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Magic Study

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Extract

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I

"WE'RE HERE," IRYS SAID.

I looked around. The surrounding jungle bulged with life. Overgrown green bushes blocked our path, vines hung from the tree canopy, and the constant chatter and trill of jungle birds beat at my ears. Small furry creatures, who had been following us through the jungle, peeked at us from their hiding spots behind huge leaves.

"Where?" I asked, glancing at the three other girls. They shrugged in unison, equally confused. In the thick humid air, their thin cotton dresses were soaked in sweat. My own black pants and white shirt clung to my clammy skin. We were tired from lugging our heavy backpacks along snake-thin jungle paths, and itchy from hosting unnameable insects on our skins.

"The Zaltana homestead," Irys said. "Quite possibly *your* home."

I surveyed the lush greenery and saw nothing that resembled a settlement. During the course of our travels south, whenever Irys had declared that we had arrived, we were usu-

ally in the midst of a small town or village, with houses made of wood, stone or brick, hemmed in by fields and farms.

The brightly dressed inhabitants would welcome us, feed us and, amid a cacophony of voices and spicy aromas, listen to our story. Then certain families would be summoned with great haste. In a whirlwind of excitement and babble, one of the children in our party, who had lived in the orphanage in the north, would be reunited with a family they hadn't known existed.

As a result, our group had grown ever smaller as we'd traveled farther into the southern land of Sitia. Soon, we had left the cold northern air far behind, and were now cooking in the steamy warmth of the jungle with no sign of a town in sight.

"Homestead?" I asked.

Irys sighed. Wisps of her black hair had sprung from her tight bun, and her stern expression didn't quite match the slight humor in her emerald eyes.

"Yelena, appearances can be deceiving. Seek with your mind, not your senses," she instructed.

I rubbed my slick hands along the grain of my wooden staff, concentrating on its smooth surface. My mind emptied, and the buzz of the jungle faded as I sent out my mental awareness. In my mind's eye, I slithered through the underbrush with a snake, searching for a patch of sunlight. I scrambled through the tree branches with a long-limbed animal with such ease that it felt as if we flew.

Then, above, I moved with people among the treetops. Their minds were open and relaxed, deciding what to eat for dinner, and discussing the news from the city. But one mind worried about the sounds from the jungle below. Something

wasn't right. Someone strange was there. Possible danger. *Who's in my mind?*

I snapped back to myself. Irys stared at me.

"They live in the trees?" I asked.

She nodded. "But remember Yelena, just because someone's mind is receptive to your probing doesn't mean you're permitted to dive into their deeper thoughts. That's a breach of our Ethical Code."

Her words were harsh, the master level magician scolding her student.

"Sorry," I said.

She shook her head. "I forget that you're still learning. We need to get to the Citadel and begin your training, but I'm afraid this stop will take some time."

"Why?"

"I can't leave you with your family like I did for the other children, and it would be cruel to take you away too soon."

Just then, a loud voice from above called out, "Venettaden."

Irys swung her arm up and mumbled something, but my muscles froze before I could repel the magic that engulfed us. I couldn't move. After a frantic moment of panic, I calmed my mind. I tried to build a mental wall of defense, but the magic that ensnared me knocked down my mental bricks as fast as I could stack them.

Irys, however, was unaffected. She yelled into the treetops. "We're friends of the Zaltanas. I'm Irys of the Jewelrose Clan, Fourth Magician in the Council."

Another strange word echoed from the trees. My legs trembled as the magic released me and I sank to the ground to wait for the faintness to pass. The twins, Gracena and Nickeely collapsed together, moaning. May rubbed her legs.

"Why have you come, Irys Jewelrose?" the voice above asked.

"I believe I may have found your lost daughter," she replied.

A rope ladder descended through the branches.

"Let's go, girls," Irys said. "Here, Yelena, hold the bottom while we climb."

A peevish thought about who would hold the ladder for me flashed through my mind. Irys's annoyed voice admonished me in my own head. *Yelena, you will have no trouble getting into the trees. Perhaps I should have them raise the ladder when it's your turn to climb, as you might prefer to use your grapple and rope.*

She was right, of course. I had used the trees to hide from my enemies in Ixia without the convenience of a ladder. And even now, I'd enjoyed an occasional "walk" through the treetops to keep my skills honed.

Irys smiled at me. *Perhaps it's in your blood.*

My stomach filled with unease as I remembered Mogkan. He had said I was cursed with Zaltana blood. I'd no reason to trust the now dead southern magician, though, and I'd been avoiding asking Irys questions about the Zaltanas so I wouldn't get my hopes up about being a part of their family. Even while dying, I knew Mogkan would have been capable of pulling one last spiteful trick.

Mogkan and General Brazell's son, Reyad, had kidnapped me along with over thirty other children from Sitia. Averaging two children a year, they had brought the girls and boys north to Brazell's "orphanage" in the Territory of Ixia for use in their twisted plans. All of the children had the potential of becoming magicians because they had been born to families with strong magic.

Irys had explained to me that magical powers were a gift, and only a handful of magicians came from each clan. "Of course, the more magicians in a family," Irys had said, "the greater chance of having more in the next generation. Mogkan took a risk kidnapping children so young; magical powers don't manifest until a child reaches maturity."

"Why were there more girls than boys?" I had asked.

"Only thirty percent of our magicians are males, and Bain Bloodgood is the only one to achieve master level status."

As I steadied the rope ladder that hung from the jungle's canopy, I now wondered how many Zaltanas were magicians. Beside me, the three girls tucked the hems of their dresses into their belts. Irys helped May start up the rope rungs, and then Gracena and Nickeely followed.

When we had crossed the border into Sitia, the girls hadn't hesitated to exchange their northern uniforms for the bright multicolored, cotton dresses worn by some of the southern women. The boys switched their uniforms for simple cotton pants and tunics. I, on the other hand, had kept my food taster's uniform on until the heat and humidity had driven me to purchase a pair of boy's cotton pants and a shirt.

After Irys disappeared into the green canopy, I set my boot on the bottom rung. My feet felt as if they were swollen with water, weighing me down. Reluctance clung to my legs as I dragged them up the ladder. In midair, I paused. What if these people didn't want me? What if they didn't believe I was their lost daughter? What if I were too old to be bothered with?

All the children who had already found their homes had been immediately accepted. Between the ages of seven and thirteen, they had been separated from their families for only

a few years. Physical resemblances, ages, and even names had made it easy to place them. Now, we were down to four. The identical twins, Gracena and Nickeely were thirteen. May was the youngest at twelve, and I was the oldest of the group at twenty.

According to Irys, the Zaltanas had lost a six-year-old girl over fourteen years prior. That was a long time to be away. I was no longer a child.

Yet I was the oldest one who had survived Brazell's plans and remained whole. When the other kidnapped children reach maturity, those who had developed magical powers had been tortured until they surrendered their souls to Mogkan and Reyad. Mogkan had then used the magic of these now mindless captives to enhance his own, making the children nothing more than living bodies without souls.

Irys bore the burden of informing the families of these children, but I felt some guilt by being the only one to survive Mogkan's efforts to capture my soul. The effort, though, cost me a great deal.