



Sunflowers

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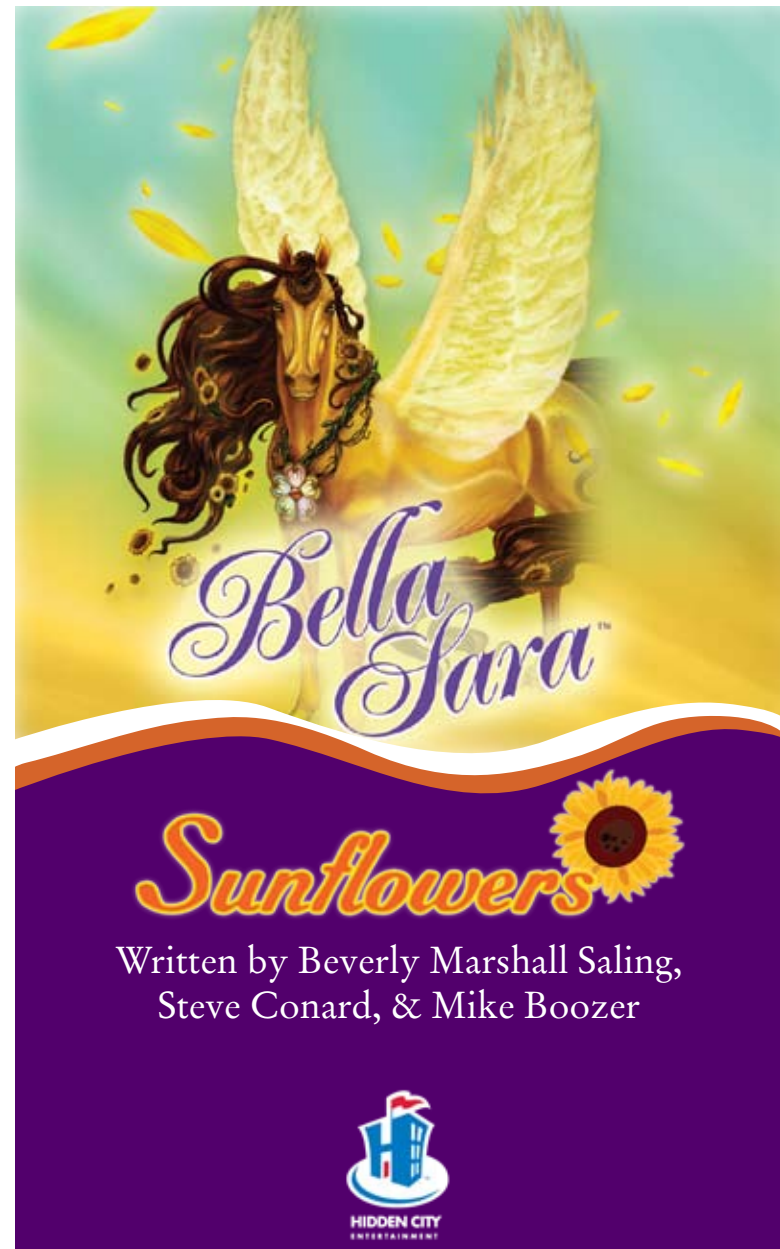
Bella Sara Sunflowers

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Emma Roland tugged wearily at the trailing ruffles of her purple gown as she made her way down the steps from the dais to the ballroom floor. This dress was the most beautiful thing she'd ever worn, but after hours of swishing her way through the crowd at Bella's Ball, she was getting tired of tripping over it. She kept smiling, though, since she knew practically everyone was looking at her. She was guest of

honor, after all, and the ballrooms of Rolandsgaard Castle were filled with brightly dressed horses, humans, and other guests who had traveled from all over North of North just to get a glimpse of her.

Her friend Deru smiled as Emma came down to meet her. Deru was a dryad and could magically grow her own clothes. Once the ball was over, she'd be able to change her formal gown of white poinsettia petals into something more comfortable in an instant. Emma had to admit she was a little jealous. She would need far longer just to pull out all the orchids woven into her long brown hair.

Emma yawned with relief when the trumpets signaled that it was almost midnight—time for the fireworks show that would end the ball. Heralds began ushering the guests out to the courtyard and lawns, where they could get a full view of the fireworks over Rolandsgaard Castle. Deru turned to follow them, but Emma gently took hold of her elbow.





“Let’s stay here,” suggested Emma. “We can see the fireworks through the Wind’s Eye.” The Wind’s Eye, a huge portal in the ceiling, was open to the sky so flying horses could enter and exit the castle more easily.

“Sure, that’ll be fun!” As usual, Deru smiled and agreed with whatever Emma wanted. Sometimes Emma found it annoying, but right now she was grateful for her friend’s easygoing nature.

“C’m on, Em!” hollered Emma’s cousin Colm from clear across the cavernous ballroom, which was now mostly empty. Colm annoyed Emma far more often than just sometimes. “We’re going to miss the show!”

“Deru and I are staying here,” called Emma. “Go on and catch up with the horses. We’ll see you later.”

Colm stomped back toward the girls, clearly enjoying the *clop-clop* sound his jeweled dress boots made on the polished marble floor. “Oh no, I’m not going without you. I don’t know

anyone out there—not any people, anyways.”

“What about Shine? Didn’t I see you dancing with her?” teased Emma.

“Aw, she went home hours ago,” said Colm. “I guess she has to be up early to open her family’s jewelry shop.”

“Stay here with us, then,” invited Deru before Emma could stop her. “The fireworks will look great through the Wind’s Eye.”

As if to prove Deru right, the orchestra began to play and the first of the fireworks shot skywards. She could hear the crowd cheering wildly outside. Fireworks had always seemed magical back on Earth, but in North of North they really were enhanced by magic. Emma gasped when they produced not only the familiar shower of sparks, but also glowing pictures that hung in the sky. One series of blasts formed an image of the gigantic World Tree, Drasilmare. Deru, who was a dryad of Drasilmare, whistled and cheered loudly.

The next firework looked like the front

half of a rearing white horse. “That’s the symbol of Bella’s herd!” said Emma.

“Yes, Herd Bellasara. And you know that one too,” said Deru, pointing to a pair of glowing purple wings.

“That’s the symbol of Herd Airistos—Nike’s herd,” said Emma, nodding. She proudly named three more symbols: the red book and spiral of Fiona’s Herd Shahazar, the green gem of Jewel’s Herd Islandar, and the blue lightning bolts of Thunder’s Herd Valeryk. But she had to ask Deru for help identifying a set of white columns outlined with aquamarine sparks.

“That’s for Herd Pantheon,” answered Deru. “They’re friends with the gods.”

“Wow,” said Emma. “That one looks like a white flower with rainbow edges. Is it a herd symbol too?”

“Yes, that’s Herd Elemyn,” said Deru. “They’re elemental horses, made of water like Lien, or stone like Diamond, or fire—”

“Like my steed Soot!” interrupted Colm excitedly.



“Right,” said Deru. “And that golden flower is the symbol of Herd Sunflower, the flower and plant horses.”

“That purple and teal one looks like a magic wand,” said Emma. “Who’s that for?”

“That’s Herd Moonfairy,” said Deru. “They’re all different kinds of fairy horses: sprites, pixies, brownies, naiads, dryads, and so on.”

“So if your steed Twig is a dryad like you, that means she’s a Moonfairy,” said Colm.

“Right again,” said Deru. “You’re very smart.” Colm grinned and looked at Emma to make sure she heard that.

“If you’re so smart, Colm, you tell us who that yellow shooting star belongs to,” said Emma innocently.

“That? That’s Herd Star... um... Star-shooter,” guessed Colm.

“Starlight,” corrected Deru. “You don’t see many Starlights around anymore. Nyx was born a Starlight, but then she became a Valeryk

when she married Iceking.”

“Hey, I was pretty close,” said Colm.

“Sure you were,” said Emma. “What herd is the brown horse profile for?”

“Yay! They included Herd Mustang!” cried Deru, clapping her hands. “They’re wild horses, and they’re sort of not even a herd anymore, but they deserve to be honored too, right?”

Emma wanted to ask what Deru meant, but she got distracted by an intense burst of rainbow flashes surrounding the largest and brightest firework of all: a shimmering purple orchid.

“That’s Sigga’s symbol—my symbol!” said Emma, flushed with pride. Outside, the crowd cheered more loudly than ever.

“*Our* symbol,” said Colm. “I’m a Roland too, y’know!”

“You may be a Roland, but you’re not a Valkyrie,” said Emma primly. “The orchid is a Valkyrie symbol.”

“Well, *you’re* not really a Valkyrie yet, either,” snapped Colm.



“Shh!” hissed Deru. “What’s that sound?”

A burst of rustling, growling, squeaking, and thumping came from the staircase at the Grand Entrance. Emma, Deru, and Colm ran towards it but stopped short when they saw who was there. A tall, dark-haired woman in a white gown trimmed with fur and dried flowers stood proudly at the bottom of the stairs. She held Bella’s own magical friend, the pink-furred Starstone Otter, struggling in her grasp.

“Ivenna,” whispered Emma, instantly recognizing the leader of the dreaded Wolf Riders. Deru turned pale and hid behind Colm.

“Emma, dear child, I’m so glad you remember me,” said Ivenna, oozing false charm. “When you didn’t invite me to your little ball I thought surely you had forgotten.”

“Let the otter go!” cried Colm, clenching his fists and taking a step toward Ivenna.

“And here’s Colm too, brave and *stupid* as ever,” gushed Ivenna. “Do you think you can touch me, boy?”



“He won’t have to,” said a voice from behind the three friends. Tyri, Emma’s Valkyrie teacher, strode past them to face Ivenna. Her spectral arborium sword appeared in her hand as if conjured from thin air, and she pointed its business end at Ivenna’s pale throat. “I would suggest that you do as he says.”

“Hello, Tyri. My, what a cute, flowery dress you have on! I do believe it makes you look *almost* pretty,” said Ivenna.

“How dare you come here?” demanded Tyri. Her voice was cool and confident, but her black eyes sparked with fury.

“Well, the Starstone Otter and I are such old friends that I just had to come to the ball and give her a hug,” replied Ivenna, squeezing the otter till she stopped struggling and merely looked at Emma with sad, dark eyes.

“You couldn’t care less about the otter. You just want the Starstone,” said Emma, looking at the star-shaped pendant that hung around the otter’s neck.

“True, it is a lovely thing,” agreed Ivenna. “And with it in my possession I shall have little trouble finding the other horse pendants and the lost herds they belong to.”

“What other pendants? What lost herds?” asked Emma skeptically.

“Sister, your student is shockingly ignorant,” Ivenna said, turning to Tyri. “Have you really never told her about the herd leaders’ pendants?”

“She has just begun her studies,” said Tyri. “She still has much to learn.”

Emma was tired of being talked about like a little child. “Tell me now, then,” she demanded.

“Go ahead, Sister,” encouraged Ivenna. “I’ll wait.”

Still pointing her sword at Ivenna’s neck, Tyri told Emma the story. “When your ancestor Sigga became the leader of the Valkyries, she took responsibility for protecting all the horses in North of North. To do that, she needed to be



able to talk to the founders of the great herds, even when they were far apart. So Sara gave each of the herd leaders a magical pendant, and she gave Sigga a special pendant called the Orchid Pendant. The Orchid Pendant could talk to any of the others, so Sigga used it to talk to the herd leaders and help them keep their herds safe.”

“What happened to the pendants?” asked Emma.

“On the day that Sigga... left us,” answered Tyri sadly, “Ivenna’s boss, Feral, and the Wolf Riders attacked Rolandsgaard Castle, and the herd leaders came from realms all over North of North to defend it. Four of them—Airistos, Islandar, Shahazar, and Valeryk—were killed, and their pendants vanished. Feral also disappeared, and the Orchid Pendant disappeared with her. I bet Ivenna knows all about that, don’t you?”

“Far be it from me to interrupt,” said Ivenna, ever-so politely. “Please, go on.”

Tyri glared at Ivenna. “With the Orchid Pendant and Feral both missing, the rest of the

herd leaders were afraid to wear their pendants anymore. So they hid them, or gave them to others to guard. Sunflower, Moonfairy, and Starlight took their herds into hiding as well. Nobody knows where they are, so they’re called the lost herds. And the only horse pendant we’ve found is Starlight’s, the Starstone.”

“Which I happen to have right here,” said Ivenna, smirking.

The Starstone Otter, quiet until now, chirped a couple of soft notes. Suddenly the Starstone vanished from around her neck.

“What trickery is this?” howled Ivenna.

That was an illusion. The real Starstone was never here, said a soft, motherly voice inside Emma’s mind. It is in a place of safekeeping. Emma could tell the voice was coming from the otter, and a quick glance around told her that the others could hear it too.

“No matter,” said Ivenna, regaining her composure. “I’m sure my dear friend the otter can be *persuaded* to tell me where it is.”



Wolf Riders must never again touch the pendants, said the otter. *Emma, don't worry about me. I will tell her nothing.*

"We shall see about that," said Ivenna with a menacing smile. "But now I believe it's time for us to be off." She turned and a magic portal opened up behind her, giving Emma a glimpse of a dark, shadowy road inside it.

"Not so fast," said Tyri, moving forward till her sword point lightly touched Ivenna's neck. "You may go and good riddance, but you're leaving the otter here."

"I don't think so," said Ivenna calmly. "You could poke me with your pretty blade, true. But as you did, I would gladly snap this creature's delicate little neck. There are many more Wolf Riders, but this is the only Starstone Otter in all the world, and only she knows where the Starstone is. Would you really sacrifice that much just to be rid of me?"

Emma held her breath as Tyri stood silently, her face a mask of controlled anger. Finally,

the Valkyrie dropped her sword arm and whispered, "No."

"I knew it," said Ivenna. "You Valkyries have become tame. Remember, Emma: if you're going to be tame, you might as well be dead. Only the savage and wild are free."

As Ivenna stepped into the portal and waved goodbye, the otter spoke in Emma's mind again: *Find the pendants, find the lost herds, and protect them all. Do what Sigga left undone.*

"How?" cried Emma. "Please tell me what to do!"

Oracle, said the otter as the portal began to close.

"She's getting away!" yelled Colm, charging toward the closing portal.

Tyri's free hand reached out and grabbed him by the collar of his black leather jacket. "Never, ever enter the Shadow Path," she said fiercely. "The wolves guard it with the ghosts of their dead. Only their kind may travel it and live."



Colm gulped, and Tyri let him go. “But we can’t just do nothing!” he insisted.

“We aren’t going to do nothing,” said Emma firmly. All eyes turned toward her. “We are going to find the pendants and the lost herds, like the otter said.”

“We can’t leave the otter in Ivenna’s hands,” said Tyri.

“No,” agreed Emma. “Which is why you need to rescue the otter while the rest of us start looking for the pendants.”

“I had hoped to go with you on your first Valkyrie quest,” said Tyri slowly. “There is still so much you don’t know.”

“I can help!” cried Deru, perking up now that the Shadow Path had closed and Ivenna was gone. “I know lots of stuff! Ask me anything!”

“Thanks, Deru,” said Emma. “Can you tell me what the otter meant when she said ‘oracle’?”

“Well, an oracle is a person who can tell you your future,” said Deru. “But there’s also a

horse named Oracle. She guards one of North of North’s great treasures, the Pool of Reflection. That’s in Waterstone, just north of Trails End.”

“So it’s not too far away,” said Emma. “Good. Let’s pay Oracle a visit and see if she can tell us what to do next. Meanwhile Tyri can rescue the otter, and then we’ll all meet back here afterward.”

“Piece of cake,” said Colm sarcastically. “Nothing can go wrong with that plan!”

“We do need to be careful,” said Tyri. “Ivenna is dangerous, and outside of Trails End her spies are everywhere. But Emma is right. Saving the otter and finding the pendants and herds are both very important quests. We can’t afford to give the Wolf Riders time to get too far ahead of us on either of them.”

“So when do we ride?” asked Colm.

Emma felt Tyri’s eyes on her. She wanted to find her steed Wings and fly off right now, but she forced herself to stop and think first, as Tyri had taught her. It was late, it was dark, they were



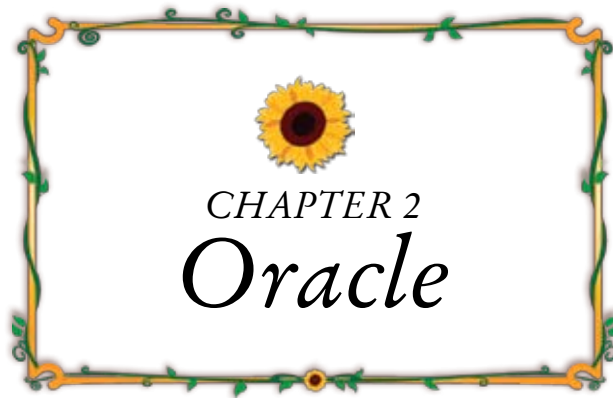
all exhausted and wearing ball clothes, and the horses were probably tired too.

“Tomorrow morning, as early as we can,” said Emma. “That way we can start fresh and have daylight to see by.”

Tyri smiled and Emma knew she had passed her first test. She was afraid the next one would be much harder.



Next chapter... meet Oracle!



After such an exciting evening, morning came far too early for Emma. Colm looked groggy too, and his cowlicky blond hair stuck up in even more directions than usual. But Deru, always happy to greet the sun, bubbled over with cheerful eagerness. Her energy lifted Emma's mood, and even Colm felt more lively by the time they arrived at the Canter Hollow Stables and found their steeds wait-

ing for them out front.

"There you are!" said Cade Traveler, the stable master. "Wings, Twig, and Soot are just about ready to ride. Give me a minute and I'll be right back."

When Wings saw Emma, he tossed his black mane in greeting and sent her a rapid series of mental pictures: Mr. Smithin, the blacksmith, checking his horseshoes, Cade's assistants carefully brushing his bright white coat, and Cade himself loading his saddlebags with food and supplies.

"I guess you got the royal treatment," said Emma as she patted his neck affectionately. "No more than you deserve, of course." One look at Twig's glossy brown coat and shiny hooves told Emma's experienced eye that Deru's steed had been pampered as well. As for Colm's steed, Soot, no one could ever brush *all* of the soft flakes of soot from his black hide, but Cade's assistants had clearly tried, and Colm seemed satisfied.

Cade's magical friend, Noble, a floppy-eared



ambassador hound with shaggy purple and gold fur, butted his head on Colm's hand. Colm gave him a few rough pets, and soon the two were play-wrestling and rolling around in the street.

"I'm not sure which one is the dog," said Emma, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, but it's so sweet of Colm to play with Noble," said Deru. "Too many people around here don't like dogs. Everyone thinks they're like wolves, but ambassador hounds aren't related to wolves at all. In fact, they originally came from—"

Just then a red-haired girl in a rainbow-colored jumper shouted greetings and ran up the street to meet them. "Oh, good, I'm glad I caught you," she said breathlessly. "My name is Penny Inkwell, and I'm a reporter with the *Canter Hollow Post*. So how does it feel to be setting out on your first Valkyrie quest?" The girl pulled a notebook and a rainbow-colored quill pen out of her bag and looked at Emma expectantly.

"Does *everyone* know I'm going on a

quest?" asked Emma, flustered by Penny's attention.

"No, and they won't until they read the *Canter Hollow Post*," replied Penny with a grin. "I only know because I saw Cade going into Mother Comfort's Delightful Candies, and I know he doesn't eat sweets very often, so I asked him who he was shopping for and he told me he was getting stuff for you to take on a quest. So where are you going?"

"Waterstone," said Colm, pushing forward to stand between Penny and Emma. "We're going to see Oracle about finding the lost—"

"Wait," interrupted Emma. "I'm sorry, Penny, but we don't really have time to do an interview right now. Cade will be back any minute and then we've got to get going."

"Aw, c'mon, Em!" said Colm. "The people deserve to know! What good is a heroic adventure if nobody knows it's happening?"

"I'm not going to wait around here just so you can show off," snapped Emma.



“Penny, what if Emma promises to tell you all about the quest the moment it’s over?” suggested Deru. “It will still be news to your readers, but that way she can give you all the details of how it happened.”

“It’s a deal!” said Penny. She offered her hand to Emma, who shook it uncertainly. “Can I at least get a quick portrait of the three of you?”

“Awesome!” said Colm, furiously brushing dirt from his hair and clothes. “Let’s do it in front of that cool fountain over there.”

Since Cade still wasn’t back, Emma reluctantly agreed. Penny posed the three friends, then stuck her fingers in her mouth and whistled. As if from nowhere, a tiny creature with pointed ears, purple skin, and bright green hair appeared by her side, carrying a painter’s palette in one hand and an easel in the other.

“This is Pixxle,” said Penny. “He’s a twinkle imp and the *Canter Hollow Post*’s best artist.”

Emma smoothed her ponytail and again

wished she could simply grow perfect clothes like Deru did. Deru’s delicate dress of pink and white flower petals made her warm brown skin glow like polished wood. Emma’s own blue riding pants, white blouse, and purple vest were clean and neat but not exactly pretty. At least she looked better than Colm, whose linen shirt looked rumpled under his well-worn leather jacket and whose patched jeans still had clumps of dog hair stuck to them.

Pixxle darted around the posed group, staring at them intently from above, below, sideways, and every other possible angle. Finally the imp hopped behind his easel. After just a couple of seconds, he proudly showed them a perfectly captured image of themselves.

“Hey,” said Colm, “I’ve still got dog hair on me. You’ve gotta paint over that!”

Pixxle stuck his tongue out at Colm and zipped away in a blur of purple and green, taking the portrait with him. Emma and Deru giggled, and Penny gave them a wink.





Just then Cade returned with three small bundles and tucked one in the top of each horse's bag. "I couldn't let you go without some of Mother Comfort's sweets," he said shyly.

"Thank you, Cade," said Emma. "It looks like you've thought of everything we could want." The stable master quickly looked down at his feet, but Emma caught a glimpse of his smile.

After saying goodbye to Penny and Cade, the three adventurers mounted their steeds. Twig sent everyone a mental picture of lush, green hills dotted with ponds and lakes, then leaped into the sky and began galloping on the wind.

"Follow us!" called Deru. "Twig knows the way

"Okay, then," whispered Emma to Wings as he spread the great, white-feathered pair for which he was named. "Let's go to Waterstone!"

Soot hesitated a moment, tail twitching. But when he saw his friends disappearing, he burst into magical flame and shot into the air after them.

"Wahoo!" cried Colm. "Wait for us!"

Emma never got tired of flying on Wings. Every time reminded her of their first flight together, when her fear of falling off was overwhelmed by the powerful joy of soaring away from everything that held her down. Now she and Wings trusted each other enough that she never worried about falling, even when she leaned down to get a better view of the Bella and Bello Monuments—great stone horse heads carved into the mountains that marked Trails End’s northern border. Everyplace they went from here on out would be new to Emma, but with Wings carrying her higher and higher, she felt like the whole sky and everything beneath it belonged to her and her steed.

By the time they reached Waterstone, Emma’s stomach felt terribly hollow, so she suggested they stop for a quick picnic in one of its many gardens. Even Deru fell almost silent as they filled their mouths with the creamy bovo-cheese sandwiches and crisp apples Cade had packed. Colm cheered when he opened the bundles from

Mother Comfort’s Delightful Candies and found tangy-sweet plumberry pocket pies along with comfort treats for the horses.

As they stowed the leftovers in their saddlebags, Emma saw a young man approaching them. He had shoulder-length hair and a scruffy beard, and the knees of his short pants were dirty and grass-stained, making Emma think he might be some kind of hobo. But no hobo would have such a finely woven blue shirt or a vest with a shining, amber-colored gemstone brooch pinned to it. The man’s woven-grass hat did its best to shade his suntanned face, and the worn leather bag strapped across his chest bulged with interestingly shaped lumps.

“Hello there!” called the young man. “I’m the gardener here. Are you folks looking for the Pool of Reflection?”

“Yes,” said Emma. “Can you tell us how to get there from here?”

“I can do better than that,” said the gardener. “I can take you right to it. And I can give





you this.” He reached into his bag, pulled out a surprisingly intact orchid blossom, and tucked it into Emma’s hair behind her ear. “May this bloom help you find what you seek.”

Startled, Emma barely remembered to thank the man. She wondered how he knew to give her an orchid. Did everybody in North of North already know who she was?

The gardener turned to Deru. “You, my dear, are already in fine flower,” he said, nodding toward the wreath Deru had grown in her ankle-length black hair. “So perhaps you would prefer this.” With a flourish, he produced a glossy, golden acorn that seemed to glow with its own light.

“Oooh, a sun acorn! How pretty!” said Deru. She flashed the man a beaming smile of thanks and tied the acorn onto a vine that suddenly grew around her wrist like a bracelet.

“Got anything in there for me?” asked Colm, trying to peek into the bag.

“No, for you I have something different,”

said the gardener. He reached down, plucked a dandelion from the ground, and stuck it into the top buttonhole of Colm's black leather jacket.

"Great," said Colm. "I get a weed."

The man smiled. "A weed is just a flower that is in the wrong place," he said. "But if you plant it somewhere else, it may grow into just the thing you were looking for."

"Whatever," said Colm. "Can we just go to the pool already?"

"Of course," said the gardener.

The young man led them down a white gravel path, then up a hill topped with a circle of trees and flowering bushes. In the center of the circle was a large, round pool so perfectly still that Emma could see every detail of its surroundings reflected in the water.

"Is this the Pool of Reflection?" asked Emma.

"It is the main pool, certainly," replied the gardener. "Would you like to see the others?"

At Emma's nod, the man continued around

to the other side of the pool, where it spilled out into a wide, clear waterfall. Emma stepped closer and watched the waterfall flow down into a series of smaller cascades that fed into dozens of lower pools further down the hillside. She turned back to the main pool just in time to see a young yellow and white mermare lower her head to hide among the lily pads. A matching yellow and pink one swam over and looked up at Emma and her friends. Wings and Soot eyed the mermare curiously until she gave a little toss of her head, inviting them to come closer. Then Wings looked at Emma hopefully.

"Oh, go ahead," said Emma, laughing. "Looks like you've found a new friend."

As Wings greeted the mermare, Twig nudged Emma's shoulder and nodded toward another horse walking up the hillside toward them. The black mare had a white mane and glowing white markings that seemed to have been written on her body.

"You must be Oracle," said Emma, giving



the black horse an awkward bow. “My name is Emma Roland.”

“Welcome. Emma. Roland,” came a series of high-pitched voices. When Emma looked around to see where they came from, she spotted several tiny water fairies dancing hand in hand on the water.

“Spring sprites!” cried Deru, coming closer to inspect them. “I love how they talk, each saying one word at a time. They’re very clever, you know.”

“Yeah, they sound real smart,” said Colm, peering into the pool. Several of the tiny creatures chose that moment to fly up and dive in beside him, splashing his face. “Hey! Knock it off!”

“Yes. Clever,” chirped the sprites.

Emma turned back to Oracle. “The Starstone Otter told me that you could help me with my quest. Please, can you tell me what to do next?”

Oracle sent Emma a mental image of

Emma looking into the water. Nervously, Emma leaned over and peered into the main pool. On its surface, she saw a series of quick images that blurred into each other: angry horses bucking and rearing, joyous horses dancing in celebration, ghostly horses staring at her as if trying to tell her something.

“What does it mean?” asked Emma, shaking her head in confusion.

“I don’t know,” said Deru. “It could be things that are going to happen, or it could be things that *might* happen if we do the right or wrong things.”

“How can I tell which is which?” Emma asked. “This isn’t helping at all!”

“Look. Again. The. Most. Important. Things. Are. Often. The. Hardest. To. See,” replied a choir of musical voices.

Emma felt Oracle gently touching her mind with another mental image: a lavender orchid floating on the water. Remembering the gardener’s gift, Emma took the orchid from her hair



and slipped it into the pool.

“Follow. The. Water,” sang the sprites.
“Truth. Fate. Destiny.”

The flower spun with the current, and a watery image formed in its wake. The image, which moved as if alive, showed Emma and Wings flying gracefully in a crystal blue sky. Deru and Twig rode the wind behind her, followed by an oddly gallant-looking Colm riding flame-covered Soot.

Emma glanced back at her cousin, who was wiping his wet face on the collar of his linen shirt and arguing with the sprites who had splashed him. *If that’s Colm’s future, it must be a long way off*, she thought.

The image faded as the flower dropped down a small waterfall into a lower pool. Emma didn’t dare lose track of it, so she asked Deru to get Colm away from the sprites and meet her at the bottom. Then she hurried down the hill to follow the orchid to the next pool, where she saw a powerful chestnut stallion standing proudly on a rock outcropping, mane tossing wildly in the wind.

“Mustang. Sad. Mustang,” chorused a nearby trio of spring sprites in mournful tones.

The image faded again as the orchid fell to the next pool. Here Emma saw an angelic mare who seemed to be made of pure, white light. Rainbow-colored bolts of electricity coursed through her mane and tail.

“Elemyn,” said a sprite.

“Tempest,” said another.

The orchid continued its journey, carried along the current down the series of waterfalls and pools, from one to the next. When it reached the fourth pool it showed Emma a regal, purple stallion with rainbow-feathered wings and eyes outlined in gold. He wore a tall, golden crown and stood on the Beach at the Edge of the World, looking out over its enormous waterfall toward the worlds beyond.

“Pantheon. Pantheon. Pantheon,” chanted the sprites.

“These are the founders of the great herds, aren’t they?” asked Emma, remembering the fireworks show at Bella’s Ball, which already seemed to have been such a long time ago. Oracle nodded.

In the next pool down, it showed a palomino mare whose mane, tail, and socks twinkled with light as she streaked like a comet across the night sky. Emma didn’t need the sprites to tell her this one must be Starlight.

The sixth pool displayed a softly glowing white mare with curly-edged gossamer wings and a crown made of flowering twigs. She danced in a beam of moonlight, and the sprites clapped their hands and danced little jigs as they cheered Moonfairy’s name over and over.

Emma sighed as the orchid dropped into the final, bottommost pool. As she expected, it formed the image of a large sunflower that blossomed into a golden yellow, winged mare with sunflowers braided into her brown mane and tail. Around her neck she wore a pendant shaped like a flower with a smooth, round gemstone at its center.

“Sunflower,” said a man’s voice next to Emma.

Emma jumped. She had gotten so lost in the pools’ images that she had forgotten the gardener even existed.

“You know this horse?” asked Emma as Deru came down to join her.

“Yes, of course,” said the gardener. “She’s



the patron of Herd Sunflower. My people have always counted ourselves lucky to have her friendship.”

“You must be one of the old Sunflower Folk,” said Deru. “I should have guessed—you know so much about flowers.”

Colm wandered down and perched on a rock at the edge of the bottom pool, gazing at the image of Sunflower. The handful of spring sprites in the pool turned their backs on him and flew over to perch on Deru’s shoulders.

“What can you tell me about Sunflower?” asked Emma.

“Are you ready to find her?” the gardener asked in return.

“That’s what I came here for!” cried Emma.

“Then I’m here to help you,” said the gardener calmly. “I’ve been waiting for Emma Roland for a very long time now.”

“You and everybody else in the world,” said Colm, looking up from the pool. “Would’ve

been nice if you’d bothered to mention that before now, though.”

Ignoring Colm, the gardener said, “Like you, I too once came here looking for someone.” He gave Oracle a wry smile. “Oracle’s pools told me that first I had a job to do. One day a girl would come on wings to reunite all of North of North’s herds, and I must help her.”

“Girl. On. Wings,” chimed the sprites. “Emma. Roland.”

Colm suddenly stood up and pointed at the gardener’s brooch. “Hey,” he said suspiciously, “your stone looks just like the one in Sunflower’s pendant.”

“That’s because it *is* the Sunstone,” replied the gardener. “Sunflower entrusted it to me, and now it will lead us to her.” He unpinned the stone from his vest and handed it to Emma.

“Sunstone. Sunstone. Sunstone,” chanted the sprites.

The tawny gold Sunstone sparkled and pulsed in Emma’s hand. The sweet scent of summer





flowers filled the air, and excitement filled her heart. She had already found one of the pendants, plus someone who could lead her right to one of the lost herd leaders!

The gardener beamed at the delight on Emma's face. "At long last, we meet at the crossroads, you at the beginning of your journey and me at the end of mine."

"Thank you so much, Mr.— Wait, I don't even know your name!" Emma finally managed to say.

"Most folks call me Mr. Bloom," said the young man. "But since I'm sure we're going to be great friends, you can call me Johan."

"Thank you, Johan," said Emma. "And thank you, too, Oracle. I can't wait to show Wings! C'mon!"

Emma, Deru, Johan, and Oracle began climbing the hill back to the top of the waterfalls. Colm checked to make sure they weren't looking, then pulled the dandelion from his buttonhole and tossed it into the bottom pool. The water rippled in response and formed an image of him dressed in some sort of silly dandelion costume.

"Dandy," said one of the spring sprites

with a smirk.

“Lion,” said another.

“Dandelion yourself,” muttered Colm. He grabbed a rock from the ground and hurled it into the pool, breaking up the image and nearly hitting one of the sprites. They all flew in circles around him, chattering angrily.

Beneath their high-pitched fury, Colm heard a deeper, growling sound, like a dog—or a wolf. He whirled around and thought he caught a glimpse of red fur somewhere in the bushes, but the sprites kept blocking his view. When he got the chance to look again, it was gone. He gave up and started back up the hill after Emma, swatting away a sprite that kept chucking pebbles at his head.

As Colm walked away, the bushes behind him rustled too quietly for him to hear.



Next chapter... meet Cayenne!



Emma and the others waited at the top of the hill for Colm, who still had a pair of angry spring sprites pulling on his rumpled hair when he arrived. Deru called the sprites over to her and murmured a few soothing words to them while Colm stomped over to stand on the other side of Emma.

“So, if that thing is the Sunstone,” said Colm grumpily, pointing at the smooth, round

gem now pinned to Emma’s vest, “why isn’t it a pendant? And why doesn’t it look like a flower?”

“When Sunflower gave me the Sunstone,” answered Johan, “she warned me that the Wolf Riders would come looking for it. To make it harder for them to find, I took the petals off and hid them in five different places. But I kept the center stone with me, and I put it on a pin so I couldn’t lose it.”

“So thanks to you, the Sunstone is broken,” said Colm. “And now we’ve got to find all the pieces and glue it back together or something.”

“Oh, it’s not broken,” said Johan. “The petals are designed to fit into their places like puzzle pieces. All we have to do is collect them.”

“Well, let’s get started,” said Emma. “I want to show Tyri the pendant when we get back to Rolandsgaard tonight.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” said Johan. “I couldn’t hide the petals too close together,



or it would have been too easy for the Wolf Riders to find them. So I hid them all over the world. It will take many days of riding to reach them all.”

“Oh,” said Emma, disappointment in her voice. She had hoped Tyri would be proud of her for finding a pendant so quickly, but now it would likely take a week or two just to collect all the pieces of the Sunstone. Besides, Emma had barely gotten used to life in Trails End, her new home. How much more difficult and dangerous would it be out in the strange, wild parts of North of North?

Emma got her answer when the spring sprites on Deru’s shoulders suddenly shot into the air and began flying in frightened circles.

“Wolves! Wolves!” they shrieked. Soon a whole swarm of their sisters joined them, all squeaking and fluttering with fear.

“Where?” shouted Emma, trying to be heard over the high-pitched din.

As one, the sprites turned in the air and

pointed. Emma looked just in time to see a pair of large wolves—one red-furred, one gray—break from the bushes on the far edge of the gardens and race away across the hills.

“Aw, let ’em run,” said Colm. “Looks like we scared them off when we beat them to the Sunstone.”

“I doubt it,” said Johan grimly. “More likely, they are off to tell their mistress what happened here. Ivenna will have the whole pack on our trail soon enough.”

“We’ve gotta go now, then,” said Colm. “Get the petals before the wolves get us.”

“But we’re supposed to meet Tyri back at Rolandsgaard,” said Deru, her black eyes wide. “She’ll be worried if we don’t come.”

Emma didn’t know what to do. The thought of racing all over this unfamiliar world with Ivenna’s pack hot on her heels made her stomach knot. But if they lost time going back to Rolandsgaard, the wolves might attack them before they even got started. And then what would



happen to the Sunstone?

Johan put a work-roughened hand on Emma's shoulder. "Whatever you decide," he said, "I am here to help you, Emma Roland."

I am a Roland, thought Emma. I have a duty to protect this world. I can't let my fear keep me from doing it.

"Okay," said Emma, looking around at her friends. "Let's get the petals."

"Sweet!" said Colm. He whistled loudly to Soot, who indulgently trotted over to his rider. Wings and Twig followed to see what was going on, and Emma explained what they were going to do.

"I wish we could tell Tyri what's going on," finished Emma. "Maybe she could catch up to us."

Wings sent a quick series of mental images: a pink water lily, a white lotus, and two mermares swimming through the Rivergate into Rolandsgaard Castle. It took Emma a moment to recognize the water horses as the ones Wings and

Soot had been talking to.

"Waterlily and Lotus are your new friends, right?" asked Emma. "Do you trust them to carry a message for us?" When Wings nodded, Emma sent him to ask the mermares for their help.

"That's done," said Emma. "Now, Johan, please tell us where the petals are so we can get going."

"I don't *think* I can tell you," said Johan. "I don't remember where I put them—not exactly."

"Of course you don't," said Colm scornfully. "They're only part of this super-important thing you were supposed to be guarding. No wonder they slipped your mind."

"Young man, it has been almost a thousand years since I hid those petals," said Johan, sounding irritated for the first time. "And I don't need to remember where they are, because I can use the Sunstone to lead us to them."

"I guess you'll have to come with us, then," said Emma, cutting off Colm's next remark with



a threatening glare.

“You can ride with me on Twig if you like,” offered Deru. “She looks delicate, but she’s strong enough to carry two.”

“Thank you kindly,” said Johan, “but I have my own steed.” He pulled a tiny bottle of red powder out of his bag and threw a pinch of it into the breeze. Moments later a spotted red mare trotted up to join them. She wore a beautiful garland of white flowers, green leaves, and small red peppers woven into her mane and tail.

“This is Cayenne,” said Johan. “Cayenne, this is Soot, Colm, Twig, and Deru. The fellow by the pool there is Wings, and this is Emma Roland.” Cayenne nodded to each of them in turn, then raised her foreleg to Emma in greeting. Emma saw it had a mark shaped like a cayenne pepper on it.

“A Spice mare!” said Deru admiringly. “I thought only the Travelers worked with Spice horses.”

“Oh, the Travelers and I go way back,”



said Johan. “I taught them the secret of growing plants with Earth loam, and they introduced me to this fiery girl here. Best bargain I ever made.” Cayenne blew affectionately at him, and he patted her neck.

Emma had learned a little about the mysterious Travelers from Cade, but not much. From what she remembered, the Travelers were a tight-knit band of wandering craftsfolk and traders who didn’t often make friends with outsiders. Knowing Johan had earned their trust made Emma feel safer trusting him herself.

“Can Spice horses fly?” asked Colm. “’Cause if they can’t, you two are really gonna slow us down.”

“Cayenne may be a land horse,” said Johan, “but she’s been traveling the world long enough to pick up a few tricks. I believe you’ll find your own steeds move even faster with her along.” Colm looked skeptical, but Cayenne’s blue eyes twinkled.

“It won’t matter how fast we go if we don’t

get started,” said Emma. “Johan, which way?”

Johan knelt and put his hand on the ground, then stared at the Sunstone for a long moment. “Northeast,” he said.

As they rode across the countryside, Emma saw that Johan was right. Cayenne had amazing speed and so much endurance that the other horses seemed to draw energy from her. Emma knew the horses should never have been able to gallop so long—and even if they could, they shouldn’t have covered anywhere near this much ground. Yet none of the horses seemed nearly as tired as she felt herself. Even when the ground turned from lush, hilly grassland to rocky mountain trails, the horses kept their pace swift and steady.

Both horses and people did get hungry, though, so Emma was glad when Johan called a halt next to a narrow mountain stream and began

unpacking food and camping gear from Cayenne's saddlebags.

"We should probably stop here for the night," said Johan.

"Already?" scoffed Colm. "We've still got at least an hour of daylight left."

"When we come out of the Ochre Mountains, we'll be on the edge of the Autumn Sands," replied Johan. "That means we need to get an early start so we can rest during the hottest part of the day and still make good progress."

"Are you sure we have to go through the desert?" asked Emma nervously as she fed Wings an apple.

"I'm sure," said Johan. "Right now the Sunstone is pointing us directly to Aria, the Autumn Sands' most famous oasis. There aren't any other plants for miles around, so the Sunstone picks up Aria like a beacon."

"It must sense the Greenroads," said Deru.

"The what?" mumbled Colm, his mouth

already full of leftover plumberry pie.

"The Greenroads," repeated Deru. "All living things give off magical energy. Plants stay in one place, so their energy eventually links together, and the links form a pattern of connecting lines. Those are the Greenroads."

"That's quite right," said Johan. "Anyone good with plant magic can sense the strongest Greenroads, like the ones that connect big forests. But with the Sunstone's help I can find even the tiny paths that lead to individual plants."

"Yay for you," said Colm. "But we're looking for Sunstone petals now, not plants."

"*Right now, the Sunstone petals are plants,*" explained Johan. "I disguised them from the Wolf Riders by planting them in the ground. With a little Earth loam, their own Sunflower magic turned them into beautiful flowers."

"Joy," said Colm. "Hope they haven't all died in the thousand years since you planted them."

"I'd know," Johan and Deru said at the



same time. Deru laughed. “If a plant with that much magical energy suddenly disappeared from the pattern, all of us who sense the Greenroads would know,” she said.

“So if we start collecting the petals,” said Emma slowly, “we’ll alter the pattern, and people will know. Won’t that lead the Wolf Riders right to us?”

“I doubt the Wolf Riders can sense the Greenroads,” said Johan. “They prefer darker paths. But you’re right. The more petals we collect, the more chances they have to spot us.”

The others kept talking about the Greenroads, but Emma didn’t hear much of what they said. Instead, she wrote in her Ballad, a magical journal the goddess Sara once gave her:

I don’t know what we’re going to do if Ivenna and her wolves catch up with us. I trust Johan to lead us to the petals, but I sure wish we had Tyri here too. Maybe we should have gone back to Rolandsgaard after all.

Emma’s worries kept her quiet most of the next morning as they continued by land, riding down into a scrubby valley between the Ochre Mountains and a range of colorful, flat-topped mountains Johan called the Pinto Mesas. Beyond the Mesas lay the huge Autumn Sands Desert, but here in the valley they were protected from the desert’s extreme heat. Dry, little gusts of wind flurried down from the foothills as they rode, and when Wings spooked at one of them, Emma realized her steed sensed her jumpy mood. *Settle down*, Emma told herself as she patted Wings’s neck reassuringly. *If you can get through everything else that’s happened since Mom and Dad died, you can survive this too.*

The journey toward Aria took all day, and by evening, when they stopped for dinner, Emma felt better. She even laughed when Colm’s face turned bright red after his first bite of the spicy bean stew Johan made. But as they packed up and continued on after dinner and the sun drooped low in the sky, she started to worry again. What



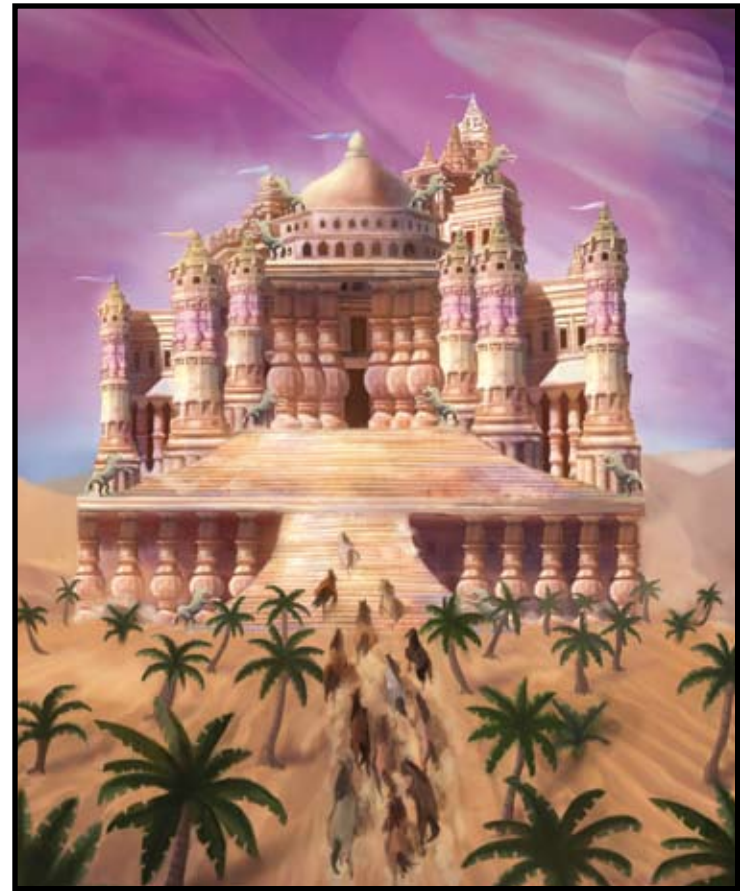
if the wolves were already there, waiting in the shadows to ambush them? Or what if they lost their way in the dark and wandered off into the desert?

Just as the sun started to sink below the horizon, Colm whooped and pointed toward what looked like a shimmering smudge in the distance.

“There!” yelled Colm. “Is that it?”

“I believe so,” Johan shouted back. “We’ll have to hurry to get there before the last light fades.”

But night had fully fallen by the time they got to Aria and dismounted to let the horses drink from the pool at its center. Two moons, a sky full of stars, and the distant lights of Shahazar Castle gave Emma just enough light to see shadowy shapes as she explored the oasis. Some of the shapes scurried away quickly and turned out to be big-eyed desert rodents. “Sand mice,” Johan informed her. Other shapes turned out to be plants: palm trees, shrubs, and some kind of



succulent plant that reminded her of aloe. But nothing looked much like a magical flower to Emma.

“Johan, are you sure the Sunstone petal is a flower?” asked Emma.

“It has to be,” said Johan. “It’s too full of

flower magic to grow into anything else.”

“It might not be a normal sort of flower, though,” said Deru excitedly. “Look!”

Emma stumbled over to Deru and immediately understood what her friend meant. Clusters of crystal formations had grown into the shapes of flowers, forming a garden of sorts that glittered in the moonlight. When Emma leaned in for a closer look, the Sunstone brooch on her vest began to glow like a tiny sun. And a crystal flower shaped like a rose started to glow in return!

“The Desert Rose,” said Johan softly. “Now I remember. I brought the first petal here, and Fiona helped me plant it.”

As if summoned by the sound of her name, Fiona herself suddenly stepped from the shadows. Even in the darkness, Emma could not mistake the legendary mare with the fiery red coat.

“Fiona!” cried Emma. “I’m so glad to see you again!”

Fiona’s appearance brought the other

horses from their resting place by the pool. They bowed their heads to her, and she nickered to them in greeting. Then she nodded solemnly to each of Emma’s friends and finally returned her gaze to Emma. Emma waited a moment to see what Fiona wanted to do, then realized that Fiona was waiting for *her*. She took a deep breath.

“Fiona, thank you for protecting the Desert Rose,” said Emma. “Now it’s time for it to be a Sunstone petal again. May I please take it?”

Fiona nodded and sent Emma a mental image of Emma’s own hands plucking the Desert Rose from its crystal stem. *This is it*, thought Emma as she grasped the glowing blossom, careful to hold it exactly as Fiona had shown her, and pulled gently.

With a tiny snap, the rose came off in Emma’s hands. Immediately, its reddish glow brightened to pink, then white, finally bursting into a dazzling blaze of light so bright Emma’s eyes shut without her telling them to. When she opened them again, the rose was gone. In its





place was a gold-edged cloisonné petal that still glowed with a faint pink light.

“That was easy,” said Colm lightly. “Where to next?”

“Bed,” said Emma firmly.

Next chapter... the Fairy Realm!



Emma woke early the next morning when the rising sun reached the tall, narrow windows of her bedroom and filtered in through the gauzy curtains around her wooden bed. She stared at the colored patterns painted on the walls for a few moments before she remembered where she was: Shahazar Castle. Fiona had invited Emma and her friends to spend the night there, and they had jumped at the chance to sleep

under a real roof. A real bath in fresh rosewater and a real breakfast of flatbread, honey, dates, yogurt, and sweetmint tea had done wonders for Emma's spirits.

By the time Emma, Deru, and Colm made it down to the castle's stables, Johan had already taken care of the horses and repacked their saddlebags with fresh food and as much water as they could carry.

"We've been on the edge of the Autumn Sands so far, but now we need to cross its heart," explained Johan. "There's not much but sun and sand from the Hope River to the Bow Mountains."

"Is the next petal in the mountains, then?" asked Emma eagerly.

"I don't think so," said Johan. "Not much grows there. But on the other side is the Emeraldian Wilds, which has a great abundance of plant life."

"And fairies!" said Deru, her face brightening. "The fairy realm is in the heart of the Emeraldian



Wilds. Herd Moonfairy used to live there too, before they went into hiding.”

“Maybe we can find some sign of them along the way,” said Emma hopefully.

“Perhaps,” said Johan. His voice, suddenly sad and distant, made Emma want to ask more questions, but she knew they had to get going before the desert sun reached its full power.

Even at the magically swift pace Cayenne set, it took two days to cross the Autumn Sands. By the second day the heat seemed to radiate from the sand itself as well as from the sun. Emma noticed that Wings began to glide above the dunes, only occasionally touching down with a hoof and sending up a little spray of sand. Twig also bounded in long leaps to avoid touching the ground, and the flowers in her dark green mane and tail wilted a little. But Soot charged to the front to gallop neck and neck with Cayenne, and

his black coat glowed with streaks of molten orange energy.

When they finally reached the bare, windy foothills of the Bow Mountains that evening, Emma worried it would take another whole day to climb those formidable peaks with their jagged cliffs. But Johan made camp at the mouth of a hidden valley and said it would take them straight through to the Emeraldian Wilds. Then he grew quiet again. The sun sank behind the mountains as they prepared dinner, and Deru began happily chattering to Colm about the wonders of the fairy realm. When Emma saw Johan get up silently and leave camp, she got up too and quietly followed him up a little stretch of scraggy hillside. She found him standing beside a boulder, staring into the dark valley with tears in his blue eyes.

“Johan,” said Emma gently, “please tell me what’s wrong.”

“Back at the Pool of Reflection, I told you I had gone there looking for someone,” said Johan



in a rough voice not much more than a whisper. Emma nodded. “Her name is Avalynn, and she and I have loved each other since we were children. But she is a phoenix fairy, and almost a thousand years ago she fell into the long, enchanted sleep of her kind. When the thousand years come to an end she will wake, and I promised her I would be there.”

“Is Avalynn in the Emeraldian Wilds, then?” asked Emma.

“I think so,” said Johan. “But the fairies don’t allow mortals to enter their realm, especially since Sigga stopped protecting North of North. Finding Avalynn on my own was impossible. Now I can only hope Oracle was right that helping you will make it possible.”

Emma put a comforting hand on Johan’s arm. “If I can help you find her, I will,” she promised.

The next day, Emma kept her eyes open for fairies as she and her friends rode through the narrow valley and down into the cool shade

of the Emeraldian Wilds. The horses moved fast along the winding dirt path through the forest, but Emma still caught glimpses of its amazing sights as she sped by. Everywhere she saw glorious tangles of green—mossy trees, leafy bushes, and delicate ferns. Bright butterflies provided splashes of fluttering color, little violet birds with long-plumed tails twittered merrily, and all kinds of strange forest creatures scampered about their business. Once she thought she saw a whole school of tiny, glittering fish leap out of the ground for an instant and then dive back into the dark, rich-smelling dirt.

“This place is freaky,” said Colm, who had dropped back to ride between Deru and Emma. “Check out the door in that tree! And did you see the flying snake back there?”

“That’s just a flitterwurm,” called Deru, looking back over her shoulder. “They’re perfectly harmless.” As she spoke a tree limb reached out to pluck a pink flower from her hair, but Twig neatly dodged it without breaking stride.





“Hey, hands off her!” yelled Colm, swatting at the branch as he and Soot passed by. The branch quickly pulled back.

“Oh, it’s just saying hi,” said Deru with a giggle. “All the trees here are used to having dryads to play with. It makes them ever so much more active, and I’m sure the exercise is good for—”

“Whoa!” shouted Johan from the front of the line. All the horses skidded to a stop in front

of a huge tree that had fallen across their path. Deru gasped and put her hand to her mouth as they all saw the deep claw marks marring its trunk.

“Wolves,” said Emma grimly.

“They know we’re coming this way, and they’re trying to stop us here,” muttered Colm, thinking out loud. “We’ve gotta get out of here fast!”

Just then Emma heard growling behind them. When Wings whirled around she saw a red-furred wolf standing in the middle of the path, fangs bared. Several gray wolves melted out of the trees and bushes to join him and began to spread out. Spooked by their sudden appearance, Soot burst into panicked flame. Before Colm could stop him, he shot over the fallen tree and away down the path at such full blast that Emma was impressed Colm managed to stay on him.

“Soot, no!” cried Deru frantically. “You’ll burn the whole forest down!” Twig caught Emma’s eye and shot her a mental image of Twig

and Deru stomping out the beginnings of a forest fire. Then she jumped into the air, swooped over the tree, and galloped after Soot as Deru called for Emma and Johan to follow them.

Ignoring Soot and Twig, the wolves paced, trotting restlessly back and forth with their ears low and their teeth bared. Their fierce yellow eyes stayed fixed on Emma and Johan as they circled the group, drawing ever closer. The red wolf snarled and growled as if saying something Emma couldn't understand. The wolves were very close now.

"Go," whispered Johan. "We'll slow them down and then join you."

"No!" cried Emma bravely. "I won't leave you to fight them alone!" Wings squealed and struck at the red wolf, his sharp front hooves narrowly missing the wolf's head. The red wolf lunged for Wings's hind leg, but Wings jumped into the air just in time, spreading his enormous wings.

"Emma, you have the Sunstone," said Jo-

han urgently. "They *must not* get it. Now fly, quickly!"

Wings flapped his wings and tried to fly upward, but the canopy of tree branches overhead was too thick. While he struggled to turn around, Emma looked down and saw Cayenne spin and kick her back feet at the nearest wolf. As she did, she flicked her tail and released a red cloud of cayenne-pepper spray right in the wolves' faces. They yelped, shaking their heads and pawing at their eyes and noses.

Johan's eyes met Emma's as she and Wings flew over the fallen tree. Then Emma remembered: Cayenne couldn't fly. Could she possibly jump over the huge tree? Emma held her breath as Cayenne dove off the path, galloped *into* a different tree, and disappeared!

Emma stared back at the spot where Cayenne and Johan had vanished. Then Wings whined, and she looked forward just in time to see the two of them pop out of another tree far ahead and gallop back onto the path. Emma whooped



with joy as Wings flew to catch up.

“How did you do that?” asked Emma when Wings landed behind Cayenne and began galloping along with her.

“I told you my good girl knows a few tricks,” replied Johan, patting Cayenne’s red-spotted neck. “Her spice spray won’t blind the wolves for long, though. We need to find your friends quickly.”

It wasn’t hard to follow the trail of soot flakes and singed branches that Soot had left behind. Before long, Emma and Johan found the others ankle-deep in a small creek just off the path. Deru and Colm were splashing Soot’s steaming coat, and Soot himself hung his head as Twig tried to comfort him.

“Emma!” called Deru as soon as she saw them. “Soot’s really sorry—”

“I know,” said Emma quickly. “It’s okay, really. But we’ve got to keep moving. The wolves won’t be far behind us.”

“We should get off the path,” said Colm as

he and Deru jumped back on their steeds. “If we follow this creek, it’ll make it harder for them to track us by scent. Though I’ve gotta say, one of you really stinks.”

“A good snort of Cayenne’s pepper smell will keep the wolves from using their noses for quite a while,” said Johan. “But you’re right that they will expect us to stay on the path. I think I can lead us—”

Johan was cut off by an eerie howl that was much closer than Emma had hoped. Without another word, they all followed Johan and Cayenne away from the path and into the deep woods.

For the next half hour, Emma saw very little of the enchanted forest around her, but every rustling leaf they brushed past startled her, and every tiny twig that snapped under the horses’ hooves made her jump. Twig, who went last, lagged so far behind the others that Emma almost motioned her to hurry up. Then she saw that Twig and Deru were using their dryad magic

to make the trees and bushes grow more thickly behind them, covering their trail and making it harder for the wolves to get through. She breathed a little easier after that.

Emma’s relief didn’t last long, though. Soon the group was forced to halt by a thick wall of tangled berry brambles and thorn bushes. It rose all the way to the forest canopy above their heads and stretched as far as they could see to either side. Not even the flying horses could get past it.

“I’m sorry,” said Johan quietly after carefully inspecting the wall. “I thought this was just a thick band of plant magic, but it’s a real, physical wall as well. We’ll have to turn around.”

“We can’t,” insisted Colm. “If we go back, we’ll walk right into the wolf patrol out there trying to find us.”

“What’s this thing doing here, anyway?” asked Emma in frustration. “It can’t be natural, can it?”

“It’s a fairy wall, grown to protect the fairy



realm from mortals,” said Deru. “But Twig and I are dryads, so maybe it will let us pass.”

Twig put her forehead gently against the wall, while Deru leaned forward and whispered to it in some breathy, soft language Emma didn’t recognize. The brambles and thorns trembled as if shaken by a strong wind. Then, creaking and rustling, they untangled themselves and drew apart, creating a doorway in the wall.

“Go on in,” said Deru, impatiently waving the others on. “We’ll hold it open for you. But be careful, and don’t touch anything.”

Colm urged Soot through the doorway. “C’mon, you guys,” he said over his shoulder. “I dunno what’s in here, but it’s gotta be better than a pack of wolves.”

Emma and Johan looked at each other for a moment, but the sound of wolves howling made up their minds for them. They followed Colm through the doorway, and Deru let it close behind them. For all Emma could tell, the land inside the wall seemed just like the land outside it:

deep, green, magical forest.

“Well, that got the wolves off our trail,” said Emma. “But where do we go now?”

“I’m not sure,” admitted Johan. “The fairy realm is so full of magic that trying to read the Greenroads in here is like trying to find a particular sunbeam by staring at the sun. We’ve also got to avoid fairy patrols—believe me, we don’t want them to catch us in here.”

“Um, Deru?” called Colm shakily from farther ahead. “A little help?”

All of them rushed forward to find Colm and Soot standing perfectly still in the middle of a path that led into a grove of carefully arranged trees. Each tree was covered with flowers and little round bubbles of different colors and sizes. When Soot turned, Emma saw Colm had a marble-sized green bubble in the palm of his hand.

“I know you said not to touch anything, and I really didn’t mean to,” Colm said quickly. “But it fell off the tree all by itself, and it was going to land on Soot anyway, so I kinda caught



it. And now I think there's something moving in there." He held the bubble out to Deru, who reluctantly took it from him and held it up to inspect it.

"Oh, dear," said Deru, her voice rising with fear. "This is not good."

"What is it?" asked Emma warily.

"It's a fairy egg," said Deru. "See the little fairy baby inside?" She held it up so Emma could see. Sure enough, inside the bubble was a tiny, winged baby, fast asleep with its thumb in its mouth.

"Maybe we can put it back," said Colm hopefully. "I think it came from—"

"It wouldn't matter if we could," Johan interrupted. "This must be the fairy nursery, the most sacred place in all the realm. The fairies would gladly blind us all for coming here without permission."

"*Blind us?*" gasped Emma, horrified.

"If not worse," muttered Johan darkly.

"We'd better take off before they get here,

then," said Colm, looking around for somewhere to hide.

"Too late," sighed Deru, pointing at a swarm of glowing green dots flying toward them from the far side of the grove. She took a deep breath. "Stay here, and I'll see if I can explain things to them."

Twig and Deru went forward into the grove, and Deru carefully held the little fairy egg up over her bowed head. Several leaf-winged fairies about four inches tall snatched it out of her hands and flew off with it. Others shouted and shook their fists accusingly at Deru, while the rest surrounded Emma, Colm, and Johan, pointing their wands menacingly at their prisoners.

"Do something, Em!" whispered Colm, who was doing his best to keep jumpy Soot from exploding into flames again. "Tell 'em you're a famous Valkyrie on an important quest and they'd better let us go!"

"I think you just did," Emma whispered



back as the fairies' faces grew even more furious. "They don't look impressed."

"They wouldn't be," said Johan tightly. "The fairies don't recognize any human authorities, not even Valkyries. To them, Emma is just another trespassing mortal."

Emma shivered and tried to see how things were going for Deru. She couldn't hear what Deru was saying, but she did see her point first at Colm, then at Emma. All the fairies stared at Emma. Their piercing green eyes made her wonder if she and her friends would have been better off taking their chances with the wolves.

After what seemed an eternity of talking and gesturing, a fairy who seemed to be the leader motioned to the others to bring Emma and her friends forward. The leader did seem a little less angry than the guard fairies, but Colm looked like he expected to spend the rest of his life in a fairy dungeon.

"I've apologized to the fairies for accidentally stumbling into their nursery," explained

Deru. "They have graciously agreed to let us pass through their realm, but they must protect their secrets from mortal eyes. So they're going to cast a spell and put you to sleep."

"That's 'wake up in the morning' sleep, not 'have to get kissed by a prince' sleep, right?" asked Colm nervously.

Deru smiled weakly. "It's more of a drowsy, dreamy feeling," she said. "You'll still be able to ride, but you won't see or remember anything around you."

"That's very kind. Thank you. We'll be glad to do it that way," said Emma quickly, before Colm could make any more remarks.

One of the fairies had a golden horn shaped like a flower on his belt. When the leader nodded, he flew up to Colm and blew the horn right in his face. A blast of yellow pollen sprayed out, and Colm blinked rapidly. After a few moments, his eyes closed halfway and a goofy look crept over his face. Another fairy flew up and waved her wand in front of his eyes, but Colm didn't



seem to notice. The fairy nodded to her companion, and the two of them moved on to Soot, then Johan, then Cayenne.

Emma got nervous when her turn came. The pollen made her blink just like the others, and she felt very warm and sleepy. But when the second fairy waved her wand a little too close to Emma's eyes, she flinched. The fairy frowned, and Emma forced herself to relax and stay very still while the fairy tapped her wand on Emma's forehead and tickled her nose. Finally the fairy nodded in satisfaction, and she and her partner moved on to Wings.

When the fairies were done casting their spell, they flew to the front of the group and began singing a soft lullaby. Deru sang along with them as she and Twig followed them down the forest path. One by one, the sleepwalking horses and riders plodded along behind them. Emma forgot about the wolves and the Sunstone petals and just let the calming music wash over her.

As they rode through the magical, green

fairy realm Emma drifted back and forth between sleeping and waking. She barely noticed when they turned down a fork in the road and entered a new area, where trees decorated with crystal ornaments grew into braided archways over the path.

Then a pale green unicorn caught her eye, and Emma tried to drag her mind free of its dreamy fog. The unicorn stood in the middle of a big circle of mushrooms, next to a piece of clear amber stone taller than Emma herself. She looked closer and saw that inside the amber was a sleeping girl with very long, red hair and fire-colored gossamer wings. Emma knew there was something important about this girl, but when the unicorn looked up at her and bowed, she forgot exactly what it was.

The next thing Emma knew, another wall of brambles and thorns loomed ahead. It looked just like the one where they entered the fairy realm, except this one had a heavy, wooden door that opened as they approached. When Emma



and her friends had all passed through the doorway, the door closed behind them and the brambles grew together in front of it as if it were never there.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up!” sang Deru happily, clapping her hands loudly. Suddenly Emma’s mind was clear, though her body still felt tired and heavy. They still seemed to be deep inside the forest.

“Where are we?” asked Emma.

“On the other side of the Emeraldian Wilds,” said Deru. “If we ride south a few miles, we can camp near the mouth of the Bluegrass Narrows.”

“Did you say the Bluegrass Narrows?” asked Johan, shaking his head groggily. “That’s at least three days’ ride from where we started!”

“It’s only been one day, though,” said Deru. “The fairies wanted to get rid of us quickly, so they took us the short way.”

Colm yawned. “No way we were in there a whole day,” he insisted. “I didn’t sleep more than a few minutes. Dreamed the stupid fairies locked me up inside a giant dandelion.”

“I dreamed I saw the most beautiful girl in the world,” said Johan wistfully. “She gave me a lock of her red hair and told me we would see each other again soon.”

“I saw her too,” said Emma as the memory came back to her. “She was sleeping in this tall amber stone, and there was a green unicorn with

her, and really big mushrooms....”

Deru and Johan stared at Emma. “You saw Avalynn?” Johan asked eagerly. “You saw where she was?”

“I think so,” said Emma. “It was up the road a bit from where we came out, in the place with the decorated trees.”

“But that was a dream, right?” said Colm. “I didn’t see any decorated trees.”

“No, we really did go by a place like that,” said Deru. “But don’t let the fairies find out their spell didn’t work on you, Emma, or we’ll all be in big trouble.”

“We have to go back,” said Johan softly, as if talking to himself. “I have to go back and find her.” He dug around in his bag and pulled out a pair of hand-size pruning shears.

“No, Johan, don’t!” cried Deru in terror as Twig moved to put herself between Johan and the bramble wall. “We can’t go back! The fairies were mad enough when we went there by accident. If you break in on purpose—”

“You don’t understand,” said Johan harshly. “Avalynn is my true love. I have searched for her for so long, and it’s almost too late! Who knows if I will ever get this close again?”

“Johan, Deru’s right,” said Emma firmly as Wings went over to stand with Deru and Twig. “I know this is hard for you, but even if we did go back now the fairies wouldn’t let us near Avalynn. They’d probably keep us from collecting the Sunstone petals too, and then Ivenna could get to Herd Sunflower before we do.”

“You promised me, Emma.” Johan’s voice was rough with tears. “You said you’d help me find her if you could. Please, I beg you, help me.”

“I *will* help you,” Emma said softly with tears in her own eyes. “But Oracle said you have to help me with my quest before you can find Avalynn, and my quest isn’t over yet. Finish helping me, and then I promise we will find her at the right time, just like she told you in your dream.”



Johan said nothing, but he put the shears back in his bag. He brushed the back of his hand across his eyes as he and Cayenne turned to ride away.

“Thank you,” Deru told Emma as they followed Johan away from the wall. “That was very brave, and I really think you did the right thing.”

“I don’t get it,” said Colm. “All that was about some girl?”

“Just shut up, Colm,” said Emma wearily.



Next chapter... meet Jewel!



Emma woke early the next morning to the thundering sound of water churning. She'd been too tired to look around much when they made camp the night before, but now she followed the sound down a broad, grassy slope to the frothing mouth of the Bluegrass Narrows. Emma was surprised to see the grass here actually *was* blue, or maybe blue-gray, and just tall enough that she could brush her hands over its

soft tips as she walked.

When she got back to the campsite, the others were still asleep except for Johan. Emma found him squatting by the campfire, stirring a pot of oatmeal with some fat, bright pink berries in it.

"Hope you like coveberries," said Johan. "They're hard and a little salty right off the bush, but if you cook them they turn soft and sweet."

"I'm sure they're delicious," said Emma. After a moment she cautiously added, "Thank you for making breakfast, and for everything you've done. I don't know what we would have done if you... well, if you hadn't come with us last night."

"I'm sorry I gave you any reason to worry about that," said Johan, standing up to look Emma in the eye. "I might wish things were different, but the fact is, helping you *did* get me much closer to Avalynn than anything else I've done. I have to trust that continuing to help you will get me the rest of the way. Please forgive me



for my outburst.”

“Of course,” said Emma, surprising Johan with a warm hug. “Now let’s get everybody moving so we can finish my quest and get back to yours.”

After breakfast, Emma and her friends spent a very long day following Cayenne and Johan down a gently curving coastal road between the mossy woods of the Emeraldian Wilds and the bright, blue-green waters of the Equinesian Sea. At first the air was cool and the shoreline steep and rocky. But as they rode farther east, the salty-smelling sea wind began to blow warm on their faces and the beaches turned into wide stretches of pale sand. By nightfall, Emma looked forward to building a bonfire on the beach and falling asleep to the soft, rhythmic sounds of the surf.

“Wow, the Auroborus lights are really bright here,” said Colm as they spread out their bedrolls beneath the dancing ribbons of rainbow light that took over the night sky.

“That’s because we’re not very far away from them,” said Deru. “We’re nearly to Equinesia, and after that there’s the Celestial Deep, then the Beach at the Edge of the World, and then you’re pretty much there.”

“Where?” asked Colm confusedly.

“In the Auroborus, of course,” said Deru, giggling. She smoothed the skirt of her pink-petal dress, which promptly turned into a pink-petal nightgown.

“I don’t think we’ll have to go that far,” said Johan, a hint of amusement in his voice. “If I’m reading the Greenroads correctly, the next petal is a little southeast of us. We should reach it by tomorrow afternoon.”

“Well, it’s about time,” Colm grumbled as he flopped down onto his bedroll and began undoing the binding straps on his boots.

Emma didn’t say anything, but her feelings weren’t too far from Colm’s. Before going to sleep, she wrote in her Ballad journal:

I can’t believe we’ve been traveling for six



days now and we still have only one of the five Sunstone petals! I believe with all my heart that finding the lost herds is my destiny. But if I'm so special, why is it taking me so long?

In the morning, Emma woke suddenly with the feeling that Wings was excited about something. When she found him, he was nibbling beach grass with the other horses—but there were five of them instead of four. The extra mare was an elegant bay with glittering gemstones in her forehead.

“Jewel!” cried Emma. She wanted to throw her arms around the legendary horse’s neck but decided bowing would be more respectful. “What a wonderful surprise!”

Emma’s glad shout woke Colm, Deru, and Johan and brought them stumbling out of bed to greet Jewel as well. Jewel nodded to each of them, then turned her deep brown eyes to Emma and sent everyone a mental image of a large pink and yellow flower.



“A hibiscus!” said Deru, clapping her hands. “Oh, it’s so pretty!” Immediately several smaller versions of the flower grew in the wreath in her hair.

“That flower holds the next Sunstone petal, doesn’t it?” asked Emma eagerly. “Please, can you take us to it?”

Jewel nodded and pointed her nose out to sea. Then she sent a mental image of them on their steeds following her as she trotted across the ocean toward an island. Twig and Cayenne snorted with surprise at the idea of walking on water, and Soot nervously backed up a few steps. But Emma could tell by the way Wings tilted his head that he felt more curious than frightened. *That’s my brave boy*, she thought proudly.

Nobody wanted breakfast after that, so they packed up their things in record time and followed Jewel down the beach to the water’s edge. With the perfectly smooth gait for which she was famous, Jewel walked right out onto the ocean as if it were nothing but a puddle in the

road. Then she turned and nodded back at the other horses, repeating her mental image of them following her.

“C’mon, Wings!” whispered Emma to her steed. “Let’s show ’em how it’s done!”

Wings trotted after Jewel so eagerly that he started to lose his balance when the water moved unexpectedly under his hooves. But he spread his huge white wings out to steady himself, and got the hang of waterwalking well enough to catch up to Jewel in just a few moments.

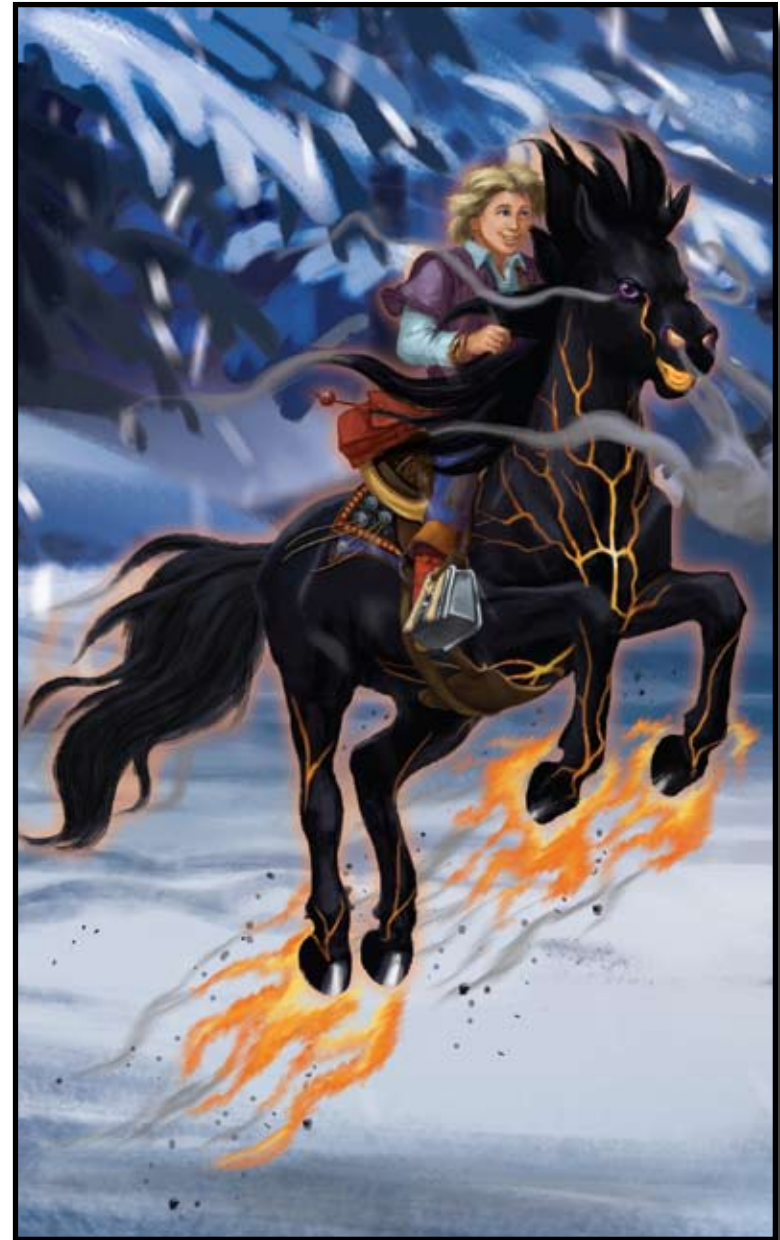
Twig took things more slowly and carefully. She sniffed at the water and waited for her incredibly long mane and tail, which normally floated in the air around her, to finish draping themselves safely out of the way in Deru’s lap. But once she got started, it took only a few unsteady steps before she too found her sea legs and walked out to the spot where Jewel and Wings stood floating on the water. When Soot hesitated, Cayenne went next, awkwardly but steadily making her way to Jewel.



After a long moment Soot stepped skittishly forward, but he shied away from the water at the last minute, the hot, orange streaks in his black coat pulsing brightly with fear. When Colm whispered something in his ear and patted his neck, he closed his eyes and put one fiery hoof onto the surf. But the heat made the water hiss and steam, and the unexpected sound sent Soot into full panic. He shot into the sky like a horse-shaped fireball, zigzagged crazily for a moment, then streaked away toward the southeast, where Jewel had pointed.

“We’ll meeeet yoouuu!” Colm called over his shoulder as Emma and Deru burst out laughing.

Jewel nickered to get their attention and started off across the sea. She began at a walk, but as the other horses got better at balancing on the water, she increased her speed to a trot, then a canter. As an expert rider, Emma was used to the normal up-and-down movement of riding a horse, but the ocean’s waves gave Wings’s gait an



extra sideways roll that forced her to pay more attention to her riding than she had in many years.

Before long Emma could see the island that Jewel had shown them shimmering in the distance: a bright ring of white sand lined with palm trees and crowned with a tall, double-peaked mountain Emma suspected might be a volcano. She breathed a sigh of relief when they got close enough to see that Colm and Soot were indeed waiting for them in the shallows by the beach. As he had after Soot's last panic attack, Colm splashed himself and Soot with water to cool down and get the worst of the soot off. For the first time, Emma noticed how patient and gentle Colm was with his quirky steed. *Too bad he's not like that with anybody else*, she thought.

"Hiya, slowpokes!" called Colm as Jewel led everyone else up onto the beach. His voice sounded like his usual teasing self, but his eyes begged Emma not to make fun of Soot.

"Hiya, wetpants!" Emma replied with a

wink. "Better get back in the saddle or the slowpokes will leave you behind!" Colm flashed her a quick grin, then hurriedly brushed the water from Soot's back and climbed back onto his steed.

Jewel checked to be sure Colm and Soot were ready, then took off down the beach at a gallop, wet sand spraying behind her hooves. As she led Emma and her friends around the island's eastern shoreline, the beach grew narrower, and jagged bits of volcanic rock stuck up among the palm trees at its edge. Emma gasped when she and Wings rounded one particularly large outcropping and saw some pointy things rising from the sea. On closer look, they seemed to be a cluster of narrow towers topped with giant seashells.

Emma slowed Wings down a little and made room for Deru and Twig to move up beside them. "What are those?" she asked her friend, pointing at the spires. "They look like castle towers, but that can't be Islandar Castle—according to Tyri's map, that's way down in the Celestial Deep."



“I think it *is* Islandar Castle,” said Deru, shading her eyes with a hand for a better look. “Like the tides, the castle moves with the moons, and the moons have been much closer together than usual lately, so their pull is extra strong. I didn’t know they could pull the top of the castle clear out of the water, but that must be what happened.”

Emma was still staring at the brightly colored towers when Wings’s excited whinny brought her attention to the large flower growing on the beach across from the castle. Emma’s heart leaped when Jewel eased them to a stop next to a pink and yellow flower whose single blossom was almost as big as her head. Reverently, the riders dismounted and they all formed a circle around the magical flower.

“The Ocean Hibiscus,” Johan said quietly. “It’s been a very long time since we planted this one, eh, Jewel?”

Jewel looked at Johan, and Emma got the feeling she was sending a mental image to him

alone. He smiled back at her. Then the legendary mare turned her gaze to Emma. Emma took a deep breath.

“Thank you, Jewel, for protecting the Ocean Hibiscus and for leading us to it,” Emma said formally. “Now it is time for it to be a Sunstone petal again. May I pick it?”

As Fiona had done, Jewel sent Emma a mental image of her hands picking the flower. Emma followed Jewel’s directions and the bloom came off into her hands, shining brighter and brighter until Emma had to look away. When the light faded, Emma looked back and saw another gold-edged cloisonné petal, this one faintly yellow. Grinning triumphantly, she held it up for the others to see, then carefully put it in her bag next to the pink one from the Desert Rose.

“Two petals down, three to go,” said Colm, counting them off on his fingers. “Where to next, Johan?”

Johan stared at the Sunstone still pinned to Emma’s vest. “Back the way we came,” he





said finally. “We really need to go south as well as west. But even with Jewel’s help we couldn’t walk across the whole Equinesian Sea, and there’s no way to get south by land until we get back to the Bluegrass Narrows.”

Jewel shook her head and sent a mental image of them all following her across the water toward the spires of Islandar Castle.

“Thank you very much for the invitation, Jewel,” said Emma. “But we have a long way to go, and we need to keep moving.”

Jewel tossed her head impatiently and repeated

the image more forcefully. “Okay, I trust you,” Emma told her. “We’ll follow.” She, Deru, and Johan mounted their steeds and rode out onto the water behind Jewel, while Soot and Colm circled slowly in the air above them.

To Emma’s surprise, Jewel stopped just short of the closest tower. Then she stamped her foot sharply on the water, making a splash that sent Soot reeling backwards in the air to avoid it. Immediately, the water in front of them began roiling and bubbling. Then a matched pair of deep-blue merhorses with delicate, sea-green fins suddenly burst out of the water, followed by another pair and another and another. Emma barely had time to notice all eight were harnessed together before they pulled a large boat from the depths behind them. Water poured out of the boat in waves that nearly took Wings, Twig, and Cayenne off their feet.

Emma held her breath in astonishment. The boat looked like an enormous wooden canoe with a wide, flat deck. The point of its tall

prow was carved to look like the head of a horse, and its stern curled like the tail of a sea dragon. From the middle of the boat rose a mast whose single sail bore the gemstone crest of Herd Islandar. Toward the back sat what looked like a little house with a low, thatched roof. Gold paint on the side of the boat identified it as the *Island Jewel*.

As Emma stared at the boat, a large black raven flew down from the top of the mast and settled himself on the side of the boat closest to her. Instantly a gangplank slid out and floated on the water right in front of Emma and Wings.

“All aboard! All aboard!” croaked the raven hoarsely.

Emma’s brain suddenly clicked back on and she turned to Jewel. “Is this your boat? Can it take us to the mainland?” she asked. Jewel nodded, looking proud of herself, and Emma blew the legendary mare a big kiss of thanks.

“Shake a leg! Shake a leg!” called the raven. “Cap’n’s orders! Cap’n’s orders!”

At Emma’s urging, wide-eyed Wings climbed the gangplank and walked onto the deck, followed by Twig and Cayenne. Soot glided to one of his more graceful landings next to Wings, looking relieved to have something solid between him and the water. When they were all aboard, the riders dismounted and everyone waved goodbye to Jewel as the gangplank slid itself back up into the boat.

Emma looked around for the boat’s crew but didn’t see anyone on board except the raven, who flew to her shoulder. “Where is the captain?” she asked him cautiously.

“At yer service, at yer service,” cawed the raven, puffing his chest feathers. “What’s yer bearin’? What’s yer bearin’?”

“My what?” asked Emma confusedly.

“Your bearing,” said Johan. “He wants to know which way you want to go. Southwest, please, Captain. We’ll probably want to dock at Midhaven.”

“Sou’west, sou’west! Aye aye!” said the



raven. He flew out over the merhorses in front of the ship, bellowing, “Shove off! Shove off!”

In perfect harmony, the team of merhorses began swimming and the *Island Jewel* moved forward—slowly at first, then faster and faster. As the merhorses pulled the boat swiftly westward around the island, Emma and her friends moved to the front for a better view of the team. Emma noticed that the raven had perched on the carved horse head and was busy shouting things like “Four degrees port! Four degrees port!” and “Mind t’lee shore! Mind t’lee shore!” None of it made much sense to Emma, but the merhorses clearly knew how to follow the captain’s orders. Once Emma even saw the sail adjust itself in response to his hollering.

When the *Island Jewel* reached the western side of the island and headed out to sea, Emma felt her stomach lurch and became keenly aware there wasn’t anything in it. Colm poked her in the arm and whined, “I’m starving. Help me find something to eat on this boat.”

“Mess abaft t’cabin,” croaked the raven. “Mess abaft t’cabin.” When even Johan looked at him blankly, the raven rolled his eyes and pointed a wing at the back of the boat, behind the little house. There they found several barrels and crates of neatly packed food for people and horses: oats, dried papayas and bananas, thick crackers, firm yellow cheeses sealed in wax, and jars of plumberry jam. Near the crates, a heavy, shallow metal tub on short legs had a pile of hot coals burning inside of it. An iron kettle swinging over the coals contained something that simmered enticingly and smelled like seafood chowder.

“Lunch is served!” whooped Colm, grabbing a wooden bowl from the stack in one of the crates.

For the rest of that day and all of the next, the *Island Jewel* sailed through wide-open seas with no land in sight. At first Emma enjoyed the chance to relax, and Deru’s many sea tales of cranky, star-shaped electric sea stellies and impish



glimmer eels kept her and Colm both laughing. But by bedtime on the second day, Emma had begun to miss riding and was almost as eager as Soot to be back on land. As she curled up in one of the hammocks hanging in the little house, she willed the boat to reach Midhaven by morning.

Emma got her wish. She woke when the raven called “Land ahoy! Land ahoy!” and almost fell out of her hammock in her rush to peer into the rosy dawn light and see for herself. By the time the boat sailed into the gentle waters of a narrow bay, she had everyone else up and packing their saddlebags. They finished getting ready just as the boat’s mooring lines unreeled and secured themselves to a barnacle-crusted pier. Emma gave her thanks and farewells to the raven and his merhorse team, then rode Wings down the gangplank.

“Now this is more like it—almost a real city,” said Colm as Soot stepped onto the pier next to Wings. “Bet you could buy almost anything here.” Emma looked around and decided

he was right. Midhaven was nearly twice the size of Canter Hollow, with at least a dozen long piers dotted along its bustling bayside harbor. Fishing vessels, trading ships, and passenger boats all jostled for space, and even at this early hour the number of people and horses going to and fro between the harbor and the city rivaled the crowd at Bella’s Ball.

“We’re not here to go shopping,” Johan reminded them gently. “Come on, this way.”

Emma wished they did have time to stop at several of the little shops they passed, especially the one whose window showcased a gorgeous green wool riding suit trimmed with gold embroidery. But then a young woman selling newspapers on a streetcorner recognized Emma and cried, “It’s her! Emma Rolanddotter!” Everyone on the street turned to stare at Emma.

“Sorry, I can’t stop. Valkyrie business,” said Emma quickly, giving them all a weak little wave and urging Wings to pick up his pace. Under her breath she added, “Johan, can you get us

out of here fast?”

“I’ll try,” Johan replied with a hint of a smile. Before the crowd could block them in, he and Cayenne quickly ducked onto a side street and led Emma and her friends on a zigzagging route that took them swiftly out of the busy business district and into the sleepier surrounding neighborhood. But Emma couldn’t relax until they had passed the last of the city’s many houses and come out into the surrounding farmland, where small cottages and barns were separated from the road by thickly planted orchards and wide green fields.

“One of these days,” Colm told Emma as they rode, “you’re going to have to figure out that being famous isn’t some kind of curse.”

“It is when you’re in a hurry,” insisted Emma, glancing nervously behind them. “Do we have to pass through any more big cities like that one?” she asked Johan.

“Well, this *is* the main road going west from Midhaven,” Johan replied. “None of the

other cities will be as big as the port, but they won’t all be tiny villages either.”

“Is there any way we can go around them?” asked Emma worriedly. “Without losing much time, I mean?”

“There might be a way to do it that gains us time, if I recall correctly,” said Johan, looking thoughtful. “But we have to reach one of the Grass Sea lakes first.”

“The grassy lakes?” asked Colm confusedly.

“They’re lakes in the Grass Sea,” said Deru, pronouncing the name carefully. “That’s what they call the plains here, because the grass grows on top of the sea.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” said Colm warily.

“No, it really does,” confirmed Deru, draping a lock of Twig’s long green mane over her hand to illustrate. “The grass and its roots grow in such dense tangles that you can walk right on top of them and never notice, but the dirt layer beneath isn’t very thick at all. Under



that is a hidden sea, like the Equinesian Sea but colder and cloudier and greener, and fresh water instead of salt. In lots of places the grass layer hasn't grown over all of it, so there are pockets of water open to the air. People call them lakes, though they're really just the parts of the sea you can see." She giggled.

Deru's Grass Sea stories continued long enough that she was still going strong when Johan led them onto a side road edged with thick, yellow-green grass that grew almost as tall as Wings's shoulder. Minutes later, they reached the shore of a rippling lake big enough that Emma could well believe it was part of a larger sea. Johan dismounted, then took his hand shears from his bag and cut a length of hollow reed from a bunch growing at the lake's edge. Kneeling, he blew through the reed into the lake, sending up a mass of bubbles.

"What's that about?" asked Colm curiously.

"I'm calling some old friends of mine—Sunflower horses who didn't go into hiding with

the rest of the herd," said Johan as he stood back up. "If they're here, they'll want to help us."

The lake's surface bubbled and splashed, and then two green merstallions lifted their heads above the water and nickered in greeting. One had a greenish brown mane and a headdress decorated with a plume of cattails. The other had a silver mane and a headdress with a plume of reeds just like the one Johan had used.

"These are my friends, Cattail and Reed," said Johan, gesturing to the newcomers. "And this," he said to the water horses, "is Emma Roland, Sigga's heir, and her friends. We are looking for Herd Sunflower, and we need to cross the Grass Sea as quickly as possible. Can you help us?"

Both merstallions nodded and disappeared beneath the surface. When they came back up a few minutes later, they were harnessed together. Behind them they pulled a pair of enormous bubbles stuck together in the middle.

"Yay!" squealed Deru, clapping her hands.





“I’ve always wanted to ride in a bubble coach! It’s supposed to be the best way to see the Grass Sea from underneath.”

“Is it... safe?” asked Emma. She glanced over at Soot, who stamped his feet nervously. “How will we breathe?”

“Oh, the bubbles are magic—they let in what they want and keep out what they want,” explained Deru happily. “So they can let us in, and air for us to breathe, but keep out water and fish and other stuff. In fact, we’ll be safer in there than we are now, because nothing bad can get at us in there. And we’ll be faster, too, because no matter what’s inside them, the bubbles stay as light as air.”

Colm stroked Soot’s neck reassuringly, but Emma could tell he wasn’t too sure about the bubble coach. “Ladies first,” he said.

“Why, thank you, Colm!” said Deru. “What a gentleman you are!” She dismounted smoothly, then calmly led Twig right through the wall into the first bubble. Once inside, she waved

excitedly to Emma and mouthed, “Come on!”

Emma followed Deru’s lead, trying not to let her own nervousness disturb Wings, who seemed eager to try this fun new thing. Holding her breath and closing her eyes, Emma stepped off the shore and through the bubble wall, which felt a bit like walking through a damp, tissue-thin sponge. Inside, the air felt a little cooler and moister and the sunlight was slightly less bright, but everything else seemed perfectly normal. Wings jumped in after Emma, and he and Twig moved to the second bubble to make room as Johan and Cayenne entered next.

Emma worried that Soot would panic and burst into flame again, but whatever Colm said to him seemed to have soothed his nerves a little. He put one hoof into the bubble, then pulled it out and shook it. Then he put his nose in and paused, sniffing the air inside until he was satisfied enough to come the rest of the way in. When Colm came in after him, Soot relaxed a bit more, and he and Cayenne joined the other horses in

the second bubble.

Emma startled when the floor of their bubble began to move next to her feet. She jumped back and watched the bubble reshape itself to include four transparent, high-backed seats facing each other. She sat down gingerly on the nearest one and found that it was quite cushy and comfortable, with a velvety surface and arms at exactly the right height. In the bubble that held the horses, the walls formed stalls, two on each side.

“Pretty cool,” said Colm, sitting down across from Emma and next to Deru. “All we need now is—”

Colm swallowed the rest of his sentence as Cattail and Reed dove and pulled the bubbles under the water after them. Emma’s stomach lurched into her throat for a moment, but she eventually got used to the bubble coach’s motion, which felt like a cross between the *Island Jewel* and a roller coaster. And its view of the Grass Sea was every bit as amazing as Deru predicted. For quite some time they all stared in wonder through the clear



walls of the bubble, watching fat neon frogs, little snail-like things, and all kinds of fish speed by in the murky green water. Every now and then beams of sunlight shone down from the “lakes” above like bright trees in an undersea forest.

“As I was gonna say,” Colm said eventually, breaking the silence, “all we need now is lunch.”

“Don’t worry,” said Johan. “I’ve still got plenty of cheese, crackers, and fruit in my pack.”

As they ate, Emma said, “I’ve been thinking...”

“Uh oh,” said Colm impishly.

Deru quickly shut him up by stuffing more crackers in his mouth. “Go on,” she encouraged.

“Well, so far both of the Sunstone petals have been in plants growing near the castles of legendary horses. Fiona helped us with the first one and Jewel with the second,” said Emma.

“So you think we’ll find the next two near

the homes of Thunder and Nike?” said Johan thoughtfully. “I honestly can’t remember if that’s where I hid them, but it seems like something I’d do. And if the Sunstone keeps pointing us due west, we *will* eventually end up in the Midwinter Mountains, where Thunder lives.”

“How can a flower grow up there in all that snow and ice?” asked Colm doubtfully.

“I know!” said Deru, her face brightening. “I bet it grows under the Everspring Pines. There’s a whole forest of them up there, and it’s always springtime beneath their branches.”

“She’s right,” said Johan. “If the next Sunstone flower is up there, that’s where it’ll be.”

“But if we can figure that out, so can Ivenna,” said Colm. “And dark, wintry mountains sound like just her sort of place.”

Emma suddenly found it hard to breathe. “Do you think Ivenna knows where we’re going? What if she gets there first?” she asked in a voice pitched higher than usual.

“Nothing we can do now but get there



as fast as we can and be prepared for whatever might happen,” said Johan quietly.

That was not the answer Emma wanted to hear.



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