

Minna

Village of Fennig

The nearly three weeks since Alyn saw the spirits were difficult in the Hunter's home. Their mother spent much of the time alone in her room, and when she appeared, her face had the drawn quality of someone fighting a terrible illness. It had always been difficult for her with Minna nearby. Minna could only guess what she was going through now. To give her some relief, she spent as much time as she could outside during the days, hiking in the woods nearby, or working in her father's small workshop next door. She considered taking the pack she readied and her bow, and heading to the falls, but she couldn't leave her sister alone.

Alyn eventually gave up trying to talk to their mother and spent most of her time sitting on the porch, wrapped in a quilt, trying to enjoy the last of the nice fall weather. Minna took her to the glade every day to commune with the *lan'and* and give their mother a break. Though her sister tried to participate, she seemed to resent the spirits now. Minna hadn't tried to talk to the *lan'and* again. The memory of the last time was too fresh.

It was unsustainable, they all knew it. Their mother couldn't live like this. Something would have to change. Though no one said it, they all knew they were waiting. Their father promised to be back in a month, and though it had only been three weeks, Minna often found herself escaping the silent house to stare down the road toward the east. She could barely face Alyn's disappointment each time she returned to the house alone. On some of these days, Minna found her mother in the distance, an old shawl wrapped around her shoulders, standing in the center of the highway, staring toward the wilderness. She returned to the house, hiding red-rimmed from her daughters. What her father could do, Minna didn't know, and she suspected they all felt the same way. It was just that they didn't know what else to do.

Early one morning, Minna was in the root cellar, organizing the winter larder, Alyn's quiet, sleepy presence in the room above, keeping her company. When she sensed someone approaching the house, she was surprised when she recognized Jason. That she could sense him was not a surprise. She supposed, as with her father, she had grown used to it without being aware what she was feeling. But it was unusual for Jason to visit, out of the blue. She sat back on her heels, sensing him coming closer, a guilty smile smoothing her features. Even from a distance, Jason's buoyant personality shone through. For a mad moment, she pictured Jason whisking her away from the gloomy house. To where, she didn't care. Maybe that small cozy house, from her dreams. Her smile fell away and she pressed her lips together. It was just a fantasy. And anyway, though it would be good for her mother, she couldn't leave her sister right now.

When the knock came on their door, she was surprised at the quickening in Alyn's rhythm. It was the first sign of life her sister had shown in days. Minna climbed the steps to find the common room awash in morning sunlight. Jason stood just inside the door, teasing Alyn about her sleep tangled hair. Alyn hugged the edge of the door, laughing and attempting to pat her hair flat.

"Minna!" he said when he saw her. "Brought your bow back." He leaned the bow beside the door. "How did your trip to the falls work out?"

"It was...It was wonderful. I shot a turkey with the new bow. First trip." Standing shoulder to shoulder with her sister, she couldn't help grinning at the excited ripples coming from her.

"Morning Fra Hunter," Jason said to their mother who emerged, and stood with a small smile in the doorway to her bedroom.

“Morning, Jason.”

Jason cocked his head and gave Minna a sly grin. “Now Minna, don’t tell me you don’t remember what tonight is?”

Caught off guard, Minna exchanged a confused look with Alyn.

“Oh, no. I don’t want to hear any excuses. You made a promise and promises must be kept.” When she still looked confused, Jason gave her a big grin, leaned toward her and said, “The harvest festival is tonight, Minna.”

The harvest festival. She completely forgot. She gave Alyn a guilty look and started to shake her head. “Oh, I—”

“Oh, no you don’t!” Alyn said. “You are not going to mope around at home when you could go to the festival with Jason.”

“But—” Minna started.

“But nothing,” Alyn said. “What good will it do for you to stay home?”

Jason pointed at Alyn and said, “You should listen to your sister, Minna. She knows what’s good for you.”

“Are you sure?” Minna asked. “You’ll be okay, alone with...” She glanced at Jason then cut her eyes to their mother.

“Yes,” Alyn said firmly. She leaned close and whispered, “It’s time me and Mama talk, anyway.” She gave a little shrug. “Maybe it will be easier if it’s just the two of us.”

Minna glanced at their mother, a grin slowly wiping the worried furrows from her brow. Jason was watching the exchange with a small frown on his face. “Okay,” she said.

“Excellent!” he said. “Now, I promised I would bring everything, so just bring yourself.”

“Jason, why don’t you come in for a cup of tea,” their mother said.

“I would love a cup of tea, Fra Hunter.”

Alyn nudged Minna in the ribs, giving Minna a wide-eyed look as Jason made himself comfortable by the hearth and their mother swung the kettle over the fire. Minna closed the door, and stood with her back to it, listening to Jason relating the latest town gossip. When he told them about an incident between Agatha and her neighbors over a missing cow, her mother actually laughed. Not wanting to spoil the moment, Minna slipped out the door and settled onto her father’s favorite spot on the bench by the door. She watched the *lan’and* drifting through the trees across the highway and hugged herself against the morning chill. She breathed the musty scents of the forest in autumn and sighed it out. It felt like the first deep breath she had taken in days. Letting her head fall back, she closed her eyes.

Though he was only there for a short time, his irrepressible cheer was like a ray of warm sunshine in the dreary house. They all felt it. After he left, Minna shut the door and turned toward Alyn and their mother. They stared at each other, suppressing grins, until they all broke into giggles. The unexpected reprieve from the prison they made for themselves, brought them all to tears. For the rest of the afternoon, Alyn attempted to cajole Minna into letting her dress her and fix her hair. Even their mother became involved, laughing with them and offering suggestions from across the room. In the end, the only thing Minna would relent to was to allow Alyn to wash her hair, brush it out and braid it with a traditional ribbon. The mood in their home when Minna left was lighter than it had been since papa left.

The days were already growing short and the brightest stars were just beginning to appear when Minna approached Fennig. Arriving at the base of the hill where the road turned before descending into the village, Minna stood in the shadows at the edge of the highway, gazing down

into the square, wondering how Alyn and their mother were getting along. Wood smoke and the scent of roasting meat wafted from the center of town. She ran her finger over the ribbon embedded in her braids. It smelled of bayberry.

How many times had she stood here, separate and alone, a voyeur into the lives she imagined *they* lived. The normal people. A desperate longing would sometimes come over her on those occasions. Now, she wasn't sure what she felt. She climbed the hill, and turned to watch the revelry in the square below. It wasn't the distance between her life and theirs that changed, it was her perception of that distance. She was not the same girl who visited the market only a month ago. She was still standing apart, looking down into their world, but when she searched for the longing she felt before, she couldn't find it. Instead, what she found was a solidifying sense of purpose.

She was a *saa'myn*. What that meant, she didn't know yet, but she knew she wouldn't find her answers in Fennig. So many things — her father's revelations, the intrusion of the Empire into Fennig, her sister seeing the spirits and their mother's pain — were telling her the time was near. But time for what? An owl, lingering in the mountains late in the season, as if it were waiting for something, hooted mournfully.

Shaking herself out of her revelry, she looked up. The *lan'and* seemed to be enjoying the festivities. Though they wouldn't normally enter the village, they gathered at the boundary, dancing among the trees that crowded the back of the hill. Remembering the awareness she felt when she talked to them, she wondered what, if anything, they understood about humans. Were they celebrating the harvest along with the villagers?

She felt Jason coming and allowed him to approach her unnoticed. He stepped up behind her, close enough that she felt his breath in her hair. She smiled and turned to face him.

“Hello, Min.” He was looking down at her and she was surprised at how much taller he was than her. When did that happen?

“Hello, Jason.” A flush rose on her throat.

He stepped back, bowed slightly and offered his arm. She laughed and took it, and they walked up to the crown of the hill. Laughter and the sound of musicians tuning their instruments drifted on the gentle breeze. Jason took a blanket from a basket he carried and spread it on the grass. He pulled bread, cheese, sausage, honey and a flask of what Minna suspected was his father’s mead, from the basket and arranged it in the center of the blanket. Lastly, he removed a small oil lamp and lit it.

When he finished, he stood and bowed, gesturing to the blanket with a flourish. “Your highness, your table is ready.”

Minna laughed, put her hand to her chest and said, “Oh, sir, I don’t know that I’m dressed for such a fancy feast as this.” She looked down at herself. She dressed like her father, clothes she made herself, appropriate for traipsing through the forest. She wore a tunic, cinched at the waist by a belt on which she carried her small hunting knife, pants of soft leather, tucked into moccasin boots and a light traveling cloak. She peeked up at him, her cheeks warming, suddenly shy in front of a boy she knew all her life.

Jason was watching her, a small smile in place of his usual playful smirk. “I wouldn’t have you any other way, Min.”

Minna lifted her cloak to her sides, attempted a curtsy, and said, “Well, then, good sir, I find the accommodations quite acceptable.”

Agmar
Village of Fennig, Village Square

Agmar was watching the crowd when Loden approached him at a run. They met two weeks before and made their plans. Whatever Marie said, he was sure the girl was planning something and tonight, with the entire village gathered, would be the perfect time for whatever it was. Unfortunately, they hadn't seen Minna in weeks, though they took turns watching for her where the road entered the village. Up on that hill where she sat sometimes, brooding. Agmar suggested they go to her house, but Jesper and Loden argued against it. The villagers would not stand for an attack on the family. They could wait for her to come to them.

"She's here!" Loden exclaimed, breathing heavily. "She's with the blacksmith's boy at the top of the hill."

Agmar's heart began to race. Finally! "Get the boys! And keep it quiet!"

Minna

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Minna sat on the blanket, tucking her legs under her, expecting Jason to sit across from her. Instead, he stepped across the blanket and sat beside her, their knees touching. Minna's breath caught. She looked up and found Jason's face only inches away, the minty warmth of his breath on her cheek. His usual smile was gone, replaced by an expression that asked a question. Music was wafting up from the square. Minna searched his eyes. A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth and she gave him the slightest of nods. The smile she loved returned and Minna let her gaze drop.

Jason stood and offered his hand. "Let's dance."

Minna frowned up at him. "What? I don't dance. I don't know how to dance." She looked down the hill where the villagers were engaged in one of the traditional dances. She watched

them dance before, of course, but she never had a chance to try the dances...at least not with anyone other than Alyn. She looked up at Jason's smiling face.

"Come on, Min! There's no one here but us. There's no reason to be embarrassed."

A smile grew slowly on her face. She took his hand and he pulled her to her feet. Minna glanced back at the dancers, then looked down at her feet.

"No, up here, Min. Look at me." Jason took her other hand.

Minna looked into his eyes, wishing she could wipe her sweaty palms.

"Like this," he said. He dipped his right hand and lifted his right foot.

Minna tried to mirror his movements and, before she knew it, they were off. It was all she could do to keep up, but Jason's touch was sure, and he led her confidently. They spun and skipped around the crown of the hill until Minna was breathless and flushed. As the song ended, they spun one last time, then fell in a laughing, sweaty heap. They lay on their backs, catching their breath, their fingers still intertwined. The *lan'and*, who had joined them while they danced, retreated into the branches.

"Oh ho, what have we here?" a jeering voice said from the shadows. They stood quickly, searching for the speaker. Jason pulled Minna behind him.

Peering around Jason's shoulder, Minna recognized Agatha's son, Agmar. He was flanked by Jesper and Loden and some other men, emerging from the shadows that obscured the northern edge of the village. The men spread out and started climbing the hill.

Agmar sneered at Minna and said, "I heard what you did to my mother the other day." Some of the others nodded, calling out their agreement.

"What are you talking about?" Jason said. "Minna didn't do anything to your mother. I saw her in the square today."

Rage twisted Agmar's face. "It's not because she didn't want to!"

Loden, standing by Agmar's side, looked directly at Minna and pointed at her. "It's time we did something about her before it's too late! Step aside, Jason."

Minna took a step back, ready to flee into the forest when a rock struck her behind her ear. She cried out and fell to her knees, her arms up to shield her head.

"Minna!" Jason knelt, resting his hand on her shoulder. "What happened?"

Minna looked up into his eyes just as another stone struck Jason on the temple. He dropped to the ground, limp, his legs twisted beneath his body.

"No!" Minna cried and knelt beside his body, cupping his cheeks with trembling hands. "Jason, Jason, wake up!" She looked up. Some of the other men hesitated, surprised and uncertain expressions on their faces. But not Agmar. He wore a gloating smile. He glanced at his companions and said, "Come on, let's get this over with."

Hot prickles sizzled across Minna's skin. For years, she endured abuse from people like these without complaint, never rising to their snubs or insults. She wouldn't even allow herself to become angry, afraid of what would happen to them. Not this time. She welcomed the first turbulent breaths of the storm stirring behind her eyes, the storm she fought so hard to quell in the past. The *lan'and* descended from the trees, swirling around her in a frenzy, and in flash, she knew what to do. Focusing on her center, she called.

The spirits roared into her mind and the storm erupted. Gasping, she was forced to catch herself on Jason's chest, squeezing her eyes shut and focusing on what was happening inside her. She extended her awareness tentatively into the storm, and found, not the howling entities, careless of her small spirit she imagined the last time. Instead, she sensed curiosity and reassurance. Encouraged, she ventured further into the maelstrom. Huddled against the gale, she

quailed, until she *heard* a rhythmic note from her center. Like a beacon on a dark night, it drew her on, until, coaxed along by the spirits, she emerged into the quiet eye in the center of the vortex. From deep in her center, bathed in the joyful tempest of the *lan'and*, she finally understood. She *was* a small, quiet spirit. The stillness at the center of the storm was her. The pressure she always felt before was gone, and in its place an intoxicating potential. It was exhilarating!

She opened her eyes, surprised to find Jason's lifeless body beneath her. Hearing the men approaching, she dragged her eyes away from Jason's face. There were fewer than before. Agmar hesitated when he saw her looking at him. When she lurched to her feet, he startled and took a step back. They locked eyes for the space of heartbeat, then Agmar drew his arm back and hurled at stone at Minna. Minna threw her hands towards him and screamed.

The potential bottled up inside her exploded outward, an immense pressure wave that crashed into the men still on the hill, lifting them and throwing them down the slope. The wave lifted anything not anchored to the ground, flinging it through the air. When the wave impacted the buildings at the eastern edge of the village, windows shattered, doors splintered and were blown inward. Loden smashed into the wall of a building, then crumpled to the ground where he lay still.

Minna saw all this in a horrifying flash, as she crumpled and fell over Jason's body.

She drifted. The *lan'and* were gone, leaving her feeling alone and empty. Slowly, her awareness returned, and she dragged herself up from the darkness. When she opened her eyes, she realized that only moments had passed. The people who surrounded her were scattered around the base of the hill. Some of them were groaning and moving feebly, but many of them lay still. Evidence of the magnitude of the blast was everywhere. None of the buildings had

escaped damage. A large wagon lay on its side. Oil from a lantern one of the men was carrying drenched the corner of a building and it was burning. The ground was littered with debris.

Feeling slow, as if she were moving through molasses, she took in the devastation. “No,” she whispered. Staggering to her feet, she took a stumbling step and tripped over Jason’s body, falling into the remains of the meal he so carefully arranged for them. He lay as still as a corpse, blood smeared across his temple and leaking into his hair. “Oh no, no, Jason.” She crawled to his side and knelt, her trembling hands hovering above his face. “Jason, wake up.” Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Sounds were muffled, but she heard voices and looked up to see a crowd approaching on the road from the village square. Some of the men caught in the explosion were revived enough to stand and were tending to others. One of them looked at her, pointed and yelled, “Witch! She’s a witch! Get her!”

Minna put her hands up as if to ward herself from the words and the man flinched. “No!” she entreated. “No! I didn’t...” Her gaze swept over the scene, settling on the crowd approaching from the festival. She looked down at Jason again and reached for him when the cry of, “Witch! Get her!” sounded again and was joined by others.

She looked up and saw several people, fear and rage on their faces approaching warily. “No,” she whispered, then stood shakily and backed toward the trees. Stones struck her on her chest and thigh and she cried out. She took one last look at Jason, then fled into the forest. Running blindly, she ignored the branches that whipped her face and arms, chased by the voices rising behind her as the crowd gathered at the edge of the wood.

She ran without thinking, needing to escape, to put distance between herself and the image of Jason laying lifeless at her feet. The voices grew more distant, but she ran on until the

branches above became so thick that she could no longer see the shadowy trunks of the trees. Still she ran on until she slammed into a tree. She hit the ground hard and lay gasping for breath. As soon as she could draw a breath again, she sat up, tense, listening for sounds of pursuit. It was quiet, not even the sounds of the forest animals broke the silence. Minna stared into the darkness and an overwhelming, crushing despair fell on her. She gasped, then drew in a heaving breath, bringing on a searing pain in her chest where she impacted the tree. She opened her mouth as if to scream, but, breathless, she could make no sound. Squeezing her eyes closed, she clenched her body. When the dam broke, she was unable to stop the wracking sobs that convulsed her, despite the pain in her chest. She hugged herself, gripping her arms, as if to prevent herself from flying apart and then a low moan escaped her throat. “No, no, no, nooo!” The memory of Jason falling to the ground played over and over in her mind. She wept until she had no strength left and then, mercifully, her mind shut down and she slept.

Malefica Dierdre

City of Lachton, Seidi House

Deirdre flipped idly through the pages of the treatise on the *saa'myn*. She read it so many times, she practically knew it by heart. Yet, she couldn't help hoping, somehow, to find something she didn't see before. It was frustrating, hinting at deeper truths, but omitting the crucial details she needed. She was increasingly convinced the answers she needed lay with the *saa'myn*. Perhaps a deeper understanding of the spirits would unlock the secrets the ancient sisters understood. According to the histories, Ione, the Seidi's greatest hero, wielded such power that no one questioned her right to rule the Empire. With that power, Deirdre could right many wrongs. Until recently, she thought the possibility of such power beyond reach, but perhaps that was not the case.

Unfortunately, she was running out of time. Briana would force a confrontation soon, she was sure of it, and what would she do then. Was she willing to start a civil war within the Seidi? Until recently, Briana and her allies seemed content to allow Deirdre to remain Malefica. After all, it was Deirdre's allies at the front, who were holding the Kaileuk back. What changed? She didn't know, but she felt the Emperor's hand in it. She let her head drop, resting her forehead on the back of her hand. When she tumbled into bed late each night, her worries clamored for her attention, troubling her sleep. If she could just rest for a few moments...

A knock at her door jolted her awake. She shook herself and rubbed her face before saying, "Yes, come in."

The door swung open and the young novice serving as her assistant in Lachton stepped through. "Excuse me, Malefica, but there is an Inquisitor Harold Wolfe who is rather insistent on seeing you, immediately."

Deirdre frowned. "Inquisitor? Wolfe?" She shook her head and said through a yawn, "Did he say what he wanted?"

"No. He refused to tell me, but wouldn't let me put him off. He said you would want to hear what he has to say, and he has a letter from Sister Nia."

"Nia? Did he give it to you?"

"No, mistress."

Deirdre closed the book. "Very well, show him in." She stood, gathering herself, trying to shake the fuzziness from her head. A visit from an inquisitor was rarely good news.

The novice entered again, followed by a man in an inquisitor's uniform. Deirdre didn't know what to make of him. She was sure Malleus Hoerst, a stickler for appearances, would not approve. A rumpled uniform, dark circles under his eyes and several day's growth of beard

contributed to an overall unkempt appearance. Yet, he entered the room with a casual grace that belied his appearance, eyes wandering the room with interest, apparently in no hurry despite his insistence on speaking with her. When he looked at her, his pale gray eyes struck her, too light for the Volloch caste. Now, she remembered who he was. He was the Volbroch inquisitor. This was very mysterious. If Malleus Hoerst had official business with her, he would not send this man.

He stopped in front of her desk, nodding a greeting, a small smile at the corners of his mouth. “Malefica, good afternoon. I don’t believe we’ve ever met.”

Deirdre watched him, expecting him to grow uncomfortable under her scrutiny, as most people did. Instead, he stood, relaxed, returning her gaze, his smile not faltering. “No, we haven’t met.” He dipped his head in acknowledgment, but remained silent. “I have heard of you, of course.”

He lifted his eyebrows, nodding slowly. “Yes, I’ve heard of you, as well.”

Deirdre frowned. Something about the way he said it suggested the words meant more than their face value. “Has anyone told you, you don’t look much like an inquisitor, I mean, besides the uniform?”

His grin widened. “Indeed, they have. It must be true as I hear it a lot lately.”

She studied him, lifting an eyebrow. “What can I do for you, Inquisitor? I understand you have a letter for me from Nia?”

“Ah, yes.” He fished a crumpled envelope from a pocket and handed it over. “Nia is a delight. Seeing a former member of my escort. What are the odds of that, do you imagine?”

Again, there was an odd note to his voice, but Deirdre, curious about the letter, ignored it. “Yes, she speaks highly of Joseph.” She sat and gestured to a chair. “Have a seat, Inquisitor.”

He sat, resting his hands on the armrests, right leg crossed over his left. “Please, you can call me Harold, Malefica.”

Deirdre turned the letter over, examining it. The handwriting looked right, and it had Nia’s seal. She broke the seal and extracted the letter.

Dierdre,

*I’m writing this letter to introduce Inquisitor Harold Wolfe. I wish we could
his information prevents me from waiting until you return. He can explain it to you
but I don’t sense any deception in him and Joseph speaks for him. You should make*

Yours,

Nia

It was frustratingly brief. She looked up to find Harold watching her. “Nia says I am to trust you.”

“I assumed as much.”

Deirdre looked back at the letter. Nia wrote that she didn’t sense any deception in this man. One of Nia’s many gifts was the ability to detect lies, but it was one of her weaker gifts and she had been fooled before.

“Does the Malleus know you’re here?”

For some reason, this made him chuckle. “Malefica, I’m afraid I don’t have a lot of time. How about I just tell you what I came to say, and you can make up your mind?”

“Okay.”

Harold took a deep breath. “Nia tells me you have an interest in the *Alle ’oss* witches.”

Deirdre glanced involuntarily at the book on her desk, alarm bells going off in her head. From most of other people, this would be a dangerous question, but from an inquisitor... Nia said to trust him. She pursed her lips then looked at him steadily and said, "Yes, that's true."

"Can I ask why?"

"You did say you were in a hurry, didn't you?"

Harold nodded. "Yes, I did, didn't I. Malefica, are you aware what the Inquisition does to the *Alle'oss* witches they bring to the Inquisition compound?"

Deirdre could not have guessed what this man was here to talk to her about, but even so, the question surprised her. No one besides Nia knew of her disgust at the Inquisition's practices. If someone else knew, she would expect them to send more than this one inquisitor. But perhaps Hoerst was probing, searching for weaknesses. "I am aware what the Inquisition does in Argren. We get regular reports from the Malleus."

With a small shake of his head, he pursed his lips, then said, "Forgive me, Malefica, but that sounds like a carefully worded deflection. I didn't ask about Argren. What do those reports say happens to the witches when they arrive in Brennan?"

Deirdre hesitated, allowing her irritation to subside and noting the sudden tension in his face as he waited for her answer. What was he looking for? "They're executed...in accordance with Church doctrine." She winced slightly as she said, "The reports are quite detailed."

She detected the slightest narrowing of his eyes, before his face relaxed and he turned his gaze to the bookshelves behind her head. "Yes, that is what everyone believes. That's what I believed, until recently." He focused on her face again. "Turns out that is not what happens to them, at least, not all of them."

Deirdre stared at him. "What are you saying?"

“They hold some of the girls in the prison, unharmed, before they transport them somewhere in the Northern Mountains.” He shrugged. “Where, I don’t know.”

“For what purpose? We’ve heard nothing about this.”

Harold grimaced. “I’m afraid I don’t know that, either. All I know for sure is that Malleus Hoerst is behind it. His personal guard serve as escorts when the prisoners are transported, and they are very secretive about it.”

“How do you know this?”

“I’ve checked the records, seen the prisoners and talked to the guards. There is no doubt.”

Deirdre’s mind whirled. So much of her time and resources were devoted to finding out what the Emperor and Briana were up to. Never once did she suspect Hoerst. Not that there was any love lost between them, but she always considered Hoerst a bit of a toady. But what was this man’s motivation? An inquisitor, a man she didn’t know, came all the way to Lachton to tell her this? What did he want from her? “Why are you telling me this?”

He shrugged, the weary nonchalance back. “Nia said you would want to know.”

For a man in a hurry, he didn’t seem able to come to the point. “Harold, what is your specific concern? Are you concerned that the witches are escaping justice or are you concerned about what Malleus Hoerst is doing with them?”

His face tightened. “Justice. Malefica, do you think what happens in Argren is just?”

A flash of emotion. That was interesting. “It’s the law, is it not? To suggest otherwise is heresy. I would expect an inquisitor to know that.”

He looked up at the ceiling, took a deep breath, blew it out, then returned his gaze to Deirdre. “Yes, I know the law. What I’m asking is do you believe it’s *just* to steal children from their families, drag them to the prison and kill them...even if it’s in Daga’s name.”

Deirdre couldn't reconcile what he was saying with anything she knew about the Inquisition. She stared at him. "But you're an Inquisitor."

He lifted his hands, palms up, a hint of exasperation leaking into this voice. "Yes, I'm an Inquisitor. Witness and accomplice to the horrors the Inquisition perpetrates. I know better than most what I'm talking about." He paused, pressing his lips together and seemed to gather himself. "I'm not asking what the law is or what the Inquisition does." A note of pleading crept into his voice as he asked, "I'm asking whether *you* think what they do is just."

What did he want from her? "Our official position is that the Inquisition is authorized to carry out Daga's will as promulgated by the Vollen Church."

They stared at one another. Deirdre saw disappointment, then resignation in Harold's expression before he composed his face. He sighed and stood. "I'm sorry to have bothered you, Malefica. I suggest you find out what the Malleus is up to. I suspect, whatever it is, will not be good for either of us. Now, if you will excuse me, I have an urgent appointment in Fennig."

Fennig? She stood and called after him, "Excuse me...Harold. Did you say Fennig?"

He paused, turning back. "Yes, it's a small, remote village in Argren. Do you know of it?"

"I've...heard of it. Can I ask what urgent business you have in Fennig?"

He gave her a guarded look. "It's of a personal nature."

"So, it's not official business of the Inquisition?"

"No."

"Does it have anything to do with the fact that Inquisitor Stefan recently left for Fennig?"

Harold hesitated before saying, "Indirectly."

It was quick, nearly undetectable, but Deirdre saw an unidentifiable emotion flicker across his face. Was it anger or fear?

Nia said she could trust this man, but the defenses she erected in the years since her eyes were opened by Ragan were not easily abandoned. If he was an agent of the Malleus, what she was about to say would be heresy, punishable by death. She took a deep breath, and with a sense of leaping from a precipice, she gathered herself and said, “No, Harold, I don’t think what the Inquisition does is just.” She watched his reaction, holding her breath, expecting a look of triumph. What she saw instead was a reflection of her own relief, a recognition of the risk she had took. She let her breath out, sagging, and said, “When I became Malefica, I believed I could right the wrongs I saw committed by the Empire. Now, it seems there is little I can do to affect anything of importance. I find what the Inquisition does abhorrent, but I’m powerless to stop it.”

“But you are the most powerful sister in a generation.” His eyes roved the tattoo on the left side of her face.

Deirdre’s fingers touched the mark of her rank. “Yes, even so, that no longer means what it once might have.” Deirdre’s eyes fell to the book on her desk. “Inquisitor, you’ve spent time among the *Alle’oss*. You must know more about them than most. Have you heard of the spirits or the *saa’myn*?”

“Spirits, no, but the *saa’myn* were *Alle’oss* spiritual leaders, branded as heretics. The Inquisition largely eliminated them years ago.”

A flicker of hope sped her heart. “Largely? Do you believe any survived?”

He shrugged. “There are rumors, but the Inquisition places little stock in them.” He studied her face, perhaps noticing the disappointment she couldn’t hide. “Still, although Argren

isn't a large place, it is mostly trackless mountain terrain. There is much the Empire doesn't control. I suppose it's possible."

Deirdre stood, came around her desk and pulled the treatise toward her, opening it to the first page. "This is a description of the *saa'myn*, written some years ago by an anthropologist from the Imperial Academy." Harold stepped up beside her, his shoulder brushing hers, leafing through the pages. Deirdre continued, "How much do you understand about Abria's gift?"

Harold answered absently. "Only what everyone is told. A thousand years ago, Daga blessed a woman named Abria with the ability to tap into Daga's essence. What her specific gifts were is no longer known for sure, but they must have given her tremendous power because her small clan descended from the small mountainous nation of Vollen to create the Empire."

"Yes! The church teaches that Abria's gift is a blessing from Daga to the Volloch caste, his chosen people. Yet, it has always struck me as a bit odd, if what the Church says is true, that Daga would bestow this blessing on so many of the Brochen caste. It's the *Alle'oss* now, mostly, but before it was the Ferolin and before that the Andians." When he looked at her, she gazed at his eyes and added, "That is one of the reasons why so few of those people remain. Unlike the *Alle'oss*, they rebelled and were crushed."

With only the smallest hesitation, he said, "Well, the official explanation is that what Brochen witches have is not Abria's gift, that they're stealing Daga's essence." When Deirdre snorted at this, Harold smiled and returned his attention to the book. "There are complex metaphysical explanations, but, frankly, if you're expecting the Empire's religion to be logically consistent, you'll be disappointed. The truth is that the Inquisition was founded after the Reformation to ensure the Volloch maintain their privileged position."

Deirdre stared at him. What he just said was so close to her own thoughts, it was as if he read her mind. She glanced involuntarily at his white uniform.

Harold, studying the book, didn't notice. "I don't know how your magic works, the Seidi guards its secrets well..." He glanced at her, a grin softening his features. "...but the *Alle 'oss* witches seem as if they are far more powerful than any sister I've met."

Deirdre's brows drew together. "Have you seen them using magic?"

"No, the Inquisition works hard to capture them while they're young, before they have learned to harness it."

"Then its only the strength of their presence you're basing this judgment on?"

He met her eyes. "Yes. They have no one to teach them to hide themselves, so it's rather easy, usually. For most of us, that is." For some reason, this brought another grin to his face. "It's one of the reasons the Inquisition worked so hard to eliminate the *saa 'myn*, to eliminate that knowledge."

Deirdre placed her hand on the book, unable to hide the eagerness in her voice. "This treatise doesn't mention that the *saa 'myn* were powerful, quite the opposite, in fact."

Harold nodded. "That is my understanding as well, though I suppose it would be difficult to tell for sure because the *Alle 'oss* people are...were, a peaceful people. The *saa 'myn* never used magic aggressively. They were spiritual leaders, healers, seers."

"Then why are the witches you see different?"

Harold shrugged, looking back down at the book. "I suppose the *saa 'myn* came by their magic without Abria's gift, and the Brochen witches we see today are blessed with Abria's gift. Relations between castes are, officially, illegal, but...things happen. Maybe, because the *Alle 'oss* are naturally sensitive to Daga's essence, Abria's gift has a greater effect on them."

Deirdre stared at him until Harold looked at her. “Does Hoerst know this?” she asked.

Harold froze, returning her stare. “It couldn’t be. The Volloch would never allow such blasphemy, can you imagine what the Church would make of it? Besides, how could he hope to control the witches? After what the Inquisition has done in Argren, they would turn on him as soon as they could.”

“I don’t know, but it would explain why he’s keeping them alive.”

Harold’s brows drew together. “Maybe. It seems...unlikely, but I suppose it’s worth investigating.”

“Harold, I’m not sure how much you know about the war in the south and the role of the Seidi there, but it’s not going well. The sisters there are nearing collapse, and, without them, the army won’t be far behind. In the face of an existential threat, religious principles are easily cast aside. If Hoerst offered them a way to maintain their comfortable ignorance, I would imagine the Church could manufacture some justification that satisfied their sensibilities.”

Harold hesitated, studying her face. “Are you suggesting that what Hoerst is doing is a good thing...anything to save the Empire?”

“Absolutely not! He’s kidnapping these girls from their families and is sneaking them off in the dead of night. Whatever his intentions are, I sincerely doubt they are for the good of those girls, or even for the Empire.”

“So, what do we do?”

“First, we find out where they are taking the girls. We can decide what to do about it when we know. Second...I want to talk to one of the *Alle’oss* witches. We need to understand them.” It was possible their strength was purely inherent, as Harold believed, but Deirdre still

held out hope that part of it was their knowledge of the spirits. Knowledge they could impart to her. In either case, it was better to have powerful allies than enemies.

Harold's grin widened. "I may be able to accommodate you there. Five years ago, I went to Fennig to bring in a witch. When I got there and saw her..." He hesitated, gave a small shrug and then lowered his voice, as if making a confession. "I...had a change of heart."

"You let her live?"

"To this day, I couldn't explain exactly why, and she was not the last. She might be exactly what you are looking for. She had the strongest presence of anyone I've ever encountered. If she's still alive, she would be old enough to begin harnessing her power. I'm afraid Stefan has gone to Fennig to find her. If I'm not too late, I'll try to bring her back."

"By yourself? Stefan took eight guards with him."

"Yes, well, I was rather hoping you might help with that." He closed the book and faced her. "Technically, you have authority over the Inquisition. You could order Stefan to hand her over to me."

Deirdre shook her head. "Unfortunately, it's a technicality without meaning. You might be able use my name to intimidate a younger inquisitor, but Stefan would refuse, and it would raise questions we're not prepared to answer." She could see his disappointment and offered, "I can, perhaps, even the odds. Stefan has a sister with him. A woman named Keelia. I think you might confide in her. I'll give you a message so she knows we've spoken." She wrote a quick note.

Keelia,

*This note is to introduce Inquisitor Harold Wolfe. Harold has my complete
don't wish to write the details in the note in case it is intercepted. I would ask you*

Malefica Deirdre

She sealed it with wax and handed it to him. "I'm not sure how she can help, but at least you'll have an ally."

He nodded, took the note and turned to leave.

On impulse, Deirdre called after him. "Wait...Harold." He paused and Deirdre hesitated. "You've spent a lot of time in Argren."

"More than most, I would say."

"Have you ever encountered sisters there?" She frowned, gesturing oddly with her hand. "I mean, women who may be trying to hide the fact they are...were...sisters."

"Friends of yours?"

Deirdre dropped her eyes, tidying papers on her desk. "Yes."

"Not personally, though I've heard stories." When Deirdre didn't respond, Harold said, "The Seidi sends sisters and novices into Argren. Have you asked them?"

"I...ask everyone who travels in Argren." Deirdre was horrified to hear the tremor in her voice. She cleared her throat and continued. "It's...important to the Seidi to determine what happened to them."

"More than a friend, then."

Deirdre met his eyes. "It shows, does it?"

"Let's just say, I recognize a kindred spirit." Deirdre returned his sad smile. "I'll keep an eye out."

“Thank you. I would appreciate it.” She extended a hand and Harold took it. “If you can bring this girl back, hide her and send a message to Nia or I. We’ll be in Brennan. In the meantime, Nia and I will try to find out what Hoerst is up to. Good luck, Harold.”

He nodded, turned and left.

Deirdre wiped the moisture from her cheeks, a sense of hope she hadn’t felt in weeks swelling her chest.