

Chapter I

The cool musty shade of the toadstool was a welcome escape. Leaning back against the thick stem, Danaí watched as féyree danced and pirouetted in flight, their colorful wings flickering in the sunlight as if a rainbow were scattering itself through the air. Some swooped down to the laden trestle tables for a goblet of goldenvine dew, a nibble of nuts. Others gathered near the musicians, laughing as they clapped along to the lively tune of skirling pipes, windhorns and throbbing tambours, laced with the vibrant thrum of harps.

Clumps of wingless srytes stood apart, deep in conversation. Danaí guessed they too were worrying about the impending Rites. She shoved away her nightmare by gazing about the meadow of the Great Dell where the trees and new grass were blushing the pale green of early spring.

What if she failed Krisályš? Then what? She had heard whispers of srytes who did not return. One never heard why. She knew only that the Rites had to be passed by every sryte if they were to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to live in their realm of Lampion, and earn their wings to become fully-fledged féyree. She shuddered her shoulders, trying to relieve the itch of her wing bumps. The dream of the strangling cocoon washed back up into her memory.

Already the sun was beginning to wester, crowning the *Shehn* on whose massive branches the first oak leaves were unfurling. Clumps of lúnasaberries clung to the smaller branches, the white globes peering out from among dark green leaves. When Lúnasa rose, his full face turned to bestow his blessing, the Rites would commence.

A merry laugh intertwined with a giggle passed nearby. Danaí glimpsed

Krisállys Chronicles Of Féyree: Crossover

Aaron and Tátia weaving their way through the stubby grass blades. Aaron's golden skin and hair contrasted sharply against Tátia's pearl and black. Each carried a goblet of dew. They vanished into a hawthorn bush, where new pink buds wove a concealing screen.

Despite her worries, Danaí smiled wryly. The aphrodisiac qualities of goldenvine dew were well known. It was a standing joke in Goldyn Vale that Tátia had indulged so often, it had caused her promiscuous personality. Since coupling was forbidden during the Rites, they both appeared to be getting in a last romp before the Mentors' summons. As if I know anything about coupling anyway, Danaí sighed.

She glanced about the Dell, noting that almost all the sprytes from the outlying dells, glens and vales had arrived, most on bird back. A few stragglers were just touching down. She spied a raven back-flapping to land beside the Trykle, the small creek that meandered from the wood across the Dell. She recognized her close friend Pook and another spryte climbing off its back.

"Danaí?" Bright azure eyes peeked under the toadstool's rim, then Triása squatted down to face her niece. "May I join you?" At Danaí's nod, she folded her cobalt wings, ducked beneath, and settled down on the soft moss. "Let me guess. Krisállys?"

Danaí did not answer, and Triása found herself once again musing over her niece's unusual coloring—silver hair, skin, and emerald eyes. The old chant came to mind.

*Silver, silver, green.
In youth remains unseen.
Wingéd, changes brings
future that has been.*

She set it aside. Not even the Teaching Skalds knew what it meant, but tradition required all younglings learn the rhyme. She waited, fingering the intricate gold Charmer amulet nestled at her throat, symbol of her chosen Calling among the féyree. Her work with the wood folk required the utmost patience for they distrusted magic and kept a cautious distance. Sometimes silence asked the best questions of all.

"I don't think I'm ready," Danaí whispered, hugging her knees. "I keep having that terrible nightmare. I'm wrapped, blind, deaf, dumb. Unable to break free. Smothering while everybody stands about and laughs and laughs. I'm dying for my wings and nobody will help me. I feel myself die, and exist motionless in a gray-blue silence of nothing. I never become a féyree." She turned despairing eyes on her aunt. "I know I must sound ridiculous to you—yet... is there nothing you can tell me?"

Triása tucked an escaped strand of silver back into her carefully plaited red hair, then shook her head. "You know I may not speak of the Rites," she gently rebuked. "Each of you must discover your Self and your Calling during the trials you will undergo." She paused, absently drumming her fingers on the

Krisály's Chronicles Of Féyree: Crossover

ground. How could she reassure Danaí that fear was to be expected when poised on an abyss of change into which there was no choice but to fall? But the Mentors and the Dolmen closely scrutinized the sprytes' actions throughout the Rites, and could discern if one knew too much. Such a violation would force both spryte and féyree to forever forfeit their wings for breaching the cloak of secrecy that surrounded these sacred rituals.

"Listen well." She gazed out at the Dell, a relaxed smile creasing the corners of her mouth and eyes, her voice barely a whisper. "Panic is a poor leader. Only a clear mind has good judgment and can solve a problem. There is nothing to fear but your self." She paused, and her voice brightened. "The Skalds have trained you well, you are capable, smart, and if I do say so myself, quite talented."

She punctuated the last words with her rich laugh. Danaí leaned over and hugged her hard, hiding for a moment in the safe return embrace. She had been fostered out to Triása as a youngling, and loved and respected her gentle yet firm manner.

"Come. Anticipation is a *dirq* with two keen edges: delight and fear." Triása eased from under the toadstool, and held out her hand to Danaí. "Only the Mother and Lúnasa know the future. Even though the Rites commence this gloaming, we also celebrate Spring, the blossom time, the season of rebirth. Let us go listen to Skalds Rianya and Amryn sing the tale of the birth of our beautiful realm of Lampion. Listen! The Orpheií are gathering with them near the sacred Shehn. Come."

* * * * *

Danaí shivered as she stood waiting on the stream bank. Lúnasa's silvery light seemed only to darken the forest shadows. Water droplets pearly her waist-length hair, and the air was permeated by the sharp scent of crushed rosemary that her Mentor had scrubbed her with during the ritual bath. After, her Mentor had slipped a plum-colored tunic over her head, then disappeared into the shadows. The first Rite, the Cleansing, so far had only been breath-taking because of the snow-chilled waters.

In the soft waiting silence, she thought of how Mentor Melítsa had strode forth with the other Mentors from among the ancient Shehn's gnarled roots. Their steps matched the beat of the pounding tambours, until each stood before a spryte. They looked as Danaí imagined wraiths might appear—draped in ground-sweeping hooded robes that flowed about them like thick brown water, wings covered, faces absorbed in the darkness of cavernous crows, hands swallowed by wide-mouthed sleeves. Cold, impersonal, silent forms that would rule their lives until the final Rite of Krisály's.

Close by a startled bird gave a half-chirp. Danaí staggered, choking back a cry of pain as someone grabbed her hair and nearly yanked her off her feet. She

Krisály's Chronicles Of Féyree: Crossover

twisted her head and glimpsed a cowed figure.

“Stand.”

She stood still. Obedience was paramount when an Order was given by any Mentor. She winced as she heard the thin hiss of metal being drawn from its sheath.

The shadowy figure hacked away, showing no mercy or concern for Danaí's burning scalp. In moments, a coarse silver thatch was all that remained, and the figure melted into the darkness. Danaí blinked away tears, gazing down at the long silver locks curling about her feet.

“Spryte, come.” Melítsa appeared and tapped her on the left shoulder, evincing no reaction to her Charge's ransacked appearance.

They slipped through the forest. Her hearing made acute from pain and nerves, Danaí thought she could detect the faintest rustles as other pairs converged upon the Dell, now devoid of all traces of the earlier celebration. Glancing about she realized all the sprytes had been shorn. Why, we look like thistles, she thought, surprised to discover some shred of humor.

There were twenty-seven members in her pod, as a group of sprytes were known. Twenty-seven, one *lumna*. Lúnasa's sacred number, the time it took for him to look away from, then return his gaze to Lampion, as he did tonight in full *solás*. They were herded into a group, then encircled by a matching number of Mentors who waited like watching pillars. Lúnasa hung directly overhead, austere in his realm of stars, drowning the Dell in silver light without shadows. Far off, a fox gave a shrill bark, an owl screamed.

A Mentor detached itself from the circle, and eased back its cowl. The sprytes gasped. It was the Dolmen.

The almost unbearably white skin emitted a dull gleam, unlike the faint shimmering bodyglow of most féyree. No wrinkles cragged its gaunt face, and the hairless skull seemed to absorb rather than reflect light. Ebony bird-like eyes glared out from silver-rimmed sockets, peering into each spryte's face, leaving them feeling as if their private self had been cored, inspected, found wanting. Shoulders slumped or stiffened in response. In those eternity of moments, each succumbed to the Dolmen's scouring scrutiny.

Danaí caught her breath. The most Revered One! The Most High of Loremasters! One that was neither male nor female, higher than even the Lord and Lady of Revelstoke. The eyes delved hers, and suddenly the urgent necessities of her life seemed trivial, self-absorbed. She bit her lip.

At last, the Dolmen raised both hands, palms out in formal greeting. “Sprytes of all Vales, all Dells, all Glens. Thrice welcome be ye. The Mother greets ye. Lúnasa greets ye. We greet ye. Ye are about to embark on the Rites of Krisály. Ye risk death, perhaps worse. Ye may choose. Leave now. Or proceed. But know that after this moment, there is only one path. Choose!” Its voice cracked like a lightning-split stone.

Daring them. Denying them. Doubting them.

Krisály's Chronicles Of Féyrye: Crossover

Not a spryte even breathed. The surrounding woods waited in silence.

The Dolmen's arms sank. There was a barely perceptible nod. "So be it. Eight are the Rites ye shall endure. The first is passed. Survive ye all, and only then shall ye confront the ninth, the most sacred, the Rite of Krisály!" Its pale hands retrieved the hood, extinguishing the face, and it stepped back into the circle.

Danaí blinked and glanced about at her podmates. She wondered if her face looked as dull and drained. As if they had all been heaving great weights. A sudden thought pecked at her. I had a chance to leave, and I didn't take it. Why? Unbidden, a second thought popped out. Now I'm in for it.

* * * * *

Danaí collapsed by the creek, sucking for air. Her myriad scratches burned with sweat. It seemed she had been fleeing the whip-wielding Mentor for ever.

The Dolmen's retreat had signaled the Mentors to lunge at the sprytes, uncoiling hidden whips that nipped at shoulders, buttocks, legs. With startled yelps, the sprytes had scattered in all directions, fleeing into the woods.

Danaí had stumbled and tripped over solid shadows, shoved through clinging twigs, dodging the whip's stinging lash. Dawnshine brought no respite. Every time she had tried to stop, the Mentor reappeared within moments, forcing her to lurch up and onwards.

The tangy smell of sun-warmed pine needles pierced her fog of desperation. Panic. Triása had warned her not to panic. But how could you not when being hunted without mercy? Then figure out some way to stop the hunt, murmured a small voice from within, like a clear draught of water bubbling through mud. Danaí scanned her surroundings. A heap of pine cones to the left, a blister of pine saplings further down, the stream burbling to the right. Forcing herself back to her feet, she dashed towards the stream, deliberately scuffing through pine needles, then darted behind the cones, careful to avoid their spiny points as she crouched low to earth to peer between their thick scales.

The forest duff crunched behind a nearby birch, and the Mentor appeared, whip tightly furled. It studied the ground, then followed the scuff marks. Anger coiled behind Danaí's eyes. She held her breath. Five feylengths. Four. The Mentor, panting slightly, stepped past her hiding place. Now!

Bellowing with fury, she slammed into the Mentor's back, knocking the figure sprawling. She yanked the whip away, then stepped aside, and cracked the long thong, savoring the hissing snap. Slowly she raised it. Your turn, she thought, intent on paying back her tormentor for the pain, the fear, the self-doubt.

The cowl crumpled back as the figure rolled over. Melítsa studied her Charge, still a little winded. She observed Danaí's posture, and took a deep breath. Revenge could be a clumsy mistress. Now came the other half of the Hunted Rite.

Krisállys Chronicles Of Féyree: Crossover

Melítsa's passive posture infuriated Danaí. Red sparks flecked her vision. How dare she lie there so uncaring, she thought. She struck. The whip dragged harmlessly through the thick unyielding cloth. Danaí lifted her arm again, determined to strike even harder, oblivious to the Mentor's disappointed expression.

In one fluid motion, Melítsa surged up, flung off the cloak, and unfolded her amber wings to fly easily out of reach of the snaking whip. She plummeted behind Danaí and pinned her whip arm against her back with a quick wrench that extracted a sharp cry. Flailing her body from side to side, Danaí kicked at Melítsa's legs, trying to throw her off balance. "Danaí, stop! This is an Order. Stop! STOP!" The last command was a full throated shout.

It penetrated. Danaí slumped, flooded by gut-wrenching humiliation. You've already failed, she thought. Don't cry.

Melítsa released her and stepped back, content to let her suffer. It was necessary, the only way Danaí could complete the Rite, despite this common failure. The silence seethed.

Trying to ignore the darts of pain in her shoulder, Danaí turned to face her Mentor. "Melítsa, I... I..." There seemed no words that could excuse the enormity of her actions, she thought. No, her crime! She had assaulted a Mentor. During the Rites! Such an act could merit only one penalty, she was sure. But it was more than that. She had always taken such pride in her self-control, had felt a lofty sense of disdain when others erupted into a display of strong emotions. The savage rape of her self-image robbed her of speech.

"You wanted to kill me is what you can't say." Melítsa spoke softly, plucking through the emotions that careened across Danaí's face. "You wanted to hurt me as I hurt you. Didn't you?"

Danaí nodded, wishing she could crawl away and hide in a squirrel hole.

"Sit." It was an Order. Melítsa settled into a comfortable position beside the trembling spryte, and gazed at the sun-splashed stream dancing over the rocks for a few moments. "Danaí, how long have the féyree survived?"

Danaí responded from habit, the chants of the Teaching Skalds coming to mind. "Since the birth of Lámpon."

"And why have they survived?"

The Laws of Lúnasa came to Danaí's lips. "Because they have avoided danger. Because they are wary. Because although they may know magic, they are not immortal. Because they learn and know their limitations. As a folk and as an individual."

"Explain."

Danaí struggled to grasp this Order. Nobody explained the Laws. They just were!

Melítsa insisted. "Explain."

"I think... I think it means that we must not abuse magic?" Danaí was guessing, and she knew Melítsa knew it. Her thoughts were muddled. She hurt more inside than out. The Dolmen had known she would fail. Would any others

Krisálvs Chroniclez Of Féyree: Crossover

suffer such shame?

“No.” Melítsa hesitated. She empathized with Danaí’s feelings, wanted to soften the pain. Yet this humiliation was instrumental to the Rite. She could not reveal that virtually all sprytes failed the physical part. But the true hurdle was their interpretation of the experience. If they could not.... “Danaí, when did you decide to become hunter, not hunted?”

Abraded by such a precise description, Danaí blurted out, “Because you never let up. You just kept chasing me, hunting me, hurting. What else could I do? Run until I dropped? Let panic rule?”

“Actually, you did just that.” She smiled at Danaí’s shocked look. “I know you think you took control of the situation, but consider your behavior.”

Concentrating, Danaí forced herself to re-experience the moment. She recalled her exhilaration upon capturing the whip, the power of striking back. She had been in control—or had she? The feelings—the anger she amended to herself—had been so violent, so consuming, yet.... She shook her head. “I was sure I was in control. It was wonderful, such a release after all the fear I had felt! And yet I wasn’t truly in control because I was reacting to your actions. Just like panic.” She hesitated, then plunged onwards. “Yes, I wanted to hurt you, maybe even kill you. Anything to stop your hurting me. Oh, by the Mother....” She paused, staring at the wriggling heat shimmers rising from a flat stone nearby. “That’s why sprytes aren’t taught magic until the Rites, isn’t it? Because we can’t conceive our limitations. We really don’t even know ourselves yet. If you armed us with magic, we’d probably kill each other instead of getting into fisticuffs in a rage we haven’t learned how to control. And depending on our moral consciences, we might even feel proud of the accomplishment—at least at that moment. True?”

“Yes, and therein are the roots of this Hunted Rite.” Melítsa’s voice deepened, her dark blue eyes seeming to see far into a forgotten distance. “Many are the old tales that originate time out of mind, when féyree were like all wild things, living the days as they came, as the Mother first intended. But there is a younger tale that you are not permitted to be told until now.

“Some thousand winters past it was, a féyree discovered certain magics—we have no records or tales to tell us how—and grew mighty with power. Sôlon was his name. He gathered those about him that concurred with his ideas. He wielded magic like a whip, and tormented the folk that resisted, ceaselessly forcing them to do his bidding. Finally, many of the folk rebelled, believing how could it get any worse?

“It was a bloody war, with féyree slaughtering féyree. Whole dells were annihilated, and it is said that the Mother wept crystal tears of blood for her warring folk. Sôlon was killed during a final terrible battle, but after seasons seemingly beyond count of battles and bloodshed, the Féyree had lost their sense of purpose, of direction, of reason for being. And so more seasons passed. It was known as the Days of Dimness, a dark time for our folk.

Krisálýs Chronicles Of Féyree: Crossover

“It is told how the Twins arose, the younglings of the Blessed One, and began to preach for thought, not emotions, as the guiding principles. These were the precursors to the Laws of Lúnasa.

“Now by then, many féyree knew fragments of magic, but it was a jumbled muddle, without reason or rhyme. The Twins collected the spells and knowledge, and working with the Chief Táins of the scattered groups, they scribed the Scrolls of Atonement. And these scrolls were copied, and carried back to each group, and the new Laws were taught, and slowly the folk began to rise again.”

Melítsa’s eyes refocused on the enthralled spryte. “Danaí, we are volatile, passionate folk. You have rightly determined that it is only by learning our own limitations that we can gain control. Only then are we fit to use magic. And even then...,” she hesitated, momentarily unsure of imparting this last piece of information, yet driven by some premonition to do so. “Sometimes, despite the Laws and the Scrolls and all the Teachings, there are féyree who have passed through the Rites, and still lose control.” She rose and extended her hand.

Danaí gratefully took it. Getting to her feet, she realized how little she really knew of her folk and her self.

They hiked back through the woods, Melítsa pointing out the early shoots of certain flowers and plants that would provide food on journeys. “You will soon receive instruction on this and many other survival skills as well as spellcasting, weapons-making and basic weather lore. There is much you have to learn after sheltering these one and twenty winters in your bower in Goldyn Vale.” She laughed, remembering. “I did not realize how much I took for granted until these Rites, how much went on that I did not even know was happening. I think that you shall discover more than you could ever expect about your self and our folk these next six lumnas.”

Danaí ventured a question. “Were you afraid of Krisálýs?”

“Yes and no. The unknown always brings fear. How you choose to deal with that fear is what determines your mettle. Ah! There is the Dell.”

At the call of the reed pipe, the pod gathered once again, encircled by the Mentors, many of which had torn cloaks. Danaí wondered how many others had also flubbed the first part of the Hunted Rite.

The Dolmen uncowled and studied the pod for several moments, waiting until they stood perfectly still. Then it asked each Mentor, “Did your Charge pass?” One by one, they stepped forward, pulled back their hoods, and answered yes. They then re-cowled and stepped back into the circle.

When Melítsa advanced, Danaí felt time slow to the crawl of ice over stone. Her heart throbbed in her mouth.

“Did your Charge pass?”

Melítsa paused, her eyes holding Danaí’s gaze for the briefest moment. “Yes.”

Neither noticed another Mentor relax at the affirmation.