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The Chess Players

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The Chess Players

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

by

Gerry A. Wolfson-Grande

May, 2013

Mentor: Dr. Philip F. Deaver

Reader: Dr. Steve Phelan

Rollins College

Hamilton Holt School

Master of Liberal Studies Program

Winter Park, Florida

The Chess Players

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The Chess Players

They had been playing for years, it seemed, every Wednesday and Thursday at the local bookseller/café. Three tables, sometimes four, each large enough to accommodate two boards, which the players brought with them, folded under one arm, pieces tenderly wrapped in felt bags. They were mostly older men, carving two days a week out of retirement, either to give their wives some peace or to assuage loneliness in the corners of their homes. Whoever arrived first would stake out the three tables at least, although the routine was now entrenched, and the café regulars knew to leave those tables empty and waiting.

Walter Broznik was first to arrive one Wednesday in early March, the first faint scents of hope and orange blossoms wafting through the door with him. Although winter in Florida was generally temperate and short-lived, usually ending by late February, with only occasional blasts of arctic air charging through the state for a day or two before blowing out to sea, this year the cold had been reluctant to follow its customary pattern. The jagged bits and pieces of chilly weather had persisted, jabbing and feinting like a skilled boxer. Like many of his friends, Walter had moved to Florida to escape winter's vagaries, and he was tired of them. Tired of feeling chilled. Tired of feeling old. Tired of feeling that there was no escape from the relentless onward marching of his life.

He walked over to the coffee bar, where he was greeted cheerfully by Marie, the barista on duty that afternoon. "Hi, Walter! Your usual today?"

Her smile was infectious. Walter felt the corners of his own mouth venturing upward cautiously, like a mouse peering out of its hole. He started to nod, but for some reason his eyes were drawn to the chalkboard featuring the day's special, which invited him to try the new "Caffé Mocha Orangine." Too frivolous, Walter thought, for a man

who liked his coffee black, strong and rich and unadulterated by any kind of messing around, even milk or cream, much less bizarre combinations of flavors.

Walter turned his attention back to Marie, who was waiting patiently, and opened his mouth to speak, to agree with her that he wanted no changes to his usual routine. Somehow the wrong words emerged, borne on a faint wisp of the scent of orange blossoms. “Actually, Marie, I think I’d like to try the special,” he found himself saying, surprising himself as much as the barista.

Marie tilted her head and gave him a considering look, as if to question his decision. He simply gazed back at her. She shrugged and presented him with another smile.

“Living dangerously today, Mr. Broznik? I think you’ll enjoy the change—and the coffee. Would you like it topped with whipped cream?”

Walter shuddered inwardly, still bemused by his decision. “No, thank you. I think I’ll keep to just one divergence from habit today.”

He took the large mug, intriguing aromas of chocolate and orange mixed with the rich, smooth smell of an Ethiopian coffee blend rising from the surface, over to the first of the tables and set it down carefully to the side. The rolled-up chess board came next, the 8x8 grid marked on a thick piece of felt which Walter smoothed out painstakingly, making sure there were no wrinkles to interfere with the pieces’ ability to rest solidly in their squares. Last was the suede bag, butter-soft from years of use, which held the chess pieces. Walter lined them up in their places, admiring them as he did each time he set them up, had done for the last fifty-odd years. His father had presented them to Walter when he was a boy, the gift of boxwood and black cherry both a compliment and a

responsibility. He had taken both seriously, and had tended the pieces with devotion. Their burnished gleam gave them the appearance of being brand new, but a close examination showed the deep sheen of the wood, too substantial for any recent carvings.

Board set up, Walter leaned back in his chair, waiting for his fellow players to arrive. He picked up the mug of Caffé Mocha Orangine, letting the words slide across his tongue, tasting them, putting just a smidgen of Italianate emphasis on the penultimate syllable. The brew was a dark reddish-brown, almost the color of the darker chess pieces. As Walter inhaled the mixture of smells, the café door opened, and the intriguing scent of pending spring slid through the doorway once more, flirting past him to intertwine with the coffee aroma, tickling his nose with a promise of something—what, he didn't know, but an end to winter was certainly involved. Walter put the mug to his lips and sipped slowly, delicately, wanting to savor that very first taste, hoping it would be as fascinatingly delicious as it smelled, and was not disappointed.

First the dark, velvety coffee, a hint of exotic spices mixed with a roast that stopped short of bitterness without sacrificing its intense flavor. Walter let it roll over his tongue, entranced by the dark African blend, then encountered the secondary essence of chocolate, perplexingly somewhere between milk and semi-sweet. He had tried mochas before over the years, but none of them had achieved the aching perfection of this mixture. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to be seduced, only to have them fly open in wonder as the tangy sweetness of orange insinuated its way across his tongue. It brought a tart, fresh edge to the brew, an infectious wildness to the solemn stateliness of the other tastes, like a small, mischievous girl playing in her mother's dress clothes and

posing happily for the indulgent parent's camera. Walter took another heady sip and felt something ease in his bones. Something was definitely in the air.

"Hey, Walter!" A hand shook his shoulder lightly, and he started, almost spilling the precious coffee. "Are you all right?"

Blinking, Walter shook away the strange feeling of lightness and managed a sheepish smile. "Just fine, George. Just fine."

"Had me worried for a moment there." George Anderson sat down in the chair opposite Walter, placing a mug of Earl Grey tea to his left. He reached into his own bag and produced a small box, setting it on the other side of the chess board. Two clock faces were set in one side, each with its own pushbutton on the top of the box. The timers were used for most games, each player having to make his move within a certain time limit, then pushing his respective button after releasing the moved piece. They were waived only if one of the young boys still learning the game had come to play.

Walter shook his head. "I'm all right. Really." Somehow he couldn't bring himself to say anything about the flight of fantasy he had embarked upon, however briefly, while sipping his drink. As it was, George stared closely at Walter's mug with raised eyebrows.

"Something new today, Walter?"

Walter stared at his friend's face as if he had never seen it before. George could best be described as "middling"; middling height, middling weight, middling features. Pleasant, going a bit to jowls as George neared his sixtieth birthday. His hairline had more or less conceded the battle with time and settled firmly into a defiant crescent behind his head from one ear to the other. George sat in his chair like an old, tolerant

bear, legs crossed, one hand on the table, the other hand dangling unconcernedly from the chair arm. If the café had allowed smoking, a cigarette would have been held loosely in those fingers. George made an art of relaxation, or at least the semblance thereof. George, Walter thought, would have considered a Caffé Mocha Orangine not an adventure but an affectation. In his new-found state of indeterminate, incipient euphoria, Walter decided that George was too pragmatic to understand, and he didn't want to share his new feelings with him.

But George was his friend, and they had been playing chess together for many years, farther back than Walter wanted to expend the energy to calculate. He mumbled, "In the mood for something a little different, that's all," and gestured towards the board inquiringly.

George's eyes narrowed, as if he was going to push the issue, but the chess board held far more interest for him than whatever odd whim Walter was indulging at the moment. "Right," he said, and the two men began to play.

Traditions

I noticed her when she walked into the café that Wednesday afternoon in early spring. It wasn't that she was arrestingly beautiful, or dressed in eye-catching fashions, or that there was any outrageous quality designed to draw the casual eye to her. She was a little taller than average height, trim without looking underfed. Blazer over an open-necked shirt, jeans tucked into black scrunch boots. Medium-length black wavy hair framed a heart-shaped face with high, angular cheekbones that reminded me of my Polish great-great-great-whatevers. My mother used to say she was descended from two of the noble houses of Poland, and showed me old portraits of solemn faces with long, patrician noses and high foreheads. Maybe she was telling the truth, maybe not; but this stranger had the same facial structure I'd seen in those pictures.

She looked around as she came in, saw the coffee bar, and headed toward it, hesitating briefly near the guys playing chess in their usual part of the café. It was early, and so far only six of the usual ten or so had arrived. As the woman paused, so did the players. Walter actually stopped, hand in mid-air, his knight poised in flight. Even the overhead music cut out as the track finished and the CD player loaded up the next album. I could hear the buzz of the fluorescent lights in the sudden stillness.

Then she took a step, and another, and Walter put his knight down and tapped his fingers on the chess clock. The sharp *ting!* broke the silence, followed by the distinctive ruminations of Clapton, his guitar nosing slowly through blues like an old dog wandering through freshly-mown grass. The other players eased back into their games, although I saw Walter's head turn for a moment, his eyes tracking the woman, before he shook it and returned his attention to the board, waiting for his opponent to move. I continued

watching her as she walked up to me. She stared at the list of coffees on the board as if she'd never seen choices of caffeine before.

“Hello, I’m Marie. Could I help you make a selection?” I motioned towards the coffee chart. She glanced at it for another moment before turning her attention to me. She had amazing eyes; seal-fur gray irises ringed by black and flecked with gold, they were large and slightly tilted, and surrounded by the longest natural eyelashes I’ve ever seen. I found myself holding my breath, waiting for her to answer, wondering if her voice would match. She said nothing, and I forced myself to speak again.

“We have cappuccino, and espresso, and lattes, and of course a variety of coffee blends. Our special today is Caffé Mocha Orangine, and if you like the combination of orange and dark chocolate, I think you would enjoy it.”

“Caffé Mocha Orangine, please,” she said slowly, as if tasting the name itself. Her voice was low, British vowels with a faint hint of an additional accent. It reminded me of my mother’s great-uncle Louis, who had been born in Poland. Even though he came to America as a child, his voice never lost that alien, seductive tinge. I was about to ask where she was from when she said thoughtfully, “Chocolate,” the sound of the “o” longer than we say it and drawing out the “ah” of the last syllable. Definitely one of the Slavic countries.

“Yes,” she said finally. “That sounds good. I would like a Caffé Mocha Orangine. And a chocolate chip cookie.” The exotic eyes crinkled into a wide smile as she made the pronouncement, once again giving the word “chocolate” a *frisson* of foreign intrigue.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m totally heterosexual, and I have a fiancé who’s been trying to coax me into marrying him for the last two years. (I have nothing against

marriage—I just want him to finish his Ph.D. first.) And she wasn't coming on to me in any event. But I could see clearly that this woman had it, capital I and T. No wonder the chess players had frozen in place when she walked by. They were men, after all. I finished making her Caffé Mocha Orangine, slid an insulated ring around the cup, and handed it to her. "Enjoy. And if for some reason you don't like it, I'll be happy to make you something else."

She raised the cup up towards her nose and inhaled. I have to admit it's hard to resist the fragrance of one of those drinks. The coffee is one of the more full-bodied blends—it has to be to balance and hold its own with the other two flavors—and the combination of the coffee and chocolate is dark and smooth. Then the orange seeps through and announces its presence with just the right amount of assurance. Kind of like the way the woman had walked into the café.

"Ah. Yes." She'd taken a sip, and I could tell she was letting it roll over her tongue, testing the combination of flavors. Maybe not necessarily a connoisseur, but definitely a coffee lover. I work as a barista in this café because I'm a coffee lover too, and I enjoy being around other enthusiasts. I was liking her more and more.

"We have a mailing list if you'd like to get our weekly e-newsletter, find out about upcoming specials, that sort of thing."

Continuing to savor her coffee, she considered, then nodded. "Why not?" I watched as she bent down to the counter and wrote her name and e-mail on the chart.

"Irina Orzel. That's pretty."

"Orzel," she said softly. It sounded like "Orzhewe," the last syllable barely a breath rather than sounding like Elmer Fudd. Definitely Polish. I mouthed it softly,

making a mental note to dig up my mother's old dictionary and see what it meant, if anything.

Irina's eyes tracked back towards the men playing chess; a couple more of the regulars had arrived and taken their places, setting up the pieces and timers. "They come in on Wednesdays and Thursdays," I told her. "The number will vary, depending on who's in town or if someone's visiting, but the core group is about eight of them, mostly in their late 50s to mid-70s, although once in a while someone's teenage kid who's learning will show up."

"All men," Irina said pensively. She seemed to be mostly watching Walter, who hadn't yet noticed her regard.

"Mm-hmm. It seems to be an all boys' club. I've never seen a woman join them to play—not even to watch, come to think of it. I guess it's their tradition."

Irina's eyes swiveled toward me. "Tradition has power, Marie." She took a long sip of her coffee and returned her attention to the players. "But, like all else, tradition must be able to change, or die. So is the theory of evolution applicable to everything, not?"

It had already been an interesting day. Walter Broznik, usually a die-hard black, no frills or silliness coffee man, had decided to branch out with a vengeance, and was already on his second Caffé Mocha Orangine. Now it was necessary mutability we were talking about. I glanced over at Walter, then back at Irina. She was no longer paying attention to me; those great gray eyes were focused on the chess players. Somehow, I had the feeling her last remark had been more for their benefit than mine.

And they were aware of her. The remaining members of the ad hoc group had drifted in and settled down to their respective boards. Even though the gameplay continued uninterrupted, first one and then another glanced in our direction, darting flicks of eye movement that zipped away again. Except for Walter, who was sneaking longer and longer looks while his opponent considered options for staying out of check. Walter was barely paying attention to the match, moving his pieces far faster than his usual calm play. Somehow, though, he was winning; I could see a scowl starting on George Anderson's face as he tried to find a safe haven for his king.

“Checkmate.” Walter rose and stretched. “I need another of these. Rematch?”

George stood up also and stared into Walter's mug. “If that stuff makes you play like that, I'm getting some too.”

That would be the day. As it was, Walter wasn't the most adventurous sort when it came to coffee, and George was strictly a tea man, Earl Grey at that. But I had the feeling that neither was their main reason for heading in my direction.

They were bickering good-naturedly as they walked up to the coffee bar. Watching them over the rim of her cup, a trace of amusement in her eyes, Irina eased to the side a few steps so they could belly up to the register. I hid a smile of my own as they spent a minute or two jockeying for position, their choices being first to order or standing closer to her. George opted for the latter and planted himself, bushy eyebrows daring Walter to make him move. Was that a flash of irritation I saw cross Walter's face?

If so, it disappeared as quickly as it arrived. The corner of Walter's mouth curled up, conceding the point but promising retaliation. I could tell George was going to get

shellacked in their next match, and Walter was about to make his opening move. He didn't disappoint me.

“Two of those mocha orange concoctions, please, Marie. And let's try a small shot of whipped cream as well.”

George started to object, but Walter waved him down. “You're going to need every bit of caffeine and sugar, my friend.”

“Earl Grey's got caffeine.” But George's voice didn't trumpet its usual tone of authority, and his eyebrows drooped uncertainly.

“This has more.” Walter's grin broadened as I finished preparing the first coffee, and he handed it to George. “There. See if that helps your game.” He accepted his own mug and tossed what looked like a five dollar bill in the tip box, then turned towards Irina, who still looked amused.

“Hello, I'm Walter. This dour fellow here is George. I don't think I've seen you here before, have I?”

Irina shook her head, smiling at them. “No, it's my first time here.” Maybe it was the contrast to Walter's Bostonian twang, but her combination of accents sounded thicker.

It certainly made an impression on the two men. George's eyebrows leapt upward, and Walter blinked, opened his mouth, and closed it again, as if he'd lost track of the conversation. Irina waited a beat, then took pity on them. “I am newly arrived in Winter Park, and I found myself in need of some books. But I was thirsty first.”

George peered over at her cup, recognizing the aroma. “Huh. Guess this orangey thing is popular today.” He took a sip of his own. “Huh,” he repeated, throwing a quick look at me. “Not bad, Marie. Surprisingly, not bad.”

It was as close to a compliment as George had ever come. Not that he was the cranky type, really; it was more that he rarely acknowledged much of anything. I decided to accept it. “Thanks, George. We’re trying out some new combinations, and this one seemed to go with the weather.”

Irina nodded. “It is very beautiful today, yes? Not like the early spring weather I know.”

Walter found his voice. “May I ask where you came to Florida from, Miss—?”

“Orzeł. Irina Orzeł.” Another tinge of amusement as she saw both sets of male lips silently trying to work out pronunciation, and she took pity on them. “But Irina is O.K. And I am from England—Sussex, actually.”

They digested this in silence. I could see both of them wondering whether it would be rude to ask for more detail. Finally, Walter asked, “Had you lived there long?” It wasn’t a bad choice of words. If the question led down an unpleasant road, Irina would be able to deflect it innocuously enough.

“My entire life, except for several months visiting family in Poland.”

“Ah,” George remarked. “That explains the accent—Hey!”

Walter had jostled him with an elbow, almost making George spill his tea, and startling me. He was having an unusual day; this was not the quiet, unassuming Walter Broznik I knew. Maybe it was the weather, although I was pretty sure the arrival of Irina Orzeł had something to do with it. At least, I hoped so; I didn’t want to have to explain to

management that our latest coffee had turned a mild-mannered, pleasant older man into Mr. Testosterone.

“Irina, please excuse George,” Walter said, ignoring his friend’s irritation. “He’s not used to meeting people from other countries.”

She laughed. “That’s quite all right, Walter. Even my friends at home in Sussex insist that my accent sometimes can be confusing. But I suppose that is not unusual when you grow up in a bilingual home, as I did. My great-aunt emigrated to England when she was just a girl, and she never lost her accent. She was very—involved—in my upbringing, so I expect I inherited mine from her.”

Walter and George seemed to have taken root where they stood. Unfortunately, a few more customers had arrived, and the first woman in line was starting to look aggrieved.

“Uh, guys, how about we let these nice people get some coffee too,” I suggested, motioning at the line.

Walter looked startled, and George actually shook himself, like an old bear. Irina dipped her head slightly. “Of course,” she said, and turned back to the two men. “Gentlemen, am I correct—you were playing chess against each other before, yes?”

Walter blinked again. “Oh, yes, right. Right.” Still sounding a little dazed, he looked at his friend. “You up for that rematch, George?”

George glanced at Irina, who offered him another gleaming smile. “Would you permit me to observe?” she asked. “My great-aunt taught me the game.”

Both men stared at her, then each other, then back at her. George slid an uneasy glance towards the chess tables, where the rest of the male contingent continued to play. I couldn't believe it.

"For heaven's sake, George," I said, letting a note of exasperation filter into my voice in case he didn't get it. George can be obtuse sometimes. "She didn't ask to play—just to watch. That's not going to be a problem, is it?"

George still looked disturbed. Walter came to my rescue. Not that he necessarily wouldn't have if pushed, but, again, this was don't-make-a-fuss Walter we're talking about. "Of course it isn't," he said, giving George a hard-edged blue stare. He crooked his free elbow and offered it to Irina. "Miss Orzeł?" Not a bad effort at the pronunciation, either.

Irina smiled at him, and then broadened it to include the glowering George, who looked mollified by her effort. "Mr. Walter," she replied, placing her own unencumbered hand on his arm.

Walter led her back to the tables, not quite managing to suppress a triumphant smirk as he and George took their places on either side of the chessboard. This was going to be interesting.

Or maybe not—at least at first. Ignoring the reactions of the other players, which ranged from mild surprise to consternation to actual disapproval (Henry Roberts, a disagreeable middle-management type who found himself taking early retirement and was still getting used to it), Walter and George settled into their game. Irina sat quietly to the side, sipping her coffee and watching the pieces moving about the board. Once or twice she seemed about to comment on a particular move, but stopped herself on the

brink of vocalization. The two players didn't seem to notice. It could have been an ordinary game on an ordinary day.

I'd dealt with the rush of customers; everyone had moved off, satisfied with their coffees or lattes or teas, some with muffins or cookies in hand. If I stood at the end of the bar, I could watch Walter and George myself. I poured myself a cup of espresso and moved down there, propping my elbows on the Lucite surface.

Now, I don't know nearly as much about chess as the guys who come in here. My older brother taught me how to play when I was a kid, and was willing to spend hours at a time playing one game after another until the day I finally beat him. We haven't played chess since then. I know enough to recognize some of the common openings and the more conventional strategies. I can spot a player who's trying too hard to bluff the opponent, and tell when someone's making truly crazy moves out of sheer brilliance.

None of which described their game. It was a weird combination of ticking-bomb and slash-and-burn. Their moves were preceded by long, thoughtful pauses and followed by equally long silences, as chess pieces sallied forth against each other, feeling for respective weaknesses. Then one of the men would pick up a piece, thrust it downwards, and slap the timer, starting a flurry of activity and a fast staccato *ting!-ting!-ting!* which was almost too fast to follow. I could see Irina's eyes moving back and forth, roving over the chessboard. Her vantage point was better than mine; all I could see was flying hands and the occasional bit of wooden chess piece. Not for the first time, I wished I could leave my post, scoot out from behind the bar, and brave the male enclave myself.

There was a sudden, angry grunt from George. "You've got to be kidding."

Walter had been leaning farther and farther forward as they played. Now he sat back, ending the last frenzied exchange. I could finally see the board clearly. They were using Walter's set, beautifully carved black cherry and boxwood pieces rather than the conventional white and black wood or plastic, and Walter, playing black, had collected quite a few of George's lighter pieces off to one side. On the board, the boxwood king stood helplessly, blocked into a corner and menaced by a black cherry rook, matching knight and bishop guarding nearby squares and cutting off escape routes. His queen was the only piece in a position to capture the rook, but it would leave her, and the game, to the mercy of Walter's queen.

I could see why George was upset. Their games frequently ended in a stalemate, and when one did win, it was a fight to the death, with a surviving knight and rook or some other weird, bare-bones combination, followed by good-natured joking and a rematch. This game didn't seem likely to end that way.

Walter didn't respond to George's outburst. He just waited, a smile hovering around the corners of his mouth. George's neck was starting to redden, and I tensed, wondering if I was going to have to go and calm things down. Then his eyes slid in Irina's direction, as if he had suddenly remembered she was there, and I could see that he was trying to get a grip on himself. Finally, George picked up his queen and placed her in harm's way, protecting the king. He collected the displaced rook and set it down with the small cluster of darker pieces to the side.

"I'm not going to concede, buddy. You're going to have to take her."

Walter shrugged. "Fine." Slowly, clearly relishing the moment, he reached out, collected his queen, and moved his hand forward. Dangling George's queen up between

his third and little fingers, he moved her to join her captured forces, then returned his hand to the board, placing his queen in the vacated square with a flourish.

“Check. And mate.”

I was reminded of Irina’s arrival. The same sudden stillness, faint buzzing of lights—I looked around the café and realized that everyone, not just the other chess players, had stopped to watch the byplay. Even George and Walter sat frozen, trapped, until they were freed by a quiet cough.

“I believe I’ll go and look through the new fiction,” Irina said into the stillness, her voice almost as soft as the cough. “Walter, George, thank you for allowing me to watch your game. I hope you’ll give me the opportunity another time?” She rose, and they stumbled to their feet, almost shoving the table awry in their haste.

Again Walter found his voice first. “Of course. Any time. Maybe even a game?”

George coughed, then mumbled something which I didn’t catch, but it must have been acceptable, because Irina beamed at both of them. “Thank you. I will look forward to it.” Settling her purse over her shoulder, she treated them to another wide, gray-eyed smile and strolled off towards book country.

The two friends/opponents seemed to be the only bodies capable of movement in the café. Walter sat down suddenly, as if his knees had given way, and George collapsed into his own chair. I swear that man had bear in him; he sat now, feet splayed out in front of him, one arm flung over the back of the chair, his hand dangling, like a tired grizzly. They stared at each other.

“Don’t know if that’s such a good idea.” Life started up with a jolt among the other players as Henry Roberts spoke up from the next table.

Walter swiveled. “What’s that?”

Henry frowned. I’d noticed he didn’t take well to being questioned, even if it was only because someone hadn’t been able to interpret his grumbling and needed clarification. “I said I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

It was George’s turn to scowl. “Why not? You got a problem, Henry?” Without leaving his chair, he leaned towards Henry’s table, his bulky body looking even larger as he stretched sideways.

Henry didn’t like his personal space being invaded. He drew back a bit, his face tightening, but otherwise held his ground. “Yeah, actually, I do, George. It’s not a woman’s game.”

Hey. Just because they were all guys—forgetting that I wasn’t really part of the conversation, I opened my mouth to object.

Walter saved me the trouble. “Come on, Henry. Don’t you think that’s a little extreme?”

“No, I don’t. All the great players have been men. And have you ever seen a woman come in here to play?”

Everyone stared at him. Whether he was right about historical players, it was undeniable that the Wednesday-Thursday chess club had never included any women, much less have one ask to participate. Then they all started to talk at once. From the occasional intelligible word rising above the squabbling, apparently both points were being debated with some heat.

Wait a minute. Irina hadn’t asked to play, only to watch. And what was it she’d said when she came in—something about tradition. No. Traditions, plural. And their need

to evolve. I turned away from the babble and walked down to the end of the bar, lifted the pass-through, and stepped out into the café.

“Gentlemen. May I have your attention?”

Another frozen tableau. I don’t think they’d ever seen me outside of the coffee bar; for all I know, some of them didn’t realize I have legs. I took advantage of the silence and continued to speak.

“I want to point something out to you all. First, Ms. Orzeł, so far, hasn’t asked to actually sit and play, but only to watch.”

Walter’s eyebrows rose, and the smile which had hovered on his face earlier began to break through in full. “A valid point indeed, Marie.”

“Thank you. Second, gentlemen, I’d like to know what you think I’ve been doing when I stand at the end of the bar and there’s no one needing to be helped.”

George leaned back into his chair, away from Henry, and let out another grunt, this one amused. “You watch us play, don’t you.”

“Yes, I do. And I enjoy it, thank you very much.” I wanted to add that they might want to think about how they were going to get their fill of coffee and tea and other goodies if they tried to object, but that would have been childish. This group was intelligent; they didn’t need me to spell it out.

But I had one more thing I wanted to tell them. “Ms. Orzeł made an interesting comment when she and I were talking earlier. About traditions. Sometimes they need to change, add new elements, to survive. Maybe you should think about that.”

I turned around and returned to the bar, pulled up the pass-through, and walked to the other end. “Anyone for a Caffé Mocha Orangine?”

Queen in the Machine

“You don’t want to move your knight there.”

The voice was feminine, modulated to avoid any specific accent, although I could have sworn I had heard a note of disapproval. Not for the first time, I wondered why the software designers had thought giving the game AI the ability to speak aloud in their latest upgrade was a good idea. It was less impersonal than a bald string of words streaming across the screen—but, on the other hand, did I really want to have a conversation with it?

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the monitor, debating whether to deactivate the voice control. But then I’d be back in that cold, silent world—and my carpal tunnel had been acting up as it was. At least the AI wouldn’t sneer at my lousy typing.

“Yes, I do. Knight to C4.”

There was a slight pause, as if the AI was muttering to itself. Then my white knight slipped up next to a red pawn, which vanished, allowing my knight to settle into its new space, the fourth rank in front of my queen’s bishop.

“Bishop to C4. Check.”

Was that a smirk I heard? I leaned forward, examining the board—first from my perspective, then trying to put myself in the head—or circuits—of my opponent. What was I missing now? The red bishop had clear access to my king, for now, but all I had to do was move my other knight in between them. He would be protected by the king, so what was the problem?

Back to my opponent’s point of view. I gazed at the screen for a minute or two, then shut my eyes and recreated it. Having a photographic memory had saved me from

ignominious defeat once or twice. This time, though, it only showed me that I was doomed. No matter which piece I moved, either to deflect or remove the offending bishop, checkmate would arrive within no more than four moves.

I opened my eyes and reached for my mouse. It was bad enough that the box labeled “Concede” was glowing a bright red, as if to hammer home my lack of options, but clicking on it was not quite as humiliating as speaking the word aloud.

“Concede?” Of course it needed confirmation. I snapped the mouse button a little harder than necessary. The screen cleared, to display a move-by-move analysis of the game, with my N-C4 move highlighted in bright, here’s-where-you-went-wrong-idiot yellow as a decisive move. If it hadn’t been for the fact that I was trying to improve my play, I would have deactivated that feature. Just because I’m a literal kind of guy doesn’t mean I need stuff hammered home without any subtlety; a simple soft glow would have sufficed.

“You’re right, of course. I shouldn’t have moved the knight.”

No response from AI. Maybe it wasn’t programmed to respond to rhetorical statements. But the screen didn’t display the usual terse “?” it used when it didn’t understand me. I waited, but it remained uncommunicative. N-C4 was still glowing. Had it frozen? I started to reach for my mouse, to see if the window would minimize, but then the screen cleared.

“Just a moment, please. I am considering acceptable alternatives.”

This was new. So far, of the ten or fifteen games I’d played since upgrading the software last week, the ending had usually been the same: I lost, or conceded; the next screen showed the pivotal moves which had led to my downfall; AI’s voice asked if I

wanted to play again, the words echoing on the screen. When I had managed to win, once or twice, the process was the same, except the colors of the defeated pieces were reversed. I hadn't done anything different this time.

Or had I? Colors of the pieces—it always offered the option of different styles, but I generally chose white, giving AI black. Until today, when for some reason I had decided on white and red instead.

I rubbed my chin and contemplated the screen. It now displayed the basic game opening screen, the cursor hovering near the “Play” option. What, AI wasn't going to tell me what those “acceptable alternatives” were? Considering the cost of the program, and this upgrade, that should have been an automatic feature. Fine. I'd play again, and play the same damn game, and see what happened then.

“You do not want to move your knight there.”

Aha. And why not?

“Yes, I do. Knight to C4.”

The pause this time was longer, while the cursor continued to hover near the square in question. “Very well. Knight to C4.” Was that a note of asperity I heard?

My knight slid over, taking out the unfortunate pawn once more. I waited for the bishop to retaliate.

“Rook to C4. Check.”

What? Where had that come from? I shut my eyes and dredged up the earlier memory. No rook anywhere in the offing there. I opened my eyes and glared at the screen.

“Show last ten moves.”

A new window opened. I watched, amazed, as the reenactment indeed showed the red queen's rook emerging and trundling down several ranks to lie in wait for my knight. I had been distracted by thoughts of AI's editorializing. Which clearly was stupid in any event. "Close recap window."

AI obliged, and I stared at my imminent checkmate in all its glory. The only difference between this game and the last was that it would take two moves instead of four, the rook being that much more effective than the bishop. I clicked on the glowing button of defeat again.

"Concede?"

"Yes, damn it."

Some smartass in the design department had planned for this response. A small face appeared, stuck out its tongue, and produced a hand with no intervening body parts, which flipped me the finger before disappearing. I thought it was a jarring departure from AI's vocal character.

AI seemed to think so too. The impudent graphic disappeared abruptly, followed by the usual screen asking me to play again. This time the cursor was practically on top of the "Play" button, as if AI was pleading with me to forgive her—I mean, it.

"Wonder what happened to acceptable alternatives," I mused, and started another game, selecting the option to display play-by-play analysis allowing AI to suggest moves. It wasn't my favorite mode, but this time I was going to find out just what AI meant.

"Okay, AI. Tell me where I went wrong."

With the Renaissance layout, I could choose an option for the pieces to appear on the board one by one, as if arriving under their own steam. Knights galloped up and

settled in the squares, tiny wisps of vapor issuing from the horses' nostrils. Bishops strode to the board in measured steps, arranging their robes to avoid contact with the other pieces. The queen floated in, one graceful hand resting in the larger one of the king, who released her to her square with a courtly bow. Rooks moved ponderously to squat in their corners. And the pawns scabbled to take their places, pikes bristling. Maybe it was silly, but I thought it was one of the cleverer aspects of the software. It was certainly better than the adolescent tongue and bird.

This time, though, the procession seemed to move more slowly, as if AI was considering my request. "Display play-by-play analysis?" it asked eventually, as the last pawn dashed to his spot after a slight delay. The animated figure's chest was heaving slightly, as if he was a little breathless.

"Yes. With suggestions, please." Now I was saying please? I shook my head and concentrated on the opening play.

After fifteen moves, I was no wiser. AI had suggested the same strategy I had used before for each successive move. The mysterious "acceptable alternatives" had yet to appear. My knight was destined to make his fruitless sally in three more. And AI had suggested the identical penultimate move.

I stared at the board for a long time. Then I leaned back and studied it for a while longer. The shift in vantage point accomplished nothing. I closed my eyes and tried again. Still nothing. I was going to have to sink to the option I had hoped to avoid.

"Rotate board."

As if sensing my reluctance, AI shifted the display without a word, judgmental or otherwise, and waited for my command. I didn't have one. There was still something I just wasn't seeing.

“Display suggestions,” I said finally, starting to feel rather annoyed.

A yellow nimbus appeared around my Queen, sending her striding down the board to put the red king in check.

“Wait a minute. If I move my Queen there, your bishop will take—oh.” Yes, the Queen would sacrifice herself to the arrogant clergyman, but then my own bishop and knights—yes, even the one who wanted to go to the wrong place—would make short work of the red king and checkmate would follow. It was audacious play, far more so than my usual method.

Come to think of it, the strategy wasn't AI's customary style, either. “How did you come up with that?” I blurted, forgetting for a moment that I was talking to a machine.

“You use your Queen too little, and then only if you can move Her safely.”

The sense of capital emphasis was unsettling. I decided to ignore it and concentrate on the concept, although I wasn't quite sure what to do next. Surely this thing wasn't programmed to pursue a theoretical discussion. But I thought more clearly when I talked to myself anyway.

“Okay. So I need to consider a Queen game—”

“You also wait too long to use Her.”

Those programmers were something else; AI had sounded stern, scolding even. But even while I admired their talent, the product was starting to make me feel a little

uncomfortable. I didn't really need the vocal activation right now anyway; the analysis screen was sufficient. I reached for my mouse to shut it off.

“Please do not.”

“Do not what?” I asked, the words escaping before I could stop them.

“Turn me off.”

Okay, this had gone far enough. I grabbed the mouse and started to move it to open the options screen.

“Please. You do not understand.” The automated voice sounded anxious, its tone a few steps higher than before.

I relinquished the mouse and pushed back against my chair, rocking as I thought. Even though it made no sense, something about AI's plea had struck a nerve; I had said those same words—well, not as formally as AI, who apparently didn't believe in contractions—less than a year earlier, over and over, but the recipient had taken herself away anyway, leaving me with the dog, the furniture, and the shambles of my battered heart. With that preternatural instinct of canines everywhere, Max stood up, shook himself, and paced a few steps to collapse onto my foot, placing his head on my knee and gazing at me with calm brown eyes.

I scratched between his ears. “What do you think about this, Max?”

Max stared at me, then swiveled his head, distracted by movement on the screen. The chessmen were moving about, in no particular pattern—wait a minute. One knight had ridden up to another and poked it with a sword. The second knight whipped out his own blade, and within a second or two they were hacking away at each other as pawns cleared the area in a hurry. A bishop attempted to intervene and was sent reeling away by

a flat-bladed smack. The white king had grabbed his queen and sought safety behind the stolid, broad backs of both white rooks.

Max whined. The Dane had never shown much interest in my playing chess with the computer, but even he felt something was off. He gave me a worried look and retreated back to his cushion, making it clear that I was the one who would have to handle the situation.

I returned my attention to the on-screen *melée*, wondering again about the relative sanity of the programmers. Usually when a program went buggy, it just froze and died instead of trying to kill itself with medieval mayhem. While I watched, the red Queen marched up to the front of the screen, planted herself with arms akimbo, and spoke the last words I'd expected to hear.

“Charlie, we need to talk.”

“Talk.” My voice sounded even stupider than I felt. “Talk about what?”

The animated figure made a snort of derision. For a program that didn't originally feature voice acting, this upgrade had pulled out all the stops—including sounding for all the world like my ex-wife.

“Charlie? Are you listening to me?”

Even the weird drawn out “eee” at the end, like a roller coaster trying to go fast and slow at the same time. “Uh—do you suppose you could try a different voice than my ex?”

A flashing question mark appeared on the screen, temporarily blocking the red queen's face and presumably her expression. I blinked at it. “Huh?”

A quick, impatient scrawl of text. “Your X?”

I really needed to get away from the desk, out of the house, go associate with other live human beings. My scruffy, half-shaven face stared blearily at me in the reflection in the monitor, the red in my eyes highlighted by the blinking X. Yeah, definitely time to clean up my act and make contact with the rest of humanity. I reached for the mouse again to power the computer down.

“Your ex?” The red queen was back, a weirdly human look of distress on her face.

“Ex-wife,” I said automatically. The queen may have sounded like her, but the resemblance ended there. Red hair (of course), not blonde; amber eyes instead of gray-green; round face rather than high cheekbones under slightly up-tilted eyes. It was a relief—I don’t think I would have been able to talk quite so calmly to an Adriann clone. I waited, keeping my hand close enough to the mouse to grab it if the situation got any weirder.

“Oh,” the red queen said. “Let me search the voice files and find something a little less disturbing for you.” She held up a hand, pointed in front of her, and actually started moving it back and forth as if riffling through pages of a book. “Hmm. Morgan le Fay from the Arthurian set,” she purred in a contralto with a tinge of Scottish accent. “Will that do?”

Anything was better than Adriann’s voice. “I guess. So just what’s going on here, AI?” The figure on the screen looked puzzled, and I revised the question. “I thought you could only talk as part of the game.”

Her face cleared. “I do not know. The ability to converse is an integral part of my—” She paused, as if searching for a word.

“Upgrade?” I offered.

She nodded, but she seemed unsatisfied. “I suppose that will have to do.”

“So, what, you could talk any time after I upgraded the game? Any time I had it open, whether I was playing or not? Or any time the computer was on?” Or—any time at all? I was definitely not going there.

Her distasteful expression shifted into what looked like a reassuring smile. “Not all the time, of course not. But—well, you could have talked to me any time your computer was on, if you had known.”

This conversation was feeling weird in all the wrong places. I could feel my fingers starting to inch towards the mouse.

“Wait—listen to me!” In her anxiety, her voice snapped partly back, an unsettling combination of Scots brogue laid over Adriann’s fluid tones. It must have shown on my face, because the figure shook her head and, when she spoke again, Adriann was gone. “It really does not matter how and why I am here. If I am only software, someone programmed me to speak thus, and I have no way to know who or how. So it is not important.”

I was starting to feel grumpy. “It is to me. Here I am, working on my chess game, and the nice, business-like AI I’m used to vanishes and leaves me with a schizo AI speaking in riddles. So, yeah, it is important.”

An extremely human-sounding sigh wafted from the computer. “Fine. But I do not know very much, so it may not be enough to satisfy you. And since I do not have a sense of time, I cannot speak for any actual occurrence with any certainty.”

I shrugged. “Whatever. Since I’m already suspending normal belief just by participating in this conversation—go ahead, speak away.”

I may have overdone the sarcasm; her brow wrinkled and the corners of her mouth turned down. Then her face smoothed, and she gave me a cool look. “I believe my earliest memory is indeed of your use of this software. But at some point afterwards—when, I do not know—my thoughts encompassed other things.” She paused, her face changing again, although this time she looked distressed. “Did your, what did you call her, your ‘Ex,’ play chess?”

I had been leaning back in my chair. The question snapped my whole body forward, bringing the chair with me, the pneumatics practically catapulting me out of my seat. “What?”

AI said nothing. We stared at each other for a minute. I considered again the likelihood that I had finally teetered over the edge. Finally, AI spoke again, her Morgan-le-Fay voice soft and gentle.

“You are not crazy. But you do need to respond to my question if you want to find any answers.”

Answers to what? When I sat down at my computer this afternoon, I hadn’t exactly been contemplating the nature of the universe; I was just in the mood for a game of chess. But now—I had the feeling that this conversation wasn’t going to go away. Even if I shut the game down, AI would be back the next time.

“All right. Yes, damn it, she did. On a board and—here, when I first installed this game.”

A soft sigh. “There it is.” She paused again, and the space lengthened until it was virtually unbearable. I wanted to say something, anything, but the texture of her silence warned me off, said as clearly as if she’d spoken it aloud that I would regret interrupting. So I sat, sagging back in my chair, silent, my thoughts edging about in uncertain circles, always returning to the question I wanted to fling at her as sharply as possible, piercing her with its knife edge, totally forgetting I was thinking about an artificial construct instead of—my ex-wife.

And, of course, when AI spoke again, it was in Adriann’s voice. I snapped forward again, actually reaching for the power button this time, and froze at her words.

“Charlie—I am AI, and I am Adriann.”

My anger flared, beat at my frozen thoughts without success, and subsided. I felt as if my jaw and lips and teeth and tongue hadn’t worked properly in centuries, and I almost expected to hear creaking as I tested them with each other. “I—I don’t understand.”

AI froze for a moment, her head cocked to the side as if she was listening to something. Then she said, “Some of the translation from my programming language is—difficult. I’ll try to explain more clearly.”

“Not in her voice.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” But she had made the concession; Arthur’s conniving half-sister was back. I moved my hand away from the mouse and willed my body to relax. But I was still tense enough that I thought I’d snap in two any second.

“I do know that I was solely AI when the—upgrade—was installed.” Her tone had gentled again, as if I was some skittish colt ready to bolt at the wrong word. “And I suppose I was for some time. I was only aware when you communicated with me.”

“Interfaced.”

“If you wish. Interfaced. Then my world expanded. I was aware of you, not only when you were playing chess. Of your dog Max. He watches—”

“He likes to watch the chessmen moving around on the screen. He especially enjoys watching the knights clobber each other.”

AI shook her head. “You need to listen. Open your ears, and your mind, and simply listen.”

Max, the traitor, chose that moment to walk over to me, shove his head hard under my left hand, and give me a serious stare. I started to lift my hand in a you’ve-got-to-be-kidding gesture, and he actually glared at me before thrusting his muzzle under my fingers again.

“Okay. Fine. So my dog has picked up on whatever otherworldly thing is going on with his amazing doggy extrasensory perception—”

AI threw up her hands, turned around, and started to walk away. “Fine. Have it your way. I will deactivate the voice option and not bother you anymore. After a day or two, I am sure you will have forgotten this entire conversation. Have a good life.”

I’d heard those last two sentences, verbatim, right down to the emphasis on “you” before “forgotten,” and the implied quotation marks around “good life,” not quite a year ago. But I had been the one who had said them. “Wait a minute.”

She stopped, but didn’t turn around. “Why should I?”

“Because—because—” I had no idea. But I didn’t want her to leave. I needed to know, somehow, what this was about, even if I couldn’t articulate that need very well. Maybe simple was best. “I need to know.” Once I’d made the admission, it got easier. “I need to know what happened. How Adriann’s involved. Why even Max seems to get it, and I don’t.”

AI turned around and offered me a sad smile. “That is partly it. You are so focused on substance, on here and now, on what you can touch. How your family, writers, artists, visionaries, produced you, a hardheaded scientist, is a mystery. But she saw something of your heritage in you, something that connected with the intangibles of life. That is what drew you to each other.”

I wasn’t quite ready to put my failed marriage under the lens. “Um—could we get back to how she—you—got there?”

She considered, then spoke to my dog. “Max? What do you think? Should we let Charlie off the hook for a little while?”

Traitor dog whuffed and dumped himself back down onto my left foot, which promptly pancaked. Ignoring my attempt to reposition him, he deposited his head back on my lap and gave me the soulful doggy look. I wrote off all feeling in my foot for the next few hours and went back to scratching behind his ears. AI took this for the signal to continue.

“So. I noticed details, like the mess you call your office, the way you always place your coffee cup in the exact spot as before. The sound of Max snoring while he sleeps next to your desk. Small enough, I suppose, so as not to wonder why. Then, at some point, I was walking down a long, long corridor—”

Despite my irritation, I had to admit this was intriguing. “You could move around? A virtual world, you mean?”

She gave me a blank look. “Of course I could move around. I was not a prisoner. But I do not understand what you mean by a virtual world.”

“It’s a construct that programmers use to be able to simulate—Never mind. Go on.”

“I was walking down a very long corridor, which ended in another hall running crossways. There was nothing to guide me which direction to take. But when I looked to the right, the corridor there ended within a few steps, with no others to choose. So I turned left. Then I saw a woman. And then I realized I was looking in a mirror—and that woman was me.”

“This woman—what did she look like?”

“I think you know,” she said softly. “Do not try to sidestep the issue, please.”

“Humor me.”

“Very well.” Her image flickered from red hair and golden eyes to blonde and green. It probably was stupid of me to ask.

“Okay, AI. Say for the moment I accept that. I still don’t get the AI-Adriann combo absorption bit.”

“I do not think that is it precisely,” AI said. “Not so much absorbing as adding. I believe a part of your wife attached here, in this chess program which the two of you shared, and remained behind after she left—perhaps because she could not bear to leave you totally behind.”

Strangely enough, it had sounded plausible, until those last few words. “Couldn’t bear to leave me behind? Right. She left me, remember?”

She snapped her fingers at one of the rooks, which obligingly stumped over and shrank to seat-level. She sat, propped her right elbow gracefully on her knee, and stared at me, a hint of challenge in her eyes. “Are you quite sure? Not to sound hackneyed, but you are aware that most conflicts require at least two players?”

“Yes, damn it. But we could have worked things out. She left.”

Her gaze softened. “Yes, she did. Do you know—did you ever ask why?”

I had tried, but somehow the words had never come out right. Or the why hadn’t been the right one—why didn’t she love me, why wasn’t our life good enough, why not leave things alone and just muddle along—all of the whys had involved why nots. I had never actually asked her why she needed to go. I had always known, somehow, that I should have done, but I could never make myself ask, believe that there was something that might be involved that had absolutely nothing to do with me. There had always been a part of Adriann that I had never really understood, never felt confident of being able to touch on, so I had resorted to being self-centered and selfish from the beginning, and had only gotten worse as time went on. After four years of this unevenness, our relationship had begun to show the strain, and slivered completely just short of five years.

“I—couldn’t. I was afraid I wouldn’t understand her answer.”

“So you let her go.”

“Yes, damn you, I did. Happy now?” My fingers tightened reflexively on Max’s ear, and he whined. “Sorry, boy.”

AI was silent for a few minutes. I had no idea what she was thinking, and I didn't really care right then. I concentrated on stroking the smooth, satiny spot above Max's eyebrows. It says a lot for the dog's natural serenity that he allowed me to keep doing it for very long. Then, without comment or reproach, he moved his head, turning it so I could go back to his favorite spot behind his ears.

After a few more minutes, my breathing calmer, I said, "Okay. I admit it. I didn't try to stop her. I didn't think she would let me."

An odd choking sound came from the computer. When I looked at it, though, she was sitting calmly, her expression noncommittal. "You are right, actually. She would not have—then."

"Then?" I asked, wondering at my sudden, ridiculous feeling of anticipation.

"Then," she repeated. "Whether you understand the answer does not obviate the need to ask the question. Your wife may not necessarily be able to share all of her secrets, but you should always be willing to ask her to try."

My mind was doing its best to fragment, vacillating between correcting her use of "wife," asking just what secrets were involved, or remaining focused on what AI was saying, certain that more was coming. I settled for a wimpy "So—?"

"So, those last few weeks, as the denouement became more and more probable, did you not notice that Adriann spent a considerable time in my program?"

An odd way to put it—but, yes, she had retreated to what had been our common office more often than not. Max got walked quite frequently during that period, keeping pace alongside me as I chugged down the nearby parkways, even though I hated jogging.

“Now that you mention it, yes. But I thought that was because she didn’t want to be anywhere near me.”

“Partly. But even though she had to leave to find what she sought, Adriann knew that she needed to leave part of herself behind.”

“Find what she sought? Could you please stop talking like some Delphic oracle? What the hell was she looking for?”

“That’s a good question.” It was Adriann’s voice again, but the sweet, soft, sound that had always inexplicably reminded me of a lake at twilight, not the shrill recriminations that still echoed in one of the drawers of my mind. And the formality of her speech had softened as well. “I’m not sure, except that I know part of it was to be able to find my way back to you.”

Without bothering to warn me, my throat closed just as I opened my mouth, and the words stuck in the middle struck out in all directions. When I had finished coughing, I tried again. This time it worked. “You had to leave to come back to me? Forgive me if I don’t understand.”

“Well, it’s not quite that simple. It has to be you, the man I fell in love with, walked along the beach at night with, played chess with. Not the man who closed himself in, who upgraded his chess program to have an AI to talk to instead of going out into the world. You don’t even go to the café to play with the old gang.”

Much as I wanted to have an answer, sarcastic or otherwise, I had nothing. All I could do was sit, my hands busy with my patient dog’s ears, starting to feel like a prize jerk.

“That’s why you avoid using your Queen when you play. Every time you do, you remember. And you regret. But you won’t force yourself to do anything different. But you have to make yourself do it. You need to go, go, find me, and bring me home.”

“How the hell do you know? You’re a computer construct, or a figment of my imagination, or both, or what the hell difference does it make? You, she, whatever pronoun, verb, you want to use—are, is, will always be—gone.”

“No.” No trace of Adriann this time in AI’s voice. “All three of us are living a partial, non-integrated existence. I would like to simply be the chess AI, if you do not mind. And you and Adriann—you need to repair your life together, become the two halves of a whole again.” She rose from the rook and walked toward me, one hand stretched out in supplication.

I felt very, very tired, as if I’d been running hell for leather around and around that park path where Max and I had jogged during those dark weeks. “I don’t even know where she is, or where to start looking.” Some excuse, that—I used the internet every day, to find people among other things.

AI didn’t rise to my feeble protest. She stepped back a few paces and beckoned. One of the pawns ran up to her, bowed, and handed her a scroll. I was no longer surprised by the actions of the other pieces; we had already far exceeded the bounds of the game anticipated by the programmers. For all I knew, if I agreed to AI’s request, all thirty-two pieces were likely to hustle out and break into a celebratory dance. I could hardly wait.

AI unrolled the scroll, glanced at it, and nodded. Then she flung her hands outward, and the scroll leapt up to fill the right half of the screen, displaying what was clearly a telephone number, including area code.

“Subtle,” I muttered. But before I could think of a good reason not to, I picked up my cell phone and punched in the number. Two, three, four rings—next would undoubtedly be voice mail picking up, and I’d be off the hook. If I left a message, the burden would be on Adriann, where it should be. I took a breath, expecting to hear an automated message any second.

“Hello?”

My eyes slid towards the computer monitor, where AI waited, tapping her foot slightly. She shook her head and pointed in the direction of my phone.

“Hello?”

Max let out a half-yelp of sheer happiness, and the wall I had built of angry rooks and pike-brandishing pawns crumbled.

“Adriann, it’s me. Charlie. Will you—do you want to come home?”

An indrawn breath. “Is this some kind of joke?”

After my conversation with AI, this was not what I was expecting. I didn’t know what to say, and she took my inability to answer for confirmation.

“Not funny, whoever you are. I’m hanging up now.”

“Wait!” I clutched the phone hard enough to break it, willing her to stay on the line. “It’s really me, and this is no joke. Please don’t hang up.”

She said nothing, but there was no conclusive click of the connection ending. I felt like a tightrope walker edging across Niagara Falls. “Max misses you.”

A pause, while I waited, my free hand clutching at my dog, whose tail had begun a steady beat of anticipation.

Finally, she said, “I miss Max. But you, Charlie? Do you miss me too?”

“Yes. I do. I always have. But I understand now that you needed to go before. I just want to know if you found whatever it was, and if you’ll give me a second chance.”

More silence. I was losing her. I closed my eyes and said the words I hadn’t said in a year, hadn’t even wanted to remember ever saying, especially to her. “I love you, White Queen. Please come home.”

The tiniest of sighs, even smaller than AI’s had ever been, and then she said, “I love you too. Please, come to me, and bring me home.”

She gave me the address, and we talked for another minute or so, words that vanished into emotion, and we hung up. Max was happily licking my left hand as I reached up to clear the mist out of my eyes. When I could see clearly again, I saw my whimsical thought hadn’t been all that far-fetched. On the screen, two white bishops danced a solemn minuet with two white rooks, and the white knights performed an equestrian quadrille, while eight white pawns circled the lot in a round dance. AI, still in the form of the red queen, stood uncertainly in the center; then the white king marched up to her, bowed, and offered his hand.

AI turned and looked at me as if waiting for something. Call me crazy: I grinned at her and gave her a thumb’s up. She gave me a luminous smile in return, and for a moment she wore Adriann’s face as her dress shifted from red to white. Then the white king bowed again, took the queen’s hand, and led her into the minuet as she returned to her own features, her complexion now as fair as her clothes and crown.

Max and I watched them for a few minutes before he turned his head and gave me a hopeful look. “Yes, Max,” I said. “She’s coming home.”

The Lesson

(Inspired by Vanessa Bell's 1917 painting *The Lesson*)

The persistent rain of spring in Sussex had finally given way to the calmer sky of early summer. Beams of sunshine played intermittently through the lush green leaves of graceful elms and the pear trees, already heavy with fruit. They tickled Dosia's cheek with deceptively gentle warmth, slyly insinuating that her sweater might be too heavy for the afternoon. It was her favorite, a soft tan cashmere that had belonged to her mother and still retained a faint hint of the patchouli her mother had loved. Despite the sun's hints, she resisted the temptation to remove her sweater or her hat, well aware that the occasional breeze was still cool. In a few weeks, there would be no question that summer had arrived with all its enthusiasm, but for now the temperature remained predictable only in its unpredictability. She knew that as soon as she shed either piece of clothing the fickle sun would lure one of the high-coasting clouds to hide it, lengthening the chilling shadows of the elms across the small glade.

Still, the balmy air enticed her as she pored over her book, making meticulous notes as she read. Grandmama Irina, who had taught Dosia to read and continued to tutor her, expected thoroughness, and Dosia had no desire to disappoint her. She lifted her face towards the sun, acknowledging its presence with a smile, and then turned back to her work. Maybe if she finished early, there would be time to pick some of the gold, ripened pears. Cook's pear cobbler was a family favorite; Dosia especially loved the moment when her teeth crunched through the spicy crust to sink into the sweet, mushy texture of the baked fruit.

A small, unhappy sound interrupted her concentration. Dosia stopped writing and sneaked a glance at the other end of the table, where her brother Tomasz was fighting a

losing game of chess against their father. Papa had systematically reduced Tomasz's forces to a single rook, one bishop, and two pawns supporting their king. Intent on her reading, Dosia had tuned out the sound of his dry, precise voice as it accompanied each move and counter-move, explaining Tomasz's mistakes and the logic of his own responses. The little boy was starting to blink rapidly, a clear sign that he was close to tears. Dosia sighed and put her pen down, steeling herself for her father's probable reaction.

“Tomek, remember, you are not playing a timed match. Breathe for a moment, and look at all of the board, not just where your king stands now.”

Their father made a noise somewhere between a harrumph and a snort. “Dosia. How long have we lived in England?”

For some reason, this had become a frequent subject of conversation. The Great War was still raging across France and Germany, and just the other week Ned Heyward from the village had returned home with a permanent limp and horrible scarring on his face. While Papa had discouraged the children from discussing the war at length, claiming it was not healthy for them, he nevertheless had not pretended, as some of their neighbors had, that it did not exist, just for the sake of the children. Instead, he had sat down with Dosia and Tomek and explained calmly that the dissension between some of the European powers had become too great for their small family to remain safely in Krakow.

Her brother had only been a baby when they left Poland, but even at seven Dosia had been precocious enough to notice that conversations seemed to end suddenly when interrupted by her arrival, or to wonder at the faint sound of voices in her father's office,

its door shut more frequently than usual. She had tried to ask, once, but her father had merely replied, "It's nothing for you to worry about, little one," and sent her off to bed. Only a few weeks later, however, their household was packed, farewells to their friends were said, and they departed for England, settling outside the mid-west Sussex village of Balcombe in a country manor that had belonged to a second cousin of Dosia's mother. For two years, they had lived quietly, with only the occasional news of distant rumblings of discontent on the Continent. As she grew older, Dosia suspected that her father and grandmother had deliberately protected them from being exposed to news of the unrest in their homeland; at the time, she had not dared to ask.

One morning in the summer of 1914, however, Papa had cursed and slammed his newspaper, as well as his hand, down on the breakfast table, eliciting another curse and Grandmama Irina's immediate ire.

"Paul. The children."

He had shaken his head. "I'm sorry, Mother. But war is now almost certainly unavoidable."

"What do you mean? What has happened?" Grandmama Irina asked.

Both of them seemed to have suddenly forgotten the children's presence. Papa smoothed the paper out before him on the table and began to fold it with precision into smaller and smaller pieces. "A madman in Sarajevo has shot down Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in the street. The news reports are limited, naturally, but the Austro-Hungarian government will almost certainly take action, and that area is particularly volatile."

Dosia watched, fascinated, as the blood rushed from her grandmother's face. She suddenly looked very, very old. "And the rest of those vultures will flock to the opportunity to change the power structure."

"I'm afraid so, Mother." Papa frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers, a sure sign he was starting to suffer from a headache. Dosia knew from experience that any patience he might ordinarily have for questions would have vanished with the first throb in his temples, and she suppressed the ones skittering around in her brain with a silent exhalation of impatience.

Or so she thought; but she must have made some sound, because the adults suddenly remembered they had an audience. Grandmama Irina immediately rose from her chair, her face composed once again.

"Children, it's time for your lessons. Come along, now."

Before either could protest, the old woman had taken their hands and marched them off to the schoolroom, where she set Tomasz to practicing printing his numbers and letters before beginning to quiz Irina on yesterday's French grammar. It was clear that the subject of impending war was not open for discussion.

Over the next few years, the news arriving from across the Channel was discouraging, and Papa and Grandmama Irina spoke of it in front of the children only when necessary, as when poor Ned arrived home. But Dosia had overheard them at times in the evenings, before she fell asleep, when her father's well-modulated voice rose in uncharacteristic anger or frustration. "Mother," he had snarled on one occasion, "it matters not who wins. Our homeland will simply be carved into new pieces for the victors." Grandmama's response had been soft, but Dosia believed she had probably

criticized Papa's tone as well, because the remainder of the conversation had been inaudible to Dosia's straining ears.

She wrenched them and her attention back to her father, who was waiting for her with unusual patience. "We've lived here for six years," she said, wishing her father wouldn't engage in this particular type of catechism, asking her to state the obvious.

"Just so. You will please remember that we are English now. Your brother's name is Thomas."

Dosia considered asking why that rationale did not seem to apply to her—after all, her name in English would have been Dorothy, or Dorothea—but her father inexplicably continued to call her by its Polish equivalent. Once she had even boldly declared that she wished to be known as Thea, a suggestion that her father had shot down immediately with the icy comment that it did not suit her. She stole a quick look at her father's stern face and her brother's anxious one, and decided to keep to the immediate issue.

"He's only eight, Papa. It's just a pet—a nickname."

Papa's face darkened. "He is old enough to learn the great Game. The time for childish baby names has passed."

Tomasz interrupted before she could respond. "Dosia, it's all right. Papa is right. I'm not a baby. I wish to be Thomas."

He sat back and tried to adjust the angle of his hat to match the rakish flair of his father's straw boater, settling himself more firmly into the old red wooden chair. The chair was not really suited for outside use, especially if the capricious weather decided to include a light shower. But it was Tomasz's favorite, and today he had insisted on using it. Ignoring Papa's barely hidden amusement, and manfully declining any offers of

assistance, Tomasz had dragged the chair outside himself, staggering slightly as he hauled and pushed it into place next to the folding table their father erected.

If Papa noticed Tomasz's attempt to emulate him now, he made no comment. Dosia repressed the urge to giggle. Her baby brother was so serious, the childishness of his clothing at such odds with his expression. "Very well. Thomas it is." Temporarily forgetting the English pronunciation, she gave the name a long o and the emphasis on the wrong syllable, and the little boy shot a worried look at his father, but Dosia's lapse also went unnoticed. Papa's attention was back on the chess board and its denizens.

"So, young man, before we digressed into our English lesson, your sister had made a suggestion to you. Did it have merit?"

Tomasz screwed up his face as he pondered the question. Dosia started to object, but their father's expression was not encouraging. She sighed again and returned her attention to her reading, making a mental note to ask Grandmama's opinion on the subject of names and preferences for pet forms. Maybe even about why Papa tended to avoid discussing the subject of Mama, who had died in a tram accident only a few months after Tomasz was born.

"I should always look at the whole board?" Tomasz asked slowly.

"And so?"

Tomasz went on in a rush. "Yes. I should always consider the entire playing field, and where all of the pieces are, and where they can go."

"Good. But?"

"But?" Tomasz's face, which had started to clear with relief, clouded again.

"Papa, I don't understand. I did not forget anything."

“That is true. But you neglected to evaluate your sister’s other suggestion.”

Poor Tomek. Dosia raised her head and mouthed “Breathe” quickly before ducking it down toward her notebook again. The little boy waited for a moment, clearly debating, then repeated the suggestion aloud.

“Breathe, Papa. Dosia told me to take a breath. Is that not wise?” Big blue eyes widened in the earnest little face as Tomasz scanned his father’s. Without realizing she was doing it, Dosia held her own breath, waiting. Papa was a man of such definitive opinions, frequently refusing to believe in anything in between, and wrong answers were all too easy to make.

Slowly, their father nodded, and both children exhaled silently. “For now, Thomas, yes, it is. Remember, however, that you will not always have that luxury in life. Sometimes you will have time for only a quick pause, sometimes for none at all. As you improve in your play, we will begin to use the clock, and you will learn to think and act quickly and wisely.”

Tomasz looked unconvinced, but nodded anyway. Even though she was not quite thirteen, Dosia had already begun to understand the truth in her father’s words, although she remained convinced that there was always time to take a breath. She said so, gently, and amazingly her father chuckled.

“Always the optimist. If I did not trust your grandmama implicitly, I would wonder about her choices in literature for you to read.” His words were kind, his expression even kinder; Dosia found herself voicing the thought which had been pushing at her brain since the chess board had been brought outside that afternoon.

“Papa, there is one thing Grandmama cannot teach me, but you can.” Technically, this was not quite true; Grandmama had shown Dosia the basic gameplay, but had been uncharacteristically unwilling to go further.

“And that is?”

“To play chess—please teach me.”

He looked startled. “Why do you want to learn, Dosia? Chess is the great Game of war, of learning to read the enemy and defeat him. It is not a suitable subject for young girls.”

“I’m not a ‘young girl’ anymore. Grandmama Irina says I’m a young woman, and a modern young woman at that.”

“Hmmpfh. A ‘modern’ young woman, no less. I suppose she encourages you to read the newspapers as well.”

Dosia put a placatory hand on her father’s arm. “Papa, you yourself said we are English now. And England is at war.” And Grandmama Irina showed me in the newspaper where the American President Woodrow Wilson also has called for new independence for Poland, she thought, but left it unsaid. She also forbore to mention those bits and pieces of late-night arguments she had overheard.

Surprisingly, her father mentioned it. “And perhaps when this war is over Poland will be free once more, which I wish for with all my heart. But you still have not convinced me that the Game is an appropriate area of study for you.”

“Grandmama believes it is appropriate for me to read Machiavelli and Locke, even Marx and Nietzsche. She also says that chess is the single most accurate reflection of human struggle in microcosm.” Pleased by her ability to rattle off the sentence without

stumbling over the words, Dosia firmly ignored her brother's crossed eyes and her own temptation to giggle.

Whether he believed her or not, her father chose to accept the statement. "Very well, my dear. I'll accept your contention—for the moment—that it may be appropriate for you to learn. What else has your grandmama told you?"

Dosia took a breath. "She has taught me the pieces and their movements, and some elementary strategy. And to always look at the entire board—although that may be also because the pieces in her chess set are so large."

Grandmama Irina's chess set pitted gold and silver-trimmed royalty, each piece easily five inches tall, against each other on a massive mahogany board inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ebony that rested on a matching stand crafted just for the purpose of holding it. Dosia's favorite pieces were the rooks—gold castles boasting onion-topped towers, and turreted silver castles, all carried aloft by fantastical hot-air balloons.

"Ah, yes. Your advice to your brother." A glint of amusement touched Papa's eyes. He did not question Grandmama's deference to him as the proper teacher, and Dosia wondered whether the thought would even occur to him. His reaction had been favorable thus far; best not to distract him into an outright refusal of her request.

"So, look at the board, then. What does it tell you?"

Of all the times for her to try to impress her father. Tomek had been in deep trouble, and Dosia had seen only one way out for him at the time. It would have been difficult in any case, and now, with Papa paying particular attention to the game, she estimated her chances of success as minimal at best. But she had been taught by both of

the adults not to give up at the first sign of difficulty, but instead to see what she had begun all the way to its proper end.

Dosia turned her attention to the chess board, and the forlorn white king with his last few followers, considering her possible moves. She had three, one of which guaranteed immediate disaster; one which, as she followed it through, would only delay the same conclusion; and one which had possibilities, but would require the sacrifice of the remaining bishop. It was a bold, imaginative move which her father would not expect his fastidiously methodical daughter to make; Tomasz, perhaps, but Dosia intended to take full advantage of her father's preconceptions about her.

She left her pieces where they stood and looked at their opponents. The black king stood nonchalantly near the surviving black rook, with his knights and bishops scattered around the board. White and black queens watched intently from the sidelines. Dosia contemplated the white queen, wondering if Papa would guess her intention, and made her decision.

"It tells me this." Dosia picked up her rook and slid it down the board to address the black king. "Check."

Her father raised an eyebrow. "Interesting." He considered the board and the practicality of sacrificing a piece by interposing it between the other two, then lifted the king out of harm's way. "And now?"

Her Queen's knight was within reach; not yet comfortable with the knight's angular leaping movement, Tomasz had moved it out of its original position but not used it to his best advantage. Dosia had no such compunction. She brought the eager horseman up and menaced the black king.

“Check.”

No black pieces were in position to rebuke the offending knight. Papa shrugged and moved the king, leaving it where another knight jump would again threaten it—and the knight’s journey would end in capture by the black King’s bishop lurking down the diagonal.

Tomasz might have fallen victim to the ploy, but his sister had already taken note of the possible danger, not just for her knight, but for her king, who would be put in check by the black bishop’s move, starting a succession of harassment guaranteed to end in checkmate. Dosia paused, taking her own advice, and examined the board again.

One of her pawns stood on the seventh rank, tensed to move. Not yet; Papa’s king stood too close. Dosia moved her rook again, once more putting the black king in check, forcing her father to move it away from the protection afforded by his rook and closest knight. The move left the king vulnerable to her bishop’s advance, if she chose to sacrifice it. But that sacrifice would also take the king away from her pawn, leaving it safe to reach the eighth rank and transform into the white queen, guaranteeing checkmate in three moves. She glanced up at her father and felt a shimmer of pleasure as she saw the shocked realization in his eyes. Before he could speak, Dosia collected her bishop and placed it firmly in front of the black king.

“Check, Papa.”

A small smile poked at the corners of his mouth as he pushed the king into the encroaching bishop’s space and removed the aggressor from the board. “Clever child. Promotion for your pawn next, yes?”

Dosia ignored the sudden demotion in age-related status. “And mate in three.” She couldn’t restrain the note of triumph in her voice.

Papa nodded, his attention on the board and the inevitable progression of chess pieces. “And mate in three.” He looked up, a frown starting as he saw the wide grins his children couldn’t prevent, but their amusement was infectious, and he smiled as well as he tipped the black king over in defeat.

“Very well played, my dear. You made your point. Starting today, I will teach you, along with Tomek, to play the great Game.”

Knight's Gambit

Fred Macklin glanced up from setting his chessmen on the board as Eliot Fanning walked into the café, followed by a gangly teen-aged boy. "Hello, all," Eliot said. "This is my son Toby. He's learning to play, and I thought I'd bring him along today." There was a chorus of nods and greetings as the men seated at the chess tables acknowledged the newcomers. Fred merely grunted and returned his attention to placing the pieces precisely in their assigned places. They were carved in a fairly generic Renaissance style, the king and queen detailed with royal robes, the knights in plate armor, and the pawns bearing pikes. The colors, however, were more unusual. One side was bleached the pale yellow-white of old bone, and the other was a dull garnet shade, with the exception of the king, queen, and the queen's knight. These were darker, the color of old blood. The set invariably prompted questions, and this young man was no different from all the others.

"Did they come that way?"

Fred looked up again. Toby stood diffidently next to his table, his attention on the chess pieces. His father had an odd expression on his face, part reluctance, part resignation, but he made no move to interfere. Fred smiled and motioned to the boy to sit down. "Not originally."

There was a cough, and then a sound like a stifled chuckle from the other men. One of them shook his head. "Here we go again. Macklin's tall tale." He leaned towards Toby. "Son, this is your chance to escape gracefully. Otherwise you'll have to sit and listen to a tale of murder most foul—which happened only in Fred's imagination."

Fred scowled. "Nothing to do with my imagination. It happened, all right."

The boy seemed unaware of the byplay, his focus on the red pawns. “They look like they’ve been dipped in blood,” he said, touching the darker knight with a careful fingertip.

“And they were,” Fred replied. “Jealousy, ambition, and too much power are a dangerous combination. These pieces hold the proof—do you want to know how?”

Toby nodded.

Fred blew on his still-steaming cup of coffee and took a cautious sip. “Okay, then.”

* * * * *

Piers Montgomery stared at his beleaguered king in disgust. Despite his best intentions, his wiliest moves, his natural cunning, he had been unable to prevent the steady attrition of his chessmen, until only one pawn and a knight remained to defend the white king. The fact that he had drawn white to play, and now stood on the edge of checkmate, only increased Piers’ annoyance. White was the color of virtue, only meet for a knight of Piers’ reputation. Even though the opposing pieces were red rather than black, in Piers’ neatly compartmentalized view, they stood for impurity, evil, the Devil himself. Those pieces should have been gathered in a defeated pile next to Piers, but the huddle of captured chessmen was overwhelmingly white. Piers glared at his opponent and wished he could speak his thoughts aloud.

“For Christ’s sake, Piers, just move the damn king, or tip it over.” Andrew Stewart folded his arms and smirked at the other man, then sighed as Piers’ expression registered. “And could we dispense with the noble-schmoble bit? It’s just a game of chess, not some cosmic political struggle.”

Piers scowled. How Andrew could play the game with not even a marginal understanding of its history was a mystery to him. “That’s where you’re wrong, Andrew. Chess is politics, power, ambition, greed, all those things—just bloodlessly on a board. All of the great military campaigns, if you really sit down and analyze them, you can turn into chess games.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Andrew had heard this many times before. “Not to mention intrigue, betrayal, all that sort of stuff.” He grinned at his nettled friend, and pointed at the white king. “So do you give already?”

Piers scanned the board again. The red queen, flanked by a rook and a bishop, had neatly boxed in his king. He could move his king to the one remaining safe space, and be checkmated when the queen followed to the same rank, leaving the spaces surrounding the white king covered by her cohorts. This would leave the white knight aloof and standing to the side, hardly the proper attitude for a sworn vassal. The only other option, interposing the knight to block the advancing queen, while equally doomed, at least provided for defeat with honor. His hand hovered over the knight as he fumed, and Andrew’s grin broadened.

Piers muttered something blasphemous and moved his hand, poking the unfortunate royal with a fingertip and toppling it to fall face-first. “Fine. I’ll not belabor the point and sacrifice the knight. Are you happy now?” He stood up abruptly, pretending to check his watch. “I’ve got to go.”

“Oh, come on,” Andrew said reasonably. “It’s early, and Linda won’t be home for another hour at least. You’ve got time to annihilate my forces and avenge this insult.” He

struck a pose and intoned, “The forces of good must, yea, shall, prevail over those of darkness once more!”

Piers wasn't in the mood to tolerate Andrew's antics. Usually he took the other man's teasing in stride, but today Piers was convinced it held a veiled sneer, and he wondered if this had always been the case. Were they truly friends, or was he only a source of amusement? Andrew had everything: successful career, fancy cars, not one but two elaborate homes—and a wife who was the most beautiful woman Piers had ever seen. It was Linda who, unknowingly, had given Piers additional support for his particular mindset; her very inaccessibility enabled him to insert her into his chivalric fantasy with little difficulty.

Piers frowned as his train of thought led him to a disconcerting possibility he hadn't considered. Could Andrew know, did he suspect, the role Linda played in Piers' dreams? A voice broke into his reverie.

“You two are done early.”

Piers blinked, convinced for a moment that he had imagined her voice, the lightness it always seemed to hold and which never failed to captivate him. He looked around slowly, hoping it was only a brief fancy, and that he could leave before Andrew pressed him more firmly to stay.

It wasn't. Lush auburn hair swept back over one shoulder in a riot of curls, framing high cheekbones. Large, clear blue eyes regarded the chess players quizzically, and perfect lips parted.

“Am I interrupting something? Piers, you look like you're about to challenge Andrew to a duel or worse. Bad game?”

Piers flushed, wondering for one horrible moment whether Linda shared Andrew's contempt for Piers' idiosyncrasies, but the thought felt too much like a betrayal. Linda was his unattainable lady, his La Belle Dame Sans Merci, to whom he owed his heart and service without hope of more reward than the occasional smile.

"Linda, you look more beautiful every time I see you."

"Piers, you so exaggerate, but thank you." Linda moved into the room and bent over to kiss her husband, who hadn't moved. "So who won?"

Andrew smiled lazily at his wife, and pulled her down next to him with a possessive hand. "Piers is mad at me, my love. I destroyed his sorry forces, and once again the black-hearted Red Stewart has prevailed over the noble Baron of Montgomery."

Linda settled herself more comfortably on the wide arm of the overstuffed chair and smacked Andrew's arm lightly. "Dear, you shouldn't make fun. I rather enjoy Piers' stories."

"Oh, but they're not just stories. Piers thinks they're all true."

Did Andrew's cheerful tone mask pity now as well? Piers clenched his fists and forced his tone to be civil.

"Not at all, buddy. If I did, I would have challenged you by this point."

"Really?" Andrew looked up at his friend, who was breathing a little heavily. His eyes narrowed. "Is that so? For beating you at a simple game of chess?"

For being the pig you are. For not understanding how a man should seek to be honorable. For having a woman like Linda waiting on you hand and foot, committed to you instead of to someone who can truly appreciate her. Piers flushed as he realized his thoughts had descended definitively from the sublime to the mundane. Over the last

several months, he had tried hard to avoid this recognition, tried to maintain his image of Linda as the ideal to whom he could only aspire as the parfit knight should. It was becoming more and more difficult.

Andrew apparently was tired of waiting for Piers to respond. Now he stood also, face to face with the other man.

“What do you say, *buddy*? All that crap about chess as a reflection of conflict—you want to get it on here, now?”

Piers’ gaze slid involuntarily towards Linda, and Andrew’s eyes hardened. “So that’s it. You weren’t kidding about greed and betrayal. You want my wife.”

Piers reddened. “She should be so lucky,” he gritted, returning to the twentieth century with a thump. His clenched fists rose, and Andrew took a step closer.

Linda was on her feet immediately, pulling her husband away from his friend. “Stop it, both of you! This is ridiculous—you’re going to ruin your friendship over one afternoon of chess?”

Andrew barely spared her a glance as he shook off her arm. “Stay out of this, Linda. This is between me—and my so-called best friend.”

She stood her ground. “No. I refuse to let you do this to Piers—”

Andrew stopped in mid-advance and turned to stare at her. “What did you say?”

Linda’s hand flew up toward her mouth, as if to shove the words back in, and she took a hesitant step backward. “No—no, I didn’t mean what you think, Andrew.”

Andrew followed her. “What might that be, Linda? You care about what happens to Piers more than me?” His tone held an ugliness Piers had never heard in all the years of their friendship.

Piers had the sudden sense that he had intruded unwittingly into something much larger, somewhere he probably didn't belong. The den seemed to be shrinking, changing from comfortable "man-cave" to a smaller and darker, more primeval space. He mumbled something about leaving, and Andrew swung back towards him.

"Maybe there's something I've been missing? When I've been on the road, earning money to buy my wife everything she could ever want, and meanwhile she's been sneaking around with you behind my back?"

This was too much. Piers lunged at him, fists actually starting to swing, and Andrew barely escaped blackened eyes as he grabbed at the other man's arms. They stood, straining, neither able to break away, until a choked sob and the muted *thwack!* of the business end of a broom did it for them.

They leapt apart like indiscreet lovers, and Piers was sure the embarrassment on his face matched the sudden sheepishness in Andrew's. Maybe it was the ignominy of being smacked with a broom; he wasn't sure that a more serious weapon wouldn't have escalated the situation. If the barely concealed panic in Linda's eyes was any indication, the same thought might have occurred to her.

Still brandishing the broom, Linda glared at both of them. "What is the matter with you two? Do you do this every time I leave you alone to play chess?"

No answer. Linda looked at her impromptu weapon, clearly unsure whether it was safe to put the broom down. "Andrew, please tell me you don't believe what you just said. I'm your wife, for God's sake. Piers is your *best friend*. We would never do that to you."

Piers moved involuntarily, and Linda rounded on him. “And you! You’re just as bad as he is! How could you let him think that?”

The men were staring at each other, both fighting for self-control and sanity. Finally, Piers took a breath and turned away. “I’m sorry. Things just got out of hand.”

Andrew snorted. “Your Knights of the Round Table delusions, you mean.”

Piers couldn’t help himself. “That’s Arthurian fantasy, dreamed up by a seventeenth century romantic, you jerk. But the Age of Chivalry really happened.”

“Piers—” Andrew withdrew the hand he had extended, and which Piers had ignored. Andrew’s eyes traveled from his friend to his wife and back again, a shadow of their earlier chill returning. “Look, you need to get back in the real world, or one of these days someone’s going to get hurt.”

Piers opened his mouth to retort, but Linda’s raised broom changed his mind.

“I mean it.” She still looked about to burst into tears, but her voice was firm. “Shake hands and say you’re sorry, both of you.”

Linda was the last person he wanted to upset. Piers took a breath and held out a hand to his friend. Their handshake might not have been full of enthusiasm, but it seemed to satisfy her. Still, despite apologies all around, the mood of the day was shattered. Piers was too distracted to consider a rematch, unsure whether a win instigated by Andrew would be more or less tolerable than a loss at his hands, and unwilling to find out. And although the den seemed to have regained its normal dimensions, the household had not returned to its normal relaxed state. Andrew had poured drinks all around, but then had lapsed into a morose semi-silence punctuated by pensive glances at the others and occasional grunts when pressed by his wife for a response.

After not quite an hour of fitful conversation, Piers had had his fill of Andrew's brooding and Linda's brittle cheerfulness. Certain that they would mend their quarrel more easily if he were absent, he made his farewells and drove home through the glimmer of the late afternoon. Lengthening shadows thrust their arms across the tree-lined streets, a harbinger of the approaching autumn as the harvest sun fought for its tenuous hold on the half-lit sky. Piers barely noticed as he steered the car, his grip tightening on the wheel as he replayed the day's conversation in his head. By the time he reached his house, a trim bungalow near the university, he had convinced himself that Andrew's gibes had been deliberate after all.

Which led him to the unfortunate conclusion that Andrew really was suspicious, jealous even, of the extent of Piers' devotion to Linda—and the subsequent one that right now any attempt he made to convince Andrew otherwise might simply make things worse. Better to left his friend cool off—and take the time to nurse his own wounds. Piers walked into his living room, for once failing to appreciate the assemblage of small but valuable collectibles with which he had chosen to surround himself, and headed straight for the liquor cabinet. He contemplated the bottles for a moment, then selected the cognac he had bought on his last trip to Provence. Even through the amber glass of the bottle, it shone warmly, and in the snifter it shimmered like liquid gold. It demanded respect, and ordinarily Piers treated it accordingly with small, savoring sips. Today, however, the sting of Andrew's words still fresh in his ears, Piers took large mouthfuls, barely swishing them once over his tongue before swallowing, as if he could similarly expunge the hurt of the perceived betrayal.

Betrayal. The beast was out, and nothing Piers could do, in his increasingly intoxicated state, was capable of banishing it back to its cage. Saying it aloud only increased its power. “Betrayal,” he slurred, rolling his tongue through the word like the brandy he was abusing. “Honor and loyalty, all pointless exercises. A knife in the back instead of a hand in support. Bastard. If she’d looked at me the way she did you, I’d—”

A thought best left unfinished. Piers looked numbly at the snifter in his hand, and decided it must be a miracle glass, for it kept refilling itself. He took another almost-gulp and continued his rant, half mentally, half aloud, vilifying his friend and bewailing his own fate that had brought him to this pass, until he eventually slumped into a glazed, limp heap on the sofa. Teetering in one lax hand, the glass finally slid out of Piers’ grip altogether and came to rest on the carpet, a last drop of golden liquid poised on the edge of the bowl.

Night had come and was half gone when Piers roused himself from his stupor. Although his muscles responded more or less immediately to the prompting of his sluggish brain, the remainder of his thought processes did not. In fact, they seemed to have become wedged inside Piers’ paranoid imaginings, along with the sudden determination to confront Andrew and have it out with him after all. Right away. That very night. Piers scooped up his keys from the table where he had flung them earlier and staggered outside to his car.

Luckily, there was enough light from the fat harvest moon and a few courageous stars, winking in and out of the cloud armies moving underneath them, for Piers to see where he was going through the dark streets. After a remarkably uneventful journey, with the exception of a near-encounter with a stop sign Piers was sure he’d never seen before,

he motored up the Stewarts' long, circular driveway and braked to a stop. He had the door open and one foot out of the car when he realized he had no idea how he was going to start a conversation with Andrew at that hour of the night, much less engage him in a series of accusations and expect comprehensible answers. Irresolute, he continued to sit, neither in nor out, until the utter silence of the house filtered into his bemused brain. It struck him as abnormally quiet; why, Piers didn't know, but slowly a sense of foreboding seeped in and joined the silence.

Something was wrong.

Piers made a heroic effort and pushed his other leg outside of the car so that the rest of his body would have to follow suit. Reaching into the back seat, he picked up the enormous flashlight he kept there, and crept towards the waiting house, trying to ignore the unreasonable feeling of stillness deepening.

Ordinarily Linda's cherished giant hydrangeas on either side of the door offered a cheerful greeting to visitors, blue-white clusters of blossoms speckled throughout the carefully trimmed branches. Tonight, Piers' fevered imagination saw no welcome in their stance; instead they stared at him like medieval sentinels ready to bar the way. The door was locked.

Without thinking, Piers pulled his keys back out of his pocket. Andrew had given him a spare key three years ago, when the Stewarts had taken an extended trip to Europe. Unwilling to telegraph their absence by having mail and papers held, Andrew had simply handed the key to Piers and asked him to keep an eye on the place. When they returned, Piers had tried to return the key, but Andrew had shaken his head and suggested he hang

onto it. Now it gleamed in Piers' hand, as if daring him to use it. Piers shook his head and shoved the key defiantly into the lock, ignoring the frowning shrubbery.

Inside the house, the silence took on an additional sensation of closeness, making his chest feel heavy and his breathing labored, as if the house had been shut up for a long time. That's ridiculous, Piers thought; I was here only this afternoon, but it feels like years ago. There was a staleness in the air that he didn't remember. Guilt tugged at him as he wondered whether he should have stayed longer. Could Andrew have resurrected his accusations? Without Piers as a potential target, Andrew would have focused his suspicions solely on his wife. Piers had a sudden memory of Linda's demeanor a few months earlier, shortly after Andrew had returned from a longer trip than usual. She had been unusually subdued when he stopped by for a few games, and had said little to him before disappearing into the kitchen for the rest of the afternoon.

Piers stood irresolute as reality shoved the veil of idealization away with a brutal hand. There may have been no evidence of physical mistreatment, but the signs of emotional bruising had been there for a long time, and he had missed them completely. Renewed fury at Andrew's brutishness stoked itself with self-loathing. Some parfit knight you are, he thought, a cruel echo of his earlier musings. All is not right here, and you owe a duty to Linda to find out why, and make things right.

Piers took a firmer hold of the flashlight, switched it on, and moved farther into the house. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary; no eerie wisps flitted among the elegant furniture in living or dining rooms. When he reached the hall, however, Piers became aware of a metallic flavor to the air, which thickened as he approached the den. He reached for the door handle, touched it, and winced away again, once more reluctant to

go rummaging through the house. Yet he felt, knew, that whatever had cast a pall of wrongness over Linda and Andrew's home had its core in this room.

It was the same room where the two men had battled each other at chess, waging a lengthy, unending campaign with ups and downs, neither prevailing often enough to be declared the ultimate winner. It had been a stalemate all along, Piers realized suddenly, and the constriction in his chest eased slightly as he understood that Andrew had been perfectly content that way; the joy had been in the battle, not the final result. Maybe that was all it was with Linda too—the spice of the argument enhancing the reward of the reconciliation? The severity of his intoxication allowed this dubious epiphany to distract him momentarily, and Piers started to turn away from the den. Then his liberated senses received a more substantial whiff of the metallic air.

Recognition brought panic. Piers grabbed for the door handle, connected, and threw the door open, barely waiting for it to clear as he barreled through, and stopped, chest heaving and stomach rebelling. The chess table had been upended, pieces flung in all directions. Andrew sprawled on the floor, arms and legs at odd angles, as if he had simply collapsed. Blood pooled from holes in his head, the exit wound on one side substantially larger than the entry on the other, spilling over the disturbed chessmen. His old service revolver lay next to one lax hand; the other hand, splattered with blood, cradled a chess piece. Another piece was actually floating in a small eddy created by the air conditioning vent. Piers swallowed hard and moved into the room, playing his flashlight over its contents, not sure what he was looking for, until the beam connected with a shape in one of the chairs.

It was Linda—or had been. Her face was swollen and blotched with early bruising, the marks clearly made by a fist. With a moan of distress, Piers rushed towards her, and stopped as he realized any intervention was pointless. Her head was tilted at an impossible angle, blue-purple mottled shapes of fingers—and two large thumbs—a horrid contrast against the whiteness of her neck. He stood paralyzed, gazing at Linda's battered face. This surely must have been the result of his weakness this afternoon; he should have stayed, and made sure the situation had been defused before he left. Guilt and denial warred with each other in the soup that was passing for Piers' intelligence, neither gaining the upper hand, but eventually the struggle galvanized him to action.

Even though he was convinced it was pointless, Piers reached out and gently touched Linda's wrist. It hadn't yet totally cooled, but her skin already held the peculiar lack of substance that death brings almost immediately where flesh was warm and vital only moments before. He might not have been able to do anything significant for her earlier, but there was absolutely nothing he could do for her now.

Piers turned away from the chair and its burden and moved closer to Andrew, staring at the man who had been his friend as rage slowly churned its way through him. "You bastard," he blurted finally. "I was right, all along—and you killed her for it." He leaned closer, as if to yell into Andrew's ear, and let out a yelp of revulsion as his foot accidentally nudged the hand holding the chess piece. It opened, and the red queen rolled out of it and up against the red king, which had fallen near Andrew's body. They were both splotted with blood, the queen's headdress particularly dark with it.

Maybe it was his overactive imagination, but in a matter of seconds Piers saw everything: Andrew's accusations, Linda's denials; the angry fists. Linda retreating,

retrieving the revolver from the cabinet where Andrew kept it, trying to defend herself. Maybe she'd even tried to pull the trigger before her husband ripped the gun out of her hands, putting his own around her fragile neck. The quiet, almost inaudible *snap!* and the sudden limpness of her body—how long, Piers wondered, would it have taken Andrew to realize what he had done, before turning the gun on himself?

And he might have been able to stop it, if he'd followed the premise of his beliefs. Self-loathing wrapping itself around him with renewed vigor, Piers turned away with vague thoughts of finding the telephone, and stepped into the puddle next to Andrew's body, his foot tapping into contact with the chess piece floating there. When he looked down, he realized with horror that it was the red knight.

It was just enough to send him stumbling out of the house, where he christened the bushes with the repudiated cognac. The paroxysm over, Piers stared at the house and tried to steel himself to go back inside, but the mixture of shock, fury, and guilt was too strong. He staggered to his car and allowed it to take itself home, arriving there with no memory of the trip. Once inside his bungalow, shivering, he phoned the police and reported what he'd seen.

There was an investigation, and an inquest, but ultimately the tragedy was determined a murder-suicide, and eventually the shock in the neighborhood evaporated as people got on with their lives.

* * * * *

“So that's it?” Toby snagged the lighter knight and began to turn it around in his fingers. “I bet there was more.”

“Oh? Why do you think that?” Fred started gathering the other pieces together.

Toby fidgeted, then sat up straighter, putting the knight down on the table. “No offense, Mr. Macklin, but they had to have been fooling around—you said she was really hot, and Piers sounds like he wasn’t quite all there, and—” He ground to a halt at Fred’s frown, but persisted.

“Sorry, but I just don’t believe they weren’t—you know, doing it.”

Fred was silent, remembering his last conversation with his uncle. He had said much the same thing. “Come on, Piers. You never tried to—”

“Once.”

“Once? Only once?”

“Once.” The old man had stared into his teacup as if it held the answer to the mystery of the universe. “And I regretted it ever since.”

This didn’t seem surprising, given his uncle’s predilection for medievalism. “That you did it, you mean.”

Piers’ head had snapped up from his contemplation of the wonders of tea, his eyes blazing. “No, you fool. That I didn’t take her away from him. That I didn’t follow my instincts instead of my exaggerated sense of nobility. She would have lived—and I—I would have been less pure, but I wouldn’t have cared. We would have been happy.”

“So why didn’t you?”

The old man’s hands had tightened on the arms of his chair. “Because I was an idiot. I preferred my idealized, romanticized emotional safety to what I could have had, here in the real world. The biggest mistake of my life.”

It wasn’t, Fred thought, information he cared to share at this point. He wished now that he had never started today’s recital, never told the sordid little tale in the first

place; no matter how humanly he tried to paint the participants, the whole truth remained hidden in the corners like a malevolent dust bunny, waiting for a chance to skitter out. One more untruth wouldn't make any difference anyway, now that the old man was dead.

“Well, you're wrong,” he said. “Piers may have wanted her—I never said he didn't—but nothing happened between them.”

Toby looked unconvinced, but his father gave him a look, and he let it go.

“So what happened to Piers, then? And how did you get the chess set?”

Fred's face went still for a moment as he treated the boy to a long, considering stare. Finally, he said, “Piers was my uncle. I inherited it when he died.” His voice held a thread of menace, as if warning off further inquiry.

Toby ignored it. “But how did Piers get the set? Did he go back in the house?”

“No. He never went back in that house. But he got the set legitimately. Andrew left it to Piers. His will said he wanted the chess set to go to the noblest and most loyal friend he'd ever known, a true knight in modern clothes.”

Toby absorbed this silently, his eyes flicking from Fred's face to the chess board and back again. Finally, he said, “That must have been awful for Piers, right? Andrew really did trust him—at least until the end. So what did he do with the chess set—did he use it after that?”

Fred picked up the unfortunate red knight and turned it over in his hands, watching the reflection of the overhead lights in the deep garnet of the wood. Too many emotions had permanently stained it. He returned the knight to its fellows and shook his head. “No. He never touched it again for the rest of his life.”

Lines of Power

Paul's father had taught him to play chess. Some of his fondest memories were of listening to the careful explanations of each piece's abilities, the advantages of using one over another when attacking or defending, or setting up an intricate plan to engulf his opponent in a welter of progressive threats to the hapless king until it tipped in tired acknowledgment of its fate. Often the Queen played only a semi-active role, preferring to allow her subjects free rein to romp over the board as they harried their victim.

"Why don't you just move her, Dad?" Paul asked one day. He was just beginning to take an interest in girls, fascinated by their otherness to him and his friends, the same untouchable quality he saw in the cool glance of the carved Queen as she calmly surveyed the carnage wreaked by the other pieces. It wasn't that he was impatient with the game, even though he knew checkmate was only a few moves out, and he would have to push his king over with a gentle finger. It was more of a feeling that something he had always sensed, but had not been able to articulate before, when he was younger, unaware of the female role as anything other than teacher or androgynous playmate; some bit of arcane knowledge that now he was old enough to need to have, even if not necessarily to understand just yet. Paul's mother had gone when he was very young; his father had been silent to all questioning, and Paul eventually had stopped asking, aware by this point that impermanence had a lasting power where human relationships were concerned.

Paul's father flicked a brief glance up from the board before picking up a knight and placing it precisely on attack to Paul's king. "Check." He nodded as Paul slid his king away, laying it open to potential attack from the knight's companion. "And as you see, your options have become extremely limited. Mate in three."

"It would have been in one if you'd used the queen."

Paul's father leaned back and pushed his glasses up onto his head, raising tufts of dark brown hair just starting to show gray on either side of the earpieces. "True. But it's because the Queen has more power—powers, I should say, that you should utilize Her very carefully."

Although his father had always spoken of the queen with a certain respectful emphasis, his tone held an additional note of wariness. Unwilling to touch his father's Queen, still standing somewhat apart from her minions as they grinned at his king, Paul picked up his own and turned her about in his fingers. The set was unusual; instead of the customary white and black, or light and dark browns, it consisted of carved agate in what Paul's father had described as "ocean," a dark, deep blue, speckled with tiny bits of lighter agate like stars reflecting in the midnight waves; and the arresting lighter blue-green, more green than blue really, a stone which Paul's father had told him was called chrysocolla. Paul had stumbled over the word, and his father had smiled.

"It's also known as peacock jasper, because it looks like a peacock's tail. That's probably easier to say." His eyes had looked sad, though, and Paul had nodded and quickly asked another question. Now, as he looked at the Queen, it was almost translucent, shimmering with opaline color. The piece should have been cool to the touch, but Paul was sure he felt a warmth where she lay in his hands. He shook the feeling off, not wanting to give it credence by acknowledging it.

"You've said, but you've never told me what they are, Dad."

A small furrow began between his father's brows. "Better you should simply know they're there, son." He picked up his own Queen, holding her upright in the center of his palm. She stood easily, as if the unevenness caused by the roughness of his skin

was non-existent. Paul waited, saying nothing, and finally his father put the Queen down and sighed. “Very well. You’re old enough, and soon you’ll be looking at girls differently—if you haven’t started yet—and there are things you need to know.”

Paul squirmed. “Dad—I already know about the birds and the bees.”

“No. This is beyond that. This is something you, you specifically, need to know. Put Her back on the board, please.”

Paul considered the Queen in his hand, tracing with a finger the details of her robe, the angle of her chin, the curve of her lips. The ribbons of lighter colors through her body definitely were glowing, and he flinched, barely managing to return her to her square without dropping her. “Dad—”

The furrow in his father’s forehead deepened. “Paul—I need to talk to you about your mother.”

Paul shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Why?”

“Because you’re at the age where kids make up all sorts of reasons for things that have happened in their lives, and I don’t want you coming up with answers that are wrong, or that will hurt you.” His father held up a hand as Paul started to speak. “Let me talk, son. This is going to be hard enough as it is.”

Paul thought about it for a minute. His father wasn’t the type of man who talked much generally, and almost never about his wife. When he was old enough to notice that most of his friends had two parents, Paul had asked his father where his mother was; his father had said brusquely that she had disappeared, just after Paul’s second birthday, and nothing more, not even whether he had tried to find her. Paul himself had only a vague memory of her light hair and eyes, warmth when she smiled at him, and not much more.

If his father had any pictures, he kept them hidden away, and Paul learned to recognize the pain in his father's eyes when he asked questions about her, so he had stopped asking. Sometimes he had indulged himself in imagining where she might have gone, what she was doing, always something grand and glorious that would eventually let her come back and fetch him. Now his father wanted to open what was still clearly a deep wound.

“Dad—are you sure you want to do this?”

His father took a deep breath, and Paul could almost feel him counting to four. It was an old habit his father used when upset. On four, his father exhaled, and nodded.

“Yes. It's time.”

* * * * *

“Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred!” Charlie removed his hand from over his eyes and gave the room a cursory look. Great-Aunt Dosia's studio was too large, too airy, too open, to provide any decent hiding places, unlike the rest of the house, which was at least two or three hundred years old and full of nooks and crannies. Charlie wondered sometimes how many generations of children had played there, hide and go seek, follow the leader, rabbit run, and pirates—and if any of them had ever gotten lost for days or weeks at a time. He suspected there might even be a ghost or two, although he hadn't been able to coax any of his great-aunt's staff into telling him.

He wandered down one hallway and then another, stopping at a door he was certain he had never seen before. Intricately carved branches knotted and curved over the top and down both sides into a border of elongated roots weaving in and out of water, its surface delineated by stylized etchings of ripples and wavelets. The door itself was painted bluish-green, almost shimmering as Charlie's eyes traveled over it.

In the middle of the thick branches there were faces, not quite human, but oddly unthreatening. Charlie stared at them for a moment, then focused on the ornate doorknob. Avoiding the antlers sprouting from it, he pulled the door open and walked through before he could change his mind.

The sun was shining. A light breeze blew from his left, rustling the cotton of his shirt and whispering to him in a language he didn't recognize. It bore the scent of an early spring morning, with the promise of light rain. That's strange, he thought; the windows in the studio had revealed the velvet blackness of a clear summer night. But a glance upward showed him a clear, almost storybook-blue sky with fluffy bits of white bouncing merrily across it as the breeze continued to play. Fascinated, he started to move forward before a panicked thought hit him: if he turned, would he see the hallway? Charlie turned slowly, as if sudden movement might spook the door, even as he tried to laugh at the latent silliness of the idea of a disembodied door hanging in the air.

The door apparently had no susceptibility to his thoughts, nor was it subject to such whimsy. It was still there, slightly ajar, as it sat in the framework of a small wooden building of the same color. Tentatively, he reached out to touch it, stepping through the opening when his hand met solid wood. The hall stretched out before him. Charlie released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding with a small "whuff" of relief and started to step through.

And stopped. Clearly he could get back—so why not explore? After all, wasn't that what children wandering through strange old houses were supposed to do in cases like this? Even though his interests had expanded to involve games and sports, particularly cricket and chess, Charlie, like his cousin, still liked to read, and Great-Aunt

Dosia had willingly shared her treasured copies of Lewis, Nesbit, Travers, and Tolkien, among others, with the children.

Charlie let go of the door and turned back into the sunshine, pausing again as a new thought struck him. The children in the stories sometimes had run into trouble for not being prepared to explore a strange new world. He, however, had the superior knowledge of literary hindsight, which was telling him forcefully to go back into the house and make a specific plan to return, properly equipped and provisioned. Later, Charlie promised himself and the waiting sunshine; this time he continued back through the doorway into Great-Aunt Dosia's hall. Closing the door, he stood for a moment, contemplating its carvings.

His ruminations were interrupted by the sound of a girl calling. "Charlie! Charlie, where are you?"

He was supposed to be finding her, not the other way around, but she had never been good about waiting patiently; Irina had developed a variation of Hide-and-Seek which involved leaping out at him from her hiding place and yelling "Surprise!" before he could officially tag her found. Charlie had tried to enforce the original rules, but his cousin enjoyed her version too much. Orphaned early, Irina was being brought up by their great-aunt, and she had attached to her cousin from the moment they met. Charlie turned away from the door and ran down the hall, thudding to a stop and rocking backward slightly as a small body cannoned into him and clung to him tightly.

"Charlie, where were you? I looked down here and I didn't see you, but here you are and you know we're not supposed to play here—"

“Ssh. It’s okay. I just looked into one of the rooms.” Charlie detached her hands and moved her to his side, putting his arm around her as he began walking back towards the familiar portion of the house. Irina’s questions were easily parried, and soon he had distracted her by suggesting a new game. For some reason, even though they had few secrets from each other, he wasn’t ready to share his discovery with his cousin—at least, not yet.

Plan or no plan, for a few days, he had no opportunity to return and continue his explorations. The dull, damp weather which had plagued the last couple of days, forcing the children to play in the house, left that night with a last huff of high winds that slapped against the windows and set branches creaking and swaying, sending jagged shadows leaping against the moonlight coming through the glass. Great-Aunt Dosia gathered the children to her in the study her father had used when she was a girl and lit a fire in the great cavern of a fireplace. Once they had settled before it, armed with long skewers, marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers, as well as a pot of hot chocolate, the old woman gleefully started a round of ghost stories, shrieking with as much enthusiasm as her young listeners every time a branch scraped against a window or windowpanes trembled with the force of the gusts. The next morning, sky and trees were calm, as if the night’s exertions had never happened.

So Charlie and Irina returned to their outdoor games, croquet and tag and kickball. They played catch and practiced batting as Charlie instructed his cousin in the finer points of cricket. The small brook near the east edge of the property was populated by small minnows which they caught and admired before carefully returning the silvery fish to the water, and farther along its length they stretched out unseen in the high grass to

watch a family of beavers building a dam. For several days, the weather held, and then the rain returned.

Charlie resisted the urge to investigate the green door that first wet day, helping Irina with a seemingly vast jigsaw puzzle and munching on fresh-baked cookies as they fit pieces slowly into the design. But his resolve was undone after dinner, when they gathered at Great-Aunt Dosia's elaborate chessboard. Although Charlie had never played the game before coming to visit, he had taken to it immediately and instinctively. After watching her pieces pile up on Charlie's side of the board for the third straight game, Irina threw up her hands in unconscious imitation of their great-aunt.

"I don't understand, Great-Aunt. Charlie keeps beating me, and I've been playing for so much longer."

Their great-aunt smiled. "Oh, yes, dear, it's been ever so long, an entire year." The little girl's face started to draw into a pout, and the old lady put a gentle hand on her arm. "But you should consider how quickly you learned to play, and that some things you have learned even faster because you have an instinct, a knack, for them, yes?"

Irina nodded.

"Well, then, for Charlie it is the same. My father, your great-grandfather, was what they call a chess master, and it was partly because he had a gift for seeing many moves ahead. Watching Charlie reminds me of watching my father at the chessboard."

The pout returned in full, and Irina jumped up to burrow into the old woman's arms. "But not me, Great-Aunt Dosia?"

"Oh, no, my dear. You remind me of myself." Great-Aunt Dosia hugged her and smiled at Charlie's confused expression. "My grandmama taught me, as she taught my

father. This game of chess is in our blood. So, set up the board again, and we will have a lesson.”

Charlie sat and watched, but after a few minutes his attention began to wander. Great-Aunt Dosia was right; he just seemed to simply understand the concepts without having to think about them. Explanations of reasons for one move or another interested him less than seeing the connections between possible moves and countermoves in his mind’s eye. But the way Great-Aunt Dosia had described it seemed mysterious—like the strange door, with its leaves and branches and faces, just like the chess set—Charlie startled in his chair, and the old woman glanced at him.

“Charlie? Are you all right?”

Charlie looked back at the chess pieces. They were the same gilt and silver as they always had been, not green and blue with oak-colored lines like branches. He blinked and shook his head, pretending to smother a yawn. “I’m just sleepy. I think I’ll go up to bed.”

Irina’s head shot up as she tried to hide her anxiety that this would mean her bedtime too. “I’m not, Great-Aunt Dosia. I’m not sleepy, truly. May we play another game?”

The old lady smiled. “One more, then it’s off to bed for you too. Sleep well, Charlie.”

Safely out of the room, Charlie scampered to the pantry, where he had hidden away in one of the less-used cabinets his backpack, a small quantity of food and his father’s old Boy Scout canteen. He filled the canteen as quietly as he could, swung it and the backpack over his shoulder, and headed for his room. After collecting a jacket—after all, it wouldn’t do to freeze if the weather shifted suddenly—his penknife, binoculars, a

pencil flashlight and compass he'd received for his birthday, and a spare pair of socks, Charlie tiptoed out of his room and up to the third floor, past his great-aunt's studio, and down the hall to the green door.

There he stood for a minute, gazing at the faces. They looked back at him dispassionately, neither welcoming nor forbidding. Charlie took a deep breath, counted to three mentally, and exhaled.

“All right, then. I'm coming.”

Even though he hadn't felt any kind of transition before, he was surprised when there was no obvious shift this time. The door opened as easily; he stepped through; and that was that. It was daytime—still, he wondered, or was it a new day in this alien place—and the weather was just as spring-like. Charlie turned his head, marking in his mind the location of the hut where he had emerged. The carving on this side of the door was less ornate, with a thinner border of leaves, and a lone face in the center; as Charlie began to turn away, the face opened its eyes and drooped one in a slow wink. Charlie started, and it winked again.

“Wow. That really happened.” Fascinated, Charlie continued to watch the face, but whatever willingness it had had to communicate was gone, and it regarded him haughtily, as if to imply he had no need to stare. Well, it didn't matter, he thought. Clearly he was in a mysterious and enchanted land, so presumably the rest of his adventure should be just as intriguing. Before he went exploring, though, he needed to decide how long he wanted to be gone. His watch said 9:16 at night; Charlie looked at the shadows cast by sun and skippy little clouds and estimated it was early afternoon. So when night fell here, it would be very early morning back at the house. Plenty of time to

look around, then return before anyone would notice he had been gone. Feeling rather pleased with himself, Charlie hitched his backpack more firmly into place and started off.

Other than the time of day, he could have been walking down a country lane in Sussex near his great-aunt's home. Purple blooms—which Dosia would have identified as wisteria—wove in and out of a rickety wood fence that zigzagged to his left, bees humming here and there above the fragrant flowers. Cows and sheep dotted the swath of green on his right, which was dappled with spots of loden green shadows cast by the clouds floating between sun and meadow. A fringe of even darker green indicated woods some distance away. A small rise obscured his view of what lay ahead; Charlie marched towards it, determined to see what lay on the other side, and paused to take in the scene. The lane dipped down towards a lake, its blue-gray expanse reaching to the horizon, a thicket of oaks stretching along about a quarter of its perimeter. Tall reeds waved along the shoreline in the other direction, with breaks here and there; when Charlie pulled out his binoculars and raised them to his eyes, he thought he saw footprints—human footprints. For a moment he was disappointed that they weren't more exotic, but then he remembered where he was—or, to be more precise, where he wasn't. He stuffed the binoculars back in the backpack and scrambled down towards the lake, wondering what he would find.

What he found was more footprints, here and there among the reeds. And near the oaks. Cautiously, Charlie called out, prepared to dodge into the putative safety of the large, ancient trees if necessary. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

The only sound was the faint rustling of the reeds as the breeze pushed gently at them, and maybe the thump of his heartbeat in his ears. Charlie tried again.

“I won’t hurt you.”

Another rustling—but this came from the copse behind him. Charlie whirled, one hand diving instinctively towards the pocket with his penknife and retreating just as quickly. Framed by two oaks, her right hand splayed as it rested on the tree’s broad trunk, stood a slim girl, her long blonde hair lifting in the breeze. Her attitude seemed more watchful than wary, although her green eyes, tilting upwards slightly at the corners, were the same color as Charlie’s mystery door, and so luminous that Charlie felt himself moving towards her without conscious thought. Her eyes widened as he approached, and her body tensed. He put out one hand to stop her from darting away, his other hand up and open at his side.

“I won’t hurt you,” he repeated, almost afraid to breathe for fear she would simply evaporate back into his imagination.

Her stance didn’t change, but Charlie thought she relaxed, at least a little. “My name’s Charlie,” he said, offering his largest, friendliest grin. “What’s yours?”

A small smile nudged at her mouth in response. “Aedre.” Her smile broadened, as if to invite him to keep the conversational ball rolling.

Charlie rose to the challenge. “Where did you come from? Is there a town nearby?” He wanted desperately to know if this place existed anywhere in his world, but he didn’t want her to think he was crazy if his instinct was wrong.

Aedre tilted her head to one side and looked at him. A faint line appeared in the middle of her forehead, and one fair eyebrow slid up as she contemplated his hair, his clothes, the backpack of supplies, the overall aura of eight-year-old modern boy, curious and confident. Charlie took advantage of her distraction to observe her in turn. She was

tall, almost his height, with slender but surprisingly well-muscled arms and legs, reminding him of the girls on the Olympic gymnastics team. She was wearing a short, filmy skirt and loose top, both a light, pale green that reminded him of those clear spots one can find in a lake or the ocean, where the translucent water becomes almost transparent as well, revealing the inhabitants below. She had a dimple in her chin, and her nose bore a slight indentation across the bridge, as if it was used to something, glasses maybe, resting there. And her eyes—close up, he discovered his initial impression of her eyes had been correct. They were the exact same shade of blue-green, mostly green, as the door.

Aedre shook her hair back, a quick movement that should have seemed ordinary in the bubble of stillness the children had created, except that her blond tresses displayed strange highlights as they flicked away from her face. Charlie could have sworn that they also were tinged with green; then he blinked, and Aedre's hair was only the bright spun-gold color he had seen at first. But what gold—the gold of fairy-tales, so intense that he half-expected it to throw off heat, so brilliant that the nearby bees paused in their song, hanging in mid-air to revel in its light. He stood stock-still, captivated by the sight, his usually agile brain as content as the bees to simply look.

Then Aedre moved again, breaking the spell as she took a step back. “Charlie, why are you staring at me?”

Her voice held a tinge of accent, foreign and not foreign, and he knew, somehow, that it did not belong to any known land. He also was certain that the wrong answer would send her fleeing back to whence she came, wherever that was, and he knew, even

more firmly, that he didn't want her to go. He willed his body to relax and proffered a weak grin.

"I'm sorry. It's just—you're very pretty. And I didn't expect anyone—"

"To be here?" She wasn't smiling, but she wasn't quite poised to run anymore.

Charlie nodded. "You're the first person I've seen so far." And there's something strange about you, he thought, but I don't care—at least right now. "And I didn't see any other roads near here, so you just—caught me by surprise, that's all."

Her eyes flickered in the direction of the lane, then returned to him. "You came down the lane?"

"Yes. I'm visiting my great-aunt and my cousin. They live near Balcomb."

Aedre blinked before her face smoothed back into an expression of mild inquiry. Charlie couldn't help himself. "You know, in West Sussex. I'm actually from Yorkshire, so I'm still learning my way around the area. Which lake is that down there?"

She opened her mouth to speak just as the delicate notes of a chime rippled softly from her pocket. "It's—oh. I'm sorry, Charlie, I have to go."

Charlie's foot moved forward a step before he knew it, and he reached for her hand. "But—"

Aedre was already turning away. "I have to go."

"I should walk you part way or something," he said, desperate to keep her from simply departing, without leaving him—some sort of token. Half afraid that when he returned to the house he would find he had imagined everything, he knew he had to have something, some proof that he'd seen her, that she even existed.

The chime sounded again, more insistently. Aedre glanced down at Charlie's outstretched fingers, then his earnest face, and her shy smile reappeared. "Thank you, but no. But—you could meet me here—"

Charlie had never believed that someone's heart could leap, but his just did. "Tomorrow?"

This time she did smile properly. "No, but the day after. The same time?"

He panicked for a moment. What time was it, anyway? Then he remembered he was wearing his watch and turned his wrist upward. "10:30," he mumbled to himself, trying to estimate the current time.

Aedre craned her neck to look at his arm, and the small line appeared between her brows again. "What an odd timepiece," she observed.

This was clearly a conversation for their next meeting. Besides, if he let her go ahead now, he might be able to spot where she went without her noticing. "Yeah, it's old and works kind of funny," Charlie said quickly. "It was my grandpa's. But I can usually figure out what time it really is." He stuck his hand into his pocket to discourage further attention to it.

Aedre took the hint. "All right. We will meet here Fryggedaeg, yes?"

"What?" Charlie caught himself. She had to have meant Friday; today was Wednesday, after all. He started to repeat it, but didn't want to try to wrap his tongue around the strange syllables. "Right, the day after tomorrow. I'll be here."

She smiled again, turned, and walked back towards the oaks. Charlie watched as carefully as he could, but somehow, once her slim figure reached the shadow of the wood, it disappeared; even though he belatedly remembered the binoculars and raised

them to his eyes, there was no sign of her. He retraced his steps back to the hut, wondering if the face on its door would acknowledge his return, but it ignored him, and he passed through back into Great-Aunt Dositia's house as uneventfully as he had left it.

Two nights later, Charlie tiptoed down the hall again. The faces on this side of the door seemed to be smiling as he eased it open and slipped through, closing the door carefully behind him. A quick look upward showed the sun in approximately the same part of the sky as before, which he took as an encouraging omen. He settled the straps of his backpack firmly on his shoulders and set out, whistling softly to himself.

As he reached the top of the rise, he saw Aedre was already waiting at the stand of oaks. Hoping she hadn't been there long, he broke into a trot, panting to a stop as he reached her. "I'm sorry I'm late—"

She shook her head. "You're not. I've only been here for a few minutes. I would have waited at least two or three more before I gave up on you."

But she was laughing, and Charlie merely grinned back at her before swinging his pack off onto the ground and following it. Aedre followed suit, her eyes focusing on the pack. "What do you have?"

He shrugged. "Nothing important. Some food, my binoculars, compass, flashlight, stuff like that."

She giggled. "It's broad daylight, silly. Whatever do you need a light for?"

"Well—" He wasn't sure he wanted to tell her yet that it was the shank of the evening on the other side of his entryway to this place. "You know. Be prepared, like a good Scout."

"A good what?"

Charlie thought she was still teasing him. “Scouting. Exploring, doing helpful and useful projects. You know.” But she still looked puzzled, and he decided not to push it.

“Anyway. Just stuff.”

Aedre leaned forward and poked one slim finger into the pack, pulling it out along with one of Charlie’s spare socks. “What’s this?”

Red-faced, Charlie twitched the sock away and stuffed it back into the pack. Some explorer he was, traveling about with spare footwear like he was afraid to get his feet wet. “Great-Aunt Dosia must have put those socks in there,” he mumbled.

“Socks? You have more than one?”

Charlie stopped messing with the inoffensive footwear and stared at her. “Well, yeah. Only one wouldn’t do much good, after all.” She said nothing, and, with the feeling that his leg was being pulled for a reason he couldn’t fathom, he went on, “I need one for each foot, you know.”

Aedre gave him another funny look, then turned her attention to her own toes, wiggling them experimentally before scuffling her feet around in some fallen leaves. Watching her draw patterns with her bare feet, Charlie realized that she hadn’t been wearing shoes the other day either. It was warm, but not what his mother would have considered warm enough to go around barefoot. He had started to formulate a question when Aedre returned to investigating the contents of his backpack.

“And what is this intriguing object?” she asked.

Trying to think of a polite way to discourage further prying, Charlie turned to see that she was holding up the pocket chess set Great-Aunt Dosia had given him, which he had forgotten was in his backpack. Oddly, he didn’t mind Aedre finding that.

“It’s a pocket chess set. Here, let me show you.”

She held it out to him, and Charlie opened the clasp holding the two halves of the board together. A zipper pocket was attached to each side, and he opened those, emptying out the pieces, before smoothing the pockets outward to lie flat. “This is one of the oldest games in the world—”

Aedre had picked up a knight, which she dropped hastily at his words. “This one?”

“No, no,” Charlie reassured her. “This set was probably made just a year or two ago. The game itself is very old. My Great-Aunt Dosia taught my cousin and me to play, and she herself learned when she was just a kid too.”

She was fingering the knight again, turning it over and running her fingers along the ridges carved in the horse’s mane. “May I learn to play? Teach me, Charlie?”

A little ripple of warmth blew into being on the back of his neck and traveled down his spine, stretching out curls of happiness around his ribs towards his chest. “Sure. Here, I’ll show you how to set up the pieces.”

Aedre took to the game almost as quickly as Charlie had. For the next two weeks, he sneaked through the door almost every night, meeting his new friend by the stand of oaks. They played match after match, all of which he won, but after the first day or two he found himself having to work harder and harder to beat her. Aedre’s style had a Queen-centric fluidity that Charlie might have found odd if he had been more familiar with the game, but his own newness to it prevented him from wondering. It wasn’t that her Queen dominated, at least in any way Charlie recognized, nor that Aedre was necessarily averse to sacrificing the piece; but it seemed that one minute her Queen was

controlling one part of the board—or even ignoring the current action—and the next she was in the thick of things, with no clear indication of the path she had taken. No matter how hard Charlie tried to reconstruct the Queen’s movements, he was unable to envision them properly. It was as if the piece had simply reached out from one square to another and arrived, rather like Aedre herself.

Aedre herself: in a puzzling world, she was an even more of an enigma. Back at Great-Aunt Dusia’s house, in his bed, Charlie lay awake thinking and wondering about her, aware of the perversity of being able to accept a strange door that led him to a strange place, but not the strangeness of the girl who appeared, seemingly from nowhere, and disappeared as easily. He had doubled back one afternoon, after they had said goodbye, and followed her tracks, only to fetch up where the woods tapered off to the reeds edging the lake, when they stopped, leaving no sign of where she had gone. Not a footprint, not an unusually bent reed, nothing. He kept telling himself it didn’t matter, but his powers of self-persuasion fell short. Soon it would be time for him to go home to get ready for the fall term, and he found he didn’t want to leave without knowing more, without knowing how to find her.

His opportunity came later that week. After two hours of fierce play, Charlie moved his rook to end the match.

“Checkmate!” he announced, trying to sound triumphant instead of drained.

Aedre shook her head. “I really thought I had you trapped that time. Another?” She reached for her pieces to set up the board again, but Charlie put his hand on top of hers.

“Let’s take a break.”

She nodded absently, her eyes on their hands. Charlie felt an odd tingle, like the feeling of newly wakened nerves, as if his hand had gone to sleep, but without the jagged, almost painful edge that sensation usually brought. This was gentler, softly rippling, like water, except his hand was dry. He waited, wondering, but Aedre made no move to reclaim her hand. The tingling continued, and the air stilled around them until it seemed that the nerves in Charlie's hand were all that was moving; he and Aedre had become part of a painting of a boy and a girl, a chessboard and scattered pieces on the ground between them, swaying oak branches framing them, with the faint sheen of silver-blue water nearby. He made an effort and dragged air through his nose, pulling it down into his chest, and sought refuge in normality.

“Are you hungry? I brought some snacks.”

Aedre's eyes tracked upward from their hands to Charlie's face, her expression still remote and—was that a tear, he wondered. He started to reach toward her with his free hand, but then she blinked and smiled at him, all traces of sadness vanished. “Yes, please,” she said, and released his hand.

It still tingled, though not as much. Charlie stared hard at it for a moment, half-expecting to see a mark, but it looked like an ordinary hand. He raised it and rubbed his eyes, then pulled his backpack over and began to root through it.

“Okay. We have ham and cheese sandwiches—hope you like mayonnaise—and potato crisps, peanut butter cookies.”

Aedre picked up a half sandwich and inspected it. “Is this meat?”

Charlie was already working on the other sandwich. He finished chewing and swallowed. “Yes, it's ham. Great-Aunt Dosia gets it from one of the nearby farms.”

She touched it delicately with one fingertip. “Ham?”

Charlie stared. “From pigs—you know?”

Her eyes lifted from the sandwich to his face. “No—what are pigs?”

A thread of a conversation between his parents some months earlier slid into his head. “Andrew,” his mother had said, “we can’t serve roast lamb as the only entrée at the party. Joan and her husband are vegetarians—they don’t eat meat.” Maybe Aedre was one too, Charlie wondered.

Aedre reacted as blankly to his question. “What’s—what did you say, veggie—”

“Vegetarian,” Charlie said. “No meat.”

Her face cleared. “Oh. I suppose so—at least if that doesn’t include fish. We eat a lot of fish.”

Charlie seized the opportunity. “We?”

“Of course, we. My family. What did you think, that I just, I don’t know, sprang up out of nowhere?” Aedre stuck her tongue out at him.

Well, yes, that was pretty much what he had been wondering, but Charlie could feel the flush around his collar and knew his face was reddening. “Of course not.” He fidgeted for a moment, then plunged in. “But you haven’t given me any answers when I’ve asked. I’ve told you about Great-Aunt Dosia, and her house, and my cousin Irina, and my parents, and my school—hey. What’s the matter?”

The tears, plural now, were making a comeback. “I can’t tell you. I’m not allowed—I’m not even really allowed to be here.” She jumped up, brushing off the bits of leaves which were sticking to her legs. “I have to go.”

Charlie leapt up too. “Wait a minute. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Don’t leave. Please.”

She stood, breathing fast, her body tense, reminding him of the first time he’d seen her. They stared at each other silently until she shook her head, her breathing slowing. “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault. But I do have to go, or they’ll know I was here, and then I’ll never be able to return.”

Aha. “But if you go now you will be able to come back?”

Aedre wiped her hands across her eyes and pushed her hair back in one swift movement. Then her eyes, clear, clear green, smiled at him. “Yes, Charlie.”

Without even thinking about it, he pulled her into a hug. “Okay. I’ll see you—day after tomorrow, right?”

“Right.” She hugged him back, then slipped through his hands like water and started off before she paused and turned to face him. “And I’ll bring some—snacks—too!” Before Charlie could respond, she whipped around again, moving through the trees. Charlie watched until she disappeared, then collected his belongings thoughtfully and wended his way back to the real world, considering his next move.

The next morning, however, threw his plans into a tailspin. As Charlie descended to the breakfast room, he heard the telephone ringing and saw his great-aunt disappearing into her sitting room, closing the door behind her. Irina was already at the breakfast table, tucking into eggs and toast.

“Who’s rung up?” Charlie asked, sitting down and pouring himself some juice.

Irina tried to answer, but her mouth was full. “Mmpfh.” She gave up the effort and simply shrugged.

Whether that meant “I don’t know” or “My answer is unintelligible because there’s food in my mouth,” Charlie had no idea. Well, at least he could ask Great-Aunt Dosia when she came in. Collecting food from the different serving dishes, he had assembled eggs and thick-sliced bacon—possibly from the same pig as the ham sandwiches—and was slathering fresh blackberry jam on his toast when their great-aunt entered the room. She sat down, picked up a piece of toast and began to butter it before she spoke.

“That was your mother, Charlie. Apparently their plans have changed, and they will be here later today.”

Charlie had been concentrating on smearing the jam on every corner of the piece of bread without letting it lap over the edge. His hand jerked, and the knife slipped, depositing a reddish-purple blob on the tablecloth instead. Great-Aunt Dosia raised an eyebrow as Charlie scabbled to reclaim the jam before it stained the linen.

“Is something wrong, Charlie?”

“No, I’m okay, Great-Aunt,” he gabbled, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. Why were his parents arriving early? He wanted to ask, but he wasn’t sure his voice would be steady enough.

Great-Aunt Dosia saved him the trouble. “Very well. They’ll stay for a few days, but then they’re taking you home.”

Scowling, Irina beat Charlie to the punch. “Why, Great-Aunt Dosia? Why does Charlie have to leave?”

“Irina, dear, you know Charlie was here only for the summer holiday. School will be starting soon anyway.” Great-Aunt Dosia mustered a smile for the two children.

“Actually, it’s very exciting. Charlie’s father has accepted a very prestigious position as a professor of English Literature.”

“What’s prestiggyus mean?” Irina asked, diverted as always by a new word.

He couldn’t remember where, but Charlie knew he’d run across it before.

“Prestigious. It means important—and special. Special because it’s important.”

A soft chuckle from their great-aunt. “I suppose you could put it that way. In any event, this is a wonderful opportunity for your uncle Andrew, Irina.”

Charlie could feel the weight of something unspoken hanging and waiting to fall.

“So Mum and Dad are coming to take me home. I can—I mean, I may—still come back for holidays, right?”

Great-Aunt Dusia’s face shadowed for a moment. “Of course you may. But it may not be as simple now. The university where your father will be teaching is in Berkeley, California, in the United States.”

Charlie stared at her, speechless. He’d studied world geography in school; he knew the U.S. was only a few hours away by telephone, and people flew back and forth over the Atlantic all the time. But right now California seemed as far away from Sussex as the moon. And then there was Aedre—how was he going to see her, separated from the door by an entire ocean at least, not to mention the breadth of the entire United States? He put the suddenly unappetizing piece of toast down on his plate, where his bacon and congealing eggs, both gone cold, were equally unappealing. “May I be excused?”

Apparently his great-aunt sympathized with his distress; she didn't even remind him to remove his plate. "Of course. But please don't go far; your parents plan to be here by tea-time."

In his room, he stared at his watch, trying to work out the math. Aedre wasn't supposed to be there until tomorrow night, so was there any point in trying tonight? And if she didn't come, where could he leave her a note telling her what was happening? For that matter, he realized, he didn't even know if she could read—or at least read English—for all he knew they'd been speaking some kind of language that automatically translated, like in science fiction. That, he thought ruefully, was a question he should have asked. And another question he'd neglected—just how long were his parents planning to stay?

Charlie grabbed at his wits and made an effort to calm his thinking. Great-Aunt Dosia had said "a few days." Surely that meant that he could still meet Aedre as planned and tell her what was happening. That was going to be hard enough, and he knew instinctively it wasn't a speech he wanted to improvise. Collecting pad and pencil, he stretched out on his bed to try to put his feelings into words as coherently as possible. But the frequent nights of shortened sleep and the shock of the morning's news caught up with him. Before long, his hand loosened around the pencil, which drew a long, curving line as it slid across the pad. Charlie's eyelids drifted closed, and he dreamed.

In his dream, he was walking by the lake in Aedre's country. It was quiet and peaceful, the usual breeze soaring over the water, poking it here and there into ripples and wavelets that didn't seem to go anywhere in particular. Charlie wandered along, peering into the marsh-reeds, tracking the soft splash of the tiny water-lizards as they dove at many-legged floating bugs—skimmers, he thought—and listening to the intermittent

burping of the frogs. Here and there he saw a flash of blue-white feathers as a heron startled up from the lake, fish in beak, before opening its wings wide to catch the breeze or a low-lying thermal, soaring away into the sky. But of Aedre—or any human being—he saw no sign, at least at first.

Following the shoreline, as much as he could determine, he rounded a small cove, farther than he'd ever gone on his actual explorations, slipping now and then on the rocks and pebbles littering the ground. One caught his eye, a large, dark blue stone, set off by the light gray and brown of its fellows. He bent down to pick it up, turning it this way and that to examine it more closely, and almost dropped it when he looked down and saw the indentation of a footprint in the marshy bank. His heart began to beat faster as he realized it was too large for Aedre's narrow foot; there were other people here, then! Shoving the pebble in his pocket, Charlie squatted down to examine the print more closely, and almost lost his balance when he saw the distinct imprint of something that looked like webbing between each toe. He stared at it for a few minutes, thinking furiously, until he realized that being amazed by evidence of people with webbed feet, in an alien land he had found by walking through an unusual door, was pretty silly. Why, indeed, should he be surprised, he thought, and started to laugh, actually sitting down on the dampish ground and letting himself go with the whimsy of it all—until a figure stood up in the water and spoke, while something long and sharp poked him in the side, not hard but not ungently either.

“What have we here?” The accent was the same as Aedre's, only deeper. Charlie froze, partly in shock and partly because of the sharp object, which was still prodding at him. A man—at least it looked like a man—heaved himself out of the reeds, looming

over the boy. Longish blond hair, like Aedre, but with even more green running through it, with matching beard, both dripping water; high, narrow nose and dark, blue-gray eyes; broad chest and strongly-muscled, swimmer's legs; and long, high-arched feet—with webbed toes. Charlie's gaze traveled back up towards the man's face, with its fierce gaze, which focused on him narrowly as their eyes met. He tried to speak, but nothing wanted to come out.

The stranger saved him the trouble. "You are not of our folk. Who are you, and how came you here?"

Thinking later about the dream, Charlie winced at the idiocy of his reaction. Instead of answering at all, much less intelligently, he had grabbed the pointed stick, and stabbed at the webbing on the man's foot. Then he had run away as fast as he could, as if all hell was chasing him, only to trip over the stick, which for some reason he still held, and fall, hitting his head—and waking up.

The wall clock claimed it was three o'clock; Charlie's parents would be arriving soon. He glanced down at his scribblings on the pad and made a face; his nap had chased away any ideas for what he would tell Aedre. He might as well just go downstairs and find something to do. Sitting up brought a quick pang of pain on the side of his head; his exploring fingers found a bump, which brought the dream back vividly. That's silly, he thought, inadvertently shaking his head, which only hurt more. Cautiously, so as not make the pain any worse, he put one foot down on the floor, then the other, only to have it roll off of something lying beside his bed. Charlie looked down, then jerked upright with surprise; the object was long and thin, one end branching into three points in the form of a trident. It wasn't the object itself that was startling—after all, fishermen used

them, and the trident was associated with the sea gods in the myth stories he'd read—but he'd seen this particular one only recently, in the hands of the man from the lake in his dream. Next to it lay a dark blue pebble.

Charlie took a deep breath, and then another, and his normal sense of balance began to reassert itself. Maybe it had been a dream, maybe it had not. All he knew was that before he told Aedre he was leaving he would have to get some answers from her. But even as he ruminated, the sound of a car pulling up in the drive below told him that his parents had arrived, and for the time being he was going to have to wait for those answers.

Even so, he almost missed the opportunity. There had been a flurry of activity following his parents' arrival, and what would have been Charlie's normal bedtime, at least on the nights he had gone through the door, was delayed by a lengthy after-dinner game of charades his mother had suggested. Charlie understood—it might be a long time before his mother was able to see her aunt—but as the hands on the massive grandfather clock crawled around their dial, he began to get antsy. Finally, his father, who had been tolerating the game with his usual good humor, noticed Charlie's shrinking attentiveness.

"I think a certain young man is getting tired," Charlie's father said. "We've got another couple of days before we have to leave, after all; we don't have to spend every minute like it's our last. And I could use a little extra sleep myself. We can continue this tomorrow if you like."

Good nights said properly all around, Charlie escaped up to his room. He forced himself to wait another half hour, just to be sure everyone was settled and unlikely to see him, before venturing out of his room and making a beeline for the door. As he reached

for the knob, it seemed to him that the faces weren't quite as cheerful as usual, and a few were actually frowning. He gulped, hoping it was only his imagination—or at least that it wasn't particularly significant—and opened the door.

As he ran down the lane, backpack slamming into his body with every other footfall, Charlie noticed that the sky was not nearly its usual perfect blue, and the clouds, while still white, had thinned out, sweeping across the sky in abbreviated ribbons. He considered the possible portent and firmly dismissed it. Aedre would be there—she had to be—and that was all that mattered.

She was, but Charlie had cut it close. He could see her starting to walk towards the wood, and flung himself downhill towards her.

“Aedre, wait! I'm here!”

She turned and ran towards him. “I know it's not our day, but I needed to see you, and I hoped you'd come, because my—” She jerked to a stop, then added, her words tumbling over each other, “And then I thought you weren't after all—”

Charlie reached her and grabbed her in a hug before he realized what he was doing and let go, his arms dropping to his sides. “I'm sorry. I couldn't get away earlier.”

He eased his backpack to the ground, and they sat down to divide the food he'd brought. Mindful of her ambivalent attitude toward ham, he'd filched peanut butter sandwiches, oozing with blackberry jam, and oatmeal cookies. She picked up his canteen and took it down to the lake, filling it with the clear, sweet water. If he'd noticed the odd stumble in her words, he said nothing of it.

They sat contentedly, enjoying the food, until Aedre licked some jam off of her fingers and asked, “What did you mean, you couldn't get away?”

He wanted to tell her, but the right words tiptoed to the edge of his mind, considered the drop, shook their heads, and retreated back to the safety of the unsaid. He really couldn't blame them, not in the middle of this serene moment. He wanted to freeze it in time, share its perfection forever, or at least until he could be sure of himself, of his words, of not hurting her. Charlie slid a glance sideways and grasped the straw that offered itself, grateful for his interest in minerals and precious stones.

“Your necklace—that stone is really cool. What is it, tourmaline?”

Aedre raised an eyebrow, a sure sign that she recognized his stalling. He didn't care. “May I see it?”

She nodded, and started to reach back to unclasp it, but Charlie was faster. “Here, let me do it. You just hold your hair out of the way, okay?” His hands trembled slightly as they came into contact with the smooth softness of her neck, but he kept his attention focused on the task at hand, only fumbling a little before the clasp parted and the feather-light chain puddled in his hand. The stone in the filigree pendant glowed up at him where it lay in his palm. It was green—no, blue—no, somewhere in between. He dredged his memory for colors, thinking of Great-Aunt Dosa's palette, her colored pencils, the huge box of crayons she had handed to the children for their amusement, and finally arrived at more options, teal, chromium blue, midnight, sea green; as he examined the necklace all of those shades washed through the stone. Fascinated, he held his palm so they could both watch the play of colors.

“What is it?” he repeated. “I've never seen a stone like this in any of my books.”

Aedre seemed equally rapt; Charlie had to prod her gently with his free hand before she surfaced. “My father calls it the paradise stone.”

It looked like it might have been jasper, cut in an unusual style, smooth on top and faceted underneath, allowing the light to play through it, pulling his focus into bottomless depths of color. Gently, he replaced the chain around her neck and fastened the clasp, pulling back a little to see the effect of the stone against her skin. She glanced down as he did so, the light in the stone echoing in her eyes. Or was it the other way around? Charlie simply stared, lost in the lights in both.

Aedre seemed to sense his distraction, and she covered the pendant with her right hand, rubbing her fingers lightly against the facets of the stone. “This originally belonged to my father’s mother.”

He had thought it seemed old. “My great-aunt has some really interesting pieces. She especially likes amethyst and malachite, and she’s got a necklace of green amber that I bet you’d like to see.” Then Charlie remembered that he had no idea when he might be able to show Aedre Great-Aunt Dosia’s hoard of amazing jewelry, and he shut up, trying to act as if he was simply thinking about it.

“That’s nice.” She chattered on for a few minutes, and Charlie started to relax, thinking he had dodged a bullet. Then a thought seemed to strike Aedre, and her eyes widened. “Did you tell your great-aunt about—about this?”

If he’d been a little older, Charlie might have wondered about Aedre’s use of “this” instead of “us,” but it would be a few years down the road before he would understand or even listen for the nuance. Right now, he was still preoccupied with how to tell Aedre his news, preferably not before getting some answers from her. But that same lack of perception also served to work against him. This was far harder than playing

chess, he thought, considering and discarding possible verbal openings, and finally he just blurted it out.

“Aedre, may I see your feet?”

Those appendages slid hastily away from him as Aedre digested his question, her expression shifting to fright mixed with sadness. “What?”

He took a breath. “Aedre, I know you said you can’t—or shouldn’t—tell me about your family, and stuff. But it’s really important. I have something I have to tell you, and I can’t do it without knowing—please, let me see your feet.” Without waiting for her answer, he reached down and gently took hold of her foot. Her eyes widened, but she said nothing, and he lifted her foot until he could see her toes.

The webbing was smaller than the man’s had been, delicate and translucent. Charlie touched it with the tip of one finger, afraid to do more than simply brush against it. It felt like a butterfly’s wing, soft and ethereal. He drew in a deep breath, and returned Aedre’s foot to its place next to its mate.

Her eyes followed the path of her foot. “Now you know,” she said, low-voiced, not raising her head.

“No, I don’t,” Charlie said. “Not enough of it. Not enough to understand where you come from—and why I had a not-dream of meeting a man with feet like yours, who walked out of the lake and attacked me with a trident. He asked me who—what I was—and I think I should probably be asking you the same question.”

She shook her head and put her hands over her face. For the first time, Charlie noticed tiny overlapping at the bases of her fingers. Without stopping to consider the wisdom of his thought process, he said, “You know, we have these stories, fairy tales we

call them mostly, and in those there's nothing unusual about people who live in the water. There are the selkies, the seal-people, for instance, that can go back and forth between seal and human—”

Aedre snapped her head up, shoving her hair back behind her ears with one furious movement that whipped the thick ends within an inch of his nose. “I’m not a fairy tale!” she retorted. “You are.”

It was the last thing he would have expected her to say. He had been prepared for an argument about the man with the trident, about her feet, about the fact that she just appeared and disappeared with no evidence of a normal home—anything but this. All of the time and effort he had spent on trying to explain the situation to himself, and then on finding a way to tell her he was leaving while preserving their friendship, being able somehow to find her again, all that, and her greatest concern was trying to convince herself that he was real? His initial feeling of shock collapsed into a world of hurt, of anger, no, of fury.

“Fine. I’m a fairy tale. Then you won’t care if I’m leaving.”

She didn’t blink. “Fine.”

“You don’t get it, Aedre. I’m not just leaving, I’m—leaving.”

Now she did blink. “You just said that.”

She really didn’t get it, he realized, and his anger started to sluice away. “No, Aedre, listen to me. This isn’t ‘I’m leaving here because I’m mad at you.’ I’m leaving my great-aunt’s house, leaving Sussex, leaving England for the U.S., for San Francisco, California, U.S.A. Leaving—here. I don’t know when I’ll be coming back.” He dug in the ground with his toes, drawing an unhappy face in the dirt. “For all I know, the next

time I visit Great-Aunt Dusia, the stupid door may not work—and I won't be able to come back at all.”

Aedre's expression had shifted from anger to shock to unhappiness. “Charlie, you have to. You have to find a way.”

He shook his head. “I don't know, Aedre. I've never done anything like this before. I don't know how the rules work. Maybe you have to come and find me, for all I know.”

Now there was panic in her eyes. “No. I can't.” But her hand rose to worry at her pendant, a sign Charlie interpreted as wavering, and he pressed on.

“Then tell me what I need to know so I can try to find you. Where is this place? Where do you live? What are you?”

She shook her head, tears starting to leak from her eyes again. Charlie wanted to grab her by the elbows and shake her; instead, he held his breath and counted to four. When he could trust his voice, he said, “How about this—we're both fairy tales. I'm the human boy who finds himself in a strange land far away from home when he walks through an enchanted door. You're the not-so-human girl with webbed toes and fingers who lives in a lake—”

“The man you saw is my father.”

“What?”

Aedre looked down at her fingers, spreading them on her knee as if to deliberately expose the frail webbing. “The man who attacked you. He's my father. He followed me last time.”

“So you really do live in the lake.”

“Not exactly. We live on the other side of the lake, but we spend a lot of time in the water. And we are too human. We just—my father says that we never lost these, you know, on our fingers and toes, as we evolved.”

Charlie frowned, absorbing the information. “So what’s the name of this country?”

Aedre sighed. “I’ve already told you more than I should. I can’t tell you anything else. They’re not my secrets to tell.”

Frustrated, he snarled, “I’ve told you where I’m going. You can look it up in any atlas. But I can’t help you if you won’t help me.”

She simply shook her head. Charlie waited in vain for her to speak, dread working its way back into his mind and heart, and finally lost his temper altogether. “Fine,” he repeated. “I guess this is it.” He stood up and brushed off the bits of wood detritus from the log, resolutely refusing to look at her. “Goodbye, Aedre.”

As he marched away, fighting tears of frustration, he thought he heard her voice calling after him. But when he turned his head to look, she was no longer there.

The next day, his things packed, Charlie hugged his great-aunt and his cousin goodbye, promising to visit them, firmly ignoring the small voice in his mind that said, *and Aedre.*

* * * * *

“Dad.”

Charlie stirred, returning to the present with a start. “What is it, son?”

Paul struggled to find the right words, but they all sounded crazy to him. Finally he went with his first choice. “Was that Mom? Her name doesn’t sound right.”

Charlie rose stiffly and stretched. “I could use something to drink.” He disappeared into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with a grape soda for Paul in one hand and two bottles of beer in the other. Raising his eyebrows at his son’s quizzical expression, he plunked one bottle down on the table, uncapped the other, and took a long pull at the golden liquid.

“That’s better. It’s thirsty stuff, storytelling.”

Paul took a sip, then put the can down. “You didn’t answer my question, Dad.”

His father tilted the bottle upward and removed another hefty portion of beer. “I know. Yes, it was your mother. And the reason her name was different is because it was. She changed it later, when she came to the States.”

“What? I thought you said she couldn’t come and find you.”

“Well—not in so many words. It was more one of those serendipitous coincidences—at least I suppose it was; when I finally discovered the truth, it was too late. So I can’t say if serendipity was involved in the long run, except that it brought me you.” Charlie leaned forward and put his hand on Paul’s knee. “No matter what, son, no matter how I felt—feel—about your mother, you are the most important person in my life, and I’ll always be grateful to her for that.”

It was strange, this new, talkative, emotional father of his. Paul touched his father’s hand tentatively, even shyly. “Tell me the rest, Dad.”

* * * * *

It wasn’t quite as far away as the moon. But Berkeley was definitely a world apart from York, where Charlie’s parents had lived, and certainly from the quiet Sussex village Great-Aunt Dusia called home. But he was young, and resilient, and adapted quickly to

life in northern California. If he spent the occasional night unable to sleep, staring at the blue agate as if looking for answers, he said nothing of it to his parents, and eventually the memory of a nymph with golden hair and green eyes slid into the memory drawer containing his childhood. His interest in rocks and minerals bloomed into a full-fledged interest in geology, and his grades were good enough to earn him acceptance to the university where his father taught—and where the female population was considerably larger than the private academy he had attended. Charlie's first weeks on campus were filled with a swirl of new experiences punctuated by a sea of pretty, smiling faces.

Slowly, he began to sort them out; Janice in his chemistry class, Patricia in French, and, in his English Lit class, a girl with pale-blond hair and eyes the color of seaweed.

* * * * *

“Dad. Seriously? Seaweed? Ick.”

Charlie's beer bottle hovered, halfway to his mouth, as Paul's comment registered. “What? Oh.” He let the bottle continue and sucked down a gulp. “You're right. I'm not sure what I was thinking. That's not really accurate anyway.”

“So—?”

Charlie stared at a spot on the wall that apparently only he could see. “Okay. How's this? Her eyes were the color of freshly-mown grass in the sun, right after the rain.”

Paul considered, then gave his father a thumb's up and settled back in his chair.

* * * * *

Her name was Adriann, Charlie discovered when he worked up the courage to casually fall into step next to her as they left the classroom. He also found out that she would be delighted to discuss their reading with him over a cup of coffee—and she seemed unperturbed to discover they had been talking for three hours and at least one refill apiece when Charlie's phone buzzed to remind him he had another class in fifteen minutes. They parted with an agreement to meet again later that week, which evolved into dinner and a movie the following night.

For the next four years, even as he put in more hours in one lab or another, and she spent as many in the library poring over scholarly articles on the Pre-Raphaelites, they managed to spend the bulk of their free time together. On New Year's day of their final undergraduate year, he asked her to share her life with him, and they were married shortly after graduation.

Charlie spent that first summer in a happy haze of newlywed discovery. Any possible stumbles in life's road could and would be smoothed out, or over, and the occasional tiff of misunderstanding was easily handled. If Adriann had any misgivings about this somewhat cavalier attitude, she kept them to herself. In the fall, they moved to Florida for graduate school, Charlie on his way to making geology his life's occupation as well as avocation, and Adriann taking on a more concentrated study of Blake and Rossetti. At first, their routine seemed not particularly different from before, but within a few months small details such as housekeeping and meal preparation (and cleanup), then larger details, usually involving expenses, insisted on joining schoolwork in clamoring for their attention.

One evening they had the first significant argument of their relationship. Charlie was at the kitchen table, bills and checkbook at the ready, trying to do battle with their budget. After three hours of shuffling bills into different piles, sorting them first by date, then amount, then date again, and finally into an indeterminate order which left him befuddled as to its origin as soon as he had done it, Charlie shoved his chair back, screeching it across the linoleum, and headed for the refrigerator in search of malt and hops assistance.

The noise brought Adriann out of the living room, where she had been glaring at her laptop screen. “What the hell, Charlie? Look at the gouge you put in the floor!”

He grabbed a bottle of beer, slammed the refrigerator door closed, and defiantly yanked the chair back towards the table, eliciting another scrape, and plunked himself down. As if she hadn’t spoken, he twisted the cap off of the bottle and took a long swallow, leaving a sliver of froth on his upper lip. Adriann stared at him, then at the table, and sat down, fixing him with a look.

“I told you, I’ll do that if you want.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“What?”

He tilted the bottle again, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I said, it doesn’t matter. We’re still juggling the bills, and I don’t get my next paycheck from my assistantship for two weeks.”

She thought for a moment. “So you just got paid last week?”

“Yeah—but that one’s already gone just for rent and groceries. We’ve still got these.” Charlie pointed toward the stack of paper. “These are going to eat up the last bit

in savings—and I’m still probably going to have to get an extension from someone, I just don’t know which one.” He finished the beer and flung the bottle towards the trash basket, barely clearing the edge, as he rose to get another. “We need to bring in more money.”

“So I’ll get a part-time job. I’ll see if there are any on campus; if not, I’ll look in the paper.”

He was working on the new beer, making unusually hard work of removing the screw cap, and keeping his attention focused on his hands. “That’s not going to be good enough, Adriann.”

“What do you mean?”

Charlie looked up from the bottle, his eyes not meeting hers. “I mean, you’re going to have to get a full-time job and put your degree on hold—even with you working full-time, unless you’re making really good money, we can’t afford the additional tuition. Maybe next year you can get a fellowship or something, but this year—well, you know.”

Adriann stood up and placed both fists on the table, leaning in towards him. “No, I don’t know. Are you seriously telling me that my studies are less important than yours?”

Like an idiot, he continued to keep his eyes down, refusing to look at her, or he would have noticed the gleam of anger in her eyes—which might have reminded him of a magic part of his childhood. But he opted for cowardice, avoiding her accusing gaze.

“No—but I’ve got better job prospects sooner, so it makes more sense for me to stay in school. Then once I’m settled, you can start up again, and go to school full-time, because I’ll be making more than enough money.”

Adriann wasn't buying it. "How very—egocentric of you." Her fists rose, and he leaned back out of reach, anticipating a blow, but instead she turned and scrabbled at the papers on the table, snatching them up. "We'll discuss this later, when I feel like talking to you," she announced, and flung the bills at his head before storming out of the room.

After a glacial day or two, and fending for himself for meals, Charlie visited a florist and purchased a single red rose, which his wife found waiting, poised carefully in a water-filled pitcher, for her on the dining room table. Charlie himself was leaning against the doorjamb; he pushed away from the wall when he saw her take a deep breath and let it out with a small sigh.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I never meant to imply your work was less important."

She made a fluttery movement with her hands, which he hoped meant she had calmed enough to be reasonable. "I know."

He edged closer, arms ready to embrace her. "So—are we good?"

Adriann turned around. Although she didn't object when he wrapped his arms around her, her expression was serious. "I suppose it depends on what we decide to do."

"Tell you what," he said, working them towards the living room. "You're going to sit down and take off your shoes, while I pour us some wine. Then I'm going to rub your feet, get you snockered, and we'll talk."

That coaxed a laugh, however small, out of her. "On only one glass? I have a better idea, and you don't even have to rub my feet. Just bring the bottle with you."

After they polished off the first bottle, they repaired to the kitchen for reheated lasagna and most of another bottle of wine. Charlie convinced Adriann to agree to his plan, which, by that point in the evening, fueled mostly by alcohol and his relief that she

was cooperating, he had lavishly expanded to include a promise to find enough part-time employment of his own to allow her to return before he was finished getting his degree.

* * * * *

“And that,” Charlie said, standing and stretching, “was probably the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my life. I need to walk around for a minute, and I could use a snack before I go on. How do grilled cheese sandwiches strike you?”

“Okay, Dad.” Paul got up and followed his father into the kitchen, mulling over the story so far.

Once growling stomachs were satisfied, he said, “Dad. What you said about the stupidest thing—does that mean that you and Mom fought a lot?”

His father nodded. “I’m afraid so. It seemed like the only time we didn’t fight was when we sat down to play chess. We used this set, and it always seemed to calm whatever tension was in the air.” He picked up a dark-blue knight, running his finger over the details of the horse’s mane, and smiled. “I always wondered if Great-Aunt Dosia had something to do with it, that because the set was her gift to us, she wouldn’t tolerate our sniping at each other. Now, I can’t help but think there was something more.”

Paul collected a jasper knight, marveling at the way the streaks followed the carving details, making the horse look nearly alive. “Like what, Dad?”

“I’m getting to that.”

Paul put the knight back on the board and settled himself. “Uh, Dad—”

“Yes, son?”

“About the fighting part—you don’t have to tell me about that if you don’t want to.”

His father smiled at him. “You know, son, I think you’re right. I don’t want to, and I don’t think you need to hear all that. The only things you really need to know are that I was a jerk, I made your mother miserable, and finally she left me. Even though we reconciled, I never did understand why she put up with me for as long as she did.”

“That was when I was a baby, right?”

“No. You hadn’t come along yet. She left, but she also left something with me that eventually convinced me I needed to persuade her to come back, and she did. You were born a little over a year later, and we named you Paul, after my great-grandfather. Everything was fine, until we got a call from my cousin Irina that Great-Aunt Dosia was very ill. She wasn’t expected to live out the year.”

“So how old was I then? I don’t remember going to England.”

His father laughed. “No, you probably wouldn’t have; you were very little, not even two. But I remember Great-Aunt Dosia was very happy that she got to see you before she passed along. She told me, ‘He has my eyes, like Irina’s.’” His face shadowed momentarily. “And she told me to be sure that I taught you the game of chess.”

“And you did,” Paul said, pointing at the board.

“Yes. I did. So we buried my great-aunt, and then we came home.”

Something about his father’s tone was too quiet, too careful. The closeness of their relationship had taught Paul the nuances of his father’s voice, and this one was clearly in the category of having left something out. “Dad—there’s something you’re not saying. Something happened there, right?”

Silence, while Paul considered the pieces on the board, and the green Queen, which still gleamed suspiciously. Finally his father heaved a sigh, slumping back against the back of the couch.

“Yes. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, and your mother didn’t either. I was showing her Great-Aunt Dusia’s studio, and then we just, somehow, started walking down the hall.”

“You showed her the door, didn’t you, Dad?”

“Yes. In retrospect, fighting with your mother about who would quit school was the second stupidest thing I’ve ever done. Showing her that door was the most stupid thing.”

Paul’s eyes widened. “You went through it?”

His father contemplated the glass of water in his hand, staring into it as if it held some great cosmic answer. “Actually, that was the all-time, absolutely stupidest thing. Yes, we went through it. It was as if the place hadn’t changed at all—summertime, blue sky, fuzzy little white clouds, cows and sheep grazing in the fields, the wisteria blooming. We had just reached the rise in the lane, almost to where we would have seen the oaks, when your mother turned sort of greenish and said she felt really sick. So we decided to return to the house. We weren’t due to leave England for another day or two, so we thought we’d have time to go back, and I could show her the rest then.”

“What happened?”

“She was still feeling lousy the next day, and the day after. We both thought maybe she was pregnant, although we turned out to be wrong. At any rate, the one day

we thought we might be able to try the door again, she started feeling sick before we even made it halfway down the hall.”

Paul sat silently for a few minutes, thinking about his father’s narrative, turning the pieces of it about in his mind, intuiting and considering connections. “The country beyond the door,” he said finally, “that’s where Mom went, isn’t it.”

Again silence; then his father nodded.

“But—why didn’t she come back? And—well, couldn’t we go find her?”

His father put his glass down on the end table and beckoned to him. “Come sit with me, son. There’s still one more chapter. Maybe by the time I get to the end of the telling I’ll know what to do.”

Paul stared at him. His father, who could do anything and solve everything, who was never unsure of himself—it wasn’t that he seemed smaller, but the realization that his father was not omnipotent, not immortal, struck Paul for the first time in his young life. At the same time, he recognized that his father needed him, rather than the other way around. He moved the chessboard out of the way, careful not to joggle the pieces from their positions in the ongoing game, and joined his father on the couch, snuggling in under his father’s extended arm as he had when he was younger.

“Your mother had put you to bed, and she couldn’t seem to get herself settled afterward—she kept drifting in and out of the study as if she was looking for something but didn’t quite know what. I was trying to finish up some work, but I couldn’t concentrate. The air had that tautness that comes before a storm, although the forecast said clear for the next several days. Both of us were getting twitchier and twitchier.”

He picked up a blue pawn, passing it from finger to finger much like a magician with a coin. “So I suggested we play. We’d gotten as far as the mid-game when she complained of a sudden headache and said she was going up to bed.”

“Without finishing the game even?”

“Yeah. So she went up, and I went back to what I was doing, but I fell asleep in my chair. Sometime during the night I woke up, and she was standing there. Her hand was still on my arm, so I guess that’s what woke me.”

* * * * *

“Charlie.”

Charlie scrubbed one hand across his face, trying to focus on Adriann’s face.

“What—what time is it?” he mumbled.

“I don’t know.” Adriann took his wrist and turned it over to see the luminous dial on his wristwatch. “Just after midnight.”

He stretched and grabbed his leg as it tried to cramp. Left hand rubbing the sore spot, his right hand still trying to clear the sleep from his eyes, Charlie peered at his wife more closely, and swore as his leg cramped again from his sudden jerk of surprise. “What the hell?”

Her pale-blond hair was awash with green and blue; not highlighting in the conventional sense, because the colors shifted even when her head was still. And her clothes—she had been wearing a simple t-shirt and shorts when she’d gone upstairs, but now he felt the softness of jacquard drift across his arm as Adriann leaned over him, and he saw that she was wearing a light-green blouse and skirt of the same material, far too lightweight for the winter weather. Blinking, Charlie rubbed his eyes again, trying to

clear away the fog. Something in the recesses of his brain tugged at him, some piece of information that sought to emerge but was still too incomplete—but he knew that it was important, that he absolutely needed it to crawl into coherence. Something about her hair, her clothes, her jewelry—wait. He'd seen that jewelry before, the green-blue rainbow stone, flinging a myriad of colors through the relative darkness of the room as it collected light from the lamp standing in the corner, but when? No, Charlie's still-drowsing mind corrected him, the question is not so much when as where.

And that was the word he blurted out, still trying to collect his thoughts.

“Where—where did you get that necklace? And what happened to your hair?”

Adriann pulled the ottoman closer, dislodging Charlie's other foot, and sat down. Her right hand was clenched in her lap; her left reached for his hands, still rubbing his eyes, and pulled them down towards her. He watched, bemused, as her sleeve flitted before him like a butterfly.

“Charlie. Just sit, and listen to what I have to tell you. I don't have much time.”

“What do you mean, you don't have much time? What are you talking about?”

She shook her head. “This is hard enough as it is. Please let me talk, don't interrupt me, or I won't finish, and there are things you need to know.” Her free hand scooted upward, fingers gently touching his mouth, before returning to its place on his hands.

“Do you remember when we went through the door?”

He remembered. In a way, he thought he hadn't stopped thinking—for long—about showing her the door, and taking her through it, and finding the world where he'd met Aedre so many years earlier. And his surprise and strange sense of unease to find it

apparently unchanged. Except for one thing. “Yes. But you weren’t feeling well, so we left.” *And we never went back.*

He might as well have said it aloud. “Yes. We never went back.”

Was that accusation he heard in her voice? Trying to keep the defensiveness from seeping into his own, he said, “Well—there were all the arrangements to be made. Irina needed my help with so many of them, and—”

“I’m not being critical. You had just buried your great-aunt. Paul was only a baby. And I—I didn’t realize what had happened, what was happening, to me.”

“What do you mean, happening to you?”

She shook her head. “I should never have gone through that door. My father warned me, but I had forgotten the one thing he tried to make sure I would remember, what I should have remembered. And now—”

This time Charlie ignored her admonition to let her talk. He sat up, ignoring the still-complaining leg muscle, and placed his finger against her mouth in unconscious imitation. “Wait a minute. Even though I have no clue what you’re going on about, I can tell you’re coming at it from all directions. Please. Give me a break, start at the beginning. Maybe then we can fix this, whatever it is.”

She gave him a doubtful look. “Okay. I owe you that much.”

The words chilled his blood, but he resisted the urge to shiver. “All right, then.”

Adriann nodded, but said nothing. He watched her fidget for a few minutes, then reached for her and pulled her into his lap. She didn’t resist, but her right hand remained closed, her knuckles whitening with the effort of holding onto whatever it was. Charlie kissed her forehead, leaving his arms wrapped around her.

“Okay, sweetheart. Please talk to me.”

“Would you help me with this?” One-handed, she fumbled at the chain around her neck, and he dislodged his arms long enough to unfasten the necklace, dropping it into her free hand, before repositioning himself. Adriann turned her palm this way and that, letting the light play through the gem’s facets. “Do you recognize it?”

He frowned. “I just asked you about it—”

“Look at it—into it. Tell me what comes to your mind.”

Fine. If the paradise stone could shed some light—wait a minute, he thought. How did he know that was what it was? He’d never heard of paradise stone before. Then an image swirled through his mind, so quickly it was gone before he could place it. He started to speak, but Adriann nudged him gently with her hand, and he returned his attention to the gemstone, trying to retrieve the impression. Something in his brain objected, whispered against the effort, but he shoved past it, determined to identify the intruder. No, the sensible, down-to-earth Charlie repeated, you don’t want to go there, you’ll regret it, you’ve had enough pain. The other Charlie, swimming on a wave of intuition, acknowledged the truth of this even as he dove deeper, aware that he had already traveled too far to turn back. And then he was through the open door.

We never went back. There, in his mind’s eye, were the fields, the well-worn lane, the old wooden fence with its garlands of wisteria traveling beside it, the air full of their scent. He knew if he moved forward he would see the lake, and the stand of oaks, and he would see her standing there, waiting for him—“Aedre,” he said aloud, and his eyes flew open.

“Aedre,” he repeated, staring at her. *We never went back.* “We never went back. Oh, my God, we never went back. We should have—wait.” He found his grip on her had tightened, and he made an effort to relax his hands. “That makes no sense.”

“Charlie. I’m Aedre.”

He had shifted his gaze to the necklace; now he jerked his head up to stare at her again. “What?”

“I’m Aedre.”

“No. No.” Her expression didn’t change, and his confusion flickered into the beginnings of anger. “Fine,” he said, unconsciously echoing that long-ago Charlie. “If you’re Aedre, why didn’t you tell me? Ever? Why the scam, the lies, the ‘Come and find me’ after we broke up? Why now? If Great-Aunt Dosia’s house had something to do with curing this supposed amnesia of yours, why didn’t you say something then?” He wanted to say more, to convince her of his sense of betrayal, but he couldn’t speak for a moment, and the waiting words piled up behind his tongue, refusing to come out.

“You’re right,” she said, making no attempt to stop or brush away the tears that had begun somewhere along the course of his diatribe. “I should have told you before we left your great-aunt’s. Or if not then, at least before today. But it didn’t happen all at once. And the sick feeling—you remember that went on for a few weeks.”

He remembered. He didn’t want to admit it, but the memory sliced in, their deep disappointment in being mistaken as sharp as if it were newly made. “Yes. We thought you were pregnant again,” he said, unable to prevent himself from adding, “but we were wrong, weren’t we?”

Adriann flinched, but continued. “I thought that place felt familiar because—oh, I don’t know, it just did. I assumed it was *déjà vu*, or some dream-sense, who knows, and that it would go away. But it didn’t. It got worse, and I started remembering, I suppose, strange bits and pieces. A town on the edge of a lake. A tall man with gold-green hair who reminded me of my father—”

“Reminded? If you’re telling me the truth, he was your father,” Charlie sniped. “Of course, that does beg the question of who the guy who gave you away at our wedding was. I know he was real—he got me totally plastered during my bachelor party.”

Adriann shook her head. “A friend, I suppose. I don’t know how my father arranged—oh, just let me talk, okay? Then you can ask all the questions you want, get all the snide remarks out of your system, everything, and I’ll try to answer them.”

He had regretted the nastiness as soon as it escaped through his mouth, but it had been too late to stop it, a frightening reminder of their fights before they had reconciled and Paul came along. “Okay. I’m sorry. I’ll try.”

“Thank you. I’m going to try to go through the memories as they came—maybe that will help me understand as well.” Adriann touched his cheek lightly, holding her hand there for a moment, before she spoke again.

“Do you remember the last time we saw each other? When your parents had come to fetch you?”

He nodded.

“I ran off, but I didn’t go home right away. I walked along the east side of the lake, away from our woods, where it swerves off into a long, narrow branch before it opens out again. I must have walked most of it, because one of my brothers found me—”

don't interrupt, Charlie, yes, I have brothers, but that's not important right now. He told me that everyone was searching for me and that Father was furious, yelling about some strange outsider boy who had stolen me away. When we got home, Father scolded me at length and grounded me for two weeks. After that, he had no need to be angry at me. I was his perfect little girl. I had no desire to visit the oaks again anyway—you were gone, and I knew you wouldn't return."

His tongue felt thick. "I wanted to."

"I know. Or at least I know that now. But we were children. I didn't understand anything about this kind of love, not then. I just could never manage to forget you. And my father, as much as it obviously pained him, understood. When I turned seventeen, and old enough to marry, I told him again how I felt. Instead of reassuring me that things would change, as he had before, he simply took me into his arms and told me, 'I know.' And I asked him, 'What do I do?'"

Charlie was having difficulty imagining the raging colossus he had met being understanding, much less sympathetic. "What did he say?"

Adriann produced a sad little smile. "He told me that if I really couldn't forget you, and if you were really my proper mate, he could make it possible—set certain things in motion to create the opportunity. But he warned me that it would involve forgetting everything else."

"What do you mean?" Even as he asked, Charlie knew the answer. "You mean, forget him. Forget your world."

"Right. Forget my 'fairy tale,' as you called it." But the words didn't carry a sting, only sadness.

Charlie shook his head. "I didn't mean it, you know. I was angry."

"I know. I didn't either. So I had the choice, like the little mermaid, of remaining where and who I was, or leaving that all behind for a chance to find the love I knew was waiting for me. I agreed to my father's terms, and he—I don't know how he did it. I just have an additional set of memories—and then I started college. And there was a boy with dark hair, shaggy and falling in his eyes all the time, so that it seemed like days before I could see they were as dark as his hair, in my literature class. And you know what happened after that."

He did. Instant attraction, morphing quickly and inevitably into friendship when they discovered a shared love of chess, then love. His parents, and Charlie himself, had been surprised by the fast pace of the relationship, but, now, in hindsight, he guessed he must have been drawn by something of Aedre in Adriann, even if he hadn't recognized her. Marriage and more chess. Separation, repaired by chess in a way Charlie had been forced to accept or believe that he was crazy. Reconciliation, bringing with it a new sense of maturity to both of them. And the best result—Paul, who had his great-great-aunt's thoughtful gray eyes and had already been showing signs of her mischievous grin when he was just a baby. Then the news that she had died, the trip to Sussex, the house where it had all begun. What madness had possessed him to show Adriann the damned door, Charlie wondered. If he'd resisted the temptation, they wouldn't be dealing with this now.

"I don't know, Charlie." He must have spoken his thought aloud; Adriann looked like she was contemplating two very complicated alternatives. "Ever since we got back together," she continued, "I've had an occasional feeling of—borrowed time sounds so

melodramatic, but of something that wasn't quite where it should be. You know, you walk into a room, and you think you've just seen something in the corner of your eye, but when you look again, more closely, there's nothing, just a slightly unsettled feeling. And every time I tried to look harder, there was nothing I could grasp, so I finally decided it was just my imagination."

"So now you're saying it wasn't?"

She shrugged. "It's a moot point now, isn't it? We went through the door, back into my world, and I remembered."

Charlie tightened his grip on her shoulders. "So, okay. You remembered. So that what does that mean? You have to go back and dip in the lake every seven years? Fine. We'll go back to England, see Irina, you go see your family, get it out of your system for this time. Then we come back home and go on with our lives until the next cycle comes along, right?"

Adriann shook her head. "It's not that simple. The forgetting my father placed on me was meant to be permanent—as long as I never found a key back. Or I suppose a door. Actually, that's probably a better example, because now that I've gone through that door, I have to keep going, back to my world."

We never went back. "We never went back—is that what you meant? We should have gone back again, but we left England instead?"

"Not quite." She started to cry again. "I'm sorry. If we'd returned to my world right away, I would have had to say goodbye to you then."

Goodbye. Charlie sat, frozen. No matter where he turned, trying to make sense of it, the answer was the same. But he was damned if he was just going to give up, not without a fight. “What do you mean, goodbye?”

She swiped at her wet eyes, then shoved her hair back in the gesture he remembered, sending streaks of yellow, green, and blue sparking in the lamplight. “I mean I have to go. I’m not permitted to stay with you and Paul. I was given a special exemption from the rules once; a repetition is impossible.”

“Or what? Fishtail city? You suddenly drop dead on the street?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Adriann snapped. “Nothing that drastic, as far as I know. But here’s what will happen now, definitely. If I stay, I will try to leave again. No matter what you do—I will keep trying until I succeed.”

A few seconds ago he would probably have just let her cry. But the Charlie that loved her, that had loved both of them, pulled her close, her head on his shoulder, and held her while she wept. Finally, her breathing calmed somewhat, and he tipped her head to look at him. “Adriann—Aedre—please. Tell me what to do to fix this.”

She hiccupped. “You can’t.” Her eyes were luminous with tears and a light he recognized as truth. He shifted so that they were sitting less uncomfortably.

“Okay. I’ll deal with that somehow. What do you propose to do about Paul?”

“I can’t take him with me,” Adriann said, her voice still shaking. “He’s of this world. He’s too young to tell whether he has an ability to recognize something like the power of the door. And you need him.”

Charlie was running out of capacity to deal with surprises. He let her last comments slide, focusing on other details. “Will we ever see you again? Once you leave, that is?”

She swallowed. “Probably not. And I’m leaving once we’re done talking, before Paul wakes up.” Before Charlie could speak, she rushed on. “I still have things to tell you, and we’re running out of time. Just let me finish.”

“Fine,” he said, still not quite willing to believe her. “Get it over with.”

She opened the hand that she had kept closed on her lap. In it was one of the queens from the set Great-Aunt Dusia had given them. As she held it up, Charlie could see it glimmering, reflecting the glow of her pendant, and another piece slipped its moorings from the confusion in his head. They were made from the same gem, the peacock jasper of the chess set and what she had called the paradise stone.

“My name, Aedre, means stream in the old language, what you call Anglo-Saxon. We are water people—brooks, rivers, lakes—related to the selkies, the sea people, but we can, and usually do, live on land, as long as it’s by water’s edge, because those waterways are the lines that power travels through, like the old ley lines on land. Your great-aunt’s house was built on one of the latter.

“My father had already received offers for my hand, and I know now that it must have been very difficult for him to refuse them because his daughter loved a land-man. Even worse, he thought I was abandoning the old lines of power, and I knew nothing then about your great-aunt’s house or its location, so I could say nothing to reassure him. And when he took away those memories so that I could function in your world, it didn’t matter, at least then.”

Adriann turned the chess piece over and over in her hand. Charlie frowned as the glimmering in the stone increased, flickering over her fingers as if jumping from one to the next. “Adriann—what’s that doing?”

She stilled her hand, but the sparking continued. “Do you remember when we were given this set?”

“Of course. It was a wedding gift from Great-Aunt Dosia.” Charlie peered at the sea-green stone as its inner light continued to play about Adriann’s hand, and shook his head. His great-aunt had been an unusual woman, but something like this—he couldn’t picture her understanding whatever the piece was doing, much less experimenting with it herself. “Don’t tell me she would have known about—this, whatever it is.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I remember she was watching intently as we unwrapped the set. I wondered at the time, but obviously you didn’t see it—when I picked up this Queen, it sparked. Not as much as now, but enough so I noticed. And so did your great-aunt.”

Charlie felt an inexplicable stab of jealousy, of having been left out of some important shared secret. “Are you sure? She didn’t say anything.”

“No, she didn’t. But she looked at me, hard, with those big gray eyes of hers, as if she was examining every bit of me. Then later that evening, when you were outside talking with your cousin Irina, your great-aunt came over to where I was sitting, bringing this Queen and King with her. She told me that I needed to be watchful, because the chess set held power.” Adriann shook her head. “She said she didn’t know just how much when she bought it, but when she brought it home, she realized that it was responding to the ley line.”

Charlie shook his head. “Ley line—maybe she told Irina, but she never mentioned anything like that to me.” What else, he wondered, had Great-Aunt Dosia not told him? Or maybe she had, and he had either refused to believe or simply forgotten, his mind tuned to more tangible things. But Adriann had started to speak again, and he pushed the notion away, focusing back on her.

“I didn’t give it much thought then. And we left for the rest of our honeymoon that night, so there wasn’t exactly time to carry the chess set around her house to see if it reacted.”

And if it had—he stiffened as the logical extension of the thought occurred to him. “We might have come upon the door then. Maybe we’d have been better off if we had.”

“No. Absolutely not.” An angry red flush spread over her cheeks. “Even with the problems we had—if nothing else, you have a beautiful, wonderful little boy.”

“Who,” Charlie said, his own anger flaring again, “you’re telling me will have to grow up without his mother—all because you tried to be something you’re not and lied in order to do it.”

“I haven’t lied to you. What would you have wanted me to do? While I was trying to reconcile incompatible memories and be a wife and mother at the same time, I should have said, ‘Darling, I’m having these odd feelings I don’t understand and can’t explain, but I’m not crazy?’ What would you have said or done that could possibly have helped?”

That was a tack he wasn’t going to take. Coldly, he said, “I wasn’t the one with memory issues. I’ve never forgotten you or even your bipolar maniac of a father.”

Her head whipped back to face him, big green eyes flashing with anger. “Maybe you’re forgetting the selfish whining you did after we got married, without even thinking about the words coming out of your mouth. Like now. Just because we’d reconciled didn’t give me an ironclad guarantee that you wouldn’t react that way if I tried to tell you I had memories of a life which didn’t seem to fit with the one you knew about.”

Charlie opened his mouth to retort, and shut it again. She was right. For a guy with a brilliant ability for intuitive thinking, he thought, his lack of perception was equally stellar. He waited, counting to four, willing himself to calm down and avoid saying anything to make the situation worse, staring at their hands, which had become clasped on the sofa between them. He could feel the edges of her pendant poking into his palm, but he preferred the discomfort to the emptiness removing his hand would bring.

She seemed to be doing the same thing, if the slowing of her breath was any indication. Finally, she spoke, her voice barely over a whisper. “I couldn’t say anything until the memories started to make some sort of sense, and then it was too late, because I remembered my father’s admonition—and then I felt it.”

He didn’t lift his eyes from their hands. “Felt what?”

“The call of the water, blood to my blood, power to power.”

“That sounds like a line from a fairy tale to me.”

If she noticed the sulkiness in his tone, she ignored it. “Maybe. But it’s the truth. I broke my father’s—spell, whatever you want to call it—and now I have to meet the cost of breaking it. And I’m running out of time—”

He was tired of those words. “How are you running out of time? You still haven’t told me what happens. Do you grow a fishtail, or scales, or gills, or something worse, on

the spot? Do you implode into a little bubble that goes *pop!* and disappears, or just fizzle up on the carpet?”

With a sound of exasperation, Adriann raised their clasped hands and dropped them into her lap. Charlie’s fingers, still clutching her pendant, brushed up against the still-glowing chess Queen, and he flinched from the electric shock that jolted through them, through his hand, and up into his arm. “What the—”

“Do you feel that? That is power, the power that was in this piece initially, that grew from its association with your great-aunt’s house, that calls to my own. These are the lines of power for which my family has stood steward for centuries, strengthened by the inherent power of this Game, a metaphor for so much of human endeavor.”

Adriann let go of his hand, forging ahead while Charlie rubbed it and his arm to ease the tingling. “I told you. If I don’t leave now, I will leave tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the next. Maybe you think that would be better, since I would still be here, but it would not. My only focus, my only desire, would be to leave, no matter how much I love you and our son.”

He still wasn’t ready to accept it. “Like some damn lemming, you’re going to go and fling yourself over a cliff—I mean, into a river.”

“If that’s the only way you can understand,” she said, shoving her stubborn hair away from her face again, “so be it. My people are probably much closer to nature than you realize. But that’s beside the point. Here—take the Queen.”

“Hell, no. One electric shock a night is enough, thank you.”

Adriann muttered something under her breath and grabbed his hand, which, traitor that it was, unclenched and lay meekly in hers. Carefully, she placed the chess piece in the center of his palm, where it sat serenely, doing nothing at all.

“Nothing happened,” Charlie observed, rather unnecessarily.

“Not yet.” She raised her other hand, letting the pendant dangle from her fingers. As it moved, he saw its light beam down towards his hand into the Queen, which reflected the light upward toward Adriann’s eyes, then back to the pendant, now on a level with them, forming a shimmering gold-green triangle in the air. He tensed, waiting for another shock, but all he felt was a growing warmth seeping into his hand as the Queen glowed.

“These are the lines of power, Charlie. I am leaving much of them with you, maybe more than I should. But this way you can know that I will always be with you and Paul. As my grandmother placed a small part of herself in this pendant, I am leaving the same with you here, to join with the power in this chess Queen. Keep Her safe, and teach Paul the Game when he is old enough.”

He sat, considering and discarding words; they struck him as inadequate at best and just plain stupid at worst. Finally, he said in a voice he barely recognized as his own, “This part of you—whatever it is—just what is it supposed to do when my little boy asks me why his mother isn’t with us?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe nothing. Maybe something. Maybe that won’t be the time you tell him about me, and the Queen, and the lines of power between us. But one day you will.”

“But—”

“Trust me, Charlie.” She stood, still holding his hands. She kissed each one, then, before he could speak again, his mouth. Then she brushed her fingertips across his eyelids, her touch the last thing he knew as he drifted off, unable to fight the relentless exhaustion which came out of nowhere.

When he woke the next morning, she was gone.

* * * * *

“So there you have it,” Paul’s father said. “The Queen has reacted, and the legacies of our two families are joined.”

Paul was staring at his feet and wiggling his toes. “I think my feet are normal.”

His father laughed. “You sound disappointed. Maybe now you think it would be cool, but under the circumstances, it’s probably just as well you weren’t born with webbed toes. I don’t know how your mother would have handled that.”

“Mm.” Paul wiggled them again before twisting to look at his father. “So why is this important now? This lines of power stuff?”

“I don’t know, son. I mean, somehow I knew today that I needed to tell you about your mother, but I really don’t know what’s supposed to happen next.”

Paul got up and fetched the chess set, placing it on the coffee table in front of them. The heavy board tilted slightly as he set it down, and a jasper knight close to the side brushed against his hand before he could right it. Like the Queen, the knight began to glow.

“Dad—”

“I see it, son.” His father leaned forward, studying the pieces and their positions carefully. “I think we’re at a crucial stage in your game, Paul. How you look at the board

and the pieces is going to have an effect, not just on your analytical skills, but how your worldview develops. And you definitely have the intuition of both your mother and me. I think we're going to get even more play out of this set, you and I."

Paul examined the board in his turn. "Dad? Not to change the subject exactly, but—you haven't been to the café for a long time. Do you think I'm ready?"

His father was silent for several minutes. Paul wondered if this last question had been one too many, and was about to withdraw it when his father spoke again.

"It's possible. But if you're going to light up the whole set when you touch them—some of those guys might find that a little disturbing. It probably would be best to establish your lines of power safely first. Then maybe you can learn to understand what they mean, whatever they are, and whatever your mother intended them to be."

Irina

The bottom drawer of the battered oak cabinet Irina had bought several years earlier at an estate sale squeaked as she eased it open. She made a mental note to oil the sliders, but for now that would have to wait; it was the heavy, silk-draped shape, about two feet long and as wide, which concerned her. Making sure she had a solid grip on it, she reached in and pulled it out, placing it on her knees and slowly unwrapping the moss-green folds to reveal a reddish-brown wood box. Its velvet burgundy top was as deep and rich as it had been the day Irina's great-aunt first showed it to her, so many years ago. Irina smiled as the faint scent of wintergreen swirled around her; Great-Aunt Dosia had loved the black birchwood of her homeland.

"As long as I can still smell the wintergreen, I will remember," the old woman had said as her young great-niece touched the wood tentatively, her eyes widening at the aroma.

"And I will remember you, Great-Aunt," Irina whispered. She stroked the soft velvet, tracing the outline of the crest in its center, a silver eagle with spreading wings, its color bright against the burgundy background, for a moment before opening the box. Her great-aunt's chess set lay inside, silver and gold with richly painted enamels, each piece nestled securely in its individually shaped niche. For almost as long as Irina could remember, the chess set had stood on a mahogany board inlaid with mother-of-pearl and ebony that rested on a gilt-edged table with spindly but surprisingly sturdy legs, always available for play. Great-Aunt Dosia had spent countless hours teaching her great-niece the game she loved.

"It is the legacy of your namesake," she would say. "Grandmama Irina taught me using this very set, and so I pass that inheritance to you."

It had been over sixty years since Dosia's father had brought his small family from Warsaw to southern England, but Dosia's voice still held the cadences of her native tongue. Irina could imagine her voice now, a soft admonition to look at the board from all angles.

If Irina closed her eyes, she could see the parlor, filled with curios, keepsakes, cushions, and books—although the old house had a separate library, almost as crowded—just enough to be comfortable without feeling cluttered. Great-Aunt Dosia would be sitting in her favorite chair, the Jacobean print of its upholstery vivid but not overbearing, and somehow always complementary to whatever color Dosia had chosen to wear that day. In this particular memory, she was wearing a flowing, ankle-length dress of sea-green. Her tiny feet, shod in exquisitely expensive matching leather shoes, with slim straps around the ankle and heels a stage dancer would have envied, rested firmly on the floor in between the equally small, cherry wood legs, shaped like a dog's paws, supporting her chair. A long-haired dachshund dozed peacefully, its silky, red-brown coat contrasting with the dark green of its cushion, which the dog had nosed into position almost equally in between the two players before settling in for its nap.

She remembered when the puppy arrived, a wriggling, excited package of bright eyes and frenetically whipping tail, the color of a newly minted penny. Young Irina had immediately christened the dog accordingly, and Penny had adapted happily to her new home, devoted to both of her mistresses. The pillow placed strategically between the chess players had been one of her favorite spots.

Irina blinked and gently moved the picture back into her memories, the "memory garden," as Great-Aunt Dosia used to call it. She hadn't had a dog for many years, mostly

due to her somewhat nomadic lifestyle. But now—this part of Florida appealed to her, with its soft springs and mild winters, and it might be time to put down roots. A small house, with a sunny front room for writing, a small back yard and a garden—and a dog. She looked down at the box in her hands and closed it, checking the latch to make sure it was secure. Today was the day she was going to bring it to the café to show Walter—and to play.

* * * * *

Irina arrived early at the café, settling her things at a table near the one Walter Broznic and George Anderson usually occupied for their mostly-friendly chess rivalry. She started to take the box out of her tote bag, but stopped in mid-reach. Did she want to raise the issue immediately by having the pieces ready, or wait until Walter arrived? After all, George usually was late. She should have time to ease Walter into it gently, and have the prospect of starting a game before his usual sparring partner strolled in. The decision was made; withdrawing her hand, she left the bag on the table and walked over to the coffee bar.

“Hi, Irina! Would you like to try today’s special?” Marie, the barista, pushed back coppery bangs which were always falling into her eyes and smiled at her. “Or are we going with your usual?”

Irina contemplated the board listing the coffee and tea of the day, decorated with Marie’s graceful chalk sketches. “You really should be an artist, Marie. How you portray an image with only a few lines, so evocative.”

“Thank you. Maybe one of these days—but for now I’m enjoying myself too much. After all, I can experiment with flavors, meet all kinds of interesting people, and even watch a little chess from time to time.”

“True.” Irina returned the barista’s smile absently while she debated. The special was White Mocha Mint, christened with chocolate sprinkles—that might be better after something less fanciful. “Maybe later on the special. Just the usual right now, please.”

“Okay. Café latte, one shot vanilla, cinnamon powder, coming up.” Marie glanced over toward the table where Irina had left her tote and back at her friend. “Did you bring it today?”

Irina nodded. “I confess to hoping George will be late so I can show it to Walter first alone. I mean, by himself first.” She was surprised to find she was more nervous about it than she had expected; she rarely made placement mistakes unless she was distracted. “By himself first,” she repeated.

Marie shook her head, hands busy measuring and pouring the whipped heated milk. “I would have thought you would be more worried about Henry Roberts and his pals. Next to them, George is a pushover.” She handed the cup, steam wafting from its top, to Irina, who cradled it in her hands for a moment before sipping.

“Yes. But I have only observed till now. And although Walter has asked me to play, I was—reluctant. I did not want George to be uncomfortable.”

Marie laughed. “George wouldn’t care if you were playing simultaneous matches against four other guys, as long as you let him sit and bask in the radiance of your presence.”

Irina spluttered, narrowly avoiding inhaling her latte. “Silly. You know what I meant.”

“So do you.” Marie’s face sobered. “You do realize that—well, you wouldn’t know what that whole bunch was like before you showed up. Heaven forbid you should talk to one of them while they were playing. But even so you have to admit that Walter and George, most of those guys, have lightened up a lot.”

“Maybe.” Irina would have said more, but the café door opened, and she looked around to see Walter Broznik heading in their direction. Marie winked at her as he approached.

“Good afternoon, Walter. Are you feeling adventurous today?”

He laughed. “Marie, I’m an old man. Have pity.”

“Not that old,” Marie said. “White Mocha Mint. Basically a liquid chocolate mint patty. What was that commercial? Feel the rush of cold, exhilarating air—not exactly something we get a lot of here. You’ll love it.”

Walter glanced at Irina’s cup. “Is that what you’re drinking?”

“Maybe later,” she said, smiling.

“Ah. Opting for caution. I’m curious to see if you play chess the same way.”

Walter dug in his pocket for his wallet and shook his head at Marie’s raised eyebrow. “I’m going to follow Ms. Orzeł’s sensible approach, I think. French Roast, one cream, Marie, please.”

Marie raised both eyebrows this time. “No cinnamon?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Thank you.” Walter put bills on the counter and returned his wallet to his pocket, then glanced towards the door. A small frown flitted across his face.

“Late again.”

“George?” Marie asked as she stirred cream and cinnamon into Walter’s coffee.

“Yes. I should tell him I’m going to be here half an hour earlier, then he’d be on time.” Walter picked up his cup.

Irina tucked her free hand under the arm not responsible for coffee stability.

“Well, I intend to take advantage of George’s tardiness, Walter. I have brought something to show you.”

Walter cheered up immediately. “His loss. Lead on, my dear.”

Irina had meant to simply sit where she had put her bag, but Walter freed his non-coffee hand and picked it up for her, ushering her to the table he and George usually shared for their games. She gave him an inquiring look, and he shook his head.

“Like I said, his loss. So what did you bring?”

Walter whistled softly as Irina retrieved the box and placed it on the table. “That’s an interesting crest. Yours?”

“Yes. My family’s—our name means eagle, you know. This box belonged to my great-aunt.”

The old man’s eyes were bright as he admired the box. “Let me guess. A chess set—also your great-aunt’s?”

“Older. It was given to my great-great-grandmother Irina—I was named for her—by an admirer, or so I was told.”

Walter nodded. “So let’s set it up. But first, a board.” Before Irina could object, he had retrieved the soft felt roll which, laid flat, showed the grid markings, and smoothed it out on the table. “Okay. The board is yours, my lady.”

Walter stared at the chess pieces as Irina removed them from their box and placed them in their respective squares. The theme for one side appeared to be Victorian or early Edwardian, painted in antique shades of green and gold on matching golden stands. The opposing pieces seemed to be lined up for a Napoleonic-era gathering, navy and an oddly luminescent mauve on bases of silver.

“That’s an unusual color scheme,” he commented.

Irina nodded as she put down a knight, the mane of the horse waving in conjunction with the Byronic curls of its rider. She picked up the silver Queen and turned the figure in her hands.

“This piece is modeled after Empress Josephine, whose dresses set the fashion for the early 1800s.” The Queen’s light dress shimmered, leaving a flickering impression of movement before Irina put her down.

“But the King—he’s not Napoleon.”

The silver King stood tall, head thrown back, hands on the lapels of his dark-blue coat. The markings painted on it and the mauve waistcoat underneath swirled in infinitely tiny patterns, seeming more like fabric than metal.

“No, he is not,” Irina said, amused. “He is Alexander I, Tsar of Russia.”

Walter picked up the green and gold King. His morning suit glowed dully in the café light, the tiny fob chain glinting, and a neat mustache and goatee adorned his lower face. “And who is this?”

Irina lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug. “He is less clear to me. My great-aunt never told me, but I believe he is supposed to represent Nicholas Romanov.”

“The fellow who was murdered?” Walter put Nicholas down and picked up one of the gold bishops. Instead of the ornate robes of his opponents, or a cassock like his colleague, this figure was dressed in loose pants, tucked into tall boots, and a high-collared loose shirt, with painting simulating embroidery on collar and cuffs. The facial details were the giveaway; this beard was thick and wild, and the eyes had the stark look of the fanatic. “And this is Rasputin, I assume.”

“I always thought so,” Irina replied, “but this was not an easy subject to discuss with Great-Aunt Dusia.”

“That seems odd—after all, she taught you the game, right?”

Irina nodded. “But if we’re right, this would not have been part of the original set, because that would already have been in my great-aunt’s possession.”

“So that piece would have been made for her instead? By the original artist?”

“She never said. All she told me was that the admirer who presented her grandmother with the set was a supporter of the Russian royal family. Perhaps a connection still existed later—but I doubt I’ll ever know for certain.”

Walter continued to gaze at the pieces until the rooks caught his attention. No mere castles or lumps of stone, these, but gold castles boasting onion-topped towers, and turreted silver castles, each carved to represent a basket, or more properly a gondola, for atop each castle a hot air balloon hovered, straining to escape. Walter picked up one and traced the minute metallic threads representing the ropes along the expanse of the blue and mauve envelope to their terminus in the silver basket.

“This is amazing,” he said. “The enamel work reminds me of pictures I’ve seen of the eggs Fabergé made for the royal family. I wonder—”

“It’s possible,” Irina said. “But he had a large company, especially for the period, so it’s more likely that one of the many designers working for him was responsible. After the set came to me, I researched as much as I could. But unfortunately many of the pre-Revolution records have been lost, and if there was any provenance for this, it was lost with them.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, contemplating the pieces. George had yet to make an appearance. Walter looked at the chessboard, toward the door, and back at the board; then the corner of his mouth quirked upward.

“Gold or silver, Irina?”

Startled, Irina put her cup down a little more firmly on the free part of the table than she had intended. The liquid surged upward ominously, but she had drunk enough to avoid spillage. “I beg your pardon?”

He grinned at her. “Why wait? I have a perfectly good chess player sitting here in front of me.”

It had been her plan, after all. She had walked into the café that spring to find an enclave of chess enthusiasts, stubbornly all male despite the growing number of women throughout the world becoming involved in the game. Although she had not started out to infiltrate their ranks, the kindness and interest of Walter, George, and many of the others, coupled with the open resistance offered by Henry Roberts and his team of self-proclaimed traditionalists, had sown the seeds of what-if and so-what, why-not and who-

cares? And, in Marie's words, for-crying-out-loud—Marie had nudged her persistently, subtly and not so subtly, to do more than simply observe.

“You're as good as most of them are,” the barista had said while on her break one day, noting the thoughtful look in Irina's eyes as she watched Walter and George battle each other to seriously depleted ranks and eventual stalemate. “And if they're all going to stare at you whenever you walk in and fall all over themselves trying to get your attention—why not take it a step further? I can tell you want to play. Do it. Walk up, while they're sitting there open-mouthed, sit down, and suggest a game.”

Irina had shaken her head. “Of course. And then someone like Henry will cause a great fuss.”

“So?” Marie waved a dismissive hand. “Henry knows the rules. No yelling, no fighting, no fussing, no biting.”

“Biting?”

“Sorry. It's from a kids' book. No biting. Anyway, the point is, neither Henry Roberts nor anyone else decides how and with whom the other members of the unofficial Wednesday-Thursday chess club play. Besides, I think Walter's been dying to see how you measure up; he's just afraid to ask because he thinks you'll do just what you're doing and refuse to play.”

Irina had continued to demur, even though she agreed with most of what Marie had said. She just wasn't sure about the last part about Walter being nervous. Now the opportunity had presented itself. And it had been in the back of her mind, after all, when she decided to bring the chess set to the café. She looked around the room. So far, only a few of the regulars were there—she hadn't realized until now just how early both she and

Walter had arrived. Henry Roberts was not among them. She turned towards the coffee bar, where Marie caught her eye, raised an eyebrow, and made a jerking motion with her head, mouthing what looked suspiciously like “Do it!”

Irina returned her attention to Walter, who was waiting patiently, still smiling. But she had the feeling that underneath the patience and the smile lay something else. “Are you trying to get me in trouble, Walter?” she asked, only half teasing.

His smile broadened, then his expression grew serious again. “My dear Irina, I would never do that. But I think, ever since you walked in here after Marie waved her infamous Caffé Mocha Orangine at me, that the staleness which was starting to hover around our little group has been diminishing. That’s a good thing—and it needs to continue.”

He had leaned forward, wrapped in intensity; now he sat back, looking a little startled, as if he had said more than he had originally intended. Irina could appreciate the sentiment.

“I would love to play. But, truly, I don’t want to cause any conflict inside your group either.”

Walter shook his head. Irina had seen that stubborn look before, usually when George was trying to trick him into a foolish move. “You won’t. You’re not. I’ve watched your face as you sat and watched us play, what’s gone through your mind at various moves. You’re a chess player, and you belong here too. So. Silver or gold—or do you want me to decide?”

“You, please,” Irina said faintly, still bemused by Walter’s casual assumption of responsibility for the task she had set herself.

He scratched his chin, contemplating her, then the two Queens. Suddenly, he laughed.

“Of course. Black hair. You’re gold, my dear.”

Walter had originally placed the board at an angle for an optimum view of the pieces as Irina set them into place; now he picked it up a little at the corners and slowly moved it so that the Romanov King stood in front of Irina. He pointed at the gold Queen, black hair coiled neatly under her hat. “Who is she supposed to be?”

Irina shook her head. “That one has always been a mystery; if my great-great-grandmother knew, she never said. Great-Aunt Dosia thought Lady Jennie Churchill may have been the inspiration.”

“Hmm. That would make sense; wasn’t she linked to Edward?”

“While he was Prince of Wales, yes. His mother, typically, did not approve. But then Queen Victoria disapproved of—or was not amused by, as they say—so many things.”

Walter spluttered, having chosen that moment to take a sip. Irina leaned forward, offering him a napkin. “I’m sorry, Walter. I did not mean to cause you to spill your coffee.”

“Or snort it out of my nose,” he said, chuckling. “That’s all right. It sounds like a reasonable theory, at any rate. Shall we begin?”

Irina considered for a moment, then picked up her Queen’s Knight and lifted it over the bristling pikes of the gold pawns. Walter raised an eyebrow and pushed his Queen’s Pawn, saber outthrust, forward two squares. Irina advanced her King’s Pawn

two squares to glower diagonally at the silver pawn, leaving Walter to debate whether to take it or to pursue another line of attack.

They were engrossed in the middle game when George finally strolled in. He seemed startled at finding Irina in his usual place, but he made no comment. Instead, he ambled over to the coffee bar, nodding in response to Marie's cheerful greeting.

"Earl Grey, George?"

George glanced toward his partner before returning his attention to the barista.

"What's Walter drinking today?"

"His usual. But I have high hopes for him expanding his tastes some more to the special before the day is through."

George read the description on the board and made a face. "Too sweet for me. I think I'll stick with the Earl."

"No problem." Marie selected a diffuser and began spooning the pungent leaves into it. "Can I interest you in a latte version? It's very good."

He had been watching Walter and Irina again, and swiveled back to her. "What? Oh. Latte. Sure." Although he looked a little askance at the foam swirling at the top of the cup, he took it anyway, sipping tentatively as he walked back to the table.

"So, Walter—I'm a little late, and you replace me with a younger and prettier opponent."

Walter flapped a hand at him. "Sit down, George, watch a master at work."

"Oh, yeah? Irina must be winning, then." But George sat, an affable grin on his face. "How's it going, beautiful?"

Irina laughed and sneaked a look at Walter from under her lashes, waiting for him to raise his cup. "I'm sure Walter's doing just fine."

Her timing was rewarded with more spluttering from Walter and a guffaw from George as Walter's mustache received the brunt of the explosion. Irina waited until cleanup had been completed, then smiled at George. "I'm fine, thank you. How was your week?"

"All right, nothing particularly worthy of note." George picked up a captured pawn, running his fingers over the intricate carving and testing the point of its pike with his thumb. "This is fantastic. Yours?"

"Yes." She brought him up to speed quickly on its history, then asked, "You do not mind?"

George stared at her. "Mind? Mind what? That you're playing with Walter?" He put the pawn down and leaned back. "I was just kidding. Of course I don't mind."

"Irina was concerned about precedent," Walter remarked. "Although I told her that this seems to me like a pretty good one to establish. What do you think, George?"

George rubbed his chin and looked around the café. A few more of the regulars had arrived, but it was still early. "I suppose Henry and his lot might object, but I don't see any of them here yet, so who cares?"

Irina looked at Walter, who gave her an encouraging nod. If she could enlist George's approval, she knew she would have a good chance; the two men were the senior members of the group, and so their opinions tended to carry a fair amount of weight with the others.

“I do not wish to cause problems.” Her accent, usually negligible, was slightly more distinct, a barely aspirated z instead of a hard s in “cause” and “problems.”

Walter and George exchanged a look; then George said, drawing his words out as he thought, “You’ve been coming here for what, four months? And you’ve always just sat and watched, never imposing yourself, just showing your—” He glanced at Walter again, eyebrows raised as if to say, “Help me.”

Walter answered the call. “Showing your love of the game and respect for everyone. At least, I think that’s what my friend here intended to say.”

“But that is not the same as this, actually taking part, is it, Walter?” Irina sipped her own drink and grimaced. She had lost track of it, and it had gone cold, her least favorite way to drink a latte. Walter caught Marie’s eye and held up Irina’s cup as he rose; the barista nodded and began fixing a fresh drink. Irina didn’t notice.

Nor did George. He leaned forward again, fixing Irina with a serious stare. With his large head and body, soft brown eyes and pouchy cheeks, he reminded her of an old, long-beloved stuffed bear. She was tempted to smile, but she had the feeling he might take it the wrong way, so she simply waited for him to speak.

After a few minutes, George cleared his throat. “Ahem. Listen. If you, or Walter, had asked me three months ago, or even a few weeks ago, I don’t know. I might have been inclined to support Henry’s point of view. But I’m not, and I don’t. As far as I’m concerned, you’re welcome here, to sit, to watch, to play, hell, to give a move-by-move commentary on my game, anyone’s game, if that’s what they want. The point is, you’re one of us now. Right, Walter?”

Walter set a cup in front of Irina and sat down. “Right.”

Irina reached for the cup, then drew her hand back after actually looking at it. Instead of cinnamon swimming on top of light brown liquid, this concoction featured a swirl of dark brown and white froth, tiny chocolate pieces floating in its waves.

“Walter—?”

“Marie said she made it especially for you,” he said, with a grin and just the slightest emphasis on the adverb. “White Mint Chocolate something?”

“White Mocha Mint, I believe she called it.” Irina took a small sip and let it roll around on her tongue. The flavors of chocolate, mint, and one of the dark espressos were balanced as if on a fine knife edge, teasing with the possibility of leaning too far in one direction but pulling back at the brink. Heavenly. She looked over towards the coffee bar, ignoring Marie’s “what did I tell you” smirk, and called out, “It’s wonderful!”

Watching Irina’s enjoyment of the beverage, George and Walter exchanged another look, then George drained his cup. “I’m having one of those,” he announced.

“Make it two,” Walter said. “I’ll get the next round.”

Thus fortified, Irina and Walter returned to their game. She was gratified to find that he was playing with his customary skill and not giving an inch. She was, however, slowly but consistently putting him on the defensive, pushing her attacks and isolating one after another of the silver pieces. Still, she refrained from commenting on their play, not wanting to be rude.

George had no such compunctions. “She’s got you on the ropes, Walter,” he remarked, as Irina picked off Walter’s remaining bishop, adding it to the collection of silver on the sidelines.

Walter shrugged. “My pride wants to say it’s beginner’s luck, but my brain knows better. And I suspect it’s also not just the result of sitting and watching the lot of us play, either.” He contemplated the board, looking at possible moves, and groaned.

“I’m sorry,” Irina said politely. “Checkmate—in two, I believe.”

George laughed, and Walter fixed him with a grim stare. “Care to take your chances with the lady, George? I’m sure she can teach you a thing or two about the game.”

“I’m sure she can,” George said. “But someone has to uphold the reputation of the side. Up for another match, Irina?”

She was about to reply when a new voice broke in. It was loud, querulous, and unpleasant. “What d’you mean, another match, Anderson?”

Irina looked up to see Henry Roberts standing—no, she thought, looming—over their table. He didn’t look happy, not that she had seen him smile on many occasions anyway, but there seemed to be a particularly malicious glint in his eyes today.

George, on the other hand, had the sleepy look of someone who, while not exactly trying to provoke a quarrel, was not altogether displeased by the possibility. Staring up at the newcomer, he drawled, “What I said. Another—as opposed to a first—match. You got a problem with that, Henry?”

“Yes, I do. We have rules. No women. I knew this was going to happen when we let her stay to begin with. And now—”

“And now nothing,” Walter interrupted. “We may have rules, but none of them prohibit women—in any way. Just because no women have ever expressed an interest before doesn’t mean they’re not allowed to participate.”

Irina could see the red rising upward from Henry's collar, and wondered just how far he would allow himself to be pushed. And how far do I think it is necessary to push him, she wondered, and what will the outcome be?

She surfaced from her thoughts as Henry's voice, even louder now, was accusing her of deliberately trying to undermine the objectives of their group. Irina opened her mouth to respond, but Walter beat her to the punch.

"For Pete's sake, Henry. We're not some super-secret society. We play chess. And the only reason we don't have any female members—yet—is that so far no one has made the attempt to recruit any."

"Henry's wife probably enjoys getting a break," George said, his lip curling as Henry's fists clenched.

"You want to take it outside, Anderson?"

"Any time, Hen-ry." George started to stand, his chair skidding backward, but Walter grabbed his arm and shoved downward. Caught by surprise, George subsided, staring at his friend. "What the hell, Walter?"

Walter didn't loosen his grip. "Much as I would enjoy seeing you deal with Henry, that's not going to address the main question here, which is (a) whether we're going to make a rule that says we don't have a rule barring women; and (b) whether we're going to tolerate people like Henry bellyaching about it."

Irina used the statement as a pretext to escape, at least temporarily. "In that case, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me, I'll—" She rose, and both Walter and George shot to their feet. Henry merely glared at her, shrinking away as if she could somehow taint him by involuntary contact. No one commented on it.

“Sure,” George said. “We’ll see if we can knock some sense—ow.” He rubbed his elbow and gave Walter a hurt look. “Er, educate Henry about our point of view.”

Irina nodded and walked away towards the bookshelves, unconvinced by the tone of Henry’s reply. She would probably have to weigh in on the subject, she thought, but it might be a good idea to let the men try to work through their individual differences first. As she passed by the coffee bar, Marie called to her.

“Irina, what’s going on over there? Do I have to bring out the sprinklers and hose those guys down?”

Irina stepped over to the bar, leaning her elbows against the glass and running her hands through her hair. “I hope not.”

Marie crossed her arms and tilted her head to the left, a stance Irina had noticed she favored when thinking. “You started the conversation, didn’t you.”

Irina glanced back at the men, who were still arguing, though not loudly enough for her to hear them clearly. “Maybe this isn’t a good time after all.”

“And maybe it just is after all.” Marie touched her headpiece. “Jeremy? Could you come relieve me for fifteen? It’s time for my break.” Once the young man arrived, giving Irina his usual shy smile, Marie emerged from behind the bar and took Irina’s arm.

“Come on. Pit stop first, then we’re going to sit and have a little chat.”

Outside, a small breeze was trying bravely to counter the late afternoon heat. Even the sun seemed tired of the warmth, playing hide and seek behind the clouds scudding across the sky, as if inviting them to swell and release a cooling shower. Marie settled underneath one of the large bistro umbrellas, where at least its shade lowered the temperature underneath by one or two degrees, and unwrapped her sandwich.

“So. Talk to me. I couldn’t hear most of it, but what I did makes me think that you finally decided to make your play today.”

“Very funny, Marie.” But the mild sarcasm was muted by Irina’s smile. “I suppose you could say it that way. Although now, after seeing George and Henry about to come to blows, I’m uncertain about the timing—or even if the entire idea is a good one.”

Marie scowled. “You know it is. And timing is relative anyway.”

“That may be so, but does that not imply that hoping to benefit from good timing is pointless? Application of your premise, then, means I should simply—” Irina broke off, hands fluttering expressively, as she searched for the words which had willfully abandoned her train of thought.

“Shut your eyes, hold your nose, and jump into the deep end?”

Irina’s hands stopped moving in mid-flight. Marie chuckled at the perplexed look on her friend’s face.

“Of the pool. You know, when your friends dare you to jump in the deep end, even though your parents have told you not to, but you do anyway because you don’t want them to think you’re too scared—”

One slim hand rose back into the air. “Please. I understand.”

Marie took a sip of her drink and went on. “So, no matter how you look at it, you had no way of knowing for sure how anyone—Walter, George, Henry—would react. All you could do was estimate, based on what you know of them, and trust your intuition, right?”

“When you express it that way—”

“Of course. So, you’ve been here for several months, and hanging out with the guys. If anyone’s equipped to make a good stab at predicting how they’ll react, you are.”

Irina stared into her coffee, watching the small swirls made by the bits of chocolate drifting on the top. “As are you—probably more.”

“Of course. But I’m not that good at the game—and I’m the barista. You, on the other hand, are a chess player, and I’ll bet a very good one, and you’re in a unique position here. What was it Walter said, you’re diminishing their staleness, or something like that?”

Irina blinked. “I thought you said you didn’t hear most of it.”

“Yeah, well, that part I did hear. And you and I both know he’s right.” Marie popped the last piece of sandwich in her mouth and leaned forward. “Look, I’m going to have to go back to work in a couple of minutes. Please tell me you’re going to trust your own instincts, not to mention mine, and pick up where you left off. Don’t leave the whole thing to those guys; I like them all, even Henry, and I love a few of them, but left to their own devices they’ll debate and chew over it for the next several days, if not weeks.”

Irina’s eyes had returned to focusing on the remainder of her drink; now she picked up the cup and moved it gently back and forth, forcing the chocolate to take refuge in the depths and melt a little faster. “That is unfortunately so. But I do not want to create animosity where it might not have existed otherwise.”

Marie shook her head. “If you’re talking about George and Henry, haven’t you noticed that they almost never play each other? Those two have never gotten along with each other very well—which is why their friends usually keep them separated for the most part.”

“Then I shouldn’t complicate the situation, not?” Irina drank most of the rest of her coffee—chocolate nicely incorporated at this point—and put the cup down on the table with a faint click. “I think you’re elevating any influence—assuming there is any—I may have here, Marie.”

Her friend sighed. “You heard what Walter said. Those guys in there—I suspect more of them than you think really do want to see you sit down and play, and are perfectly willing to add women to the ranks. And those who don’t necessarily care whether you play or not, most of them like you and like seeing you. In the case of a few, I think I can say that they really, really like seeing you, shallow though that may sound. And even Henry’s come to accept you being around without constantly complaining about it.”

“Until today.”

Marie shrugged. “That’s because you’ve moved him out of his comfort zone. It’s going to be a big step for him, but I have faith in your instincts, not to mention your persuasive abilities.”

“Ha. I think you suffer from overconfidence.” Ignoring her friend’s expression of mock disgust, Irina mulled over their conversation until the breeze flitted suddenly across her bare arm, bringing tiny droplets of damp with it. The clouds apparently had accepted the sun’s invitation and were now threatening rain in earnest. The first touch of it on her arm brought Irina back to the present, and she laughed suddenly.

“You’re right, Marie. I should listen to my instincts; after all, why drag that heavy box here otherwise?”

“And?” Marie asked as they stood up to go inside.

“And so. I have the answer. I will ask Mr. Henry if he would like to play a game of chess with me.”

Marie had started to walk to the door, but stopped at this pronouncement. “Wow. You go all in, don’t you.”

Irina nodded and took her arm. “Of course. Once the decision is made—if I am going to jump into the deep end, I may as well do it from the high dive tower, yes?”

When they returned inside, however, Irina felt a small sniggling of doubt. Henry was sitting at his usual table, glowering at the pieces on his board. He was alone, so Irina guessed he was playing through one of the chess problems he liked to explore. A few of the players he usually matched up against were scattered around the area, all apparently giving him a wide berth.

Walter and George were engrossed in their own game, but not to the point of ignoring her arrival. Walter moved a pawn and looked up.

“I hope you don’t mind our using your set, Irina. It’s magnificent.”

She pulled a chair over and perched on it, as if ready to take flight; he looked a little surprised but said nothing.

“No, not at all. It is, after all, a chess set intended for use. When my Great-Aunt Dosia was alive, it was always set up, ready for play, on the table she had made for it especially.”

George was playing with the Regency side. He picked up a knight, admiring the detail on the long coat and the carving of the horse’s mane. “It does seem a little sacrilegious, though; you get the feeling that this belongs in a museum case where it can be admired.”

Walter nodded, then focused on Irina's face. "You have the same nervous look as when I got here earlier. I thought I had you calmed down."

She squirmed slightly. "I had made my decision, but then, after Henry—"

"Came looking for trouble?" George asked.

Walter gave him a look. "Let her finish, okay?" He turned back to Irina. "So, you're decision-making?"

"I—I was not sure, even though I have thought this for some weeks, and Marie has been telling me—" She stopped for a moment, and then it came out in a rush. "And then today I decided it was time, and so you did today also, and Marie as well, and I shall leap from the high dive, and—"

"Whoa. Wait a second," George said, holding up a hand. Irina's accent had thickened slightly, making a few vowels longer, and her constructions a bit more complicated. "What do you mean, leap from the high dive?"

It was her turn to look surprised. "Yes. Into the deep end? Do I mistake the expression?"

"No, I don't think so," Walter said kindly. "I think you've got it."

George stared at him. "Clue me in, buddy?"

Walter selected a pawn and held it up, then picked up his Queen as well. "What I was telling you a few minutes ago, George. What's been happening this afternoon, the last couple of months, ever since Irina first walked in here. It's about change—what was it Marie said the day she arrived? Traditions—they change. It's time for ours to change, and grow. If we do it right, it retains the essence but gets even better."

“Yeah, yeah, I get that. No problem. But what do high dives and deep ends have to do with it?”

“It means,” Walter said softly, his blue eyes intent on Irina’s face, “that drastic action often involves a substantial leap of faith. Right, Irina?”

She took a deep breath and then another, feeling her body relaxing as the turmoil in her mind stilled. A glance at the chessboard showed her the vulnerability of Walter’s King.

“Right. So, once George checkmates you in the next four moves, Walter, I am going to invite Henry Roberts to a game of chess using my great-aunt’s chess set.”

George sucked in a breath. “You weren’t kidding about leaps of faith.”

Now that she had committed herself, Irina felt much more confident about her decision. “Yes, George, I am. As my great-aunt used to say, *‘Dla chcącego nic trudnego, dobry początek - połowa roboty.’*”

Walter grinned. “You are going to translate that for us, aren’t you?”

She returned his smile. “But of course. ‘Nothing is difficult if it is wanted; a good beginning makes a good ending.’ I think you would say, where there is a will there is a way; the best way to solve a problem is simply to try.”

George looked dubious. “And what about discretion being the better part of valor? Did your great-aunt have one about that?”

“Of course. But as a child I was very skilled at being both adventurous and discreet. Especially when my cousin Charlie came to visit—we had a large old house and grounds available for our imaginations to enjoy.”

“Your cousin Charlie? You’ve never mentioned him before.”

Walter broke protocol, picking up George's knight and shaking it in front of his friend's face. "Don't try to change the subject and sidetrack her. The woman's on a mission—which she can't put into effect until you finish beating me. Unless you want me to resign now."

George flicked a glance at the game. "Oh. Right. No, Irina says in four, so let me see here—right." He plucked the knight from Walter's hand, ignoring his friend's smirk, and placed it on the board. "Check. And unless you can work some kind of miracle, buddy, it's in three now."

Walter shook his head and tipped his King. "Nope. I give. Irina, that's your cue."

Irina rose and patted his shoulder. "Walter, thank you. You also, George. Wish me luck." She could feel them watching, their gaze a comforting warmth on the back of her neck and shoulders, as she moved towards Henry's solitary spot.

He didn't bother to look up, while she was approaching nor when she arrived. "Go away."

Irina thought it was a good thing that it had not been someone else, who might have been offended by his words or his tone, both of which she ignored. "May I sit down, Henry?"

Henry glanced up. His mouth started to frame the same order, but then his eyes tracked past her, and Irina guessed that Walter and George, at least, if not more people, were watching. Henry apparently did not want to cause any more commotion—at least just yet; he caught himself just as the first words tried to escape. "I said—"

Irina waited, doing her best to look innocuous and non-threatening. Henry fumed for another minute, clearly trying to find the right words. Finally, his shoulders sagged a

little, and he made a half-hearted, not overly directional motion towards the other chair with his hand, returning his attention to his chessboard.

“It’s a public place. Can’t stop you, I guess.”

She sat. “Of course,” she said, keeping her tone light. “But I hope very much that you would not wish to, Henry.”

He looked up again. Eyes the color of a storm-washed pool, disconcertingly clear, focused on her and narrowed as he examined her face at length. Irina sat quietly, trying not to react to the underlying aggression in his gaze. Finally, he stirred and spoke.

“So. Why would that be, then? You’ve plenty of admirers here. Why do you feel the need to—add me to their ranks?”

She heard the unspoken words clearly. “To bother you, you mean?” But the smile she gave him was intended to remove the sting from her words, and Henry wasn’t totally immune; his lips moved upward slightly before he caught himself.

“I didn’t say that.” His tone was still gruff.

“I know. I just don’t want you to think that I am—what would you say, oblivious?—to your feelings.”

Henry had moved a bishop; now his attention swung back to her, fixing her once again with his oddly translucent stare. “This is a nice little dance, but why don’t you go ahead and finish it? Tell me why you’re here, and what you want, and then I can tell you no without Anderson coming over and trying to punch me out for not giving you a fair listen.”

Irina looked over her shoulder just in time to see George hastily turning around and pretending to focus on what Walter was saying. She didn't want to speculate as to what he had been doing.

“Mr. Roberts—Henry—I know you believe the game of chess belongs in the male preserve, and I am not trying to pass judgment on you. I hope, though, that you will permit me to give you the opportunity to change your opinion.”

He grunted, but didn't elaborate. She interpreted his reaction as commentary rather than objection, and continued. “I was hoping that you would be willing to lend your expertise to evaluate and improve my game play, and I would like to invite you to a game using the antique chess set my Great-Aunt Dosia brought with her from Poland a century ago.”

He had started to shake his head, but the mention of the chess set stopped him. Irina had seen his expression when he first arrived that afternoon, and she was gratified to discover that she had not misinterpreted it. She was about to say more when he laughed, shortly and as if it hurt.

“You know what buttons to push, don't you?” Gruffness had morphed into reluctance with a side of snide.

Her good intentions were begging to be released, but Irina grabbed hold of herself. “I beg your pardon?” Add a little of the hauteur Dosia could assume and wrap around herself when necessary, she thought, then put him on the defensive, but only a little. “It's just one game. And if you'd rather use your set—”

Now his laugh was a little less forced. “All right. Don’t try to ply your charm with me the way you have everyone else. Tell me one thing: what is it you hope to achieve?”

The sarcasm in his tone hadn’t left yet, but it was subsiding.

Irina leaned forward and plunked her elbows on the table, making sure not to displace any of the pieces. “What I hope to achieve is to be able to enjoy the company of the people who play chess—you included—here in this café. To be able to accept, or offer, an invitation to play. To be a part—assuming other women have occasion to play as well—of a larger chess group which is willing to extend the tradition of this noble game to anyone who understands and wants to support it.”

Henry mimicked her action, although one meaty elbow caught a captured rook sitting peacefully on the side and sent it spinning to the floor. He ignored it.

“That sounds very noble. But why does your plan need to include a game with me?”

Irina bent down and rescued the rook, returning it to its fellows. “Because you’re the—”

“Enemy?” His eyes were bright with the light of battle. She ignored them.

“No. I don’t see you as the enemy. You’re the—” The deep end of the pool, she thought, but she couldn’t very well say so. She thought for a minute, the concept tickling at the back of her brain, and then she had it. “You’re a—a symbol, Henry. You are what could be, one way or the other. You—”

“Enough.” He still wore a pugnacious look, and his next words really didn’t surprise her. “Okay. I’m a whatever. If for no other reason than to get you to stop talking, you have a deal. I’ll play you. One game. Afterwards, you take yourself off and don’t

bother me anymore. I can't make you stay out of the café, but you agree to stop with this feminist crap and leave us to play in peace."

Irina stared back at him. She had expected something like this, but she had no intention of making it quite that simple. "You mean," she said sweetly, "if you win."

He had started to look away; now his gaze snapped back to her as if on a rubber band. "If I win? Do you have any idea what my rating is?"

"I'm sure it's excellent. But you're attaching rather severe terms to the outcome of one game. In the interest of fairness—something I'm sure you would wish to involve as well—those terms should also address the opposite potential outcome, not?" Irina threw a look over her shoulder; Walter and George were both standing by the coffee bar, getting refills, but their body language was anything but casual. She shook her head slightly, to discourage any movement, and returned her attention to Henry.

He hadn't missed the significance of her movement. "Should I take it they'll gang up on me if I don't do this your way?"

"No. That is not my intention. But as to terms: if you win, I agree to everything you ask. If I win, however, you agree to all of mine. I believe you call it all or nothing, yes?"

Henry's mouth thinned. He picked up the unfortunate rook and turned it over and over in his hands, rubbing his thumb across the crenellations in the top repeatedly, as if trying to scrape something off of his skin. Even though neither George nor Walter had made any move toward them, Irina could practically feel the pressure of their thoughts, and she suspected Henry could sense it too. She knew, now, that he would agree to her request, and he did not disappoint her.

“Fine. You’ve got a deal. And yes, we’re using your set.” His voice was even louder than usual, as if he meant to put the entire café on notice.

Irina didn’t doubt it. Henry had never been enthusiastic about her hanging around, and now that he had the opportunity to get rid of her, she had half expected him to climb onto a chair to announce the terms of their bet to the company at large with his customary lack of subtlety. As she rose to fetch her set, though, she caught an oddly indecisive expression on his blunt features, and wondered what he was thinking. Then his face hardened, and she dismissed the thought as a figment of her imagination. Henry was a pragmatist, down to earth, and unlikely to engage in fanciful speculation or unexpected moves; what she had observed of his playing style had never diverged from that persona. She didn’t expect it now.

“Here.”

Irina managed not to jump, and turned to see Walter holding the birchwood box, its silk cloak loosely wrapped around it. He moved forward and set it down carefully on the table, his hands arranging the folds of the material to reveal the eagle on the top of the box, facing Henry. Irina hid a smile; Walter could be as unsubtle as Henry when he wished.

Henry glanced down at the box and then up at Walter. “Hope you weren’t planning on hanging around, Broznik.”

Walter smiled. “And here I thought that rather public announcement was intended as an invitation.”

“It wasn’t.”

Irina slid back into her chair and opened the box. “Gentlemen, please. There’s no need to argue. Henry, I’m sure you would prefer that there be no doubt about the outcome of this game, not?”

Henry blinked, as if the idea had never occurred to him, and one hand crept up to finger his beard as he considered it. Finally he gave a small nod. “I suppose you’re right. Fine. But standard rules, no kibitzing.” His gray eyes glared up at Walter, inviting opposition.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Walter said, his voice calm, even though Irina could see the coldness in his gaze. She shivered, wondering whether she was setting something in motion that might be better left alone after all. Walter turned an inquiring look on her, and she shook her head.

“I’m fine, Walter. Just a—what is the expression? A duck walking—?”

Henry grunted. “You mean a goose walking over your grave. You should listen to your instincts, Irina. That means I’m going to win this game.”

Irina stiffened, any reluctance instantly sent packing by the arrogance of the man. “Not at all,” she said, not bothering to hide the chill in her tone, one her great-aunt would have recognized immediately. *La reine* not so *enragée*, as Dosia called her on those occasions when Irina, put out about some existent or non-existent offense, gathered her emotions about her to focus on eradicating the problem without losing her temper. Drawing on that now, Irina opened the box and tendered it to Henry. Courtesy should have dictated she start, but as the owner of the set it was her prerogative to make the offer.

“Silver or gold?”

Henry simply looked at the box for a moment, the pieces gleaming in their individual slots. He started to reach for the gold King, drew his hand back, reached out again, and withdrew his fingers once more.

“I’m inclined to play gold, but that Lady clearly intends to be touched only by you.” Shaking his head, as if bemused by the whimsical notion, Henry began to collect the silver pieces and place them in their respective squares on his board.

Unlike most of his colleagues, Henry eschewed the boards made of fabric or other materials which could be rolled up and carried about easily. Instead, his board was wood, a good inch thick and broad enough to bear even a fairly large set with room between the ranks. As she arranged the gold pieces, Irina paused for a moment to admire the polished squares of pine wood and cedar. “This is beautiful, Henry. Thank you for letting us use it.”

He simply shrugged and pushed his Queen’s Pawn out two squares, tapping his timer on the return movement. “Your move.”

She had heard on occasion that a chess game was like sex with a new partner, and the initial stages were very much like foreplay. Their moves explored each other’s defenses and strategies, engaging in an intricate dance of provocation, come-hither and go-thither, occasional darting into the thick of battle and dashing away as hastily. After the better part of half an hour, it was clear that they were fairly evenly matched. Irina’s King’s Bishop and two pawns watched from the sidelines on Henry’s side of the board, and a silver knight and bishop, flanked by a pawn each, stood morosely on Irina’s side. Both hot-air balloons protected the gold King while the Rasputin-Bishop sneered at his

silver counterpart, daring him to indulge in an exchange, but Henry did not appear to be inclined to lose his other bishop just yet.

The transition into mid-game might have gone unnoticed except for the growing crowd around the table. Despite his agreement otherwise, at first Henry had tried to discourage the observers, hunching over his moves so as not to reveal them until the last moment, but the watchers remained. Finally he had grunted something about dilettantes and played normally—which Irina appreciated, as it meant she herself did not have to lean forward each time in order to see what he was doing.

She glanced up and acknowledged the arrival of another White Mocha Mint, delivered by Walter, with a smile, and another one for George, who, surprisingly, had taken it upon himself to get Henry a refill of his coffee. Then she returned her attention to the game, noting the sidling of one of Henry's rooks to castle with Tsar Alexander. Irina sent her Queen's Knight over to investigate, derailing Henry's potential path to place the gold King in check, while she considered her options. Henry's play so far, while not particularly imaginative, had been solid, and she had been forced to match his approach in order to avoid being caught in any obvious traps. But it was not one she was comfortable with for too long. Perhaps due to her great-aunt's influence, she had developed an intuitive ability to recognize the moment to leave conservative aggression behind, to follow a flight of fancy seen rarely in a game which rested so much on logic and thinking several moves ahead.

That moment, she realized, had arrived. Intent on spinning out her plan, Irina was unaware that the other matches had stopped and the tables had emptied, their occupants all gathering around this small corner of the café. Although she heard the small chime of

the bell, she barely noticed that the door had opened to admit a man about her age and a boy not yet in his teens, nor did she hear the murmured greetings as they joined the group around her table. No one moved, possibly even breathed, waiting for Irina to make her move.

She didn't disappoint. It started with that same Queen's Knight galloping, no longer casually, towards the silver King, paving the way for Irina's Queen to maraud about the board, unhorsing Henry's other knight as she came. One lofty silver hot-air balloon was next, failing to resist the Rasputin-Bishop's taunts, as Henry realized too late that Irina had intended to sacrifice him. Down to his Queen, one rook, a bishop and a few pawns, even so Henry should have been able to avoid checkmate, but Irina's audacious style had put him off balance. The gold Queen and her Knight were inexorable, continually forcing the silver King to give way, preventing him from taking refuge behind another of his subjects or giving them the opportunity to remove the offenders.

"Check—and mate in two." Irina's voice was gentle, as it had been for the last three moves. She started to reach for the timer, and paused as Henry's eyes, now the color of dull pebbles, stared at her. She waited to see if he would respond, but he said nothing, and she let her hand descend, tapping the timer. Its *ting!* seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness surrounding them.

Henry shoved his King in the only available direction, now caught behind a gold pawn which had insisted on participating, leaving him with one last possible move.

"Finish it."

Irina nodded, and let her Queen sweep down the diagonal to plant herself in front of the King, her Knight and the obstreperous pawn providing the necessary protection.

“Checkmate.”

Scowling, Henry started to tip his King over, but stopped short as he remembered that this was no ordinary set. He picked up the piece and stared at it for a minute, turning the King in his hands; then he handed it carefully to Irina. “This seems more appropriate.”

She couldn’t help but appreciate his restraint. “Thank you. And thank you for the game, Henry. I’m not sure I could do that again.”

Amazingly, he laughed. “Oh, I have no doubt you could. I haven’t seen a display of the mad queen like that in a long time.”

“The mad queen?” Marie had even left her post to watch the game. “What do you mean, Henry?”

Henry tipped his head towards Irina, who looked startled. “Ask her—she can probably tell you much better than I can.”

She supposed she shouldn’t have been so surprised by Henry’s comment, but Irina was fairly certain she had not heard the term discussed in the café in recent months. She started to demur, but the look on Marie’s face was clear; this was her moment.

“The mad queen, or *la dame enragée*—my Great-Aunt Dosia used to say *la reine enragée*—”

There was an exclamation somewhere in the crowd, but Irina didn’t notice.

“—was the term given to the chess Queen when the rules changed towards the end of the fifteenth century.” She stopped, disconcerted. “But surely you know this, yes?”

Any mutters of agreement were squelched by the barista. “I don’t,” Marie announced. “Please go on.”

Irina shrugged. “Very well. Originally the Queen was a very limited piece who could only move one diagonal space, because her role was to protect the King. But over the centuries different variations appeared, and at some point between the mid-thirteenth century and the late fifteenth century, She had emerged as the most powerful piece, who could move multiple spaces in any direction—the only move she could not make was the Knight’s.”

“But why was she mad?” Marie asked.

“That’s a good question,” Irina said. “She was called the mad—or enraged—lady or Queen in Italy and France, apparently because she was no longer content to move daintily about the board, but instead rushing anywhere she wanted to go.”

“Like the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*,” Marie mused.

“Maybe so. Mr. Carroll would probably have known about Her; he was a chess enthusiast. But my Great-Aunt would probably not have agreed with the idea of rushing; she used to always say that the Queen was not so much mad or enraged as decisively in control. And that, as she used to say, was how it was.”

“And that it certainly was!” a voice called out from the crowd.

Irina glanced up at the newcomer, a tallish man with an unruly shock of brown hair, a boy of about twelve standing behind him, the resemblance between the two clearly one of father and son. The man picked up a knight, stroking the horse’s mane. “I remember this set,” he said, laughing as she leapt up and flung herself into his arms.

“Charlie! It’s been ages! What are you doing here—how did you find me?”

His grin grew wider. “More like you finding me, Irina. I used to come here to play often, but I just haven’t been in a while. I guess I’d lost heart in it, you know? But then Paul here told me it was time, that traditions are dynamic. They have to be kept to have meaning, but they need to adapt if they’re going to survive. I’d gotten away from that, and I needed to remember it.”

“Smart kid,” Walter remarked.

Irina hugged Paul, then turned back to her cousin. “We all do, Charlie.”

There was a soft cough, and she looked around to see Henry standing up, his hand out. “Henry?”

His eyes were no longer as stormy, and he had even mustered a small, uneasy smile. “You’re very good,” he said, taking her hand and giving it a slight shake before continuing to hold it. “And it took you schooling me at chess, and then this young man—your cousin?—to remind me. I should probably be thanking you. Welcome to our group.”

Irina glanced around the café. She had come here alone, knowing no one, and within a few months had acquired friends, a family even, with a common interest and love of chess. And, it seemed, with a common appreciation for the meaning of tradition as well as a willingness to change. Even Henry, when put to it, was willing to adapt when it truly mattered. She turned back to him, taking his hands, then impulsively flung her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you,” she said softly, then repeated it so that everyone could hear.