

# Minna

## *Village of Fennig*

In the crisp, cold air high in the mountains, the aspens gloried in their golden mantels. Here, near their home, the elms, hickories and maples enthusiastically embraced the change of seasons with gaudy displays of yellow, orange and red. Only the oaks, ancient and hoary, begrudged fall's arrival, and as if resentful of the spruces' serene permanence, stubbornly held on to their summer cloaks.

It was cool, but there was a noticeable difference in the temperature as they descended to lower elevations. Minna loosened her cloak while she walked, describing her encounter with the turkey for the third time. She gestured with her hands, glancing up her father to ensure he got the full picture. Although he was present during the event, he smiled, nodded and asked questions at just the right points in the story.

"I thought it heard me and was getting ready to fly, so I shot even though it was still far away," she explained, her frown conveying the seriousness of the decision.

"It was a good shot, that's for sure."

"Yeah...yeah, it was," Minna said, a satisfied smile settling on her face as she relived the moment. The first hunt with her new bow and she shot a nice, fat turkey. Her eyes kept returning to the bird which hung down her father's back. Her

mother would be happy. Turkey was one of her favorites. “Do you think Jason should come over when we cook it? It’s just because I used the bow he made me.”

Her father grinned down at her and said, “Let’s ask your mother.”

“Yeah, we should ask her,” Minna said. They walked for a while in silence, before Minna launched into the story again. “Do you remember when we heard them? I thought they were too far away, and we would never catch up.”

The *lan’and*, reacting to her excitement, whirled through the trees above them. The spirits seemed tuned to her moods, and would gather in great numbers when she was especially happy. She grinned up at them, imagining them spreading the word among the other spirits, “Minna is happy, let’s go see what it’s about.” They were a comforting and familiar presence. But what happened next was completely unexpected. The spirits, which normally flitted about seemingly at random, began, as one, to spiral down toward her. Her voice trailed off and she slowed to a stop, letting her father walk ahead, and in a moment, she was at the center of a swirling cloud of glowing orbs. Smiling, she extended her arms to her sides, gazing down at her body and turning slowly on the spot. In the shadowy forest, spirit light bathed her in lambent luminescence, like sunlight playing across the turbulent waters below the falls. When her father came back into view, he was staring at her, a worried frown on his face.

“Minna?”

Minna beamed at him and laughter bubbled up unbidden.

And then there it was. The presence in her mind, the same one she felt in the market. She hardly thought about it in the past two days, having decided she imagined the fleeting sensation amid the turbulence of her anger. But this time, there was no storm to mask it. Squeezing her eyes shut, she concentrated on the spot behind her eyes. Fluttery and insistent, like the beat of a butterfly's wings, it was not her imagination. Perhaps it was because her father had so recently told her about the *saa'myn*, women who could talk to the *lan'and*, but she had the inexplicable feeling they was trying to get her attention. It could not be a coincidence the only other time they exhibited such odd behavior, in the market, she felt the same presence in her mind. It must be the *lan'and*. But how could she answer? Maybe if... She focused on the restive presence in her mind, furrowed her brow and called.

Her mind exploded into a whirling maelstrom. She stood stock still, eyes open but unseeing. It was them, the spirits. She was sure of it. There was the same sense of otherness, of a presence that was not her own, sharing her mind. They swirled as they did in the trees when she was happy, but somehow, they were sharing her consciousness. And she felt their joy. In the intimate closeness of her mind, the *lan'and* responded to her happiness, reflecting it back to her and filling her up with their exhilaration. She laughed again.

Dimly, she became aware of her father kneeling in front of her, gripping her arms and shouting her name. She focused on his face and said, "Papa, the *lan'and*, they're talking to me!"

His brows knitted, and searching her face, he asked, “They’re talking to you? What do you mean...what are they saying?”

Minna closed her eyes and tentatively extended her awareness into the whirlwind. Talking was not the right way to describe what was happening. It was more like she was sharing their emotions. Now that she was paying attention, she realized it was more nuanced than simple joy. It was a boisterous celebration of relief and triumph, exuberant and unruly. And heedless of her presence. A growing disquiet stole over her, a sense of being buffeted and jostled in her own mind. And suddenly, it was too much.

She opened her eyes, searching for her father’s reassurance. “Papa?” she asked in a quavery voice.

He gripped her arms tightly, shook her gently and asked, “Minna, what’s going on?”

And just like that, the spirits were gone. She sagged into her father’s strong grip, closed her eyes and let her father guide her to sit on the forest floor. In the wake of the storm, she was left with utter silence, as if the spirits scrubbed her of all thoughts and left her mind a clear pool, mirror-smooth like the pond they sat next to the night before. And in that stillness, a ripple appeared, as if a pebble disturbed the surface of the pool. Following the ripples back to their center, she found her father. Her eyes flew open and she gazed up at him, kneeling next to her, watching her with concern. She reached out and touched his cheek. Yes, the

ripple she felt was his, she was sure. She could sense his presence in her mind.

And there was another ripple.

She gave her father a puzzled look, fighting free of his grip to stand.

“There’s someone I don’t know there. I think they’re at our house.” She pointed ahead.

Her father gave her a blank look, then turned to look where Minna pointed.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded and said, “I can feel him.”

“Him?”

Minna nodded, staring ahead.

Her father peered through the trees. “Come on, let’s go see who it is.” He started walking and Minna let him take two steps before following warily.

They paused among the trees across the Imperial Highway from their house. Their home was set back from the highway on a low rise. Twenty men and their horses occupied the large space in front of it. They were preparing to camp in their front yard. Some of the men tended horses, while others were pitching tents, tending a fire or preparing a meal. Most of the men wore the same clothes, green shirts and pants tucked into knee-high boots. Beside the fact Minna had never seen any of them, and they dressed unlike anyone she knew, there was something else about them that was odd. It took her a moment to understand what she was seeing, but then she realized what it was. They all had black hair.

“Who are they?” Minna asked.

“Imperial soldiers,” her father answered in a flat tone.

The only outsiders to visit Fennig were tinkers, bards and mummers, and most of those were *Alle ’oss*. A year ago, two men passed through Fennig on their way to explore the wilderness to the east. It was quite the event for the villagers. Minna didn’t see them, but Jason still talked about them. The men never returned. The fact that, here in her front yard, was flesh and blood representatives of the Empire so soon after her father’s revelations, was disquieting. The Empire, such an abstract thing two nights ago, was suddenly real. But more disturbing than the soldiers was her father’s reaction to them. His face was grim and his grip on her shoulder was uncomfortably tight.

She shook his hand off and edged behind him, watching the men going about their tasks and noticed two of them talking to her mother. She was shaking her head and gesturing to the forest where Minna stood with her father. One of men glanced in their direction and caught sight of them. He tapped his companion on the shoulder and they turned to look.

Minna’s father sighed, then knelt in front of her and got her attention. “Wait here, Minna.” He glanced over his shoulder at the approaching men and said, “In fact, it might be better if you went back into the forest a bit. You know where to go, don’t you?” Minna nodded. “Wait there until I come for you, okay?”

She nodded absently, but didn’t move, peering over his shoulder. The two men were crossing the highway.

“Minna! Now.”

Minna's attention snapped back to her father. She nodded, then headed back the way they came. When she looked over her shoulder, he was watching her, but then he turned and headed out to meet the two men. Minna knew she shouldn't, but she was curious, so she stopped where she could still see what was happening. Her father's back was to her, but she could tell he was tense. He stood with his hands on his hips, shaking his head. When one of the men pulled a folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket and handed it to him, her father read it and his shoulders sagged.

Laughter caught her attention and her gaze returned to the soldiers. They seemed to be happy, talking animatedly among themselves, the mood at odds with the dangers she imagined. She relaxed a bit, scanning the scene until her eyes settled on a tall man who stood alone near the house. Unlike the others, he wore all white. She could tell instantly the ripples she sensed were from this person, and though she was sure she was far enough into the trees he couldn't see her, he was staring intently in her direction. She edged behind a tree and peered around it. He was still there, still staring.

Minna ducked behind the tree and stood with her back to the trunk, her heart racing. When she peeked again, the man was speaking to a soldier and pointing in Minna's direction. The soldier glanced at the men talking to her father, then began speaking. The man in white stood erect and leaned forward until his face was inches from the other man's face. He spoke quickly, clearly angry, then pointed back along the highway to the west. The soldier's head dropped, then he

turned and jogged toward the horses. Minna watched him go, then turned her attention back to the man in white. He was looking in her direction again, but there was a small smile on his face.

She wasn't sure why, but the man scared her. She ducked behind the tree again, hesitated, then headed farther into the forest.

Evening was descending, and Minna, worried and alone, was still waiting for her father. Even the spirits had vanished after they *talked* to her. To distract herself from what might be happening back at her home, she pressed her palms to her eyes and tried to make sense of what happened. Was this how the *saa'myn* talked to the spirits? If so, she wasn't sure how she could ask a question. She'd imagined the little spirits floating around her as she talked to them. She even wondered what their voices would sound like or how they might make sound. It didn't appear that was how it worked. Could they understand her thoughts? Even if it was possible, how would they answer? All she felt was their emotion. And how were they sharing her mind? She tried to remember if she saw spirits outside herself while it was happening, but all she could remember was her father's face.

The bigger questions were why they wanted to communicate with her and why now? After a lot of thought, Minna decided the *lan'and* taught her to recognize the ripples. It was only in the quiet serenity they left in their wake, she recognized what the ripples were. She sensed them before, but they were always



fleeting, just out of reach, like a name you can't quite remember. She became so used to it, she no longer paid attention to it. Now that she understood what they were, she realized some people, like Jason and Alyn, had their own characteristic ripples, while others, like her mother and Agatha, had none. What did that mean? And did they teach her about the ripples now, to warn her about the man in white? She was more confused than ever, and though it was thrilling, the sensation of being crowded out of her own mind was frightening. She wasn't sure she wanted to do it again.

Exhausted, worried and confused, she couldn't think about it any longer. Though she didn't know what it all meant, the possibility the spirits might have been concerned for her well-being overwhelmed her last defenses. A sob of gratitude fought its way past her closed lips and tears moistened her palms. She always considered the small spirits companions. They were her secret, something no one could take from her. That they might return her affection made her feel, suddenly, less alone in the world. She leaned forward, hugging herself, gave in to her emotions and wept.

She felt her father coming before he appeared. Her tears had dried, but her anxiety had not diminished. When he came into view, she jumped up and said, "What's happening, Papa?"

Her father sat on the log where Minna had been sitting and patted the space beside himself. "Sit, Minnow."

Minna sat still, hands in her lap, looking up at her father's face. He was gazing into the gathering shadows.

Minna waited. When he spoke, it was devastating. "The soldiers are going into the wilderness tomorrow. They've never been east of the mountains, much less into the wilderness. The man I was speaking to is their captain, their leader. He asked me to be their guide."

It took a moment for Minna to work through everything he said, but when she got to that last part, she asked in a small voice, "Guide?"

"They want me to show them the way, so they don't get lost."

"But why you?"

"I'm the only person who has ever been into the wilderness and returned. Someone in the village told them about me."

Normally, that news would have unleashed a flood of questions, but the vast chasm opening inside her swallowed any thoughts she might have on the subject. "But you're not going, are you? They can't make you go?"

Her father sighed, slumping and said, "Yes, they can make me go. The Emperor and his men are not forgiving people. You can't say no to them."

Minna felt her heart thudding in her chest. "What would they do to you?"

Her father turned to look down at her, his eyes hidden in shadows. "You can't say no to the Empire, Minna. I have to go."

Minna was young, but she knew how precarious her situation was and how important her father was to her. Her life revolved around him. He was always

there, picking her up when she needed it, making her laugh and teaching her. She also understood it was his reputation in the village that shielded her. The prospect of facing the villagers alone scared her. She threw her arms around his chest, tears streaming down her cheeks. “No, Papa, no! You can’t go. I’ll be alone.”

Her father held her. After some time passed, he said, “I have to go, Minna. You’ll be all right.”

“How long will you be gone?”

Her father gently pulled her away and looked into her eyes. “They said it would be a month, at the most. I’ll be home before you know it.” Shadows hid his face, but she recognized the smile in his voice.

Minna leaned on his shoulder and sniffed. “You’ll miss the harvest festival.”

Her father chuckled and put his arm around her shoulders. They sat like that for some time until Minna ran out of tears.

“Papa?”

“Yes, Min?”

“There was a man with the soldiers. He was wearing all white.”

Her father’s voice carried a tense note when he said, “Yes, I saw him. What about him?”

“He was the man I felt when we were coming home.”

Her father turned and lifted Minna’s face to his. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. He was watching me. I went into the forest like you said, but when I turned back, he was watching me. He scared me.”

“What did he do, Minna?” he said urgently.

Minna frowned. “He talked to a soldier and then the soldier left on a horse.”

“Back toward the mountains?”

“Yes.”

Her father thought for a few minutes. “Minna, I want you to be careful while I’m gone. You can see Jason, but don’t go into the village by yourself.”

Minna didn’t need her father to tell her to avoid the village. The only time she went into the village was when she was with her father or Jason or if her mother made her run errands, but she asked, “Why, Papa?”

“Just...be careful. If you see anyone come to the village you don’t know...or if you...feel someone you don’t know, I want you to go into the forest and stay until I come back. Have a pack and your bow ready. If someone comes, go into the forest until I get back. Go to the falls. Do you understand?” Her father was speaking in a low urgent tone.

“Why, Papa? Who’s coming? Why do I have to hide?” She paused, swallowing, and asked the next question though she knew the answer. “Is because I’m a...*saa ’myn*?”

He didn’t respond at first, just looked at her. Finally, he said, “Minna, I hoped I wouldn’t have to explain this. It should have been...” He shook his head

and laughed softly. “I guess I...I don’t know what I was thinking.” He nodded and said, “You need to know.”

Minna held her breath. “What, Papa? What do I need to know?”

“This is too difficult to explain when I’m leaving in the morning. We’re both tired and it’s been a difficult day. I’ll explain when I get back.” He nodded, staring into the distance, and then turned to Minna. “We’ll go hunting at the falls and I’ll tell you everything. Promise me, if anyone comes to the village or you sense anyone like you did today, you’ll go to the falls.”

She frowned, opened her mouth, then shut it again. She turned, looking into the shadows, then began again, “Papa...” She wasn’t sure what she wanted to say, torn between curiosity and fear at what he wanted to tell her. Suddenly, the events of the day settled on her and she felt exhausted.

“Min, promise me.”

“I promise, Papa.”

The carefree elation she felt that morning seemed such a distant and foreign thing.

They slept in the forest that night, eating the remains of the provisions they took on their hunting trip. They spoke no more of troubling things. They made plans for hunting trips they would take when he returned. With her father’s encouragement, Minna once again related her encounter with the turkey, though

more soberly than before. A shadow had fallen between them. A shadow cast by her father's secrets and Minna's sense she stood on a precipice. Whatever her father wanted to tell her would change her life, irrevocably.

The next morning, their farewells were tearful, but brief. He hugged her at the edge of the forest and Minna whispered in his ear, "Please come home, Papa."

He smiled, ruffled her hair and said, "Of course, Minnow. I'll be home before you know it." Then he turned and walked down to join the soldiers who were preparing to leave.

Minna caught sight of the man in white as he mounted his horse. He only glanced her way, but she didn't like the small smile that appeared on his face. As they left, her father looked in her direction and smiled before turning and disappearing around a bend in the highway. He was gone.

Minna stood among the trees, pondering the events of the previous day. She watched her mother and little sister, still standing in the middle of the highway. Her father and mother were devoted to each other. His leaving would be very difficult for her. She always tried to love her mother, even though her mother had been cold and distant toward Minna for years. Whatever caused the people of Fennig to hate her also affected her mother. She turned her attention to her sister, who was watching her. When their eyes met, Alyn smiled, waved and began skipping toward her.

Minna forced a smile and stepped out of the trees. The spirits had returned, drifting idly as if enjoying the warm fall morning. She closed her eyes and lifted her face to the sun. Maybe she would go see Jason today.

## Aron

### *A Bluff Overlooking the Imperial City of Hast*

Aron closed his eyes, relishing the contrast between the sun's warmth on his face and the chill wind as his back.

"*A ama ot'skumeos ali ērtsa, ku isto lisameos ērtsu* (If I was an imperial, you would be dead)."

Aron smiled, opened his eyes and turned to look at the newcomer. "*A ku ot'skumeos ali ērtsu, ama isto āla aku skūsitan rimenga* (If you were an imperial, I would have smelled you coming)."

Zaina snorted.

Aron shrugged. "I knew it was you. Saw you when you left the forest."

They sat on their horses, comfortable in their silence, gazing down at the imperial city of Hast. Hast sat astride the Odun river on the plains below the foothills of the mountain range the *Alle'oss* called *na'lyos* (our home) and the Imperials called the Eastern Mountains. The bridge in Hast was the only way to cross the river this far south on the way from Argren to the imperial capital in Brennan, unless you wanted to get wet. From their position on the bluffs next to the Imperial Highway, they could see the imperial fort from which soldiers made forays into Argren.

Aron asked, "How's Eaven?"

"She's adjusting. Better than the others, I'd say. They'll be leaving for Sanctuary tomorrow."

“That’s good. Someday, they will be a new generation of *saa’myn*.”

Zaina waited, but when Aron offered no explanation, she asked, “So why are we going to Brennan?”

“I have something to do.”

“Ah, yes. Another mysterious errand for *her*.”

Aron glanced at Zaina, a small frown flickering across his face.

Zaina lifted a brow and asked, “Do you ever tire of being her messenger boy?”

“You know, Zaina, has anyone ever mentioned to you what a cynic you are?”

“Many, and better people than you.” When Aron showed no sign of answering her question, she asked, “Well? Do you?”

Aron shrugged. “Her ways appear mysterious, but she knows what she’s on about.” He met her eyes. “You may not trust her, but I would think you would trust me by now.”

They watched each other for a few moments and then Zaina said, “She’s spooky.”

The corner of Aron’s mouth quirked up. “Spooky?”

She ignored his teasing tone and searched his face. “You trust her?”

“She’s like a mother to me.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Aron faced forward and considered. “Trust. Let us say I trust her goals are worthy, and she knows better than most how to achieve those goals.”

“That is an awfully slippery answer for a yes or no question.”

Aron gave her a small smile and said, “I trust she has our best interests at heart.”

Zaina was silent for a while, then she said, “Why am I here?”



Aron beamed. “You’re my wife.” When Zaina scowled at him, he said, “It’s easier to move through imperial territory that way. A man by himself, very suspicious, but these imperials tend to underestimate women who don’t have a tattoo on their faces.”

Zaina’s face relaxed and she looked down at Hast. “What’s our story?”

“Registering our business on the tax rolls.”

“Have you ever been to Brennan?”

“Many times. Don’t worry, it’s big, dirty, smelly and crowded, but we’ll be safe. Just don’t stick out, don’t look anyone in the eye. Act humble...if that’s possible.”

Zaina’s brows shot up. “That’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

Aron laughed and nudged his horse forward.