



Song of the Dryad

BY

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Dedication

To all of my amazing new subscribers! I couldn't do this without you!

Part One: The Dryad

A sour smell, bitter and thick, tinged with the spicy sting of torched wood, assaulted Shanya's nostrils and high-pitched, girlish shrieks rang in her ears.

“Shanya?”

Her hearing pricked as her father's anguished shout floated over the canopy, his booming voice causing the leaves to rustle, some blowing off their branches and fluttering in the glassless window. Shanya frowned and her brows furrowed. She slid out of bed and followed the sound.

“Father? What's wrong?”

“Shanya? Where are you?”

She stopped at the windowsill and craned her neck. “Here! What's going—” She expected the crisp, clear sting of the cool spring breeze to tickle her cheeks. Instead, a dark grey smoke choked the air supply from her lungs. The city below blurred into lights at the bottom of a murky river. She blinked back the burning itch searing at her eyes, but the water welling in them only intensified.

What in the world?

She swept the smoke away and squinted to make out her village beneath its cloudy residue. The pounding of horses' hooves was louder than any stampede she'd ever heard. Soldiers rode in grim grey uniforms atop the army of charging steeds. The smoke would have camouflaged them completely had their diamond swords not given them away as the bloody reds, oranges, and purples of the firelight dancing on the torches they held in their opposite hands reflected off of the smooth surfaces.

The blades clashed against each other in an almost sickeningly beautiful, stomach churning symphony of chaos. With each thrust, parry, and swipe, another puddle of golden blood stained the once pristine green grass. Bodies lay lifeless everywhere Shanya turned, and bile crawled up her throat. The suffocating scent of burning flesh clogged her senses, it's odor so tantalizing and potent that she found it impossible to breathe.

Her eyes snapped downward just in time to see her father sagged against the trunk and two more of the grey-clad invaders smiling evilly up at her tree. She gasped and ducked out of sight, crouching down and placing her ear on the wood of the wall beneath her window.

“You were right. The Chief's daughter was the perfect bait. Looks like he used the last of his magic to blow out our first flame.”

Her father's gruff voice cut through the anarchy, but she winced at the sound of his labored, raspy breathing. “You'll never get—Ooh.”

Shanya sucked in her breath as his words were cut off by the distinctive slice of a sword plunged through his flesh. Her eyes welled with tears.

Father! No!

The intruder laughed a dark laugh. “What if *that one*,” Shanya winced at his shift in tone, “is still alive?”

“No matter,” said a new voice. He let out a harsh cackle that sent tremors through Shanya’s spine. “She won’t last much longer after this.”

Shanya peaked over the sill and watched in abject horror as he struck a match against a nearby rock and hovered it above the splintering torch the other soldier held until it had engulfed the entire surface of the base of the stick he held. The other man thrust it at the roots, which immediately set ablaze.

Our tree!

She sprinted to the door and placed her hand on the brass only to wrench it away as the flesh sizzled.

Father must’ve not gotten to all of the fire.

It crackled from the other side of her door frame, licking and gnawing at the thin surface which served as Shanya’s only flimsy barrier between a chance at life, or certain death.

She stared at the door before taking a deep breath and extending her left hand. It glowed with a light tinge of green before she placed it against the scorching wood. Her heart hummed in her chest. The tips of her fingers began to tingle, as if she were pressing down on a handful of pine needles. They grew warm, but the spread of temperature was soothing and powerful as it extended up her arm and over her shoulder. She closed her eyes and focused exclusively on her breathing. Her hand grew notably warmer than the rest of her. A closed-lipped smile graced her features.

Cease! she shouted in her mind.

When she opened her eyes, the door gleamed with a blinding green light. She grinned, pressing her hand more firmly into it as she willed the fire just beyond to sputter and die, leaving only misty wisps of smoke behind. The light pulsed before fading away as Shanya finally relented the pressure being forced into the door. She stepped back and reached for the handle again, but ripped her hand away the moment the pads of her fingers brushed the searing metal.

How can it still be warm?

Her mind flashed back to the ghoulish sparks sputtering from the soldier's torches. Red, orange, yellow... Like any fire. Except, occasionally, a purple tinge would coat the flame.

Damnit! Her eyes grew wide. She clenched her teeth and ran her hands through her hair. *How could I have been so stupid?*

The flames must have been cursed by dark magic.

The hissing crackle of the fire seemed to radiate in her ears; almost as if it were taunting her. Her knees buckled as horrible, shrill screams pierced the thick canopy that kept the kingdom of the Dryads hidden from the mortal world.

Shanya clenched her fists and ground her teeth against the slivers of sense trying to worm their way into her subconscious, but no matter what, she couldn't force back the memory of her father's last words—shouts of defiance before the cruel glint of the jeweled sword pierced him straight through—the sunlight reflecting off of its smooth surface; winking up at her; as if the Fates themselves had condoned his death.

Her stomach twisted and her legs shook. Spots distorted her vision.

No!

She forced herself back to her feet, using the door as a support for as long as she could bare as the heat ate away at her flesh. Now was not the time to submit herself to panic. She focused on counting down the facts one by one.

Grey uniforms.

Weapons made of unbreakable gems.

Cursed fire.

It could only mean one thing.

The Northern Hunt had found them.

#

Rasheen's labored panting as his massive paws pounded against the snow-covered ground in tandem with her worn deerskin moccasins was Shayna's only sign of progress as they sprinted across the vast forest floor. Her makeshift shoes had worn down to the soles, and the top piece of animal hide flapped in the frigid wind, exposing her frost-bitten toes. Thick flakes tumbled around them, blanketing the bronze plates covering her shoulders. Her breaths crystallized in the air; it licked and gnawed at her cheeks, coloring the flesh until it burned. Her skin gleamed with a luminescent pink tinge from spending so many months braving the harsh winters of the Meragiae forests, but they had no choice as long as the Northern Hunt knew they were alive.

She'd done her best to make suitable clothing from the leaves and foliage littering the ground after her own had been shredded in their first encounter with the Hunt after escaping the destruction of their village. Just weeks later, her brother had stolen those nine accursed jewels from the Hobgoblin in the Seian Mountains. The hides from her kills provided a sliver of extra warmth, but it wasn't much against the constant blizzards howling across the land.

For once, she envied Rasheen and the greedy tendencies that had overtaken his moral since their parents' murder at the hands of the Huriant tribe and their hunt in the last war for the fruitful lands that were once a safe haven for Druids. His stupidity had caused their predicament in the first place, but at least the curse would prevent him from freezing to death until they found a way to cure the lycanthropy.

If they ever found one. After a year on the run, and two months alone dedicated to evading the Great Northern Hunt and their merciless slaughter of all magical creatures, Shanya began to doubt the possibility that they would ever make it out of the forest alive, not to mention with her brother in his rightful skin. She almost let out a sigh of relief as the trees finally began to thin around them, but the thundering of horses' hooves echoed through the woods.

Rasheen growled and turned to face the onslaught of hunters, his cumbersome wolf body acting, not for the first time since they began their quest, as a shield of protection for his sister.

Nonetheless, Shanya whipped around and in one fluid motion pulled the last arrow from her pack, notching it in her battered bronze bow. She took aim as best she could through the icy sheets of snow and wind. Her eyes watered and every breath burned as the arrow glided through the air, but a triumphant grin burst forth from between her chapped lips when she heard the *whoosh*, clink, and agonized groan that meant it was a direct hit.

"Maybe we'll live through this after all, Ra," She looked down at the wolf.

Rasheen nuzzled her hand and offered a big, toothy grin before bending down on his front paws and scooping her up on his back.

Shanya barely had time to fist two clumps of fur in her hands

before he plunged into the undergrowth to their right. The jolting movement knocked the midnight black hood from her head and exposed her bright red hair.

They raced through the brush. Branches stung as they ripped and scraped at Shanya's already pulsing skin. Air chomped at the open wounds. She gritted her teeth and clenched her jaw, swallowing the scream bubbling from her throat.

Finally, they emerged in a small, round clearing. Shanya let out a long breath as she slid off of Rasheen's back. The wolf spun and faced the path, his ears perked in high alert. Shanya froze and clutched his side, watching the shaking leaves without blinking. They quivered and quaked as the Hunt galloped past.

"Where did they go?"

"They've vanished, General."

"Impossible. Dryads are many things, but not invisible. They're merely hiding, waiting out their journey until this blizzard passes."

"But, If that's true, how will we—"

"They have to reveal themselves sooner or later, if that ridiculous girl really does plan to bargain with the Hobgoblin."

His harsh laugh ricocheted through the clearing and seeped into Shanya's bones. She hugged Rasheen that much tighter.

"Shall we make camp here, then?"

"Yes, but only until dawn; if those two are smart enough to have evaded us for this long, they will disappear again before the sun peeks through the clouds. Keep your men on high-alert, and be prepared to move out an any sign of a disturbance."

Shanya's slumped and stroked her brother's back. "What are we going to do?"

Rasheen shook his fur and nuzzled his nose beneath her arm.

She stumbled, pushing back a laugh as she turned to face the center of the clearing. A large grey tower blocked out the rays of the setting sun, its dilapidated and crumbling state offering a beacon of hope.

Rasheen nudged her forward, and Shanya offered a soft smile as they started toward it. At least for tonight, they would be safe.

Part Two: The Hunter

“Why can’t we simply wait?” Kadar asked, putting on his helmet and tightening the leather straps that held up the silver armor plates protecting his shoulders. “You’re normally in such good health. I’m sure it won’t take long to recover if you follow the doctor’s orders. Besides, if the mission is so important, don’t you want to be there to command it yourself?” Kadar crossed his fingers behind his back and made a conscious effort to stand still.

Damian sighed from his place in bed. “I wish I could, son; you don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to see you head out on your first mission. But this one... It’s crucial that we complete it in the timeliest manner possible.” His lips set in a determined line and his gaze hardened as he stared at the far wall of their cabin.

Kadar’s forehead creased as he went over to stand by the bedside. “What’s wrong, Father?”

Damian’s eerie silence penetrated the room for so long that it made the hair on the back of Kadar’s neck stand up. If it hadn’t been for the steady rise and fall of his muscular chest beneath the blankets, the boy would have sworn the mighty general was nearing death.

“Father?” Kadar’s shoulders sagged in relief when the elder man finally turned to face him. It wasn’t long however, before the haunted look in the usually confident general’s dark eyes made his son’s breath catch in his throat.

Damian watched intently as his son’s face changed before letting out a low, long sigh. “If you are truly to lead the Hunt in this journey, I suppose it’s only right you know.”

Kadar suppressed a shiver at the foreboding edge in his father’s words. He swallowed around a lump in his throat. His palms began to sweat. “Know what?”

The commander closed his eyes for a brief moment before locking gazes with Kadar. “I assume by now you’ve heard the rumors surrounding the war that secured these lands for our tribe, yes?”

Kadar frowned. “You mean, the ones that say the Dryad’s haven’t been run out of our land?”

Damian nodded and Kadar blinked at his solemn reaction. “Of course. It’s all the recruits wanted to talk about. I tried to tell them it was preposterous—no one could have survived the onslaught of your troops on that village. Let alone with such meager weapons as they had.” He shook his head as a superior smirk turned up the corners of his lips. “I’ve never heard such ridiculous wives’ tales.” He started to laugh, but it fizzled when his father didn’t join in. Instead, his hard features remained blank and stern. “They are just wives’ tales, aren’t they, Father?”

Damian pressed his lips together, his eyes unblinking. “No, Kadar. I’m afraid not.”

Kadar’s eyes widened. His mouth hung open. It took him a few heartbeats to regain the use of human speech. “What do you mean? You’ve said yourself that the hunters have searched our lands up, down and sideways with no sign of the accursed creatures.”

Damian ran a hand down his face. “And up until February, I was convinced we had.”

“Wh-What?” The prior February had wrought the land with one of the deadliest snowstorms in history.

“The guards were on their nightly rounds when they discovered one in the undergrowth. I don’t know how long she had hidden there, but her clothes were barely rags and mud and leaves coated what was left of her body, though it didn’t appear to be much more than skin and bones.”

Kadar raised an eyebrow. “A swift kill then?”

Damian grumbled. “That is what they thought too. But the storm was picking up, and the woman was guarded by a very protective grey wolf.”

“A wolf?” Kadar echoed. Wolves hadn’t been seen on their territory in decades. Their form was much too closely associated with Lycanthropes for the comfort of the Hurian tribes

“We don’t know for certain if that was the creature’s true form,” Damian continued, “but it gave the girl enough cover to escape, and land a fatal wound in one of our best trackers before disappearing into the underbrush.

Kadar gasped. “Edith is dead?”

Damian nodded. “I ordered the Hunt to bury her in the woods with only those who had given chase present. I didn’t want to risk raising suspicion with a proper ceremony until it was certain this pair was a threat. No one was to mention it until then.”

“And... Are they? A threat, I mean.”

Damian leveled their gazes. “Wrynn claims he saw them on patrol last night. He said their health was much improved. They looked to be scouting us.”

Kadar scrunched his brow. “But... How is that possible? If they were so malnourished when they escaped...”

“It seems unlikely that they would have survived much longer in

such a harsh winter, does it not?”

Kadar nodded.

“We believe they are being sheltered. For what reason and by whom, we do not know. No one out in the open for as long as they were could have survived such frostbitten conditions without the aid of another magical being.”

Kadar stared at his father. “Are you actually implying... Do you think she isn’t the only Dryad out there?”

Damian grimaced. “You know very well that I do not subscribe to such theories without proper evidence.” He scoffed even as his eyes traced every nook and cranny of the room.

Kadar watched him for a moment as he gathered his courage and took a breath. “But?”

His father’s face was pained. “In this case, I’m afraid we can’t risk the unknown. If my intuition is to be believed, and they do in fact have magical aid, be it more Dryads, or another species entirely, we cannot risk the possibility that they attempt to stage a revolution to reclaim the very land we won from them.”

Kadar shivered in spite of the warm spring breeze filtering in from the small open window just to the left of his father’s bed. “You want me to lead the Hunt after them.” Kadar’s voice was emotionless despite his shaking hands.

Take Jadea and ask Lyndiol for any scrap of material that the patrol may have picked up when they inspected the woods after Edith was killed.”

Kadar nodded. Jadea was their most highly trained hunting animal—a phoenix that they had kept alive after their last raid on the woods when they discovered her ability to recognize people by their scents. She was the only known specimen of her species to possess that ability. It made her much more valuable to the Hurians if she was alive.

Lyndiol had been the lead patrol guard for the month of February.

“Release Jadea into the wild with the Dryad’s scent,” Damian instructed. “She will lead you from there.” Then he opened the drawer of his nightstand and reached inside, pulling back to reveal his first bronze knife. He held it out to Kadar, who took it with trembling hands. “You will do us proud, my son. Bring the glory back to our name.”

Kadar bowed his head. “I’ll try, Father.” he vowed. “I will.”

Kadar’s heart drummed against his chest, mimicking the rhythm of the horse’s legs as his hooves trampled the earth. Leaves crackled, shredded under the metallic clang of the beast’s metal horseshoes as they flew over the forest floor. His black hair slapped at his cheeks, but the sting barely registered as a tap. Atlas panted beneath him, the air pouring from his nostrils. He leaned forward and sunk his weight into his heels as they approached yet another fallen log obstructing the path.

The restless monsoon had destroyed most of the village; so he shouldn’t have been surprised to discover that the damage had also extended to Myriad Glade. The eye of the storm had finally broken through the chaos sometime late last night, but Kadar didn’t have time to admire how the lush landscape still smelled of fresh soil; the musty yet poignant scent that only blanketed the land after a long rainstorm. Leaves had transformed from sickly yellows and browns to greens brighter than a newly ripened pear. They swayed to the beat of the breezes coasting through their veins, and the once timid blossoms burst open like fireworks.

He clenched his teeth and gripped the worn leather reins, wincing as the material bit into his palms. As they sailed into the air, he kept his eyes trained to the canopy for any sign of the elusive phoenix.

There!

A flash of color streaked across the corner of his vision. The leaves rustled and a lone feather fluttered down from the tops of the trees before the bird disappeared completely from his sight.

Atlas's hooves pounded at the ground and she urged him into a gallop. His stomach churned in on itself as they kicked up a cloud of dust so thick that Kadar nearly choked. The dirt stung his eyes while they flew along the damp terrain, but no matter how fast they went, he couldn't outrun the doubting murmurs of the bloodthirsty hunt behind him, nor the weight of the bronze handled knife slapping against his thigh.

It was well known that the one who placed first in their final exam got the privilege of joining the general as their second in command on the next big mission. Last night, Damian had taken ill to the point where Kadar insisted on sending for the village doctor, who had ordered the general to stay hydrated and not take on any more missions until his fever had broken and he was well enough to defend himself again. Kadar had tried to convince his father to postpone today's outing, but according to him, there was no time to be wasted with this particular mission.

And even as the rest of the hunt jeered and cursed behind him; about his age, his skill, and the possibility of Damien playing favorites by letting his son take his place, though they had all seen him complete his training, Kadar resolved that no matter what, he would make his father proud.

He gave Atlas a swift kick to his flanks and veered off into the canopy of trees where the Phoenix had disappeared. They rode and rode until finally they came to the path through the Meragiae forests where Damian had said Edith was murdered shortly before the Druids had disappeared into the undergrowth. Kadar dismounted his horse and motion for the other soldiers to follow him.

They searched for a length of time that he couldn't define. It was a lucky slip of his foot that eventually led them to what they believed to be the Dryad's hiding spot. He had tripped on a large overturned root that had been buried in dirt by last night's monsoon, and in his scramble to regain his footing, he got caught in the brush of a sharp rose bush whose buds at not yet sprung. The wood, it seemed, was much thicker here, and more expensive than any of the hunt had previously thought. After a few feet of aimless wandering in an attempt to return to his troops, he

stumbled upon a bright clearing, in the center of which stood a dilapidated and crumbling stone tower. It was covered in moss and vines, and under any other circumstance, he probably would have turned around. It blended so seamlessly into the foliage that if he hadn't seen the small patches of stone reflecting the light of the setting sun, and if Jadea hadn't perched atop its crackling exterior with a satisfied *caw*, he could have just as easily turned around and gone back the way he came without a second thought.

It would make the perfect hiding spot.

Kadar fingered the copper whistle around his neck. Calling for backup would be the safer move, but it would also alert whoever lived here that their hiding place was no longer safe.

What would Father do?

He dropped the metal instrument and crept toward the tower as silently as he could. Jadea swooped down and landed on his shoulder. As he slithered around the side, his back pressed against the thick plants. At first, he heard nothing, but his hearing pricked as a young voice talked in hushed, urgent tones.

“What has gotten into you, Rasheen?”

A low, rumbling growl emitted from inside the tower and sent shivers up Kadar's spine.

“Are you *sure*? I didn't hear anything.” The young voice echoed through the woods again and Kadar crept closer to the window to peek inside.

The sunlight streaming through the cracks of the building illuminated most of the empty room, but in the far left, in the only darkened corner, a girl with ashen blonde hair knelt in front of a large, furry creature—the wolf?—gently stroking his fur.

Kadar stiffened at the sight and his left hand wrapped around his father's knife. The Dryad had her back toward him. He had to strike

before she sensed his presence.

With a nod to Jadea, the phoenix let out an ear-splitting screech as it dove toward the lumbering wolf, who immediately turned on its heel and snarled. It placed itself resolutely between the bird and the young girl, but Jadea was too quick. She lunged over the wolf's head, claws extended as if to sink them straight through the girl's chest.

The Dryad screamed, backing out of reach until she was cornered by the wall. A bronze knife flew through the air and she yelped as the woosh of the metal barely missed grazing her ear, pinning the fabric of her rawhide vest to the stone.

Kadar gave a sharp whistle and the bird fluttered back to its position on his shoulder. "No kills today, Jadea," he chided, scratching her feathers. "I think Father will be much more pleased to have these two alive." Then he lifted the bronze whistle to his lips and blew, strong and loud.

The satisfying thunder of horses' hooves rattled the trees a few minutes later, Jadea having distracted the wolf by flying in circles just out of his reach until Kadar's comrades could assist in apprehending it. The young Druid had started to cry, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. Father would be very proud indeed.

Part Three: The Price of Freedom

One rope around the waist secured Shayna to her horse, the horse to her captor's steed, and another binding her hands to the reins. Rasheen lumbered next to her, struggling against the chains that bound him to the other soldier's mare. Shanya urged her mount into a gallop so as to meet her abductor at the head of the pack.

“Finally decided to stop wallowing in pity, *Dryad?*” he spat.

“I have a name, you know,” Shayna retorted. “Not that you ever bothered to ask.”

Kadar snorted. “Why would I? In a matter of hours, you will be nothing more than a trophy on my father's wall.”

Shayna's hearing perked at the sound of her brother's growl from the back of their brigade. Her stomach dipped and her breath caught in her throat, but she did her best to morph her features into a stern expression as she swiveled in the saddle to give him an almost imperceptible shake of her head.

Rasheen whimpered, but Shayna only sharpened her glare until he blinked and cut his gaze away. Attacking now would do no good. The

weather was clear and they were surrounded by soldiers—running would be useless.

We can't escape... she thought, a kernel of an idea forming in the back of her mind as she mulled over Kadar's last words, *but maybe I can strike a deal.*

Glancing at him again, she caught sight of the Northern Hunt Lieutenant crest on his uniform. She smiled; all she had to do was hit him where it hurt, and Rasheen was as good as free.

“A trophy on *your father's* wall, hmm?”

Kadar's brows furrowed together as he whipped to face her. “What?”

“You said my head will end up on your father's wall when we return.”

“...And your point, *daughter of the trees?*”

Shanya fought to hide her smirk at the haughtiness in his voice. She had him right where she wanted him. “Well, you led our capture, did you not, *lieutenant?*” Careful to emphasize every syllable, she watched the soldier stiffen as the tips of his ears began to darken.

“Indeed.” The word was curt and gruff, more like a wolfish snarl than human speech.

Shanya stifled the urge to snicker at the irony of the comparison. “Then should it not be you, who receives the glory?”

“Well...”

“I am the last Dryad alive after all, so a chance such as this will not come again.”

He opened his mouth. Cleared his throat. Closed it again.

Shayna gave a noncommittal shrug. “Of course, I suppose it is better after all, letting your father take the blame when the magic finally fades

from this land completely. Surely, the disasters will swallow your village and any survivors of the recent downpour with it.”

His mouth dropped open and he turned completely in his saddle to face her. “Wh—What do you mean? What disasters?”

Shanya scowled and yanked at the reins to pull her horse to a stop. “For a race so determined to wipe out all magic on Earth, it is amazing how little you seem to know of it.”

Kadar only continued to stare and Shayna sighed.

“Dryads are tied to the land of their birth. Just as it’s prosperity keeps us living, we too keep it vibrant with our workings of nature.” She demonstrated by stretching out her hands and letting them glow green for an instant until a patch of flowers grew in the road ahead of them.

“As the last of my race, the well-being of your land rests on my shoulders. Have you not noticed the change in the weather since you murdered my kin?”

Kadar’s expression faltered. The monsoon two days before had only been the most recent of their natural disasters. Sometimes they seemed so frequent that the village builders could scarcely reconstruct homes before another storm came to destroy them. “You mean...”

“Should you kill me, you will kill your people as well.”

His eyes bulged and his mouth felt like sandpaper. “But... My father... he said...” Suddenly, his eyes narrowed. “How do I know you are not simply spinning falsehoods to buy your freedom?”

Shanya leveled their gazes. “You don’t. But is the possibility that I am a chance you’re willing to take? Is murdering your own people a guilt you are prepared to live with, Hunter?”

Kadar’s heart drummed in his ears and Rasheen snarled at his lack of response, making him jump. He looked back at the wolf, and swallowed the impulse to cower in his seat. He took a deep breath and met Shayna’s piercing gaze again. “What do you expect me to do? My

father... The rest of the Hunt..."

"Will be safe," Shanya cut him off. "I will go with you. I will stay as your prisoner and keep the land thriving as best I can—"

"You will?"

"If you agree to disband the Hunt the moment you are able—"

"What?"

"And let the wolf go free."

Rasheen snarled.

Kadar sneered and laughed a tight laugh. "And why would I agree to that?"

Shayna shrugged. "It's your choice, *lieutenant*. His life. Or the lives of the Huriant Tribe."

Kadar glowered, but gnashed his teeth and turned to the guards atop the horses dragging Rasheen. "Cut the wolf free."

"What?"

"But Kad—"

"Do not question the orders of your leader, Larel. Free him! Now!"

It took some coaxing, but finally, Shayna strained her vision until the last tufts of his gleaming fur disappeared into the undergrowth. Then she turned and roared forward. Neither of them would ever be free, but at least one of them would have their freedom. ‘

End

Thank You!

Thanks for joining me on this adventure! Check my members pages often for behind-the-scenes tidbits from all my latest projects and if you like my writing and get early glimpses at all of my upcoming projects.

About the Author

C.J. has spent most of her life telling stories. She was captivated by the written word at the age of seven, when she read her first *Magic Tree House* book, and has ventured to countless far off places since. She loves to travel and explore new cultures. When she's not writing or dreaming of new book ideas, you can usually find her helping other authors polish their works as a freelance editor--and singing while doing so. Broadway musicals are her soul-food, something her mother and sister know well. She constantly blasts the newest soundtrack through the halls of their Missouri home, much to the chagrin of her very sassy and spoiled cat.

