharp look to Almiley. "I have a passion for learning and discovering new things about the world around me. People think they know so much, but in reality no one is capable of knowing all. I was born with this natural curiosity that sometimes gets the best of me." Marie smiled thinking to herself that his curiosity was not always a bad thing.

It was strange for Marie to be with a man who knew so much about everything and to be with a friend who knew so much about their world. She knew so little. Information was exactly accessible where she lived. But she, nonetheless, enjoyed their company. The craving of knowledge was suddenly becoming a weakness of hers as well.

They worked on the raft a week longer. They had finally reached the point in which they so anxiously waited. It was time to set sail.

"I'm kind of going to miss it." said Almiley.

"Me too," Marie agreed.

“Jeez, not me. I’m ready to see more.” answered Thomas. “Where exactly are we anyway?”

Almiley answered, “We were on the Island without a Name. No plane ever flies out there. No ship ever passes there. It actually has somewhat of a rumor of being haunted.”

“Like the Bermuda triangle of Mheriche?” Thomas asked.

“The what?” Almiley looked confused. Thomas occasionally forgot that neither of them knew anything of his world and when this was over he was determined to take them there and show them what they were definitely not missing out on.

Marie pulled out a map out of her backpack. Almost all of the items were soaking wet from her spontaneous jump off the plank. But she managed to read the map well enough to know where they were. “The Island without a Name is the midpoint between the West Island and Chicauca. We’re about 100 miles away from the Chicaucan coastline.” Thomas helped Marie and Almiley onto the raft and they sat as comfortably as possible.

“Well that’s good news. The winds, I imagine will take us about 10 knots per hour. It should take us perhaps a day. We’ll have to travel against the current for a good 45 minutes but after that the current will take us straight to our destination.”

“No, that’s not good news! “We’re going to be entering battlefields!”

“Yeah well the entire island can’t be filled with battle.” Marie retorted smartly

“We shall see.” Almiley said as if she knew she were right.

Almiley fell asleep and Marie was getting quite tired too. Thomas noticed this.

“Marie, why don’t you get some shut eye.”

“I can’t leave you to row by yourself. I’d feel terrible if you were the only one couldn’t sleep.”

“No its okay according to your map I’ll only have to row about 10 more minutes and then we can let the currents guide us there.”

“Are you sure? Well promise you’ll go to sleep when you stop rowing.”

“I will.” Marie tried to force herself to stay awake but her eyelids were becoming heavier with every minute. Soon she fell on Thomas’ lap and fell into a deep sleep.

Thomas fell asleep eventually. Almiley awoke to witness the first sight of Chicauca. “Hey! Marie...Thomas...wake up! We’re here!

“What?” she asked with her eyes still closed.

“Look, it’s Chicauca.”

“Oh!” Marie jumped up and began waking Thomas.

They were five miles from land. To Marie’s surprise Almiley had been right. There was fighting from one end of Chicauca to the other. Almiley was leaning on the far edge of the raft as if she could see Chicauca better that way. Horror struck their faces as they realized they were entering a war. Ships were docked from left to right. The deafening sound of canons and gunshots sounded. People were screaming and yelling. The sights that Marie saw were things she would never forget. There were men retreating to their ships trying to escape the death sentence in which they were involved. One man Marie would always remember was yelling and screaming a running away from Morvinians that were chasing him and his men with swords. The man had a look of terror in his face that brought tears to her face. His speed had picked up but the enemy was gaining on him. The Morvinians was finally close enough to aim at the man. The

shot of the canon echoed in Marie's mind. The man stopped, his eyes grew big and blood trickled down his face. He looked into the sky as if saying his final prayers. He then fell into his watery grave.

All this was seen from a mass of bushes the three hid behind in the woods. They had quietly pulled their raft up to the shore and managed to escape onto land without being noticed. Marie quietly thanked God for her safety and her life--which she was beginning to value more and more.

Two Morvinian soldiers approached the bushes when they heard Thomas speaking. They were heavily armed and Marie, Thomas, and Almiley were petrified. The soldiers were just about to move the only two bushes that hid Almiley, Thomas and Marie. The taller of the two *did* move the two bushes. "Well, well, well, what do we have here, Nicolas?"

"I don't know Charles, looks like a nice meal for the giant anacondas that lurk in the marshes."

"Sounds like a plan." they both smiled and reached for Marie--but they didn't touch Marie. Something had stopped them. Then Marie realized that they had been stabbed. That had to mean that who stabbed them was good. Sure enough, a Chicaucan man found them hiding white as snow frightened out of their minds.

"What do you kids think you're doing? It's very dangerous to be in Chicauca right now, I'm afraid, even for us soldiers." He sighed.

"Well...uh," Thomas obviously had another 'brilliant idea,' "we were actually here to see our...relative. We heard he was ill--near death, he is, so we thought we'd come and say our goodbyes." Thomas held his head in hands and pretended to weep.

This was definitely not like the intense sobbing he had done when he had begged her to forgive him. Almiley was right, that was no acting. Nevertheless, *this* sobbing was believable and proved to be quite effective. The soldier led them to the hospital tent. It was a large white tent with a red cross on the entrance slit.

The wounded soldier

The tent smelled awful. It smelled like feces and urine and other bodily fluids. On either side of the tent a panic-stricken nurse who was trying to take care of them all. “Yes sir, Ill be right there! Just one moment Mr. Canton. I understand it hurts, Mr. Bodeine, but I really need to finish this man’s stitches.” The nurse had every right to be a nervous wreck. She had 15 on-the-verge-of-dying patients and she was the only one who could help them. Marie felt guilty for taking even more of her time.

“Nurse,” said the soldier that had saved them.

“I said one moment--oh David, I didn’t realize it was you. It’s good to see you. You’ve brought friends, children shouldn’t be here though, David.”

“We’re not children. I’m 20 years old and these are my dear and very grown up sisters. We’re here to see our relative. We heard he was very ill.”

“What is this...relative’s name?”

“Oh yes...you would need to know that wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.” the nurse looked very suspiciously at Thomas.

“Well his name is...well its, uh...his name is--“

“Rand...olph.” Marie quickly interjected.

“Randolph?” The nurse asked, quite unconvinced.

“Yes, you see my brother here he has been suffering from acute amnesia.”

“I have?” asked Thomas.

“The poor dear, he doesn’t remember anything.” The nurse seemed to understand.

“Well I don’t know of any Randolph, but there are a few that we don’t know who they are. Right this way. You can see if there’s someone you know.” Marie, Thomas, and Almiley followed.

“So what do we do now, genius? She’s gonna know we don’t know anyone here. What are we going to do next?” Marie asked Thomas.

“Look I don’t know; this was the first thing I thought of okay. It’s not like you’re bursting with ideas.”

“OH MY GOD, WILLIAM!” Marie ran to William’s side.

“Do you know this man?” asked the nurse. “This is William Prince. I thought you said your brother’s name was Randolph.”

“Well, my middle name is Randolph. It’s what everyone calls me at home.” replied William.

“Yes, well alright. I’ll leave you, then. I have a lot of work ahead of me.”

“Thanks,” the three of them said to William when the nurse walked away.

“I’m so happy to see you, Marie. I can’t believe you ran away.” William stated.

“I didn’t run away. That’s the thing. I wasn’t running away from my problem; I was running to it. Madame Cortez told me that I may be the answer to the prediction of the substance of knowledge.”

“You? But you didn’t tell me that.”

“I know I didn’t tell you, but I’m telling you now.”

“Hello, I’m William--Marie’s brother. Who are you two?”

“I’m Thomas Warren.”

“I’m Almiley Mckanne.”

“Pleased to meet you,” William said extending his hand.

“What happened to you,” asked Marie as she looked at his injured, yet mummified, leg.

“I was stabbed. It’ll be amputated tonight.”

Marie gasped. “No.”

“Fraid so.” he said. Marie explained everything to William telling him why they were there.

“And Thomas has some business to attend to, although he’s never told me what it is, exactly.”

“I know that this was the last place the substance was found, it’s obviously here isn’t it?” Thomas said as if he were absolutely certain he was right.

“No, it’s not.”

“What! You’re serious. We came here for nothing?”

“No, this wasn’t a useless trip. I came here to find clues. The substance of knowledge is never found in the same place twice.”

“This thing will never be over.”

“Oh Thomas yes it will.” Marie said laughing at Thomas’ hopelessness.

“The soldiers aren’t doing good out there.” William’s smile had completely disappeared. “There are 10 men out there--all from Gimolas.”

“Oh God. Against how many Morvians?” Marie looked worried.

“About a hundred. But I’m sure Longview will have plenty more coming for us to fight off.”

“Are you saying that Longview is not on our side?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Those traitors. We saved their butts last time.”

“Wait, a guy from the mortal-world remember? I don’t know about *last time*.”

“Oh, right. Well we were referring to the last time that Morvano tried to take over all of Mheriche. They marched into Longview and their city was almost taken. Gimolas stepped in at the last minute and saved them,” she turned back to William, “and this is how they repay us.”

“Did you say you were from the mortal-world?” asked William.

“Yeah.”

“Marie, you might be the answer to prediction, after all. *The heir of Zuloft and her mortal-world lover*. You’ve got to be it.”

“Well,” she added, “right now we don’t have time to think about that. There won’t be many people to save from the curse if we don’t stop Morvano.”

“You’re right. Wait, what do you mean--*we*.” Thomas asked very scared of Marie’s answer.

“I’ve got to do something, Thomas with or without your help.” She took William’s armor that was lying next to his bed. She drew his sword out of its sheath. She tied up her hair and walked toward the exit of the tent.

“Marie, you’re just a child, you can’t fight.” cried William from his bed.

“I’m *not* a child, William! We’ve been through this.”

“Marie, William’s right you’re a--“ Thomas was interrupted.

“A what? A woman? Let me show you how a woman does it.”

Fight with all you have

She placed the helmet bearing the Gimolas crest and walked out of the tent.

Thomas ran to her side and grabbed her arms. "Thomas, let me go; I can do this."

"Your independence is admired but pride is a sin."

"It's not pride its truth and truth is definitely not a sin."

Thomas smiled and said, "I know you can do this on your own but you won't have to." He drew a gun from his backpack.

"What's that?"

"A mortal-world thing. It can kill any man who dares come near us."

"That's pretty scary," she gawked at this strange object. The object was rather useful, Marie thought. It killed every one that it saw. Thomas simply pulled a trigger and the object shot fire and made its victim bleed to death. It was brilliant--as long as the enemy didn't have one. She saw a man hiding in a deep trench. "What're you doing down there?"

"I'm so afraid....I promised my wife and daughter that I'd make it home safely. I know if I go out there I'll be killed."

"Do you realize that there are only 10 men fighting against Morvano and Longview's army?"

"That's exactly the point, Miss."

"Well you now have 12 soldiers." She glanced back at Thomas.

"No, you have 13," said Almiley who came from no where. The girls drew the swords. "Sir, please, fight for Mheriche. Wouldn't it be terrible if Morvano took over and you had it on your conscience that you did nothing to stop them? I know you're afraid. We all are. But if every man who was afraid did not fight, then we wouldn't have

a single soldier in our army. If you die today, you will die a brave man--not a coward hiding in a trench. Your daughter and your wife will be proud that you died the way you did."

"I can't. I'm too frightened."

"We can defeat them." Marie cried.

"You pathetic coward. You're not going to fight while two women 16 years of age fight in your stead?" Marie looked at Almiley as though she were ruining everything. But Almiley's way seemed to work. For the man quickly started climbing out of the trench and was on his way to fight. Almiley and Marie got separated somehow. But Marie wasn't focusing too much on Almiley. All she was thinking about was fighting and killing every Morvinian in sight. She succeeded this. Morvinians were coming at her left and right and in the center. She stabbed one and high-kicked the next. Her sword was beginning to be stained with Morvinian blood. The oozing thick green blood of the Morvinians was piling on the sword. She could do nothing else than scrape it on the bottom of her shoe. 'Uh,' she said to herself. The Morvinians' long greasy hair was lying on the ground as it was torn from their oversized heads. Their sharp teeth were quite venomous and were biting the soldiers causing them numbness wherever they were struck. Marie felt sick to her stomach as she witnessed--and helped perform--stabbing of the Morvinians. Their brains and livers and intestines were pulled from their bodies. They lay on the ground--wet and slimy.

She could see in the distance that Longview was coming. The flag on their ship was familiar: two lions standing up right holding a shield that conveyed the letter 'L.' Rage was building in Marie. She was so angry that Longview was helping Morvano.

This gave Marie a whole new inspiration to kill. That she did. Some inner strength arose in her. She was deadened to her fatigue and ever-growing weakness--a slash of a Morvinian here, a beheading there. She was going insane making sure no Morvinian lived. The Longviews stepped off their boat and the last ten of the Gimolas soldiers turned their attention to Longview.

“So,” yelled out the General of the Longview army. “We have acted as an undercover spy. We have deciphered their codes and determined where their logistic ships were coming from. Rest assured, we have destroyed all the rest of their soldiers and all of their food and supplies. We come to help you finish these Morvinians off.” Feeling more confident as she watched the Gimolas General shake hands with the Longview general, she quickly focused her attention back on her killing spree.

“I knew they couldn’t be helping the Morvinians.” Marie said to herself. So, with Longview’s help the Morvinians were dying out fast. But fatigue was now too difficult to ignore. She was so exhausted so tired of fighting, so hungry, so...well she just wanted to die. She fainted right there in the middle of the battle field. Thomas saw this and tried to run to her but the more he tried to get to her the more Morvinians it seemed he had to fight. Hours and hours passed and Marie awoke from her deep sleep. The air was still. The only wind that seemed to be there was an invisible force that made the Gimolas, the Chicaucan, and the Longview’s flags wave. They had won. The Morvinians had been defeated. She smiled and spit out the dirt from her mouth. She got up from where she had lain. She removed her helmet bearing the Gimolas crest and searched from horizon to horizon to find sign of Thomas or Almiley. She saw neither. She began running trying to find a sign of any life at all. But all the soldiers seemed dead.

Far away almost completely covered by fog she saw movement. Afraid that it might be a Morvinian she yelled out, "Who are you?"

"Marie, come quick." It was Thomas. He was kneeling beside Almiley who had been stabbed and was bleeding badly.

"Oh my God. Almiley, please....please be alright."

"I can't die."

"That's the spirit," said Thomas.

"No, I mean that's my curse. I'm immortal. It's just..." she tried hard to speak. It was difficult for her to breath. "...I...I feel...I'll never stop feeling this...this horrible...uh...pain. It's just like living the actual death part over and over and over. But I won't die. I'll just...suffer...really badly until I can get to...a...a nurse."

"Well let's get you to the hospital tent." Thomas and Marie carried Almiley to the tent. The nurse was even more frantic than she had been the last time they had been there. More soldiers were hurt--so many that there weren't enough beds and they were piled on the floor. As soon as they got Almiley into the care of the nurse they noticed that William's bed was filled by someone else.

"Excuse me, nurse, what happened to Will--Randolph?" Marie asked.

"Oh, poor thing, he limped on out of here to fight." the nurse said.

"Oh no! He's dead. I know it. He couldn't fight on that leg."

"I'm so sorry, Marie."

"Yeah, me too." Tears rolled down her eyes. She would remember William well. He was always properly dressed and responsible. Marie had always hated that about him. She laughed through her tears at how sensible he always was. She would miss that about

him. What would she complain about now. “He was a good brother to me.” She thought of how difficult life would be for Jack and Peter with their older brother not there to protect them and keep them out of trouble. They would never listen to Almiley like they listened to William.

“It’s alright, Marie. He died for a good cause. At least his death wasn’t in vain. I really am sorry.” Thomas hugged Marie and kissed her on the forehead as she cried into his shoulder. When Almiley was stitched up, Thomas suggested that they start looking for the clues to where the substance was.

“I can’t Thomas. It’s been too long. I miss home, my garden, my father, and my horse, especially. I just...I can’t. I’ve lost my brother...I just can’t.”

“MARIE PRINCE, YOU DID NOT COME ALL THIS WAY TO GIVE UP!
You must find that substance! The whole world is counting on you! Don’t let them down. Almiley and I are here with you. You don’t have to do this alone.”

After another breakdown of crying she decided that Thomas was right and that she needed to find the clues, for everyone’s sake. They had no idea where to look or what to look for. While Thomas and Marie looked for clues, Almiley went to talk to the people in charge of the horse races to persuade them to hold the horse races again now that the war was over.

Marie and Thomas were walking along the beach talking about where they might look and what they might look for--though, neither of them had any idea of what they were talking about. Thomas looked up at Marie and then ran into a crevice of two large rocks. It was something like a narrow cave. “Thomas did you get an idea or something, I mean what is it?” She ran in the direction that Thomas had run. “Thomas did--Ah!--Oh

my God Thomas you scared me to death.” He had jumped out at her and began kissing her lips and her neck. He pressed her against the side of the enormous rock. “Thomas we can’t do this now.” She giggled as he nibbled at her ear.

“Sure, we can. He removed her sweater a little at a time between passionate kisses.

“Thomas? Marie? Are you guys down here?” Almiley was calling them from outside of the crevice of the two rocks.

“Yeah here we are.” Marie said as they walked toward her.

“I think I found a clue.” she said.

“Really! Let’s go.”

The clues

They ran to the racing track where Almiley had won many times in the past. What they would encounter was obviously a clue to the whereabouts of the substance of knowledge. There was a man sitting in the top box counting money. Almiley knew the man well. He had been to every race that Almiley could remember. He was always

selling refreshments or collecting the bid money. The man loved racing almost as much as Almiley. “Thomas, Marie, this is my good friend Mr. Jones.”

“Nice to meet you sir,” Marie extended her hand.

“Likewise.” He answered.

“I came to talk to him about the races. It’s such a shame that the races were canceled here. I came to practically beg him to start running them again. He explained that he-- well why don’t you tell them sir?”

“Absolutely! At first, I wasn’t for the idea of starting the races over. For a long time the war made everyone’s decisions. It’s been such a drawn out battle, that many of us thought we wouldn’t live to see the end of it. When we received word of Longview fighting alongside Morvano we were terrified. It was sad to see the races go but it was just not important enough to risk everyone’s lives. But recently we’ve gotten word that the war ended due to a sudden inspiration of the men and Longview’s espionage tactics. I was overjoyed and I finally decided to try to get this show on the road again. I began trying to contact the racers and a couple of our regular bidders. I began to set dates for the races. I was so caught up in my work one day when a strange unfamiliar man came up here to this very room. He wouldn’t tell me his name but he handed me a letter addressed to MP, TW, and AM. He would not tell me what the initials stood for or any idea of who I should give this to. He said that he would be receiving some guests very shortly and that I should give them the letter. The funny thing is--I never get any visitors...until you three.

Almiley spoke up. “The interesting thing about the initials is that it matches perfectly with our initials. The letter must be to us.”

Mr. Jones handed the letter to Almiley and she vigorously tore it open and began reading it.

Though they're spelled alike they do not rhyme

Love is not known by this kind

No policemen, this is no sound

This is where crashing ships are found

They'll lure him in until he dies

Beware of these creatures' cries

"Well what does that mean?" asked Marie.

"I don't know. It's got to be a clue though right?" asked Almiley

Thomas was muttering under his breath. Marie looked intensely at him knowing that he was on to something. "What is it, Thomas.

"Let me see that map." Marie handed the map. "Sirens Cove."

"What?" Marie and Almiley asked together.

"'Though they're spelled alike they do not rhyme, love is not known by this kind.' It's simple, isn't it? Cove and Love--they don't rhyme but they're spelled alike. 'No Policemen this is no sound, this is where crashing ships are found'--Sirens!"

Marie and Almiley seemed puzzled. "Honestly, don't you two know anything about mythology? Sirens were fair and beautiful creatures who cried out for men passing by in their ships to come and save them. Their cries and beauty were so entrancing that men could not help but come to rescue them. The siren's cries were a trap. It would

cause the men to crash their ships and their bodies would be fed to a monster. It all fits. Look.” Almiley and Marie read the riddle one last time and they finally understood.

“So how are we going to get there--Not the raft?”

Thomas smiled. “I think I have a better idea.” He ran toward a ship that had belonged to Longview. There were no soldiers around or anyone who could put the ship to any use, so they decided it was perfectly alright to commandeer it. Thomas was put in charge of steering the ship. Marie was in charge of the map reading and Almiley was making them lunch down in the kitchen.

“Why is it that I always get stuck with kitchen work?” Almiley complained as she walked down the stairs to the kitchens.

Marie smiled at Thomas. “We’re so lucky to have someone so intelligent to be with us.” she told him.

“No...I just think you’re lucky to have stumbled upon a mythology major.”

Marie laughed.

“So, do you think we’ll find the substance of knowledge on Siren’s cove?”

“I don’t know. For all we know there could be another clue.”

“Yes, there probably will be. Why would fate just allow us to have good luck for once? No way I’m sure it has too much fun making our lives miserable.”

“Miserable?” Thomas asked her.

She stared into his gentle amber eyes and replied, “Well, maybe not too miserable.”

“Marie there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you...ask you...well somewhat of both.”

“And what’s that.”

“I...I think...well I know...I love you...”

“Really?” Marie smiled. She loved him too. She was so head over heels, so infatuated, so mesmerized by this intense love. It was overwhelming. This feeling that aroused every part of her. He stimulated her soul, her mind, her body, and her heart. She loved him with every part of her being and existence.

“I love you too.”

“So...what are you doing for the rest of our lives?” He kissed her and laid her on the deck of the ship. “You don’t have to answer right now. In fact, I want you to think about it. I want you to truly think about it. I know we haven’t known each other for long. But I’ve known a lot of girls; and you, Marie, are the one and only for me.”

“I don’t want to think about it. I already have my answer.”

“Please say you will marry me.”

“I will!”

“God I love you.” He picked her up and spun her around kissing her lips and hugging her tight. “Come with me.” He brought her down stairs into a dark hallway. He kissed her this time more sensitively. There was even more passion in his kiss. He removed the straps of her dress and it fell to the floor. He removed his own clothing and pressed her up against the wall.

By that time Almiley was done cooking their lunch.

“Where is everyone?” Almiley yelled.

“Always interrupted.” Thomas exhaled deeply with annoyance. They dressed as quickly as they could and walked back up the stairs.

“Where were you too,” Almiley asked as she saw them approaching her.

“We were just--Sandwiches?” Thomas asked as he stared at the food.

“Well, if you wanted something extravagant, then you should’ve gone down to the kitchens and made it yourself.” Marie laughed at this and though offended Thomas did too.

They saw the East Island which was far off. Marie turned to Thomas, “So Thomas do you think that the sirens’ cries will hypnotize you?”

“Why would I be hypnotized by them when I have the most beautiful thing in the world looking back at me as we speak?” Marie blushed. Thomas reached for the wheel and aimed straight for the cove. Thomas and Marie were having their usual discussions about the differences between the mortal world and Mheriche. Soon he began staring blankly into space.

“Thomas?” Marie waved her hand in front of his face.

“Marie, it’s the sirens.” Almiley informed her.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Women are immune to it.”

“Oh.” She grabbed the wheel from Thomas’ grip; he was trying to steer the ship into the cliff. It took both Almiley and Marie to pry his fingers off of the wheel. Marie took hold of the wheel and turned it left as far as it would go. She prayed (so did Almiley but she was also reciting a few choice words) that the ship would turn. If it didn’t start turning they would surely hit the cliffs. Slowly the ship was turning. They were going to be alright. After they were far enough away from the realm of the sirens, Thomas was returned to his right state.

“Good morning sunshine.” said Marie sarcastically.

“LOOK.”

“Really? What?”

“That cliff.”

“What cliff?”

There were indeed markings on the cliff. They anchored the ship and rode in a safety boat to the shore. They knew someone had been there. There was a message--another riddle. It read:

You’ve traveled long and far but backwards must you go

The West Island is where I advise you to row.

You’ve proven that you’re strong and you’re rather witty

Now you must find the skull infested city

Here your fears will be tested so please be prepared

Here it lies with much emotion to be spared

“That one, I think I know.” said Marie.

“What is it?” Thomas and Almiley asked her.

“I read about a place called Samora.” She pointed to the northern part of the West Island. “There have been many battles on her shores. That’s why there are all sorts of skulls--hence the skull-infested city--there. In Samora is the Cave of--“

“Mysteries! I read about that too.” Said Almiley. “It’s a dodgy place. The Cave of Mysteries is supposed to test your greatest fear.”

“I see: *here your fears will be tested*...--so let’s go.”

“What’s the quickest route?” Marie asked Thomas. “Wouldn’t it be best to go above Chicauca and straight to Samora?”

“No way,” interrupted Almiley, “there’s nothing but ice up there. You’ll never get through it. The only way is to go through the bloody channel and underneath Chicauca.”

“Great. Then we could just stop at Port Williamson and get Kana and Serena.”

“Well, it’ll be a long ride both with the ship and the horses. But--will do.”

So Almiley, Marie, and Thomas took the anchor out of the water and started for the bloody channel staying as close to Chicauca as possible to stay out of the Sirens’ realm. A week had passed by with the three friends knowing each other better than ever having had a lot of time to talk. Thomas had discovered the captain’s office which contained tons of books and reference material. Thomas spent hours every day pouring over these books trying to learn as much as possible about Mheriche. Almiley and Marie kept themselves occupied. Marie tried to teach Almiley how to sew. And Almiley in turn tried to teach her a thing or two about more “important” things as she called it. Almiley told her all about her life story and how she got involved in the races. Marie confided in Almiley all of her history and the two became inseparable. After a week of nothing but ocean they finally reached Port Williamson. They went and collected Kana and Serena.

“So Almiley where’s your horse?”

“She’s right here.” It was a large black horse with piercing yellow eyes.

“Wow, she’s beautiful.” said Thomas.

“Well, guys...I think this is good bye for me. The races are going to be held in Chicauca in a couple of weeks and I really need to start training again. It’s been really great knowing you guys. Thank you for everything. Good Luck. I’ll be waiting here to have my curse removed.” She smiled at Marie and they hugged. Thomas hugged Almiley and kissed her cheek.

“Bye Almiley we’ll miss you.” said Marie

“That we will...good luck with the races.” Thomas called as they trotted along down the beach.

They were riding for hours. Kana and Serena didn’t mind this one bit. They had been locked up for so long that they were more than ready to run. Thomas and Marie flirted and talked about what their wedding would be like and how they would spend the rest of their lives together. “Let’s stop here for the night.” They both missed Almiley’s company but they were thrilled to be alone. They finally wouldn’t be interrupted. They made camp just south of Shadows Pass. They would have to climb into the heights of the Cockran Mountains to reach the rocky terrain leading to Samora. The next morning they woke early and set off into a glorious sunrise. After two days of riding and two nights of barely any rest, they were finally on the shores of Samora. They knew that they were there by the smell of decay and the awful sight of skulls and bones lying on the sand.

“Well, it’s just like I pictured it.” Marie said turning up her nose. They got off of their horses and tied them to a tree. “We’ll be back in a few minutes, okay Kana.” Neither of them expected to be gone for more than an hour or two. They saw the Cave of Mysteries. They ran toward it knowing that all of their torture and all of their searching was coming to a close. But they were sadly mistaken.

Scorpions arose from the sand. Their enormous claws and deadly stingers were approaching in masses toward the couple. A circle was formed around the two and it was getting smaller and smaller by the minute. The poison-tainted creatures were minutes away from contaminating their bodies. Marie suddenly knew that their tortures were not quite over yet.

Three Impediments

“This must be the first impediment.” Marie yelled as scorpions steadily rose up from the skull-infested shores.

“What are you talking about?” Thomas’ skin was green. Anyone could see he was frightened out of his mind. Marie hated scorpions too but it wasn’t her worst fear. It must be Thomas’.

“There are three...” she stomped on a scorpion “impediments. They are supposed to make you face your...uh” she stomped on another one “...get off...greatest fear.”

“Oh. Well this is definitely my biggest fear,” said Thomas with the knuckle of his index finger clenched in his mouth. Marie whistled and Kana pulled the rope off of the tree and ran toward her, trying to stomp on the scorpions. Kana stopped very briefly for Marie to get on. As the horse began trotting Marie pulled with all of her might to get Thomas on the horse. The horse dropped them off safely inside the cave which was--thank God--free of scorpions.

“I didn’t know you fear scorpions out of everything else.”

“Yeah, so, what is it that you fear?”

“I fear nothing. What have I to fear? *My* horse can get me out of bad situations. My horse is smarter than your horse,” she teased him. He laughed and they walked on.

“Do you hear that?” Thomas asked Marie

“Hear what?” Thomas motioned for her to be quiet. She heard a roaring sound in the distance.

“What is that?”

“I don’t know.” They followed the noise. They finally came upon the source of the noise--it was a boiling lava pit. “You’re scared of lava?” Thomas asked her.

“No, I mean I don’t want to go skinny dipping in it but it’s not my greatest fear.”

“Is it heights then?”

“No!”

“Maybe the substance was mistaken when it determined your worst fear.”

“I guess so.” As soon as she said this her worst fear had been realized. Vampires!

“Oh God, Vampires. Yeah, that would have to be my greatest fear.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that they really existed.” Exclaimed Thomas.

Three vampires walked toward Thomas and Marie. “Hello there, at last, you’ve come to us.” said one of the vampires

“Wait just a minute, Edward.” replied the second vampire

“I’ve waited long enough, Daniel!” replied the one called Edward.

“Patience Edward. Marie Prince. I’ve waited for so long for you to come here.”

“Why have you waited for me?” she asked him nervously.

“Well it started about a hundred years ago--“

“OH, COME ON DANIEL!” The third vampire yelled.

“You, too, lack in patience, Jonathan. As I was saying, dear Marie, it began about a hundred years ago. We three men were coal miners in this cave. We struck gold one great day and decided to keep a bit for ourselves. The other miners warned us that an avalanche was about to occur. But no, we were greedy; we wanted every piece of gold in this cave. So we stayed. The avalanche crushed our bodies and we were then in a state between life and death. But there was a creature, a creature like we are now. He bargained with us. He told us that we did not have to die. He told us that we could become creatures whose stomachs did not need filling. We would only have to quench our thirst--for blood. We were to wait here until a girl named Marie Prince wandered into the cave. If we drank her blood and slayed her then this curse would be unbroken and we would be fully alive again with all of our gold. For so long we’ve feasted on the blood of rats. Now, boys, we have a real feast with the blood of a woman.”

The other vampires laughed and they inched closer and closer to Marie. “Marie,” Thomas whispered, as the vampires were coming even closer to her.

“What is it, Thomas?”

“You have power in your blood. Benjamin told me so. Use your power against them.”

“Thomas I don’t know how to use my power if I even have any.”

“Just try...Just concentrate.”

Marie didn’t know what to do. She closed her eyes and imagined the Vampires being gone and she and Thomas safely on the other side of them. When she opened her eyes she saw that she had three silver stakes in her hand.

“What do I do with these?” she asked Thomas.

“Someday you’ll learn about mythology.” Thomas quickly grabbed the stakes out of Marie’s hands and threw them at the Vampires. The stakes went straight into their hearts--or where the hearts would have been if they’d had one. They turned into dust and their remains and their cloaks fell into the lava pit.

“You did it. You have powers. I’m your mortal-world lover. We are the answer to the prediction.”

“Okay, bring on that third impediment. What do you think it’ll be?”

But before Thomas could answer they saw a rickety old rope bridge in front of them. “Well maybe Almiley was afraid of rickety bridges over lava pits. Perhaps the substance expected her to come with us.”

“Of course. That has to be it.” So they walked across the bridge without any trouble. At last, Marie saw it. She saw in front of her the substance of knowledge. It was a deep sapphire blue. It was a round ball sitting on a golden stand. She could see all that she had searched for. All that she had lost and gained and fought for--it was right there. She held out her hand and reached for it. Her fingertips were almost there.

“Very clever.” Marie turned around to see a man favoring John Armstrong holding Thomas with a knife to his throat.

“This must be Benjamin Armstrong.”

“Yes, very clever indeed. You somehow mesmerized your killer into falling in love with you. You’ve conquered your fears. You’ve gotten so far, but I hate to say that your prize is less pleasurable. This third impediment will end your journey. I promise I’ll make your death quick. Hand me the substance.”

“Get it yourself.” she cried out knowing he could not do this. She was the only one that could touch it without being cursed.

“I shall make your death more painful if you don’t hand it to me now!”

“So, how exactly are you planning to get the substance with me dead?”

“Don’t toy with me, girl. You have no idea what I am capable of.” He held the knife extremely close to Thomas’ neck now. “Give me the substance or Thomas dies.”

“Don’t do it, Marie!” Thomas yelled.

“You shut up. You broke the contract. You signed in blood that you would get of this girl for me. Consider this love between you two over--by death.”

“Wait!” Marie yelled. “I’ll give it to you.”

“That’s right, girl, hand it over.”

“You have to release him first. You have my word that I’ll give it to you.” she picked up the substance off its stand.

“Fine.” He let Thomas go and began walking toward Marie. Thomas jumped up, took out his gun and placed it to Benjamin’s head.

“A conspiracy, how nice.” Benjamin ducked from the gun’s view and stabbed Thomas in the stomach. Thomas shot Benjamin in the shoulder and he fell to the ground covered in blood. Marie ran to Thomas.

“Thomas, hold on okay.”

“Look, Marie, I’ll never make it to a nurse. I just want you to know...” it was getting more and more difficult for him to speak “...that I...love you... and that knowing...you was the...best thing...that ever happened...to me.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Marie burst into tears. She pushed her face into his chest.

“Don’t worry I hear heaven is a pretty nice place.” he joked. “I’ll be fine.” She lifted her head and kissed him.

“Your independence is admired but pride is a sin.” She said trying to speak through her tears.

“It’s not pride, its truth and truth is definitely not a sin.” Marie now had a lump in her throat. She cried madly so that her cry echoed through out the cave.

“I love you...Thomas Warren. I’ll never forget you.” And he was gone. His body was turning pale and his skin was cold. His gentle amber eyes were now staring out into space. These eyes would never look into hers again. She would never hear him speak or hear him laugh. He would never kiss or touch her again. She wiped her tears and walked toward Benjamin.

He was wounded badly but he would survive. She could not let him survive. She would end his life right now. “You killed Thomas. I LOVED HIM AND YOU KILLED HIM! DIE!!”

She stabbed him over and over and over again. She stabbed him after she knew he was dead. She didn't stop until every organ was mutilated and all his blood stained her clothes. She picked up the substance and was about to wish for Thomas to come back to her. Then she remembered Madame Cortez's advice: *when you decide how to retrieve its powers, don't abuse it*. She cried even harder now and walked the lonely path back to her horse. Kana was waiting for her and the scorpions had disappeared. She glanced at Serena knowing that the man she loved wasn't going to ever ride this horse again.

"I'm sorry Serena," Marie gazed into the horse's eyes. "Thomas isn't coming back." The horse seemed to understand Marie. Serena usually walked and trotted with her head held high, but this time her head was low. It seemed like it took tons of energy for Serena just to move. Just watching the horse walk made Marie cry. She knew now her life would never be the same. She had lost the most important thing to her. She was herself with him and now she didn't even know who she was.

She wished with everything that she had that the people of Mheriche would be rid of the curse. She then, threw it into the sea. She saw it smash into a large rock and shatter into pieces. She was done with the substance of knowledge. She didn't want to think about it, she didn't want to ever talk about it again. She wanted it to be forgotten.

The journey home seemed much longer than it had before. She didn't have Thomas to talk to. She was already missing him so much. He was gone from her world. She'd see him nevermore. She broke into tears yet again. The dim streetlights of Gimolas were now in sight. She made sure she took the detour so she could stay out of the Colossal Desert because Thomas wouldn't be there to save her if she fainted again. When she came into the city limits everyone in the city crowded around her.

She dreaded being in a crowd of people where she would have to force a smile. Yes, she was happy for these people. They were humans again. It's what they had always wanted. But what about what she wanted. What about all that she had sacrificed. Was it really worth it? She didn't know. She hated to, but she let Serena go to run wild and free with the other untamed horses out in the prairies of West Gimolas.

The End

She was ignoring all of these people. They were thanking her and grueling at her feet for ridding them of their curse. She had also protected them from the domination of Morvano. Oh her family's honor would definitely be restored.

"Marie, don't you have anything to say?" asked one of the townspeople.

"I..." she started to speak but only sobs came from her.

"What is the matter Miss Prince?" they all asked her.

"I...I just want to go home." So they cleared a path for her. She raced the horse as fast as possible until she was out of their sight. Kana was now climbing the familiar

cliff and she was going through the thick woods. The path had not been used for months, so some trees and weeds had grown over it. Kana trotted through the prairies of West Gimolas. Marie could see the little, vine-covered cottage. But she frowned when she saw it. Her father would be working and Jack and Peter would be arguing over whose turn it was to do the dishes. But William wouldn't be there. He was gone too, just like Thomas. Her family was melting away. She had nothing to come home to but her dog, Stanch. She decided she would just get some sleep, a little food, and then head to her garden. She walked into the cottage after washing Kana and putting her back in the stables.

"Marie! You're alright. Thank heavens, you are alright." Her father hugged her tightly.

"Daddy, why aren't you working?"

"When I heard that you were alive and you were coming home I rushed here as fast as I could."

"You noticed I was gone?"

"What do you mean? Of course I noticed you were gone. Did you really think otherwise?"

"Well...yeah I guess. I mean you're always working. I just didn't think you really remembered me or Jack or Peter."

"Oh, honey I'm so sorry. I was just trying to keep myself busy so that I wouldn't think of your mother."

"Daddy, I lifted everyone's curse."

“I know you did, darling and I couldn’t be more proud. If only your mother could see you now.” This was the first time he had ever spoken of her mother. “I think it’s long overdue to tell you about her. I think some pictures would be good too.” Marie was happy to be home. She missed Thomas and William and Almiley, though. After a while it seemed as though she had dreamed it all. She had no pictures of Thomas or Almiley. But she had her memories and for her that was enough.

She had always hated that she was so isolated from the world. She had always wanted to see the world and leave this cottage. Now that she had, she loved the cottage. She had had enough of the world. She was tired and depressed and was glad she didn’t live near a lot of people that would disturb her privacy and her shameless wallowing. She had learned a very valuable lesson...well, actually she learned quite a few. She learned that it wasn’t meant for people to know everything. She also learned to love more deeply than she could have ever imagined. She found friendship and adventure and though she had no regrets, she knew that the small little vine-covered cottage was exactly where she belonged. Experience is the greatest teacher. Her father and William could have told her a million times that she was better off here, but she had to learn this on her own--only, then, could she truly understand what was important in life and what really mattered.

She got into her bed that night (she was more than happy to be in the comfort of her own bed). She said her prayers and turned out the light. She looked out of her window and saw a beautiful bright full moon. So many memories came rushing into her mind: the night she met Thomas, the day she met Almiley, how she jumped off of a plank, that amazing night on the beach with Thomas, finding the substance....and losing

Thomas. She missed him so much. She continued to stare at the full moon. She admired the way it lit the otherwise dark world. She spoke to this goddess of night, knowing that somewhere, somehow Thomas was staring at this same moon. “Goodnight Thomas, I’ll never forget you.” She laid her head down on her pillow and fell asleep.

Part II

A Trace of Magic

A new life

Marie sat alone in her room. This was perhaps the first time her room was messy. She had always had a habit of keeping it tidy, but now things like this didn't seem to matter to her anymore. She was staring out of the window hoping to find something outside among the rain. She missed Thomas so deeply that nothing was important to her anymore. She cried and cried some more. Her eyes were so red and tired of crying, but she couldn't help but spend her days in the darkness of her room watching out the window. Lightning struck and illuminated her face so that her father, who was now standing at her doorway, could see that she was still, as always, upset.

"Darling--" he began. Marie wiped her eyes and tried to pretend that nothing was wrong.

"Yes, daddy?"

"I know you're hurting. Let's not forget that I lost someone that I loved too...your mother and William." His eyes seemed less confident and cheery when he

spoke of William--his eldest son. William had always been very important to their father and he truly missed William even more than Marie did--if that was possible. "I know how you feel. I know that nothing I say or do could possibly heal your heart right now, but don't be upset with me for trying. I am your father and I want to help you."

"I know, daddy." Marie hugged her father. It was now too hard to stop crying. The lump in her throat was hurting so badly that she broke into tears. How could Thomas have died? How could he have left her? They had talked about their wedding and how their life would be together. Everything was perfect. It wasn't exactly true, what they say: *you don't know what you have until it's gone*. She knew exactly what she had and that is why she was so upset. She knew how great her life would have been if they had spent the rest of their lives together. But that would never happen. She had given her heart to someone who had taken it to his grave. She knew she would never be able to love like this ever again. She sobbed some more.

"Why don't you go down to the Cultural Parade tomorrow afternoon? It'll be a great experience. I know you've always wanted to go, and I'm sorry I never let you have the chance." Marie suddenly felt a little guilty. Her father didn't know that she had escaped to the Cultural Parade every year. But she went along with it. "...they have all kinds of food and music there. I know you'll love it. Would you like me to go with you?"

"No, no, thank you. I just don't feel like going. I've already seen--" She looked at her father and decided not to tell him that she had gone several times before.

"What dear? What have you already seen?"

"I've seen...those Gimolas people enough."

“Oh I see, you don’t want them coming up to you and asking you a bunch of questions about something you don’t really want to relive.”

“Exactly,” she said as her father got up from the chair beside her and left her room. When he shut the door she went back to staring out the window, watching it rain. This was exactly how she felt--just like a cloud that was letting out every last drop of water left in it. She had cried so much that she couldn’t cry anymore. Somehow, though she found a way to cry herself to sleep every night.

If this had been a year ago, the day that she left for the substance of knowledge, then she would be quite happy with what she had accomplished. She had rid the world of their curse. There was no such thing as vampires, gnomes, centaurs or mermaids. She didn’t feel happy with what she had done, though. She didn’t care that she was being selfish for wanting to take it all back. She said over and over to herself *‘If only I could take it back. If I had never gone looking for it, he wouldn’t be dead.’*

It seemed nothing would take her out of her depression. The only time she did stop thinking about Thomas and blaming herself for his death, was when she took care of her father. He had become very ill since she had come home.

“Oh, Marie, dear, it’s just old age and too much work catching up with me. I’ll be fine...really! Go on, get yourself out of my room.” he’d say. He always wanted her out of the room so she couldn’t see his pain. She knew that he wasn’t going to be fine. She knew she had to find some help for him some how but he wouldn’t go to the doctor. He was as stubborn as stubborn comes. She liked to think she inherited that from him.

Her days were long and slow. Everyday was exactly the same--that was until she received a letter. It was addressed to her as Miss Prince. It didn't say on the envelope who the letter it was from. She hoped, as she ripped the letter open, that it was from Almiley. But the letter was not from Almiley.

Dear Miss Prince,

I would like to personally congratulate you for all that you have accomplished. You've taken everyone from their curse and turned them back into humans. I thank you so much for doing this for the people of Mheriche. It was a happiness that I never could have brought to them. I must meet you to thank you face to face. I admit I have heard rumors of your great beauty and courage. I've heard of your intelligence and of your bravery. I would like to meet you at my ball in the Talimar Palace at 7:30 November 19th. I truly hope that you'll accept my invitation.

With deepest gratitude,

Prince Ian III of Talimar

She crumpled the letter and threw it on the floor. She didn't want to go meet some prince who would just like the publicity of being next to "the one the substance prophesized about." She wanted to continue wallowing in her vine-covered cottage thinking and terribly missing her informal fiancée.

That night while she, her father, Jack and Peter were eating dinner her father pulled the crumpled letter out of his pocket. "What's this Marie?"

“I don’t know, daddy.”

“I want you to go to this.”

“No thanks.”

“I don’t think you understand. I’m not asking you.”

“Daddy, you can’t make me do this! I don’t want to...please.”

“Marie, I’m ill--“

“Exactly, I can’t just leave you.”

“Please listen to me. I’m ill and I might not make it through this sickness. If I do pass, then I want to make sure that you have everything that I could never give you. With a prince, you’ll have that. Please, Marie...do this for me...as my last wish.”

“For one thing, it’s not like he’s asking me to marry him. Second of all stop talking like you might not make it through this. You’re going to be fine.”

“Right. I’m just saying incase.”

So since she was being forced to go to a ball that she didn’t want to go to and meet a prince that she didn’t want to meet, she decided she would enjoy it. How often do you get to attend a ball at the Talimar Palace? It was like she said: It’s not like he was proposing to her. He just invited some girl to a ball. She was probably just his pick of the week. She packed her bags that night knowing that she’d need to leave the next morning if she was going to make it there for 7:30 November 19th. It would take four days to get there. That’s exactly how much time she had. She didn’t have any fancy clothes at all, so she packed what she had. If only the clothes she had bought at Port Williamson a year ago hadn’t been left on that bloody pirate’s ship then she would have something to wear to this ball.

So after she had packed everything she thought she might need, she went to her father's room to check on him before she went to sleep. "Daddy, are you alright?" She asked.

"Yes, Marie, I'm fine. Everything packed?"

"Yes."

"Look I know you really don't want to do this but please try to enjoy it."

"Okay, I'll try." She blew out the candle in the hallway leading to her bedroom. She pulled down the covers and kneeled by her bedside. She said her prayers and then climbed into bed. She looked at the moon and told Thomas good night as she did every night and then dozed off to sleep.

The next morning she slipped into her robe and went down the hallway to the kitchen. She found Jack and Peter feeding their breakfast to the dog--Stanch. Her father was reading the paper and sipping his morning coffee. Marie ate a banana and drank a glass of milk and then she was off. She saddled Kana and rode out into the prairies of West Gimolas. She came to the path in the forest that was now completely covered in vines and weeds. She hadn't come down this path in six months--ever since her ride home from Samora. She hadn't visited her garden in a year. She thought this was the opportune moment to do so. When she came to the cliff where the waterfall stood, she started to feel happy, for once. This reminded her of how happy she was when she came to the garden and how much it used to mean to her. But if she was the least bit happy, all of it went away when she saw the garden. The plants were all dead and the water in the fountain was dirty and filled with leaves. Marie frowned. This too was dead.

Everything that had ever mattered to Marie was gone. She was angry and alone and she didn't know of anything that could possibly help her.

She and Kana went down into Gimolas. Marie had forgotten that today was the Cultural Parade. She didn't really have time to stop and look around. But she did take a few glances on the way to Madame Cortez's trailer.

Madame Cortez

Marie noticed that the Cultural Parade wasn't very cultural anymore. There were no vampires (thank goodness), no gnomes, no mermaids, no centaurs, no nothing--Just humans. This Parade was for the first time...well, boring. Madame Cortez's trailer was now in sight. When she arrived right in front of the trailer she jumped down off of Kana.

"Kana, I want you to stay here, okay. Don't go running off."

She walked inside. The familiar colors and fabric hung from the ceiling. The trailer seemed even larger than Marie remembered. There was no one inside waiting to have their fortunes read. This seemed odd to Marie.

"Madame Cortez? Are you here? It's me...Marie. I was just coming to talk to you to see how you've been. Okay I guess you're not here. I'm going to go now."

"I'm in here, Marie."

"Madame Cortez, hi. How have you been? Why isn't anyone in here? This place is usually crowded."

"Marie, do you not remember? You saved everyone from their curse. Do you also not remember me telling you that the gift of foresight was my curse? I do not have the gift anymore."

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m happy to have it gone. It’s just that I now have no way of making a living.” Madame Cortez sighed and lowered her head. “I’m proud of you. I knew you were the one. I told your mother that it wasn’t right with her but she didn’t listen.”

“Madame Cortez, I just don’t know what to do. Thomas is gone and I just can’t bear to live anymore.”

“Darling, ending your life before it is meant to will destroy destiny. For some reason I don’t feel right about all of this.”

“What do you mean?” Marie asked confused.

“I just don’t feel like this whole thing is right.” Marie now looked more confused than ever. “It doesn’t seem like the substance is really gone. Intuition tells me that this is wrong. Do you get what I mean?”

“No actually I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t know. I can’t explain it. But something is really wrong. Anyway, what brings you here?”

“I just wanted to see how you were doing. I’m on my way to Talimar.”

“Talimar!” Wow! Any reason for that?”

“Yes, Prince Ian wants me to attend some ball thing.”

“Oh. Excellent.”

“No, not excellent.”

“Ah-hah. You miss Thomas and you don’t want to fall in love with someone else because you feel like you’d be betraying him.”

“No. I know I’m not going to fall in love with him. He probably doesn’t even know what love is. I’m just another mistress. You know, the one for this week.”

“I don’t know. We shall see.”

Madame Cortez and Marie talked more about Marie’s incredible journey for the substance of knowledge. These memories had not been shared with anyone except for the people that were in them--Thomas and Almiley. They talked for almost an hour when Marie looked at her watch and realized she was already behind schedule. Amazingly, though, when she walked outside the trailer, she noticed it was as if she had never even been in there--like time had somehow stood still. She was just as puzzled now as when it had happened before.

She went around the Colossal Desert this time knowing it would be a longer but much safer route. This was a dull route. There was nothing but prairies (which she was very used to) and trees everywhere. It was lovely but after 60 miles of it, it became rather boring. This was better than the desert, however. When she finally, after many long hours, reached the mountains it became very cold. The higher she went through Shadow’s Pass the more bitterly cold it became. Her face and hands were numb. Even her breath turned into misty vapor. She was beginning to realize just how lonely she was. There was no one here to save her if she *did* faint or pass out from the bitter cold. She knew she was on her own and decided that it was up to her to stay warm. She was now over half way through Shadow’s Pass. She decided that she would make camp there that night. She found some sticks and logs and made a fire. She was now beginning to feel her hands again. She looked up at the sky and remembered how she and Thomas had once gazed at the sky from these same mountains. The view was incredible. She could

see all of Port Williamson from here and where the Gulf of Merfolk and the Sea of Aranine were divided by a long chain of volcanoes in the far distance. The howling of the wolves frightened Marie and made it difficult for her to fall asleep, for in that unconscious state she could not stay alert for unwelcome guests.

She did finally fall asleep and awoke the next morning to the loud, yet peaceful calls of the quails. She stretched and glanced once more at the remarkable view. It wouldn't be long now until she entered Port Williamson at the end of Shadow's Pass. She looked forward to this moment hoping that she may see Almiley. But when she did reach Port Williamson and went into the stables where she worked, she didn't find Almiley. 'She must be at the races.' Marie said to herself and smiled at the thought of how much Almiley loved her horse and racing. She left Kana there and proceeded to the shores of Port Williamson.

She went to the harbor and boarded a ship. She was shown to her room in the center of the ship. The ship was very elegant. The wallpaper was cream color with an accent of white seashell designs. The light fixtures were cast-iron and the carpet was a beautiful royal blue. When she entered her room she saw to her left a fabulous black marble bathroom. As she walked forward through an arched ceiling she saw her tall bed. She ran, jumped and landed on the bed and sank at least a foot into the comforts of this seemingly cloud-like bed.

She decided to explore the ship. On deck were artists lined up to paint the breathtaking sunset. She walked around the entire ship as if she was taking in every perspective of the view. There was nothing ahead of her but ocean. Soon she would be

arriving at the East Island and would be able to indulge herself at the Royal Palace of Talimar. The thought of this made her feel pampered already.

She spent two nights on the ship and finally saw land. They were passing by the southern tip of Chicauca and heading for Morvano. From there she would take a train that would lead her to the center of Talimar.

Talimar: The City of the King

Marie's ship had finally docked in the Morvinian Port. Marie got so many looks and stares from the Morvinians. She knew that they weren't very happy with her.

"You killed my husband," one peasant cried out.

"You murdered my brother," yelled another.

"He was my only son you heathen!" shouted an angry middle class man.

Marie for the first time felt rather guilty for killing the Morvinians. On the battlefield there were power-hungry Morvinians trying to take over her world, but now that she was looking at the situation from another perspective she saw that they too were people--but they were *people* again because Marie made them that way. That should at least make the people a little happier. They were no longer the slimy disgusting creatures they once were. This made Marie feel a little better about her current situation.

When she stopped worrying about how many people in the city hated her, she took some time to marvel at the city. Morvano was a very modernized city with tall buildings and paved roads for some sort of moving machine. Marie had no idea what these strange machines were called but someone she heard was calling it a *taxi* or something. She realized immediately that this 'taxi' would be useful. She waved her hand as she saw everyone else doing it and a taxi pulled up next to her.

"Where ya headed?" asked the taxi driver.

"Uh...Talimar." Marie answered.

"Really? You were invited to the ball, weren't ya?"

"Yes."

“Yeah...I could’ve gone to that, but I really didn’t feel like going to those lame parties Prince Ian throws. The guy just can’t seem to find a wife that’s suitable for him. He wanted to meet my daughter...probably would have married *her*, but what can I say? My daughter wouldn’t have been happy with a guy like him.” Marie highly doubted that any of what this man was saying was true. Nevertheless, she climbed into the back seat of the taxi cab and the driver took off extremely fast. Marie was nervous riding in this machine-taxi thing. She was being thrown around every time the driver went around a corner. When there were many of these taxis stopped for miles, the taxi driver would swear the most vulgar profanity Marie had ever heard. She was very happy when she saw the first sight of Kingdom Come Station.

She wiped the sweat from her brow and proceeded on with her luggage to the platform and into the cart in which she had previously purchased a ticket. She boarded the train and sat in the very last compartment which was completely empty (which she very much liked). She was staring out of the window admiring the all of the scenery. East Island was very different than West Island. West Island had snow but nothing like what she saw out of the window. The train was traveling along the coast of the icy waters of the Sea of Aranine. Glaciers could be seen in the far distance in front of the cold, cloudy sky. Marie got up from her compartment and went to the other side of the train. On this side of the tracks was nothing but snow covered hills. There weren’t many buildings or houses on this long strip south of Morvano. Marie was now heading back to her original compartment when someone spoke to her.

“Are you going to walk away without even saying hi?”

Marie turned her head and saw a girl with a pale face and long red hair and intense blue eyes stared at her. This was Marie's best friend Almiley. She finally saw her after six months. Marie was lost for words. She was absolutely ecstatic. Marie ran to Almiley and almost made her faint from squeezing her so tightly.

"I'm so glad to see you!" exclaimed Marie.

"Same here. How have you been? Are you and Thomas married yet?"

Almiley didn't know that Thomas was dead. She had not been with them in the cave of mysteries. She didn't watch Thomas die. Tears soon fell from Marie's eyes and she held her face in her hands. "What is it, Marie?"

"Almiley, Thomas is dead."

"NO!"

"Yes..." Marie went on telling Almiley how everything had happened. Almiley seemed horrified.

"So you killed Benjamin?"

"Yes. And I'm glad I did."

Once the painful subject of Thomas finally faded away they began talking about what Almiley had been doing in the last six months. She had won three races and she was on her way to the Talimar Palace to receive a gold medal from the Prince and attend his ball. Marie was excited that Almiley would be there. She had been nervous that she wouldn't know anyone and that she wouldn't fit in to a place like Talimar. But as long as Almiley was by her side she didn't care what anyone thought of her.

The train after many hours finally stopped. They stepped off of the train and decided it would be fun to ride on the horse and carriage. The whole way to the palace

they were laughing and talking and enjoying each other's company. As deep as they were in conversation, both of their jaws dropped at the sight of the Talimar Palace. It was magnificent. The palace seemed to tower to the heavens. It was a dark palace of what mortal-world people would call Gothic architecture. Nonetheless, it was very elegant. There were gardens and fountains and ponds. Though Marie's garden wasn't quite as extravagant, nor was it as large, it still reminded her of how happy she felt in the garden. She marveled at the landscape for a while and then she and Almiley and the butlers who were carrying their luggage walked up the palace steps to the front doors. Two more servants opened the two doors as Marie and Almiley reached them. Walking in the palace was like walking into a dream. The marble flooring and high ceilings were separated by grand staircases and French doors leading into other rooms. The walls were made of brilliant mahogany wood and had intricate designs carved into each panel. On the high ceilings was an enchanting painting of angels. On the right there was a three story library with ladders to reach the top. On the left was an incredible view of the ocean through glass windows that stretched from the ceiling to the floor.

Just as Marie and Almiley wiped their saliva off of their chins, The King and the Prince walked down either stair case on a ruby red carpet. The King was very old and tired looking. The prince was undoubtedly very handsome. He had his nose held high and every movement and gesture he made suggested that he thought himself the greatest thing to ever walk the planet.

The King walked toward Almiley and Marie. They both bowed and he bowed his head. He recognized Almiley immediately as the winner of three prestigious races. He didn't know who Marie was at first and this made her feel a little offended. The Prince

knew who she was when he saw her. He knew at once that this was the beauty everyone had spoken of, the one who had saved Mheriche. She was a hero and not bad looking at that. His brown eyes stared into hers almost as if she had hypnotized him to do so.

He spoke in his prince-approved way. His voice was deep and dignified. "I'm glad that you could make it. Once again, I want to thank you for all that you have done for Mheriche. Now, if you'll go with Catherine, she'll show you to your room. Please, make yourself at home, and if there's anything you need, Catherine would be glad to help you."

After saying these few words the prince walked away with his father into the next room. Marie was excited to see the rest of the castle, so she proceeded on with Catherine up to her room. She bid Almiley a farewell and she walked up the red carpeted staircase with mahogany railings up to the second floor. She saw to her left that there was yet another grand stair case with royal blue carpet that must have led to the third floor. Catherine did not lead her to the second set of stairs. She was led down the hallway. On the left side of the hall she saw seven rooms. On the right there was only one room. On a gold plate at the top of the door read: *Maiden's Suite*. This was where Catherine stopped and opened the door with her free hand. The other hand was full of towels and toiletries. She made sure Marie was okay with her room and then slammed the door due to the fact that she was in a hurry.

Marie was fascinated by this room. The ceilings were made of pure silver! The walls were made of fabric and the floors were the same ingenious mahogany wood as the rest of the palace. An armoire stood tall on the same wall as the door. In it was enough room for all her family's clothes put together. On the wall opposite this was an enormous

canopy bed with soft cushions and goose-down pillows. Each pillow bore the Talimar crest. This was heaven on earth, Marie thought as she jumped on the bed and closed her eyes to allow her other senses to enjoy this room. To her right was a balcony overlooking the great library that she had seen down stairs. There were many servants in the library, probably passing the time away until their next shift to work. To the left of Marie's bed was another balcony that led outside. It overlooked the Sea of Aranine and the Prince's own private beach. November was much too cold to go to the beach thought Marie, but nevertheless, she did walk down to it that night. As she walked along the sandy shores staring up at the full moon, she noticed someone walking toward her. At first she didn't know who this could possibly be but then she realized that it was Prince Ian.

"Marie!" he called out to her. She pretended not to hear him. She knew that this was dumb because he would only call louder the next time. When he called her name the second time she answered.

"Yes, it's me."

"I've been looking all over for you. I just wanted to apologize."

"For what?"

"Well, for my greeting. I was thrilled to see that you could make it. I really thought you'd blow me off, but you didn't. I was so delighted. It's just...when I'm with my father, I have to act and talk and walk a certain way. If I seemed too overjoyed to see someone it would be too "humble" as he says. I truly am sorry though.

"Apology accepted your majesty."

"Please, call me Ian."

"Okay...Ian."

The other side of Ian

After talking with Ian that night she felt a little more comfortable around him. He wasn't so stuck up--except when he was around his father, but Marie understood that. He was very kind to her and showed her around the palace the next morning. They had breakfast together and went horse back riding through the royal vineyard. At the foot of the vineyard was a little gazebo. They sat on the bench and talked about the painful memories that Marie was being forced to remember yet again. For some reason, Marie couldn't put her finger on it, she didn't mention her undying love for Thomas. Why had she not mentioned Thomas in that way? He was after all the most important thing to her. She convinced herself that she didn't want to have to speak of him because it would have been too difficult.

She spent the entire day wandering around Talimar seeing all that there was to see. That night around 5:00 she went back up to her room where Catherine had already prepared her a dress. This dress was exquisite. It was a crimson strapless dress that fitted to her waist and flared out until it reached the floor. She was loaned some of the Talimar jewels to accent the dress and her hair and make-up was done. She had her nails painted and then slipped her feet into high silver-strapped shoes. She had never in her life felt so beautiful. She couldn't wait to see what Almiley looked like. She had been showing off her racing skills to some of the wealthy men and women of Talimar all day. Marie was more than ready to see her best friend again.

She walked down the hallway to the grand stair case that led to the first floor. When she got to the stair case she saw that Ian was waiting for her. He was in a black

tuxedo with a cummerbund to match her dress. He extended his right hand which was covered with an elegant white glove. He escorted her down the stairs.

“I’ve always been so afraid that I’ll be all beautiful and classy and then trip down a flight of stairs,” whispered Marie when she saw all of the people that had arrived stare at her.

Ian whispered back to her, “It’s alright, just don’t think. Don’t you worry about anything just pretend you’re somewhere else. The key is to smile--smile like your life depends on it.”

“I’m glad *you* know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, I’ve had a lot of practice.”

“Don’t rub it in.” Marie said jokingly.

“Trust me there’s nothing to rub in but pure alcohol on an open wound.”

“That’s pretty graphic.”

“Well I get sick of attending these dumb parties with people ten times older than I am and ten times more boring than you’d like to think. The only good thing about these parties is the food. It’s wonderful--especially the chocolate fudge cheesecake.”

“Wow! Cheesecake is my favorite.” Marie told him in an excited manner but very quietly. They started dancing to the orchestra. The music and decorations and even the dim lighting made everything absolutely perfect. Marie couldn’t deny that Ian was very good-looking and that she had had fun with him that day, but she wouldn’t allow herself to think about this. She missed Thomas so much that she felt she was blasphemous for even thinking about another man. She enjoyed herself--but not too much. Soon it was time for dinner and she finally saw Almiley. Almiley was absolutely gorgeous. She had

on a royal blue dress and white gloves. Her long red hair was pulled up into a neat bun. She didn't seem too happy about being all dressed up. At dinner she and Almiley and Ian were all talking trying to keep themselves awake, with all of the boring talk of business and dumb jokes that were being said among the King and his guests.

"Oh did I tell you the one with the golfer and the drunk?" The guests were begging for more jokes and they laughed uncontrollably at everyone--sometimes even before the punch line.

Almiley stuck her finger in her mouth as if she was about to make herself puke. "Oh come on it isn't that bad," added Ian.

"Yeah, that's 'cause you're used to it." Almiley answered him.

"You're one to talk about boring conversation. What about all the horse racing you talk about? You don't seriously think everyone is interested in that, do you?" added Marie. Almiley threw a piece of toast at her.

"Shut up Marie," they laughed.

"Hey, Thomas--Oh God, I mean Ian, when's that delicious chocolate fudge cheesecake coming along?"

Almiley snickered under her breath. Prince Ian was not amused.

They ate the delectable food and every course was better than the last. After dinner they were sure they wouldn't be able to even move. Almiley got into a deep conversation with the King about some of her races. This left Ian and Marie to there own conversation.

"Let's say we ditch the party and go somewhere." Ian asked her.

She didn't know what he meant by "somewhere" but she took a chance and accepted. She tried to tell Almiley that they were leaving but she was too interested in the King's praising of her riding skills to even realize Marie was speaking to her. Ian snuck her out of the palace and into their car lot. He took out one of the machines like the "taxi" she had rode in on, but this was much nicer. It was what mortal-world folk would call a 1920's ford with blue cloth seats and a musical horn. Ian took her for a ride to see the night life of Talimar. Ian had never experienced going to a real party with people his own age before.

This was a new experience for Marie as well as Ian. Marie had never been to Talimar. They walked into one of Talimar's famous dance clubs. They had brought disguises so that neither of them could be noticed. Marie could feel the beat of the music in her heart. She felt a connection to the music so, that it and her heart almost pulsated in accord. The club was flowing with liquor and drunken people dancing and acting irrationally. Occasionally there were flashes of light to enlighten the many people of Talimar dancing and doing God knows what else. There were people in the corner making out and others that were passed out on the floor from either drugs or intoxication. This club made Ian and Marie feel very uncomfortable. They got a drink and sat at the bar. They decided that after this drink they would leave.

"What did you order?" Ian asked Marie.

"Oh...I don't drink. What did you order?"

"Something called...a White Russian."

They glanced around the dance floor staring at the odd, grotesque faces of those who were going to be too drunk in the morning to remember anything that happened this

night. Ian ended up having more than just one White Russian and became very inebriated. Marie drove his 1920's Ford back to the palace. She decided that since the party was still going on she wouldn't try to sneak him just yet. They went to the little gazebo at the foot of the vineyard.

"I luv ya, Marie Pwince. I really do." Ian said laughing hysterically.

"That's nice Ian." Marie answered back, not really knowing how to answer this.

"You know what?" He seemed a little conscious of what he was saying now.

"What?" asked Marie trying to understand what he was saying through his verbal slur.

"I never had a girlfriend before. I think you're just the part."

"Oh..."

"Will you marry me?" he looked into her eyes and again began to laugh loudly and crazily.

"Let's get you inside." Marie said. She snuck him in through a window into one of the butler's rooms (He was away to visit his family). Marie laid him in the bed and got him some water. She lay on the couch next to the bed. She could barely sleep at all. So many things were on her mind. She was sleeping on a couch in the Talimar Palace's butler's room next to the drunken prince of Mheriche. He had just asked her to marry him, though he probably didn't mean it. This thought of marriage made her think back to when she and Thomas were planning....

"Marie," she remembered him saying; *"I'll give you everything! You'll have the most beautiful white gown that any bride has ever seen. There will be millions of red*

roses everywhere the eye can see. All of our family will be there and all of our friends. It will be the best day. We'll be together forever."

The word forever echoed in her mind. Tears fell from her soft green eyes. He wasn't here. He had promised her he'd be here forever and he wasn't. She was angry. She was angry at him, even though it wasn't his fault. She was angry at herself because she let him die. If only she had just given the substance to Benjamin. The people had lived for centuries with their curse. They could have dealt with it. Then she realized that this thought was the most selfish thing she could ever think. But there was nothing she could do now to change what happened. He was gone forever. She could either wallow in his memory or move on. She knew he'd want her to be happy. She knew now that being a hero and doing something that's good for everyone sometimes meant that she would have to sacrifice. She hated this, but she accepted it.

The engagement

The next morning, when Marie woke, she saw that Ian was lying awake staring at the wall. “Are you alright, Ian?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“So, are you ready to back to the Palace now?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing, I’m fine.” he said finally.

“Ok. Well let’s go back to the palace then.”

They climbed out of the window that they had climbed through the night before and headed for the palace. The guards looked suspicious but they asked no questions. They thought they had made it back in with no problem until....

“So, just where have you two been?” asked the King.

“Father!” Ian yelled nervously.

“Your majesty!” Marie yelled in unison with Ian.

“Yes I’m well aware of the many names I go by. But what I don’t know is where you two have been.”

“Well, we uh...see it was like this...we just--“

“We were kind of bored...and we, you see it’s like this we--“

“I see,” the King chuckled, “I probably don’t want to know, right?” Marie and Ian were relieved to find that they weren’t in serious trouble for sneaking out the night before. They both went up to Marie’s room.

“So I probably said some really stupid things to you last night, huh?” asked Ian.

“It’s okay; you didn’t know what you were saying.” Marie assured him.

“Well what if my mind was clear for some of it?”

“Like what?”

“Well what if I meant it when I said I love you?”

“Then I’d tell you that you don’t mean it. Ian, you don’t even know me.”

“Well, my father is pressuring me to get married by my seventeenth birthday and that’s only a month away. He’s had every maiden and princess and duchess come here so that I may choose a bride, but none of them suit me. I really like that you’re so down-to-earth. You’re not stuck up like all of the royalty I’ve had to meet. You’re so fun and caring and intelligent and beautiful--What I’m trying to say is...well, you’re the first girl I’ve ever liked like this. You make me feel...different--but in a good way.”

“I’m flattered Ian, but we just met two days ago. I think I’m the only girl you’ve ever met that you can stand to be around. Trust me there are plenty other girls out there that are intelligent, down-to-earth, and whatever else it is that you want. I’m not the right girl for you. I love being around you--you’re a great guy. Maybe, we should just be friends.”

“No, that’s okay. Don’t waste your time being *friends* with me. It’s okay--whatever.” Ian started walking toward the door.

“Wait!” Marie cried out. Ian turned around but didn’t look straight at her. “I’m sorry, I just--well what if I did marry you?”

“Don’t do me any favors, Marie. No one’s forcing you to marry me, I just thought you’d want to be a Queen, to have everything you could ever dream of, and to have someone who loves you--but I guess that just doesn’t appeal to you.”

“I do love you.” Marie said before she really thought about it.

“Are you sure?”

Marie honestly didn't know what she felt for Ian. She didn't want to lose him but the thought of being married to him was completely out of the question. She didn't know what to do. “Yes, I'm sure.”

“Then, marry me.”

“Okay.” Ian kissed her and she thoroughly enjoyed it. This kiss was amazing but she still didn't know how she felt. She really liked him but she didn't love him. She didn't want a huge commitment. Her heart still belonged to Thomas and she would never be able to give it away again. She half-way smiled and Ian left the room in a much better mood.

Now, she was engaged to the Prince of Mheriche. She would rule her world from the most amazing city she'd ever seen. She would be wealthy and have everything that her heart desired--except love...true, undying love.

Marie tried to ignore all the negative things about this marriage. She crossed the hall to Almiley's room. “Hey Almiley are you sleeping?”

“Not anymore, thanks. Where the hell were you last night? Why did you leave without me?”

“I tried to tell you that we were leaving but you were so deep in conversation with the King that I didn't want to bother--“

“Oh so it's all my fault. Sure blame it on me.”

“Almiley, I'm not blaming it on you--listen I just need a friend right now.”

Almiley motioned for Marie to come and sit beside her on the bed.

“What is it?” Marie started crying out loud. “Honey, what is it?” Almiley asked, now more concerned.

“I’m engaged.”

“You and Ian? Wow! I don’t know...what to say. Are you happy about this?”

“I don’t know. I like him...I really do. He’s fun... and...I don’t know.”

“Do you love him?”

“That’s the thing. I have no idea. I want to be with him. The thought of being alone again isn’t that appealing, but marrying him isn’t either.”

“Well, I know exactly what you’re feeling. I think what it is--well I’m guessing--you still really love Thomas. You’re not done grieving yet. Right now, you’re really vulnerable. I think ever since Thomas died you’ve been so depressed and now that you’re able to laugh and have a little fun--you’re scared of losing that. This is the first time in six months that you’ve been happy. That’s what you like about Ian. You don’t love him--I don’t believe you love him at all. But, maybe this marriage thing is a good idea. I know it’s hard to grasp that Thomas is really gone--but he is. You can be with Ian. You don’t have to love him. If being around him makes you happy then that’s what you should do.”

“Almiley, I can’t marry him if I don’t love him.”

“Hon’ we’re talking about a royal marriage. Do you think any of the royals actually love their spouses--NO! I don’t really think Ian loves you, either.”

“Thanks Almiley.” Marie said disdainfully.

“No, I’m serious. Maybe this is the first time he’s been happy in a while too. But if you two get married it would be good publicity for both of you, you’d both have a lot

of fun together, you'd get to have fabulous jewels and be able to buy extremely expensive Christmas presents for me." They both laughed.

"Thanks, Miles." Almiley was right, Marie thought. She should go through with the marriage. It would be all politics anyway. It would be like living with one of her best friends. She hated lying to him though. One day, and soon, she would have to tell him how she felt about the marriage.

She had spent a month in the palace. Christmas--and her wedding--was drawing nearer. She was to marry Ian on Christmas Eve. All of Talimar would be there. All of their friends and their family would bare witness to the wedding of the year. It was now December 21 and she was sitting alone in her suite. She looked around and realized that in three days, she would be moving out of this suite and into the Prince's room. Their wedding day would also be the day of christening for the Prince. He would be King Ian Mortimer III of Talimar. She would be Queen Marie Prince Mortimer of Talimar. That had a nice ring to it she thought.

The next morning of December 22, she and Almiley were picking out fabric for the bride's maids. They decided on a crimson silk fabric. That same day Marie was being fitted for her wedding dress. There were tailors that would be spending every waking hour making Marie's dress unique, original, and completely worthy of a Queen.

That night over dinner (which was just Almiley and Marie) Almiley began talking to Marie, and trying to give her some inspirational words. None of them seemed to help.

It was Ian's birthday and when he arrived home from business discussions with the parliament they celebrated with dinner. She had given him a card--a simple card, but

that didn't seem to matter to him. He had everything he could ever want. A card seemed to please him entirely. "There is one thing that I want that only you could give me."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Love me tonight."

"I do love you." She said untruthfully.

"I mean--physically love me tonight."

"I'm not married."

He didn't listen. He carried her to his bed and laid her down kissing her lips. Something inside of her wanted this, but she felt like a traitor. Her body had only been given to Thomas. She didn't want to give it to any one else. As bad as she felt, she didn't stop him. He held her in his arms and though this wasn't as pleasurable as it had been with Thomas--it was nowhere near as romantic, she pretended to be madly in love. She couldn't help but picture Thomas in her mind. His cinnamon skin, his auburn hair and big amber eyes were all so clear to her.

"Don't close your eyes," Ian whispered to her. The candles and the sounds of the Sea of Aranine crashing on to the shores of Talimar were amazingly soothing and this did feel wonderful. Physically, this was incredible but emotionally, she was numb.

The eyes can be deceiving

Marie went back to her room. She looked at the moon and felt unworthy to speak to Thomas tonight, as she did every night. She climbed into bed, but couldn't sleep. She felt unclean, and dirty. She had given herself to a man she didn't love. This made things even more confusing for her. She liked him more now that they had been so intimate. But she loved him less, for comparing him to Thomas and the way she felt when she was

with Thomas. So many thoughts came into her mind. She tried hard to clear her head of Ian and Thomas. She concentrated hard on everything her father had told her about her mother. She had been loved by so many and then hated by so many. She was adventurous, caring, gorgeous, and generous. She was so proud to be the offspring of this incredible woman.

Marie's thoughts were interrupted by a bang at the window. She thought at first that she was imagining things, but when she heard it again, she tiptoed to the window to find the source of the noise. A shadowy figure was trying to break into her room. She wanted to scream. She wanted to run away, but however hard she tried to execute either of these actions, she couldn't. She couldn't speak; she couldn't move. Her eyes were fixed on this figure. He or she was dressed completely in black with a black mask over his or her face. When she was finally able to speak, instead of screaming she spoke softly to the figure.

"Who are you?" she tried to look harder to see who it was.

"Please don't scream, don't yell, I swear I won't hurt you. All I want is for you to listen to me. Just give me a few minutes to explain. I can't say much here, but I'll say all I can. Do you promise you won't scream?"

"Yes."

He removed his mask. Marie wanted to scream. She could barely contain her screaming. This was impossible; this could not be--Thomas.

"Thomas? Oh my god!" Her eyes filled with tears and she covered her mouth to muffle the sound of her cries.

“Marie! He ran to her and picked her up into the air swinging her around and around until they were both dizzy. “I...I don’t even know what to say. After all this time...I finally see your face. God I missed these entrancing eyes, this glowing face, this flowing brown hair. I missed everything about you.” Thomas, too, was beginning to cry.

He kissed her. She almost melted. How could she have forgotten how truly breathtaking his kiss was. She felt so safe, so secure, so deeply in love. She fell to her knees crying and glancing up at him. “How is this possible,” she whispered.

“I’ll explain everything to you, I promise, but I can’t do it here. Just be with me right now.” They kissed and hugged and constantly told each other how miserable their lives had been with out each other.

“This must be a dream.”

“It’s better, Marie, it’s real. God I had forgotten how beautiful you are. I guess Prince Ian of Talimar thinks so too.” Marie held her head down in shame. She had never hated herself more than she did now.

“I don’t love him.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. You moved on. How could I have expected you to still love me?”

“How can you sit there and say that. Thomas you are the most important thing in the world to me. I died that day. I vowed to *never* love again. And I haven’t. You cannot possibly fathom how profoundly painful life has been for me. There have been so many days I wanted to end my life because I didn’t have you with me. So, don’t sit there and say that I don’t love you, because damn it, I do.” she said ferociously.

“Look, I don’t care if you’re marrying Ian, or why. All I care about is knowing that you’re happy.”

“I still don’t understand how you can stand here in front of me so alive and well.” she told him still shocked.

“I told you I can’t explain it here. Come with me somewhere so that I can explain it to you.” he looked into her loving eyes full of compassion.

“Let me get my coat.” She reached for her coat in the closet and climbed out of the window with Thomas. They jumped on his horse and rode off to the little gazebo at the foot of the vineyard.

“Okay Marie, what I’m about to tell you is very important. I need to fill you in on what happened the day I ‘died.’ Let me guess, you believe that we were so close to getting the substance and then Benjamin Armstrong came along and we killed each other.”

“It happened somewhat like that.” Marie remembered that she had added the final touches to Benjamin Armstrong’s death.

“Well, I’m here to tell you that what you believe happened that day didn’t happen at all.”

“What? Thomas I saw it with my own eyes.”

“The eyes can be deceiving, Marie. For a long time, I believed that you turned on me and wanted to kill me. You wanted the substance for yourself. I remembered Benjamin trying to save me and you died in the struggle. I believed that I destroyed the substance and went back to the mortal world.”

“That didn’t happen!”

“I know it didn’t.”

“So if what you believe happened didn’t happen and what I believe happened didn’t happen, then what did happen?” asked Marie confused out of her mind.

“Well...let’s see where do I begin? Okay here goes. You know Jean Zuloft was your ancestor, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, he and his ‘committee’ were the ones who created Mheriche. They were the only ones to know how to retrieve the powers of the substance without receiving a curse. Jean Zuloft, however, was the only one who possessed the power to destroy the substance.”

“Thomas, I already know all of this. Where is this leading?”

“Well... in the mortal world there used to be a group of people in northwestern Europe called Celts. These Celts practiced Paganism.” Thomas could see Marie didn’t know what Paganism was. “So, I see you’re still mythology illiterate. Anyhow, Paganism is a religion that believes in worshiping the elements: water, fire, earth, air. There were commoners, warriors, a druid and a king (or arch druid).”

“What does the history of northwestern Europe have to do with why you’re still alive?” Marie wondered.

“Just let me finish. I promise it’ll all make sense, soon. Okay, so where was I? Oh yes--The Celts. There were many tribes of Celts long ago, but soon Christianity took over and paganism and Celtic life disappeared. But today, there is one tribe left.

“One of the men from Jean Zuloft’s committee was traitor. Long ago, he betrayed Zuloft’s trust and told the arch druid of a tribe known as The Gauls the secrets of how to

retrieve the powers substance of knowledge. Over centuries the arch druid told his son who told his son and so on and so forth. Now the last tribe of Celts on the planet is on a mission to reclaim the substance of knowledge.”

“What do you mean reclaim?”

“Well when the substance of knowledge was in the mortal-world, people fought over it. It caused war between countries, between families, between the closest of friends. It ruined any and every ounce of peace in our world. The Gauls had fought another tribe for the substance and won. So in their minds, the substance belonged to them. The arch druid of the still--yet barely--existing tribe of The Gauls wants to reclaim the substance of knowledge, which he feels belongs to his tribe. He knows he could make the world fall to his power. Isn't that what every leader wants--Power, wealth, fame? He could get that if he had the substance of knowledge.”

“Oh! Well, I still don't understand how that pertains to your being alive.”

“Well, see Benjamin Armstrong is the Arch druid of the last tribe of Celts. He used me and my determination to find this world of Mheriche to get the substance of knowledge for him. Didn't you ever wonder why he would go so far, as to kill, for the substance of knowledge? I mean what would make him want it so badly? Well, now you know.”

“So how do you know he's the arch druid? Did he tell you?”

“No, he only told me to kill you and get it for him. I didn't find this out until very recently, but, you see, I'm a druid of the tribe of the Gauls.”

“You're in on this?” Marie yelled.

“No, no, no! I kept having this strange feeling like something wasn’t right. I kept having these dreams that you were still alive. At first, I thought it was just some old dream, because I missed you like hell. But they were so real. It made me turn to research. Psychology and logic told me my dreams were from a traumatic experience-- your supposed death. But mythology told me differently. Ancients believed that dreams could tell the future or the present. So of course I went with the latter. I found, that because Zuloft and his bloodline were the only ones who were able to destroy the substance, that I couldn’t possibly have destroyed it. I’m not part of his bloodline. The more evidence I found against what I thought I remembered, the more my dreams told me. It was as if I had been brainwashed to believe something else. I thought for a long time ‘who would try to make me forget what really happened and why.’ Finally my dreams showed me that I was part of the tribe of the Gauls. I didn’t think much of this dream--after all that’s all it was. But I did check into it. I went to the place that I saw in my dreams and I met Sam Bailes and Aryanna Eisenhower. They told me that they had the same dream that I had. We all came to the conclusion that Benjamin Armstrong was the Arch druid of the tribe. He had told us our positions in our dreams. I was a druid, Aryanna and Sam were warriors.

“But I don’t think Benjamin planned what would happen next. I think he wanted me to believe that you were dead so that I wouldn’t go looking for you. He wanted you to think he and I both were dead so that you wouldn’t come looking for us either. If neither of us knew the other was alive Benjamin could have us both right where he wanted us.”

“And where exactly does he want us?”

“He already has the substance; he took it that day you thought I died. That was no problem for him. The difficult part though is that he needs all four members of the tribe to be present for the ceremony to retrieve the powers of the substance of knowledge. He doesn’t have Zuloft’s blood flowing through his veins, so he needs you for that. He needs Sam, Aryanna, and I to help him call on the four corners: north, west, south, and east. This is the only way he can gain all the power he needs and could ever want without receiving any curse.”

“So,” Marie continued, “you’ve come here to protect me? You found out his plan before he could come and get me so you came to warn me.”

“I wish it were that simple. It would be much easier to hide from him than what we have to do.”

“What do we have to do?” she asked.

“We have to destroy the substance. You have the blood of Zuloft running through your veins. You alone, can destroy the substance. You have to do this. The substance will be gone once and for all.”

“Wait! How, if I didn’t get to the substance, did I lift the curse from the people of Mheriche?”

“He had you hypnotized, Marie. He made you ask the substance to rid the world of their curse. This created the illusion that your memory of that day really did happen.”

Marie tried very hard to let all of this sink in. It was so much to process. How can you sit there and watch someone die and then find out that you didn’t watch anyone die? She sat confused about all of this and yet she understood.

The plan for destroying the substance of knowledge was to play along and strike when least expected. Thomas and Marie were to leave the next morning for the mortal-world.

“Before we leave, I have to go to the palace to tell Ian that I’m leaving and get Almiley.” Marie told Thomas, guiltily.

“NO! You can’t tell anyone that you’re leaving or where you’re going. In fact maybe you shouldn’t even go back to the palace at all.”

“Thomas, I have to.”

“I’m sure Ian will be fine without you for a couple of days.” Marie resented Thomas for saying this.

“I don’t love him.”

“I didn’t say that you did.”

“But that’s what you think. You think I love him and that I forgot about you. Well you couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Really, then why are you marrying him?”

She started crying. “I don’t know. If I had known you were still alive, none of this would have happened.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter anymore. It’s over and I’m going to have to face that.”

“NO, IT’S NOT OVER! I LOVE YOU, THOMAS WARREN!”

He kissed her on the forehead and held her in his arms as she cried. “Trust me, darling, there will be plenty of time to discuss this later--and boy, do I *want* to talk about this but we have much to do and little time to do it in so let’s get some rest. And remember don’t tell anyone what we’re doing or where we’re going or that you even

know I'm alive. Benjamin could have spies anywhere. Constant vigilance is necessary. Do you hear me? Constant vigilance."

"I hear you." she retorted.

The Mortal-World

Thomas and Marie spent the night there on the gazebo talking about everything under the sun, except that Marie had given herself to Ian. She felt that needed to be omitted from their long talk. They finally fell asleep in each other's arms bringing them back to such a nostalgia that they almost felt complete again. Marie awoke around two-thirty in the morning. She was in the comforts of Thomas' arms. This was exactly where she wanted to be. There was no comparison between Ian and Thomas. The only thing that troubled her was that she had to tell Ian that she couldn't marry him because she loved Thomas. She hated leaving Almiley again, but she knew what she had to do. She had to destroy the substance.

She stroked Thomas' arm and watched him sleep. He was so peaceful when he slept and she was more than ready to see the mesmerizing hazel eyes that hid behind the soft eye lids. Finally, he awoke and smiled at her. They kissed and stayed in each other's arms for another half an hour not speaking, just being together and breathing in accord.

They decided to leave before daybreak. This way no one would see them leave. Thomas had told Marie that Benjamin could have spies anywhere and that they were never really safe to talk about anything. He told her to speak in code whenever possible.

"I have something for you," Thomas told her. He made her shut her eyes and about four minutes later he came back and asked her to open them.

"Kana!" Marie cried out. She was thrilled to see her horse and her horse was thrilled to see her. Marie jumped on Kana patting her neck and stroking her mane.

"Yes, she was very happy to see me," Thomas added. "You know I wonder where *my* horse could be." Marie remembered letting Serena go into the wild. But as soon as she remembered this she saw Serena walking to Thomas. "I found her on the way Port Williamson. Someone had taken her in and given her food and shelter. She obviously hadn't gotten along too well with the other horses."

"Thomas I'm so sorry I just thought you were dead, and that you really didn't need her anymore."

"I know, it's okay."

They rode off together. Marie didn't know where they were headed. Thomas was leading the way northwest of Talimar. Marie assumed that they were headed for Morvano. She didn't really like the idea of going back there. Everyone there hated her

beyond belief. She followed him, though. She stayed close to him--like there was no tomorrow. It's strange; if you lose someone you love more than life itself and then they come back to life somehow, you don't want to leave their side again. Although, that's not really a common predicament.

They rode their horses to the familiar Kingdom Come Station that led to Morvano. They entered the vestibule of the train cart. It wasn't a normal seating area for people. This cart and a few others were where they kept animals. Thomas had reserved this cart for Kana, Serena, Marie, and himself. They were to all ride together to Morvano.

"So I guess your world isn't so much like The Lord of the Rings. Only West Island and Chicauca are like it."

"Will you ever explain to me what that is?" Marie questioned him.

"I told you already, it is a mortal-world book."

"Right. So what book does East Island remind you of?"

"Uh...that's a tuff one...uh...probably Little House on the Prairie meets the big city."

"What's the Little House on the Prairie?"

"It's another book of the mortal-world. Don't Mherichans read?"

"Of course we read. There are books on philosophy, mathematics, science, and history."

"What about fiction?"

"What is fiction?"

“You know--make-believe stuff--like vampires, elves, ghosts, witches that sort of thing.”

“Um, yeah that would be under history and philosophy.” Thomas had just remembered that vampires, elves, ghosts, and witches were recently part of her culture.

They were silent for a long time after that staring out at the icy waters of the Sea of Aranine. They were quite warm though, cuddling together. Marie loved being able to smell him, feel him, and have him there with her. She couldn't get close enough to him. She never wanted to let him out of her sight. She held him tight and closed her eyes. His scent and touch made her recall so many wonderful memories--and an even deeper guilt for what she had done.

She still didn't know what the deal was with Ian. She didn't know how she felt about him. He made her laugh and he was intelligent and extremely rich. Most of all he really liked her. And she liked him too. Her feelings for Thomas were not questionable. She knew she loved him more than she could even begin to say. But with Ian it was different. Her feelings were confusing and somehow mysterious--which wasn't a bad thing. She was kind of engaged to two men. How would she ever get out of this mess? She wanted to be with Thomas forever and always, but the thought of being without Ian made her feel sad. She put this from her mind and fell asleep in Thomas' arms.

“Marie, wake up.” She heard as she awoke from her sleep. She allowed things to come into focus from their blur. She realized that they had finally reached Morvano. After everyone else left the train they quietly jumped out of the train with Kana and Serena. Marie didn't know where they were going, so she just followed Thomas. He led her into the heart of the city where businesses flourished. Restaurants were everywhere

while orchestras played on the streets. It had just rained in Morvano and the streets were wet and slippery.

“I don’t think it’s done raining, Thomas.” Marie warned him.

“Don’t be silly, the sky is completely clear.” He obviously had a lot on his mind because he didn’t notice that the entire sky was covered in a thick black overcast. She was right, and the rain soon came pouring down.

“Okay, so *I’m* silly now?” she said jokingly.

“Come on let’s get inside.” He pulled off his coat and held it above their heads. It was no use because Marie was already soaking wet. Finally, they entered a building that was labeled “Bancus de Zurich.” When they walked inside they removed their coats and found that they were still sweating terribly. Marie couldn’t tell if the water falling down her face was from the rain or if it was from the incredible heat. There was a fireplace to the left of them and a man standing there with his hand propped against the mantle.

“Excuse me, sir; I need to get into my vault.” Thomas told him.

“Just go in. Do you have your key?” the man asked with a cheerful British accent--as mortals would call it.

“Yes, it’s right here.” Thomas held up a little brass key.

“Check in at the front desk for identification.”

“Will do.” Thomas and Marie walked up to the counter where Thomas showed his I.D. and then went into a room behind a red curtain. Marie never realized how much she didn’t know about Thomas. How long had he been in Mheriche before he came for her? He must have been there a long time to have a bank account established. He had his

own little private room. Marie was fascinated by this. “This is somewhat like the Zurich of Mheriche, huh?” Thomas added after a few minutes of silence.

“Zurich?”

“Yeah, you know...Switzerland?”

“No.” Marie shook her head.

“I have so much to teach you.”

Thomas picked up a little green velvet bag. “What’s that?” Marie asked curiously looking at the little bag.

“Well, if all goes well, we’ll be able to use this.”

“Is it something to use against Benjamin?”

“Now, I don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“Okay, fine.” She knew at once that the suspense was going to kill her.

“Now, Marie, we’re fixing to enter the mortal world. The portal is right here,” he pointed to a point in mid-air. “Here is a picture of the Greenwich Observatory in London, England. I want you to look at this picture and then see it in your mind. Concentrate really hard on this place. If you don’t concentrate you’ll end up somewhere else. We have to end up in the same place, Marie okay.” He put something into her purse. “Make sure you concentrate.”

All of a sudden some sort of clear, silvery liquid began floating in the air. Thomas half-way stepped through and reached for her hand. She stepped through. She was taken into what looked like outer space. She saw stars and nebulae and planets and asteroids. She was traveling fast through this “wormhole.” She tried hard to concentrate on the picture of the Greenwich Observatory. She thought of how it looked and the

scenery around it. She was so excited about seeing the mortal-world for the first time. She could barely contain her excitement. She thought about what Thomas' world must look like and what Thomas meant by "advanced."

She fell face first on the ground a few seconds later. She spit the grass from her mouth and stood up. She saw a great structure in front of her. It looked like some sort of tower, but it was leaning. There was a sign right next to her that read "Torre Pendente." She was already scared that she wouldn't be able to understand mortal-world language.

"Hey you, get out of there. You're not supposed to be in there."

"I'm sorry, I'm lost. How do you get to the Greenwich Observatory?"

"The what?"

"Where am I?"

"Pisa, Italy." the man looked at her curiously. He could barely believe that someone didn't know where they were.

Traveling to Thomas

What was she going to do? She wasn't where she was supposed to end up. Maybe the Greenwich Observatory wasn't far. If she could just find a map of the....wherever it was that she was at, then she could get to the Observatory. She walked down the streets of Pisa admiring the scenery and enormous and contemporary architecture. The cars here were gorgeous and obviously more modernized than they were in Mheriche. The traffic, however, was much more congested. The people dressed very differently. Marie looked down at her attire. She thought she looked alright with her white dress reaching the floor and the corset around her torso and lower stomach. It

was amazingly hot here in “Pisa, Italy.” She pushed up her sleeves and made sure she hadn’t lost her purse. Why had she ended up in the wrong place? “If you don’t concentrate you’ll end up somewhere else,” she remembered Thomas telling her.

She hadn’t concentrated. She had been too excited about being in the mortal world. She walked into a shop that seemed like a convenience store. There were maps stacked against the wall on the right as she walked in the door. “Excuse me sir, how much are these maps?”

“No, no, take...for free.” He obviously didn’t speak much of her language. She thanked him and walked out of the store. She opened the map frantically. Just as she did so she heard a pleasing dulcet. She realized after a while that the sound was coming from her purse. It was some small electronic device. She pressed some buttons trying to make it stop ringing. She pressed a little green button at the top and heard Thomas’ voice coming from the device.

“Marie, put the phone up to your ear.” Marie did so. Thomas was now able to talk a bit softer. “Where are you? I don’t see you anywhere.”

“Uh...I’m in Pisa.”

“WHAT?!”

“Pis--“

“I heard you. Why are you in Italy? That’s like hours and hours away from here. Listen, Marie, get to a taxi right away. I put some Euros in your purse. You need to go to an airport and board the plane to Calais, okay. When you get there I’ll call you.”

“What? What’s an airport?”

“Listen, just tell the cab driver and he’ll know where to take you.” Marie pushed the little red button to shut off the phone like she was told. She found a yellow car that read “taxi.” She climbed in when the driver stopped.

“Can you take me to the...uh...airport?”

“Si.”

She admired the city taking in the canals of Venice and St. Peter’s Square in the Vatican. The driver was no doubt taking the scenic route to the airport. She didn’t complain, though. She finally reached the airport and saw many huge machines flying in the air. She knew at once that this must be what would bring her to London. She was nevertheless astonished to see the mortal-world’s outstanding technology. She boarded the plane after showing her passport that Thomas had illegally created for her. She was right next to the window and was able to see an incredible view of the Alps. She flew over what the man next to her called Switzerland and France.

This man was chubby with enormous glasses that over-magnified his tiny brown eyes. He was reading some news paper and every now and then glancing at the flight attendants. After what seemed like forever, the plane was finally landing. Marie was on the verge of puking. She had never felt so queasy.

She was still as amazed as she was when she first saw Italy. They were now in Calais, France. She was overjoyed and completely astounded at the rich color in every object. The reds seemed to be more vibrant, the oranges seemed to be brighter, the yellows seemed to be more vivid and the greens seemed to be more dramatic. Every sight, every sound, and every smell seemed more intense and real than they had been in Mheriche. What was it that Thomas had liked about Mheriche when he had lived and

saw *this* world? She continued to admire the scenery of France. She was startled by the noise of the speaking device that she had spoken to Thomas through just hours before.

“Marie, are you in Calais?”

“Yes. Am I near the Greenwich Observatory now?”

“Not quite. Listen I need you to board a ferry that will take you across the Strait of Dover, alright?”

“How do I get there?”

“Use some more of those Euros I gave you and find another taxi. He or she will take you to the ferry. I love you, Marie. Be careful.” And then she heard a boisterous ringing noise. He had hung up.

She did as she was told and found another taxi cab. This man was very thin and quite edgy. He drove very slow being overly cautious. She told him that she was headed to the ferry that crossed the Strait of Dover. He drove her there and she paid him. He then slowly backed out and vigilantly drove away. She looked in front of herself to see an enormous boat carrying more of the automobiles. The vehicles were empty though. The people were standing at the fore of the boat staring out at the distant sight of Dover, England. She joined the other people and stood there for a while until Dover became its actual size. She then paid the man standing at the exit and walked into the city of Dover. She was very thirsty and quite hungry. She hadn't eaten in almost 24 hours. She decided she would stop and get something to eat at a nearby café. She walked in to find several people reading. “Oh no, Saroman has joined forces with Sauron. I don't believe it.” cried out one man sitting in the corner. Another woman was muttering to herself, “I

wonder if Daisy killed Myrtle on purpose because she knew Tom was having an affair. Why did Gatsby let her drive?"

Marie turned her attention to the counter where many delicious looking pastries and bagels were being sold. There above the glass shelves of pastries was an illuminated menu that had every type of coffee and cappuccino anyone could think of. Some people actually even ate it frozen. She decided she would try the hazelnut coffee and a cinnamon roll. She was looking up at a screen where the pictures moved and sounds were coming from it. This must be another of the mortal-world's creative inventions. There was a man inside this box and he was talking about rain and sunny skies. He was pointing to what looked like a map of England. He was warning--what she assumed--the audience about "nasty" weather.

"Hi, I'm Sam." said a man that sat down next to her.

"Hi, Marie Prince...well Marie Warren...or it might be Marie Mortimer."

"Right," the man looked at Marie like she was crazy.

"So are you from around here?" the man called Sam asked her looking at her strange apparel.

She knew it would be dumb to say, "No I'm from another dimension called Mheriche that my great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather created. I'm here on a mission to destroy the substance of knowledge because if it is not destroyed then an ancient Celtic tribe called the Gaunts will return to power and probably try to take over the world." She knew she had better say something that was believable

"No, actually I'm from Pisa."

"Italy? You don't have much of an accent."

“Well...uh...my parents were--“

“Let me guess...American, right?”

“Right.” They talked about Sam and his family and history for about five minutes when Marie’s mobile telephone rang.

“Marie, have you reached to Dover yet?”

“Yes, I just got here. How do I get to you?”

“Alright, get in a cab and tell him to take you to Greenwich Observatory in London. I’ll still be waiting here outside the building.”

“You’ve been waiting there this whole time?”

“Of course not. There are plenty of shops in London. I’ve just been shopping a little. Yeah...alright...I have been waiting here the entire time. Just hurry okay. I miss you.”

“We spent six months apart and now you can’t wait a few hours?”

“Marie, I lost you once. I won’t let it happen again.”

“Alright, well, let me tell Sam I’m leaving.”

“Sam? Sam who?”

“Don’t worry honey I’m in enough relationships right now. You don’t have to worry that I may start another.”

“No it’s not that. I trust you Marie. But then again I’m sure Ian does too--“

“Very funny.”

“It’s just that his name is Sam, and there’s a man in the order by the name of Sam.”

“Oh, Thomas. It’s not him. He didn’t even know who I was.”

“And you think if it were *that* Sam he *would* tell you he knew who you were? I can see it now, ‘Excuse me, Marie Prince Warren Mortimer (whatever your name is), my name is Sam and I have come to kidnap you so that we may lure in Thomas to come and rescue you. Then we’ll have all the members of the order there so that we can perform the ceremony to retrieve the powers of the substance of knowledge that you thought you destroyed.’ How likely.”

“I gotta go Thomas, bye.”

Click.

She turned to Sam. “Look I’m sorry but I have to go.”

“Where are you headed?”

“London.”

“I can give you a lift”

“Oh, thanks, but I’ll just take a cab.”

“No really I insist. It would be free. These British taxi cabs charge so much.”

Marie glanced down at the three Euros she had left.

The Wrong Turn

“Sorry ma’am but that won’t get you to London.” Sam announced matter-of-factly. Marie accepted his offer and followed him outside of the café. He pushed a little button on his key chain that made his car open. His car was hot. It wasn’t a classy,

luxurious vehicle like some she had seen. His vehicle was made for speed and it was known as a sports car--a 'German' Mercedes.

They drove for a long time and Marie made periodic glances at her map just to see how far away she was from her beloved. They were passing through many cities and small towns. They went through Ashford...then Maid stone...then Walton-on-Thames (where Thomas grew up)--but wait they had gone to far. They had passed up London. Sam must've been taking a longer route. But they had taken a wrong turn. They were heading straight for Guildford which was in the completely opposite direction from London. Marie didn't know what to do. Surely Sam knew where he was going. This was no mistake. He wasn't intending on going to London. Maybe he was trying to kidnap her. Should she keep her mouth shut? Should she say something? Until she could think of a plan she would keep quiet. Sam must've thought Marie was dumb. She was an American (or so he thought) who had lived in Pisa Italy most of her life. What did she know about where London was? But did he really think she was so stupid not to realize they were going in the opposite direction when a map was sitting right in front of her? Then she saw a familiar tattoo on his arm. It was the symbol of East with Earth as the background.

Did this mean something? Was it a coincidence that his name was Sam and someone in the order that had the name Sam? Did it seem strange that Sam of the order may represent Earth and East and Sam next to her had a tattoo of these two things? But what she did deem as unusual was that he wasn't taking her to London to meet Thomas. Neither would the Sam in the Order, she thought. Was there a chance that Sam was taking her to Benjamin? Yeah. That is exactly what was going on. This was the Sam

from the Order and he *was* taking her to Benjamin Armstrong hoping to lure in Thomas. Benjamin's plan was working well. But she had to do something. She was already ahead of Benjamin because she knew what was happening. She had to get out of the car. She had to run away and get a head start before Sam found out she wasn't coming back.

That's it she thought!

"Sam I really have to use the rest room. This ride to London is longer than I expected." She tried to look as innocent and dumb as she possibly could. He seemed to believe her and though it aggravated him he agreed to stop at a convenience store. They had parked next to a "gas pump" that was supposed to refuel the vehicles or something. While he was pumping gas she went into the gas station and asked for the restroom. She went to the little hallway at the back of the store. The bathroom was filthy. The toilet was filled with waste and paper towels were all over the floor. Marie could see that the soap dispensers were empty. The sink had a thick layer of rust around it. This was absolutely disgusting--not to mention the awful odor. She saw an area in the ceiling that led into a wide air conditioning duct. She (though disgusted) placed her foot on the toilet seat and then climbed up to the back of the toilet. She placed one foot on the dirty sink and tried to pull herself into the duct. When, after a couple of minutes of struggle, she finally made it up there, she was happy to find that the smell was much better. She was frightened and disgusted by the sound of distant rats and the feeling of squashed bugs beneath her palms as she climbed through. *Just keep going. Get yourself out*, she reminded herself. How could she have possibly gotten into this mess? Benjamin Armstrong was a lot more intelligent than she thought. Was it possible that he knew that his plan would work? Did he know that even if she and Thomas were informed of his

plan that it was inevitable that he would still win? It was hardly possible that Benjamin Armstrong could have known Marie wouldn't keep her focus in the portal and therefore be transported away from Thomas. Did he know that she would then be heading for London to meet Thomas and that he would have Sam there waiting for her?

She pushed this from her mind. She saw a vent a few feet away and crawled a little faster towards the light of the room beneath the vent. When she was right above the vent she saw that no one was in the little storage room, so she opened the vent and climbed down.

"Ouch!" She screamed as she fell from the roof. She quickly covered her mouth and her eyes opened as wide as they possibly were able. She listened avidly for anyone who may have heard her scream. When she was content with the fact that no one had heard her and that no one was outside the door, she continued in her plan of escape. She saw that they were two doors to the room. Above one was a window where plenty of sunlight was brightening the room. She opened the door finding, luckily, that this was the back of the building and Sam would not be able to see her from where he was parked. She ran and ran as swiftly as she could. She ran like there was no tomorrow. She didn't stop until she was deep into the woods behind the building. She stopped and placed her hands on her knees and tried to calm her breathing. When she finally caught her breath she walked around some more trying to find a way out other than the way that she had just come.

"Marie? Are you in here?" Sam cried out. Marie was petrified. He must have seen her run into the woods somehow. Now there was no one to help her if he tried to kill her. Wait! He couldn't kill her because she was needed for the ceremony. But she

still did not want him to find her. She climbed a nearby tree and hoped and prayed that he wouldn't look up and find her there. He looked in front of himself, behind, and all around, but thank goodness he didn't look up. Marie squeezed her eyes shut hoping that this would help her not to be frightened. This only made her more scared. If her eyes weren't open she couldn't see what he was doing and--well she just had to keep her eyes open and aware. She let out a huge amount of air that she didn't realize she was holding when Sam left the woods. She slowly climbed down the tree making little or no noise just incase Sam were to come back.

She tiptoed still, trying to find a way out of the woods. She had been walking for hours and hours and she still had not found her way. What was she going to do? She sat down and held her face in her hands knowing that she may be trapped in these woods forever and she may never see Thomas again. Then she remembered her "cell phone" and quickly called Thomas.

"Marie, where are you? You should have been here by now. I've been trying to call you but I couldn't get through. I didn't know where you were, so I couldn't come and look for you. I've been sitting on this bench for three hours worried sick. Where--"

"Yes, Thomas I'm fine."

"Oh, I'm sorry sweetie; I've just been really worried."

"I know you have," her eyes began to fill with tears and it was getting harder for her not to cry. "I've been really worried too. I don't know where I am. I'm somewhere in Surrey between Walton-on-Thames and Guildford."

"Do you realize that that is in the complete opposite direction of London?"

“YES, Thomas I do realize that. The man that offered to drive me to London was Sam--from the order. I’m so stupid, Thomas. Why did I fall for that?”

“You didn’t know. It’s okay. Look let me just come and pick you up alright?”

“Okay. I’m in the middle of the woods right behind a convenience store.”

“Which one?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well how am I supposed to find you?”

“Look Thomas I’m sorry I don’t know where I am. I had to get away from Sam, excuse me for not paying attention to the small details.”

“Alright, Marie. I’m sorry, I love you and I will search every wood between Walton-on-Thames and Guildford. I will find you. I love you.”

“I love you too.” She put the phone back into her purse. She continued sitting down just waiting for Thomas. She knew she’d be there a while. She decided she might as well try to find the way she came in so that Thomas would be able to find her. When she got to her feet she looked in every which way trying to find some kind of path that would allow her to retrace her steps. *Hmm, that tree looks familiar. No all the trees look the same. I think I remember that dwarf-faced tree.* But every time she thought she was on to something she ended up nowhere. How was she ever going to get out of here? After an hour she gave up hope and began walking having no particular place to go and less and less frequently she looked up to see if she could see the convenience store that seemed so far away.

Before she knew it she had gotten stuck in a pit of mud. She realized after a few seconds reserved for reaction that she was actually sinking. This was in fact called

sinking sand, which she would find out later. What could she do? She was stuck in a sinking sand pit in the middle of the woods and there would be no one here to find her. She decided that crying out for help would do her no good. She had tried that hours ago. She decided to accept the fact that she was going to die here.

She yelled out to the lord, "Father, when I die, I know I'll be in good hands."

"Let me help you." Cried out a voice.

By now the Marie's neck was beneath the sand and she was trying hard to keep her face above the sand to breathe. Through all of her straining, she could scarcely make out the face of her rescuer. It was a woman with long black hair and trusting eyes. Marie grabbed onto the rope the woman held out for her and pulled with all her strength to get out of the sand. When she could finally breath without toil she studied the woman a little more closely. She was wearing a strange outfit made of animal hides. It seemed she lived out in the middle of these woods behind a convenience store.

"Thank you so much," cried Marie.

"No problem. People call me Arya." She held out her hand hoping for a greeting.

"Pleasure, my name is Ma--" she thought it best not to say her name, for she knew Benjamin's spies could be anywhere. "My name is Magaret.

"Come let's get you back to civilization."

The Plan in Action

“Do you live out here,” Marie asked after a few minutes of silence. They were walking through some thick bushes but it was apparent that this path had been traveled before.

“Well that’s kind of a difficult question.”

“How so,” Marie asked curious to know what the woman’s story was. “I’m sorry was that rude; it’s just that I’m so interested in the people here--their culture, customs, everything.”

“Oh, so you’re not from here?” she asked somewhat surprised.

“Uh...” Great now she had done it. She had given away information to someone she didn’t know. She could be a spy. What are the chances that your seconds away from dying in a pit of sinking sand and someone just happens to come along and rescue you? Slim to none, that’s what. “Well...you see...I’m from America.” She remembered Thomas saying something about how the Americans messed up the English language.

“Oh.” Arya looked disappointed. “And no, it wasn’t rude for you to ask about me living here. Well I used to live here. Very recently, there was a whole village here. My entire family and about four other families dwelled here in these woods. We were all very happy and led an excluded life away from the fast-paced world with its technology and machines. We were all about instilling puritan values and living off the land. We also were strongly against superstition. Nothing of the paranormal was accepted in our community. So, when I started having strange dreams, I had no one to tell. I just kept them to myself no matter how real they were to me. I felt like these dreams were sending me very real messages and I had to keep quiet for the sake of mine and my family’s reputation. The dreams told me that I was part of the last tribe of Celts and that if I didn’t

come to the place the arch druid told me, then my village would be burned to the ground. And it was.

“I was devastated. My family had to relocate; all our memories and structures, and art--everything--was gone for good. I knew then that I must obey the arch druid. And when I have completed all my instructions to his satisfaction, my village will be restored as if it had never happened.”

Marie suddenly knew--Arya was what people called her, but Aryanna was her name. It was the same name Thomas had spoken of when he talked about the warriors: Sam and Aryanna. Marie froze. Her eyes were wide and full of fear. Did Aryanna know that she was Marie? Was she going to try to take her to Benjamin and help him in his plan? After so much planning she and Thomas would fail in their attempt to destroy the substance. She felt like dying. She had messed everything up. She hated herself. She wished so badly that Thomas could be there to help her out of this situation like he had done so many other times. But the cold hard truth was that he wasn't here and nothing could save her.

“Magaret, are you okay?” asked Aryanna. Marie tried very hard to be careful with her words and not say anything that might lead Aryanna to believe that this is what her master wanted.

“Yes...I'm fine. So what does this...Arch druid want you to do?” Marie was curious to know what would happen to her if Aryanna had known who she was.

“I'm supposed wait for someone. I was left in our burned village for this one soul purpose and that is to wait for this person and bring her to the Arch druid. The funny thing is,” a sly grin came across her face, “you're the first person ever to come across my

path. No one but my village people has set foot in this place in over 5 centuries, but my ancestors were there to help them realize their crime and willing showed them their consequences as I will show you yours.” Aryanna pulled from nowhere a bright red ball of light. She looked at it with awe. “One of the many gifts from the arch druid,” She looked again at the ball of light before throwing it at Marie. Marie was still frozen. She could not scream, move, she couldn’t do anything. Instinct told her to put her hands up. Somehow she felt protected when her hands were blocking her face.

When nothing happened to her, she peaked through a tiny opening between her fingers. Aryanna looked confused as she glanced back and forth at her hands and Marie, who was unhurt, unmarked, completely untouched. “How is this possible,” Aryanna asked bewildered. “The only one who has that kind of power is the arch druid and well of course--YOU! YOU’RE NOT MARGARET! YOU’RE MARIE, HEIR OF ZULOF!”

“Guilty.” That was all Marie could say. She was so afraid of what was going to happen, but on the other hand she was somewhat relieved that she had some sort of shielding power against Arya’s--or Aryanna’s--power balls.

“It is my duty and privilege to take you to the arch druid.”

“Jeez, his name is Benjamin; why can’t you just say it, already.” What was the big deal? He was just some really mean guy who wanted all the knowledge and power to control the world.

“You filthy brat, you are unworthy to speak his name.”

“Yeah whatever lady.”

That was the final straw. If ever Marie had seen someone so angry and so offended she definitely didn't remember. She had never even seen her father become so enraged; and he got angry A LOT.

Aryanna closed her eyes and lifted her hands to the sky. "I call upon the power of the Eastern Winds." She yelled and all of a sudden it was as if Marie was back in the portal. She was traveling through space in some vortex or loop hole seeing things of the past and she realized time was becoming closer within her reach. Yet she wanted to stay in the vortex. She wanted to stay away from Aryanna. She tried with all her mind and every ounce of strength that she had to keep her self from leaving the vortex. Some unknown, invisible force wouldn't allow her to stay there. Something kept telling her that she could do it if she tried hard enough. *Fight it! Don't let them win. You can do this. Fight it!*

The force became too much for her and she felt her self coming to a stop as if time was slowing down and she was going to end up exactly where Aryanna wanted her to. When she finally fell, face first, into the grass, it was night. How was it possible that it was 3:00 in the afternoon when she left and it was 9:00 at night when she arrived? It seemed like she was in the vortex for only a couple of minutes--seconds perhaps. Before Marie really had time to think this through she was being dragged by Aryanna and Sam.

"Let me go! Let me go NOW!" Marie screamed and tried to break loose from there grip. She concentrated really hard on getting away from them not knowing that this was the key to using her power. Some shield formed around her and Aryanna and Ben were forced to let go of her.

“OUCH!” Sam and Aryanna cried out together in unison. “Your greatness, we cannot touch her.”

Benjamin Armstrong walked over to Marie who apparently still carried the invisible, yet powerful shield. “Why must you play these games? Your powers are no match for mine.”

“Incase you haven’t realized, you need me for your little ceremony. Where I come from, when you want someone to do something for you, you treat them with some respect. I don’t think dragging someone and forcing them to do it is very polite.”

“Well incase *you* haven’t noticed we *don’t* come from the same place and I like to do business a little differently. You see, I don’t like having to go through the whole process of asking and kissing up. It gets frustrating being at someone else’s mercy. So it’s much easier to just force them to do it.” Marie gave him a cross look. He threw his hand toward Marie’s direction. Nothing happened. He again flung his hand toward her. This time she felt an imperceptible force trying to knock her down. But she stayed on her feet. The force was growing and she was trying hard to stay standing. She again found a voice from within telling her to hold on. *Don’t fall. Don’t give in. Stand up!*

The harder she tried to fight the force the weaker she became. Soon she couldn’t fight it anymore and she fell to the ground. By now she was so weak that she couldn’t even get back up. She lay on the ground. Millions of thoughts were rushing through her mind. Would she ever see Thomas again? Would he know where to find her?

Hours flew by though Marie didn’t know this. She was in a deep sleep. Exhaustion overwhelmed her and kept her asleep. When she finally awoke from this deep slumber, she saw that she was tied by ropes that she couldn’t see. She tried to free

herself and break loose but it was impossible. She gave up and sat there still. She heard whispers very faintly and stopped breathing for a few seconds to see where the sound was coming from and what it might be.

“She is more powerful than I ever could have imagined. I never thought she could withstand so much power. It took us hours to get her out of that portal. It took me a long while and a great deal of strength to knock her down. If that Warren boy were here I’d be afraid our plan would fail. But,” Benjamin chuckled, “as I told you from the beginning, there is no possible way he could be here because my plan is infallible no matter what happens. Love will be their downfall just like I knew it would.” The three of them laughed hysterically.

Marie was livid. If only Thomas knew where to find her. If only he could free her and they could escape. She unconsciously wished with all her heart and all her soul that he could be there.

“Marie,” Thomas whispered.

“THOMAS!” Marie exclaimed.

“Shhhhh! You’ll get us caught.”

“How did you find me?”

The Great Escape

“You know....I don’t exactly know.” He seemed amazed when he looked around. Marie could barely see anything but Benjamin, Aryanna, and Sam in the distance sitting

around a fire. Apparently Thomas saw something more. His hazel eyes were like glass as the reflection of the fire danced in them. Marie studied his eyes like she would never see them again. She examined his strong chin and cinnamon skin and longed to caress his face. She had this undying urge to reach out and touch him--to be held by him once more. His auburn hair hung in his face. His curious expression as he looked from east to west suddenly made Marie remember the current situation. She had become so caught up in Thomas and being close to him that it took her attention.

Thomas looked back at her. He bit his lip and nodded. "Yes, this is *the* Stonehenge. The ancient Celts built this. Why didn't I think of this before? Of course he would have the ceremony at a place like this." He was in a state as if he had accomplished something great. He had the look as if he were quite proud of himself. "C'mon we've got to find a way to get you free. How did he do this? Did he say an incantation?"

"How should I know? I was unconscious. I was trying to fight it but I became too weak. And I guess I fell asleep."

He was thinking very hard. "How can I get you out of this? There are no visible ropes to untie. Wait! How did you bring me here?"

"I didn't, that's silly! I didn't....did I?"

"You must have. I was in London one minute and the next I was here. What did you do right before I got here?"

"Well I just wished that you were here."

“Great. Just wish that you were out of these ropes.” So she did. She closed her eyes and wished with all her heart and all her soul to be out of the ropes and in Thomas’ arms. She opened one eye. Nothing had happened. “Believe in yourself Marie; I do.” She thought of killing Benjamin once and for all and destroying the substance. Almiley’s face came into her mind as did her father’s and her brothers’. She heard Stanch barking in her head. These happy memories made her smile to herself. Then she thought of how Benjamin had caused her to suffer for months and months. He had planted the thought in her head that Thomas was dead and that was the worst form of an insult anyone could ever carry out. All these emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, vengeance--all of it built up inside her. It was like the force she had tried to prevent from knocking her down and pulling her out of the portal--only it was reversed. It was coming from her instead of to her. She let this power flow through her veins and out through her fingertips and she felt a sensation. She felt freedom. The ropes were gone.

“You did it, Marie.”

“Oh my god, I guess I did.” She hugged him and then gently kissed his lips. “You believed in me.” He smiled at her and kissed her again. They crawled behind one of the larger rocks that formed the base of the structure called Stonehenge. They crawled, stopping to hide behind this stone and that. They crawled until they got as close as they could to Benjamin and the warriors without being seen. They overheard them speaking about their plans.

“It must be done tomorrow before dusk,” Benjamin announced.

“On Christmas Eve?”

“Yes. The substance made a prophesy years ago that a girl and her mortal-world lover would rid Mheriche of their curse. But what those Mhericheans don’t remember is that the substance didn’t stop there in that prophesy. It also stated that on December 24, Christmas Eve, the substance would fall to a ruler who would receive its powers and dictate the world. If I don’t go through with the ceremony, that will disprove the substance’s infallible nature and therefore make all of its knowledge wrong in every way. If it is wrong then it serves no purpose and will self-destruct. That, my friends, is the secret that Jean Zuloft’s betrayer told the Arch Druid of the Gauls so many years ago.

Thomas and Marie looked at each other as if they knew what needed to be done. They had to stay away from Benjamin until it was too late and he could not go through with the ceremony. This would mean killing two birds with one stone. They could stop Benjamin from taking over the world and allow the substance to self-destruct.

Marie reminded herself of all her emotions and again allowed them to flow through her body and out through her fingertips. She concentrated being in the photograph of the Greenwich Observatory that Thomas had shown her earlier that day. After some struggle in the portal again she found that the Greenwich Observatory was indeed where she was. Thomas was next to her. “Let’s get out of here.” she insisted. They began walking down the streets of London at 10:00 at night. Not many cars were out and a few pedestrians were walking along. “So where are we going?”

“To my flat--It’s just two blocks from here.”

Snow began to fall. The ground was already covered in a blanket of the white snow. But as the freezing flakes, so complexly designed, fell, she danced in circles taking in the fresh heavenly precipitation. She looked at Thomas who was admiring her

as she was admiring the snowflakes. He smiled at her and took her hands. They began dancing in the middle of Main Street. They dodged the few cars that seldom passed. If only they didn't have to go back to Salisbury--If they could just stay in this moment forever, Marie would be content. Nothing could have possibly prepared her for the love she found in Thomas a year ago. She loved him more everyday and traveled far beyond the limits of average love. This love--the love between Thomas Warren and Marie Prince was the kind of love that one could scarcely imagine. This love was almost unfathomable. It was even beyond their understanding. The only thing they knew was that they loved each other. They also knew that they were two crazy young lovers who were dancing in the middle of the street in weather that was below freezing. They of course didn't care, because after a while everything but their hearts was numb.

A Trace of Magic

After almost an hour, they finally walked through the doors of Thomas' flat. It was a cozy, small little apartment. The room they stood in was a living area with a fireplace and a bookshelf. A bed was to the left and a bathroom to the right of it. To the right of the living area was a small kitchen. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Uh...no not really, thanks."

"Well go ahead, make yourself at home. This is your home too." Marie sat on the couch next to the fire. "Can I take your coat?" She accepted. It had become full of snowflakes and ice. Her nose and cheeks were red with cold and she had to breathe warmth into her hand to make sure they were still there. Thomas sat next to her and held

her tight. "Body warmth works best." She kissed him--and it became intense. This had been one of the most emotional and powerful kisses they had ever experienced. Thomas pulled away. "I can't do this."

"What?"

"Not until I know what your plans are with Ian."

"Thomas I don't love him. I love you."

"But you're marrying him."

"No I'm not." She unbuttoned his shirt exposing his bare chest. She bent down to kiss his torso.

"Marie, when are you going to tell him you're not marrying him?"

She held his face in her hands and looked him in the eyes. "Thomas, listen to me. I love you. I love you more than anything in this world...and the next...and NOTHING is going to keep us apart. Ian is nothing to me. When I go back to Mheriche I will tell him how much you mean to me and that my heart lies with you."

"That's all I needed to know." He took her and picked her up. They continued kissing until they reached his bed. There he caressed her legs and thighs. His hot breath on her neck had awoken her senses. She trembled nervously as he searched every inch of her. The soft touch of his fingertips made her longing for him grow even more. Their unclothed bodies laid there close enough to exude heat that warmed them through the night as they slept.

Upon awakening the next morning, they laid there studying each other's eyes. Thomas' arm was around her nude body holding her close to his own. He twirled her

hair around his finger taking in all of her beauty. "I love it when you smile," he whispered to her.

"Thomas Warren, if I didn't know any better I'd say you were trying to seduce me."

"Well if you knew any better, you would have known that I would have seduced you last night if I hadn't been so exhausted."

"So, now that you're rested, what *are* you going to do with me?"

"Well let me just tell you what I'm going to do to you--" But they were interrupted by an expression of sheer horror on Marie's face. She had had some sort of premonition--some sort of feeling like she knew Benjamin might find her.

"He's after us!"

"How do you know, Marie?"

"I felt it."

"What do you mean you felt it?"

"I don't know; it was like I could feel his anger. I could sense his emotions."

"I think your emotions have a lot to do with your powers."

"I didn't even know I had powers. I mean sure I had the power to rid the world of their curse without getting one myself, but to actually think that I have real powers--well...it's insane."

"No it isn't. You have connections with your emotions--the stronger emotions the stronger your power. Think about it. When you really wanted me there, you transported me with your power. You just need to learn how to control it. Some how, you and Benjamin have some kind of connection through emotions. I can't quite figure it out but

one thing I'm almost sure of...every second he knows more about where you are. He can find you wherever you are. He will not stop looking for you. He will go to *any* length to find you. Whoever he has to kill...he will kill. Whoever he has to...well you get the idea."

"So how can I use my powers to hide my location?"

"Well, what I'm thinking is, the only way you can stop him from finding you is by feeling no emotions--which is impossible."

"So what do we do?"

"We have to get out of here."

"And where are we going to go?"

"Mheriche."

They both were silent for a long time as they got into Thomas' car and left the apartment complex. "I don't understand. How do you get into Mheriche?"

"There's only one way in. It'll be risky, but in a way it'll be kinda safe."

They drove and drove until they reached the end of a street and parked in the cul-de-sac. They walked through the cast-iron gates that were covered in vines. There was an old manor that looked centuries old standing on a hill only thirty feet away. They walked closer and closer until they reached the door. The door was open, so they walked right in.

"Where are we?"

"This is Benjamin's house."

"ARE YOU CRAZY!!?"

“Look, Marie, this is the last place he would expect to find us. He’s not going to come here because he’s probably out looking for you at my flat. Anyway this is the only way to safety.”

“Okay.” She followed him into an office. There in the corner with only a little light from the window was a desk. Behind this desk was a chair which facing opposite direction. But the worst thing about this view was the bald, shiny head sticking out from the top of black leather chair--Benjamin’s head. He turned around slowly and smiled his common devious smile. His cold gray eyes stared into Marie like a knife piercing into her brain.

“I wondered when you would come here. I thought love you have for each other could be used to my advantage but it seems its almost the downfall of the plan. But luckily I prepared for this and was here expecting you. One question though--How, Thomas, did you get around my hypnotism?”

“It’s none of your concern.” Floating right next to Thomas was a silvery liquid like the one Marie had seen in the Morvano Bancus de Zurich.

“And just where do you think you’re going?” Benjamin asked.

“Well that’s really none of your concern either. The thing you should be concerned with is the fact that you’re going to hell.” she said smartly. Marie didn’t realize it--maybe it was from all this anger that had built up in her--but she had a fire ball in her hand. She stared at it in amazement. It felt quite cool on her skin but the fire blazed like the intensity of the anger she felt inside.

“Feels wonderful, doesn’t it? To hold so much power, so much destruction, in your very hands. The only thing that truly exists is power, is it not? There’s really no

good or evil--only the decisions you make with your power.” Marie thought to herself that this made sense. It all depended on your decisions whether you were good or evil. Nature itself had power to sustain life. It was neither good nor evil. It could cause storms and droughts while allowing the circle of life to occur and surrounding the creatures with an amazing scenery--flowers, trees, birds, sun!

Since no one was perfect that meant everyone made a bad decision or two in a lifetime. If each bad decision made you evil then everyone would be evil--and that definitely wasn't true. So what Benjamin was saying was right--what Benjamin was saying was the truth. “Let's say you put that fire ball down. If you put it down and you and Thomas assist me in this ceremony I'll share the power of the world with you. You and I will be King and Queen of the world. Every body, every soul, every living creature will be under our command. It could all be yours Marie.” Marie was in a trance. Her mind kept showing her a future as the Queen of the World--No, Empress of the World. This sounded wonderful.

“Marie, snap out of it,” Thomas shouted into her ear.

“I'm gonna need you to mind your own business, Tommy; I'm working here.”

He drew his own fire ball and threw it at Thomas causing him to be slammed against the wall and falling into a state of unconsciousness. Marie was still stationary. Her eyes were entranced and her mind a blur. It had not occurred to her that Benjamin was hypnotizing her as he had once done before. But somewhere deep inside of her was a voice. *Don't listen to him. Go to Thomas. Your beloved is hurt, go to him. Benjamin is brainwashing you. Don't listen to him.*

She suddenly came back to normalcy. She was furious with Benjamin for what he had tried to do. Again all of her rage, more so than ever, built up inside of her. Every ounce of anger and pain and vengeance flowed through her veins and out through her fingertips. The force was so strong that she couldn't even control the fire ball. It went straight for Benjamin without warning trapping him inside an invisible cell while what seemed like jolts of pain slashed his skin every where on his body. Bruises abounded and blood spurted from him. No knives, no pain, nothing could be seen--except the effects. Marie felt wrong and cruel. She had not known she could create such a ruthless consequence even for such an enemy as Benjamin. She felt guilty but walked away from him, allowing him to stay in the never ending pain.

Before Dusk

She ran to Thomas and tried to help come back from his state of unawareness. "Thomas, come back to me. Please wake up."

"Marie," he said breathing hard and coughing up blood. Marie's fingers were resting on his face and were now covered in Thomas' crimson blood.

"I'll be alright," he said to her hoping to ease her pain even if his could not be eased.

"You're independence is admired but pride is a sin."

He smiled at her. "It's not pride it's truth and truth is definitely not a sin."

Marie remembered this exact moment from her "implanted memory." She remembered saying these words to Thomas and the awful memory of his expression

when he took his last breath. This memory was haunting. It was so painful to recall even though it hadn't happened. She helped Thomas up as he limped toward the portal.

"We're going back to the Palace okay, Thomas. Almiley will help us."

"Why don't we invite Ian too?"

"Don't start that with me," she smiled. She stepped into her world and into the castle grounds of Talimar. The familiar vineyard was beside their path to the main entrance. She helped Thomas to the palace and banged on the front doors. Two servants calmly opened the door and asked them inside. Thomas and Marie who were out of breath were moving frantically as the rest of the people in the palace moved, in what seems like a slower speed than usual. They ran up the stairs to Almiley's bedroom. She was found there with Ian. They were talking and Almiley was in tears. She was curled in a ball on the large four poster bed while Ian's arms were around her trying to comfort her. "It will be alright I promise." Ian assured her.

"How can you be sure?" Almiley asked.

"I would know if she were dead," he whispered

"I think I would know to," said Marie out loud. Almiley's face shot up and glanced at Marie. They ran to each other and hugged.

"Marie Prince! Where the hell have you been? NO NOTE, NO GOODBYE, NO NOTHING! And, oh my lord, Thomas....you're alive! How can that be?"

"Marie she is right," Ian continued. "You should have told us you were leaving; we were worried sick."

"Ah so this is *Ian* then is it?" Thomas asked with a look of disgust.

“Yes and you must be the *un-deceased* Thomas Warren. It’s just...great...to meet you.” Ian’s glance toward Thomas was nothing less than brutal judgment. Marie looked nervous.

“Okay glad you guys have met and all but we have a serious crisis on our hands.” Almiley and Ian looked perplexingly at Marie. “Look the substance hasn’t been destroyed.”

“Yes it has; you destroyed over six months ago.” cried Almiley.

“Yes, yes, I remember that.” Ian added.

“Well we were all deceived. It was never destroyed and we are all living in a fixed memory.” Ian and Almiley now looked more bewildered than ever. Listen we don’t have time to talk. Benjamin Armstrong will be here any moment.”

“But he’s dead. You killed him Marie.”

“That’s part of the fixed memory now come on let’s go.” They climbed on to the fastest horses Almiley had from the races and ran them as fast as possible to the Morvano port. “We’re never going to get there at this speed.”

“Your right,” exclaimed Thomas. Why don’t you take us there with your power?”

“I can’t magically transport myself and three other people across the Bloody Channel and the Sea of Loren. Let me see you try it.”

“Marie you can do it.”

They all grabbed hands. Marie knew the urgency of getting to West Island. This made her more nervous. She tried to relax. She took deep breaths to calm herself. She was standing with the people that were closest to her and she felt so much compassion for

these three people that words fell short and could never express it. This love, the love that can ‘move mountains’ actually moved the foursome. When they all opened their eyes they were traveling through the vortex. Time was right there within reach. Space and time collided in this unusual wormhole. There at the end of the tunnel was a light. It was becoming clearer by the second. Finally they all fell face first--Marie would work on the whole *landing* thing later--on the soft green grass of Gimolas. They were all standing in Marie’s garden. They walked through the waterfall and saw from the cliff the breathtaking view of Gimolas. They walked briskly down to the city and into Madame Cortez’s trailer. (She was always there when you needed her)

“Madame Cortez...Madame Cor--“

“Marie? Is that you? Oh excellent. Who are your friends?”

“This is my friend Almiley.” Madame Cortez smiled and nodded remembering Marie’s long discussion of her best friend Almiley. “This is Ian.” Madame Cortez bowed.

“Your majesty.” Prince Ian blushed.

“And this...is Thomas.”

“It can’t be!” Madame Cortez placed her hand over her mouth in shock.

“It can! It is.”

“I knew something wasn’t right.” This whole situation didn’t seem right to me. So go on tell me. What is going on?”

“First...are we safe here? We’re kind of hiding from someone.”

“Oh yes, you couldn’t be safer here. Just cause I don’t have the power to see the future anymore doesn’t mean I don’t have the power to keep this place protected. No one can walk in here unless they have worthy intentions. It’s one of the finer spells I’ve cast.”

“Yes ma’am.” Marie tried to begin explaining to keep Madame Cortez from babbling. She went on telling the story of what she believed happened on that tragic day six months ago. Then she told them Thomas’ side of the story. He told the others of his research and how he came to his conclusion that Marie was still out there. They went through the long tale of all that had happened in the mortal world and why they were back here. They explained that in a few hours it would be dusk and the substance would self destruct. Right now they were glad to find some security away from Benjamin. They were trying to buy time. But little did they know, they were actually pausing time.

When a long while had passed they heard a loud knock at the door. “Oh no, it’s him.” Marie was nervous

“No he wouldn’t knock would he?” Thomas asked.

“You’re right he probably wouldn’t knock would he?” Almiley suggested.

“He definitely doesn’t seem like a guy that would knock.” Ian advocated.

“No, he’d have to knock. This place is protected by magic.” Madame Cortez answered in her know-it-all tone.

“So should we answer it?” the four looked at Madame Cortez.

“Yes, answer it. What harm can he do you if he needs you?” she looked at Marie knowing she couldn’t be touched. They all went to the door. Thomas opened it cautiously. There in front of them was Benjamin Armstrong. To his right was Sam and on his left was Aryanna. Marie gasped with shock. They were all staring into her eyes

with such a rage that she screamed when Benjamin lifted his hand. But he did not have a ball of fire in his hand this time. He raised his hand as to say he came in peace--which all of them knew that wasn't possible.

"I've come to negotiate. Obviously there is no way that the plan will work without your cooperation. Hear my bargain fully without interruption and if you decline I'll accept that."

Thomas looked disapprovingly at Marie. However, they all attentively listened to Benjamin's proposition.

"We go through with the ceremony. Marie you cooperate and donate the amount of blood needed to invoke the substances power. Thomas, Aryanna, Sam, and I will call on the four corners. Ian, Ms Cortez, Almiley and all the rest of us will be in the tribe of the Gauls. There will no longer be an arch druid controlling the power and decisions made. We will be a secret society running the entire world and other worlds"--he looked at Ian--"and the world will be at our feet."

"That sounds very worthwhile but the substance causes nothing but pain it must be destroyed!" Marie demanded.

"I don't know Marie...that does sound pretty interesting and...inviting." Almiley retorted.

"I'll have to agree with her." Ian continued.

Then Thomas and Madame Cortez agreed. "Am I the only sane one in this room? What is wrong with you people? Do you not realize all the damage the substance has caused? Why would we put ourselves through this?"

“I’ll tell you why,” Ian stammered, “It’s because all my life I’ve been told what to do and how to do it. Everyone in the world has controlled my life. When I become King of Talimar, that won’t change. I’ll be a king that rules Mheriche while everyone else rules me--I’M SO SICK OF IT. I’m ready for something new.”

“Marie,” Almiley grabbed her hands and looked into her eyes apologetically. “Ya know I love racing but I can’t pass up an opportunity like this--a chance to change things to make some rules of my own for once instead of breaking the established ones. Try to understand Marie. This is a good idea.”

“HE CAN’T BE TRUSTED. ARE YOU PEOPLE DEMENTED?”

“But Marie darling, there are 5 of us against the three of them. If for some reason he does try to back out of the deal we have enough power to fight him.” Thomas added.

Everyone liked the idea and was completely willing to do this. She felt as if everyone had turned against her. She felt alone like no one was fighting for her sake anymore but for themselves. Then she felt selfish for not trying to understand what they were all feeling. So in her selfless decision, she accepted the proposal.

“Excellent.” Benjamin was thrilled. “Let’s head back to Stonehenge before it’s too late.”

“But isn’t it already too late?” Marie asked.

“No haven’t you ever noticed this place stops time?” Madame Cortez spoke up. “Though I don’t have my old powers anymore my residence still contains a lot of the old magic. This place surprises me everyday.” She chuckled and glanced around the room admiring her home.

The ceremony

Madame Cortez, Prince Ian, Almiley, Marie, Thomas, Benjamin, Aryanna, and Sam all stepped out of the trailer and Benjamin conjured the vortex. They all stepped inside held tightly to the other's hand. Seconds later they landed--this time much more gently--at Stonehenge. It was almost dusk and they had little time to perform the ceremony.

Thomas, Aryanna, Sam, and Benjamin each held a candle. Benjamin spoke in a Germanic tongue. Everyone was quiet staring at Benjamin as he called upon the northern waters. Each of the four members held their candles to the darkening sky and called upon their corner and element. After each call they all raised their four candles to the sky pressing the flames into one. Thunder struck the sky and shook the ground as lightning lit the night.

"In comes the blood unto which the substance respects. Here comes the woman of sacrifice. We give the sacrifice unto the substance in that our intentions are clear and our fates are saved. Thomas laid Marie on the altar. Marie laid there naked and cold as she watched the thick rain drops fall onto her skin. But the candles still prevailed. The flame would never go out just like the love in her heart.

Thomas was the lesser druid and it was his duty to capture the blood from the sacrificed victim. He took a blade and slit her hand. She inhaled deeply from the pain. Thomas squeezed the blood from the wound and caught it with the blade. Benjamin placed each of his ten fingers in the blood. He touched the substance warily afraid of receiving a curse. He tightened his eyes trying to prepare himself for the worst. But

nothing happened. He opened his eyes to see that everything was perfectly normal. He spoke again in the Germanic language of the Gauls. He asked in this foreign dialect for all the powers of the substance.

Lightning was no match for the intensity of the glow of the substance of knowledge. The light reached for miles and miles. It had happened. The powers were retrieved. It was too late to turn back now. Benjamin had the power running through his veins. He held out his palms that Aryanna and Sam may touch them. They did and followed suit holding out their palms. Finally everyone touched another's palm and enjoyed the sensation of the gift they were receiving. Knowledge and power were filling their veins, their minds, their souls. It was a tremendous exhilaration. In that moment the world had changed forever....

In the first hours after the ceremony they were all exhausted. They had no idea what to expect. They didn't know how the world would change or how people would change or how they themselves would change. They were all curious but too exhausted to carry on. They all slept under the stars that night beneath the shadows of the enchanting Stonehenge.

Weeks had passed and they hadn't noticed any change at all. None of them felt any different or more powerful. They did, however, notice how chaotic the world had become. They knew there were a lot of things they needed to fix and it may not be as easy as they had anticipated.

But for the last moments of our story we'll discuss the details of the Warren wedding. Thomas knelt on one knee and pulled out the green velvet bag he had in Morvano. He pulled out a beautiful sparkling diamond. "Marie you know I love you

more than anything. Please be mine for the rest of our lives.”

Marie’s eyes filled with tears as she smiled and hugged him tightly. She extended her left hand and Thomas placed the ring on her finger. “I will, Thomas. I love you.”

Marie caught her breath from that exhilarating moment. She realized that there was something she needed to do. She walked over to Ian. It was time to explain how she felt about Thomas.

“Ian, I think we need to talk.”

“I agree. It’s obvious you love Thomas. I want you to be happy and we’ll always be friends.”

“Thank you for understanding. You really are a great guy. You’ll find someone. I promise.” But it seems he did in fact have a new love interest--Almiley Mckanne.

Marie took the beautiful gown she had planned to wear for her inauguration. All of the tribe stood in the wedding and bore witness to the marriage of a love so pure and real. They stood on the steps of the Parthenon in Athens while millions watched their passionate kiss.

After the wedding ceremony they all went to Talimar. Wine was flowing, music was lurid, and laughter was abundant.

“My daughter is finally married. I love seeing you happy and I wish your mother could have seen this day. You look so much like her.” Marie’s father began to cry. He was getting older and more feeble everyday but there was a youth in his eyes--a fire that would never die. She liked to think she inherited that from him. It was the happiest moment in her life. Everything in the world that ever mattered to her was all right here.

Thomas, Almiley, Madame Cortez, her family--all of them were laughing harmoniously as she celebrated the most wonderful experience of her life.

It's interesting how things work out. Who would have guessed that a girl who lived a secluded life, who had no friends, no knowledge of life outside the walls of her cage could possibly end up the way Marie Prince did. She was a High Priestess of the tribe of the Gauls who now ruled the world. She had power, fame, love, friendship, and purpose. She had come so far and conquered more than she could have ever dreamed. What more could she ask for? But knowing Marie Prince there will always be something more. But that is another story meant to be told at another time....