

A Place in the Sky

by Olen Henry Rambow

As the last glow of twilight faded away, the Elvenwood was immersed in nearly absolute darkness. The only light that could be seen was that emanating from the trees and creatures of the forest. Overhead, the cloudless sky was a solid black canopy, a void that served constantly to remind those whose memories reached back far enough of the passing of an age when gods had waged war in the heavens. Even among the elves, there were few living souls who remembered the Great War. Generations had been born under an empty night sky and had simply taken its emptiness for granted.

On this particular evening, certainly no one in the Elvenwood was paying attention to the sky. One and all, they were simply going about the lives that they had learned to live in this dying world. Inside of the great trees in which the wood elves made their homes, families were finishing their evening meal. Fathers were putting small children to bed. Older children were playing or reading. The sounds of women's voices singing or humming floated up from several homes. No one was aware of an approaching darkness that was blacker than the starless sky.

In one home, a woman named Amarelle looked lovingly across the table at her husband as he finished his dinner. She smiled, taking in his familiar scarred face and mechanical movements, but her eyes were tinged with deep sadness and resignation. Many would have wondered that she could smile at all; but despite the cloud that hung over her life, her happiness was genuine, and her love for Denelain remained as strong as ever.

It had been nine years since Denelain had returned. Nine years since the horror of a more recent war had come to their door and entered their home, not just for a brief visit, but to become a permanent part of their family. That war had been one of a string of many smaller wars that had ravaged the land since the Great War; but even though it was small as wars are measured, it was no less devastating to those whose lives it ruined. Nine long years had passed, and those dreaded events remained as clear to Amarelle now as if they had only just happened that morning.

Sharpest of all in her memory was that first moment, when she had felt as if her heart and soul had been wrenched from her body, leaving her dead in life. Still able to breathe, see, walk, and speak, but dead nonetheless, and worse off than a corpse, for she still had the faculties to experience the solitary hell that had descended upon her.

Nine years ago, there had come a knock on her door late one night, and the wait for her husband and sons to return from the war had suddenly come to an end. Opening the door had brought the somber sight of soldier's faces, elven faces like her own, stamped deeply with marks of grief and defeat, clear even in the faint night glow that emanated from the forest surrounding the tree that constituted her home, hers and Denelain's, together with their two boys.

With growing desperation, she had searched among those faces. Where was Denelain? Where were her sons? At last she had looked down, and her eyes had fallen upon the soldiers' awful burden. It had taken her a moment to recognize her husband's face, which seemed an impossibly gruesome mask of cuts, bruises, and stitches, on a body that lay motionless on a litter. Her husband Denelain, the very root of her life. What evil had reduced him to that?

That image had haunted her sleep, giving her nightmares that became more intense upon waking when she realized that they weren't mere dreams; many times she had thought how much better it would be to remain asleep and believe everything a dream than to wake and know it to be true. She had dreaded sleep because she couldn't face waking up.

At that moment, as she had stared down in shock at that cruelly mauled face that had been so dear to her, she had at first thought Denelain dead. It had been a great relief to realize he was still alive when the soldiers had taken him into her home and begun tending to him. Hope had welled up within her. And then she had asked about her boys.

None of the soldiers had been able to meet her eyes. She had noticed their faces grow heavier with sorrow at her question, as though more pain had suddenly been added to the grief they already carried for themselves and their own loved ones. On seeing that, she had needed no answer, but they had given one anyway, telling her what had happened to her dear boys. Amarelle's only consolation was that they had died bravely.

In nine years, the memory of that moment hadn't faded a bit. It had been that moment when she had felt as if her death had begun. Sobbing and wailing, she had both pleaded with and cursed the gods, though she knew well that they had died long ago. Her throat had gone dry and she had been unable to speak for days, and her

wails had become hoarse and silent. She had felt as though she were drowning in unbearable sorrow, desperate for a gasp of relief but finding none.

All that had kept her from dying of grief had been the spark of hope that Denelain would recover. Tenderly she had nursed him, desperate for him to awaken and hold her again and comfort her as he had done before he left for the war. She had sought the help of the wisest of her people, the wood elves, and she had prayed to those gods without ceasing, hoping that perhaps not all of them had really died. Had any remained to hear the fervency of her prayers, they surely would have been moved to intervene. But none did, and for a long time nothing happened. And then what finally did happen had been worse than nothing.

It was another memory that would never fade. As Amarelle had been washing Denelain, she heard him groan faintly. It was the first noise he had made since arriving on that litter. Frozen, deaf to the audible pounding of her heart, oblivious to all but Denelain, she had watched as his eyelids fluttered open, and his eyes, unfocused, had turned toward her. She had smiled.

But something had been wrong. Somehow, Amarelle had known that Denelain did not recognize her. Her own husband, her root, did not know her; she had been able to see it in his eyes.

She had felt cheated. The opening of his eyes should have meant that he was returning to normal, that she could have him back. It should have been cause for greater hope, but instead it had led to deeper despair, and she had felt her loss all over again.

She had continued to nurse him, and his wounds had healed, but his mind had seemed to be gone. He could eat and drink and move when directed, but his eyes remained vacant and he spoke not a word. She had longed to hear him whisper her name. But it was as if he were no longer aware of anything or anyone around him, or even of his own existence. It was as if he had forgotten her. All that had once made her life beautiful, and all that she had been hoping to have back, were gone.

For a long time, Amarelle had kept up her hope that Denelain would one day remember and speak. But as days stretched into weeks, and weeks into months, that hope had dwindled almost to nothing. Until one day, when something had happened that caused a seed of life to take root in her heart.

She had led Denelain to what had once been his favorite seat in their home one evening, as she had made it her habit of doing, so that he could wait there while she tidied up after their meal. The seat was by the one window in their home, great and round, spanning from floor to ceiling, and looking out over the smaller trees and plants below and the lighted walkways that wound among them. Also beside the

chair was the lyribus that Denelain himself had crafted by hand, with its smooth ivory keys and shiny steel strings. Before he had left for the war, he had played it often for Amarelle, and she had loved to sit and listen as his hands worked the keys, producing enchanting melodies and harmonies that resonated in their home and floated out into the forest below. She had kept it oiled and in tune while she waited for him to return.

That evening, after leading Denelain to that seat and positioning him so he could see out the window, she had gone to the kitchen to wash their dishes as usual. And then suddenly, as she cleaned, notes from the lyribus had filled the rooms. She had nearly dropped a bowl in surprise.

Amarelle remembered how she had cautiously peered out of the kitchen at Denelain, her heart caught in her throat, barely able to believe her eyes. Sitting at the lyribus, Denelain's back had been turned toward her, and his head bent down, but she had been able to see his shoulders and arms moving smoothly as if they remembered the playing motions on their own. She had crept slowly toward him, feeling as though she were in a dream, and sat down quietly beside him to listen.

It was her favorite piece, one he had written and that no one else knew. And for the first time in months, Amarelle had felt certain that her Denelain was still present in that body, and she had thought that perhaps he did remember, but he only had no way to show it.

As he had played that song that evening, she had watched his face, clinging to renewed hope. She had sat there remembering the very first time he had played it for her, and for a moment she had felt as if she had been transported back to happier times. When he finished, he would turn to her and with a smile, say, "You like it?" And she would feel as though Denelain had just walked in through the door, unharmed, safely back from the war, and they could start their life again together.

But when the song had ended at last, Denelain had placed his hands back in his lap. Trembling, Amarelle had gently reached out and taken his hand in hers. And when she touched him, his head had turned, and for a fleeting moment, he had smiled at her. It had been a faint smile, gone in a flash, but to Amarelle it had meant the world. It had confirmed to her that more remained of Denelain than an empty shell.

From that day on, Amarelle had sat Denelain down at the lyribus nearly every evening. And almost every time, his hands found their place on the keys and he played that song again. Only then, when he played his song for her, did he smile at her. Only then did he seem to remember and to know her. Since that first time, Amarelle had felt that she had found a new reason to live. She no longer dreaded sleep, because she had something to look forward to each day when she woke up.

It had been that way now for more than eight years, and tonight would be no different. Waiting patiently, Amarelle studied Denelain's face as he ate. The scars on his face had given him a beastly look, and he was beginning to appear old and frail, but she still saw the strong yet gentle young elf who had won her heart so many years before.

Denelain's spoon scraped the bottom of his wooden bowl, and as he took one last swallow of porridge, Amarelle rose from her seat, glided around the table and placed her right hand on his shoulder. With her left, she caressed his face and then gently turned his head, stooping down so she could look into his eyes.

"You like it?" she asked softly. "You know how happy it makes me when you like what I cook." Denelain gave no response, not even a blink, but as always, Amarelle believed that he understood her. She wanted to believe.

She took his hands in her own and pulled firmly. "Play for me again."

Denelain stood and walked as she led him to the seat before the window. She helped him sit down before placing one of his hands on the lyribus.

"Play." She stroked his hair and kissed the top of his head, and then returned to the table to gather the bowls and spoons and take them to the kitchen.

Once in the kitchen, she placed the dishes beside a small wooden basin that grew out of the countertop. As was the way of wood elves, the whole kitchen was a single piece of wood, polished smooth and dark from years of handling, that had been coaxed out of the tree in which they lived. It was all still a living part of the tree.

She stroked a spot on the wall above the basin, and the wood shifted, opening up to allow water to pour out into the basin from a hollow higher up in the tree where rainwater collected naturally. When the basin was half full, she touched the wall again and the flow of water ceased. She immersed a cake of soap in the water in the basin and rubbed it to prepare the water for washing the dishes, all the while listening for the lyribus. Minutes passed, and she nearly finished before the first notes of the song floated to her ears. When she heard them, she set the bowls down, dried her hands quickly, and went to sit by Denelain.

As his hands danced smoothly over the keys, she put her arm around his back, leaned her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes. She felt him relax at her touch, and she in turn relaxed as well. Her breathing slowed, and in her mind she tried to stretch out every moment, every note. This would make a nice eternity, she thought. But then suddenly she felt Denelain tense, and he stopped playing before reaching the end of the piece.

She opened her eyes and sat up, and rubbing his back with her hand, she looked

up at him. He was staring down in front of him, but it wasn't his usual blank stare. He was very focused. Still rubbing his back, she followed his gaze over the lyribus and down to the base of the open window. There on the floor lay a small figure, similar to that of an elf, but only as tall as the length of Amarelle's forearm. From its back grew wings like those of a dragonfly, dark green covered with thin black stripes. A female wood sprite.

The wood sprite lay on her back, eyes staring up in horror as if at some nightmarish vision that only she could see, and her tiny chest heaved with the deep, hurried breaths of panic. Amarelle stared in shock for a moment before her thoughts started moving. What could so frighten a wood sprite?

She looked back at Denelain, but he remained still as stone, eyes fixed on the small figure that lay on the floor. Amarelle rushed to the window and knelt by the sprite's side, gently putting her hand behind its head.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The sprite's tiny eyes continued staring straight up, seeming not to see Amarelle, and her face was contorted in fear to match her breathing.

"*What's wrong?*" Amarelle asked again, but this time in the musical language of wood sprites. Still the sprite seemed not to notice her. It was as though she were trapped in a waking nightmare, a feeling Amarelle knew well. Often she had longed to escape this nightmare of a life, and often there had been no one to comfort her.

Amarelle looked up at Denelain, who was still staring down at the sprite. "I have to help her," she said. Then, cradling the small figure in her arms, she stood up. "I'll take her to Esoph. Wait for me here, Denelain." Her husband didn't move.

Amarelle stepped quickly to a dark alcove in the wall across the room from the window. Shifting the sprite to her left arm, she reached out with her right and brushed a spot on the wooden wall as she entered the alcove. A faint yellow glow lit the alcove, and the floor shifted. Amarelle hastened down the spiraling walkway that wound its way down through the long, thick tree trunk, and the wooden floor molded itself to her feet as she stepped nimbly. When she reached the bottom, she touched the door, and the trunk opened up to let her out.

The walkways along the forest floor were lined with lanterns that looked like giant fireflies. In their light, Amarelle could easily see where she needed to go. As she rushed along the familiar route, tree roots shifted along the path to avoid tripping her and to give her feet a smooth landing. The trees seemed to sense her urgency. Or perhaps it was the panic of the sprite they sensed. Sprites had an even deeper connection with trees than wood elves had.

Amarelle's thoughts raced as fast as her feet.

What could possibly be wrong with the sprite? Their kind were all but immortal. Nothing Amarelle knew of could hurt a wood sprite. The forest was their domain, and all who knew of them were in awe of their powerful magic. When she was little, Amarelle had watched with her own eyes as wood sprites defended the Elvenwood from trolls. There had been at least several dozen trolls and only a handful of sprites, but the contest had been nowhere close to fair. The elves had never had to raise a weapon, only to wait and carry the trolls' corpses to the edge of the forest to burn them when it was all over. Such was the power of wood sprites. And now Amarelle held a frightened, perhaps dying, sprite in her arms. She hoped Esoph would know what to do.

Just as she was beginning to breathe heavily from running, Amarelle slowed and came to a stop in front of a particularly large tree, one that she had visited often as a child. Its trunk had grown much thicker since then, but its character remained the same. She felt a sense of welcome as she approached it.

She reached out and grasped a vine that hung from the tree, pulled it to within inches of her face, and whispered the incantation that Esoph had taught her. The vine snaked slowly down around her legs, forming a comfortable seat, and then contracted, lifting her up into the air half the height of the great tree. It set her down on a large flat branch, and just as her feet touched the branch, a hole opened up in the trunk right over the branch, just large enough for an elf to walk through, showing a well-lighted, cavernous room inside. In the opening Amarelle could see the silhouetted figure of a stooped old wood elf.

"The trees speak of urgency," Esoph's voice floated to her in a concerned but soothing tone as he stepped out onto the branch and shuffled hurriedly to Amarelle. The vine that had carried Amarelle to the branch had returned to its original position, hanging motionless beside her. Amarelle looked from Esoph to the sprite that still lay cradled in her left arm, and before she could say anything, Esoph was at her side, gently brushing a finger over the sprite's forehead. The sprite's eyes were closed now, but her body still trembled faintly.

Esoph gasped softly. "Bring her inside. Quickly." Without looking back, he shuffled back in even faster than he had come out. Amarelle stepped through the opening behind the old elf, and the wall closed up behind her.

Esoph went straight to a table in the middle of the spacious room that had doubled as his living room and library for as long as Amarelle could remember. A firefly lantern hung down from the ceiling over the center of the table, filling the room with a soft greenish yellow glow. The old elf quickly gathered the papers and books that were strewn about the table into a single pile and set them on a chair.

“We’ll put her on the table. Just a moment while I get something soft for her to lie on.” Esoph disappeared around a corner, where Amarelle knew his kitchen was, and almost immediately reappeared carrying a towel, which he folded in half and set on the table. As Amarelle laid the sprite on the towel, Esoph turned away from the table again and went to a cabinet on the wall just beside the entrance to the kitchen. Taking a small box from the cabinet, he returned to the table and began fumbling to open the latch on the box. Amarelle had never seen him in such a hurry before. It frightened her.

“Tell me what happened,” he said as he began taking small bottles and metal tools from the box, not looking up.

Amarelle told how the sprite had appeared as Denelain had been playing the lyribus. Trying to recall any details that might help, she told of the panicked look in the sprite’s eyes and the heavy breathing. As she talked, Esoph examined the sprite. After some gentle poking and prodding, he dipped a small stick with a ball of cotton on the end into a bottle of some thick green liquid. When he removed the stick from the bottle, the cotton ball trailed a sticky thread of the liquid. With his left hand, he opened the sprite’s mouth, and with his right he touched the end of the stick to the sprite’s tongue. It had no effect that Amarelle could see.

“Panic,” Esoph whispered when Amarelle finished talking. Though his focus seemed to be entirely on the wood sprite as he hurried about, she was sure that he had taken in everything she had said. “I will do what I can, but you know the magic of this world is dying. The death of the gods has left us with little besides the devices of nature.”

Esoph took a quill from the box and opened a tiny jar that contained a red paste. After dipping the end of the quill in the paste, he held it in front of his mouth and blew softly on the tip before whispering some of the ancient elven magic that sounded strangely familiar to Amarelle. The red paste on the tip of the quill began to glow orange, then yellow, and then bright white. Amarelle gasped. She remembered that Esoph had performed the same spell on Denelain nine years ago.

Esoph’s lips moved soundlessly as he recited incantations of healing in the ancient elven tongue. His hand, which had always shaken from old age as long as Amarelle could remember, became rock steady as he moved the tip of the quill over the sprite’s face and body. His wrist and fingers flowed as they guided the quill through the forms of elven runes, cramming impossibly minute detail into tiny markings on the sprite’s face and neck. The strokes of the pen left lines finer than hairs on the sprite’s skin that glowed almost as brightly as the tip of the quill itself.

When Esoph finished writing, he carefully placed the quill back in the box and

then turned to watch the sprite. “I fear this will be no more effective than it was for Denelain.” Esoph shook his head sadly. “It was once such a powerful spell.”

The two stood in silence for a moment, staring at the body of the sprite as the glow from the runes faded slowly away. Nothing changed. The sprite’s chest still rose and fell slowly, almost imperceptibly. Her eyes remained closed. Esoph sighed.

Then suddenly the sprite’s body jerked, and both Amarelle and Esoph jumped. After another moment, Esoph began shaking his head again, and Amarelle realized that the sprite had stopped breathing. Then, as she continued watching, a dark shadow, like black mist, began to rise slowly from the sprite’s body.

Before she knew what was happening, Esoph had put his arm in front of her as if to block her from leaning forward toward the sprite, and he began to back away from the table slowly, pushing her along behind him until her back was against the wall and she had to peer over his shoulder to see what was happening.

Her eyes never left the black mist, and as she watched it seemed to draw in on itself, becoming denser and more solid. Slowly it began to take on a more definite shape, which Amarelle found herself straining to identify as it became clearer and clearer, until at last it was obvious. Right there, sitting on the sprite’s chest, the mist had solidified into a moth that was unnaturally black, darker even than the night sky.

She wasn’t sure whether it was because Esoph’s reaction had frightened her or because the unnatural sight of the black mist materializing into the moth was frightening enough already, but Amarelle’s heart was pounding and her eyes were wide open in terror. Esoph stood like a wall in front of her. She was sure he intended to protect her from the moth.

It seemed to Amarelle that she stood staring over Esoph’s shoulder at the dreadful apparition for a long time before it suddenly took off and flew directly toward them. It did not flutter about clumsily like an ordinary moth, but moved along a straight line with an unnerving air of purpose. Amarelle was paralyzed. She felt as though she were watching something terrible happening to someone else and couldn’t move a muscle to help.

Suddenly, there was a loud cry, and Esoph twisted around, his arm darting to the other side of Amarelle, before turning and straightening again in front of her, holding something out at arm’s length between them and the moth. She couldn’t see what had happened, and she didn’t dare speak, or even breathe. Time seemed to stand still for an agonizing eternity as the moth hovered before them, until finally it turned and flew out the window.

Esoph’s shoulders sagged and his arm fell to his side. He let out a great sigh and sank into a chair, closing his eyes and resting his forehead on one hand, his elbow on

the table. Amarelle saw now what he grasped in his other hand, which he had held up to ward off the moth.

It was a black crystal globe that had tiny pinpricks of light floating in it. At first glance, the points of light all looked white, but upon closer inspection it could be seen that some were slightly reddish or yellow, and some had a tinge of blue. Some were brighter than others, and some flickered eerily. And some, when examined more closely, turned out to be clusters of countless more, even tinier, points of light.

Esoph had explained the globe to her before. Many generations ago, in Esoph's youth, the sky had once held points of light just like those in the globe. Amarelle couldn't imagine what it would be like to look up at night and see the sky filled with lights. In her lifetime it had always been completely black. The only light at night came from the plants and animals of the forest.

Esoph said the stars had been connected to the gods, and that it had been through the motion of the stars that he had been able to observe the Great War among the gods all those generations ago. Through the constellations, he had witnessed the final battle, in which the spirits of the elven ancestors had died defeating Silbis and his minions, who had risen up to conquer the world through the hearts of humans. Esoph had told Amarelle that the globe was more than just a model, that it contained something of the essence of those stars.

After a moment, Esoph looked up from the table at Amarelle and motioned for her to sit beside him.

"We should be safe now," he said. "It left." He sounded tired.

"What happened?" Amarelle asked shakily when she had sat down and could find her voice again.

Esoph pursed his lips and stared at the globe. It was a while before he answered, and when he did, his voice was filled with disbelief. "It seems the gods are not all dead after all," he said hoarsely.

Amarelle stared, completely taken aback. That was the last thing she could have imagined that Esoph would say. "How do you know?" she asked. "And what do the gods have to do with what just happened?"

Esoph held up the globe for her to see the glittering constellations inside it. "The mother and child represent the spirit of love." As he spoke, the points of light shifted, a few growing brighter while the rest faded almost to blackness. The brighter stars formed the outline of a woman holding an infant.

"The hand," Esoph went on, the stars shifting again so that the brighter ones formed the outline of a hand, "is the sign of the spirit of justice. There were thousands of others that I knew of, long ago. Impossible as it may seem, I think there

were infinitely many spirits—which makes it all the more astounding that every last one of them disappeared.” The points of light in the globe shifted rapidly, flickering through a myriad of different images. Amarelle thought she saw a mouth and a sword among them. The other images passed too quickly for her to discern any shapes.

“Just now,” Esoph continued, “I called on the power of the gods to help us. The good ones, that is. But that shouldn’t have worked. At least, not if they were dead. If they really were all dead, this globe would be useless. It has no power of its own. I had thought it useless for so long. For years I tried to coax some magic out of it; but nothing ever worked, and that was one reason I was so sure that the gods really were dead. Just now, I wouldn’t have thought to use it, except that the sign of the moth brought it to mind. And it worked. After all these years, it worked.”

Amarelle stared at the globe, trying to fully grasp what Esoph was telling her. He appeared deeply shaken, but Amarelle felt almost nothing. She had never known any of the gods, had never seen their power. They had all died long before she was born, or so she had been taught. Their names and symbols were just parts of stories she had heard as a child, mostly from Esoph, stories about a time long past. Except now Esoph was telling her that the gods of those stories weren’t dead after all.

Amarelle’s mind turned to a more immediate question that Esoph’s talk of gods hadn’t seemed to answer. While it was indeed astounding that the power of the gods had saved them, she still had no idea what it was they had been saved from. “But what was that moth?”

As Esoph opened his mouth to speak, the stars in the globe once again shifted, forming the outline of a moth, shaped exactly like the one that had just come out of the sprite. “The black moth,” Esoph said in a grave voice, “is the sign of Silbis.”

Amarelle suddenly felt cold to the bone. Most of the gods seemed abstract and far removed from the reality that Amarelle knew; but the stories of Silbis were many and terrible. Even having thought that Silbis had long ago been defeated, at the sound of the name her heart felt a sudden grip of icy dread. And to think that just now, in the same room with her and Esoph. . . .

“You mean that . . . that moth was. . . .” She couldn’t even say it.

“No.” Esoph said. “I don’t think that could have been Silbis himself.” His gaze seemed to turn inward again in deep thought. Then he said, “I’m not sure exactly what it was. But it was related to Silbis. And it was horrible enough.”

That was certainly true. Small though the moth was, Amarelle could not imagine being more frightened by anything else, even Silbis himself. The moth had seemed to radiate fear. Even Esoph had been terrified by it. And she had never imagined that anything could frighten Esoph.

“Well, it’s gone now, right?” she asked, hoping Esoph would say yes and put her heart at ease.

For some time Esoph didn’t reply. He still seemed buried in thought. “I wish I could say for sure that it is gone,” he said slowly. “But I’m afraid it’s not.”

“Then how can we get rid of it?” Amarelle asked.

Esoph looked at her patiently. “I have to know for certain what exactly it is before I can say.” As he spoke, his gaze returned to the body of the sprite. Gently, he touched the sprite’s hand with one finger, his face softening in a combination of fondness and sadness. “But I think it is extremely urgent that I find out.”

Suddenly Amarelle felt worried for Denelain. She had left him all alone in front of the lyribus, by the window—where the sprite had come in. If this thing of Silbis was still lurking in the forest, it could get to him easily.

“I have to go,” she said, standing up.

Esoph looked up from the sprite back to her. “Yes. You go take care of Denelain. Let me worry about this.” Then he stood up as well and held out the constellation globe. “Take this. You can use it if you see the moth again.”

Amarelle took the globe in her hand. It was warm.

“If you need to use it, hold it tight and think of love. Love, and justice and peace and happiness. Those are the powers of the gods that defeated Silbis. And sacrifice. It was their sacrifice that saved us. No minion of Silbis can stand against these things. Thinking of these things while you hold the globe will draw the power of the gods.”

“But what about you?” Amarelle asked. “If I take this, how can you defend yourself?”

“Don’t worry about me. I have plenty of artifacts of the gods here that can protect me.”

Esoph shuffled back to the wall that had opened up when Amarelle had arrived, and Amarelle followed, casting one last pained glance back at the body of the wood sprite. Esoph paused before opening the wall again to let Amarelle out, taking her left hand and looking compassionately into her eyes. “You were right to bring the sprite here. You did everything you could. I’m sorry I couldn’t save her.”

Amarelle said nothing, only nodded, and Esoph went on in a gentle, reassuring tone. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. You have protection. Both you and Denelain will be all right. I will try to find out what this thing is tonight, and I will come find you first thing in the morning. Now let me summon a sprite to keep you company on your way home.”

Esoph put his left hand on the wall. The wood creaked deeply and then opened up, a smooth crack stretching from the floor to the ceiling. It widened until it was just

big enough for two people to walk through it, and then the tree was still again. Esoph again touched the wood at the side of the opening, and this time the whole tree seemed to shift. The wood groaned and creaked, emitting a deep bass note that resonated through the whole trunk. Then, in the blink of an eye, two sprites appeared hovering in the air just outside of the opening, their wings stirring a slight breeze.

“There is a danger in the forest tonight,” Esoph said to the sprites in their own tongue as Amarelle strained to understand. *“A threat even to your kind. It flies in the form of the sign of Silbis.”* At that, the sprites exchanged glances as they hovered there in the air. But they said nothing, and Esoph went on. *“This young lady needs to go home, and would feel more at ease with an escort, especially a sprite.”*

“We will see her home safely,” said one of the sprites.

“I need one of you to stay and help me, too,” Esoph said.

The sprites looked at each other again, and then the one nearer to Esoph said, *“I will stay.”*

Esoph bowed slightly to the two sprites. *“Thank you. We elves are ever indebted to the sprites. We deepen that debt continually, and still you favor us.”* Esoph then turned to Amarelle. “Good night, Amarelle. Everything will be all right. Do not let this trouble you. It will soon pass.”

“Thank you, Esoph.” Amarelle stepped out through the opening onto the branch and walked out to where the vine still hung limp, the sprite hovering by her shoulder. Before taking the vine in her hand, Amarelle looked back. Esoph stood inside, watching her. “Good night,” she called to him.

She made her way home warily, holding the constellation globe ready in her hand. She felt comforted by Esoph’s words and by the presence of the sprite, though they said little as they went. Her thoughts were on Denelain. She had kept him waiting a long time. She tried not to think of the danger he might be in, sitting alone and helpless at the lyribus as he waited for her to return. She didn’t run, but she stepped quickly.

Amarelle was relieved when she returned home and found everything as it had been when she had left. As she helped Denelain get ready for bed, she told him all that had happened. Once Denelain was in bed, she lay by his side, cradling his head in her arm. In her other hand she held the constellation globe. Denelain quickly fell asleep, but she lay there with her eyes open, determined to stay awake and protect him. She couldn’t imagine ever feeling safe again.

The next morning, the first golden rays of sun made their way through the forest canopy and birdsong filled the cool, misty air as if nothing were out of the ordinary. But Amarelle awoke in fear, fighting her way out of a dream of black mist closing in

around her, smothering her with terror and filling her nostrils with the thick smell of death.

When she opened her eyes, the haunting visions flitted away, receding to dark corners in her mind to wait until nightfall to reemerge, and hard memory rushed in to take their place. A chill gripped Amarelle's heart as she recalled the sprite, the black mist, and the moth. Those had been no dream.

Hurriedly, she rolled over in bed to check on Denelain, and she heaved a sigh of relief when she saw that he was sleeping peacefully. She was glad that he seemed to know nothing of the danger, and she felt satisfied to carry the fear for him as if she were buying him peace of mind at the cost of her own unrest. The constellation globe lay on the bed between them, where it had slipped from her grasp when she had fallen asleep. She picked it up and carried it with her as she began her morning routine of washing and tidying.

Normally, after Denelain awakened, she would have taken him for a walk down along the creek, where they could wash and have a breakfast of nectar and sweetmoss, but she was afraid to go out. And Esoph had said he would come find her in the morning. There were plenty of nuts, fruit, and dried sweetmoss in the kitchen, so she made a simple breakfast of them and sat down at the table with Denelain to enjoy it as best she could.

After they had eaten, Amarelle sat Denelain down on their couch and settled down beside him with a book, *History before the Great War*, hoping to immerse herself in stories of the past and forget about the danger that might be floating in the air around their home until Esoph arrived. She kept the constellation globe beside her as she read.

Hours passed. The birds and insects were still singing, and the air was turning warm. Amarelle was feeling content as she leaned against Denelain and read. She had forgotten about the constellation globe that lay on the couch beside her. But then she heard a cry rising from the forest floor just outside the window.

“Amarelle! Amarelle!”

She dropped her book with a start. The sense of danger came back to her suddenly, and she was holding the globe up in her hand before she realized that it was the voice of her friend Cyrilla. Still holding the globe, Amarelle rushed to the window and looked down.

“Amarelle! Oh, thank the gods!” Cyrilla shouted again when she saw Amarelle appear in the window. “Come down! Or let me come up!” She looked upset, and there was urgency in her voice.

“What is it?” Amarelle asked.

“It’s Esoph. Something terrible has happened.” Cyrilla’s voice was shaking. “He—He’s dead.”

Amarelle’s breath froze within her, and her heart clenched in a knot. She looked at the globe in her hand that she had taken from Esoph. He had said that he had other things that could protect him. He couldn’t be dead.

“Amarelle,” Cyrilla cried. “Please, let me come up.”

Without a word, Amarelle nodded and walked numbly to the wall across from the window and put her hand on the wood. The tree shifted, creaking and groaning, and after a moment Cyrilla was rushing up through the trunk to her.

“Oh, Amarelle!” Cyrilla put her arms around Amarelle and leaned against her. Her face was wet with tears. Amarelle returned the hug, rubbing Cyrilla’s back with her free hand, though she still felt numb herself.

“What—” she cut off, afraid to ask because she already knew the answer. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Cyrilla replied. “Valomer went to see him this morning. They often walk together in the morning. But when he got there, something was wrong. The tree—it wasn’t right. And when he went inside, he found—found Esoph on the floor in his library.” Cyrilla began sobbing softly.

Amarelle rubbed Cyrilla’s back with one hand. An image came into her mind of Esoph lying on the floor in his library, panting, eyes filled with panic, just as the sprite had been. She raised her free hand and clutched her head, trying to think of what she ought to have done differently the night before.

As she thought, the constellation globe slipped from her other hand and hit the floor and shattered. Cyrilla jumped and pulled away from Amarelle, looking down to see what had made the noise. Amarelle stared at the broken shards of the globe. The pieces were no longer black, but instead looked like ordinary glass.

She knew she ought to feel panic; her only protection was gone. But her fear was suppressed by numbness—numbness and guilt. “It’s my fault,” She said softly.

“What?” Cyrilla said between sniffs, new tears running down her face. “What’s your fault?”

Amarelle took Cyrilla’s hands in hers, as if she were asking for forgiveness, and told her what had happened the night before. She had carried the danger to Esoph, and then she had taken away the constellation globe, the only thing that she knew could protect him. And now he was dead.

“Silbis?” Cyrilla said disbelievingly when Amarelle had finished recounting it all. “But how can that be? He’s dead. All the gods are dead.”

“Esoph said it wasn’t Silbis himself. But it was something . . . of . . . Silbis.”

Suddenly it occurred to Amarelle that if the moth had returned to kill Esoph, it was likely still in the area, and anyone nearby would be in danger.

“Where’s Valomer?” she asked.

“He went back with some others to—to get Esoph’s body and to try to figure out what happened,” Cyrilla replied.

“Oh, no!” Amarelle said. “They might be in danger. You have to go warn them!”

“But . . .” Cyrilla’s eyes were open wide in terror. “Come with me, Amarelle.”

“I have to—” Amarelle turned toward Denelain, who was still sitting on the couch as if nothing had happened. She didn’t want to leave him alone. She looked back at Cyrilla, whose cheeks still glistened with tears. It was Valomer, Cyrilla’s husband, who was in danger now.

“I’ll go with you, Cyrilla. Everything will be all right.” But even before the words had finished leaving her mouth, she remembered that Esoph had just told her the same thing the night before.

Before leaving with Cyrilla, Amarelle whispered in Denelain’s ear to let him know where she was going, and stroked his cheek. “I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

The two women ran as fast as they could to Esoph’s. When they arrived, the base of the tree was open, and they rushed in together and climbed the long spiral walkway up to Esoph’s rooms. Valomer and two other elves were in the library, gently laying Esoph’s body on a pallet. They stood when Amarelle and Cyrilla entered the room.

“You have to get out of here,” Amarelle said in a rush, still panting from running through the forest and up the tree. “I know what happened. This place is not safe.”

“What are you talking about?” one of the other two elves asked. “There’s no one here but us.”

“You have to listen to her,” Cyrilla said, going to Valomer’s side and taking his arm.

Amarelle went to the pallet and knelt beside Esoph. His eyes were closed, and his dear old face looked peaceful, as it always had in life. She touched his cheek. She half expected him to stir at the feel of her finger on his face, but he remained perfectly still. He was really gone. She only hoped that he hadn’t suffered as the wood sprite had.

“What happened, Amarelle?” Valomer asked gently, breaking her attention away from Esoph’s body. “Why is this place not safe?”

Amarelle stood up and looked at the table where the wood sprite had lain the night before. The body was gone. Of course. The other wood sprite had taken it away. Valomer and the others were watching Amarelle, waiting for her to answer.

She told the story again, pointing to where she had set the sprite on the table, and where she and Esoph had backed against the wall when the moth had come at them.

“Esoph insisted that I take the constellation globe for protection on my way home. He said he had other things that could protect him.” Tears welled up in Amarelle’s eyes. She looked at Esoph’s body lying on the pallet. “It’s all my fault.”

“No,” Valomer said softly. “This is the fault of no one but the spirit that did it. Silbis.” He added the name as a whisper. “If it really happened as you say, then we are all in danger. We must leave at once.” He motioned to the other two men with him, and they stooped to lift the pallet.

Amarelle was anxious to get away from the danger, but she was reluctant to leave the familiar home of dear old Esoph. It was as if they were surrendering it to Silbis. But there was no choice. As she looked about the room one last time, her eyes fell on a book on the table. Esoph’s journal. He had been writing.

“Wait,” Amarelle said. Everyone turned to look at her, the three men holding Esoph’s pallet just outside the opening in the wall. “He was working to find out what it was that killed the sprite—and how it can be defeated. If he learned anything, he would have written it down.” She walked around the table to the journal and picked it up. “I’ll take his journal. It could save us.”

When they reached the bottom of the tree, Valomer turned to Cyrilla and brushed a lock of her hair back from her face with one hand. “I must take care of Esoph now. You take Amarelle home.” Then, turning to Amarelle, he added, “Let us know what you find in the journal.”

Amarelle nodded silently, and tears came back into her eyes as she looked down at Esoph again, her teacher and her friend. She touched his hand and, unable to find her voice, she said goodbye to him in her heart. The three men carried him away, and soon they were out of sight among the thick trees.

Cyrilla walked Amarelle back home in silence, the two holding hands. Before Amarelle went inside, she hugged Cyrilla one more time.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Me too.” Cyrilla squeezed Amarelle’s hand gently before turning to go back to her own home and wait for Valomer to return.

Once Amarelle was inside, back with Denelain, she opened Esoph’s journal and found the last entry. It was from the night before, and it was several pages long. In the first few pages, written in the crooked strokes of a shaky hand, was a detailed description of everything from Amarelle’s arrival with the sprite to the black moth. At the end of the description was a thick horizontal line across the page as if to

signify a break between entries, and then there was more writing.

The wood sprites tell me that they have heard of a few similar occurrences in other places of inexplicable deaths connected with sightings of the black moth. Some rumors of such occurrences can be traced back nearly to the time of the Great War, but there is no record of any occurrences before then. This suggests that it was some event of the war itself that triggered these killings.

It has been theorized, and it seems reasonable to me, that when Silbis was defeated, his spirit was not extinguished entirely, but rather was shattered into a number of pieces that are spread out over the world. Since his spirit had wormed its way into the hearts of humans, it had no single focal point for either life or death. The nature of the attack of the other gods against Silbis is yet unknown, but it is conceivable that, like a worm that has been chopped into pieces, fragments—"wisps"—of the spirit of Silbis remain alive and retain some of the capacities of Silbis himself, though they of course lack his full strength.

These ideas are so far mere speculation, but if they are true, they raise some important and frightening questions. Are these wisps of the spirit of Silbis weakening and dying away as severed parts of most living beings would, or are they growing stronger and more complete as pieces of a worm can do? Can these wisps recombine, and if so, are there enough to reform Silbis completely? Or is the present situation static, so that the world is doomed to be haunted by these wisps as they are until the end of time?

Some more optimistic questions are raised as well. Could a similar thing have happened to the good spirits? It seems that at the height of the Great War, Love had found its way into the hearts of humans alongside the spirit of Silbis. Could there now remain wisps of the spirits of other gods as well? It is reasonable to assume that their fates are bound together in balance. If the remaining fragments of Silbis are dying away, then surely there remain fragments of the other gods that are also dying away. Or on the other hand, if the wisps of Silbis are growing stronger, perhaps there are wisps of the gods of good that are also growing stronger. In any case, there is still hope.

The more immediate and practical question that remains to us is, how do we face these wisps of Silbis? I no longer believe that it was the constellation globe that saved us from the wisp this evening. Rather, it was my willingness to stand between the wisp and Amarelle, to sacrifice myself for her sake. It was

the same sort of loving sacrifice that shattered Silbis at the end of the Great War, and the wisp sensed it in me and was afraid of it.

No, there is no sign or sacred object that can defeat these wisps. Only love itself, which the wisp senses and fears. And such love is only present when there is more than one person present—it could be between parent and child, husband and wife, or between close friends. And I believe that in order for it to be effective, it must be deep enough that there is a willingness to sacrifice oneself.

I must tell Amarelle all of this immediately. I cannot let her go on believing that the constellation globe can protect her. I must tell everyone. Until this wisp of Silbis is defeated, we are all in danger.

There the journal entry ended. Esoph seemed to have finished all that he intended to write the night before. He must have been preparing to come and find Amarelle when he was killed.

All of the speculation about fragments of the spirits of gods meant little to Amarelle, but the part about how to face a wisp of Silbis was clearly important. Amarelle glanced at the broken shards of the globe that remained on the floor. She felt relieved to know that Esoph had decided that it wasn't the globe that had protected them after all.

Esoph's theory that the wisp could be defeated with love wasn't particularly comforting, though, vague as it was. When the wisp had come at Esoph and her, neither of them had had time to think. If it came again for her and Denelain, she wouldn't know what to do but to stand between it and Denelain. But she could only do that if she wasn't frozen by fear, as she had been at Esoph's. The idea of making a conscious effort to harness sacrificial love to scare the wisp away seemed ridiculous.

Such love is only present when there is more than one person present.

Amarelle looked at Denelain, who was snoring softly beside her on the couch. She couldn't leave him alone again. She had to hope that Cyrilla and Valomer would come to her soon so she could tell them.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Amarelle was beginning to feel hungry again. She prepared a small meal and woke Denelain to eat. When they finished, she sat down on the couch with him.

Also on the couch beside her were *History before the Great War* and Esoph's journal. With a knot forming in her throat, she picked up Esoph's journal and opened it to the first page. She traced her finger over the first line of crooked handwriting and smiled through tears that welled up as she imagined Esoph—peaceful, happy and

wise old Esoph—sitting at the table in his library recording his thoughts. As she read, she remembered how she had sat on his lap as a child and he had told her stories from times long past.

Amarelle wouldn't have noticed the fading of the sunlight or the chirping of the crickets as evening fell, except that it became too dark for her to read. She had been engrossed in the thoughts Esoph had recorded in his journal and in her own happy memories of him. And so she was shocked when she realized that night had set in. Closing the journal and setting it down carefully, she rose to light a lantern and prepare dinner, leaving Denelain asleep on the couch.

As she heated a pot of water to make porridge, she hoped that Cyrilla and Valomer would come soon. They needed to know what she had learned from Esoph's journal. She wished she could summon a wood sprite, as Esoph had done, to help alert everyone.

Just as the water was beginning to boil, she thought she heard a noise from the living room, where Denelain was. She froze for a moment, straining to listen, and then rushed out of the kitchen to check on Denelain.

Denelain had sat up on the couch, and he was staring at something. There, fluttering in the air before him, was the black moth. Amarelle's breath caught in her throat, and her heart began to pound. As if in slow motion, she saw Denelain reach out his hand and close his fingers around the moth. He then opened his fist and stared at his palm. The moth was gone.

Suddenly, Denelain started trembling, and his eyes filled with terror, the same terror Amarelle had seen in the sprite's eyes. He turned and looked Amarelle in the eye, and he seemed to be pleading with her to help him.

"No!" Amarelle shrieked. Rushing toward him, she clasped his hands in hers, looked into his helpless, frightened eyes.

"Leave him alone!" she shouted. Still, Denelain trembled, more violently than before. His mouth opened, and he gasped.

"No!" Amarelle yelled again. Tears were streaming down her face now. She took his head in her hands and pressed her forehead against his. Her own body shook with sobs now. The tree groaned and shifted as if it shared her distress.

Amarelle embraced Denelain, one arm around his shoulders and the other around his head, pressing her face against his. Squeezing him tightly, she reached out in her mind and . . . pulled . . . with all of her will. She had a sense of something stretching, resisting her, but she pulled harder. And then she felt it.

The wisp came out of Denelain and into herself. It was struggling to get away now, but she held onto it. She had to keep it away from Denelain no matter what.

The feeling of dread and horror that she had seen on the sprite's face before, and on Denelain's face just now, began to fill her. But she pushed it down. She knew what she had to do. She had to get it away from Denelain.

She heaved herself up away from Denelain and looked about the room, panting, straining her soul to hold the wisp within herself. For Denelain. For Esoph. For the rest of her people who were in danger. She had to end it now. Her eyes fell on the window, and she ran.

She didn't think about herself or how much it might hurt to jump. She didn't even notice the sensation of falling. Her whole mind was focused on one thing. Denelain. She had to get the wisp away from him.

"Amarelle!"

Her whole body hurt badly. She couldn't move. She opened her eyes. It was dark. She was outside, on the ground. By the light from the lamps along the path to her home, she could see several people gathered around her. Cyrilla and Valomer, and a few others. Cyrilla had her hands over her mouth and was staring down in horror. Valomer was kneeling beside her, silently checking her wounds. His face looked grim.

Amarelle tried to open her mouth, tried to force words out. She had won. Somehow she knew. The wisp was dead. Denelain was safe. She wanted to say it, but she couldn't.

Valomer bent down closer to her face. He could see that she was trying to speak. "What is it, Amarelle?"

Amarelle felt her strength fading. She changed what she had been trying to say. There was one more thing that she wanted now, more than anything else.

"Denelain," she managed to get out in a soft rasp.

"You want Denelain?" Valomer asked.

"Play for me," she said, putting all of her remaining strength into this one last sentence. She didn't think she could say anything more.

Valomer looked confused, but Cyrilla seemed to understand. She knelt down beside him, placing her hand on his shoulder. "Go get Denelain and his lyribus. I'll stay with her."

"Of course," Valomer said. Without hesitating, he disappeared from Amarelle's view.

Cyrilla leaned over and took Amarelle's hand in hers. "You'll be all right," she said, her voice shaking. Amarelle could tell from Cyrilla's pained expression that her own body must appear badly broken. Cyrilla's eyes shone with tears, and Amarelle wanted to cry too, not because she was in pain, but because her friend was crying at

the sight of her pain. How she loved Cyrilla.

A moment later, Valomer was back, setting the lyribus up on its stand beside Amarelle. Another elf put the stool before it and led Denelain to sit down, placing his hands on the keys. He began playing almost immediately, and the music floated through the forest like a cloud of tranquility.

Amarelle could see Denelain's face over the back of the lyribus. He was watching her as he played. She felt tired, and the pain throughout her body was intense. She had a growing urge to close her eyes and rest, to escape the pain in sleep, but she fought to keep her eyes open so that she could see her dear Denelain's face for just a moment longer. In the dim light from the lamps, she could see tears running down his cheeks as he watched her; and knowing that death was upon her, she gave thanks that the last sight she would behold in this life was this picture of her husband's love for her.

Denelain, too, saw the tears in Amarelle's eyes, and as his hands played the music that he had written for her so long ago, grief welled up within him, wakening his soul, and everything returned to him. He remembered Amarelle as she had been when they had played together as children, the sound of her laughter as he chased her through the forest. He saw her looking up at him from under the veil of her wedding dress as Esoph clasped their hands together while they spoke their vows.

A lifetime of memory washed over Denelain and flooded his mind in a single moment, and he felt as though he would burst with joy and grief, laughter and tears. He remembered every moment of the last nine years as Amarelle had cared for him tenderly and waited for him with patient hope, never giving up. And he remembered all that had just happened, remembered Amarelle reaching into his soul, removing his terror, and sacrificing herself to save him.

"Amarelle!" he gasped.

His hands stopped playing. There were others standing around him, staring at him in shock, but he hardly noticed. All he saw was his beloved Amarelle lying on the ground, dying. But she was smiling. Tears were running down from the corners of her eyes, dripping onto her hair, fanned out beneath her on the forest floor, and he could see pain in her eyes, but she was smiling. He rushed around the lyribus to her and knelt by her side, taking her hands in his own.

"Oh, Amarelle," he said again, tenderly. "I love you." He was sure her smile deepened after those last words, the words she had been yearning to hear just once more for the last nine years. And then she closed her eyes, and her chest was still.

"No!" Denelain said softly. He bowed his head, and his body shook with sobs.

His tears fell on Amarelle's face, mixing with her own. Valomer was by his side, putting an arm around his shoulder, whispering words of comfort. He was vaguely aware of others as well, all mourning with him.

After several minutes, Denelain's sobs subsided, and he sat on the ground stroking Amarelle's hand. Then, as he watched, a glowing aura materialized around her body and coalesced into a silvery mist that rose up into the air above her. It swirled slowly around Denelain and brushed his face as it floated upward. Its touch was warm, and it stirred his memory of how Amarelle had often brushed his cheek in the same way with the back of her hand. It was as if Amarelle were saying goodbye one last time.

Denelain stood and gazed up at the silver mist as it rose above him into the sky through a broad opening in the forest canopy above. He held up a hand to protest its departure, but on and on it continued up into the sky, growing larger and brighter as it rose.

When it reached the heights of the heavens, the mist swirled and materialized into the shape of a woman with long, flowing hair. Amarelle. Then, slowly, the mist began to draw in on itself, getting brighter at certain points and fading elsewhere, until at last there hung in the sky a lone constellation of twelve stars. Denelain and the others stood there for a long time staring up at it in awe. Then finally Denelain whispered into the air, "I love you, Amarelle."

All of the wood elves' emotions were bittersweet the next day as Amarelle and Esoph's bodies were buried. The loss was crushing. No one shed more tears than Denelain himself as he wept for his dear Amarelle and the nine years with her that he had lost. But at the same time, Denelain's recovery and the defeat of the wisp of Silbis had filled everyone with hope.

In the years that followed, Denelain lived much as Esoph had lived, spending most of his hours alone and in silence. Many believed him despondent, but those who really knew him considered him to be the most joyful of all the wood elves. He had suffered great loss, but rather than living in grief, he chose to celebrate the joy that he had been blessed with. To the day he died, every night Denelain would play on the lyribus his song for Amarelle. And it was said that the lone constellation of the woman with flowing hair shone brighter whenever the sound of Denelain's lyribus filled the air.