

Prologue
3/27/2004

Through the dark forest came the heavy thud of many feet trampling the dense foliage and the sound of an equal number of breaths, quick from the exertion of running. The pale light of wax lanterns danced on the long trunks of ancient redwood trees, and the legs and feet of those that gave chase merged in a confused tangle in the darkness. From a cottage window, a pretty young woman with ashen hair watched the small firefly-like light of the lanterns grow brighter. Frightened, she turned to her diminutive companion, a plump and rather squat fairy with round eyes made even larger by the thick, square eyeglasses he wore.

"They're coming, Rædan," she whispered. "They've found me."

Rædan hurried to the window and looked out, his small green wings twitching just perceptibly over his shoulders. He watched as the lights drew nearer.

"Quickly," he said. "We must go now."

But before they could move, a forceful blow came at the door, shaking the pictures on the walls, knocking ceramic figures off the fireplace mantel. Rædan and the young woman looked toward the door. The young woman took a fearful step back, shaking her head.

"They don't know you are here," she said. "I will tell it to you, and you can go."

"No! It is not allowed!" Rædan answered emphatically.

"Then I shall write it down, and you can take it!"

"No, it is too dangerous!"

The door began to buckle under the force of the blows from outside. Rædan reached for the young woman's hand.

"You must go now," he urged her.

The door burst open and two grotesque, man-like creatures ran into the room. Their pointed ears and sallow green skin revealed their goblin nature. Rædan stepped between the young woman and the goblins, who drew their swords and moved towards the small fairy.

"Rædan!" the young woman screamed.

"Get out of here," he yelled back, without looking at her.

"Not without you!" she yelled.

She took a step back. Rædan pulled a wand from under his cloak. Leaping aside he avoided the thrust of the goblin's sword. Turning, he waved his wand, and from the tip a streak of lightning burst forth, striking the other goblin and incinerating him. Two more goblins came through the door. One carried a bow and he shot an arrow at the young woman, which zoomed by her head. A fraction of an inch closer and it would have connected squarely with the soft skin under her cheek bone. Rædan turned his head to look at the young woman, who stared back at him, eyes wide and frightened.

"Go now!" Rædan yelled at her.

This time she nodded. She pushed the back door open and rushed out as more goblins flowed into the room. She stopped outside of the cottage and looked back. Lightning illuminated the windows and she could hear crashing from within. Two goblins bounded through the back door and saw the young woman. She gasped and turned to flee into the woods.

<Excerpt from here>She sprinted through the forest, terrified. Breathing heavily she glanced back repeatedly at the goblins following her. The trees began to thin and as she entered a clearing a panther leaped into her path with a growl, its sleek fur shining black in the moonlight. She shrunk back and turned to retrace her steps, but the goblins reached the clearing, blocking her

escape. The panther crept closer with sinuous grace, a low growl emanating from deep within its throat. Just before it was upon her, the panther's form began to contort, its features taking on human-like qualities. Soon the transformation was complete and a tall wizard named Archimago stood before her.

The young woman scanned the clearing for any means of escape, but saw none. Archimago grabbed her by the arms and held her firmly. She whimpered almost imperceptibly, and struggled, but to no avail. Then Circe, harsh-looking yet beautiful woman, swept into the clearing. The young woman stiffened and her breath caught in her chest. She began to shake her head. The goblins backed away from Circe as the fairy approached the young woman. Circe stood before her, her face inches from the young woman's face. The young woman could feel Circe's hot, sour breath on her cheek, and she recoiled in disgust.

"Give it to me," Circe said in a low, drawn-out voice that sent shivers up the young woman's spine.

"I...I don't know what you mean," the young woman stammered.

Circe slunk even closer. Smiling, she reached up and delicately ran her hands over the young woman's hair.

"This doesn't have to be difficult," she purred.

"I don't know anything!"

Circe sighed and turned away. Suddenly she swung back around, slapping the young woman across the face with a loud smack. The force of the blow sent the young woman hurling to the ground.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Circe asked angrily, standing above the young woman. The young woman touched her lip and looked at the blood on her fingers. She looked up at Circe who approached her maliciously.

"I know very well that you are a keeper," Circe said. The young woman began to crawl away on her hands and knees. Circe followed.

"Tell me the prophecy."

The young woman shook her head, still backing away.

"Tell me where the gifted one is."

The young woman met Circe's gaze and held it defiantly. "I will tell you nothing," she spat. "The one will come and will destroy you!"

Circe smiled sardonically. "I'm afraid you are mistaken," she said.

She removed a smooth, black orb from her cloak and stood over the young woman. The young woman's eyes grew wide as from within the orb swirls of every imaginable color began to circle and glow. The young woman drew back on her hands, watching the orb in terror. The swirls grew brighter, their light emanating from the orb and refracting around the clearing. A malicious grin crossed Circe's face, and as she began to laugh, the young woman screamed