



The Children of Light Anthology

Description

Felindra has a unique gift, she can communicate with animals. She's a Whisperer.

In Book One, she is a thirteen-year-old girl living peacefully with her family in the Duchy of Trethawynd. When the duchy is attacked by the Dark Brethren, her family is forced to leave home and travel to the Monastery of The League of Light where her father is the Commander of the League Defenders.

On the journey, she befriends an injured female wolf. The pair become inseparable partners in the war to defeat the Dark Brethren.

In Book Two, seven years have passed. Just as she has finished her education and started working as a teacher at the Monastery, she receives a summons from the Queen of Albasiny who wants her to go to the island Kingdom of Motu Ataahua in the tropics of the Southern Ocean. They need her skills to help discover why animals are dying and the sea creatures have disappeared from the surrounding ocean.

Expecting to solve the problem in months and return to Albasiny, they are delayed when the situation becomes more serious than they'd expected. When their defender is killed, she and her companions realize that this is more than a local disease; Dark Magic is involved. Renewed conflict with the Dark Brethren leads Felindra and her companions being carried far from the Islands and Albasiny.

Book Three is about their escape from war-torn Basrind and their hazardous journey across the continent of Utreia. They travel through numerous countries, through forest and deserts, and over mountain ranges. After being attacked by bandits, and escaping from a ruthless anti-witchcraft shah, they struggle on, hoping to reach a port where they can catch a ship back to their home in Trethawynd, Albasiny.

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Book One

1 – Leaving Home

Felindra

After helping her mother with some household chores, Felindra left the house and climbed up the slope outside the walls that surrounded their home. This was her favorite time of day and her favorite place to relax and meditate. It was late spring, and the wild flowers were blooming in abundance in the long grass. The fragrance of the flowers and the scent wafting from the nearby orange orchard were entrancing, but what really captured her was the feeling of life all round, bees humming, birds singing, the rustle of tiny rodents in the grass, the contented murmurs of nearby cattle, and the whinnying and snorting of horses in the paddock. Sometimes, she imagined she could almost read their thoughts, especially the dogs and horses. She even received sensations from the little field mice and rabbits, not so much thoughts as feelings of alarm, or gratification when they found something to eat. She lay down in the grass in the shade of a tree and felt blissfully at ease and peaceful. This was her home and she loved it.

But she had to finish her lessons, so she roused herself after a while and stood up, brushing the grass and leaves from her knee britches. “Goodbye, little friends,” she called softly. “Be safe!”

Daryan

When Daryan reached home, the first person he saw was his son.

“Father!” Darson darted out from the kitchen door as soon as he heard the clatter of hooves and rumble of wagon wheels on the cobbles of the yard. It was already after sunset, although the lantern light from the open door of their little house gave them enough light to work by.

“Hello, Darson. How do you fare this fine evening?”

“Hello, Father. I’m well, thank you, and you?”

Daryan couldn’t help smiling. His son was so solemn and formal. Sometimes, he sounded like an elderly tutor. “I also am well. Would you like help with the horses?” Daryan replied, ruffling his son’s hair. Darson was a sturdy boy of ten with light tan skin, caramel-colored eyes, and black curly hair that almost reached his shoulders.

His daughter, Felindra, poked her head out of the kitchen door. “Dadi’s here,” she called over her shoulder. “Welcome home, dadi.” She dashed across the yard into his arms.

“You’d think I’d been gone a month,” he laughed, “instead of one day.” He planted a kiss on her forehead.

Felindra had thirteen years. Her hair was also black and curly, but her complexion and eyes were darker than those of her brother. She got her coloring from her mother, Parvana, while Darson looked more like his father.

“Need help with the horses?” she asked. Felindra enjoyed working with the intelligent horses.

Daryan had already removed the bridles and given them to Darson to put on the rack in the stable. “Would you like to rub them down? I’ll get some water and feed.”

“I’d love to.” She turned and went into the little stable.

Meanwhile, Darson had clambered up onto the wagon and was rummaging through the things Daryan had brought back from Salispon. "What's this, dadi?" he asked, brandishing a cylindrical package.

"Nothing you need be concerned about. Leave it for now, but you can bring in a wheel of cheese. I'll take the flour. We'll leave the rest for tomorrow."

Daryan walked towards the open door with the sack of flour on his shoulder.

Inside, his wife, Parvana, was preparing their supper. The table was already set with spoons, ceramic bowls, and mugs. Daryan put the bag of flour down by the wall and turned to his wife. She left the stirring spoon in the iron pot and came to embrace him, then kissed him on the mouth. "You look tired, my love. Busy day?"

He nodded and pressed her against his body. Being home amidst the warmth of his family seemed to wash his cares away for a while and his body relaxed, shedding some of the tension he'd been carrying with him since hearing about the attacks in the north.

Parvana

From the moment Daryan stepped through the door, Parvana suspected he had something on his mind, but decided to wait until they were alone before saying anything that might upset the children. The two youngsters finally fell asleep up in the loft. Parvana and Daryan slept in the only other room in their little home, a small chamber under the loft, barely larger than a storeroom, but the door allowed them some privacy.

She reached out and took his hand as they lay waiting for sleep. "Is something wrong, my love?" she asked in a soft voice.

Daryan sighed and turned on his side to face her. "Aye." He hesitated, as if wondering how to break it to her, and then decided it would be best simply to tell her. "We're going to have to leave."

Parvana's heart lurched; she raised herself on one elbow to face him. "Oh no. What happened?"

"There are signs that *they're* back."

"You mean ... *them*? What sort of signs?"

"I'm afraid it may be so, beloved. Some travelers at the inn were talking about things that had been happening farther north near the border. It sounded like their kind of evil magic."

"*Solas Naofa!* What sort of things?" A tremor went through her.

"What you would expect from the Dark Brethren. Attacks on travelers on the highways, children disappearing, unexplained fires and crop damage." He reached out and stroked her arm, which had broken out in goose flesh.

She moved into his arms for comfort and warmth. "I thought we had finally beaten them, but now... after all these years. When do we have to leave?"

Parvana offered no argument or second-guessing upon hearing this news. She knew too well the situation and the urgency brought on by these events. They had come to this village of Picobali outside Salispon eleven years earlier, following the last battle against their ancient enemy, when everyone in the League of Light had thought they'd been defeated for good. The followers of Oglestra, the Dark Brethren, the very epitome of malevolence, used evil magic and unspeakable rites in their attempt to destroy the Children of Light and gain control of their world.

Daryan and Parvana were both members of the League of Light, but since the last battle fifteen years earlier, they had settled down to live ordinary lives and raise their children. The children knew nothing of their parents' gifts or their past. To them, Daryan was a swordsmith, albeit a very special sword maker.

His swords were prized throughout the Duchy of Trethawynd for their power and perfection, and the nobility paid generously to acquire them. The price of one sword would keep his family through two seasons and so he only created four or five each year, even though the demand was higher. He worked in a smithy that opened into the stable yard, separated from the road outside by a stone wall; he didn't want observers asking question, even though his work was approved by the League. Truth be told, there was magic involved in his craftsmanship, but it was inadvisable for this fact to be known abroad. Although the use of Light magic, gifts bestowed upon the Children of Light by the Lord of Light Himself, had saved them from the previous attack by the Dark Brethren, ordinary people were still wary of it and suspicious of those who practiced any form of magic. That wasn't the only danger, or the most serious: The Dark Brethren had ways of tracking down Light mages, and killing them, so the less people knew about them, the less they could be forced to reveal.

Neither of the children had been initiated into the League. Gifts didn't usually become apparent until a child entered adolescence. It was obvious to their parents that they were gifted, but they had tried to put the children's odd feelings down to approaching adulthood. It appeared that the time was coming for them to be told. Felindra at thirteen, and Darson ten, were approaching the age of initiation.

"The day after tomorrow," Daryan said in answer to his wife's question. "I've bought supplies for the journey; it's all stored in the wagon,"

"So soon." Parvana sighed. "I suppose we'll have to spend all the morrow packing and preparing food for the journey. I'll have to bake plenty of bread. Is that why you brought the flour in? I take it we're going to the Monastery."

"Yes, my love. We have to get the children initiated as well." He kissed her gently and lay back. "We should sleep; we've some hard work ahead of us."

Daryan

The following morning after they'd broken their fast with quick bread, herbal tea, and stewed apples, Daryan remained at the table, pulling on his boots. "Come and sit down," he told the youngsters. "I have to talk to you about something before we help mother with the baking and packing. We're going on a trip."

"When? Where are we going, dadi? Darson asked, his eyes lighting up.

"We'll be leaving on the morrow, early in the morning. Now, what I am about to tell you must not be repeated to anyone around here, but it is time you knew." Daryan looked at his son and daughter, his children, more precious than life to him. They gazed back wide-eyed with expectation, but neither spoke.

He sighed as he reorganized the thoughts he'd already reviewed and reconstructed several times since the day before. "Firstly, our family is not what you know it to be. No that's not right. Let me word it another way: your mother and I, and you our children, are much more than the lives we have lived for the past dozen years."

Felindra, "What do you mean? What are we?"

Darson, "How?"

"I'm coming to that. Your mother and I are mages and members of the League of Light."

"*Solas Naofa!*" Felindra exclaimed, her eyes big with wonder. "Truly?"

"Indeed." Daryan replied. "You know what that means don't you?"

"Does that mean we're gifted, too?" Darson asked.

"Let's say there is a very good chance you are. But you need to be tested by an archmage at the Monastery to discern and confirm your gifts."

"Couldn't you and mami test us?" Felindra asked.

"We could, but we are not trained for that and might not make an accurate judgment. It is best to have it done by someone with the right training. You have probably been some experiencing strange or unusual ... how can I say this? ... perceptions, sensations. I know I did at your age."

The two youngsters looked at each other warily, neither wanting to be the first to admit to any such manifestations. Finally, Felindra gave in. "I sometimes think I can tell what the horses are thinking," she admitted shyly.

Daryan nodded and smiled at his daughter. He covered her hand with his. "How about you, son?"

Darson cleared his throat. "Nothing."

"That's fine son. You are a bit young." Daryan laid his hand on Darson's shoulder.

Parvana walked by carrying a bundle of linen. She smiled and nodded to them as she passed.

"I know this is a lot to take in at one time, but there is more. First, we have to leave the village because it might become dangerous for us here, but also because we'll be needed at the Monastery."

Darson interrupted, "Why must we leave, dadi? What danger is there?"

"There may be some very bad people looking for us, so I have to take you to a safe place. We're going to the Monastery of the League of Light in the Great Mountains, the headquarters of the Trethawynd division of the League. It's a holy place, but it is also a great center of learning. While I was in Salispon, I heard that there have been ... incidents ... that may have been perpetrated by the Dark Brethren. I fear they could be returning. The Dark Brethren are not just enemies of the people, they are also determined to hunt down and destroy the League of Light. We must get to the Monastery as soon as possible. We will be safe there and have time, we hope, to prepare for the struggle I fear is coming. You children have to be initiated—that is if you wish to; you are free to choose—and trained for whatever is to come. I'm sorry I've had so little time to prepare you." He stood up. "If your friends ask, tell them we are going to visit family friends if they ask. That's not an untruth; it just leaves out the details" He looked at his two children and smiled. "That's enough for now. There's work to be done."

Darson and Felindra went outside and through the gate into the field.

"What do you think?" Felindra asked her brother.

His eyes lit up. "It's great. Aren't you excited?"

"I suppose so, but I'll miss this place."

"We'll get to meet lots of new people, and Mami says there's a school. I can't wait to go to a real school. There's so much to learn."

They left at dawn the next morning with two of their horses pulling the wagon, the other two ridden by Parvana and Felindra, while Darson sat beside his father on the front of the wagon.

Daryan looked back at the village as they passed around a bend in the road, wondering how long it would be before they could return. Picobali looked so small and insignificant from this distance, but it was the place they'd called home for more than eleven years. They'd developed a bond with it and its people, this little cluster of small, rose-colored adobe houses lined up along a single unpaved road with a meeting hall, a blacksmith's forge, and one all-purpose store that sold everything from lamps to sewing thread, tools, and onions. The villagers' major source of income came from the surrounding orange orchards, vineyards, and olive trees.

Book Two

1 – Joy and sorrow

The reception room of the new palace was so hot and crowded with guests, Felindra wanted to get away for a moment and breathe some fresh air. Tall glass doors opened onto a terrace facing the sea, so she edged around the guests, few of whom she knew, and stepped outside. A cool breeze wafted in from the sea, moving the leaves on the plants, spreading their fragrance through the air.

She leaned on the outer wall of the terrace and looked at the gardens below, but she hardly took in its grandeur; her mind kept drifting back to thoughts of her future. Almost seven years had gone by since she and her family had moved from their village home in Picobali to the Monastery of the League of Light. Her parents had returned to Picobali once the conflict with the Dark Brethren had been resolved. Daryan Peshanar, her father, had resigned from his post as Commander of the League Defenders to devote himself full-time to his other occupation, crafting enchanted swords. Felindra and her brother, Darson, had remained at the Monastery to complete their education at the Monastery University, but now she had finished all her courses, she was undecided about what she would do next.

She sensed someone behind her and turned to look. “Varan!”

“I hope I’m not interrupting a private moment,” Lord Varan said.

“No, not at all,” she replied. “I just wanted to get out of the crowd and cool off.”

“It is rather exhausting, isn’t it?”

“It must be for you, having to talk to everyone and listen to all their comments.”

Varan shrugged. “It’s part of my training in dukemanship. It’s my poor father who endures the most of it.”

“How’s he doing?” Felindra asked. “He looks great. It must be such a relief to finally have his own palace.”

“It is. He can finally settle down and relax a bit. Imali is a great chancellor. He shoulders a lot of the burden.” He came closer and leaned on the wall beside her. “But I didn’t come out to discuss government matters. I wanted to talk to you, find out how you’re doing.” He put his hand over hers resting on the wall.

At his touch, Felindra felt a warm thrill surge through her, the feeling she had whenever he was close. She moved her hand over his and squeezed it. *If only....* She sighed. If only he weren’t the son of a duke and she a commoner....

He moved his hand and placed it over her shoulder. “What? Why do you sigh?”

She turned to face him and looked into his eyes. “You know.”

Varan put his arms around her and pressed her close. “I know,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “Let me show you around; tell me what you think. Come on, before someone interrupts us.” He took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers, and led her to the end of the terrace, then up a flight of stairs to the level above. The iron barred gate at the top of the stairs was locked. “Family quarters,” Varan explained. He let go of her hand and took a key from his pouch to unlock it.

Once they were through the gate, he locked it again. They were now on the terrace of the next level, which was set back about three spans from the level below. The terrace on this level was had window-doors at intervals that led into the individual rooms and suites.

Varan led her through the rooms, pausing occasionally for her to take it all in. Everything was elegant and skillfully realized, harmonious colors and simple details without anything flashy or overly elaborate.

“This is my salon,” Varan said, allowing her to precede him into the room. “Thank you, Lamont, that will be all.” he said to the footman as he followed her into the room.

Felindra stood inside the door and looked around, barely breathing. Apart from the white marble floor, the room was done entirely in ocean colors, subtle greens, and dusky turquoises, with touches of sand and deep blue. “It’s beautiful!” she said, turning to face him. She held out her hands for him to take. “I am completely amazed at what you’ve accomplished here.” She smiled up at him. “You see; you don’t have to spend all your time practicing dukemanship. You’re a great architect.”

He pulled her into a hug. Resting his chin on her head. “Thanks to you for your encouragement, but I’m hardly that. I’m not responsible for the whole project. I was only allowed to make suggestions, and they all had to be approved by father. Luckily for me, he liked the palace at the Monastery and was quite agreeable for the builders to use it as a model.”

The palace to which he was referring had been the temporary Palace of Trethawynd, an impressive ziggurat-shaped building on the grounds of the Monastery, where he and his father, the duke, had set up headquarters after the destruction of their castle in the capital. The new palace had taken more than four years to complete and this was the formal celebration of its inauguration.

Suddenly, Felindra stiffened and pulled away from him with her hand over her heart.

“What is it Felindra? Did I do something...?”

Felindra’s eyes refocused and she looked up at him. “No, no, it wasn’t you.” She covered her mouth with her hands and shook her head, unable to continue.

“What is it? Tell me, maybe I can help.”

Felindra shook her head again. “Something’s happened to Ashala. I can’t find her.”

Felindra had been bonded with the wolf, Ashala, for more than seven years and, apart from a brief period when Felindra had been captured by the Dark Brethren, the two had been inseparable. She could communicate with her even from a distance, but suddenly, she was not answering Felindra’s call.

She started towards the door. “I have to go,” she said. “I have to find out what’s happened to her. Something is wrong; I can feel it,” she added desperately.

“Wait, let me go with you.”

“I have to get my father and go back to the Monastery. I would love it if you came, but you should be here. This is your big day and you can’t just go running off. I must go now, Varan. I’ll contact you as soon as I know something.” She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and ran off down the hall to the room where she could change out of her party clothes into some riding gear, her mind constantly reaching out to Ashala. When she was ready she ran past a guard and down the interior stairs of the palace to find her father.

The sun was rising when Felindra and her father emerged from the secret tunnel that zig-zagged from the plain below to the Monastery situated high above.

“You must be getting tired,” Daryan said as they walked their horses to the stable. “Why don’t you go and get some rest?”

“I can’t, Dadi. I have to find her. I couldn’t sleep if I tried until I find out what’s happened to her.”

“I understand,” he said, giving her a hug. He did understand. Nobody knew better than he did how much the wolf meant to her. She owed her very life to Ashala. “I’ll be in the defender’s building if you need me.”

Felindra walked away towards the woods behind the white palace where Ashala usually slept. As she neared it, she put two fingers between her lips and gave a sharp whistle. This signal had always brought her running. She continued into the trees, feeling around with her mind, trying once more to locate her. Suddenly, a grey shadow burst from the trees, tail wagging, and tongue lolling. Felindra gave a relieved sigh. “Where’ve you ...” she stopped, her hope suspended. It wasn’t Ashala, it was her son Pico who stood looking up hopefully at her.

She knelt on the ground and stroked his head. *Where’s your mami, Pico?* She whispered, relaying an image of Ashala.

Pico whined, then raised his muzzle and howled.

“What is it, little one?” Felindra put her hand back on Pico’s head. *Tell me what’s happened?*

Pico lay down, rested his muzzle on his paws and gazed up at her, and then he started to relay a series of images. Ashala standing up and yawning. Walking slowly, her head bowed almost to the ground—as if she barely had enough energy to stand—going towards the Monastery gate, and outside the gate, continuing into the Great Forest. After a short walk, Felindra saw her going into a thicket of bushes and lying down, her head on her paws, and letting out a shallow breath.

Felindra knew instantly that her beloved companion had departed. Tears flooded down her face. *And I wasn't here with her.* She stood up and ran into the woods behind the white palace where she threw herself down on the ground and wept. *What am I going to do without my sweet girl? Oh, Light, please help me. I knew she was slowing down. She wasn't as lively as she used to be, but I never for a moment thought she was so close leaving this world. I'll miss you so much my beloved friend. I don't know how I'll live without you. I should have been here with you in your final moments.*

A warm body flopped down beside her, and a warm tongue licked her hand. She put her arm over Pico’s back. *Poor boy, you've lost your mami. I understand how you feel; I share the pain.* He whined in response and put his head down.

Felindra stood up after a while. *We can't leave her out there to be eaten by scavengers. We must bury her properly. Come on, Pico, show me where she is.* She turned back to the Monastery buildings and went towards the defenders’ quarters, the young wolf at her heels. *I need to find Dadi; he'll help us.*

“This is foolish, my love; you need to get some rest,” Daryan said when she told him she wanted to go out in the forest and bury Ashala.

“If you don’t help me, Dadi, I’ll have to do it myself,” She replied, pulling away from his embrace. More tears fell from her eyes. She dashed them away with her hand. “Don’t you see? I *must* bury her. I owe her that at least, after the number of times she’s risked her life for me.”

Her father recruited a novice defender to go with them. After picking up some shovels at the supply building, they trekked into the Great Forest, following the young wolf to the place where his mother lay. It was almost noon by the time they found her. Pico whined, went right to the body, and licked his mother's muzzle. When Felindra saw her beloved companion's body lying so still, covered in flies, she broke down again and frantically tried to brush them off.

"Come, daughter, there is nothing you can do now. Sit down over there with the little one and let Robi and me bury her." He led her to a grassy hummock, followed by Pico.

After placing the wolf's body in the pit they'd dug, the two men filled it in and then gathered some rocks to pile over it.

They all stood for a moment, and then Daryan put his arm around Felindra. "Come on, my girl, you have to go to bed."

They walked slowly back to the Monastery and Daryan went with her right to the door of the mages' residence. He kissed her on the cheek. "Now make sure you get some sleep. I have to go back to DarSolas to pick up the rest of the family. I'll see you when we return."

When she reached her room, utterly worn out, she lay down on the bed, but couldn't sleep. Tears kept flowing from her eyes as she went repeatedly through the events of the night, berating herself for celebrating at a party leagues away while her best friend was dying. She would never forgive herself for not being with Ashala. After she'd soaked several handkerchiefs with tears, she finally fell into an exhausted sleep.

Book Three

1 – Sandstorm

Felindra and her companions—Farah the communicator, Sastin the healer, Tirzah Lin the Master Wizard, and the two defenders, Barengush and Vertan—were becoming accustomed to sleeping in the daytime and traveling by night. Shortly before sunset, they were up and eating their evening meal—two small desert rodents, baked while they slept, and some dates from the last oasis; not much for five people, but they had to make do with whatever they could scavenge from the desert.

Three days had passed since they had escaped from Basrind and slavery, and they still performed scans to detect anyone following them, but that didn't mean they were completely free. Now the Basrindian military was after them with charges of desertion and treason, although to them, such charges were unjustified. They had been brought to Basrind against their will and sold as slaves, although the two defenders had been taken on by the Basrindian military to train recruits after Pangast and Nedra had invaded Basrind six days earlier. The two Albasinians had left their posts as soon as the opportunity arose and joined their companions at the plantation of Dom Ash where they were being held as slaves.

Now, they were traveling west across the Basrindian desert to the border of the neighboring land of Nedra, where they hoped to seek asylum. Nedra was one of the nations that had invaded Basrind but was a minor player; Pangast was the instigator of the invasion.

Vertan glanced back as he slung his pack on his shoulder. The setting sun had turned the sky a portentous shade of rust. "That sky looks a bit threatening," he said. "Do you think we're in for a storm?"

Tirzah Lin, the Master Wizard, studied the sky for a moment before replying. "I fear we may be." He blew out his breath.

"You don't sound happy about it," Lady Farah said. "I thought we needed some rain."

"We do indeed, but it will not be that sort of storm. I fear a *samoona* is building up ahead of us. We must find some shelter before it arrives. We could not survive out here in the open desert. I suggest we continue this way and keep our eyes open for a place to shelter. Some high rocks would be best. And cover your faces," he added.

"What about a wadi?" Barengush asked.

"The blowing sand fills in low-lying places and we could be buried."

Their energy was beginning to flag by the time they found a suitable place to shelter. The ominous sounds of the approaching storm were rising from a whistling rumble to a deeper moaning that created an almost musical undertone.

"What's that?" Barengush said, pointing to a shadowy form approaching from the west.

"It looks like a camel," Vertan replied. "And it doesn't look very steady on its feet,"

"There's someone on its back," Farah added. "He's hurt."

“Get them in here,” Tirzah Lin urged, taking charge. “Lady Felindra, will you bring the camel into the shelter?” They’d found a large rock formation, and a couple of power blasts from Gremulkin had created a shallow cave in one of the bigger rocks.

Felindra was the best candidate where animals were involved. She tightened the cloth over her face and staggered against the blowing dust towards the camel. As soon as she touched it, she felt the pain in its haunch and found the arrow that caused it. Soothing it as best she could, she persuaded it to go in between the rocks to the more sheltered space. A groan from above alerted her to the rider, a young boy from the nomad tribe they were following.

Tirzah Lin rushed over to the camel and looked at the boy, who was still conscious. After a brief conversation, he turned to the others. “He was sent to warn us of some dangerous people coming this way. When he came near the strangers, he coaxed his camel to speed past, but they shot arrows at him as he went by. One hit him in the shoulder and another got the camel before they were out of range.” He kept his hand on the boy’s uninjured shoulder and turned to Vertan and Barengush. “Could you gently help him down and sit him on a mat in the shelter?”

Sastin was already sorting through his healing supplies when they sat the boy down next to him. He looked up at Tirzah Lin. “Would you translate for me, please, Lin?”

“His name is Kemal,” Tirzah said. The boy looked at him questioningly when he heard his name and Tirzah patted his knee to reassure him. “This man is a healer. He’s going to help you. First he will examine you and then ask a few questions.”

“Before I start, I’ll give him something to ease the pain,” Sastin said.

The noise of the storm was now a constant rumbling roar with intermittent whistles and moans. A fine dust was filtering through the narrow gaps, but the rocks sheltered them from the full force of the driven sand. Above them the sky was covered by a roiling blanket of orange-tinted black cloud.

The removal of the arrow from Kemal’s shoulder was complicated by the fact that it hadn’t gone completely through, and the head was buried in the flesh of his shoulder. “He’s lucky it hasn’t damaged anything vital and has only pierced the muscle. I’m going to get the arrow out,” Sastin, said, “but it will be a bit tricky. I’ll have to push the head out first. It will be very painful. Can you help control the pain?” Tirzah talked to Kemal and then answered the question. “I told him what you will do. I’m going to put him to sleep so he won’t feel anything.”

By the time the arrow was removed, and the wound covered with a clean cotton bandage, the sandstorm seemed to be right on top of them, the sound deafening.

“What a touching sight!” a loud voice proclaimed. “All my little friends together.

Startled, everyone turned to see who had spoken. “Oh no,” Barengush groaned. “Not again.”