

The Silver Door

By Holly Lisle

Chapter One – Passing Notes

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I cannot complain that Doyati's grand suite in Arrienda was not magnificent, for it was. He had a fountain in his parlor, and a library that I would have thought held every book ever written, had Danrith and I not seen the even bigger bigger one in the wizard's lair hidden under the cliff.

I could not complain that we were ill-treated, for Catri and I sat in wonderfully comfortable chairs in the library, peeking out at the dancing waters of the fountain that we could see through the opened double doors. We ate sweet, juicy Spinner apples and black grapes and bits of sweet marshmelon out of season, and we were warm, and safe.

I *should* not complain that we were bored, for my best friend Catri and I were learning the magic of the Sun Wizards.

But I will.

Oh, by Spirit and all the little gods and their unlucky cousins, we were bored.

Master Navan, who was not nightling, but human, and who therefore had a voice that sounded more like rats scratching in the eaves than bells and choirs, had decided that Catri and I must conjugate verbs. This was because neither Doyati—who was supposedly Moonwalker to my Sunrider—nor Yarri, my other

best friend and a freed nightling slave— nor even the cat, who talked and did magic and was not truly cat, though he would not tell us what he really was, or even what his name was—had come to the class that day. Doyati spoke the Sun Wizard language, Tagasuko—which means the true language in Tagasuko—and would have been kai-lord of all of Arrienda had he not stepped down in favor of his younger cousin. And Doyati, who did not love Master Navan, would have told the old man that there were better ways to teach people to speak, and the three of us and Yarri would have spent a happy hour or two pretending we were Sun Wizards and telling each other what to do or asking each other questions, while the cat whispered rude comments about Master Navan directly into my mind.

Instead, Master Navan growled about people who did not appear for their scheduled classes in a timely fashion, and set us to repeating after him:

“I am. Be sha.”

“He is. Noen sha.”

“She is. Haen sha.”

“It is. Ruen sha.”

“We are. Beni shan.”

“They are. Rueni shan.”

“You are...for one person. Su sha.”

“You are...for many people. Suni shan.”

“Everyone is. Benini shan.”

Catri and I repeated. We repeated present tense. We repeated past tense. We repeated future tense. We repeated command tense, which the Sun Wizards seemed to like a great deal. I think it telling that they did not have words for either

“please” or “thank you” but they had a merry plenty of ways to tell people what they must do.

While his back was turned, I passed a note to Catri that said, “I dreamed about the silver door again. It was just as before. Arched and carved with wizards and lightning, and suns and roses. And when we walked through it, I was suddenly wearing leather breeches and leather boots and a short leather jacket, and I was the Sunrider for real.”

Then Master Navan turned around and set us to conjugating another verb, and Catri could only sneak a peek at the note, and then make a face at me and mouth the words, *And then what?*

Drone, drone, drone, is what. Master Navan high, whining voice drove the fine details of the dream from my mind.

Catri and I both wanted to get to the good bits—we wanted to learn to cast Sun Wizard spells. The images in the ancient Sun Wizard books in Doyati’s library, only brought in after Kai-Lord Letrin’s death, showed wizards sending lightning shooting from their fingertips, and wizards flying through the air like birds, and wizards creating iron horses that ran and winged ships of the air soared through the sky, looking about with heads like birds or great cats or wolves or other creatures.

They certainly did not show wizards sitting in cushiony chairs repeating “Be shaba, noen shaba, haen shaba, ruen shaba, su shaban, suni shanba, rueni shanba—” while their eyes crossed.

I shifted position. I’d been sitting on my left foot, and I untucked it, and sat on my right foot instead. Catri twisted one strand of long golden hair around her finger. I squirmed again, putting both my feet on the floor, then crossing my legs, then bouncing my foot. The fountain just outside the door sounded enchanting, and the smell of sweet water drifted into the room and made me think of walking into the

springhouse in Hillrush, where most of my neighbors, as well as my own family, stored roots and vegetables and such fruit as could be over-wintered.

“I asked you a question,” Master Navan said, and I jumped.

“Yes, you.” I looked up to find him glaring at me. “I asked you to conjugate the Tagasuko verb for ‘walk.’ Would you like to join me of your own will, or must I shut the door so that I can have your attention. You will never learn the magic you must know, Genna, if you will not learn the language in which it is cast.”

I cannot count the times I’d heard that lecture. We had been in the underground nightling city of Arrienda for three months. Aboveground, spring had come, and the new lambs were born and wobbling about in the pastures, and trees were in flower, and the snow had melted away from all but the highest and coldest places. Days were growing longer, the sun was getting brighter and warmer, and the air would smell green with new growth.

In the nightling world, nothing changed, and I could only keep track of how long I had been away from my village and my family by making marks in my daybook, and writing faithfully every day of what I had done. I had not missed a day.

Three months.

And at least twice a day, Master Navan reminded me that I had to learn the Sun Wizard language, and I had to learn it quickly.

He nagged Catri, too, but she was suffering through all of this as my companion, and not because anyone thought the fate of humanity rested on whether or not she could conjugate the command tense of the Sun Wizard verb for ‘sneeze.’

Master Navan cleared his throat, and I realized that, right in

front of him and while he was waiting for an answer, my attention had wandered again.

“This is *hopeless!*” he wailed.

“Where *are* they?” I asked him. “Doyati and Yarri and the cat were all supposed to be here with us, and Doyati has been gone now for weeks, and the cat for days, and even Yarri has not come to classes the last two days. Nor have we seen her out of class.”

Catri nodded. “You *must* know where they are.”

“I *must?*” Master Navan looked frustrated.

“If what I do here has value, you would think that true, wouldn’t you? And yet I do not know. I have been given no word from anyone. I have heard nothing. I teach those who show up, but such is the importance of what we do here that if no one were to come, I would clearly never be told why.”

The tips of his ears turned dull red. It was the first color I had ever seen any color on him at all. He had white hair, and pale skin, and dressed all in white—including his very clean shoes—and even his eyes were a bleached tan that made him seem an old rag left lying in the sun too long.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. I could not have done anything about the situation, but for once I did feel a bit bad for the old man.

He chewed on his upper lip and nodded curtly. And then he did something entirely unexpected. He gathered up his bag and his books and his long sheet so verbs and Sun Wizard writing—which would have been the next thrilling thing Catri and I were set to—and he said, “You’re on your own today. If you’re bright girls, which I doubt, you’ll practice verbs and then take down one of the simple Sun Wizard texts on the bottom shelf, and you’ll sit in here and practice your reading, and when you’re

done with that, you'll practice your writing." He stomped toward the door, and turned and glared over his shoulder at us. "Or you'll spend your time sending each other notes and giggling about boys, as you do when you think I'm not looking. Either way, the day is yours."

And he tromped away, his shoes making a surprising amount of noise on the polished stone floor.

Catri and I looked at each other, mortified. "I did not know he knew about the notes," she said.

"Nor did I," I whispered.

We both jumped a bit as the front door to Doyati's suite slammed.

"Or the boys," she added. Her cheeks were bright red. Mine burned so much, I suspected they were the same.

We looked around the enormous library, and at the foods Master Navan had set out for us, and at the pens and paper he had already put at the table so that we might use them later. Four pens. Four small sheaves of paper. Four ink bottles. So he truly had expected Doyati and Yarri—or if he had not expected them, he had still planned for their return.

"We ought to work," I said.

"We could practice talking to one another."

"Without Doyati here, how will we know when we go wrong?" I rested my chin in my hands and sighed. "Perhaps reading. We could get out the primers again, and practice on those." The Sun Wizard primers had lovely drawings next to each word or sentence, and had clearly been designed to teach small children to read. They were not very exciting, but they were a huge help with getting words like *shirt* and *shoes* and *door* and *apple* and so on.

“Ahhgh!” Catri flopped back in her chair, closed her eyes, and covered her face with her hands. “He could have just left, without making us feel guilty.”

I nodded. “But then how would he have felt happy all day, if he did not know he’d left us miserable?”

We got up to get the primers, and heard the door slam again.

“He came back?” Catri whispered. “Perhaps to tell us how wicked we have been?”

But the footsteps on the stone floor scurried toward us, light and fast, and Master Navan had never been light of step, nor had he ever moved quickly.

A nightling child with skin the pale blue of a robin’s egg and eyes the green of spring leaves poked his head through the half-opened doors, looked around, and saw just us. He ran to me and pressed a folded piece of paper into my hand. “Note from Yarri,” he said. “It’s urgent.”

With not another word, he fled back the way he had come, slamming the door as he exited. I stared at the folded paper in my hand, afraid to open it. Urgent? Was Yarri in trouble?

“Hurry up and see what it says.” Catri came over and leaned over my shoulder.

I unfolded the note. It was a note that said, “Fallowhalls Level, Friends Gathering. Look for these marks when you come up, and if you care for me, hurry!” And then a few additional scrawls that I could not decipher, and her name.

Catri and I exchanged glances.

“She looks like she wrote it with her feet,” Catri observed.

“She looks like she was in a hurry. Is she in danger? In trouble?”

We both stared at the note, willing it to say more, to explain itself. But it did not, of course.

I ran my fingers along the slender chain around my neck, the one that held the little light crystal Yarri had made for me.
“We have to go.”

Catri said, “We have never been permitted to go up to the old city—not even accompanied by someone else.”

“It sounds like Yarri is in trouble.” I looked at the note, wishing it said more, and wondering how much trouble she was in that she could not have written a longer note.

“We have to go, of course,” she said after a moment. “But maybe we should tell someone.”

“Would someone let us go?”

“No.”

“Right.”

We looked at each other. “You have your dagger,” Catri asked me.

It was a silly question. Like every other child in Hillrush, I’d carried a small dagger since I was eight, and a larger one since I was twelve. I just raised an eyebrow.

“I sometimes think about not carrying mine,” she said.

“Do you ever leave it?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Exactly.” We studied the marks Yarri had drawn beside the word Fallowhalls. They were the nightling words for the Fallowhalls, and they would be carved into the stone arch that was the gateway into that level.

“Should not be too hard to find,” I said. “I know it’s on the level right below ground. If we hurry, we can be there and back before anyone realizes we’ve gone.”

We slipped out the front door to Doyati’s suite, nodded to the nightlings we passed in the twilit corridors, pretended to be enchanted by the lightning bugs that swarmed next to one of the hundreds of public fountains on the Kai level of the city, and, without drawing attention to ourselves, sought out the nearest spiraling walkway that led up, into the older parts of the underground city, nearer the sun, nearer our families, nearer the world where we belonged and where we fit. And nearer Yarri, who seemed to have found trouble.

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