

RESTORATION
DAY



DEBORAH MAKARIOS



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Restoration Day

Deborah Makarios

To Anna
without whose early encouragement
this book might never have been more
than a seedling

Trouble Brewing

One day, Lily promised herself, I will walk down the stairs alone.

She stood at the head of the castle's grand stair, trying to wait patiently, and counted off the days: Martday, Launderday, Fallowday, Sunday, Mūnday, Landday, Middweek—only one week until she would be eighteen. Were it not for the War, how different things would have been!

A grand coming-of-age ball, at which *no one* would prevent her coming down the stairs on her own... Her magnificent entrance, the cynosure of all eyes... (She wasn't sure of the precise definition of a cynosure, but it sounded impressive.) The hall, full of guests in their finest...

She swept the hall with her gaze, populating it with a glittering throng. At the foot of the stairs stood her parents, King Frederick and Queen Celandine, greeting their guests and looking remarkably like their portraits in the gallery upstairs. Her imagination laboured to animate their oil-and-canvas features, and moved on. A flourish of trumpets, an expectant stir in the crowd, and all faces turned upwards, seeking a glimpse of their young princess.

Lily's simple white day-dress was invested with swathes of lace, frills, and exquisite embroideries on tissue of silver. Her head went up. One hand delicately reached for the balustrade, and the other swept up her skirts as she prepared to descend. A dancer's light grace carried her down to the landing, where

she turned, bathing the hall with the warmth of her gracious smile. After a nicely-judged pause, she put forward one dainty foot to continue her triumphal progress down the stairs.

"Lily!"

The glittering crowd disappeared, along with the lace, the grace, and her parents. Instead there was only Aunt Hortensia, sweeping across the hall like a storm-front, purple-grey in the half mourning she still wore after fifteen years. Lily froze, one foot still hovering over the step.

"What *do* you think you're doing, child?" Aunt Hortensia moved up the stairs with a rapidity surprising in so stately a woman, and took firm possession of Lily's arm.

"I had my hand on the railing all the way, Aunt Hortensia," Lily said. "Just as safe as in someone's arm. Safer, really, because the railing—"

"Young ladies do not talk back," Aunt Hortensia said firmly, descending the stairs with aggravating slowness. "You know the rules. Just think if you had slipped and fallen! And not a soul present to come to your aid."

"But—"

"You must not take these risks with yourself. Arcelia depends on you."

"I was imagining my coming-of-age ball," Lily said. "I remember you saying that you entered alone at yours, and since I'm practically—"

"That was entirely different. *I* was not heir to the throne of Arcelia."

"But Aunt—"

Having reached the foot of the stairs, Aunt Hortensia released her death-grip on Lily's arm and turned the full force of her pale blue eyes on Lily's face.

"That is quite enough, Lily. We shall not discuss the matter further. After the evening observance, you may wish to remain in your room and consider your motives for spurning

the care others go to so much trouble to give you.”

“But that’s when I have dancing!” Lily cried.

“I am sure Master Sennet will not object to excusing you on this occasion. Now come along. It would not be appropriate for you to be late.”

Lily trailed across the hall and out the solid oak doors after her aunt. She didn’t want to miss dusk in the garden, but her usual enthusiasm was dampened by the loss of the evening’s dancing. Aunt Hortensia *never* said “you may wish to” if it was something you might actually wish to do.

Lily risked a scowl at her aunt’s perfectly straight back as it led the way across the terrace. And she *knew* how much Lily loved to dance! Which was probably why she was only allowed two dancing evenings each week—young ladies ought not to be enthusiastic, Aunt Hortensia held, and to be enthusiastic about something so potentially *vigorous* as dancing was suspect indeed.

Lily sighed, and gave her arm to her aunt. Together they descended the stone stair which led from the terrace to the eastern lawns and the ceremonial garden. The steps weren’t even slippery. Winter ended tomorrow, and it had been unusually mild this year: wet rather than icy. But it was no use arguing the case with Aunt Hortensia. “Young ladies never argue,” was one of her favourite maxims.

Master Sennet, Lily’s tutor, and Holly the cook (still wearing his apron) were already waiting at the entrance to the ceremonial garden, as was Burdock the gardener. The three men ducked their heads respectfully as Lily and her aunt approached. Holly flashed Lily a cheerful grin, which made her feel a little better. Holly was like that.

“Good evening, Master Sennet,” Aunt Hortensia said formally. “Holly. Burdock.”

“Good evening, Lady Hortensia; Princess Lily,” Sennet replied warmly.

“Lovely evening for it,” Holly observed, as he invariably did if it wasn’t sleeting down in a gale.

“Eh,” said Burdock, which, while not strictly in line with the etiquette of the situation, was as much as he ever contributed to any conversation.

He was, Lily privately felt, a little odd, but he kept himself to himself and since Aunt Hortensia apparently thought him harmless, he must be less dangerous than a staircase.

Aunt Hortensia led the way into the ceremonial garden, and silence fell. The beauty of the moment never failed to have its effect on Lily. The green, growing hush. The sinking sun bathing the grounds in that unearthly golden light seen at no other time. Best of all, the earliest of the bulbs were in flower, and the garden was full of their intoxicating scent, a promise of wonderful things to come after the cold sterility of winter.

She stood in silent gratitude for the good things of the day—Holly had made her favourite cake, for one—and resolved to be a better, more dutiful niece and pupil henceforth.

Aunt Hortensia gave a genteel cough, her accustomed signal that the prescribed time of silence had ended. It came, as usual, far before Lily was ready for it. She gazed off into the distance, so as not to be drawn immediately into conversation.

The distance was composed, as always, of the Hedge: the great wall of privet that encircled the Castle of Candra and its grounds. Privet in the language of plants meant *prohibition*, and Lily felt the force of it. The Hedge had no gaps, no arches, no breaks. It was a solid, living barrier between her and the world outside—she couldn’t even see over it unless she was up in one of the towers. It was the green boundary of her world. Except it didn’t look entirely green, not today. Perhaps it was the light.

She wrinkled her brow, trying to focus more clearly. *That can’t be right...*

“Lily, do not squint. It is most unattractive.”

"Aunt Hortensia, isn't privet supposed to be evergreen?"

"Of course it is, child, what a silly question! You know—" Her aunt fell silent.

By now they were all looking at the Hedge, and the dull brown patch that had formed on it.

"Probably just the light," Holly said, but even he sounded uneasy.

"Lily," came a whisper on the chilling air.

Lily turned. One moment she was looking at Burdock, who was leaning on his stick, one hand stretched out to her, and the next, she was looking at a dandelion. She blinked. Burdock hadn't moved; he just wasn't there any more. There was only a dandelion, leafy, green and puffy-headed, in his place.

"Burdock!" Aunt Hortensia trumpeted, appearing at Lily's side. "Where is the man?"

"He...he..." Lily couldn't quite find the words.

"And a dandelion seeding! I shall have to speak to him quite severely."

"He was here a moment ago," Holly volunteered.

"He turned into a dandelion," Lily said, her disloyal throat abandoning the gentle tones of a proper lady's diction for a childish squeak.

Aunt Hortensia's head snapped round. "What?"

"He was there, and then there was a dandelion! He just vanished!"

Aunt Hortensia stood swelling for a moment, and then, with a visible effort, controlled herself. "Don't be ridiculous, child! You are far too old for such make-believe."

"I'm *not* making it up!" Lily said, stamping her foot.

"Master Sennet, will you kindly check the gardener's cottage while I escort Princess Lily to her room?"

"Of course, my lady." Sennet bowed slightly and moved away, his rheumatic limp more noticeable in his hurry.

Lily cast an appealing look at Holly, her last remaining ally.

"Did you actually see it?" Holly asked, clearly interested. "Did he go all green first?"

"Holly, I will thank you not to encourage Lily in her foolishness," Aunt Hortensia said frostily. "I am sure you have some duties to attend to in the kitchens."

"Oh—well, yes. Yes," Holly mumbled, avoiding Lily's eye. "I'd better..." He rolled away at remarkable speed for one of his bulk.

"Come along at *once*," Aunt Hortensia said, taking Lily's arm and clamping it to her own well-corseted side.

As she was towed away, Lily looked back. The dandelion was still there, a little tuft of white in the gathering darkness.



Lily rose the next morning determined to find answers to the questions that had troubled her all night. She knew her aunt well enough not to waste time with a direct approach, but she tried a solicitous inquiry as to Burdock's health at the breakfast table. The reply came straight out of Master Sennet's lessons on diplomatic vagueness.

Her necessary morning attendance at the ceremonial garden was closely supervised, and she discovered only that the dandelion had gone. Had she imagined the whole thing? Aunt Hortensia wouldn't have been so upset if that was all. But, then, what...? And what was happening to the Hedge?

The time spent in the ceremonial garden each morning was supposed to help you think of bad habits and errors that you needed to pull up by the roots, just as you pulled up weeds in the morning so as to have them wither in the heat of the day. Privately, Lily thought it much easier to resolve to be better henceforth in the evening, when you were going to be asleep soon anyway, and had a fair chance of being good for several hours together. Her repeated resolution to be good was difficult enough to keep on an ordinary day, sitting down to hour after hour of lessons in the library, but today...today it would

be particularly hard to be the docile young lady Aunt Hortensia required.

Lily chafed inwardly as Sennet discoursed on the geographical formations caused by the movement of water. What had happened to Burdock? She'd seen no sign of him this morning, and—

"Do try to attend, my lady," Sennet said wearily, rubbing the spot on his temple where the hair was entirely grey already.

This was his habit when a headache was coming on; and now she looked closely, he had dark rings around his eyes as well.

"Dear Master Sennet, you aren't unwell, are you?"

She was seized with a sudden premonition of all the castle's residents being carried off one by one by this mysterious ailment of Burdock's, leaving her alone in what would no doubt be, henceforth, a *haunted castle*.

"Quite well, I thank you," Sennet replied. "I am perhaps a little fatigued—I did not have so much repose last night as I am accustomed to."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to take a rest? I'm sure I can find some way to pass the time before my walk." Her pulse quickened. Would he take the bait?

"No, no. Let us not be shirkers of duty. As Arcelia's future queen, it is vital for you to have a working understanding of the land and the forces at work upon it."

Lily gave up that line of attack. When Master Sennet got onto the subject of Duty, there was no moving him.

"I am sure some fresh air would do you good," she said solicitously. "Perhaps we could continue the lesson on the terrace."

Whence there would be a better view of the Hedge. She did not say it, but Sennet's look suggested he heard her anyway.

"I think not, my lady. It is still winter, after all, and I am sure your aunt would not like you to catch a chill."

That wasn't the only thing Aunt Hortensia wouldn't like about the idea, and they both knew it, but you would never get Master Sennet to admit as much. He was a diplomat at heart.

He cleared his throat. "Now then. As the water descends in the form we know as a waterfall, the rock and soil over which it passes are eroded by the passage of the water—the principle of friction."

Lily stifled a yawn, allowing no sign of it to appear on her face—possibly the most useful lesson she'd ever learned from Aunt Hortensia's discourses on the art of Elegant Conversation.

"This is particularly the case at the foot of the waterfall, which receives the brunt of the water's force as it falls from above. Thus, natural rock pools are formed, which are frequently of much greater depth than the rest of the river's passage. It is also by no means uncommon to find a cave behind the waterfall, another effect of—"

"Caves behind waterfalls?" Lily exclaimed, her interest diverted for a moment. "How exciting!"

He gave her a wry little smile. "I can assure you, my lady, that there is nothing at all exciting about the gradual erosion of rock by water. Tens if not hundreds of years are involved."

"But it seems so magical... The sort of place one would find buried treasure."

"The sort of place one would find a great deal of slime, I am afraid," Sennet said. "Now, if you will turn to—"

The door opened, and Aunt Hortensia entered. Sennet scrambled to his feet, and Aunt Hortensia gave him one of those looks which mean a great deal, but only to those who already know what they mean. Lily was familiar with those looks, and loathed them, since she was invariably the one who *didn't* know.

"Dear me, is it that hour already?" Sennet said. "We have

entirely lost track of the time in the fascination of geography.”

“I’ll just go up and change my shoes,” Lily said, rising and arranging her books neatly on the table with exemplary docility. Aunt Hortensia mustn’t suspect why she was so eager to go out...

“No need,” said Aunt Hortensia. “We shall have our promenade indoors today—I fear it is coming on to rain.”

Sennet unsuccessfully tried to conceal his surprise. The day had dawned crisp and clear, and with hardly a cloud to be seen.

Lily’s heart leapt for a moment. “In the ballroom?”

“The portrait gallery,” Aunt Hortensia replied, turning away.

Lily fumed inwardly. The ballroom windows looked out towards Burdock’s cottage, but the portrait gallery would tell her nothing.



“It’s so *unfair*,” Lily said.

Elegant Conversation had continued until luncheon, a semi-formal affair from which there was no escaping before her guardians left the table. Aunt Hortensia then retired for her Afternoon Rest, leaving Lily in the custody of Sennet, who was intent on improving her chess—well away from the windows.

“My dear young lady, the pawns make up half your army. You simply cannot hope to defeat your opponent without using them.”

“Sacrificing them, you mean.”

“Sacrifices must be made if you are to triumph. There is, alas, no such thing as a bloodless victory.”

“But why should it be the pawns who are sacrificed? They don’t get to decide. I think the king and his counsellors should lead the fighting. It would be much fairer.”

Sennet sighed, and rubbed his temples again.

"Chess is a metaphor, my lady. One can only take a metaphor so far. After all, if chess were literal, the castles would not move. The game is a stylized version of reality, from which certain valuable lessons may be garnered."

"Such as that a queen can go anywhere?" Lily said wistfully.

Sennet sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"A chess queen is a queen-consort. You will be—or, rather, *are*, though subject to a regency in your minority—a queen regnant, reigning in your own right. More analogous, in fact, to a chess king."

"Spending my whole life running away, one square at a time?" Lily cried in dismay.

"You persist in taking the game too literally. The king's movements are constrained only while the enemy is at large, which is the framework of the game. The twin objectives of the game, remember, are to protect your king, and to capture the opposing king, thus defeating them."

"Then why don't the two kings fight a duel? That would be much more efficient."

Sennet was pinching his whole head now, applying pressure to both temples at once. This was serious.

"Efficiency is not always best. The other pieces become involved because—to humanize them as you do for a moment—they know that if their king falls, their kingdom falls. No land will stand without its king. That is why the king *cannot* be taken. If the king is lost, all is lost."

"But..." Lily ventured, wondering if it was safe to push him further.

"Yes?" Sennet said, patient as ever.

"You said that the king is constrained only while the enemy is at large. We don't have an enemy, not since the War ended, so why—?"

She stopped, frightened by the expression on his face. Perhaps it had been tactless of her to bring up the War with one

who had suffered through it.

Sennet was silent for a long time, his face showing uncertainty, sorrow, and, most unsettlingly of all, fear.

"My lady," he began at last, speaking quietly and with more than usual seriousness, "there is some knowledge which your tender age forbade we lay upon your shoulders. Your aunt—" He shook his head. "I have become less certain, of late, of where my duty lies, but Lady Hortensia—"

A click of heels sounded on the marble floor of the hall, and Sennet fell silent. Lily could have screamed. Of all the times!

The door swung open.

"It is time for your brewing lesson, Lily," Aunt Hortensia announced.

Sennet said no more, but bowed as they left the room. Lily brooded silently. So she was right! There *was* something they weren't telling her. Something important. Perhaps a little detour was in order, on her way out to the brewhouse...



Lily scowled out the brewhouse window at her aunt's retreating form. Brewing was her least favourite lesson—Holly was a magnet for mess—and Aunt Hortensia had managed to thwart her every chance to investigate the Hedge, without so much as turning a hair.

"Don't worry," Holly said comfortably as she put on the hideously unbecoming cap which kept her hair clean. "We're not doing anything gloppy today; we're just going to fumigate a barrel."

"It's not just that," Lily said, pulling off the loathed cap and matching apron and flinging them into a corner of the straw-strewn floor. "Something's going on, and no one will tell me what." She looked at him narrowly, but he wouldn't meet her eye. "Holly, you'll tell me, won't you?"

"What's going on," he began, and Lily's heart leapt, "is a brewing lesson. Here's the barrel—I'll just put the bung down

here..."

She scowled at him.

"If you persist in making that face, you can expect to get wrinkles," he said, in a fair imitation of Aunt Hortensia.

Lily tried to hold the scowl, but it slipped, and she broke into giggles.

"That's better," Holly said. "You know I'd tell you everything, but I don't know anything. Not even my own name," he muttered, rummaging under the workbench for a thin iron rod.

This was true, Lily knew. He'd lost his memory in the War, and no one knew his real name. Aunt Hortensia had bestowed on him the name Holly, for, as she observed, they had to call him something, and Holly meant *Am I forgotten?* in the language of flowers.

"Couldn't you just let me slip away?" Lily wheedled.

"More than my job's worth," Holly said firmly. "Tear a strip off this," he added, handing her a roughly woven rag.

"What's the worst she could do? You can't be sent out through the Hedge."

"She could build a siege catapult and fire me over the top," Holly said.

"She wouldn't! She didn't when you set the kitchen on fire."

"Occupational hazard. Could have happened to anyone!"

"Or when you blew up the chicken coop..."

"Entirely the chickens' fault. How was I to know that—"

"...or when that arrow skewered her favourite hat to the portrait of Great-Grandmother..."

"You were the one who fired it," Holly retorted.

"Under your supervision," Lily countered.

"How could I know your aim was that bad? I didn't even know it was *possible* to—"

"Never mind that!" She tore the cloth with some vigour.

"How am I supposed to do the right thing, when I don't know

what's going on?"

"No use fretting over what you can't change," Holly said. "Cheer up. This'll be fun."

The barrel to be fumigated was on its side in the middle of the floor. Holly took the strip of fabric from her and laid it on the workbench, next to the iron rod and a large potato.

"What's the potato for?" she asked. "Didn't you have enough lunch?"

"The potato," said Holly grandly, "is indispensable. Now, then. Barrel, bung, brazier; pot, rod, rag; potato. Ready. Oh, no, wait. Forgot the most important bit. Flower of yellowstone."

"*Flower of yellowstone?*" Lily had seen mentions of yellowstone—or, to give it its full name, yellow burningstone—in covertly studied books of alchemy, siegecraft, and the like, but flowers? "Don't tell me there's a flower that smells like yellowstone, because I simply refuse to believe it."

Holly pulled a thin metal phial out of his apron pocket and popped the lid off. Lily picked the lid off the floor and straightened up, wrinkling her nose.

"It's called flower of yellowstone because it forms in little flowery shapes," Holly said. "Isn't it pretty?"

"If cauliflower is pretty," Lily said, peering into the phial.

She took an unwary breath and reared back, nose pinched, trying not to gag. The smell was like the rottenest egg you could imagine, but more so. Holly seemed strangely unaffected.

"Right, so the flowers go in the pot—not too much, we only need a little—and that goes on the brazier." He handed her the phial, still two-thirds full, and she hastily shoved on the lid. "Here, wrap the rag around one end of this rod, while I keep an eye on the melting."

Finding herself a hand short, Lily slipped the phial into the hanging pocket which was tied around her waist beneath the

folds of her dress.

"All blobby on one end," Holly specified. "We need a spill, too. I'll hold the rod..."

Lily passed over the duly wrapped rod and rolled a piece of stray paper tightly into a spill.

Holly was hunched over the brazier. "It's ready! Light the spill and pass me the rod! Oh—here it is. Watch this..."

Lily moved closer, spill in one hand and nose firmly pinched with the other. The rag went from white to yellow as Holly rolled it around in the melted yellowstone. Lily lit the spill from the brazier and stood poised.

"Light 'er up!" Holly shouted, a mad joy dancing in his eyes.

Lily put the spill to the rag at arm's distance, and a nasty yellow-gray smoke started to ooze out.

"Potato!" Holly cried. "Quickly!"

She dashed around him and seized the potato. Holly carefully lowered the smoking rag end of the rod through the bung-hole of the waiting barrel. He took the potato and pushed it onto the other end of the rod, before lowering the whole strange assemblage until the potato was resting on the outside of the barrel.

"Oh, so *that's* what the potato's for," Lily said, enlightened.

"Brilliant, isn't it? Never fails." There was a sudden thunk, and the potato rolled off the barrel. "Oh dear..."

The rank discoloured smoke began to seep out of the barrel and fog the room. Lily coughed and gagged.

"Ouch!" The forgotten spill had burned to the end and singed her fingers. She dropped it to the floor, where it immediately set fire to a wisp of straw. "Holly! Fire!"

Holly turned from his hectic flapping at the smoking barrel. His eyes widened at the sight of the growing conflagration on the floor.

"Step away!"

She retreated, coughing, into the corner as he reached

through the smoke for a large clear glass bottle on the shelf.

"Holly," she croaked, "that's not wa—"

Pop! went the cork. *Whoomph!* went the brandy as Holly poured it out. *Pock!* went the bottle as the bottom blew out in a stream of fire. Holly hastily dropped the remains. The barrel carried on smoking. Lily carried on coughing. The fire carried on spreading across the floor, borne on streams of blue flame.

"Don't worry!" Holly called. "It's all under control!" He was seized with a paroxysm of coughing, and knocked against the brazier. "Yeowch!"

The little iron pot tumbled to the floor, spilling what was left of the melted yellowstone. The quantity of stinking yellowed smoke increased noticeably. Lily could see Holly dimly at the other end of the room, crashing about with the barrels. She pushed further into the corner as the flames licked closer, seizing the despised apron and pressing it to her face. She was aware of Holly waltzing about with a large barrel, but her eyes were fixed on the advancing flame. Then all disappeared with a hiss and a sizzle as a wave of small-beer washed across the floor.

Small-beer being as close to water as it is possible to come without actually being water, this did the trick. It also washed the tarry remnants of everything else on the floor up to and over her shoes. A yellow stain began to creep up her dress.

"Holly!"

"There you are," Holly said, beaming at her across the wreckage. "All under control. What did I tell you?"

The bung bumped against her sodden shoe. She picked it up, grimaced her way across the sticky floor, and corked the still-smoking barrel without a word.

"I blame the potato," Holly said thoughtfully, but Lily did not stay to argue the point.

She had trailed almost up to the stairless kitchen entrance

before she realized that she was loose in the castle grounds, unsupervised. She could skirt round the castle and investigate the Hedge. She could even go looking for Burdock.

She stopped to consider this, and a miasma of rotten egg billowed up from her dress. Lily pressed her lips together and went inside. The Hedge would have to wait.

She was just opening her mouth to call pitifully for Aunt Hortensia, when she heard raised voices in the drawing room. To hear Aunt Hortensia's voice raised was not so unusual as to excite comment, but the other voice was Sennet's. She'd *never* heard him raise his voice before, not even when Holly's pet frog had spawned a mass of tadpoles in his bath. She stared at the drawing room door in silent shock—until she heard her name.

"Lily needs to know," Sennet said.

"She is only a child," returned Aunt Hortensia, her voice high and imperious.

"She will be of age in a matter of days," Sennet said. "You can't hide the truth from her forever. You can't hide *her* forever."

Lily crept closer to the drawing room door and found it slightly ajar.

"Master Sennet," Aunt Hortensia replied, the ice tinkling around the edges of her voice, "have the goodness to remember that Princess Lily is under my care. I have always acted in the manner I consider most consistent with her well-being, and I see no reason to change that merely because she is to celebrate another birthday."

"My lady," Sennet said, unusually impassioned, "I have obeyed you as Regent, as duty decreed. But time is running out..."

Lily pressed closer to the gap.

"Enough," Aunt Hortensia snapped. "I will not hear another word. My poor late sister pleaded with what were prac-

tically her last words that I should keep her only child safe."

"Lily will never take her place as queen if she stays here," Sennet returned, his voice stronger now.

Lily's breath caught in her throat. *What? Why?*

"But she *will* be safe," Aunt Hortensia insisted. "The world is an uncertain place, as you ought to know."

"I do. But it must be faced, sooner or later—and in my opinion, better sooner. I want only what's best for Lily, as you do."

Aunt Hortensia sniffed. "Well!" She broke off, and sniffed again. "What on earth is that smell?"

Lily darted away, appearing innocently at the entrance to the hall as Aunt Hortensia swept through the drawing room door.



An hour later, Lily was nearly drowsy with delight. Aunt Hortensia might be controlling, but she certainly knew how to make a fuss of someone.

She'd drawn Lily a hot, scented bath and laid out her softest, warmest dress to change into; and now Lily was tucked into the most comfortable chair in the drawing room, with a stool at her feet and a rabbit-fur shawl over her knees. The remains of an afternoon tea of legendary proportions stood on the table nearby.

This last was partly a peace offering from Holly, and partly the result of his brief but lively interview with Aunt Hortensia. Whether he'd had the threat of a catapult hanging over him, Lily wasn't sure, but he had certainly been inspired to produce his best. There were the lightest of scones—with honey *and* jam—as well as little cakes, dainty sandwiches, and even a delicious miniature lemon tart. The tea trolley had positively groaned as Holly wheeled it in.

"Another cup, Lily?" Aunt Hortensia enquired.

"No, thank you, Aunt—I believe I have had an elegant sufficiency."

Aunt Hortensia inclined her head and carried Lily's empty cup back to the trolley. Lily sighed happily and wiggled her toes towards the bright crackle of the fire. This was almost worth the unpleasantness in the brewhouse. Almost.

Her aunt returned, carrying a large folio beautifully bound in lavender. Sennet bowed and excused himself to the library, removing the trolley as he left.

"I thought perhaps you might enjoy looking through some of my sketches," Aunt Hortensia said, carefully laying the folio on Lily's lap. "I believe there are one or two portraits of you as an infant, as well as other scenes of interest from the time."

"Oh, *yes*, thank you!" Lily said.

This was a privilege she had hitherto been denied, and one that strongly suggested increased openness on the part of her aunt. Perhaps Master Sennet had not spoken in vain.

Aunt Hortensia took a seat nearby, where the light was best for needlework.

Lily turned the page, and found her mother looking at her with a sweet smile. "Oh, wasn't she beautiful!"

"Indeed she was," Aunt Hortensia said, her voice unaccustomedly quivery. "I trust you shall grow up to be just like her. She was the sweetest, gentlest young lady imaginable."

Lily leafed on through the pages, laughing at the chubby beribboned ball she once had been, and looking with interest at the scenic depictions of the palace in Denton—overshadowed by the great persimmon tree in the town square—and the fortress of Roxburghe.

"Oh, and here's Candra! Only I don't see the Hedge."

"A scenic artist is always free to take liberties with the scene before them in the interests of composition," Aunt Hortensia said briskly. "I believe I have mentioned this to you in your drawing classes."

"Oh, *yes*," Lily said, and turned the page hastily. Candra had looked uncomfortably exposed. "Who's this?"

A rather oddly dressed man stood by a handcart with all manner of items hanging off it: teapots and trowels and what appeared to be lengths of lace.

Aunt Hortensia leaned over with a creak of stays. "That is the pedlar—such a picturesque fellow, I simply had to sketch him."

"Where did you meet him? Was he in Denton, or...?"

"Don't allow your sentences to trail off, Lily. Always know what you intend to say, and say it."

"In Denton or somewhere else?"

"Dear me, the fellow was everywhere. I believe he travelled throughout the country, peddling his wares. We encountered him several times, and your father seemed quite taken with him. *Not* a suitable friendship, I would have thought, although I must say the man was always very well-spoken and polite."

Aunt Hortensia returned to her embroidery and Lily leafed on. She stopped to gaze at a picture of her father—rather a stiff depiction, she thought—and noticed a corner of paper sticking out from between the layers which made up the mounted pages of the folio. Aunt Hortensia appeared intent on her embroidery, so Lily hazarded a gentle tug on the corner. The thick paper moved without tearing. She worked it free and laid it flat on the page before her.

It was a pencil sketch of a rather handsome man—if sharp, angular features were to your taste. He seemed to be regarding her with the faintest hint of disdain—it was something about his eyes. They had been tinted pale blue, the only colour in the entire sketch.

"Aunt Hortensia, who's this?"

The only reply was a horrified gasp. The next moment Aunt Hortensia was beside her, the sketch snatched up in her hand and her embroidery forgotten on the floor.

"Where did you find this?"

"It was tucked behind this picture of Father," Lily said ner-

vously. "I'm sorry if I—are you all right, Aunt?"

Aunt Hortensia was trembling, and so white as to appear almost blue. She set her lips and tore the sketch in half, then in half again, and again, until she could tear no more. Then the pieces were flung on the fire, and Aunt Hortensia sank into the fireside chair across from Lily's to watch them burn.

"Who was that?" Lily asked in a small voice.

"That was your father's *worthless* older brother," Aunt Hortensia replied, her normally restrained voice filled with fury.

Evil Uncle Phelan! A shiver went through her despite the rabbit-fur shawl.

"Uncle Phelan, who—who killed Mother and Father before the loyalists fought back and killed him?"

There was a silence. Aunt Hortensia continued to stare into the fire.

"Aunt Hortensia?"

"Yes," she said finally. "That is what happened. Now you must put him right out of your mind and never think of him again."



Contrary to Aunt Hortensia's instructions, Lily thought about a great many things that night, as she waited for the creak of the floorboard outside her door. When her aunt looked in, Lily put on a convincing performance of *The Sleeping Innocent*, the covers pulled up to hide her darkest dress: a blue velvet which was only to be worn on very special occasions.

Well, this *was* a special occasion, Lily reasoned as her aunt left the room. More importantly, this was an occasion for not being seen.

She slipped out of bed, put on her matching shoes, and arranged a bolster in her bed, to be on the safe side. Creeping down the stairs with a guilty thrill, she was halfway to the front door when she heard the board creak again overhead.

Heart pounding, Lily took to the nearest shelter: the statue of Queen Magnolia as a young woman.

Aunt Hortensia came down the stairs, and Lily stopped breathing altogether. Her aunt didn't appear to be searching, however; she had on her warm winter pelisse, and as Lily watched, she crossed the hall and went out the front door. Aunt Hortensia sneaking out in the night? It didn't seem possible.

Still, there was no way Lily was going to follow her aunt out the front door—that was just asking for trouble. She would have to take the back way, through the kitchens and round by the kitchen garden. It wasn't much further this way; Burdock's cottage was to the south of the castle, just visible from the long windows of the ballroom.

Lily dashed through the vegetables, screened by the garden's wall, and crept across the grass, avoiding the crunchy gravel path despite the damp assailing her shoes. There was no sign of Aunt Hortensia, but there was, she could see, a light in Burdock's window. Perhaps he had taken a turn for the worse...

Now she could hear voices. She slid around the corner of the cottage and crouched, heart thudding, under the slightly open window.

"You *agreed*," Aunt Hortensia was saying fiercely.

"The situation has changed," a hoarse voice replied.

Lily realized with a little shock that it must be Burdock speaking. She'd never heard him say more than a word at a time before, and that word was usually "eh." And now here he was using whole sentences with polysyllabic words? Perhaps it was Master Sennet with a cold. But no, *that* was Sennet—saying that he was sure an agreement could be reached. Poor Master Sennet; he liked to think everything could be solved through diplomacy.

"I can't maintain the Hedge for much longer," Burdock was

saying.

"You *must*," Aunt Hortensia said.

Was that all this was about: a gardening dispute?

"I am growing weak faster than I had thought possible," Burdock said.

If Burdock was sick, why was Aunt Hortensia insisting he keep on with the garden work? He was a very good gardener, but it wasn't as though none of the castle residents knew how to prune or weed. Arcelian children learned to garden almost before they could walk. It was strangely unkind.

"I must speak to her," Burdock wheezed. "She's old enough to know."

Know what? *Know what?*

"I forbid it," Aunt Hortensia said. "Master Sennet, you will not cooperate with this madness."

"Yes, Lady Hortensia," Sennet sighed.

"Our sole purpose is to keep Lily safe," Aunt Hortensia went on. "No one must be allowed to endanger her—for whatever reason."

"Soon, there will be no safety anywhere," Burdock whispered.

"I do not wish to hear another word," Aunt Hortensia said firmly. "Master Sennet, kindly give me your arm."

Lily held her breath. The door creaked, and the gravel crunched as her guardians departed, keeping up a muttered debate as they moved away. Lily waited for them to move out of hearing before she dared move. There was no way she could get back to the castle before them, and following too close invited discovery. But there was one thing she could do...

Tingling all over with excitement, she got to her feet and cautiously picked her way to the cottage door. It creaked as she opened it, and she froze. There was no response, so she shook herself, slipped inside the door and pulled it closed behind

her.

The cottage appeared to consist of one room, with a table and chair on one side and a funny sort of long box with curtains over it on the other side—like the beds she'd seen in fairy tales.

Then a hand pulled aside the curtain, and Lily gasped. It wasn't Burdock at all. It was an old man with a cloud of white hair, dressed in ragged green. A stranger.