

CHAPTER 1

Her Majesty, Queen Irene I, was holding a dinner in the great ballroom of her palace for friends, advisors, and notables. It was the culmination in a day of thanksgiving throughout her kingdom of Cabbage for the miraculous return of Crown Prince Winter from the land of the dead. The festivities went on for hours and the guests had a marvelous time, eating, dancing, and enjoying the antics of the acrobats and jesters Queen Irene had hired for special entertainment. With Crown Prince Winter and his twin sister, Princess Spring, safely tucked into bed in the nursery, Irene's happiness was complete.

Irene gazed around the room at her friends, knowing how lucky she was to have the support of so many good people. There was her dearest friend, Nan, now looking decidedly pregnant, talking animatedly with her husband, Sir Fitzgerald, which made her red curly hair bounce. Irene's childhood love, Michael, and burly King Gar from the fairy Kingdom were swapping stories, while the wizards, Asa, Seever, and Kaza appeared to be in a deep discussion of some sort.

The Queen looked around for Kay and Jon, puzzled. They had left the table and she didn't see them anywhere in the room.

Perhaps they were tired and wished to retire for the night.

When the party finally broke up and Irene and her friends exited the ballroom, they met Kay and Jon coming down the stairs into the palace entry hall.

"Where were you?" Irene asked. "You missed the acrobats. Were you unwell?"

"No," Kay said. She held a haversack loosely in her hands. "We have some news and didn't want it to spoil the festivities."

Nan looked sadly at Kay. "So you are really going," she said, softly.

Kay nodded. "Yes. Jon and I were just packing. We leave Cabbage at first light tomorrow."

"Leaving?" a puzzled Irene asked. "What are you talking about? Where are you going?"

"Jon and I are heading back to Settlement Town. I apologize for not telling you sooner, Irene. I shared our plans with Nan yesterday, but asked her not to say anything."

"But why? And how can you leave us?" She turned an accusing face to Nan. "I can't believe you didn't tell me this!"

"I'm sorry, Irene, she made me swear not to," Nan said, putting a hand on her belly. "Kay told me earlier because she thought I might not take it well if I learned of her plans suddenly. She was just worried about my well being."

"Exactly," Kay said. "Jon and I have decided to, well, basically become spies for the rebel army. We all know the Black Lord wants to kill us all. But we need to know *exactly* what his plans are. So, Jon and I are going north to learn what we can and send messages back to Fitzzy to help our side. We think we can root out information that we will be able to use against Anthony and Zarohdin."

"No, no—it is *far* too dangerous, Kay," Irene said firmly. "And besides, I need you here."

"If I may, Irene," Fitzgerald interrupted. "I think their plan makes sense. We need someone to infiltrate the Black Lord's schemes. It could make all the difference to our side."

"But this plan is simply too risky," Irene insisted. "If *you* must go, Jon, I understand, but not

Kay. We can protect her here.”

“I appreciate your concern about Kay, Your Majesty,” Jon said, “and your fears are not unfounded. But there is a war in the wind and all of us are in danger. If you think she will be sheltered here, you are deluding yourself. We must all use our abilities to keep this mad wizard from destroying our world.”

“But Kay, what if Zarohdin sees you?” Michael broke in. “He will surely know you from our previous visit when we rescued Prince Winter.”

“We thought of that,” Kay replied with a smile. “And thanks to Seever’s magic, we have come up with a way to keep me from being recognized even in Zarohdin’s own castle.”

Irene studied her friend. “How will you get to Settlement Town?”

“By sea, of course,” Jon said. “It is the safest and quickest route. So far as we know, the passage to Settlement Town by sea is still open, so we should be able to reach the city in a couple of days. But I must ask to borrow a ship from you, Your Majesty. Simon and Rupert took my ship, the *Erudite Rival*, back north already.”

“Of course. You may take any one you like,” Irene replied. “The cutter might best suit your needs.”

“Thank you. We’ll sleep there tonight so we can head out on the morning tide.”

Irene reached for her friend’s hand. “Kay, I am quite uneasy about this. I feel this places you in far too much danger.”

“Irene, please don’t worry,” Kay said with a grin. “You know me. I always manage to get out of any scrape just fine!”



Jon and Kay sailed north early the next morning towards Settlement Town. The crossing from the river to the ocean was uneventful and the sea was calm with favorable winds. Jon had every hope of making very good time.

For a long while neither Kay or Jon spoke, each deep in thought about their plan—was it really a good idea to try to spy on the wizards? Or was it likely to lead to danger, or possibly her death?

Jon looked over at Kay. She gave him a wan smile that didn’t reach her eyes. He reached out and pulled her closer to him, kissing her gently on the forehead.

“Do you have the potion Seever made?” he asked softly.

Kay laughed. “As if I would forget that! It’s my only hope of avoiding detection. Yes, I packed it safely in my bag.”

“What did he call it again?”

“I forget exactly, but the translation amounts to something like Image Changer.”

“And how do you use it?” Jon pressed. “When will you transform?”

“When you tell me we are within an hour or so of docking,” she replied. “Seever told me to take a single swallow. It should take effect almost immediately, but he warned me there could be some initial nausea or dizziness. Then, all I have to do is take another swallow every third day to maintain the transformation.”

Jon frowned. “That doesn’t seem like one bottle will be enough. What if you need more?”

“Oh, it’s quite a good sized vial,” Kay said, confidently. “I think it will suffice. If I do need more, I can send a message to Seever and he will use one of Irene’s servants to get it to me in town.”

“Promise me you won’t wait until the last minute to ask him for more. If you are going to get a position working for Zarohdin and Anthony, you absolutely cannot afford to run out of this stuff and revert to your usual self. Zarohdin will recognize you in a heartbeat.”

“I won’t wait too long, I swear,” Kay said. She frowned. “But you bring up something we should

discuss. What position in the castle should I seek, exactly? I am not much of a cook, and while I can sew a bit, I don't do fancy needlework—if they even need that. And I certainly would risk giving myself away if I exhibit my talents in archery. I suppose the only job I am suited for is menial labor. I might have to be a scullery maid," she finished with a grin.

"And that might suit very well, actually," Jon mused. "No one pays any attention to such a lowly servant. You would be virtually invisible throughout the castle. Just keep your eyes and ears open. We also need to figure out how we can meet up so you can pass your information on to me. You might only have one day off in seven, if you're lucky."

"I know. However, Kaza gave me something that will help." Kay reached for her haversack and pulled out a plain, wooden box. She opened it and showed the contents to Jon. Inside there were sheets of very thin paper, a spool of red thread and rows of sealed glass tubes, each holding what looked like a large insect.

"What are those?" he asked. "Are they dead?"

"Dragonflies. And no, they're sort of asleep," Kay replied. "Gar's fairies collected them, and Kaza placed a spell on them. All I have to do is write my message on the paper, tie it with thread to the body of one of these and touch it lightly on the head. It will wake up and fly to you."

Jon peered more closely at the box. "How on earth will they find me?"

"Ah!" Kay smiled. "That's the real magic." She dug into her haversack again and pulled out a leather cord, on which hung a tiny silver dragonfly. She put it around Jon's neck.

"Whoever wears this charm receives the dragonfly," she said. "So whatever you do, don't lose it! It is my only way to communicate with you. And I only have..." she counted quickly, "...ten of these. So do not expect any silly little love notes from me." She smiled up at the fisherman and kissed him. "I can only afford to use it for the most *critical* of communications."

Jon lifted the dragonfly charm and studied it before letting it drop under his shirt. He looked at Kay with worried eyes and sighed.

"I wonder if I did the right thing in asking you to come with me. It seems your job will be far riskier than mine. All I will do is skulk around bars and inns, seeking bits of information. I won't be anywhere near the wizards. Maybe Irene was right—I should take you back to Cabbage."

"Don't you dare!" Kay cried. "Zarohdin and Anthony must be stopped at all costs. I gladly take this on because of what I hold dear and for those I love." Her eyes were angry for a moment, and then softened. "All those I love," she said again, leaning in again to kiss the fisherman.

