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ARLINGFANT ELESSEDIL SAT FROZEN BENEATH THE BROAD canopy of the Ellcrys, the words a whisper echoing in her mind.

Child, I have need of you.

Had she actually heard that, or only imagined it? Whose voice was she hearing? Her eyes were still closed, and her presence in the Gardens of Life carried little more impact than the space she occupied and the soft sound of her breathing. Sunrise approached, bringing the new day to life. The world was mostly asleep, and the Elves of Arborlon were just beginning to stir. Dreams still held sway.

She felt again the soft touch and opened her eyes to find its source. A slender silver branch adorned with scarlet leaves rested gently upon her shoulder. It moved slightly, a feather's touch she could feel through her clothing, strange and reassuring.

–Child, do you hear me–

Heart hammering, a flush of fear and expectation rushing through her, Arling rose to her knees to face the ancient tree, rocking back on her heels and looking up. She was aware of the branch that lay across her shoulder moving with her, maintaining contact as she shifted her position.

“I am here, Mistress,” she whispered.

All around her, the light was changing, darkness giving way to daybreak, blackness turning silvery with the brightening of the east-

ern sky. And in that strange, in-between time the world seemed to hold still around her.

–Long years have I kept the faith of my calling, strong against the elements and the whimsies and vicissitudes of nature and Man. Long years have I been true to all expectations and challenges, never once regretting what I gave up to be so. But time wears down all living things, and so it is with me–

It was not her imagination, Arling thought. The tree was speaking to her. The voice she was hearing belonged to the Ellcrys. She could feel a connection between the voice and the branch resting on her shoulder. She could feel the link between them.

Could feel the link to herself.

Arling tried to parse this out, to understand what was happening, but now the tree was speaking again.

–It happens slowly, but there is no mistaking its direction. There remains time to do what is needed, but for that to happen I need you first to understand. You are a Chosen in service to me. Many others have been so. Others besides yourself are so now. But you are special to me, child. You bear the blood markings that tell me no other will serve my purpose so well or so long–

Arling blinked rapidly, aware that the Ellcrys was praising her for something the tree found in her that she had not found in others. But Arling had no idea what that something was. Blood markings?

“I don’t understand, Mistress,” she blurted.

She felt a wash of shame when she admitted this. She wanted to be helpful, was anxious to serve in whatever way she could. But the Ellcrys was telling her she was failing, that time was taking its toll, and Arling did not know what it was she was expected to do.

–I am dying–

There it was. The truth of things, the words clear and unmistakable. The Ellcrys was coming to the end of her life. Arlingfant felt tears spring to her eyes and found it suddenly hard to breathe. How could this be happening? The Ellcrys was showing no signs of deterioration—no wilt, no shedding, no loss of color or form. All looked to be as it should, yet the tree was telling her otherwise. Telling her! Arlingfant didn’t want to be the one made responsible by

knowing. She had done everything she had been asked to do and more in the course of her time as a Chosen. She did not deserve this!

–Child, you are precious to me–

“Don’t tell me that!” Arling cried out. “I have failed you! I did everything I could, but it wasn’t enough. Could you be mistaken? Could you be given medicines and special care to keep you from . . . ?”

She couldn’t finish, her words dying away into a series of hiccupping gasps. She was crying uncontrollably, and she couldn’t seem to make herself stop.

Then the branch shifted against her body, and she felt a strange peace settle through her, bringing an end to the tears. She went still, the sounds of her lamentation ceasing. All around her the air turned soft with the scents of flowers and grasses and leaves, smoothing away the hurt and fear.

–There is much you can do to help me, Arlingfant. My service has been long and successful, and that service must continue. All of the Chosen must care for me in my final days, and you must tell them so. All must band together to keep me safe and comfortable during the time of my passing, but pass I must. Back to where we all one day will go. Back to our birthroots, to our pre-life, to where we await our next appointing. Try to understand–

Arling did not understand. Asking her to bring word of this to the others was unbearable. Why choose her as opposed to another? Why ask this of her when so much else was happening?

But this was selfish thinking, and she would not speak it aloud to her mistress. She was a Chosen, and the Chosen did not complain—ever—of what was asked of them during the time of their service.

“I will tell the others,” she agreed. Then she hesitated. “And we will do much more than you ask. We will find a way to stave this off, to cure you of what afflicts you and make you well and strong again!”

There was a long pause.

–Oh, child, no. You ignore the truth at your peril. Hear me once again. I have need of you. I have need of your strength and your dedication. I have need of what you are and what you will be when I am gone. Do you not see–

Arling shook her head in despair. “I see only that you need help

and I don't know how to give it.”

–You will give it in the same way that I once did, a long time ago—when I was a girl no older than you are now. When I was one of the Chosen. You will carry my seed to the Bloodfire and immerse it and then return to me, and through you I will be renewed and the Forbidding will hold—

“I will . . . carry . . .”

That was as much as she could manage to repeat before the enormity of what the Ellcrys was saying tightened about her throat in an iron grip of such fear that she choked on the rest. She saw it now. She saw what she was being asked to do.

–You are my Chosen one. You are . . . –

Instantly Arlingfant was up and running, her dark hair flying out behind her in a tangle. She broke away from the touch of the Ellcrys, from the voice in her head, from the realization of what was being asked of her and how her life would be altered forever. She felt cold and hot all at once.

She knew the story. All of the Chosen had known since the time of Amberle Elessedil, who was the last to be called. The tree was said to live forever, and some believed it was so. But the truth was a different matter. The tree had a finite life; centuries long, yes, but finite. When its time was up, the tree always selected one among the Chosen to take from it a seedling, to carry that seedling to the Bloodfire, to immerse it in the flames, and then return to become . . .

No, I cannot do this! It is too much to ask! I will lose everything. I will have to give up my life!

. . . to become the next Ellcrys, reborn into the world at the death of the old, and linked forever in an endless line of talismans that would keep the Forbidding intact and the demons imprisoned.

I cannot do this! I am only a girl and nothing special. I was not meant to bear this burden!

She exploded past Freershan and a couple of the other Chosen coming into the gardens, not even slowing to acknowledge them but racing for the concealment of the trees and the waning darkness, anxious to hide and not emerge again for weeks or months or however long it took for this impossibility to vanish. She ran for her cot-

tage and the comfort of home, trying to regain something that was already lost. She refused to acknowledge it, but she knew it anyway in her heart.

Then, abruptly, she remembered Aphenglow. She needed her sister—the one person who had always been able to make things right.

But Aphenglow was leaving for the deep Westland, off on her expedition with Cymrian to find the other Druids and to tell them what had become of abandoned Paranor, following the Federation attack, and of poor Bombax.

Had she already departed?

Changing directions in midstride, Arling turned toward the airfield, fighting down the panic surging through her, her face streaked with tears, her breathing ragged. *Don't let this be! Don't make it so!* She darted through the trees—a slight, almost ephemeral figure in the growing light of dawn—taking paths and byways that shaved seconds off the time required to reach her sister.

Aphen! Please be there, please!

Then she burst onto the grassy flats where the airships were anchored, their dark hulls glistening with early-morning dew—great tethered birds hovering in the windless morning light, their sleek curved shadows cast earthward. She gasped in relief as she caught sight of *Wend-A-Way*, her mooring lines still fastened in place.

“Aphen!” she screamed, closing the distance as swiftly as she could, desperation providing her with fresh strength.

Then her sister was running to meet her, flying across the open fields beneath the canopy of airship hulls, tall and strong and safe. Arling threw herself against Aphen, crying out her name, her face buried in Aphen’s shoulder.

“She’s dying, Aphen, she’s dying, and she wants me to take her place and I can’t do it, Aphen, I can’t!”

Arling sank to the grass, pulling Aphen down with her. Aphen held her sister close, soothing her. Hushing her, saying it was all right, that she was safe.

Arling drew back, her face stricken. “She touched me on the shoulder with her branches and spoke to me. She said she had need

of me. She said . . .”

It all poured out of her, a jumble of words riven with emotions that she could barely control, all of it released in a torrent of need and despair.

“Arling, stop now,” her sister said at last, taking her firmly by the shoulders and turning her so that they faced each other again. “I understand. But we don’t know enough yet to be certain of anything. There are Chosen records of the history of the Ellcrys and those who have served her. We should look at those, read what has been written of their history.”

Arling shook her head in denial. “What difference will that make? I know what she expects of me. I heard her speak the words.”

“And then you fled, right in the middle of her explanation.” Aphenglow pulled her close, hugging her anew. “You need to go back to her. You need to hear the rest. But before you do that, we’ll read the records of the Chosen. We may find something of value that will turn things around. Stop crying. I am here with you. I won’t leave you to face this alone.”

Cymrian appeared, rushing up. “What’s happened? I didn’t even realize Arling was here.” He knelt beside them, his eyes finding Arling’s. “What’s wrong? Tell me what it is.”

But it was Aphen who repeated the story, keeping alive the possibility of more than one interpretation of the Ellcrys’s words. Cymrian listened without interrupting, his eyes never leaving Arling.

Then he reached out and took her from Aphen, and held her against him. “Do not fear, Arling,” he whispered. “I will be your protector now. I will stand with you as I have with Aphen, and I will give up my life before I let anything hurt you.”

Arling shook her head. “But you were leaving to find the Ard Rhys. Both of you. You can’t stay because of me. Finding the Druids and telling them of Paranor’s fate—”

“—can wait,” Aphen finished. “What matters now is discovering what is needed to help you, and what can be done about the Ellcrys. If she is truly dying, then we face a far more important task than seeking the missing Elfstones.”

Cymrian nodded, his features somber. “If the Ellcrys fails, it

doesn't matter whether or not we find them."

Arling looked from one to the other. She had ceased crying, and her wilder emotions had quieted. She felt better having reached her sister and Cymrian. Maybe Aphen was right and things would turn out differently than she had feared when she fled the Ellcrys. She experienced a momentary shame for having acted so foolishly, for responding in such a childish way.

"Thank you both," she said to them.

"We will face this together," Aphen assured her. "Starting right now."