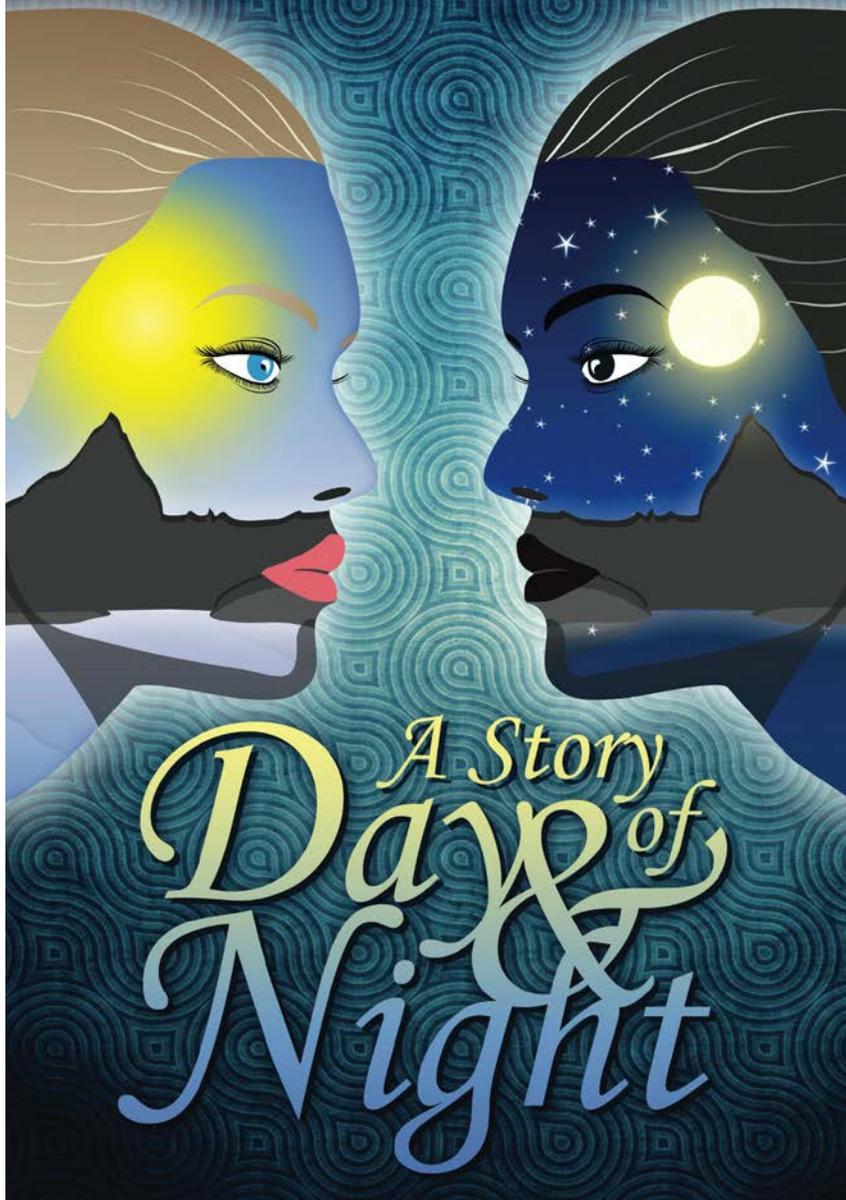


MARY M. CUSHNIE-MANSOUR



*What Readers are Saying About*  
*A Story of Day & Night*

Christine Galloway, Librarian ...

I enjoyed reading *A Story of Day & Night*; it was quite gripping...

The Great Battle has ended, and now the world is under the control of an evil force. The earth has stopped rotating on its axis leaving one side perpetually dark and cold, and the other side bright and burning hot. Two maidens living on opposing sides of the world are destined to embark on a treacherous quest to find the secret that can rid the world of this torment.

Lunaria from the dark side and Raycindia from the bright side have both managed to escape the misery that has enveloped the rest of the world. They have read the book of ancient tales bequeathed to them by their grandmothers and realize that they must journey to The Border of Light and Dark where dwells the Keeper of ancient legends, Zemias; she will help them with their quest.

There follows a series of incredibly difficult and dangerous tasks as the two maidens battle one mythological monster after another in their attempt to save the earth from its inevitable doom. Magic spells, malevolent warriors, and grotesque creatures build the suspense as the maidens hasten toward the final Battle between good and evil and the day of reckoning.

I think it is a very interesting book—when I finished one chapter I was eager to read the next one because there was always a surprise. I think if you are interested in adventure this is a really good book to read because it is about two girls on an awesome journey; they meet strange but interesting creatures, and the story has lots of excitement! ... Asha, age 9

*A Story of Day & Night* was an enjoyable tale of good versus evil. The mythology within could have come from ancient stories explaining the constant cycle of day chasing night, and darkness chasing light. This was a real page-turner, and I would definitely recommend it to my friends ... Stacy Thomas

I have never read a book with this idea of how the earth stopped and the problems that followed. *A Story of Day & Night* was interesting and creative. I really liked it ... Evan, age 13

*A Story of Day & Night* had strong role models for pre-adolescent girls. There are a few surprises in store for readers, particularly near the end of the novel. This story has a unique concept that is craftily ended to lead into perhaps a series ... Karen White

*A Story of Day & Night* is a captivating tale, full of daring adventures and magical twists at every turn. A light, quick, and very amusing read, it is a tale that will grab your attention—no matter your age—and always keep you on your toes, cheering for the prophecy to come true! ... Danielle

# A Story of Day & Night

Mary M. Cushnie-Mansour



CAVERN  
OF DREAMS  
PUBLISHING

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This book is dedicated to all the  
students who attended my  
“JUST IMAGINE”  
writing workshops in the 1990s--  
who listened and were inspired  
to pick up their own pens and write

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# *Chapter One*

## *The Dilemma*

There was a beginning—and the people of Earth were happy. There was a war, and then there was an end to the happiness and Old Earth. New Earth was consumed by an evil force that had sprung up during this time—one that burdened the people of Earth with a misery that penetrated deep into their existence—one that saddened the multitudes to the point the ancient legends of a land once filled with goodness were almost forgotten. For the New Earth, after the Great Battle, was stayed in its tracks, leaving one side to cool under the gibbous moon, the other to burn under the searing sun. It was into such a world that two maidens were born. One who lived in darkness, Lunaria; one who lived in light, Raycindia.

There was great sadness on Earth because of this. The people and animals that lived on the dark side would cry because everything around them was difficult to see, and they were always so tired that they wanted to do nothing more than sleep. The vegetation was lifeless and creepy in its struggle for what few beams of light the moon cared to cast down from its lofty position. The

animals huddled in eclipsed corners, their once grand strengths withering away.

Great sadness tormented the other side of Earth, as well, but for the opposite reason. Here, where the sun always shone, the people could not get enough sleep because even when they closed their eyes, the sun's golden waves would penetrate through them. The vegetation was wrinkled and scorched from the constant searing of its rays. The animals scattered, trying to find a shelter cool enough to soothe their burning hides.

Thus were the tales of Old Earth—bright and happy, filled with light and darkness for all—beginning to dim with the misery cast on the people, dimming in the hearts of all but two young maidens.

Lunaria, the maiden from the dark side, tall and muscular, with long black hair and milk-white skin, would sit in her shadowy corners. Helped by the light of her precious candles, her black eyes poured through the book of ancient tales bequeathed to her by her beloved grandmother. Grandmother had instructed Lunaria to read the stories carefully, and had also said that she, Lunaria, would one day accomplish great things. Lunaria had dismissed the ramblings as those of an aged woman about to embark on her final journey; but, she obliged her grandmother's final wish and read on. And the seeds of thought began to germinate within her mind.

Raycindia, too, was a reader of tales. Raycindia was the maiden from the light side. She was tall, but of a slight, more frail nature than Lunaria's robust stature. Raycindia's long curls had been bleached white by the sun, and her soft blue eyes contrasted brightly against her bronzed skin.

A unique book had been bequeathed to her, as well—a book that was one and the same as Lunaria’s. She, too, was instructed by her grandmother to read the stories carefully. On her deathbed, Raycindia’s grandmother had cradled her hand on her heart and whispered into Raycindia’s ear that one day she would accomplish great things. Raycindia had smiled and dismissed the ramblings as those of an aged woman about to embark on her last journey; but, she obliged her grandmother’s final wish, and read on. And the seeds of thought began to germinate within her mind.

As the maidens read through the stories, they each came upon the one that spoke of the Border of Light and Dark. The story spoke of the many who had tried to live on the border, but nothing of any goodness would ever grow from the sparse soil. Misery that was worse than in their previous homes became the lot of those people. Soon everyone stayed away and left the border to its moods of light and dark—to the forces of evil that ruled with a ruthlessness the like that could not be fully described in the books. Only those who had been there could tell the full truths of that world.

The story the girls had read told how the border led to the top of a mountain where there dwelled the keeper of ancient records. The story alluded that this keeper held within their grasp the secret that could free the world from its torment. The keeper’s name was Zemias. The rest of the story was vague; but, it had wetted the appetite of Lunaria and Raycindia, and the seeds began to sprout further within their hearts.

So it was that one hour, when the moon stood high in the sky, Lunaria called her family together and told them of her intentions.

“I am embarking on a journey,” Lunaria began. “There is something that can be done about this curse that has been cast on our earth, and I feel that Grandmother knew of things and mysteries from beyond our earth—from another time and place. She bequeathed to me a unique book and told me I would one day accomplish great things. I have read much, and there is a stirring from within my breast; the time has come for me to begin my journey. I know Grandmother is watching over me from above, and she will guide my way toward the Border of Light and Dark.”

Lunaria’s mother spoke up softly: “I always knew there was something special about you, my dear child. My mother would rebuke me if I scolded you too firmly. She would tell me to let you be; you were strong-willed because the gods had decreed it so. She said your willpower would be a staying force when the time came—when it would be most needed. She said you were destined for great things and that I should be patient and nurture your strength, not harness it.” She walked over to her daughter, embraced her with a kiss, and added, “Go with my blessing, child, and may the gods watch over you and bring you home safe to us.”

Lunaria turned to her father, wiping away the tears from the corners of her eyes. She searched his constant face for a moment of approval. He had stood back and listened to his wife as she had rambled on, and something inside him had moved his heart to bless the child standing before him.

“May the gods guide your footsteps, child, and bring you home safe.” His constant face mellowed as he spoke.

Lunaria had one last person to bid farewell. He would be the most difficult to break ties with, for it was

he that she was to be wed to within the next month. Her feet dragged on the path that led to his cottage.

“Lunaria,” he greeted her with a flashing smile. “To what do I owe this great pleasure?”

Lunaria’s gaze fell to the ground. “Samson, love of my heart, I have come to inform you that I must take a trip. I know not when, or even if I will return, but I ask your indulgence on this matter. I beg of you to wait for me until I come back to your arms, or until word is sent to you that I shall not return.”

Samson, who was wise beyond his years, had sensed in his heart for some time now the maiden he was in love with was destined for great things. He gathered her into his arms and brushed away her tears with his lips.

“Say no more,” he murmured softly. “I shall be here—waiting—only death can part us.”

Thus, it was that Lunaria left her family and her love to embark on a quest.

~

At the same hour, on the other side of the earth, when the sun was at its highest in the sky, Raycindia gathered her family and her love and broke the news to them of her intentions. Her mother stood by the stove, apron on waist, ladle in hand, and fought back the tears that strove to pour forth. The mother knew her daughter was special; her mother had informed her so. She had been told to be gentle with Raycindia—that one day she was destined for great things.

Raycindia’s father stood by the doorway, as though his standing there would stop his precious daughter from her journey. The baby sister bubbled and laughed at the gathering, and continued with her play.

And Leonardo, handsome and wise—Raycindia’s betrothed—poured the tears from his heart into his soul so she might not witness his pain. He smiled and gathered his love to his breast, blessing her with the words that he would wait for her until eternity, and beyond—if necessary.

Thus, it was that Raycindia left her family and her love to embark on a quest.

It was unknown to each other that the two young maidens set out in search of the Border of Light and Dark. Lunaria rode an ebony black stallion called Noiria. His mane and tail sparkled of stardust, and he breathed a cool mist from his nostrils. Raycindia rode a crystal white stallion called Blanco. His mane and tail were like golden ripples of sunlight, and he breathed fire from his nostrils.

After a multitude of long, tedious hours of travel, the two maidens happened on each other on the Border of Light and Dark. They stood, each on their side, contemplating their next move. They gazed at each other, and at the barren, rocky land that lay along the line that was not fit for man or beast.

Finally, Lunaria spoke. “I see that you are from the land of never-ending light. I would have a word with you. I am from the land of never-ending darkness, and my people tire of their life. There is little will left to continue under the circumstances; all they wish to do is sleep.”

Raycindia answered: “I too desire to have a word with you. I have travelled far in search of the land of darkness so my people might have some night in which to rest their weary eyes. They tire of having so little sleep to fully rest their bodies.”

The maidens smiled to each other. They dismounted from their horses, embraced like old friends, and then sat on the ground face to face. The haziness of the border was eerie, for it was neither light nor dark. They talked for many hours, getting to know each other, sharing the stories from their grandmothers' books and discussing a possible solution to Earth's predicament.

Suddenly, Raycindia's face lit up: "I have an idea," she began. "If I was to give you some of my light, and you were to give me some of your darkness, then we would each have a bit of both and everybody would be happy."

Lunaria smiled. "Why that is a superb idea. I wish I had thought of that. But, the question is, how are we going to carry out such a feat?" They both laughed at the silliness of such a notion.

Once again, the maidens sat reflecting, engrossed in silence. Without warning, Lunaria sprang up from her spot and declared, "I know what we must do. As the book instructed, the Chosen Ones were to travel to the high mountain situated on the Border of Light and Dark at the peak of the earth. I have read accounts that there lives the old, wise woman named Zemias. She is, supposedly, the last of the peoples of Ancient Earth and the stories written say she holds many secrets within her breast."

"Yes, I too have read of her," said Raycindia. "If there is anyone able to help us, I am sure it will be her."

The maidens resumed their journey, this time with a newfound friend and companion—joined by a mysterious trust bequeathed to them from long ago. They travelled up rocky hills, down into stony valleys, across barren plains, through bushes of towering trees,

and plunged headlong through rivers of turbulent waters. Finally, they reached the base of the high mountain. Lunaria and Raycindia put their hands to their eyes and gazed upward at the towering mass. The way to the top would be long and treacherous, but the maidens were brave of heart, and their steeds were as strong and steady as the rocks in the mountain's belly.

On they pushed, through the eerie mist that covered the trail, going ever upward toward the grey smoke at the top. Suddenly, Blanco and Noiria began to snort and dance around on the narrow pathway. Their tails twitched from side to side, and the maidens could feel the quivering of their massive muscles. Without warning, a huge, black creature descended on the travellers, blocking their upward passage.

## Chapter Two

### The Mountain's Mystery

It was a grotesque looking creature. The eyes bulged forth from a skinny little skull. Instead of a mouth, there was a large curved beak that hooked downwards, almost touching the scrawny neck that attached the skeletal head to the bony shoulders. Protruding from the shoulders were broad, web-like wings spanning at least six feet on each side. The body of the creature was fat and full, and the maidens prayed the fullness was not from eating young morsels such as them. There were no legs to the creature—that the maidens could see—for it had come on them quickly, settling down and resting its belly on the stony path.

After a brief time of scrutiny from both parties, the creature opened its mouth: “State your business on this mountain!” it screeched.

Raycindia had always considered herself to be brave, but this creature sitting on the path terrified her. Still, she managed to calm her voice and return an answer: “And who, may I ask, would like to know?”

The creature appeared momentarily unnerved. No one had ever dared to question it so before. Its body rose slightly from the sitting position, revealing two short, skinny legs that trembled from the sheer amount of weight they had to support.

“I am Belsathar, keeper of the ancient mountain. I have been charged to let no mortal set foot past the midpoint of the mountain unless their purpose is of the most honourable sort.”

Lunaria spoke up earnestly: “But our quest is most honourable, and unselfish, I might add. We have come in search of an old wise woman called Zemias, with the hope she will be able to help us bring happiness to our people.”

Lunaria continued, relaying what was happening to Earth’s people. She explained how sad everyone on Earth was, and that she and Raycandia had set out to try to discover a way to bring happiness to everyone. She told of the books their grandmothers had left them, and of the words each grandmother had whispered while the breath was shallow in their lungs. When she finished her story, the creature stayed exceedingly quiet for what seemed an unending moment. It studied the maidens with thoughtful intensity; they awaited the verdict.

Then, without warning, it began to flap its huge wings and lifted from the ground. As it was flying away, it called back: “I believe your quest is genuine and honourable. But beware—heed my advice—if you are telling a falsehood, you will not reach the top of this mountain alive. You stand upon a living, breathing mountain ... a wise mountain ... an all seeing mountain...a mountain destined to protect the mistress of Ancient Earth...a mountain that will wreak her own justice if anyone tries to deceive her!” With those words, Belsathar flew up into the misty clouds that enveloped the mountain’s crown.

The maidens shuddered at the creature’s final words. Both knew what they were taking on was good. They were not doing it for themselves alone, but they

began to fear and to wonder if the people on the earth would be happy if they carried out their quest. What if it would all be in vain? Would they find themselves consumed into the belly of this living mass of dirt and rocks?

They glanced at each other, their thoughts one and the same. No matter the outcome, they had to continue. They must talk with Zemias in order to bring happiness to the people of Earth. So, they pushed forward, inching their way along narrow paths, climbing higher and higher to their unknown destiny. They could hear the mountain's belly rumbling from within, as though it were hungry and just waiting for some delicacy to happen along.

After many exhausting hours of travel, the weary young travellers reached a level space of ground. A light mist floated up from the green grasses, meandering through the haziness, creating eerie looking figures in the duskiess. The horses moved slowly through the long blades of grass and soon before them appeared the mouth of a cave. The maidens could smell a fire burning from within and knew they had finally reached their destination. They dismounted and released Noira and Blanco to eat their fill of the mountain grass, and then they crept stealthily up to the opening of the cave. As they neared the entrance, a small flicker of light beckoned them forward.

“Who goes there?” shrieked a quaking voice. “Be it friend or foe? If it be friend, enter and be welcome. If it be foe, step in and receive your just reward!” The closing statement concluded with a hideous, cackling laugh.

“It be friends, Zemias,” Raycindia replied boldly. “I and my companion have come to seek your guidance.”

“Then enter, and I shall see if you are friends and if you deserve my counsel.”

Raycindia and Lunaria entered the cave with hesitant footsteps. They had read wonderful stories of Zemias; they had also read terrifying stories of Zemias. They silently prayed the story they were fulfilling would be a wonderful one.

They came upon an old woman sitting on a huge stone carved out to resemble a throne. Ancient creatures, the girls recognized from their grandmothers’ books were carved into the stone, folding arms, legs, tails, and wings alike around the woman. She was dressed in tattered clothes, and her hair hung in ragged strings down her back. When she raised her face to the approaching maidens, they gasped in fright.

Her eyes were too big for her face. Her nose hooked downward toward the thin line of her lips. The jaw jutted outward and upward, trying desperately to kiss the nose. Dark lines of age etched their way around the facial features, giving the appearance of a grape left too long in the sun. She so resembled the creature who had greeted them on the mountain’s path.

“Well dearies, come sit by the fire and warm yourselves. Quickly, tell me what you want for I am extremely exhausted. Time draws close for my rest. Help yourself to the food in the pot, for I am sure you must be famished from your long journey.” The old woman eyed the maidens, like an eagle searching for prey.

“Thank you, but we are not hungry right now,” stated Lunaria. “Our quest is most urgent; we do not

wish to waste time.” The maiden proceeded to re-tell the story of Earth’s plight to Zemina. Zemina listened intently, nodding her head periodically, either in affirmation of what was being said or from exhaustion—the maidens were not sure which. When the story ended, complete silence ensued within the walls of the cave.

Hearts beat. Time crept slowly. Finally, the old woman spoke: “I have listened. I must have time to think on this matter. For now, you will eat and then sleep. There is nothing so urgent that it will not wait until the morrow. You will find all you need for your comfort placed out here. I will give you an answer in the morning. Now, I am tired.” There was no further discussion. Zemina shuffled off into the shadows of the cave.

The maidens woke early from a restless sleep. They were anxious to hear Zemina’s answer and be on their way. They knew their quest was honourable and unselfish; they hoped Zemina would see it that way too. After what seemed like hours of waiting, they heard a voice approaching from the shadows. Whoever it was, they were singing, and to the maidens’ surprise, the music was melodious to the ears. They had thought that for one as antiquated as Zemina, who had such a quivering voice, she would not be capable of singing so serenely.

Then, to the further amazement of the maidens, an exquisite creature dressed in the finest of white silks appeared before them. Her hair was ankle length and was the colour of gold. As she walked, it floated around her body like light, fluffy clouds on a breezy day. Her features manifested a perfection that neither maiden had ever before seen. There was a startling glow encircling

her as she strolled toward the stunned maidens. Such a brilliance it was, unlike any ever envisaged on Earth for as long as Lunaria and Raycindia could ever remember.

“Good morning,” she greeted them, her voice as smooth as the silk that caressed her body. “I trust you slept well?”

“Well enough, thank you,” replied Lunaria. “But, we are astounded by the sight that appears before us now; where is the old woman, Zemias?”

The lady smiled. “Zemias is my keeper. She guards well the mouth of the cave, letting none in that will harm me or my world. Zemias can take many different shapes, two you have already witnessed.”

The lady paused and extended her hand to the maidens. “My name is Solearia. I am the protector of the sun, earth, and air, and I am the keeper of Ancient Earth’s secrets. I and Zemias have been left behind by the gods to guide the New World. We are to help in any way possible, ensuring a smooth path for the new sprouts as it was written by the aged wise. We await the time when all will be well with you so we may once again be with our loved ones who have gone before us.

“Zemias has informed me in full detail of your quest. She is my constant companion—my friend, my shield, my life. Without her, I would be destined to desolate loneliness. She lets no one past the mountain’s waist if she has the least mistrust of their intentions. I, and what I guard, must never be exposed to those considered unworthy.” Solearia rambled on with her speech, as though the maidens were not there.

“But, I guess you two do not wish to hear all that; you are here with a purpose.” She paused for a brief moment and smiled sweetly. “I have considered carefully your request and feel that what you are trying

to do is wise and void of selfishness. I also feel that you two are the Chosen Ones spoken of in the ancient books. I believe there should be a day and a night for all people. It was so in Ancient Earth; it will be so again.”

“If it was so in Ancient Earth, then what happened that it is not so now?” asked Raycindia.

“That, my dear, is a story not recorded in the books your grandmothers left you because it was not written yet. The stories you read were of the goodness on Earth and were left to you so you might one day have a yearning to restore such a life back to the people. It is a story that would take too long to recount if I were to tell all; but, to fill you in briefly—the evil wizard Bulshrieka cast a spell on the New World. He cursed them, pronouncing that some would live forever in darkness; some forever in light. It was a powerful spell, not easily destroyed, and it was meant to remain until he felt the people of Earth had learned their lesson.”

“Then what are we to do?” pleaded Lunaria.

“That is where I come in,” said Solearia. “Another wizard—one loyal to the gods—wrote in the ancient tablets that one day two young maidens, one mounted on a steed of black, one on a steed of white, would come in search of me on this mountain. They would plead for the people of Earth and at that time I was to give them this.” Solearia extended her arm and in her hand was a small green rock.

“You are to take this rock to the bottom of the earth. There you will find a mountain, even higher than this one. You must climb that mountain to the top and throw the rock into its mouth. When you do that, the earth will begin to rotate as it once did long ago. Then, everyone will have a day and a night.” Solearia placed the rock in Raycindia’s hand.

Turning away, she said, “Guard the rock well. Your road will not be an easy one. Do not be careless of the route if you see not his signs along the way. He will strike as he pleases, at random. Bulshrieka influenced many before his fall, and even though he seems to have been absent for a long time, his evil influences still exist on Earth. Many loyal followers do his work and report to him in the underworld. Most of these followers linger on the border, waiting to pounce on the Chosen Ones. There has been a restlessness of late on the Border of Light and Dark, which has been forewarning us that the time of the coming of Earth’s saviours was drawing near. Beware, though, for before this quest ends, Bulshrieka will rise, take wing, and fight for his supremacy.” With those words, Solearia slipped back into the shadows of the cave.

Lunaria and Raycindia stood rooted in astonishment; their mouths dropped wide open. They couldn’t believe what they had just heard. They had thought their quest would be over now they had pleaded their case; they had thought Solearia would just do what was necessary and they could go on their way home. To travel to the other end of the earth and to suffer themselves to unknown evils along the way—this they had not anticipated.

Raycindia was the first to break the shocked silence. “Come, we must go now; Solearia has given us a task. She said it was written in the old tablets that we would come. Therefore, we must complete this responsibility because it is so written.”

“You are right. We must leave, and the sooner we do, the sooner we finish this business and will be able to return to our families,” stated Lunaria.

The maidens left the cave, gathered Blanco and Noiria, and began their journey down the mountain. As they approached the halfway mark, Belsathar descended on them from out of nowhere, touching down just in front of the horses.

“Solearia has sent me after you to tell you that if you should ever need her help all you have to do is rub this necklace.” The creature reached under its webbed wing with her beak and drew out a golden chain with a sparkling, crystal stone dangling on the end of it.

Belsathar delivered the necklace to Lunaria. “This is Solearia’s personal necklace and it has great powers. It is an immense sacrifice she makes giving this up to you. Guard it as you would guard the stone. If it falls into the hands of one of Bulshrieka’s followers, it would mean an eternity of torment for Solearia, plus the failure of the quest and a never-ending affliction for the New Earth!”

The creature started to flap its wings. “I shall watch over you. I can take many forms as Solearia has disclosed to you.” And before the maidens appeared Zemias, just as quickly transforming back into Belsathar, then taking flight to leave the maidens alone with their mighty steeds once again.

Thus, it was that each maiden had her stone to bear—one that would protect them along the way, and one that would free the world from its heavy burden. Each prayed to the ancient gods for the strength to complete their mission.

The rest of the passage down the mountain was untainted by hazardous events. The horses, well rested from their night in the mountain meadow, travelled with a quick and steady pace. At the foot of the mountain, the two maidens paused to consider their route to the

bottom of the earth. Together, they decided it would be best to follow the Border of Light and Dark. This way, they could ride in the mist and slip quickly into the shadows when necessary.

Lunaria and Raycindia were amazed at their good fortune when they found themselves at Earth's bottom sooner than expected. The journey, thus far, had progressed much too smoothly for their liking. They had only come upon the odd weary traveller, with vacant looks on their faces, walking along the border. None seemed to notice, or even tried to bother the anxious looking maidens. For all the maidens knew, these travellers could have been Bulshrieka's spies, but somehow, both Lunaria and Raycindia knew the real tests were yet to come. They were convinced the true danger lay waiting on the mountain itself. What that peril would be was still shrouded in mystery, but of one thing the maidens were sure: whatever, or whoever they were about to face would not be an easy adversary.

The maidens discussed that if they were to be so easily overcome, then Solearia would never have sent her necklace with warnings of caution; and, Belsathar would not be watching so closely over them. The maidens could not rid themselves of the shadowy presence hovering in the sky as they had journeyed to the bottom of Earth, and they felt comfort in knowing, or at least of the thought that it was Belsathar.

A small oasis of grass appeared at the base of the mountain, so Lunaria and Raycindia decided to stop and make camp. They had travelled long and hard, and not only did they need rest, so did Blanco and Noiria. Even though the stallions never complained or faltered on the path, a night of tranquillity and a plentiful portion of

grass for their bellies would put them in good stead for what lay ahead.

Lunaria and Raycindia ate a small portion from their food pouches, curled up beside each other for warmth, and fell into a fitful sleep. Each dreamed a dream, yet their dreams were one and the same. They were foreboding. They were sinister. They were rank with fear. The maidens bolted up simultaneously from their earthen bed, both wringing wet from perspiration. Both were clutching their precious stones; both were unwilling to re-enter the land of slumber. For the balance of the evening hours, they sat holding each other close. They rocked—rocked to and fro—in the hopes of rocking away the reality of the dangers they sensed lay before them.

## *Chapter Three*

### *The Goat*

Lunaria and Raycindia were nuzzled from their numbness by the warm breath of their faithful steeds on their necks. They looked up at the stallions and smiled a bright good morning.

“Yes, it is time we got on our way, your majesty,” laughed Lunaria as she rubbed the wet nose of her black stallion. He tossed his head, whinnying approval of her suggestion.

“Not so fast, though, my friend,” stated Raycindia. “We must put some food in our bellies so as not to waste time stopping later in the morning. Only the gods above and the demons below know what lies beyond the base of this mountain; and, after last night’s dreams, I fear the worst.”

Lunaria and Raycindia ate their fill, packed the rest in their saddlebags, and then began their trek up the mighty mountain. Light grey clouds fluttered in the misty sky, seeking out one another, uniting for the rain dance that Lunaria and Raycindia knew would follow soon on their heels.

Mother Sun, from her side of the trail, was cloaked in a lazy haziness, as though she knew even her great strength was no match for the gathering storm

clouds. Father Moon was asleep, nowhere to be found at the moment.

Breezes from all Earth's corners, except the east, had ceased to exist and had found their own private hiding corners to wait out the moment of Mother Nature's anger. Animal life scurried around in the last moments of calm, trying to find some protective hole in which to wait out the impending fury.

Blanco and Noiria also sensed the gathering storm, and they pushed forward with their two charges clutched securely on their sturdy backs. Side by side, they tread up the mountain—day and night.

The dozing sun had reached her highest point before either maiden spoke. They knew that to proceed quietly was the quickest way up the mountain, but Lunaria was curious about what was happening with Solearia. She pulled out the necklace that Belsathar had entrusted to her.

Raycindia drew in her breath when she saw what Lunaria was about to do. “Lunaria, we are only to use that in time of danger. Quickly, thrust it back to your bosom!”

“But I am curious to understand what help it will bring us when we are faced with danger. What if it is a hoax? What if this whole thing is some sinister deception? What if...” Lunaria's tone was becoming frantic.

“Lunaria, my friend, snap out of this mood! We must trust Solearia. She is the last of the Ancient People. I do not believe she was lying to us. Now put the necklace away and let us get on with our task. We must not let fear cloud our good judgements.” Raycindia spoke quietly but firmly to Lunaria.

Lunaria hesitated a moment more, and then slowly returned the necklace to its resting place. Raycindia breathed a sigh of relief. They continued up the mountain, but not before they heard a painful, blood-chilling screech, and saw the dark-winged shadow that passed across the sun, just as the precious stone was hidden beneath the layers of cloth.

“We should stop soon and find some shelter,” Raycindia commented as she gazed upward at the sky. “It will not be long before those clouds begin to release their tears on us. By the look of them, they are quite angry. I wonder if someone has angered the gods today, and what their punishment will be to us.”

“I don’t believe the gods have anything to do with Mother Nature’s feelings,” Lunaria reflected. “I think she takes out her personal frustrations on both those who deserve a lesson and those who do not!”

“Maybe you are right my friend, maybe you are right. But then again, I have always thought Mother Nature was one of the gods—maybe even the supreme one!”

“Maybe so,” Lunaria smiled. “Maybe that would explain our temperamental weather,” she added with a light laugh.

Raycindia’s stallion halted on the trail, his ears perked sharply forward. Raycindia leaned over on Blanco’s neck and whispered, “What is it, boy? What do you hear?”

Blanco tossed his head and began dancing around. His muscles flinched nervously. Noiria, also sensing danger in the air, joined in Blanco’s performance. Suddenly, Noiria reared up, flailing his forelegs to the open sky, striking out at the unknown intruder. The sudden movement of her steed caught

Lunaria off guard, and she found herself seated squarely on the ground behind him. Raycindia was about to laugh at Lunaria's plight, but the gurgles of mirth caught in her throat as she beheld the spectacle that appeared before them.

"What are you doing on my mountain?" the bellowing, ugly voice pierced the air.

The maidens stared, transfixed, at the sight on the mountain path. Blocking their upward passage was a huge mountain goat, larger than any they had ever laid eyes on. The horns on his mighty head were at least ten feet from tip to tip. He stood tall, almost as much so as the mounts that Lunaria and Raycindia straddled. His coat was a silky grey, streaked with wisps of ebony. There was an evilness that emanated from him, and the terrified maidens froze on the spot.

Once again the hideous voice questioned them. "I repeat myself seldom, but you look to be tasty morsels worth waiting for, so I shall ask you once again—what are you doing on my mountain?"

Lunaria was the first to gather an element of courage. "We are just travellers—adventurers, who would like to see what is beyond the clouds of this mighty mountain."

"There is nothing beyond this point that is of interest to you," the goat sneered warningly.

"How do you know what interests us, Sir Goat?" Lunaria retorted bravely.

"If truth be told, it doesn't matter what interests you. You are on my mountain, and I am exceedingly choosy about who climbs beyond this point." The goat's silky beard waved in the brisk mountain breezes.

An awkward silence crept over the small group as they stood in confrontation. Lunaria reached for the

necklace around her neck, taking comfort in the warmth it radiated from beneath her cloak. Blanco and Noiria shuffled their hooves on the loose gravel. Mist floated around the stallions as they tossed their heads and snorted at the monstrous, looming figure in front of them.

Suddenly, the goat made his move. He began tossing his impressive horns as though trying to strike terror into the hearts of the intruders of his domain. But, to the maidens' unanticipated surprise, Noiria, who was still free of his rider, reared forward toward the advancing antagonist. His hooves flailed out at the air, seeking their target. Sparks flew as he struck the horn of the mighty goat.

The goat staggered back. He was in shock; he hadn't expected these insignificant creatures to stand up to him. He had presumed the maidens would be easily deterred from their mission. Bulshrieka would not be pleased with this turn of events. Maybe, these are the Chosen Ones. He stepped aside.

"Well, I can see you two are determined, so be my guests. Go through if you must; or should I say—if you dare. I am not the last adversary you shall encounter on this trail," he snorted.

Lunaria remounted Noiria, and they fell in behind Raycindia and Blanco. The stallions sidestepped past the goat. Raycindia glanced back and noted the sinister smile on his face. Fear of what lay ahead of them once again shivered through her bones.

## *Chapter Four*

### *The Wall*

The rest of the day was uneventful. The light, grey clouds were becoming angrier; the trail leading upward was becoming steeper. Sweat flowed in minute rivers off the rippling muscles of Blanco and Noiria. The maidens rode in silence, each absorbed in her own troubled thoughts.

Lunaria thought of the necklace around her neck—Solearia’s personal necklace. She thought of how close she had been to calling on Solearia just before they were confronted by the great goat.

Raycindia thought of the precious stone buried deep inside her pocket. She thought of the mission she and Lunaria had embarked on, the importance of that mission to the people of Earth, and what it would mean to mankind should they fail.

Lunaria was the first to notice the impenetrable mass in front of them. She pulled up sharply on the reins. Noiria reared, and the tip of his hooves clanged against solid rock. Raycindia pulled Blanco to a swift halt just behind Lunaria.

“What is it?” Raycindia questioned anxiously.

“A wall. It appears the trail ends here,” replied Lunaria.

“What are we going to do? How could we have taken the wrong path?”

“There is no wrong trail, my dear Raycindia. There was only one beginning at the base of this mountain, which means it had to be the right one. But, why it stops here puzzles me.” Lunaria drew Solearia’s necklace from its hiding place. “Maybe now it is time we asked for help,” she stated solemnly as she peered into the crystal. She rubbed the gem softly with her thumb and within seconds a familiar voice answered.

“What is your need?”

Lunaria gazed deeper into the stone and saw Solearia’s smiling face. “We are stuck here, Solearia; it appears the trail has ended. What should we do?”

Solearia frowned. “What is your obstacle, Lunaria?” she queried.

“A solid mass of rock.”

“Ah.” There was a notable pause before Solearia spoke again. “Go through,” she stated with surety.

Lunaria laughed nervously. “I beg your pardon; how would you suggest we go through solid rock?”

“It is not what you think, my dear Lunaria,” Solearia replied gently. “Bulshrieka is deceitful and full of magic tricks. It is but a figment of your imagination, a mirage that blocks your way.”

Raycindia was listening intently to the conversation. “So what you are saying is that we should just push forward?”

“Yes. As you challenge it, the wall will be no more. On the other side, you will find an extensive meadow filled with lush grass for your horses’ bellies. At the far side is a cave to protect you from tonight’s impending storm. All will be safe, for now. Sleep well tonight for I fear it may be your last peaceful dreams for

a time. Bulshrieka is becoming uncomfortable with your closeness.” Solearia began to fade. “Good-bye and good luck.”

The maidens stared at each other in shocked silence. Blanco and Noiria stamped their hooves anxiously on the earthen path. Lunaria dug her heels into Noiria’s flanks. He flung his head and sidestepped nervously, refusing to attack the solid wall. Lunaria tried desperately to control the skittish horse, but to no avail. His back feet slipped on the edge of the trail, and over they plunged.

“Lunaria!” Raycindia’s scream resounded through the air.

Lunaria couldn’t answer her friend. Her eyes closed as she and Noiria catapulted to an unknown fate. Just as she was about to utter a final prayer, huge, webbed wings appeared beneath Noiria’s belly. The fall was arrested. For a moment, horse and rider were held motionless in the air. Then, slowly, they began their ascent back up the side of the mountain. Lunaria held her breath as the great, broad wings settled her and Noiria down to the mountain path.

Raycindia’s face broke into a relieved smile as Belsathar set her friend on solid ground. “Belsathar!” she breathed happily. “Thank you.”

Belsathar rested her grotesque body on the path. “Lucky for you I was around,” she quaked. “Foolish animals, horses are, always skittering at something.”

Lunaria finally gathered her composure: “Belsathar, how did you know...”

Lunaria wasn’t allowed to finish her question. “I told you before that I would be watching. Go forward now. Remember Solearia’s words. Take your rest

before time steals your moments.” Belsathar took flight and was soon lost in the gathering storm clouds.

Raycindia turned to Lunaria. “I will go first this time; maybe Blanco will be steadier at the wall. The horses are hungry; I am famished, and we both need our rest for I fear the tomorrows.”

Thunder erupted into the stillness as Raycindia nudged Blanco forward, and through the imposing barrier. The wall dissipated. Lunaria and Noiria followed close behind.

## *Chapter Five*

### *Poissan*

The maidens caught their breath at the beauty before them. The grass was like a flowing sea of green hues, deep and luscious. Huge, ancient trees guarded a silvery lake in the heart of the meadow. Bushes laden with numerous varieties of fruits were scattered in the distance. Blanco and Noiria did not wait for their mistresses to give them leave to eat; they lowered their heads and began ripping and chewing the juicy blades.

Lunaria and Raycindia slid from their saddles and ran through the long grass toward the lake. They wished to sink their tired bodies into the healing waters. Raycindia had rushed ahead, and as she drew close to the water, she noticed an unusual rippling on the surface.

“Come, Lunaria, look at this—it is so beautiful,” Raycindia called eagerly, an amazed expression on her face.

Suddenly, up out of the water’s depths came what appeared, at first glimpse, to be a young woman. But, as the body ascended, the maidens saw that it was covered in scales from the shoulders down. The scales shimmered like red, gold, blue, and green sequins in the moonlight’s birth. Hair, the colour of newly fallen

snow, cascaded down its back. The creature reached her arms toward Raycindia. Eyes of fire invaded her mind.

“Come...join me here in my waters. You look tired and drawn, in need of peace,” the creature’s voice cooed softly.

Lunaria felt there was something not right about the beast—something sinister. She watched as Raycindia walked toward the lake, mesmerized by the cooing voice.

“No! No, Raycindia!” Lunaria screamed.

But Raycindia was totally captivated by the creature. Her steps drew her closer to its outstretched arms. Lunaria lunged forward and grabbed Raycindia’s wrist.

“Don’t move, my friend,” she whispered huskily in her ear. “I feel there is something evil about this creature.”

The creature riveted her eyes toward Lunaria. Hatred spewed forth in a torrent from its mouth, erasing the beauty that, just moments before, had stood before the maidens.

“Take your hands from her!” it hissed. “I have a need, and you will not deny me!”

Lunaria had to think quickly. Raycindia stood unmoving, in a trance-like state. The storm that had been brewing earlier was drawing nearer. Lightning streaked across the sky, illuminating the creature’s face for a split second, revealing its true grossness.

The beauty, which had earlier stunned the maidens, disintegrated. The brilliant colours dwindled, becoming dull and lifeless. The hair became coarse and dark—like seaweed—hanging in straggles down the scaly back. Only its eyes had any light—an inferno, spewing forth flames of deception.

Lunaria yelled back at the creature: “She is mine, you hideous beast; I have need of her!”

“No! It is not to be this way. Bulshrieka promised me a morsel. I, Poissan, will not be denied!” Hysteria saturated the creature’s voice.

Lunaria thought quickly: “Then you must fight for her!” she shouted.

Poissan hesitated a moment. “What do you mean, I must fight for her?”

“I mean just what I said.” The nerves in Lunaria’s stomach tightened. She began to notice a slight gasping in Poissan’s breathing; and, her ugliness was becoming more pronounced as the seconds ticked away. It began to dawn on Lunaria what was happening. The longer Poissan was out of the water, the more her power dwindled. Lunaria started pulling Raycindia away from the shore, far from the creature’s grip.

Poissan roared, partly from anger, partly from the pain at her imminent loss. She began to move toward the shore, her entire body shivering in fury. “Give her to me!” she shrieked over and over.

However, the voice had begun to weaken. Thunder clapped from the heavens, blending with the mournful pain of the creature. Her body thrashed weakly in the still waters. Slowly, it began to shrivel away, scale by scale, until there was nothing left but the silent, silvery waters receiving the tears of the gods from above.

Raycindia shook her head: “What happened, Lunaria?”

“I believe we just bumped into another one of Bulshrieka’s servants. I guess we will have to be extremely cautious of everything from here on. Solearia was right; Bulshrieka is getting nervous. We are

drawing near to the end of our mission. Soon Earth as we know it will be no more.” She paused. “Come, let us gather Blanco and Noiria and head for the cave. The storm is maturing.”

The maidens pulled the reluctant horses from their long awaited meal and headed for the shadowy opening at the other side of the field. To their surprise, when they entered the cave they found a blazing fire, and there, sitting beside the warmth, was Zemias stirring a pleasant smelling pot of stew.

“It is about time,” her voice quivered. “I had almost lost hope—I heard Bulshrieka’s fiend’s torment.” She smiled at Lunaria: “Well done, child. You have proven you are worthy of this mission. I can see why the gods have chosen such as you. Come, both of you, and take your fill.” Zemias handed each a wooden bowl filled with savoury stew.

Lunaria and Raycandia hadn’t realized how famished they were. They gulped ravenously and held out the bowls for seconds.

“Greedy are you?” Zemias cackled as she refilled the empty bowls.

Lunaria and Raycandia laughed. It felt good to laugh. Peace descended in the cave. The maidens closed their eyes and slept, dreaming of what they had left behind, and of a new and better world.

Zemias watched the two sleeping maidens. She knew the rest of the path would be no easier for them; in fact, it would be even more difficult the closer they got to the top of the mountain. She also knew the result if they failed their mission.

A flash of light brightened the corner of the cave. “Good evening, my beloved Zemias.”

Zemia looked up to see her mistress standing in the corner. “Solearia.” She shuffled over and embraced the ageless woman.

“I see that Lunaria handled the situation with Poissan quite well,” Solearia chuckled.

“Yes, she did.” Zemia paused before speaking again. “I feared I would have to intervene. Poissan is exceedingly powerful.”

“However, like most fish, she is not too smart.” Solearia laughed softly. She gazed into Zemia’s eyes. “You know what comes next don’t you?”

“Yes,” Zemia answered, her voice hushed.

“Are you able?”

“As always.”

“Good.” Solearia hugged Zemia again. “We will meet in the designated place when it is all over.”

“For sure.”

“Our lives will never be the same again when this is finished.”

“I know.” There was a hint of tears in Zemia’s eyes.

“Then, for now, goodbye my beloved friend and companion...till we meet again.” Solearia’s light faded into the cold, stone walls.

## *Chapter Six*

### *The Prince*

Lunaria and Raycindia awoke to the aroma of a tantalizing breakfast. They stood up, stretched, and walked over to the mouth of the cave. The storm had passed on to another place. To the east, Mother Sun was at her best as she smiled down on the new day. To the west, Father Moon had closed his eyes and nodded off to sleep. Even the mist that usually covered their trail had dissipated. Blanco and Noiria were crunching peacefully on the juicy morning grass.

They turned around and searched for Zemias. She was gone. Their bowls had been washed and placed beside the fire. Raycindia filled them from the pot and handed one to Lunaria. For a time, they ate in silence, each going over in their mind the events of the past few days.

“Zemias is correct. We are getting close to the top of this mountain. The goat, the wall, the fish creature—they were nothing to what I fear is still ahead. Bulshrieka will stop at nothing to ensure we fail this mission,” Lunaria reflected.

“But we have the stones, my friend. They will protect us.”

“I wonder if others tried before us and failed. I wonder if they had the stones in their possession and still failed. And if that be so, I wonder how Zemias and Solearia retrieved the stones back to their bosoms. I wonder...”

Raycindia studied her companion. They had, in such a short time, been through so much together. They had been there for each other; when one faltered, the other remained strong.

“Do not think such twisted thoughts, Lunaria. It is Bulshrieka who plants these doubts in your head. He seems able to reach across the barriers of time and space to infiltrate his poison into our minds. We have to resist all the forces he throws in front of us. We have to concentrate on one thing only—completing our mission.” Raycindia reached over and touched Lunaria’s shoulder. “Time passes swiftly. We must leave this place and be on our way.”

Lunaria nodded. The maidens gathered the bowls and set them beside the pot. Raycindia scattered dirt on the fire. Wisps of smoke struggled for breath, belching in their final moments. The maidens whistled to Blanco and Noiria, mounted, and continued their journey out of the peaceful meadow, travelling ever upward toward the grumbling mountaintop. Zemias observed their departure from the dark shadows of the cave. Soon, she too departed, ascending higher, ever watchful of the quest.

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Time hung heavily on the travellers. The horses picked their way slowly and precariously along the treacherously narrow path. The maidens sensed the moment would soon be upon them when they would have to leave their faithful steeds behind. Mother Sun was reaching her peak in the east; and, for some

unknown reason, on this day she seemed to be reaching across the line, penetrating Earth with an unrelenting heat. Sweat streaked the flanks of Blanco and Noiria, and trickled down the brows of Raycindia and Lunaria.

The mountain was awakening. It grumbled fiercely from deep within its belly. Tiny pebbles began their long journeys down the steep sides of the mountain walls, jeering with haunting echoes of woe to the maidens as they kept pushing upward. The vegetation became sparser, and no longer was it bathed in bright colours. It seemed nothing more than an insignificant infringement for the glowing hunger of the ravenous boulders that crowded the upper trail as the maidens drew closer to the mountain's crown.

A plaintiff cry caused the maidens to yank their horses into silence.

“Did you hear that, Lunaria?”

“Yes.”

“For sure it is a trap of some kind.”

The maidens waited. The cry came again. It sounded like someone pleading for help.

“We must check it out,” Lunaria said as she dismounted from Noiria. “If someone is truly in need of assistance, we cannot just leave them. We must comfort them, and give them some food and water to sustain them until they can continue their decent back down the mountain.”

Before Raycindia could stop her, Lunaria called out: “Where are you? Do you seek help? Speak again, that I might follow your voice.”

“Over here, just around the bend,” the voice answered back weakly.

Raycindia leaped from Blanco's back and grabbed Lunaria's arm. “Please, my friend, do not go.

Let us mount our horses and speed past the voice with blinders on our eyes. I fear this is not right. Who else would be on this mountain besides Bulshrieka's followers and us? Remember the goat and the wall. Remember the fish creature. Please, think straight, and recall why we are here—our mission—and what it will mean to the people of Earth if we fail,” Raycindia appealed to Lunaria.

“I know what you are saying, Raycindia; I will not be fooled. But, nevertheless, I must see for my satisfaction who it is that is in need of our help.” Lunaria handed her reins to Raycindia: “Wait here with the horses. I will check this out myself and signal you if all is well. If you hear a sharp whistle, it will be my signal for you to bring the horses so we might quickly flee this place.” Lunaria turned hastily and headed toward the plaintiff sound.

As she rounded the corner, her eyes beheld a young man of astonishing handsomeness leaning weakly against the mountain's side. His tattered clothes hung limply on his body. His feet were bare and calloused. His skin was etched with bloody scratches. His chest heaved unevenly.

“Bless you, child,” he murmured as Lunaria rushed to his side. “I thought I was surely a dead man.”

“Who are you? How did you come to be on this mountain?” Lunaria asked.

“My name is Prince Adel Bashibab. I was informed there were great riches on this mountain, and in my foolishness, I have tried to seek them out. You must not travel further. There is much beyond this point that no man, let alone a delicate maiden such as you, should set their eyes on.” The prince paused and gasped for breath.

Lunaria hesitated a moment. Was this a trick? Was he indeed a prince, or was he one of Bulshrieka's mercenaries? But, he had warned her not to go further. "Why would a prince wish to seek out riches on a mountain such as this?" she questioned. "And why alone? Should not a prince have his army with him?"

Prince Adel Bashibab grimaced. Lunaria thought she detected a spark of malice creep into his eyes, though. "I am somewhat of an adventurer," he replied with a slow grin. "I have been known for such oddities as leaving my kingdom for days on end..."

"You must reside on the light side then, for I do not recognize you as one of the princes from my lands?" Lunaria interrupted before Prince Adel could finish his sentence. "Perhaps you know of my friend, Raycindia; she lives in the land where the sun never rests."

Prince Adel stroked his chin. "No, I cannot say I do."

At that precise moment, Raycindia appeared around the corner. "Lunaria, what is happening here?" she called out.

"Come, Raycindia. I have found us a prince. And he is from your side of Earth. Perhaps you know him—Prince Adel Bashibab?"

"There is no Prince Adel Bashibab anywhere in our kingdoms that I am aware of," Raycindia spoke as she turned her eyes on the supposed prince. She studied him carefully: his features, his clothing, and his tattered and broken body. "He is not a prince from our lands," she stated matter-of-factly.

Prince Adel Bashibab shifted restlessly. "And do you know all the royal families in your land? You, who appears so young, are an authority on the monarchy and

can identify each member of all the royal families without the least hesitation?” the prince sneered.

Lunaria threw a shocked look at the prince. His tattered weariness seemed to have been given a shot of sarcastic strength.

“Maybe, sir, you need to be corrected on this matter,” Raycindia began. “The monarchies from our lands are marked with a particular symbol, one visible to all. You sir, in all good faith, do not bear this mark. I charge that you are not a prince from the land where the sun never rests, but that you are a fiend of Bulshrieka, and have been sent to dissuade us from travelling further on our quest.” Raycindia’s voice rose in anger. She turned to Lunaria. “Tell me, my friend and companion, did this prince not try to discourage you from continuing?”

Lunaria looked at Raycindia. She saw the firm expression on her friend’s face. She turned back to the prince. He smiled beguilingly at her. Lunaria’s reply was slow in coming: “Yes, he did say there were many dangers beyond this point, but if one were to note the shape that he is in...”

“Don’t be fooled my friend, my dear Lunaria. Remember the fish creature that so mesmerized me? Remember how you saw through it, and that you were right? Don’t let this dire situation steer your mind from what we both know is right!” Raycindia pleaded to Lunaria’s better judgment.

Prince Adel Bashibab cursed at Raycindia: “You wench!” he screamed. “What do you know of life? You have hardly begun yours...” his voice became hideous. “Soon both your petty lives will end—and for what? There is no glory in what you are about to do. No one down there on the plains, or in the valleys, will ever

thank you for your efforts. They are nothing but an ungrateful lot. Why is it, do you think, Bulshrieka cursed them so vilely? He is the real master of the land, past and present. He is the one who knows how to control all, for the benefit of all. The snivelling race of Earth's people is not worthy to serve at Bulshrieka's feet!" Prince Adel laughed hysterically.

The maidens took advantage of his self-absorption and quickly slipped back around the corner. They huddled together in the shadow of a great rock, pondering their next move. Where could they go from here?

"We need help," Lunaria stated shakily. "I don't know who this Prince Adel is, or what powers he holds, but I also don't think I want to know."

"We must call on Solearia," Raycindia uttered softly. "She will help us. Take out the necklace Lunaria, quickly, and beckon her."

A piercing scream invaded their hushed conversation. Around the corner flew an enormous winged creature. It was so startlingly beautiful that it grabbed the breath from the maidens' throats. Its ebony feathers sparkled shades of gold and silver in the sunlight. Its well-defined features were effortless to gaze on, unlike Belsathar's. The mighty expanse of its wings flapped fiercely in the still air, stirring up a wind filled with fury.

"How dare you defy me and all that I have sent to try to dissuade you from this foolishness!" the winged creature roared. "You shall never fulfil your mission. It may be so written in the ancient tablets, inscribed by the foolish gods you worship, but it is not so written in mine!" The huge feathered wings flapped furiously.

Tiny pebbles swirled on the ground around Raycindia and Lunaria, striking the bare flesh of their arms and face. Blanco and Noiria reared in fright. Their forelegs struck out at the creature that hovered just beyond hooves' touch. The majestic bird swooped down and struck Blanco with its mighty beak. Blanco screamed in pain. Red liquid oozed from the open gash on his flank. Noiria lowered his head and then flung his haunches out at the creature, landing a severe blow with his hooves on the bird's left wing.

The winged creature faltered momentarily, but soon regained its command. "You pitiful specimens—do you believe you can overpower me?" it roared.

"They may be no match for you, Bulshrieka, but why don't you try me on for size?" A familiar voice permeated the disturbed air.

Lunaria and Raycindia looked up and gasped in disbelief. Belsathar was challenging the great winged creature.

"Run, Raycindia and Lunaria! Leave your horses here; they can travel no further on this trail. I will detain this detestable creature," Belsathar shouted to the maidens.

"You decrepit bag of bones and feathers," yelled Bulshrieka. "Do you honestly think you are a match for my powers?"

"We shall see, shan't we, Bulshrieka, who it is that is a bag of bones and feathers. I can smell it on the wind; your demise is close, and I believe you are aware of that fact as well! Go maidens! Why do you hesitate? Did I not tell you from the beginning I would be watching over you?" Belsathar's great webbed wings stroked at the wind Bulshrieka had brewed up, clearing a path for the maidens to flee.

Raycindia and Lunaria sprinted back up the path where they had found Prince Adel Bashibab, only this time they knew it would be empty, at least of princely men. They could hear the shrieking of the two mighty birds as they clashed in embittered fury. However, precious time had been bought for them, and they could not linger to see the conclusion of the battle—they could only pray that Belsathar would be the victor. As they raced up the narrow pathway, the shrieks became nothing more than a dim echo in their ears.

## *Chapter Seven*

### *The Tree*

Fear propelled the maidens forward, despite their fatigue. There was no time to hesitate. The mountain's belly rumbled hungrily and smoke curled lazily from its mouth. All plant life had ceased to live on this section of the mountain; it was barren except for the rocks and the dirt beneath. Nowhere was there a sign of even the tiniest of animal life busy about their daily routine.

Suddenly, Lunaria seemed to acquire new strength, and she pushed forward with revitalized energy. However, Raycindia weakened with each step she took, staggering along the path, almost losing her footing several times.

"Lunaria, stop, please. I need to rest. I banged my leg on a boulder as we fled. It needs tending to," Raycindia called out as she fell to the ground, grasping hold of her wounded leg.

"There is no place to sleep here, my friend. Perhaps if we press forward just a little more, we will find a hidden oasis for us to rest our tired bodies for a while."

Lunaria retraced her steps and put an arm around Raycindia. "Here, I will help you. Lean on me. I want this mission over with too. I want to go home to my family and friends, to my beloved Samson. Fatigue

knocks at my mind's door, but we must finish this that we have begun." Lunaria had a worried look on her face. Raycindia allowed herself to be led.

Soon the maidens came to a plateau in the path. Just ahead of them, in the middle of the flat terrain, was a knurled and battered tree. Its green foliage was lost to the four winds; its roots protruded through the rocks as they sought Mother Sun's healing rays.

"You can rest by the tree," Lunaria stated, pointing to the monstrosity.

Raycindia nodded and smiled listlessly. Her heart was heavy. She knew not if she had the strength left to complete the mission. With every step forward she took, it seemed as though her energy dwindled. The rock was becoming heavier and heavier in her pocket, as though it were trying to break through and escape its final destination. Rest was all she needed—just a few moments of peaceful respite.

Lunaria leaned Raycindia against the tree's trunk. She checked the wound on Raycindia's leg and then ripped a piece of cloth from her clothing and wrapped the gash. "This should help," she said.

Reaching into her food pouch, Lunaria drew out two portions, handed one to Raycindia, and popped the other one into her own hungry mouth. "I am going to check the trail up ahead. You eat, and then close your eyes and rest." Lunaria disappeared around the corner.

Raycindia chewed slowly on her food. There was no taste to it. How she longed for a real home-cooked meal of venison and potatoes, followed by a huge glass of goat's milk. She closed her eyes and began to dream of her home. She saw her family as they were just before she embarked on her journey. She saw her mother, apron on waist, ladle in hand. She saw her

father, tall and strong among the village men. She saw her baby sister, bright and bubbly, playing with the neighbourhood children. She saw Leonardo, handsome and wise, and her heart began to weep that she may never see him again.

Suddenly, Raycindia's eyes flew open. Something was creeping around her neck, choking off her breath. She sprang up from her resting spot and turned to face whatever it was that had moved on her. She opened her mouth to scream at the sight that greeted her, but no sound burst forth.

The tree had transformed, and before her stood a writhing mass of snakes. Mousy-brown scales covered the trunk; the branches were like hundreds of tiny green fingers reaching to clutch their unsuspecting victims.

Just then an enormous, villainous head rose from the uppermost branches. The voice grated evil: "Come, what do you fear? I and my children will not harm you. We were only going to wrap around you to keep the cold from your body. The winds on this mountain can be cruel at times, you know." The snake appeared to be grinning, and its fangs protruded menacingly from its mouth.

Raycindia recovered a fraction of her courage. "I do not need your warmth Mother Snake, or that of your children. I believe I have rested long enough, and that I will be on my way." Raycindia began to back away from the serpent.

"Not so hasty, my lovely. Where is that friend of yours? She has not rested yet. Perhaps she would be in need of a moment's reprieve."

"I doubt it," retorted Raycindia as she retreated further from the villain.

The great snake began to writhe furiously. Her body extended straight up toward the clouds, and her muscles bulged from the strain of pulling. Slowly, the roots of the “tree” emerged from the hardened earth. They wiggled and twisted in a grotesque dance, and they moaned and groaned as their eyes opened to the sunlight of their new world.

Raycindia froze, petrified as the baby snakes broke away from their mother and slithered across the clearing. She tried to move her feet. She tried to open her mouth and scream for Lunaria; however, once again, nothing came out. Evil began surrounding her, began crawling across her weary feet, covering her legs with scaly ugliness.

Her thoughts raced to a choking death, to a failed quest. It was she who held the stone that would free the world from Bulshrieka’s immoral grasp; yet it was she who stood here, alone and helpless, surrounded by his demons.

“Raycindia!” Lunaria screamed sharply as she returned to the site. She was stopped still in her tracks at the sight before her. Small green and brown snakes covered Raycindia up to her waist. And, hovering at the edge of the clearing was the great mother snake, giggling gleefully at the plight of the intruder.

Lunaria thought fast. If there was ever a need for Solearia’s necklace, it was now. Quickly, she drew it from around her neck and warmed it in her hands. “Solearia,” Lunaria whispered. She watched the crystal, but Solearia’s face did not appear.

“Solearia,” she whispered again with more urgency in her voice. Still, Solearia did not materialize.

Lunaria began to panic. Where was the woman who had promised them protection? Where was

Belsathar—Zemia—whoever she was? Why had they abandoned the Chosen Ones when the end was so close? The snakes were almost to Raycindia's neck, and still, she did not move.

Suddenly, a sword appeared in Lunaria's hand, and a voice murmured softly to her: "Take the sword and cut the mother serpent at her roots. When she dies, so will her children. Be not afraid. I am with you. I will guide your strokes to the beast's destruction."

Lunaria moved steadily forward, toward the grinning viper. The sun glinted off the sword's blade. The sabre began swinging like a pendulum as Lunaria drew closer to the serpent.

The creature roared with laughter as she beheld the approaching maiden. "Do you think you will destroy me?" she screamed evilly.

Lunaria did not answer. She just kept pressing forward, her eyes glued on her target. The sword continued swinging, cutting even the rocks in its path. Then, it took its first nick of the snake's skin. Blood spurted forth. The snake ceased her laughter and looked down at her roots in shock—no blade had ever been able to penetrate her before!

A horrifying scream resounded on the mountain. "Bulshrieka!" came the plaintiff cry for help. "Bulshrieka! Where are you?"

The blade cut again.

"Have I not served you well?" the serpent's voice pleaded in agony.

The blade sliced deeper.

The baby snakes that surrounded Raycindia heard their mother's wail. They too began to lament, and their chorus of pain startled Raycindia to action. She began

ripping and throwing the tiny serpents from her clothing.

The blade carved further.

“Bulshrieka!” Despair overflowed within the serpent’s voice. It tried to move from its spot, but to no avail. “Why do you leave me helpless before these two insignificant girls?”

The blade struck again.

“Do I not deserve a better death than this?” the serpent choked as she began to lose hold of her lofty position in the air.

The babies were racing back to their mother. “No!” she screamed out to them. “Do not come near to me. If my blood touches you, you too will all die!”

But they listened not.

The blade slashed the snake’s main artery. Blood spewed forth like a dam set free, splattering the ground with crimson ooze. The mother snake’s blood baptized her babies, and as each drop found its mark, it was like the kiss of death.

“Bulshriekaaaaa!” A final painful sound emitted from the creature’s mouth.

The blade severed the roots. The sword, having completed its mission, disappeared from Lunaria’s hands. All was silent except for the deep breathing of the two maidens. They turned and took hold of each other’s hand, and walked slowly out of the horrible place. Once free of the blood pond, they sank to the ground, holding each other comfortingly, and wept tears of relief and exhaustion. Sleep overtook them.

A deep rumbling from within the mountain’s belly awoke the maidens. It was a rumbling unlike the ones they had heard as they had travelled up the

mountain. This one was urgent, filled with anger. It sounded like a warning.

Lunaria stood. "Come, we must move on."

"I don't think I have the strength left to go further," Raycindia stated. "Back there, before the snakes came, I dreamed of home, of my mother, my father, and my baby sister. I saw Leonardo, and there was a worry on his face that I might not be returning to him. I wondered how and why I was chosen for this. I do not have the strength you do, Lunaria. For some reason, mine diminishes quickly as though death is knocking at my door. I should give you the stone; you should be the one to thrust it into this mountain's mouth, while you are still able."

"Do not forget, my friend, Solearia gave that task to you. It must have been for a reason. You are the one to complete that part of our mission. We each have, according to the ancient records, our own charge to embrace. I believe my part in all this is to make sure you reach the top of this mountain. That is why I carry her necklace."

Lunaria helped Raycindia to her feet. "Come, let's get moving. We shall show Bulshrieka that he no longer has a hold over Earth. So far, we have struck down every rival he has set in our path. I have a feeling that he will be our last obstacle."

## *Chapter Eight*

### *Blackbirds*

Raycindia and Lunaria pushed on. Despite her newfound fortitude, Lunaria longed for their mighty steeds whose hooves never tired and whose backs were forever secure. The mountain's belly continued rumbling and growling. Wisps of smoke curled lazily from her mouth. The sky on the Border of Light and Dark grew dimmer. Lunaria gazed up in dismay because it was not yet time for Mother Sun to rest. In the distance, she noticed the reason—a large flock of huge blackbirds was drawing closer to her and her companion.

“Look there, Raycindia,” Lunaria whispered as she pointed to the sky.

Raycindia shook her head. “I do not wish to gaze upon more disaster, my friend,” she stated, turning away from where Lunaria was pointing.

Lunaria worried about Raycindia's mindset. What had happened to her? Lunaria, too, was tired and longed for home; she yearned to see her parents and loved ones left behind. But, Lunaria knew they must complete the mission. She grabbed hold of Raycindia's chin, forcing her to look up at the approaching birds.

“We must find a path to the top that will hide us in shadows,” Lunaria asserted.

“And how do you suggest we do that?” Raycindia questioned with a hint of sarcasm.

Lunaria drew out Solearia’s necklace. The stone radiated comforting warmth. She cradled it gently in her hands and beckoned the Mistress of Ancient Earth. Solearia’s loveliness appeared in the crystal.

“What may I do for you, Lunaria?”

“I am in need of shadows, Solearia. There is an enormous flock of blackbirds headed toward us, and I feel they are not coming to be of aid to our mission. Can you help us?”

“Just ahead, around the next bend, you will come to a mountain stream. On the far side is a waterfall. The stream will be difficult to cross because there are many undercurrents that can sweep away even the heaviest of creatures. After you are safe on the far bank, you will go through the waterfalls, and there you will be rewarded with shadows. But, I must also warn you, these shadows will not last for long, so once there, you must hurry your steps to the mountain’s peak.” Solearia began to fade from the stone.

“Wait!” Lunaria uttered. “What shadows are you talking about? How will we know the way?”

“You will be invisible to the birds. There is only one path beyond the falls, and it will lead you to the top. Go now! Hurry! They come!” Solearia disappeared.

Lunaria propelled Raycindia forward. “I hope you can swim my friend,” she expressed expectantly.

Raycindia stumbled along the path. As she turned the bend, she saw the stream and a choking cry caught in her throat.

“We’ll never be able to cross that!” she proclaimed adamantly. “My encounters with water have been limited to gentle ponds and muddy creeks!”

Lunaria delivered Raycindia another little shove forward. “We have to; there is no other way.” Lunaria glanced back at the birds. Their screeching was drawing too close for comfort. Mother Sun was barely visible, and Father Moon and his stars had not yet woken from their sleep.

Lunaria plunged into the frothy waters, dragging the reluctant Raycindia with her. Waves, as high as those on a wild ocean shore, pounded at their fatigued bodies. The waterfall roared defiance at them from its lofty position. *Come and get me*, it seemed to be taunting. Lunaria tightened her grip on Raycindia’s arm.

“We must stay together,” she screamed above the din.

The birds were narrowing in on their target. Their squawking pounded in the maidens’ ears. Panic overwhelmed them as they pushed onward, pressing hard against the heavy waters. Suddenly, a powerful current began to swirl around their ankles, lifting their feet from the stream’s bed. They struggled relentlessly with Mother Nature, but she proved too forceful for their weakening states. She split Lunaria and Raycindia apart, playing with them as though they were puppets on a string.

Raycindia wailed frantically and then disappeared under the foaming waves. Lunaria choked on a mouthful of water but managed to shriek out, “Belsathar! Where are you? We need your help!” Her arms flailed helplessly against the furious waves.

Lunaria scanned the sky for their friend, but all she could see was the mass of ebony wings descending closer to their vulnerable victims. The waters closed around her.

Just as she began to think all was lost, she noticed a gigantic winged fish creature swimming toward her.

“Grab hold of my tail,” it ordered. “Quickly, before I lose sight of Raycindia! She is being swept further and further away. If I do not reach her soon, she will be cast over the precipice and plunged into the pit of demons!”

Lunaria grabbed hold of the swinging tail. It was a comforting voice that reached out to her. It was Belsathar. The mighty wings beat against the current. Lunaria could see Raycindia being tossed about aimlessly in the waters just ahead. Belsathar was breathing heavily. Lunaria prayed to the gods that her protector would have the strength needed to rescue Raycindia, and then transport them both to the waterfalls. And, there were still the lingering blackbirds to worry about. Would they have taken flight once she and Raycindia had disappeared under the frothy waters? Where and when was all this going to end? How many more demons would they have to face before this was all over?

Belsathar was almost to Raycindia when her great body smashed into a ragged rock. She bellowed out in pain, and Lunaria had to hang on for dear life. Red liquid emerged from an open wound on Belsathar’s left wing. “As I spin around, Lunaria, you must grab hold of Raycindia,” Belsathar hollered out. Pain reverberated through her words. “When you have her secured, tug on my tail so I will know.”

Belsathar made a sharp turn, and her tail whipped, just inches from where the helpless Raycindia was being tossed about. Lunaria held tight with her left hand, and reached out and grabbed Raycindia with the right one.

Lunaria tugged on Belsathar's tail. "I have her!" she shouted.

Belsathar didn't answer. She was using all her power to push against the stream's current. Blood flowed freely from the open wound, leaving a crimson trail for all to follow. She began her ascension toward the surface. Lunaria held fast to the tail and to the unconscious Raycindia. Fresh air gushed into Lunaria's lungs as Belsathar's great wings emerged from the tumultuous waves, and she skimmed her tail along the water's rough surface.

The blackbirds showed no mercy as they surrounded Belsathar and her passengers. She screamed with pain as they attacked her with their beaks. A deep shuddering assaulted her body and Lunaria thought all was lost! She closed her eyes to await the end.

The tail she grasped so tightly began to thicken in her fingers; a thick, rough skin replaced the scales. Lunaria opened her eyes and looked upon a giant winged dragon. Fire spewed forth from its nostrils. Its head swung freely to and fro, lashing out at the blackbirds with flames of death. The birds screeched in anguish, trying desperately to avoid the blazing inferno from the dragon.

The waterfalls appeared comfortingly near. The dragon's tail flipped the two maidens into the air, and they found themselves flying through the waterfall and landing on dry earth. The roar of the water cascading over the rocks drowned out the agony of the dying blackbirds.

Lunaria stood up shakily. She waited for the dragon, for Belsathar, to follow them through the falls, but she did not come. Raycindia lay in a heap at her feet.

Lunaria reached down and shook Raycindia's shoulder. "Raycindia, come; I believe our mission is nearly over."

Raycindia's eyes fluttered open. "What happened?" she questioned hazily.

"Never mind for now. We are almost there. We have a mountain—a demon—to conquer. Then we can go home!" Lunaria shook her fist at the smoke filtering out of the towering mountain.

The mountain groaned in despair.

## *Chapter Nine*

### *The Stone is Thrust*

As Lunaria and Raycindia continued their struggle to the mountain peak, the rumbling from within increased. Thick belches of smoke emitted every few minutes from the mountain's gapping mouth. The sky began to darken, covering Mother Sun with a murky veil. Even Father Moon could not illuminate the landscape against the iniquitous darkness. Greys, purples, browns, and blacks of every hue blended, resulting in a colour that none on Earth had ever before witnessed.

“Lunaria, please stop,” Raycindia pleaded. “I can go no further. Look, see my feet—life flows from them. My heart fails me, and my eyes grow dimmer by the second.”

Lunaria glanced down to Raycindia's feet. The shoes were ripped and covered with dust and blood. Lunaria's eyes travelled up to Raycindia's face; it was pale and lifeless. Her eyes were nothing more than a veiled abyss. Lunaria shook her head. What was happening here? How was it that Raycindia was so much more tattered than herself? Did Bulshrieka have something to do with this? Had his evilness penetrated

Raycindia's body causing it to fail in the final moment of confrontation?

"Come, I will lead you. If I must carry you to the top to finish this deed, I will." Lunaria placed her arm around Raycindia and lifted her weariness. "You are the one chosen to cast the stone into the mountain. So it is written. So it shall be!"

Raycindia said nothing. She accepted Lunaria's help, allowing herself to be guided like a lamb to the slaughter. Her mind suggested that maybe that is what she was heading for. She knew she was a terrible burden on Lunaria, and as Raycindia glanced up into her companion's face, she realized just how much so.

Lunaria, who had been gifted with superior physical strength, was beginning to show signs of wear, as well. Dark lines of weariness etched their way around her eyes. Her shoulders slumped with fatigue. Her steps were not as light and effortless as they once had been.

Suddenly, a dazzling light streaked across the sky. The mountain spewed forth molten lava that began to flow down its sides with great urgency, its destination uncaring of what lay in its path.

Lunaria cast her eyes everywhere, searching diligently for a place of protection. She knew there was no way they would be able to walk any further on the path. The mountain trail was already steaming from the excessive heat of the lava, and the rocks exploded as they cracked under the heat of the passing inferno. Destruction headed unwaveringly toward the maidens.

Lunaria rested Raycindia down beside a rock. She reached for Solearia's necklace: "Solearia! Solearia!" she screamed over the din of the mountain. "We are in desperate need of you."

Solearia appeared immediately; weariness lined her face. Bulshrieka was pulling out all his best tactics and the game was taking its toll on all involved. “There is a cave about 500 yards from here. Once inside, take a turn to the left and then follow that path. It will be difficult, for the trail is narrow and extremely slippery; but, it will lead you to the top of the mountain. In fact, as you exit, you will find yourself on a precipice jutting out a few feet across the mountain’s mouth. Throw the stone quickly, turn and retreat the way you came. Be swift of foot, for once the stone hits the bottom of the mountain’s belly, the mountain will begin to move. It will shake like it has never shaken before. It will release itself from Bulshrieka’s beastly imprisonment; however, those around may not survive its emancipation. Good luck.” Solearia disappeared.

Lunaria gathered the limp Raycindia up into her arms. “Let’s move. Help me as much as you can. It is almost over, my friend; soon we can go home.” Lunaria was trying to encourage Raycindia, even though deep inside she was not sure if either one of them would ever see their homes again, especially after hearing Solearia’s last words.

The maidens staggered, arm in arm, up the path. They could feel the heat of the mountain penetrating up through the hard soil under their feet. The air was becoming hotter and stickier as it was saturated with the elements of the mountain’s belly. Just ahead, there loomed the entrance to the cave. Lunaria quickened her pace. Waves of molten lava were quickly plummeting toward the frantic girls.

“Come on, Raycindia, move those legs. Think of your mother, your father, your baby sister—think of Leonardo and the life that you will one day have

together. Give fuel to your legs! Help me to get you to where we must go.” Lunaria cried out in despair to her companion as her own body tired of the extra load.

As though Lunaria’s words had summoned a reserve of strength from within Raycindia, her legs began to quicken their pace. The maidens were almost to the cave entrance when around the corner appeared the trail of boiling lava. It had a hideous laughing face that leered at the maidens, challenging them to whom would be the first to reach the cave. It bubbled and boiled. It quickened its drive, pushing forward with an uncontrollable appetite.

The maidens stumbled into the cave just as the lava rushed by. Lunaria motioned to the left path. “Be careful, Raycindia; Solearia said the way was treacherous,” Lunaria warned. “Follow close. Take hold of my cloak.”

The final piece of the trail was steep and narrow. It appeared that, at one time, someone or something had tried to carve stairs in the stone. This should have allowed for an easier ascent; however, the moisture dripping from the walls had caused mosses to grow everywhere, thus making the stone path exceedingly slippery.

As the maidens pushed on, tiny pieces of rock broke away from the edges, and their landing was gobbled up by the din of the hungry mountain. Surprisingly, the cave was inordinately frosty, despite the heated turmoil from within the mountain. Lunaria had expected the heat within to be unbearable.

They continued, even though it felt as though the elements were dragging their feet. “Will we never be finished with this cursed venture?” Raycindia screamed out from behind Lunaria.

“Soon enough, my friend,” Lunaria roared back at her.

Her voice was swallowed by the raging fire from deep within the mountain. The maidens stared at the sight before them as they turned their final corner of the cave—flames of red, orange, yellow, and blue licked savagely at the precipice that jutted out from the cave. The maidens stopped momentarily, shocked by what was before them. They folded into each other’s arms, trying to tap into whatever might be left of their inner strengths, hoping it would be enough to conquer the evil forces ahead.

“Draw out the stone; be ready Raycindia,” Lunaria commanded.

Slowly—methodically—as though in a trance, Raycindia did as she was directed. With the stone safe and secure in her hand, she began moving forward, past Lunaria. Lunaria tried to follow, but her feet were immobile. Despair welled up inside her. What was happening?—Raycindia did not have the strength to finish this alone! However, Raycindia advanced, driven by some unknown inner strength, while Lunaria remained anchored on the path behind.

Raycindia balanced on the extremity of the precipice. Gushing winds swirled around her, trying desperately to loosen her from her lofty position. She stretched out the hand that held the stone. She raised her head to the sun, the moon, the stars, the winds—and to Bulshrieka.

“Die!” she screamed with renewed potency. “We, the snivelling humans have conquered you. With one tiny thrust, you are no more! So it was written!” And then, as she cast the stone from her clenched hand, “so shall it be!”

As the stone plummeted into the burning inferno, a thunderous roar of torment ripped through the mountain. It began to shake as Solearia had predicted. The lava flowing down its paths was stilled and cooled. Shadows of all Bulshrieka's creatures flitted in and out of the flames, wailing at their defeat. The goat that had greeted them on the mountain no longer stood tall and proud. Poissan twisted and turned in the agony of her hot grave. Prince Adel Bashibab reached out pleading arms toward Raycindia, his voice plaintive as he cried for help. The snake tree and her children once again wiggled and squirmed in defeat as they plunged into the blazing inferno. The blackbirds flew aimlessly about, falling ever deeper into the pit. But, for all the creatures that were now meeting their doom, one was not there—the great winged bird who had challenged Belsathar on the path—Bulshrieka!

## *Chapter Ten*

### *Bulshrieka's Challenge*

Lunaria was finally released from her captivating spell, and she rushed immediately to Raycindia, who was teetering dangerously on the edge of the jutting rock. Lunaria grasped Raycindia's hand and slowly led her back into the cave. Just as they were about to turn and flee, the mountain spewed forth again, but this time it was not lava. Vast stacks of black smoke further darkened the already murky sky, and from within the clouds of darkness came a voice.

“You think you have won? I still have the power to destroy you and all that crawl on this planet!”

Raycindia no longer held the energy she had shown moments before. She shrivelled before the threatening voice. Lunaria drew from her inner core; however, before turning to face Bulshrieka, she gave Raycindia a gentle push toward the escape route.

“Go,” she whispered huskily. “I will follow shortly. I must see this demon put to rest once and for all. The way down will be much easier for you.” Then, turning to Bulshrieka, “What power have you wielded that we have not defeated? Answer me that Bulshrieka!” Lunaria bellowed out her challenge.

The dark clouds swayed in anger at this provocation. "You have only touched the extremities of my power!" Bulshrieka screeched.

Lunaria did not let him proceed. She assumed command. "Nothing you threw before us stopped us from reaching and completing our quest. Soon the world will begin to turn, and all Earth's people will be able to live in happiness. Your evil presence here is, at this moment, disintegrating before your eyes. These pages of history will be locked away forever in this mountain, soon to become forgotten memories of what never should have been. The only event that shall be recorded is how two young maidens by the names of Lunaria and Raycindia conquered the high and mighty Bulshrieka! And when the people read his name, they will ask one another *who is this Bulshrieka that two mere maidens could conquer him so?*

"Then we, the insignificant Earthlings, will undertake writing the new pages of the marvellous happenings and the greatness that is to come! You are nothing anymore—less than nothing. I repeat to you, two defenceless girls have conquered your kingdom and cast it into your own bottomless pit of damnation. Remember well our names—Lunaria and Raycindia—for I can think of no greater defeat for you than this!"

Lunaria's dark hair whipped around her body. Her black eyes shone defiantly. The mountain began to tremble like never before. A loud resounding sound, the landing of the stone, echoed up through the din. The ground beneath Lunaria's feet began to shift. Rocks broke away from their birth walls. The precipice crashed down into the famished crater. Lunaria tried to turn and follow Raycindia, but found the way blocked by a wall of fallen stones.

Bulshrieka roared out his defiance: “In your attempt to save all the worthless people of Earth, you and your fine friend have forfeited your own lives! I’ll have no need to remember your names because no one will even know what you have done here on this day. Nothing is going to change!” He laughed evilly. “Was it worth it? Where are you going to go now—you, who think you have all the answers? Why not just come to Papa? Let Papa give you a new life.” The cloud reached out inviting arms to Lunaria.

Lunaria searched around for a way out of her dilemma. She was trapped. She cringed at the whispers of ebony clouds that drew closer to her. Where was Belsathar? Where was Solearia? Of course! The necklace! She reached up her hand to pull out the precious stone, but a tiny warning voice from within caused her to hesitate. Lunaria remembered the words of Zemias as she had warned Lunaria never to allow Solearia’s necklace to fall into the hands of Bulshrieka or his followers.

Her hand dropped back to her side, and she fell to her knees and awaited her destiny. She prayed that Raycandia was faring better than she, and would find her way back into the arms of her beloved Leonardo before too many moons passed.

An immense growl of displeasure spit forth from Bulshrieka. The sky had lit up with the brightness of a new dawn. Lunaria dared to gaze up. Sweeping toward the mountain was a shimmering, white-winged horse. The wings appeared as frail as silk in their transparency, yet they fanned the thick air around the mountaintop. The horse’s coat sparkled with gold dust, and diamond eyes lit its way through the clouds. Upon its back sat Solearia, her infinite beauty radiating everywhere,

projecting a divine light on the area. Bulshrieka covered in its brilliance.

“Be not fooled Bulshrieka, it is over for you.” Solearia’s voice rang through the temporary lull. “We have defeated you. It is time for you to crawl back to your pit and lick your wounds. So it is written; so it shall be!”

“You are not as well versed in ancient prophesy as you should be Solearia. I am not yet defeated,” Bulshrieka jeered. “And I think I will not go alone!” he yelled defiantly.

The immense black cloud swayed and descended closer to where Lunaria still knelt. “I will take this maiden with me; she will be mine! After all, there must be a dark side to her since she has lived so long on the side of Earth where the sun never rises. Maybe, should the mood strike me, I will even take her for my bride...” Bulshrieka taunted Solearia, his heinous nature mushrooming quickly.

“To take this maiden, you will have to destroy me Bulshrieka, and you are not capable of that! You have lived for so long in debauchery that there is not an ounce of goodness left inside you. You know, as well as I, in the end, evil will never overpower good! You tried once before to destroy Earth, and the gods thwarted that attempt; however, you managed to curse Earth with an intolerable form of night and day. Your curse has finally been broken; your time is being terminated.” Solearia hovered over the black cloud as she waited for Bulshrieka’s reply.

Before Solearia realized what he was doing, though, Bulshrieka shrouded Lunaria with his misty cloak. Lunaria felt two huge talons dig into her shoulders and lift her from the ground. The scream for

help was stifled in her throat. The dark cloud dissipated and in its place was the great winged bird that had challenged Belsathar on the path below.

“What say you now, Mistress of Ancient Earth?” Bulshrieka roared defiantly to Solearia as he hovered over the raging mountain’s gaping mouth. “Shall I drop her in and feed her to my fiends? I am sure they would love to deal with this one again, especially after how she has treated them in their own homes!”

Lunaria forced her eyes open and gazed down into the pit. The goat, Poissan, Prince Adel, Mother Snake and her babies, the Blackbirds—they all were stretching out welcoming arms toward her. They were smiling evil, beguiling grins, as though her sacrifice would give them new life. Their hungry moans rose from the pit and were like music to Bulshrieka’s ears.

“Listen to my children sing for their meal, Solearia? Oh, what beautiful music they do make. Come, children, Papa has brought you a tasty morsel to calm your hungry entrails,” and Bulshrieka took a sweep downwards toward the bottom of the pit.

Lunaria struggled futilely against her captor, her arms and legs flailing helplessly in the hot, sticky air. Flames reached out from every direction, licking at her clothing, singing the edges. Bulshrieka’s children began to sing louder and louder as they awaited, not only the delicate morsel, but their revenge. Lunaria closed her eyes once more and whispered a final prayer. Even Solearia could not save her now.

“Bulshrieka!” Another familiar voice rang out through the din. “Let the girl go! Take me instead! You have always wanted me, been envious of my ability to stop you at every corner, every precipice of your evilness!”

Bulshrieka hesitated in mid-flight. Zemias—Belsathar! How he hated her, no matter what form she took. His eyes began flaming as brightly as the inferno he hovered over. Revenge on this creature would be even sweeter than the taking of the pitiful maiden he clutched in his talons.

“The battle must take place in our true forms, Zemias!” he challenged.

“As you wish, Bulshrieka!” Zemias replied. “But I name the place.”

“Where?”

“Do you agree?” Zemias bantered.

“Yes.”

“Good. We shall meet at the seventh hour at the place where the seven stones rise out of the earth, and the seven rivers originating at the seven stones flow into the seven lakes, which are surrounded by the seven mountains.” Zemias’s voice was full of assurance as she announced the battle site.

Bulshrieka seemed to lose some of his enthusiasm. Lunaria held her breath, awaiting his reply. Finally, it came: “You witch!” he cursed.

“You agreed, Bulshrieka,” Zemias interceded.

“But of all the places to choose.”

“It is the only place where all will be fair.” Zemias paused a moment. “You may choose one of your demons for a witness, as I will choose someone for mine—as it is recorded for such a battle to be fought and won or lost fairly.”

A shuddering sigh escaped Bulshrieka. His vast wings flapped weakly, and Lunaria thought that maybe there was going to be no battle and that he would just give in now and admit defeat. After all, Zemias, in the form of Belsathar, was presenting herself as a most

imposing figure. And he must know he would be no match for her if she had already defeated him many times before.

No such luck. Bulshrieka must have gathered from an inner source of fortitude. Lunaria felt the muscles tense in his talons. “I designate Prince Adel Bashibab as my witness!” he spit forth.

“And I,” began Zemias, “choose Lunaria, the maiden you clutch in your claws.”

Lunaria was stupefied. She had just presumed that Zemias would choose Solearia. Why had she not done so? Where did Solearia fit into this battle? Bulshrieka was shaking with anger at Zemias’s request.

“But she is a human!” he bellowed. “You know the rules—none but those whose blood is of the gods may enter that place.”

“Yes, she is a human, and one that has withstood all that you pitched before her, therefore, in my opinion, deeming her worthy to walk with the gods! With all the steps she has taken, and with the number of times she has thwarted you, I believe we can declare that she is sanctioned by the gods themselves.”

“She did so only with your help.”

“At times, maybe, but she has shown strength and courage beyond her years, and that is enough to allow her into the Place of Seven.”

“Within the hour then,” Bulshrieka remarked with a sigh of defeat. “Here,” he said as his talons loosened from Lunaria’s shoulder. “Here is your witness!”

Lunaria felt herself free, but she was also falling into the fiery pit. This time she was confident she would not touch bottom. Events were working out. Zemias and Solearia were in control again. This, Lunaria was sure

of. Bulshrieka was not happy with the battle site. Distaste had echoed through his words and shivered through his muscles at the very mention of it. And, just as Lunaria had thought, Belsathar's vast, grotesque body flew under her and broke her fall.

As they flew up and out of the crater, Belsathar turned her scrawny head back to Bulshrieka: "I, Zemias, will meet you within the hour. I, Zemias, of the Ancient Earth will destroy you before the end of the seventh hour. I, Zemias, can already feel the beginnings of Earth's rotation. Soon, all peoples will be able to live as they were meant to. Bulshrieka, do not fail to be present for your eradication!"

With those final words, Belsathar flew away from the mountain. Lunaria clung easily to her back. Solearia followed close behind on her winged horse. Bulshrieka flew into the mountain's belly to recover his witness, and prepare for his victory. The mountain's rumbling eased, but there was a tremor deep within Earth—a precursor of a good omen yet to come.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### *To the Place of Seven*

Lunaria pondered silently on her fate as Belsathar's great wings swept them through the air. She wondered about the Place of Seven. What significance was there in having the battle take place there? Why had she, Lunaria, been selected as a witness? What had happened to her friend and companion, Raycindia? Would the end of this conflict indeed mean a fresh beginning for Earth? She had thought thrusting the stone into the mountain would end Earth's torment. How was it that Bulshrieka was so powerful? And, who was Prince Adel Bashibab to the Lord of Evil that he should be chosen as his witness? This final question Lunaria decided to ask out loud.

“My dear Belsathar, why did Bulshrieka choose Prince Adel Bashibab for his witness?”

“The Prince is his son,” answered Belsathar. “You have witnessed the overpowering handsomeness, the perfect physique of the prince—well, his magnificence is nothing in the shadow of his father.”

Lunaria asked her next question: “Why is it that you chose me over Solearia to be your witness?”

“Had I not chosen you, you would now be nothing more than cinders at the bottom of the volcano—, and you would be that only after Bulshrieka’s fiends had their way with you. Enough of this talk, though; I must prepare for battle. I will need all my wits against this monster, for, as a man, he stands nearly seven units high. I, in my descending years, stand only four.”

Lunaria noticed a speck on the ground. It appeared to be someone staggering along as though they were lost. “Look, Belsathar...there,” Lunaria pointed downwards. “I believe there is someone in need of help. Can we not swoop down and see?”

Belsathar focused her sharp eyes on the slow moving object. She turned her head slightly and spoke to Solearia. “It is Raycindia. Please fetch her. I will meet you at the Place of Seven.”

“As you wish, my friend.” Solearia directed the magnificent winged horse downward.

Lunaria’s heart thrilled within her breast. Raycindia was safe! All would be well. Zemias would destroy Bulshrieka. The peoples of Earth would be free from their agonizing tribulation. All children, everywhere, would be able to romp in sunny fields by day and sleep under twinkling stars by night. With these warm thoughts comforting Lunaria’s senses, she closed her eyes and slept.

When she awoke, she found herself in the most beautiful haven she had ever set eyes on. Long, lithe blades of grass sparkled like millions of feathery emeralds around the meadow. Seven massive rocks extended up out of the ground. Their shiny grey colour contrasted sharply with the green foliage that waved at their roots. From the base of each of the seven stones, flowed a brilliantly blue boisterous river with crystal

caps upon each wave. As Lunaria followed the course of the rivers, she saw that each one poured into a sparkling sapphire coloured lake. Surrounding the seven lakes were seven ruggedly omnipotent mountains with swan-like clouds swirling at their uppermost peaks.

Lunaria was enthralled at the magnificence. She stood and walked over to one of the stones. Each of its sides was etched with writings. She ran her fingers across the lettering, trying to make sense of the words.

“It is the language of Ancient Earth,” a voice said from behind her.

Lunaria turned, startled. “Oh,” she gasped. “I thought I was alone.”

Solearia walked over and stood beside Lunaria. “All that happened before the great curse is recorded on these stones,” Solearia offered. “And when this is all over...” she began.

“Solearia!” a sharp, quavering voice cut off Solearia’s sentence. “Speak no further. Time draws near. He will soon be here.” Zemias, leaning heavily on her wooden staff, hobbled over to the young woman. The contrast of their appearances was overwhelming. Lunaria could not help but wonder why the younger, more magical creature, Solearia, was not the one who would be fighting Bulshrieka.

“Lunaria,” a voice called out.

Lunaria turned and saw Raycindia. She ran into her arms, and the two maidens held each other tight for a brief moment. They stepped apart and gazed into each other’s eyes.

“I was afraid you were lost to me forever,” Raycindia ventured to say.

“I too feared the worst,” returned Lunaria. “Our good friends—benefactors—whatever it is they have

chosen to be for us—have aided us both at our times of greatest need.”

Suddenly, the sky overhead dimmed. The maidens stared upward. Soaring toward the Place of Seven was Bulshrieka, and on his back was the Prince Adel Bashibab. The magnificent bird touched down to the ground, and the prince dismounted.

Prince Adel nodded his head curtly and smiled slyly at Lunaria and Raycindia. “We meet again, my lovelies. You should have taken my advice while you had the chance. Now it is too late...” The prince waved his hand toward the bird.

The bird transformed. The maidens could barely believe their eyes.

## *Chapter Twelve*

### *The Battle*

Before them stood a warrior the likes of the ones read about in the ancient fables. As Zemias had said, he dared to defy gravity by standing at least seven units high. His muscles shone like newly polished gold in the glittering sunlight of the hour. His hair hung in dark ringlets down to his waist. His facial features were chiselled to godly perfection. His eyes glowed red with the light of a thousand demons. His teeth, when he smiled, sparkled as white as the snow on the crests of the distant seven mountains.

On his chest, he wore steel armour, and within the steel were the carvings of lifeless bodies strewn upon the ground. In his left hand, he held an immense shield, and on it were the engravings of enormous diabolical creatures. In his right hand, he clutched an inordinate iron sword. Its blade gleamed under Mother Sun, and its force spread her arms to beyond the seven mountains. The handle was adorned with bright, crimson rubies that transmitted black, shadowy sparks all around the clearing.

Bulshrieka's evil laughter filled the peaceful haven. It thundered across the sky, reminding all of the Night of Many Storms. He tapped his shield and

sneered at Zemias: "Today, I add another body to this armour!"

Zemia shuffled across the enclosure toward the mighty warrior. She leaned heavily on her wooden staff, and the hearts of Lunaria and Raycindia sank to the roots of the grasses at their feet.

"Well, my dearest Zemias, destroyer of my father, are you ready to meet with him in the Ever After?" Bulshrieka had regained his haughty attitude that had been paralysed at the mountain not long ago.

"First, my dear Bulshrieka, I will never meet your father in his Hereafter because he consorted with demons. Win or lose the battle we are about to wage, I will walk with the gods! Second, you must understand one thing before this combat takes place; I did not destroy your father. He wallowed in his own deceit and decrepit ways for too many moons. He sealed his fate with the gods long before he passed by my house," Zemias retorted.

"He was never the same after leaving your house."

"Nor was I ever the same after his leaving," Zemias's aged voice quavered angrily.

There was a long pause. All present held their breath. Then Zemias began to speak, slowly: "You, my dear Bulshrieka, have been foolish enough to request that we fight in our true forms. You, my dear Bulshrieka, have thought the old, haggard creature standing before you now is the real Zemias." Zemias's voice began to rise in outrage. "What a fool you are, just as your father was before you! But then again, you were a baby then and never saw me as I truly was."

Zemias raised her staff to the heavens and lightning flashed down to touch its tip. A brilliant light

lit the horizon and blinded the occupants of the Place of Seven. And when they could once again open their eyes, there stood before them a mighty woman warrior.

Even Solearia was astonished at the transformation. In place of her beloved aged Zemias stood a youthful woman not less than seven units tall. Silver hair swirled around her body as the breezes danced in the meadow. Her face was perfection, smooth and flawless, and her eyes beamed the light of a thousand stars. The liveness of her body was a phenomenon to gaze on.

Upon her chest was silver armour, and carved in the precious metal were the figures of gods and goddesses at play. In her left hand, she held fast to a silver shield, etched with the mythical creatures of Ancient Earth, its circumference embellished with glistening green gems. In her right hand was a sparkling crystalline sword; its translucence symbolized dominance. It drew Mother Sun's arms back from beyond the seven mountains where Bulshrieka had cast them, to once again embrace the meadow.

“Well, my dear Bulshrieka, what say you now? Draw your sword, and prepare to meet your father in the Valley of Doom.”

Once again, lightning streaked across the sky, leaving Zemias's body illuminated with a divine brilliance. And the battle for dominance of the New Earth began.

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The first clang of the two mighty swords split the air. The earth shuddered. The mountains rumbled. The rivers roared. The lakes began to dance. The swan clouds took flight, descending to the place of seven stones, covering it with a cloak of mist. Sparks flew

everywhere as the warriors, time and time again, struck out at their opponent. War cries surged from their throats. The emerald grass became spotted with crimson blood as the blades targeted in on open flesh.

Lunaria, Raycindia, and Solearia huddled by one of the great stones on the east side of the field. The winged steed grazed on the luscious grasses in the southern corner, oblivious to the battle that was being waged just a stone's throw away. To Lunaria and Raycindia's surprise, he had been joined by Noiria and Blanco. To the north of the meadow, just outside its outer limits, there stood Prince Adel Bashibab with a dark scowl on his face. Hatred reflected from his eyes as he riveted them on the maidens and Solearia.

The battle raged on and on. Neither warrior seemed to tire. Steel grated continually on crystal, and beacons of light streaked through the meadow, ricocheting off the seven stones, diving into the tumultuous rivers, fading away in the frolicking lakes.

Raycindia spoke up in a husky voice: "Solearia, for how long does this continue? Both Zemias and Bulshrieka seem to have unending endurance."

Solearia hesitated before answering. She studied the maidens before her, and knowing what she knew in her heart, was unsure of how much to tell them. Finally, she spoke: "The battle will end, even if there is no victor, at the close of the seventh hour."

Raycindia waited for more explanation, but it was not forthcoming. "Do you know the outcome?" she queried.

"It is in the hands of the gods now," Solearia answered with a hushed voice.

The battle continued with passionate fury. Neither one gave much ground to the other.

Bulshrieka's muscles bulged with fatigue and bubbled with sweat. His black ringlets matted together in a disorganized jumble of knots. Zemias lithe body glistened with sparkling beads of perspiration. Her long, silver hair no longer frolicked with the breezes.

An enormous crack of thunder resounded in the sky. Solearia jerked her head toward the tops of the seven mountains. Smoke steamed from their peaks. Dark clouds began to roll toward the Place of Seven. The earth beneath began to move. The sky above swayed rhythmically with the gathering clouds.

"Time draws near," stated Solearia. "The seventh hour is close."

And, as though they heard her whispered words, desperation possessed the two swords in the meadow. The iron blade swung with blind recklessness. The crystalline blade whirled with accurate precision. Bulshrieka's face became lined with agony as he began to lose ground for the first time in the battle. Zemias face took on a look of determination, and she pressed forward with her omnipotent sabre, attacking the mighty warrior before her.

And the thunder increased in the skies. And the lightning streaked across the heavens. And the warriors fought until the final moment of the seventh hour when one of them lay still on the blood-soaked grass.

Then, the seven mountains bellowed their defiance at the happenings, and the earth began to move, and the waters danced like never before. The long sheaves of grass bent to the four winds as they were whipped into action by Mother Nature's creation. And the heavens above opened to the glory of all the gods!

Bulshrieka lay silent on the ground. Prince Adel Bashibab ran to his father and knelt on bended knee at his side. His head fell to his chest, and his shoulders shook as he wept his loss.

Zemia stood tall and strong, her face lifted to the winds, victorious and free of the past's vindictive hold. The crystalline sword rested in the ground at her feet.

Solearia rushed over and embraced the warrior Zemia, the true defender of the ancient records. Zemia wrapped her tired arms around the lovely Solearia, and together they wept tears of joy and relief. All would be well now with Earth. They could go home. They extended their arms to Lunaria and Raycindia, who still stood in rooted shock by one of the great stones. The maidens moved forward and were gathered into their protectors' bosoms.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### *The Explanation*

Zemia was the first to break the silence. She motioned for everyone to sit on the grass, and began to speak: “It has been many suns and moons since I have known my true form. Only Solearia has been aware of who I was, although she cannot remember how I once had looked. She is my sister.

“When Old Earth still nurtured strange warriors, our father was one that fought for the right of all creatures, and because of that, on his deathbed, he was granted the status of a god. Bulshrieka’s father, on the other hand, had made a pact with demons from the Underworld, and that is where he will forever remain.

“At the sunset of the day of the Great Battle that ended the life of my father, Bulshrieka’s father dared to enter my castle on his victory and demand my hand in marriage. I would not hear of it. This was not the first time he had pursued me. My father had sent him away many times before. I believe that if there was one soft spot in that man, it was for me. When I refused him, his shoulders sagged in despair, but at the same moment, his eyes became filled with anger and hatred.

“I had hidden my baby sister, Solearia, away from his eyes, and those of his men; I wasn’t going to chance her falling into evil hands. I knew he had a

newborn son, and the mother had died giving birth. That infant was Bulshrieka.

“Bulshrieka’s father returned, day after day, for an entire week, asking—begging—me to marry him over and over again. Each time I refused him, calling him every scandalous name I could think of. And each time I rejected him, he left with an angrier scowl in his eyes. On the final day of my refusal, upon his leaving, he laid a curse on me and my castle. The curse could only be broken at such time that I was challenged to a fight in my natural form—thus, the hideousness of my being all these years.

“I had not the power to undo his spell; however, my maid—your grandmother, Lunaria—eased its pain slightly. She was a white witch, so she cast her enchantment on my soul, allowing me to take many forms in order to protect the ancient records of Earth. The only problem was, all these creatures resembled Zemias, the aged, not Zemias the youthful.

“The great ugly bird was the most useful to me and was named Belsathar by a young boy on one of my many trips down the mountain. As I plucked him from danger, he uttered that name, terror reigning over his face. I never found out why he called me so, for he died of his wounds before saying.”

Zemia turned to Raycandia: “Your grandmother, my dear, a white witch as well, also worked her magic for the well-being of me, Solearia the infant, and the safekeeping of Ancient Earth. She transported us to the mountain where you first found us. She predicted that one day a curse would be put on Earth, and the people would be consumed by an unbearable torment. She left me with two stones and ordered me to guard them well. Solearia blossomed lovelier each day as she drew near

to womanhood. As she grew older, though, I stayed the same, although, at times, I felt I grew uglier with each passing hour.

“Earth was, for a time, a peaceful place to inhabit. I heard by way of the birds that Bulshrieka’s father was murdered in his sleep by the hand of his closest confidant. I was informed that his son had possession of his father’s coveted magic necklace and used it to spread even more evil around the countryside than his sire had.

“With his father’s death, Bulshrieka began wreaking havoc on the land. He pillaged the countryside, murdered the men, and took the women captive. I could stand it no longer. I took the form of Belsathar and flew down to mass a great force against him. There were many lords still loyal to the gods, and I felt all they needed was a capable leader.

“We defeated Bulshrieka at the Place of Seven, but not before he had the opportunity to cast a curse on the entire Earth. That curse is the one that you were born into. Earth was no longer able to rotate on its axis.

“One day, we were dusting off the Ancient Records, and the Great Book opened at a particular page. We noticed the writing on the pages was new and I began to read. The words conveyed how two young maidens would come and seek our help, and that these same maidens were descendants of the loved ones that had secured our safety. I knew as soon as I lay eyes on you that you were the Chosen Ones.

“I read further in the pages of the Great Book, and they told me of the power of the two stones that Raycindia’s grandmother had left in my care. The directions were precise about which one of you was to bear which stone. The stone fastened to a chain was to

be Solearia's, and for it to gain its power it had to hang around her neck for forty moons. I went to her at that point and told her it was time to put the necklace on—the saviours would be coming soon.

“Once again, I took the form of Belsathar and began circling the mountain every day, watching for your coming. I witnessed your meeting along the border. I watched your trek up the mountain. I waited for you in the cave.” Zemias paused a moment for breath. “The rest you know since you both were there.”

“Then why did you give us such a hard time when you first met us?” Raycindia enquired.

Zemias smiled: “To make sure you were the Ones, and to note the strength of your determination.”

Lunaria spoke up: “I thought that once the stone was cast into the mountain's mouth, the quest would be over. Why was it necessary for this battle?”

“We underestimated Bulshrieka's power of recovery,” began Solearia. “And it was then that we realized there was only one way to end his terror forever.”

“When he challenged me to do battle in our true forms, I could not have been more delighted,” Zemias grinned. “I guess his father failed to tell him of what it would take to break the spell over the woman who had scorned him so.”

Solearia gazed up at the open heavens. “It is time Zemias.”

Zemias nodded. She turned to Lunaria and Raycindia. “You two have been true to your quest. Against all odds, you remained steadfast and drove yourselves to the precipice of the mountain. As it was done, so shall it be written upon the stones, forever to be recorded in the annals of time.”

With those words, Zemias picked up her sword and pointed it at one of the seven stones. An intense light beamed down from the open sky above and seared the letters on the rock.

Solearia gathered the winged steed, mounted his back and beckoned to Zemias, who positioned herself behind her sister. As Solearia and Zemias took flight toward the misty opening in the sky, they both turned and waved to Lunaria and Raycandia.

The earth began to tremble once again. The rivers, lakes, and mountains moved to the rhythm of a distant, melodious music. The seven stones whirled free of Earth's hold, following the flight of the winged horse. Dust swirled around making it impossible for Lunaria and Raycandia to keep their eyes open. But, just before they closed their lids, they watched the earth open and swallow Bulshrieka and Prince Adel Bashibab down into the Valley of Doom.

When all was silent again, the maidens dared to peek at the havoc left behind. To their surprise they found themselves in a large meadow of flowing grasses, bordered by great trees. There was a rippling brook that ran through the length of the rolling field. Birds and wild game were plentiful everywhere.

Nowhere was there a sign of the seven stones, seven rivers, seven lakes, or seven mountains. The Place of Seven was no more.

Raycandia stood first. "I want to go home, my friend."

"I too," returned Lunaria.

"Will we ever see each other again?"

"I shall invite you to my wedding," smiled Lunaria.

"And you to mine," laughed Raycandia.

The friends embraced. Tears streamed down their cheeks. They stepped apart and walked to their patiently waiting horses. They mounted and without further words, Lunaria headed to the west; Raycindia to the east.

As each maiden headed toward her home, their thoughts were one and the same—Earth would now have peace of mind, for all the people would be blessed with a night and a day.

From the heavens, Zemias and Solearia smiled their approval on the parting maidens. And, from the pit of Earth—the Valley of Doom—Bulshrieka lamented his defeat.



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Check out Mary M. Cushnie-Mansour's other works at

<http://www.writerontherun.ca>

To reach Mary for readings or workshops

[mary@writerontherun.ca](mailto:mary@writerontherun.ca)