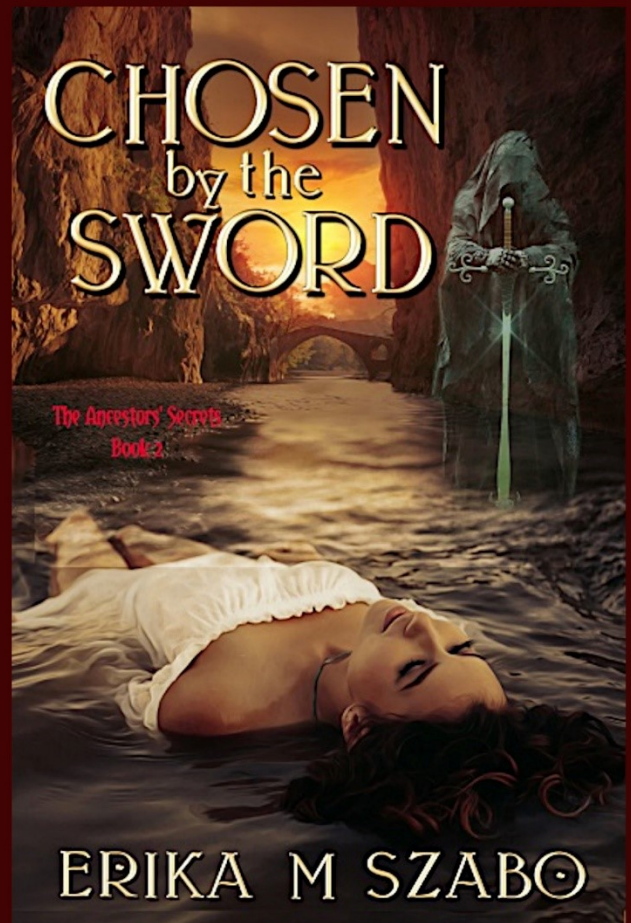


SNEAK PEEK

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ERIKA M SZABO



The Ancestors' Secrets
Book 1

PROTECTED
by the
FALCON

Protected by the Falcon

The Ancestors' Secrets Series, Book 1

Ilona resigns to live the simple life of a small-town doctor, but her life goes into a tailspin on her birthday. She finds out she was born into a secretive, ancient clan still hidden among us. She starts to develop unusual powers which she finds exciting as well as frightening. She can slow time and heal with her touch, but how and why?

She struggles to find answers, but those who try to reveal the clan secrets are severely punished.

A menacing man is following her and wants to kill her. Who is he?

More life struggles continue to plague her. After being thrust into a world of clan mysteries, obscure traditions, and beliefs, her life is drastically changing.

She must seek out and stop Mora's evil plan. Punished by the ancestors long ago, Mora has waited centuries for the chance to reunite with her beloved Joland and to gain power over the Hunor clan. Revenge has kept her alive for over 1600 years.

Ilona must search for the mysterious Destiny Box that holds a message from her Ancestors while she attempts to sort out her feelings for the men in her life.

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Prologue by Loran



I'm Loran, the Táltos (shaman) of the Hunor clan that still exists hidden in every country with its strict hierarchy, deadly rules and traditions. Although every event and everything is written by Hunors with the ancient writing, called Rovasiras, is registered in the Collective Memory, my job is to create a detailed file of every gifted clan member whose fate is to preserve the traditions and keep the clan intact.

The Ancestors' Secrets file is an important historical document and now available to every clan member who reached adulthood. This file contains diary entries by the *Chosen One* and by those who are close to her as well as those who chose to oppose her and try to stop her.

When I started putting the file together, there were gaps in the events, and I had to talk to people in order to place the puzzles pieces together. It's amazing how some of their time bending ability could bring the present and past together. Reading the diaries, I felt like I was walking on the lush steppes with the ancestors, traveled with the gypsy caravan in the fourteenth century or visited a long dead King.

The Ancestors' Secrets file includes three parts. *Prelude* is a glimpse into what will come in *Turmoil* and *Destiny*, as the present and past events are interwoven in the complex story of the most important members of a secret society. A lot of ancient tribal secrets must be

unveiled, and the puzzle pieces must find their place before the Chosen One discovers what fate has in store for her.

Mora's Fury



Mora closed her eyes and began searching the complicated network of the Collective Memory, in her mind. She murmured under her breath, “The Elders took everything I valued in life from me, but they never found out I could read every word that is written by every gifted Hunor after they reach maturity. When they use the ancient letters given to them by the Ancestors and they mention the meaning of the flowers, their lives are open books for me.”

Mora’s prune-like face lit up, “Good girl, Adel. You are the servant of the Leaders and can’t talk to anyone about this, but you just wrote in your diary that the Elders are planning a meeting. Oh, I see. One of them is about to take her last breath, and they need to choose her successor. Hmm... could I use it to my advantage? We’ll see. There is another interesting sentence here; you are worried about your mistress, Csenge. She seems distant and unhappy. Let’s see what our Leader has been writing...” she scoured Csenge’s desk in her mind.

“What?!” Mora shouted angrily when she read Csenge’s note in her calendar, “The Chosen One, Ilona, is coming of age today.” Mora was furious, “I can get into the minds of those who are related to me, but I can’t get into the Elders’ meeting or see the Chosen One. I curse you Ancestors for taking away my powers, and I curse you for tearing me away from the arms of my beloved, Joland. We’ll be together again one day, my love. I’ll find a way, somehow...”

In her fury, Mora clawed a hole in her soft comforter, but then, she started seeing an unfamiliar handwriting in her mind. Someone, unknown to her was writing a diary with the ancient Hunor letters. Mora’s rage calmed instantly as she rejoiced, “Ilona’s diary! She must be the Chosen One that Csenge wrote about.”

In her mind’s eye, the ancient Hunor letters appeared as Ilona wrote them in her diary. *Dear diary, I’m supposed to keep a detailed journal from now on...*

Mora grinned, “Write my little princess and keep writing. I want to know everything about you.”

Longing

Ilona's Diary



Dear diary,

Today is September 19, the morning of my twenty-ninth birthday. I will remember this important chapter in my life by the beautiful flower of the camellia that Elza placed in my room last night. In the flower language of my ancestors, the camellia represents longing, a persistent and unfulfilled strong desire or need. Elza had sensed my true feelings, as usual.



I'm supposed to keep a detailed journal from now on, so let me write about the peculiar and disturbing dream I had last night. My usual dreams are always jumbled, unconnected images and feelings, but this dream was different. The clarity of it was uncanny, and it played out like a movie in my mind.

In the dream, I was about four or five, with pigtails, wearing a white ruffled dress. We were in a grocery store. I was happily hopping and singing while holding onto my mother's hand. She smiled at me, and I felt her warmth and affection. She was a beautiful woman. Her lustrous

dark reddish hair flowed to her mid-back and her deep-blue eyes promised love and security. I admired her and wanted to be with her all the time. To my childish disappointment, she was busy for the biggest part of every day, but when she could spend the entire day with me, I enjoyed every moment of our time together. I chattered away, glad she paid attention to me, only to me.

In my dream, I was telling her a silly story I'd made up when I saw an old woman fall in the middle of the aisle. I tore my hand from mother's grasp and ran over to the woman. She cried out in pain, lying on the floor with her leg bent in a revolting angle.

I sensed my mother behind me, "Momma. She is broken! I want to fix her." I looked up, hoping for her approval.

"All right, sweet pea. Put your hands on her. Don't be afraid." I heard my mother's velvety voice and felt her hand on my shoulder. As I touched the woman's hip, strange warmth started emanating from my fingers and a serene, satisfied feeling washed over me as I watched the woman's leg straightening back to normal. She stood up, smiled and walked away.

I looked at my mom. She smiled, but her expression grew serious, "You will come to great powers, honey, but don't let it change you. When you find your Destiny Box, it will guide you."

The dream faded, and I startled myself awake. My room was dark. The digital clock on my nightstand just blinked to two a.m. "What a strange dream," I whispered quietly as I fluffed my pillow, pulled the comforter up to my chin and immediately fell back asleep.

The sun woke me up again around seven. It snuck like little fingers through the lace curtains, tickling my nose. I sneezed, yawned, and stretched under the fluffy cover. It was a beautiful Sunday morning. The air smelled spicy with the aroma of ripened fruits. I didn't have to get up

early because I had taken the day off. *The birthday girl should enjoy the luxury of sleeping late.* I thought to myself as I recalled my dream, wondering how it might have continued.

I rolled onto my side trying to find a comfortable position and go back to sleep, but I couldn't. I tossed and turned for a while, and then I realized that a vague, nagging memory in the deep recesses of my mind was trying to surface, but I couldn't pry it up close enough to remember.

I felt a strange yearning and excitement inside. This was a new feeling to me. I usually kept my emotions well under control. I tried to hush it, urging it to leave me alone and let me savor the lazy morning, but I couldn't. It became pressing, strong, and I had this odd feeling that I might be able to wipe away all diseases with a touch as I had done in my dream. *I wish it could be that easy...* I toyed with the strange idea. *I am a doctor, and for me, the need to heal people shouldn't be strange.* However, this feeling was different from merely diagnosing an illness and writing a prescription. It was magical and far-fetched, and I knew it was impossible, but the strange thoughts kept swirling in my head.

To divert my attention, I thought about what Elza told me the night before, "Your twenty-ninth birthday will be a turning point in your life. In order to move on, you have to reflect on who you are and what you have achieved in your life."

So, diary, let me tell you a little about who I am. I work in the Emergency Room at a small hospital. I love my job and I am very passionate about diagnosing illnesses and treating my patients. Every person is a new challenge. As long as I can remember I wanted to be a doctor, just like my mother before me. In my professional life, I feel satisfied.

My personal life? It's different. Growing up in a Hunor family and following the strict rules and keeping peculiar traditions was not always

easy. We are the descendants of an ancient race. The secrets, we are not allowed to find out until we reach a certain age, had always bothered me, but other than that, my childhood was happy. Because of the secrecy, I never found out why, but when I was young, people I met had a strange expression when they saw me for the first time. They stared at the birthmark on my face, turned to my mother and asked, “Is it true? Is she the one?” Mom would hush them and send me to my room, or she’d quickly change the subject. I remember sometimes they’d start to get down on their knees, and then Mom would give them a sharp look. When I asked what they were doing, she’d simply reply, “Oh, she just has a cramp in her leg,” or “He dropped his ring.” Some of them masked their movements; others merely looked confused and walked away. I knew there was more to it, but also knew that I would not get a straight answer from mom. Although I suspected that it was about the birthmark on my face, I could never be sure because only a few people had the peculiar reaction when they saw me and stared at the left lower corner of my eye before they started acting strangely. The light patch on my skin is barely visible, but it has always drawn people’s attention. After a few episodes mom covered my birthmark with makeup, I guessed to avoid the annoying stares.



I sighed, turned on my side and must have fallen back to sleep. In my short dream, we were celebrating my ninth birthday. My mother was smiling and leaned toward me. “Remember, little one, twenty years from now will be a turning point in your life. You will become an adult and you will find out about your heritage and...”

“But Mo-o-m, I’m only nine.” I cut her off angrily, eyeing the gifts on the table. “Can I open my presents? Please?” I whined, tugging at her dress.

“Okay, go, but let me show you something first,” she insisted. I was eager to find out what was in the big silver-wrapped box, so I just nodded. Mom pulled something small and shiny from her pocket. “Remember, you have to wear this necklace when you turn twenty-nine. It’s crucial, don’t forget! Even if I can’t be there, you must find this necklace and wear it on your twenty-ninth birthday. This is part of your heritage.”

I was angry that she held me back but quickly turned toward the table loaded with presents. From the corner of my eye, I noticed a small, gold medallion hanging on a dark string between her extended fingers. It was just a necklace; it had no meaning to me. “Yes, mother, I will remember.” I assured her but thought, *why is she showing this to me now?* I turned and ran because my mind was already on the bike I was hoping to get.

I woke from the short sleep feeling disturbed by the dream and realized that there was something important my mother wanted to tell me, but my nine-year-old self just didn’t care what she said. The silly girl was eager to open presents. I wish I’d paid more attention. She had mentioned the importance of my heritage, but I couldn’t remember anything else. It must have been significant; her message was trying to emerge from the fog filling my brain, somewhere from my subconscious memory.

Sitting on the bed I tried every method I knew of to recall what happened back then. While waiting for the flashback to click, I tried to picture Mom in different places. I tried to visualize us in my old room, and I recalled other birthdays when I was a child, but it was no use. She never repeated that sentence, and she never had a chance to give me the necklace. She didn’t live to celebrate the turning point in my life. “Oh Momma, you promised to give me that necklace today. I miss you so much!” I sobbed softly into my pillow.

Going back to sleep again became impossible, and the nagging feeling returned with full force. It started to annoy me, and I knew it would haunt

me unless I tried to relax and stop obsessing about it. I threw the covers off and walked barefoot to the bathroom.

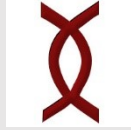
Ema, Elza's daughter, and I switched rooms a few days back, and because I still wasn't used to sleeping in my new room, I took a wrong turn in the hall and opened the linen closet door. "What a dope," I mumbled and oriented myself toward the bathroom.

During my shower, the nagging feelings grew stronger and stronger. By the time I'd finished drying my hair, my nerves were on edge. I tried to get control of my emotions and to go about my day as usual. I went downstairs, trying to make my swirling thoughts quiet down, telling myself just to enjoy the day.

I found, Elza, in the kitchen, making breakfast. Her long auburn hair was pulled into a tight bun and she wore a gray uniform with a crisp white apron pressed and wrinkle-free. I always hated that disgracing uniform because I thought of her as a favorite aunt, but she insisted on wearing it. She ended our countless arguments over it every time by saying, "I am your housekeeper. I like who I am and that's that." Although Elza is officially my "housekeeper", I always thought of her as family. She came to live with us after my mother met her in the hospital. Elza lost her husband in an unfortunate car accident. She was pregnant and alone, so my mom offered her to stay with us. Her husband had never been a financial genius and left her in debt, so after Ema had been born, Elza refused to stay with us as a guest and asked mom to hire her. After my parents passed away and I was left without family, I begged her not to leave me.

Elza lifted her hand for a special greeting that my ancestors used for centuries. When we greet each other, we raise our arm, turn our hand palms facing toward us, and we touch our inner wrists together where we all have a birthmark that everyone from the Hunor bloodline is born with.

The ancient symbol means uniting opposite forces and creating unanimity.



The mere touch connects us in a way that only older Hunors can fully feel, but the younger ones get a taste of the effect as well. We feel a belonging and a genetically encoded bond. We can also read each other's emotions clearly, but there are times when we don't want to share them. We can mask our feelings with loud and focused thoughts, or if the emotions are strong enough not to be hidden easily, then we do not greet each other with a touch, keeping our feelings to ourselves. I cannot help but notice that when older Hunors meet they hold the ancient touch for a while, their expressions change rapidly as if exchanging not only emotions but information and thoughts as well. I cannot feel that bond yet, but I remember the enormous change my parents, Elza, and Rua went through after their fortieth birthdays. Unfortunately, my parents were taken shortly after that.

After a brief touch, during which Elza masked her feelings, she quickly pulled her hand away not letting me read her. Although she surprised me, and it bothered me that she was trying to hide her feelings, I respected her wish.

I was affected by the emotional rejection by Elza more than I could tolerate. I just hoped that after prayer and breakfast everything would return to normal.

Rua shuffled through the back door and after a quick greeting, Elza handed him a mug filled with freshly brewed coffee.

Rua was the groundskeeper, over-all fixer and beloved uncle of my family since I can remember. We often take him for granted, like old, comfortable furniture. He fell off a horse when he was younger. His

injuries were so extensive that he lost the use of his right arm. His left leg is shorter than the other and he walks with a limp and a shuffle. He has always been there, and I could not imagine life without him being in it.

I heard Ema skipping down the stairs, singing. I have always loved Elza's daughter, sensitive and mysterious Ema, as a sister. Physically, both of us have the Hunor look, with high cheekbones and piercing blue eyes. The only distinction is that Ema has softer features, leaner muscles, and long slender fingers.

After a brief greeting, we gathered in the living room to begin our usual Morning Prayer. The role of leading the ceremony had fallen on my shoulders after my mother had died. Elza insisted on continuing the Hunor tradition, so I obliged to please her.

When Elza took her place between Ema and Rua, I knew she still didn't want to touch me. *What is she hiding?* I wondered.

We held hands, making a circle, and I clearly felt their emotions. Ema's were clear and simple, as always. When she's happy, she shines with bliss, yet her sadness shows with equal intensity. Although I felt the thorn from her early past deeply set in, she masked it well, but overall, she was happy and excited. However, I could never put my finger on Rua's repressed emotions. He had made a sacrifice a long time ago, but I couldn't find out what it was, and it had puzzled me since I was very young.

I lit the sacred candles infused with herbs and then placed them in a silver candleholder on a small round table. The ancient wooden male and female figurines holding hands stood between the candles. They were delicately carved with the beloved Turul bird with a crown on its head and a sword in its talons. The Falcon held widely stretched wings over the figurines as if protecting them.

The statues had been in my family for centuries. They were small and had a deep, warm brown color. The rich, shiny brown hue came from the hot herbal tea Elza poured over the statues every morning, as my ancestors had done for generations. Beside the statues was an ancient, dark leather-bound book. Its permanent place was on the prayer table, and every Hunor family had one.

I had leafed through our book many times. The first few pages remained empty to me, but the rest of the book contained my ancestor's names and achievements, written in ancient handwriting. When I asked mom about the empty pages she'd reply, "The Book will reveal all its secrets to you, but only when you reach the age of maturity." I wondered if I were ready; I was entering Hunor adulthood after all, so I made a mental note to check the book the next day, after prayer time.

Elza wrapped the ceremonial shawl around my shoulders as I took a deep breath and placed my hands on the Book of the Ancestors and traced the Tree of Life carved into it with my fingertips. I opened the book and began the prayer by reading the Hunor writing, carved into the inside cover of the sacred book.



Mother and Father leading in unity,
Protected by the Turul for eternity,
Guide my soul and keep my body healthy.
Test my courage and try my patience,
Let me prove I have endurance.
Let compassion always guide me,
Make me wise to help the needy,
Free my mind of fear and worry.
Challenge me on my daily journey,
And give me the strength to prove I'm worthy.



Closing my eyes, I held my hands in silence over the table for a minute and embraced the serene feeling I always had while saying the prayer. Warm energy flooded my insides, and I experienced a deep connection to something powerful, majestic and welcoming.

I was still a little angry with Elza for not letting me read her feelings. She was murmuring under her breath, as she did every morning. It was a low, rhythmic humming sound, but I did recognize some of the ancient Hunor words. She refused to give me an explanation whenever I asked her about it, but I'd seen her doing the strange whispering, at Morning Prayer, ever since she came to live with us.



As a child, because of the secrecy, I did not understand what Elza was doing and I was determined to find out. I'd planned to look around in her room, hoping to find something that would prove my childish suspicions that she was a witch. I had waited a long time before my chance arrived. My parents invited people over one evening and they forbade me to go downstairs, but I could not stay in my room for long. I tiptoed through the hall and peeked between the rails on top of the winding staircase. That's when I saw a large group of people sitting quietly in the middle of the living-room carpet in a circle, holding hands with their eyes closed. I slipped into Elza's room and quickly closed the door behind me.

On the top of her dresser, I found a cherry red leather book with Hunor writings. I assumed it was her spell book. It said, "Property of Elza, The Seer." Of course, everyone had warned me not to touch private property, but that just made me more intrigued. My heart was drumming so loud I could hardly breathe and came close to chickening out, but my curiosity was much stronger than my fear, and I didn't want to miss my long-awaited opportunity. I stared at the book, wringing my trembling fingers. With my mouth as dry as parchment, I mustered all my courage and lifted a badly shaking hand to the corner of the book. As soon as I touched the cover, the book shuddered and started vibrating gently, as if the lifeless leather had come to life. Suddenly, a strong electrical shock coursed through me, scaring me half to death. I dropped my hand to my side and backed away from the dresser. My fingers were numb and

tingly, and I wanted to scream, but the dark cloud of punishment hanging in the air made me control the urge. The fear allowed me to move fast. I was out of her room in seconds, and I never again tried to touch her book again. The Hunor writing on the book had said *Seer*, yet I still had no idea what it meant. I had never known her to perform any evil deeds, so that's why I decided she must be a good witch.



As soon as Elza grew quiet, Ema's eyes lit up with excitement and turned to me, "I have so much to do today, Ilona. Thank you for helping and not being mad at me for making you work on your birthday. And thank you for asking Bela to help."

"Don't be silly. We're happy for you and happy to help."

Elza served breakfast, but Ema just stuffed a slice of toast into her mouth as she was rushing up to her studio to get ready for her art show. Rua, after finishing, excused himself to go and prepare the truck for Ema's paintings, and Elza began cleaning up the remains of breakfast.



Dear diary, I never talked to anyone about this, but you're a diary, it's your job to keep secrets, so here it goes. I've been in love with Bela since I can remember. As children, we were almost inseparable. We shared everything, including the punishments after we got into trouble and later, in high school, everyone assumed we were dating, but it was far from the truth. Bela grew up to be a very handsome, muscular and tall teenager, with wavy blond hair. He was such a gentle giant. Girls drooled over him, giggling excitedly when he was around. He was always polite, friendly, and never pushy. To my utter disappointment, he didn't see me as a potential girlfriend. In his mind, I was the best friend, but it seemed that he did not think of me as a desirable female. I fantasized about him touching and kissing me as a boyfriend would. Although it was natural for us to hold hands and give each other a peck on the cheek, I wanted

more. I wanted romantic walks, whispers, and steamy kisses like I saw in movies or read about in books. My fantasies fell into the abyss time after time.

I tried, in my own shy and childish way, to be coy with him, and I attempted to flirt with him halfheartedly, but I was afraid he would laugh. Well, that's what he did. I followed the advice I read about in one of the sweet and innocent love stories written for teenage girls. The main character in the book looked up at the boy of her dreams through her eyelashes, and he instantly fell in love with her. I tried the same technique, but Bela looked at me concerned, instead of getting the message. The big dumbbell asked me if there was something in my eye, and when I fessed up, he laughed nervously and avoided me all day. He was totally oblivious to all my desperate and childish attempts at seduction.

When we were still in high school, for a short time, in my attempts to find an explanation for his lack of romantic interest in me, I fantasized about him liking boys. I soon discovered he preferred girls, and I sadly noted many of them. He did like girls, just didn't want me as a girlfriend, only as a best friend. He'd had so many fleeting relationships, and even though he'd introduced me to every girl he dated, I couldn't keep up with their names. From the time we were teenagers, their faces were blurred since his relationships didn't last long enough to make an impression.

In college, we rented an apartment together. Once, when we were sitting on the sofa in our barely-lit living room, listening to music, I finally mustered up enough courage to ask him what I meant to him. I wanted desperately to hear something that would give me hope, and I waited with baited breath for his reply. "You are the solid base in life, my confidante, and best friend, but I must confess, I often fantasized about holding your hand, kissing you, and even making love to you."

My heart sped up as he continued his response. “But when I fantasized about you, I always lost the intimate and cozy feeling we share when I thought of you as a friend. I don’t want to lose our friendship. I cherish it too much, and my life would be empty without the special bond between us.”

Just freaking fantastic! I thought, feeling like a deflated and discarded balloon.

I buried my feelings deep within and allowed myself only to feel love for him within the boundaries of friendship, but I did not allow myself to hope. He stood by me, no matter what took place in my life. He was my pillar, and I was his. I forced myself to think of him only as a friend, and at the very least, I had a firm and lasting friendship.

Dear Diary, it feels great sharing my thoughts with you. Elza was right, I need to write a journal, so see you a little later.

Mora's Castle



Mora mumbled on her breath, “That’s right, little girl. Keep writing.” Her prune-like lips curled into a cruel smile. Her castle was well hidden from prying eyes, deep in the woods on the mountainside. Nobody knew

about its existence, only Zelda, her trusted servant throughout the centuries.

Mora didn't allow anyone to see her in her miserable state, old and wrinkled. Her mind control ability helped her to make even Zelda see her in her youthful glory as she knew her so long ago, but she couldn't completely conceal her body's present state of old and wrinkled. The image of her old body shown in Zelda's mind through the youthful picture Mora projected.

The soft humming of her rotating, air-filled mattress relaxed her and protected her withered body from developing bedsores.

The Royals and Elders were furious when they found out many centuries ago that Joland had shared the gift of eternal life with her and gave her the power to keep her body young. The Elders separated them, but they couldn't make them mortal again. She has lived so many lifetimes, alone, because Joland was exiled to a timeline in the distant past. As his punishment, he couldn't move forward in time with her. The Elders succeeded in taking away the ability to rejuvenate her body, which became bones with wasted muscles and shriveled skin. Although her withered body was useless, the power of her mind allowed her to reach the remotest part of the world and beyond.

Mora prepared to channel her beloved, Joland, through time. Creating the connection between two dimensions would make her mentally exhausted for days, but she had to share the good news with Joland. She closed her eyes, began taking slow, deep breaths and concentrated her energy to break through the barrier between timelines with the power of her mind. She never let Joland see a mental image of her, old and withered. Therefore, she put a youthful picture of herself up as a shield. She only let Joland see her, as she was when they met, a beautiful, young woman in her glory. When she finally broke through the barrier of time, she saw Joland in her mind's eye. He was resting in his tent.

She reached out to him, *“My love, can you feel me?”*

Startled, he sat up on his cot, *“Yes! I can feel you and see you. My beautiful Mora, I miss you so!”*

“I have good news, my love, finally our time has come. I know who the Chosen One is. She was born in this timeline as it was foretold.”

His answer came instantly, *“Your good news is most welcomed, my love. I’ve been waiting for this moment for centuries.”*

Mora’s dried-up body trembled with satisfaction. *“She’s following the traditions, which will give me a chance to stop her. When she comes to her full powers, she could interfere and make sure the child is born in your time, the fifth century.”*

“We cannot let that happen. When the foretold date passes, and the child has not been born, the future as we know it will change, and we could be united again. Then, my love, we will rule the world together.”

“I’ve been waiting for this day for so long. I have trained the twins well. They will help me.”

“Our future together will be worth the sacrifices you have made.”

“We have both made sacrifices. They couldn’t take away the gift you shared with me, to be able to live forever.”

“We will be together again. I promise!”

“We will, darling. I’m losing contact, but I will channel you again when I have more news.”

“Love you forever.”

The connection between them faded. Mora was mentally exhausted but smiled with satisfaction. She opened her eyes and whispered, *“We were meant for each other and we could have been happy together. They will pay dearly for separating us.”*

Dreadful Thoughts

Ilona's Diary



Dear Diary,

After breakfast and Prayer, the dreadful thoughts started to affect me more than I could handle. I stood up, tried to shake the sad mood and act normal by walking to the sink where Elza was busy washing the dishes. Pretending first, and then getting caught up in a cheerful mood, usually worked to shake my dire feelings. It was easy for me to fool others and, eventually, I could fool myself to some degree. My pathetic attempt at acting cheerfully was to grab Elza to dance with me to the “Good Morning Starshine” tune on the radio. I tried to touch her hand, again, but she politely pulled away.

“Look who just got her good mood back? The birthday girl!” Elza exclaimed slapping my hands away.

She smiled, although the look in her eyes puzzled me, and her refusal to touch hands for the third time offended me. She looked at me and, for a fleeting second, I had a feeling she was searching for some change in me. Moreover, I thought she was expecting something from me. She blinked and shook her head a little as if she had closed a discussion in her mind. After a few seconds, she was back to normal—loving and steady. *It*

would be so easy to find out what's bothering her. I thought. If I could only touch her hand, just for a second...

Elza, tried to divert my attention by asking, “Ilona, you never talk about your blood relatives. Don’t you think it’s time to forgive them?”

“Perhaps, but it’s not easy. It hurt me deeply what my uncle did. I didn’t understand why he never visited us when I was a child. My parents avoided the subject, but I overheard you and Rua talking about it. You said, my uncle never forgave my father for marrying my mother, and I never found out what it was that made him object to their marriage. In fact, I have seen him maybe three or four times in my entire life. He had two children whom I know of, but I never met his wife.”

“I remember when he came to your parents’ funeral. Soon after discovering that you were of legal age and your parent’s sole beneficiary, he didn’t even stay for the service.”

“Yes, I was sad, and he seemed infuriated after the lawyer read the will. Those emotions did not allow us to communicate. Later, I never thought about inviting him to visit, and he seemed to have forgotten about me completely. Sadly, I don’t have any memory of him that would make me miss him, even though he is my only living relative. Perhaps I should have called him, but being stupidly stubborn, I did not.”

“You should give him a call sometimes. He might have changed, and his children are grown by now. Perhaps they would like to meet you and keep in touch.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Gypsy, my bear-sized St. Bernard, snapped me out of the sad mood as he stormed through the custom-made doggy door. He plowed into my legs with such force that it made me lose my footing, “Whoa!” I managed to yelp before plopping onto the floor, on my backside. “Ouch... Gypsy, you’re like a bulldozer.”

He wagged his tail happily, pinned me down and licked me all over my face. I could not escape his overwhelming display of love, as he was too strong.

Mirci Catchmousky, our Maine Coon cat, puffed her long hair and hissed at Gypsy from her perch on a low windowsill. Gypsy trotted over to the cat - giving me time to stand up - and gave her a sloppy lick too. It almost knocked the silver-haired cat off the windowsill. Mirci swatted at Gypsy's head, which made him jump back. He gave out a low, throaty growl. Although I didn't see any blood, the cat's sharp claws must have slashed him a little. Gypsy turned, and with a powerful swish of his tail, sent Mirci flying. She knocked over the garbage can and ran from the kitchen, hissing.

“Yes!” I heard Elza's muted yell and caught her doing a victory dance from the corner of my eye. I looked at her indignantly, and she quickly wiped the grin off her face. Elza had never been fond of my free-spirited cat. She fed her well and adequately cared for her, but Gypsy had always been her favorite.

Gypsy tried to knock me off my feet again, but Elza rescued me by pushing the pail-sized bowl close to him, with her foot. The sound of the metal bowl sliding on the ceramic tile got his attention as Elza poured his breakfast into the bowl, and he started wolfing it down. I cleaned up at the sink, wiping the slobber off my face.

Elza turned to me, “Is Bela coming to help Ema?”

“Last week he said he would help us. I'll call him a little later, he likes to sleep in.” I informed while I doodled on the countertop with my wet fingers. The dream I had was still bothering me, and I wanted to talk to Elza about it, but I didn't know how to bring it up.

Elza snapped me out of my thoughts. “He's been moping around for days,” she said, giving me a half glance.

The idea of talking about my dream immediately took second place in priority. “What’s wrong?” I asked Elza, concerned. “I haven’t talked to him since Friday. He seemed to be fine then.”

“He called while you were working but made me swear not to tell you. He said he’d wait until you had a day off.” Elza offered shrugging her shoulders.

I glanced at her, and again; the fleeting expectation filled her eyes. She turned away and her anticipation pressed on my mind, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. I grabbed the phone and dialed Bela. He answered on the first ring as if he were awaiting my call.

“What’s wrong? I demanded an answer. Elza said you made her swear not to tell me while I was working.”

“Nothing, love, honestly. It’s just a little writer’s block. My publisher is bugging me to finish the book, but I don’t have a single idea in my head. I need your help, but I didn’t want to bother you when you were working,” he confessed, “and I haven’t seen you for days. I missed you.”

“Oh, you big dope, you should have called me,” I complained, twisting the phone cord between my fingers.

“You said the opening is tomorrow, so I thought we could talk when I came over to help Ema.”

“Thanks for remembering it. Yes, we can talk after we get everything done.”

“I’ll be there in half an hour.” He abruptly hung up on me, without waiting for my reply.

He forgot my birthday! He’d never forgotten before. I felt sadness creeping up on me and I slowly replaced the phone. I went upstairs, changing into my favorite lounging outfit, faded jeans and soft T-Shirt. By the time I was done, I’d heard the familiar sound of Bela’s sports car

pulling up to my driveway and I went out to the porch to greet him. He got out of his car, holding Tui, his chocolate Chihuahua. She was yapping excitedly and squirmed in his hands. Gypsy trotted over, and when Bela put Tui down, he licked her from head to tail with one sweep of his huge tongue. Tui growled at him halfheartedly, not appreciating the unexpected bath, but forgave him quickly and reached up to touch her tiny nose to Gypsy's, that was almost as large as her whole head. She yapped hello to Gypsy and he gave her a low, throaty rumble. The pair vanished into the backyard, Tui in the lead.

Bela hugged me, "Happy birthday to my bestest friend."

"You didn't forget!"

"Nope, and you can't open your present yet." His mischievous smile prepared me for what was coming, "And remember, you're always going to be older than me,"

"Yeah, exactly thirty days older!" I blushed.

I couldn't help it; I had to punch him on the shoulder. He laughed and dove into the back seat of his car and emerged with his laptop and a poorly wrapped package. He put his laptop in the van and carried the box inside as we walked into the kitchen, holding hands, to have coffee and wait for Ema to get ready.

Freedom

Zoltan's Diary



Hey, Diary,

Today is September 19, and I'm starting a starting a new life. I chose freedom and it gives me the power to act, speak or think without externally, or in my case, internally imposed restraints.



I know that this “write in your journal everyday business” is going to be a drag, but I can't say no to my mother. She's very strict about keeping traditions, and every time we talk, since my birthday a month ago, she nags, “Write your journal every day, because if you don't, I'll find out!”

After a couple of weeks, I lost my patience and snapped at her angrily, “Yes mother. I do write it but stop badgering me already. I'm not your little boy anymore.”

“I know son, but I want to make sure you don't ignore our customs.”

“Mom, I promise I'll write every day, but please don't ask me anymore.”

“Alright then. Thank you.”

She stopped nagging me after that, but by now I'm so used to writing about my everyday life that I kind of enjoy it. It's almost like talking to a shrink without a person prompting you to open up, ask questions and draw conclusions.

So, finally, today, I'm moving to a new town to start a new life. I lived in the city long enough and created a lifestyle there, which I loathed. I needed a new beginning. I was longing for something stable and peaceful. Everyone expected me to be the way I have always been—shallow, leading the fast life. Despite the line of lovers, I was lonely, burned out and cynical. I got to the point where I needed a change, a breath of fresh air, and I needed space after a choking concrete jungle.

A few days ago, I reached the breaking point, opened a map and looked at the northeast side. I ran my fingers through the row of towns, looking for something close, but not too close to my hometown of Red Hook. I wanted to find a town with a hospital, somewhere in the mountains and near the river.

I stopped at Hudson on the map, went online and found the hospital's website. On a whim, I filled out an application for an ER physician spot. The director called me an hour later, and after a long conversation, he offered me a position. He even hooked me up with a real estate agent to find an apartment. It was a smooth process; I resigned from my job, subleased my apartment in Manhattan, arranged for movers and called my parents, who were very surprised, but happy.

Mora's Discovery



Mora was daydreaming about the time when she was a young girl. Life was hard and uncertain for a while with the constant fights between the clans. Her mother cried night after night, trying to keep her hungry children silent in the caves where they were hiding. After the clan wars had ended and her father returned home, her family and the tribe settled into a simple, quiet and sheltered lifestyle, in the Carpathian Basin.

Mora dreamed of a better, exciting life. As she listened to the legends and stories told by the shaman, her mind wandered. The shaman told them about the Gods who lived among the people a long time ago. Before they returned to the stars, they gave special powers to their children to stay and help the people. She also heard whispers about the nobles and their unique powers, but never met anyone, except a Healer. Her mother took her to the old woman when she fell ill. Although the woman healed her with her concoctions and incantations, Mora didn't think it was anything special. She kept wishing for magical powers such as turning invisible or at least being able to command others to do her chores. When she became an adult, she got her wish, but it was different than what she was dreaming about as a child. She discovered that she could enter the bodies and minds of animals. She could perceive what they saw and felt,

along with being able to control their actions with her mind. She was excited but didn't know the purpose of her ability, or how to use it.

When she asked her father about it, he became anxious. "I don't understand why you were given this power. Nobody in our family is gifted. This ability should not be taken lightly or used foolishly. If those with evil intentions found out, they could force you to use your gift to control others and gain power. Wait until we can determine how to use it to help our people. Until then, I forbid you to tell anyone about this."

She obeyed and didn't tell anyone, but only because her father didn't forbid her to use her powers, she started practicing in secret. She was afraid to test her ability on humans, so she practiced only on animals, but often fantasized about killing Altona, the chief's wife, who made her life miserable. She always watched Mora closely because she sensed cruelty and great ambition in her and wanted to break her strong will before she could hurt anyone. She always kept Mora close to her as if she was her servant.

Mora often complained about it to her father, but his answer was always the same, "She's the leader of the clan. Obey her."

Feelings of bitterness and resentment tortured Mora day after day, and when she couldn't take it anymore, she ran into the woods or up to the mountain slopes. There she found and entered a predator's body and mind, thus being able to use the animal's body, she stalked and killed small prey. The cruel act gave her a certain satisfaction, which allowed her to face Altona's scrutiny for a while. Her only escape was when she imagined killing Altona, but she knew she had to wait.

One day, Altona ordered her to fetch water from the nearby spring. Altona rarely left the village, but on that day decided to take a walk, and while Mora hauled the heavy wooden buckets, Altona stopped to pick wildflowers on the field, close to the trickling spring. Mora noticed that

nobody else was around and realized that it was her only chance to take her revenge. She put the buckets down, and closing her eyes, searching the area for a large predator. She found a huge mountain lion nearby, sleeping. She concentrated hard, and slowly entered the animal's mind and body. When she had full control of the magnificent animal, she made the lioness run and pounce on Altona, who bent down to pick a flower.

The lioness knocked Altona to the ground, ready to mercilessly rip her throat and chest open. Suddenly, Mora's body shuddered. She fell to the ground and her consciousness was ripped from the lion's body. She opened her eyes with terror flowing through her. She saw a huge tiger standing over the lion's body she possessed just seconds ago. The blood of the lion was dripping from the tiger's mouth and chin as she lifted her head and looked at Mora with piercing eyes. The huge tiger growled and kicked her body into full speed with its hind legs, toward Mora. She screamed in fright and tried to run, but her legs wouldn't move.

Mora watched in horror as suddenly, the tiger's body went limp in mid-air and dropped to the ground like a rag doll. As it lay there, unmoving, a slow change occurred. The tiger's body took on the shape of Altona's form. Mora whimpered and fell back, confused and frightened. She didn't understand what was happening.

She was confused and felt shivers crawling up her spine, sensing that someone was watching her. She searched the area and next to a tree she saw a stranger. He was staring at her with his piercing, blue eyes, a handsome man in his early thirties, long black hair flowing down his back.

He smiled, "She's dead. I couldn't let her kill you, I saw what you did, and I am impressed,"

The blood froze in her veins as he continued, “Don’t worry, I will not tell anyone. I like a girl who is ruthless and not afraid to do what she wants. I despise weak people with their stupid morals.”

She relaxed a little and walked closer to Altona’s and the lion’s body. The stranger left his hiding place and stood on the other side of the dead bodies.

Mora looked up at the man and said with trembling lips, “Thank you for saving me.”

“Sure, it was my pleasure. I assume she did something to make you mad enough to kill her.”

Mora coldly looked down on Altona’s body and confessed, “Yes. She’s been tormenting me all my life, but this was the first time I used my ability for revenge. I played with my powers before, but I hate it when the animals always die after I leave them. Too bad, this was a beautiful lion. Did I imagine it, or did Altona really take the shape of the tiger?” She asked the stranger.

“She did. She was from the chameleon bloodline. She had the ability to change her shape, and that was the reason I came to this village, to take her powers.”

“How can you do that?”

“I’ll tell you later, but first, let me ask you something. Have you tried to take control of people yet?”

“No, when I found out that the animals I possess die afterward, I was afraid that if I try to enter someone, and the person dies, the others would find out about my ability.”

“You have the potential. My name is Joland, the Law Keeper, by the way.”

“I’m merely a low-status girl, Mora, the third daughter of a hunter.”



Mora came out of her dreamy state and cried out loud, “Why? Why did they have separated us?”

Her nurse rushed into the room and frantically looked around, “Is everything all right ma’am? Did you call me?”

“I’m fine. Leave!”

“Yes, ma’am.” She retreated, closing the door behind her.

Her anger subsiding, Mora continued her monologue in a subdued voice, “They will pay! But, for now, I have to gather every bit of information I could use for my revenge. Let me see what they’re writing about. Oh, so that’s where the Seer is hiding. She has written about every boring detail, but she never mentioned whose housekeeper she was. Damn this crippled body and the constrictions they installed in my mind. Hah! The Chosen is in love with Bela, the mutt, now that’s ironic. His mother was excommunicated from the tribe for breaking the law. He’s useless to me but let me see what Zoltan is doing. At first, he refused to write in his diary, but his mother made it sure that he does now. This is interesting! He decided to move to the town where the Chosen One works, which means that I can use him. Finally, my chance to change the future arrived. They must meet, and he has to get close enough to her, and then I will make him kill her, whenever I see fit.”

Mora, using her mind, channeled her daughter, *“I need your talent. I will have you taken to Hudson by one of my Time Benders. The boy is moving into his new place, and coincidentally, the Chosen One will be there today too. Her name is Ilona. Make sure you have the right girl before you have them notice each other. It must be a strong attraction; I want them to connect and become inseparable. You know what? Tonight, plant hatred in his mind in his dream but don’t activate it yet. I want to prepare him for the time when I want her to be killed. I will send your*

brother as well, tomorrow, and he can finish what you start in his dream.”

“Yes, mother, I will do as you ask.” She sighed.

“Use your power well. Make the connection between them. Don’t mess it up!” Mora channeled and instructed the Time Bender.

Her daughter always hated time travel. It scared her, but when her mother needed her, she couldn’t say no. She gasped when the Time Bender materialized out of thin air in her kitchen and grabbed her hand without saying a word. She closed her eyes, expecting the dizzying sensation. Luckily, it was over in seconds, and they materialized behind a parked van.


Satisfied, Mora continued reading Ilona’s diary.

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CHOSEN by the SWORD



The Ancestors' Secrets
Book 2

ERIKA M SZABO

Chosen by the Sword

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Prologue by Loran



I'm Loran, the Táltos (shaman) of the Hunor clan that still exists hidden in every country with its strict hierarchy, deadly rules and traditions. Although every event and everything is written by Hunors with the ancient writing, called Rovasiras, is registered in the Collective Memory, my job is to create a detailed file of every gifted clan member whose fate is to preserve the traditions and keep the clan intact.

The Ancestors' Secrets file is an important historical document and now available to every clan member who reached adulthood. This file contains diary entries by the *Chosen One* and by those who are close to her as well as those who chose to oppose her and try to stop her.

When I started putting the file together, there were gaps in the events, and I had to talk to people in order to place the puzzles pieces together. It's amazing how some of their time bending ability could bring the present and past together. Reading the diaries, I felt like I was walking on

the lush steppes with the ancestors, traveled with the gypsy caravan in the fourteenth century or visited a long dead King.

The Ancestors' Secrets file includes three parts. *Prelude* is a glimpse into what will come in *Turmoil* and *Destiny*, as the present and past events are interwoven in the complex story of the most important members of a secret society. A lot of ancient tribal secrets must be unveiled, and the puzzle pieces must find their place before the Chosen One discovers what fate has in store for her.



Ilona had been a sheltered child and teenager, happy, carefree and loved. The sudden of her parent's accident had wiped out all her security and everything she had ever known. Ilona was alone, and it seemed as if a dark cloud always followed her, but she learned to cope—she had to.

For years nothing seemed to move forward after she settled into a comfortable lifestyle, and she felt secure in her little corner of the world. After her twenty-ninth birthday, Ilona's life had turned upside down in three short days. She learned more about herself in three days than in her entire life.

Growing up in a Hunor family, following the strict rules and keeping peculiar traditions was not always easy. Ilona's life and beliefs had changed after she started remembering her mother's instructions that were concealed as rhymes and she discovered secrets that her parents kept from her. She also found out that she had magical abilities that are exciting as well as frightening. She's a doctor, she heals people, but the healing powers she inherited went far beyond that.

Mora had been exiled by the clan and waited centuries for the chance to reunite with her beloved Joland and gain the power to rule the Hunor clan. Ilona still doesn't know that she was chosen to stop Mora's evil plan.

Although Ilona knows our history from legends and honors the rituals, she's not aware of her true heritage. She begins to remember her mother's instructions, which are concealed as rhymes. She is also unaware that her pleasant life as a doctor is about to change, and she'll be thrown into a dangerous world filled with secrets.

Ilona had been in love with her best friend but when she met Zoltan, he stirred up emotions that Ilona was afraid to feel before. When their eyes interlocked for a long moment and his face lit up with a bright smile, at that moment, nothing else mattered. The whole world disappeared as if a tunnel connected them to each other. Then Ilona met a man and his hateful, cold stare sent icy chills down her spine. She felt a foreboding of evil and sensed a dark force behind him that drove him to destroy her. There are a lot of secrets that must be uncovered. Ilona must find her Destiny Box, and discover what fate has in store for her.

In her quest to protect her family and the future of our clan, she must activate her Chameleon side and obtain unimaginable powers. She can use her powers for absolute good or absolute evil; the choice is up to her. She must sort through her feelings about the men in her life while she travels through time to back when her people were nomads, to the castles of the 14th century, to present day, as she struggles to overcome the obstacles placed in her path.

Instability



The doorbell sounded. Elana hurried to the door and stepped out through the Jurta's leather door covering. She came back a minute later looking exasperated. "You have to leave soon as Csenge is coming to visit within minutes. The Seer just informed me. She is curious about Ema," she explained and then turned to Ema. "Just remember the story we rehearsed, take the White Shield and you will do fine," Elana assured her.

A thought occurred to Ilona and turned to Zoltan. "What if we time our departure so we can take a look at Csenge before we leave? I wonder how a human being could live for hundreds of years. I want to see how she looks 1600 years earlier before I meet her."

He agreed. "We can take a look at her through the slit on the door covering, and then pop out in a split second before she reaches the door and sees us."

Elana gave Ilona a small pouch with White Shield in it. She told her that she would have to put a pellet under her tongue. Within a couple of minutes, it would protect her thoughts, and the effect would last for about a day.

They said their good-byes and Ema made Ilona promise that she would visit soon. Ema said she would start writing a diary so as not to forget anything important she had to tell her.

“Do you have pen and paper?” Ilona asked.

Ema laughed, “No, silly, it hasn’t been invented yet. We use a flat grass, similar to papyrus. It is dried and then pressed into sheets. We write with a bird feather, and we use minerals as ink, mixed with oil and herbs. We also write stories on clay tablets, carved into stone, sewn into our clothes and painted on cookware.”

“What if it’s found in the future?” Ilona asked, concerned.

“That’s my intention. To write a chronicle of how life was and what it became.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Elana interjected. “Ema doesn’t have a status because she wasn’t supposed to be born. She can’t become a Healer; she doesn’t have the heritage for it. She could become the Historian. I will contact our Seer about it later,” she said, aroused by the idea.

They heard a soft knock on the door and Elana opened it a crack, thanking someone, “The Seer says Csege is approaching. Look out here,” Elana whispered and showed them the small slit on the leather curtain.

Ilona peeked out, and she saw Csege walking toward Elana’s Jurta, surrounded by other people. She looked to be about forty, although Ilona knew she was much, much older. She had high cheekbones and penetrating blue eyes. Her hair was dark and was braided down her back to her waist. She had a small, maroon colored mark on her left cheek, just below her eye.



She was a majestic looking woman, with an air of authority. Elana looked over with a warning in her eyes and then grabbed the door flap. They heard the sound of the small drum as someone hit it with the wooden stick. Zoltan hugged Ilona's waist ready to take her back to their timeline. Ilona felt the familiar swirling dizziness and let her mind and body immerse into the pleasantly tingling and arousing feeling of time travel.



Ilona slowly opened her eyes. Elza and Zoltan were standing in the exact spot in her living room where they stood before they went to see Ema and Elana in the past. It was as if the past evening, night and morning they had spent with them had never happened. Ilona was disoriented for a minute and wondered if it really happened, or if she was dreaming. When she looked at Zoltan and Elza, she realized, judging by their expressions, that indeed it did happen. They time traveled to the past.

Ilona shook her head to clear her mind and turned to Zoltan, "How do you cope with this?"

He smiled and reached for her hand. "I'm used to it. Jumping to the past for me is like going to the next room. Perhaps, because that's the ability I was given, I'm not sure." He looked away, a dreamy expression playing on his handsome face.

Ilona's heart skipped a beat as she watched Zoltan turning his head, and the soft light shone through his dark hair. She quickly regained her senses and started talking. "I don't want to think of this and lose my mind, so let's focus on what is happening now."

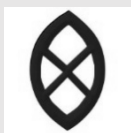
Ilona fished out a little ball from the pouch Elana had given her and put it under her tongue. It tasted spicy yet smooth and melted in her mouth in seconds, leaving no trace.

She took another pill out of the pouch and gave it to Zoltan. “Would you take this pill to Rua? And please tell him to come up to the house.” Zoltan understood right away and darted out of the house.

Elza stared at Ilona in astonishment. “It seems you’re back already, but to me, you never left! I will never understand this.”

“Neither do I, believe me,” Ilona told her. “Take this pill and put it under your tongue. It will protect your mind from the mind reading ability of the Leaders.” Elza complied without question.

By the time Rua came through the back door with Zoltan, they had heard footsteps on the front porch. Ilona went to greet the Leaders. She recognized Csenge at once. Her hair was cut short, and she wore modern clothes, but she appeared to be the woman they saw in the past, just a short time ago. She had the same Leader mark under her left eye.



Ilona was amazed but still couldn’t wrap her mind around the fact that she had seen the statuesque woman 1600 years in the past. *Wow, it would be fantastic to figure out their secret and live for hundreds, or thousands of years.* Ilona pondered the mind-boggling possibility.

The man standing on the porch appeared about the same age as Csenge. He had the Leader sign on his face, as well. He was tall and erect, appearing very healthy. His face displayed kindness and serenity, but Ilona detected something in his eyes that made the little hairs stand up on the back of her neck. His eyes were penetrating, and as they darted around, Ilona caught a glimpse of something calculating and sinister.

The third person was a muscular man in his late forties. He had long black hair peppered with gray that was pulled into a ponytail at the base of his neck. There was also an air of authority and self-importance in his presence. Ilona recognized him instantly. He was the lurking dark man! He was the one Ilona had seen when all the attacks on her had occurred. Ilona's blood instantly boiled with anger. She froze time to think it over. *What is he doing with the Leaders? What is he going to do? Is he going to attack me or control someone else to do it? I must be on guard.*

Ilona looked around for a weapon in case he tried something. She rushed into the living room and snatched the ancient swords from their display above the fireplace. Her slender fingers wrapped around the blades as she shoved the swords under the love seat and concealed them by the cover. She felt a sharp pain in her index finger as the sword sliced into it, but she ignored it. She hoped that if needed, Zoltan would be quick enough to recognize the situation, and she could hand him one of the swords. Ilona couldn't think of anything else, so she took her place at the door facing the visitors. A quick glance around assured her that everything was in place, so she unfroze time.

The Leaders started moving again and slowly ascended the stairs followed by the sinister man. The Leaders stopped at the entrance and bowed to the Turul plaque placed over the entrance. They whispered the ancient words written on a plaque.

"May the sacred Turul protect you on your journey."



Everyone got down on one knee, formally greeting the Leaders. They placed both hands on their knees, palms up. Ilona had never used this traditional greeting before, but she had practiced it with her Mom. Her

mother told her, “With this ancient gesture, we offer our services and lives to protect the People. The Leaders represent the People to the Elders, and they acknowledge our offer by touching our shoulder. It means they accept our offer and even sacrifice if need be.”

Ilona remembered that Elana greeted her in a similar fashion, but she had done something different. She bent her head and then exposed her neck. Ilona recalled that the type of greeting Elana used was reserved only for people with very high authority in their tribe. Her mother showed her that greeting only once. She didn't know much about the hierarchy within the Hunor society, and there was so much she didn't know about her own life and her origins, but she didn't have time to ponder it. For the time being, she had to concentrate on many other pressing matters.

After the Leaders, Csenge and Kund had touched everyone's shoulders in turn, they all stood up. Ilona waited for them to extend their hands for the formal Hunor greeting, in order to read their feelings. Kund and the dark man stood motionless; chilling smiles were frozen on their faces. Csenge was the only one to touch hands with Ilona, Zoltan, Elza and Rua. She lingered when she touched Rua but released him quickly and then turned to Elza. Ilona spied on the Leader and the dark man from the corner of her eye, noticing they were waiting and watching everything like hawks.

Csenge broke contact with Elza, who looked relieved, and she turned toward Ilona. Ilona planned to slow time when she held the touch with Csenge. She hoped to observe how Csenge accomplished the mind reading. Csenge lowered her eyes to Ilona's hand, and then looked up at her questioningly, then turned her eyes toward the sofa. A tiny smile played in the corner of her shapely mouth, and when she looked at Ilona again, she gave her a warm, reassuring look. *She knows I hid the sword and cut my finger on it*, Ilona thought.

She wiped the blood on her pants, balled her fingers into a fist and lifted her hand in the ancient greeting. As their inner wrists touched and their marks made a connection, something unexpected happened, which made Ilona jump. She had a ticklish feeling in her mind. It was similar to the sensation in her throat when she breathed in unpleasant fumes. It felt as if skinny little fingers were touching and probing inside her brain. She saw from the corner of her eye that the others were moving in slow motion. *I didn't slow time yet, what is happening?!*

She was startled when she began receiving rapidly playing images, and then heard Csenge's voice in her mind, "*Don't be afraid, and try to act normally. I see you took White Shield, so I can't read your thoughts.*" Ilona was afraid, not knowing what would come next, but Csenge continued, "*I'm able to slow time, and because you have the ability as well, I can talk to you without being detected by the others. Just listen. The others don't know about my ability and I can fool them for now, but not for long. Ond is getting stronger and more suspicious of me every day. We don't have much time—just listen. I will project my thoughts to you.*"

Ilona gave her a small nod and opened her mind. She saw Elana's home and Ema's smiling face. She saw herself and Zoltan as they were peeking through the slit in the leather door covering at Elana's home, looking at Csenge. The next images rapidly changed, fast forward pictures of ancient people on horseback, firing arrows behind them. Ilona felt happy and content.

Within the next images, the clothing of the people changed, and Ilona saw people plowing fields and building stone houses. Women in long skirts were tied to stakes and burned. People started wars and slew others in the name of God.

Then she saw primitive cars emitting thick smoke on the streets that were hugged by tall buildings. She felt the sickness, disasters and the

suffering of people living both in ghettos as well as those in palaces with powdered servants.

Ilona realized that Csenge was not only projecting images but her own feelings to her as well. Ilona had a sense of being cheated, lied to and used as she was forced to view these unbearable pictures.

The images kept flowing. She saw people talking on the phone, watching TV and texting on palm-size computers and phones. Ilona felt burned out, confused, stressed and very lonely.

The next image was of Ond appearing and taking control over Kund. Kund became conniving, plotting and power hungry. Ilona felt trapped as if she couldn't hold it together. She sensed Csenge's feelings as she was watching a great nation's demise that couldn't cope with the time changes, because of the strict and fiercely enforced laws of the clan. Everything she worked for so hard for 1600 years was slipping away. Csenge made her feel helpless and alone.

Then Ilona heard Csenge's voice in her mind, *"I have great hopes for you because I cannot fight them alone. I'm hoping for your help. I have to be careful—they're watching me, but I'll find a way to contact you and then we can talk."* Ilona was in tune with Csenge's thoughts as she continued, *"We must stop now. Ond is very strong; he might sense that I have slowed time. I'll tell you more before we leave."*

When Csenge released Ilona's hand, time returned to normal speed. Ilona was stunned and could hardly contain her emotions.

Csenge turned to her husband, held his hand and looked deeply into his eyes for a long second. Kund shook his head slightly. He seemed disappointed.

Ilona had to turn away from them for a few seconds, to hide the turmoil that was brewing inside her. She motioned them to follow her

into the living room and offered them seats. Ilona trailed Zoltan to the loveseat and sat down with him.

Elza retreated, and then returned, pushing a cocktail cart. She offered refreshments that gave Ilona some time to collect herself. After a few minutes, Ilona gained control of her emotions, but her mind was racing. *What was that? How is it possible? Csenge is not happy; she knows things are out of control. Perhaps I can use this to our advantage and help her in the process.*

Ilona assumed that the Leaders wouldn't volunteer any information; therefore, she had to provoke them by asking questions. "To what do we owe this unexpected visit?" Ilona asked with a smile, knowing that behind her polite words, they could detect her disapproval. She heard Elza taking a sharp, horrified breath behind her.

Kund glanced at the others, and then he took the role of spokesperson. He gave Ilona a sincere looking smile. "We were in the area, and I thought we would stop by for a short visit. Our new Healer is coming of age... we didn't want to pass up the opportunity to welcome and to congratulate you."

Ilona decided to play along and answered in a polite manner, "Thank you, I never expected this to happen. I am honored."

Csenge took over, "If your mother were alive, it would have happened differently," she said, giving Kund a quick glance before bowing her head. He shrugged his shoulders slightly, and then looked back at Ilona with a smug expression.

Ilona glanced over at Kund. "I've heard of you and Csenge—you are our Leaders." Then, with an icy stare, she turned to the dark man. "But I don't know this man."

The man seemed startled for a second and then gave Ilona a self-satisfied look. His sharp eyes tried to penetrate hers, but Ilona stood her ground and stared right back.

“He is Ond, my adviser,” Kund answered, in surprise. Ilona guessed that he wasn’t used to being questioned, and as she suspected, Kund refused to say more about him. “Ema will not join us tonight?” Kund asked, turning to Elza.

Ilona was afraid that Elza might slip with her answers, being intimidated by the Leaders. Elza appeared pale and nervous, startled by Kund’s question, so Ilona answered for her. “She’s not at home today; she had to travel to New York for an unexpected business trip. She opened a new show a couple of days ago, and an art dealer is very interested in organizing an international show of her paintings,” Ilona explained, without blinking.

“Hmm... we are very happy for her success, of course, but Elza didn’t mention it when we called.” A subtle warning sounded from the voice of Kund.

Elza, wringing her hands nervously, stammered, “I forgot to mention it. I was happy to hear you were coming.”

Kund nodded and diverted his attention to Zoltan. “How’s the sixth son of the sixth son? Have you done any time travel lately?” he probed.

Ilona felt Zoltan’s eyes on her and gave him a little nod, remembering they might smell the soap root they showered with at Elana’s home. Zoltan was quick with his reply. “Yes, just today we took a short visit to the year one thousand; I wanted to show Ilona the coronation of Istvan,” he lied, smoothly. Kund gave him a sharp look but didn’t say anything.

Kund picked up a sandwich and had some tea, along with the others. The polite small talk continued for a while. Ilona’s mind was in turmoil, and she couldn’t concentrate on what the others were talking about. She

was grateful for Zoltan's ability to chat while she couldn't even form a thought. He was talking about his experiences having a new job and meeting Ilona, and he spoke about his family. Elza was no better; she stood nervously by Ilona and refused to take a seat. Rua seemed like he wished to be somewhere else. The nervous tension in the air was palpable.

Finally, Csenge ended the uncomfortable visit by reaching over to hold Ilona's hand. "We have to leave now, but we must get together soon. I can't even imagine how it feels having no guidance, having to figure out everything by yourself now that you have accepted your ability. The role of the Healer is a big responsibility; I'm so sorry about your mother not being able to help you."

You have no idea, Ilona thought. Time slowed again, and Ilona began to receive Csenge's messages that only she seemed to be aware of. "I'm tired," Csenge projected. "I want this to end. This life is not what it was meant for. I'm so sorry about your parents, Ilona, they deserved a better fate. They were good people. I hate keeping this law, which was made so long ago. It has gotten way out of hand, and we need to change things. We cannot live by rules that were made for people who lived in tribes. Kund doesn't want to see that. For a while, I thought I succeeded, and we were going to change things. But Ond has a strong influence on him, and I can't fight him alone." Csenge paused for a second and then continued. *"We cannot rule in unison anymore, and Kund has become a power-hungry monster. You made the best decision to take Ema back to the past. They know who she is, and they want her—not you. I cannot do anything alone, but the two of us might. You must find your Destiny Box that contains the message of the ancestors. It was hidden by your father somewhere in the past where Joland and Mora can't find it. I'll help you and communicate with you again when the time is right."*

Csenge released Ilona's hand with a smile, and time sped up to normal. Ilona was frustrated. She had a million questions but couldn't ask them. Csenge had spoken to her, but all she could do was listen. *I'm in the dark. I don't know anything!*

Ilona opened her mouth to ask, but Csenge's warning glance stopped her as she spoke. "Well, I hope we can get together soon. I'll let you know," she hurried to say before Ilona had a chance to ask another uncomfortable question.

Ilona forced her anxiety aside and smiled back, "Please do." Then a thought occurred to her. She ignored Csenge's warning and turned to Kund, "I want to ask you something if you don't mind." Ilona heard Elza and Rua taking loud, gasping breaths behind her, and Csenge seemed startled. Ilona glanced at Zoltan, who seemed a little taken aback, but he gave her a supporting and encouraging nod.

"Go ahead," Kund answered.

Before she lost her courage, Ilona continued. "I've been experiencing some disturbing events lately. I was nearly killed by a crazed gunman and a delirious wrestler. Then there was a murderous deer and others, as well... for some reason, they all wanted to kill me. Have you any idea what I can do about these attacks?" She gazed into Kund's eyes.

He seemed startled but collected himself quickly. Kund gave him a sharp look but didn't say anything. "Hmm... indeed disturbing," Kund answered. "It must have been a mistake. Those attacks were meant for someone else; I'm sure of it. I will ask our Safe Keeper to form a protective circle, right now." He pulled his cell phone out of his pocket.

Ilona's mind was racing. *You just admitted that those were well-aimed attacks, buster. Not very smart, are you? Perhaps you're just too self-assured or brainwashed, or you don't give a damn!*

As soon as the phone was in Kund's hand Ilona watched him very closely. She saw him glance at Ond, who gave him a little nod. Ilona had excellent hearing and was sitting close enough to hear. She saw him pressing a number and heard a single beep. He began to speak in a raised voice. He was describing Ilona and her location in detail, but Ilona heard only his voice. No automated dialing or even a tone, and no sign of anyone at the other end. The phone was silent. The expression on Csenge's face changed from disbelief to anger and then to disgust. She shot a glance at Ond, who stared her down with a smug expression, then raised one of his eyebrows. Ond looked at Kund, who nodded in agreement to something unspoken. That answered what Ilona wanted to know.

"It's all taken care of." Kund smiled.

"Thank you."

"Any time."

"I think it's time to go." Csenge stood up, followed by Kund and Ond. "Thank you for the refreshments, it was nice of you."

"You're welcome. We enjoyed your short visit." Ilona tried to sound casual and light.

The Leaders and Ond were gone in a couple of minutes. Ilona was deep in thought, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Rua shouted, limping out of the room. "I don't want to know anything! I want to stay completely out of this. Good night to you all."

Elza looked after him sadly, "Seems like the herb worked, thanks to Elana. They didn't suspect a thing."

"You would be surprised to know how much Csenge knows about us, that she's not telling the other two," Ilona revealed. "She communicated

with me and told me a lot of things. She knows who Ema is and that she's in the past, but luckily, she didn't tell the other two about it."

"When did that happen? I didn't notice anything," Zoltan asked, confused.

"Hopefully the other two didn't, either. Now I understand what Csenge's ability is. She can read thoughts and memories while the rest of us can read only the emotions that we feel at the exact moment when we touch. Despite the herb Elana gave us, she could read my thoughts and projected her thoughts and feelings to me." She told them in detail what she'd found out and told them about the phony phone call Kund had made. "It was a charade for my benefit, but a message to Ond to stop the attacks on me. I'm sure of it. They know who Ema is, and they will not give up looking for her. I think we can trust Csenge. She will help us." Ilona assured.

Zoltan hugged her close, "At least you will be safe."

"I'm not so sure. I don't trust Kund and Ond especially." She was thinking out loud. "Kund said Ond is his adviser. I wonder what it means... Why is he attacking me; or rather making others attack me?"

"There are still too many unknowns," Zoltan stated. "Elana said Joland's descendants are the Law Keepers. It is the Law Keeper's job to carry out punishment. Because of the misguided dream, they might have thought you were the second daughter of the Healer, so they had to destroy you. Ond was there each time when something happened. Do you think he's the Law Keeper or perhaps he might be the representative of the Law Keeper?"

"Oh, I'm almost positive about that. Ond must be the one. Don't you think so, Elza?"

"Yes, it is possible. I have the right to get certain information from the collective, but it doesn't mean I can find out everything. As I mentioned,

I bump into walls when I try to search for something I'm not supposed to know. To the best of my best knowledge, there is a Law Keeper, but nobody knows who she or he is. It could be Ond," she speculated, looking deeply disturbed.

Elza shouted angrily, "We trusted them! They are betraying the People." She looked as if the whole world had just crumbled at her feet. "They are supposed to be Leaders. We honor them for who they are and what they represent. How could they betray us?"

Ilona tried to soothe her, "Not all of them. Csenge seems to be a great Leader. She wants the best for our People. Kund is the one who has changed. I'm sure Ond controls him somehow. We have to figure this out and help Csenge make things right."

"I'm so disappointed. I thought that...never mind what I thought or believed. We have to help her."

"We will, I promise," Ilona said with determination, and Zoltan nodded in agreement.

Ilona turned to Elza, "What do you know about my Destiny Box, Elza? My mother mentioned it, and now Csenge told me that I have to find it."

"I heard your father saying something about it once, but I didn't pay attention. Sorry."

"Another mystery. Just great!" Ilona was disappointed, but she had more important things to worry about.

She told Elza about the day they had spent with Ema and Elana. Elza listened in amazement, her mind at ease knowing her little girl was happy. They sat in silence, trying to digest what had happened to them.

Elza said goodnight after a short while and went upstairs. Ilona and Zoltan sat on the loveseat, close to each other. They were deep in

thought, but Ilona felt the attraction between them once again. *My senses were just fried I guess. When we were in the past, for a few minutes, I didn't feel close to him or attracted to him. Now I want him close with every fiber of my body.*

Zoltan slid next to her and leaned over. They looked into each other's eyes for a long moment, and then Ilona reached up to him. His face glowed in the soft light. He was so handsome that he took her breath away. Zoltan gave her a light kiss, then a more serious one and hugged her close to his taut body. He lingered at her full lips, and then kissed her smooth forehead, her eyes, and neck. He wasn't hurried or forceful. When their lips touched, it felt sensual, sweet and soft.

Zoltan stroked Ilona's face with the back of his hand and pushed her long hair out of her face. He looked lovingly into her eyes, "It feels wonderful being home again. You're here with me."

They talked for a while, and then Zoltan stood up and reluctantly said goodnight. Ilona didn't give him any indication that she wanted him to stay, so they kissed on the porch, and she watched as he drove away.

Mora's Anger



Mora was furious. Confined to her bed, her withered, ancient body shook with anger. No matter how hard she searched, she couldn't find anything in the collective. She channeled Ond, *"What is going on? Did everyone stop writing at once? I can't see what's happening anymore. Have you any news for me, son?"*

Ond projected his silent thoughts, *"Yes mother."*

"Well then, tell me!"

"Please mother, give me some time to get to my quarters so that I can concentrate on our connection. We just got back to the castle a few seconds ago."

"Alright, contact me when you're ready, but don't make me wait too long."

Ond released Csenge's and Kund's hands. He had transported them using his time-bending ability. Kund took a deep breath, stepped away from Ond and mumbled under his breath, "I'm never going to get used to this time travel. It makes me queasy every time."

Csenge glanced at him and silently signaled the servant waiting in the corner. The man turned, opened the door of the antique cabinet next to

him, and filled a crystal glass with ruby-red, sweet-smelling liquor. He placed the delicate glass on a small silver tray and walked toward the Leader, who collapsed into a comfortable armchair. Kund took the glass and drank the liquor slowly, savoring every drop. “What a day!” He glanced at Csenge, who took a seat across from him.

“Yes,” Csenge responded with a sad expression on her face.

Ond cleared his throat and spoke, “If you don’t need me anymore, I’d like to retire. Transporting two people drains me.”

Kund looked up and waved his hand as if dismissing a lowly servant, “Yes, of course.”

Ond’s blood boiled, and angry thoughts swirled in his mind while he turned and walked out of the room. *How dare he treat me like this? Oh, fierce Leader, you will pay for this when I have full control over your mind!* He closed the door behind him and hurried down the long corridor. Although the Leaders gave him access to a large, beautifully furnished apartment of their castle, they still interacted with him only when they needed his services.

As soon as he reached the privacy of his rooms, he channeled Mora. *“Mother, I’m here, and I have some news for you. I transported the Leaders to Ilona’s house because the Elder’s Council decided that Ema, the one who was not supposed to be born, must die. I was ready to carry out the punishment that the Leaders had to witness, but they hid Ema. I suspect because Zoltan was there, and he seems to be very close to Ilona, that they hid her in the past.”*

“How did they find out what the Elders were planning?”

Ond sighed, feeling frustrated, *“I don’t know, but Ilona recognized me, and I was instructed by Kund to leave her alone.”*

Mora fumed and shifted on the bed, *“Damn the Leaders, Elders, and Royals who separated me from my beloved Joland and made me live this miserable life, all alone. Now, the only power I had left to read their diaries became useless. They stopped writing—all of them. How could they suspect that I could read everything they write? You have to be my eyes and ears from now on.”*

“Yes, mother. What do you want me to do?”

Mora considered the possibilities and decided, *“Do nothing, for now. I must think this over and make plans. I see now that I shouldn’t have asked your sister to make the boy and Ilona fall for each other, but it’s too late to take it back. He is too confused and useless to me after Elza’s meddling with the dream Rua sent, to make him fall in love with Ema. I’ll contact you when I decide what we should do.”*

“Yes, mother.”

Consolation



Ilona pulled the covers up to her nose after the alarm had dragged her out of a wonderful, but confusing dream. She lay there, remembering Zoltan's arms around her in the dream. His lips covered her lips with sweet, discovering kisses. Ilona felt a pulsating urge deep inside, while in the dream, responding to his touch. Then she was in Bela's arms and felt the same arousal. *I just had a delicious threesome in my dream, Ilona concluded, feeling embarrassed and confused. But who am I in love with? Zoltan is new and exciting, and I think I'm falling in love with him, yet Bela is the love of my life.*

She wanted to stay in bed and think about the dream a little longer, but a quick look at the alarm clock made her jump out of bed. She rushed through a shower, breakfast and Morning Prayer. Elza and Rua were unusually quiet, sensing her distress.

Ilona drove Elza's car, which was different from driving her Subaru. She hoped she would get her favorite car back in a couple of days. She drove into Hudson and slowed down on Main Street, looking up at the windows of Zoltan's apartment. They were dark. Then she saw him stepping out of his front door. "Can I give you a ride?" Ilona called over.

Startled, Zoltan turned toward her, a smile spreading across his perfect face. Ilona thought bitterly. *What is he doing here and most of all, what is*

he doing with me? I feel clearly that he likes me and wants to be with me, but still...

Zoltan got into Ilona's car, and after their traditional Hunor greeting, he leaned over to kiss her. His lips were soft and warm. He pulled back and caressed her hand with the back of his index finger and held her eyes. "You're so beautiful!"

Ilona's doubts almost disappeared, but still lingered in the recesses of her mind. She remembered how distant she felt about him when they visited Elana and Ema, in the past, but as they drove to the hospital garage, she felt his loving eyes on her. The mere closeness of him sent shivers down her spine, and she didn't understand the indifference she felt about him when they were in the past. They walked into the ER together, holding hands that drew curious glances from the night shift. Later, after the gossip had spread, Ilona received stares suggesting more than curiosity.

"You little bitch! You hooked him right under our noses!" Stacey hissed when they were alone. She was one of the pretty single nurses who had her own plans for Zoltan.

"He's free, and he can do whatever he wants," Ilona hissed back.

"Yeah, he didn't even give us a chance as soon as he saw you!" she accused angrily, but then softened a little. "I guess the bets are off now." She smiled, but it was a sour one.

The breath choked in Ilona's throat, "What bets?"

Stacey shrugged her shoulders. "Well, we were making bets about who he would go out with."

"Did anyone make a bet on me?" Ilona asked lightly, but, in fact, her throat constricted.

“Yeah, you were at the top. It looks to me as if most of us were right betting on you, although we weren’t sure if you would go out with him. You’re supposed to be the queen of all ice princesses you know, not dating and all.” Her tone was cocky. “I still hate you, though!” She gave Ilona a mocking smile and then walked away.

Ilona received curious stares from the others as well and noticed the whispers, followed by brief glances at Zoltan and her. Later, while they were sitting at the desk together, Zoltan took Ilona’s hand and looked into her eyes. Warmth flooded her insides, and at that moment, she didn’t care what the others were thinking or feeling. She just wanted him by her side.

Zoltan’s warm smile turned sad. “Can you see this ten-year-old boy for me? I suspect he has leukemia. I don’t want to do anything until you’ve seen him. Maybe you can do something before the blood test.”

“Of course.”

He led the way to a pale, fragile-looking boy, lying on a stretcher with his parents at his side. They were so worried; it nearly broke Ilona’s heart.

Zoltan turned to them, “Dr. O will take a look at your son if you don’t mind?”

“Why, is there something wrong?” the father asked, anxiously.

“I asked Dr. O to examine him because she has more experience with pediatrics than I do,” Zoltan explained.

The father wrung his hands, “Please, and thank you.”

Ilona touched the boy’s chest and belly, ran her fingers over his lymph nodes and then turned her back toward the parents, concealing the little boy from their view. She wished to heal him. Nothing happened. Ilona tried again, touched him on the chest and slid her hands down to his sides and belly, much slower this time. She didn’t see any images and didn’t

feel anything, except his skin and muscles under her fingers. She tried to heal him, again, feeling no warmth in her fingers as she had hoped. Ilona straightened up and took her hands off the child. Sadness and confusion overtook her. She slowed time and in her time bubble thought about what happened, and finally, she understood.

She returned time to normal and looked at Zoltan, and then smiled weakly at the parents. “We will do some blood tests. His lymph nodes are swollen, which can be caused by many things. We need the tests to confirm what is causing it.” The parents thanked her, and Ilona walked away.

Zoltan followed her to the doctor’s desk. “What is wrong? It didn’t seem like you were able to do anything.”

Ilona turned to him, “Unfortunately, there is nothing I can do. I tried. I’m sorry.”

“Why? I saw you heal everyone you touched before.”

“I didn’t understand it at first, but now it’s coming together. He’s not a Hunor. I think my abilities are limited to healing Hunors with the same genetic makeup as mine. I’m sorry. I wish I could.” Ilona answered, sadly.

“Hmm... I understand. I thought there was no limitation to your gift. Is it that your abilities are paralyzed?”

“When I tried to heal him, nothing happened. It’s not like my abilities are paralyzed. It felt as if I didn’t even have them.”

Zoltan hugged her close, “I’m so sorry.” He kissed her hair, and then looked at her with sympathy.

Ilona sighed, “I am disappointed. I was so excited about this healing business, but I think I must accept the limitations that come with it. There is nothing I can do for him.”

“I understand, but it’s still making me sad for them.” He gently squeezed Ilona’s arm, reassuring her of his understanding, and then turned toward the computer to order the necessary blood tests for the diagnosis.

They were busy all morning, but around lunchtime, the patient flow was slowing, and only a couple of lacerations and runny noses were waiting, which the PA could handle. Ilona remembered that Elza always packed enough lunch for two people, so she invited Zoltan to eat with her. They went to the break room, and Ilona took her lunch bag out of the fridge. As she opened the containers and put the chicken in the microwave, Zoltan sniffed, appreciating the aroma.

“Everything is homemade. Elza is an amazing cook,” Ilona chuckled. “She insists on making everything from scratch. She never buys the ready-made stuff. I’m so lucky to have her. Most likely I would live on cold cereal if she weren’t taking care of my stomach.”

Zoltan laughed, “What did you eat when you lived in the city?”

“I was lucky again. Bela is a very good cook. He loves creating new concoctions in the kitchen.”

The corners of his lips turned down a little, “Oh, you lived in the same apartment?”

“Yes, he’s my ‘best’ friend, you remember?” Ilona teased.

He sighed, “I wish we had met each other back then.”

“I think we can appreciate each other better with bad experiences behind us, don’t you think?”

“You really think that bad experiences make us stronger?”

“Yes, most experiences, although not all of them.”

“For example, let’s take this little boy with leukemia, whom I couldn’t heal. It is a bad experience to live through, and I feel powerless and angry having to admit I cannot help him. Does it make me a stronger person? No. It makes me humble. But if I look at it from a different perspective, it has some effect that makes me stronger, too. Knowing I’m a doctor, I can still help him—if not the easy way with my magical abilities, then the hard way with painful tests and awful chemotherapy. Regardless, I can still help.”

“How did bad relationships make you stronger?”

“They made me independent and forced me to learn to rely on myself, I think. They made me realize I can make myself happy—although not fully—but happy with myself. I don’t have to depend on someone else to make me happy. Am I strong? I have doubts about myself, of course, but yes, I’m strong.”

“So, you think you don’t need to be in a relationship to be happy?”

“I think that finding the right person would make me fully happy,” Ilona answered, then stood up and walked to her locker. Inside the door was a laminated, handwritten letter taped to the metal cabinet. She pulled it off, turned, sat down and handed the letter to Zoltan. “My Dad wrote this to my mom when I was little. She treasured it so much that I kept it.

Zoltan leaned over and read the words out loud. “I don’t love you because I need you. I need you because I love you.” With so much depth in his eyes, Ilona could really see inside him, “So corny yet so beautiful. Have you found the right person?”

Hesitantly, Ilona responded, “I don’t know yet...”

Zoltan reached for Ilona’s hand and gently kissed her fingertips. “I know I have.” He held her eyes captive.

They were brought back to reality when a code was paged. In an instant, they darted from the break room and rushed into the trauma area, which was being prepared for an ambulance's arrival.

Sue, one of the most experienced ER nurses, met them at the door. "Eighty-two-year-old male was down for an unknown time, found by his wife. ACLS protocol initiated by EMS forty minutes ago. He is intubated, and they were not able to establish cardiac and respiratory function."

The drilled-in by experience words were tempered with a sad expression on her face, as she handed Ilona the list of medications that had been called in by the EMT en route.

The automatic door to the ER swung open, and the stretcher with the patient on it rolled in. One of the EMTs was on top of the man, performing chest compressions on him, and Ilona heard the rhythmical hissing of the Ambu bag squeezed by the paramedic, forcing air into the patient's lungs. They transferred the elderly man to a stretcher with one swift movement. Practiced hands attached the cardiac monitor on him and the respiratory tech hooked him up to the ventilator.

"Stop compression," Ilona instructed. "Let's get a rhythm."

Ilona listened to his chest, checked his pupils, pulse, and looked at the monitor. She scanned the med list and concluded with sadness that the paramedic did everything possible to save the patient, and there was nothing more they could do. He'd had all the protocol medications to no avail; it was his time, they had to let him go. Ilona stood by the stretcher and stroked the old man's head.

She looked at the clock and then the group of staff standing around the bed. "There is nothing more we can do. Time of death is 12:20. Thanks for your efforts," Ilona piped, looking at the array of nurses, aides, EMTs,

respiratory and imaging techs. She began chanting the send-off for the dead in ancient Hunor.



*Begin your journey,
Evaluate your life.
Carry the good,
Let love be your guide.
One door closed
And one is open wide,
It is the order of things,
The endless circle of life.*



It took Ilona by surprise when Zoltan joined her. The ritual she performed when she lost a patient didn't draw curious glances anymore. The staff members who presented at codes were used to her chanting, and every time, silently waited for her to finish. Although they didn't understand the words, they guessed it was a prayer of some kind. Ilona had begun doing it when she was an intern, but later it became a routine. It was her way of acknowledging and respecting the end of a life.



Ilona remembered a conversation she had with her mother when she was a little girl. Her mother told her about the meaning of life and death; “We live our life, learn and experience things. When our physical body dies, we move on to the spirit world, and after a while, we are born into a new body and new life. It's a never-ending circle. Some of us remember more about our previous lives, and we carry the experiences to the new life; others forget and keep making the same mistakes, over and over again. It's as if we never really die; we just move on to the next life to learn more.”

Ilona had argued, “But mom, how can we learn if we don't remember what we knew before?”

“We do remember, not consciously, but we do. We remember feelings and thoughts as déjà vu. These feelings warn us about past mistakes. We ignore them most of the time, but occasionally we get the message and make the right choice.”

Ilona always wished that she could remember. She often wondered who she had been before and what kind of person she had been. “But mom, why can’t we stay who we are?”

“When we choose to be reborn and take a new physical body, we don’t know what will happen to us and who we will become. Some old souls choose to stay in the spirit world.”

Ilona thought about it. “Oh, okay then. I can decide when I get there.”

She remembered how much relief she felt hearing her mother’s words. Despite all the knowledge she gathered since that conversation about life and death, she chose to believe in what her mother told her.



She snapped out of her remembrance when everyone started moving and began the task of caring for the dead, during which there was no place for joking and teasing, the only time in the life of the ER when everyone performed their tasks in silence.

The afternoon was busy, with more and more patients flooding the ER.

Zoltan’s phone rang around five. “My mother,” he mouthed, with a concerned expression. He listened intently, creasing his forehead. Then a huge grin spread across his face. “I’m glad he’s okay; yeah, it can only happen to Dad,” he chuckled. “Call you later, Mom, I’m at work.”

He hung up and turned to Ilona to explain. “Mom called from Kennedy. My father just arrived from a European business trip. He had a huge suitcase, which sent the metal detectors into a frenzy. When they asked him what was in it, he said, “Nothing but a kitchen sink.” The

guard thought he was joking with him and became angry. When he insisted, my father kept saying, ‘Yes, a kitchen sink, really is in the suitcase.’ Then they ushered him into a room, strip-searched him, and the bomb squad opened his suitcase.”

Zoltan laughed hysterically as Ilona gaped in horror, as did the nurses who had gathered around to hear the story. “When the suitcase was opened, it really was a stainless-steel kitchen sink he’d bought in Budapest as a surprise gift for my brother who has just moved into his new house. They let him go and escorted him out to the terminal.”

Zoltan finished wiping his eyes, still chuckling. Everyone laughed with him in relief. “You see,” he turned to us to explain, “My father is an unintentional clown. He’s this tall and sophisticated businessman type of guy, who looks as if he’s never learned to laugh or tell a joke. But when he says something funny, it throws everyone off guard. His joke provokes ten times more laughter than a jovial person’s would because you don’t expect it from him.”

Ilona tried to picture his father, probably an older version of him. She wondered if she would ever meet him.

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. They made a good team, and they enjoyed each other’s company. Ilona felt natural and comfortable to be close to him.

They had the usual patient load of chest pains, abdominal pains, and various injuries. One case was a teenage boy who was rolled in on a stretcher on his belly, bellowing in pain.

A young, stocky boy holding onto the stretcher with tears rolling down his face kept saying, “I’m so sorry! You don’t know how sorry I am!”

“You shot me in the butt, you idiot!” the boy on the stretcher cried.

“I didn’t mean to! You must believe me, I didn’t mean to. That stupid nail gun just fired when I picked it up.”

“Because you’re stupid, that’s why!”

“I’m so sorry!”

“Alright! Stop saying that already.”

“Do you forgive me?”

“Yea, I will. Not now, maybe tomorrow. After they dig the nail out of my butt.”

Brian, the paramedic, had difficulty containing a laugh and everyone turned away and tried to stifle the smiles, forcing serious expressions on their faces.

The next case was Ilona’s, and it was no less interesting. A man walked up to the registration window, showing a zip-lock bag filled with ice, containing his three severed fingers. The young registrar took one look and slid under the desk, unconscious.

The patient yelled for the triage nurse to check on her. “She just fainted when I showed her my fingers!” he exclaimed indignantly. “I thought you people wouldn’t be grossed out by these things.”

The triage nurse alerted the staff, and the nurse’s aides lifted up Shardee, who was slowly coming to. She was shivering and looked like she was about to throw up. Cathy, the bubbly blonde nurse, medicated her, tucked her into a nearby bed, and stayed with her.

“This crazy guy just shoved his bloody fingers in my face,” Shardee sobbed hysterically. “He should be locked up in the psych ward!” Cathy nodded amen to that, patting her shoulders to calm her down.

Ilona examined the man’s hand. It was a clean cut by a table saw, so she sent him to a neurosurgeon via ambulance. To top the day off, Ilona’s

next patient was a mid-forties man with chest pains. At first, it seemed like a usual case and Ilona ordered the routine tests. She looked at his EKG, which revealed a heart attack.

He had a heart transplant ten-year prior and was on multiple medications to support his heart function, as well as to prevent organ rejection. He seemed extremely nervous, and Ilona assured him that she would do everything possible.

They had to wait for the blood test results to come back. In the meantime, Ilona ordered Aspirin to prevent platelet clumping and a low dose of Morphine to ease his pain and to control his breathing. Ilona was surprised he had lived so long, and she was very eager to help him live longer.

Ilona turned to walk out to consult with Zoltan about the course of action they should take, but she hesitated. Something was nagging at her, a feeling that she may have missed something. Then she realized what had grabbed her attention: it was seeing his children. The young boy about six stood by the bed and a baby girl probably six months or so was sitting on her mother's lap, in the corner. They both had a faint Hunor sign on their wrists, but Ilona could only detect a resemblance to the feeling she usually had when meeting Hunors. They didn't smell or feel right; as if they were Hunors, but not completely. Ilona realized it was a similar feeling she had all her life with Bela. She couldn't explain what it was. The boy smiled at her, then turned back to watch his father sadly. As soon as Ilona looked at the baby, the child extended her arms towards her, giving her a big smile.

“This is very odd,” the child's mother exclaimed, “she's usually afraid of strangers.”

“Oh, there’s nothing mysterious about it. Babies are attracted to people with symmetrical faces. My face is almost perfectly symmetrical, so naturally, all babies immediately like me,” Ilona assured her.

Turning back to Brian, the patient, Ilona had a stronger feeling, but he didn’t have the sign. It was all very confusing. She became alarmed when suddenly she felt her father’s presence. *How could this be possible? He had been gone for ten years.* “Have we met before?” She asked her patient.

He hesitated, “I don’t think so, but you seem familiar.”

“Do you have a Hunor ancestry?” Ilona asked.

“I don’t think so... but wait, my great-grandmother was Hungarian. Why do you ask? Are you Hungarian?”

Ilona left his question unanswered. “It’s just that you seem so familiar, and your children also have faint birthmarks on their wrists.”

His look inquired, but he didn’t press further. “Oh, we’ve been wondering about those birthmarks since they were born. Nobody in our family has any birthmarks. It’s interesting that both of our kids do.”

Ilona resumed her examination of him and listened to his heart again. As she leaned closer to him, she felt her father’s presence even stronger. She heard the valves opening and closing, and the turbulence of blood being squeezed by the powerful muscle. It was so familiar and comforting as if she had heard that very same sound before. She placed her hand on his chest, over his heart, and it became even stronger. Ilona started receiving faint pictures of her mother and herself as a small child. It was startling, but she wanted to find out more. She kept her hand on Brian’s chest but got no answers except the same hazy pictures playing over and over.

There were no images of Brian. It was as if Ilona had somehow tapped into her father's memory in Brian's body, but couldn't make a connection with Brian. She detected a small area of muscle damage in his heart and wondered if she could heal it. *Worth a try*, she thought. She placed her palm on Brian's chest and wished hard to heal him. He looked up at her in surprise when her hand began to warm up. Ilona switched position to shield the glow from Brian's wife. She glanced at his young son, who was sitting closer to the bed. His eyes grew wide as he stared at her hand but didn't say a word. Ilona winked at him, and he nodded as if he understood the mystery and accepted it. Ilona closed her eyes and silently asked permission.

Ilona saw her father's face emerging from the blue mist, in her mind. Startled, she almost broke contact. He smiled and nodded his head, saying, "*Hey pumpkin! I see you found a small part of me.*" He winked. "*He's a good man. Heal him, love.*" As her father looked down at Brian, Ilona felt his words inside her head. She wanted to say something, but he shook his head. "*Not now, honey. I'll be around, don't worry,*" and then he faded away.

Excitement and disappointment overtook Ilona. She wanted to reach for him and hold him back, but he was gone. She pulled her hand away as soon as it cooled to normal.

Ilona saw an immediate change on Brian's heart monitor. His heart was in perfectly normal sinus rhythm. Brian's eyes grew wide in surprise; he grabbed her hand and silently mouthed "*thank you.*" Ilona had to leave the room because her eyes were becoming misty. She didn't really care what Brian thought about her strange behavior.

She called Elza and told her what had happened. Elza was silent for about a minute and then took a sharp breath. "Oh, for the love of the Gods, you found your father's heart. He must have been an organ donor when he died, and this man must be the recipient."

“Okay, but how do I know that? How could my body recognize an organ, which was possibly my father’s? It’s just a muscle. It’s not him!” Ilona argued.

Elza reminded her, “Memories are not only stored in our brains. The cell memory is there, in every fiber of our body.”

“But how could I see him? How is it possible?”

“Well, probably because it’s not the time for him to be reborn yet. He’s in the spirit world and is able to help you heal.”

Ilona hung up the phone feeling confused, and then she took Zoltan to the side and told him about her discovery. Amazed, he helped Ilona to sort out Brian’s results and medical history. Ilona ordered an Echocardiogram and a line of blood tests. They found a bacterial infection, but his other lab results, EKG, and Echocardiogram were perfectly normal by then. He had a therapeutic level of medication, and there were no signs of rejection. Relieved, Ilona went into Brian’s room to give him the good news. She ordered antibiotics and told him that they would keep him at the hospital for a couple of days. While his wife and kids were in the cafeteria, Ilona grabbed the chance to tell him that she suspected he had her father’s heart. He was startled but held Ilona’s hand, and his eyes overflowed with tears.

“I’ve been searching for my donor’s family for the past ten years but couldn’t find out a thing. Now you’re telling me it was your father. How can you know? Never mind... I don’t doubt what you’re saying at all. It’s just... it is just unbelievable! At first, I thought I liked you because you’re a beautiful woman. But as soon as you spoke to me and touched me, I had a feeling that I’d known you all my life, but as a relative. It’s so very weird. Since I had a heart transplant, I’ve had these feelings that I don’t understand. I have memories and dreams, and it feels like I have

another person inside me, or rather the memory of someone. It's really unbelievable," he confessed, choking on his words.

"Yes, I know it's unbelievable. I hardly believe it myself. Can I ask you not to talk about this, even to your family for now?"

"Of course, this will stay between us. Who would believe me anyway? Can I ask you a favor?" He looked at Ilona sideways. "Would you be my doctor after I leave the hospital? I have a strong urge to stay close to you."

"I feel the same. We could analyze this strange bond between us later. I strongly believe it is my father's heart that kept you alive for all these years."

Soon Brian was transported up to the cardiac unit, and Ilona talked to Zoltan about his case. Although she was still in shock over the circumstances, Zoltan didn't seem to be fazed. "Knowing you, I see I should expect some mysterious things. This is one of them, finding your father's heart beating in another man's chest." Giving her a small smile, he walked away to see the next patient.

Ilona was a little annoyed that he seemed disinterested, and she decided to talk to Bela about it. Time flew by, and when she looked up it was already seven o'clock. They gave reports on the patients who hadn't been seen yet, to Peter, and they headed to the locker room.

"Did you make any plans for tomorrow?" Ilona asked Zoltan.

"No. I was hoping to spend time with you if you don't mind."

"Come over for lunch. Bela will be there, and a friend of ours is coming from New York for a short visit. He's a lawyer who went to school with Bela. We haven't seen him for a long time."

Zoltan smiled at her warmly, “I’ll be glad to, thanks for inviting me.” He put his arms around Ilona and held her close for a minute as if he didn’t want to let go.

Then they heard someone at the door punching in the security code. Ilona took a quick step back to get out of his embrace. They gathered their bags and walked to the garage holding hands.

Ilona gave him a ride home. They had shared a lingering, sensuous kiss before he stepped out of the car. “See you around noon then?”

“That’s perfect, see you then.”

Ilona drove away, watching him in the mirror looking after her until she turned onto 3rd Street.

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I inherited my dad's artistic talent and my grandma's love for storytelling. My parents didn't have time to listen to my childish babbling about magic wands and dragons, so my early audience included Meow, my cat, Pepe, my duck, and Maci, my St. Bernard. Later, I told my fantasy stories to anyone who was willing to listen. I write epic fantasy, historical suspense, cozy mystery, supernatural, sweet romance, and bilingual books for children 2-14.

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