

THE FOUR SWORN: SUMMER SOLSTICE
BY LENORE SAGASKIE
CHAPTER 1

Tendrils of steam rose from the collection of mugs congregated on the tile countertop, the strong aroma of tea and coffee mingling in the air. A gentle and enticing smell of cinnamon wafted up from a plate of buns that Abby placed on the counter amidst the mugs. She dragged a stool toward her as she grabbed a bun and took a seat. Nibbling at the warm pastry, she glanced across the counter at her friend, Sara, who was flanked on one side by her boyfriend, Joe, and on her other by William. William's eyes lit up his lined face with interest as he eyed the plate of buns. He looked toward Abby eagerly.

"Go ahead." Abby gestured with a casual wave toward him in answer to his unvoiced question. William smiled and eagerly reached for a bun. "Help yourselves, you two." She casually waved at Sara and Joe as she bowed her head back toward her steaming mug.

A lock of her chestnut colored hair fell across her eyes as she sipped her coffee. She pushed it back and tucked it behind her ear. She cleared her throat in preparation to speak but found herself at a loss for words. *How do you broach such a topic?* She wondered. *Where do I start?* Maybe it had all been a dream, a hallucination of some sort. She cast an anxious glance across the counter and carefully looked at each face. Would they all be here if it was a hallucination? Definitely not William Walker, that's for sure. Joe, Sara, and Abby hadn't even known William last year. Abby watched them carefully. Each of them seemed much too preoccupied with their coffee and buns, and Abby couldn't help but notice that they all deliberately avoided her eyes.

It was hard to believe that now they were all good buddies, the kind that you get from a shared experience, like a war. And it *had* been a war! A war in Feyland, the land where fairy folk existed. Abby hadn't even considered that fairies were real, let alone living in a realm of their own, and she sure didn't expect to one day have the abilities of the Fire Vessel, one who could embody the powers of the Fire Element. Sara, her best friend, was imbued with the power of the Air Element, and Joe, another local artist, became the vessel for the Earth Element. William Walker, psychic artist from England, was the Water Vessel. Out of the four of them, only William had his powers most of his life. The four of them found each other and helped to prevent an overthrow of the fairy realm which, if it had been successful, would have had severe repercussions for the human world, too. The Evil Bad Guy—Thaddeus—was dead. The veil between the fairy world and the human world was kept intact and everything turned out alright, barring a few casualties. Her husband, Dan, was among the wounded. Abby still had a lot of questions about much of what had happened.

They are being much too quiet, she thought as she glanced once more across the counter. She realized that while she was sitting there in silent contemplation, Sara, Joe, and William's eyes were now riveted upon her, their bodies stiff and motionless as if they were sitting at attention awaiting orders.

"I, uh, wasn't going to say anything," she blurted out sheepishly. *God, that was stupid*, she chastised herself. But she wanted to say something. Anything.

"How's Dan doing?" Sara enquired softly as she picked up her mug and cupped both hands around it.

Abby started. "What? Oh, he's good, good," she answered quickly, her voice a little higher than usual. "He's..." Abby took a large gulp from her mug, "...recovering. It's been slow, but

he's doing well."

"Does he remember anything?" William enquired as he wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"No." Abby's eyes were misty as she turned her head slightly to gaze out the small window of her kitchen. "He dreams about it," she whispered, still staring off in the distance. "Sometimes he screams out loud." She turned away from the window and fixed her gaze on William. "He says he doesn't remember the nightmares in the mornings either, but afterward he always seems so, so—"

"Shaken?" Joe asked tentatively.

"More like haunted." Abby shuddered and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Did it all really happen?" Sara blurted out, setting down her mug to scratch her head, tousling her blonde hair. "I mean, we can talk about it, now that it's over, right?" Sara looked at the others.

William snorted. "Aye, yeah. I start telling people I'm the vessel for the Water Element and that I helped teh save the world from an evil man from fairyland, and they'll be locking this old fart away in a loony bin. I'll not be telling that story anytime soon, thank you very much."

Joe nodded, his dark eyes solemn. "I agree with William. I don't think that I would keep my teaching job long if I spoke of my ability and our adventure in Feyland. Even in the native community, the other realms are not spoken of lightly."

Sara's face reddened. "No, no, I'm not saying we should call CNN or anything, but we can talk about it, can't we?" Sara eyed each of them. "To each other," she added quickly.

Abby felt a rush of excitement. It was the opening she was dreading but also hoping for, but it was even better since she didn't have to initiate the conversation. "What exactly did you want to talk about, Sara?" Abby spoke carefully, hoping her voice sounded casual.

Sara moved closer, perched on the edge of the bar stool as she leaned further over the counter. "Well, lots of things, really." Her blues eyes were as big as marbles and bright with excitement. "But the one thing I am dying to know is—do you guys *still* have your abilities?"

William turned his gray head sharply to glance at Sara. He crossed his arms over his chest, his mouth thin and taut. "Well, I've always had mine, haven't I?" He responded gruffly.

Abby rolled her eyes in annoyance. "I don't think Sara meant that question as an affront to you, William. I think she was directing it at us." Abby motioned at herself, Joe and Sara with a sweeping, circular motion of her hand. "We're the newbies, remember?"

William harrumphed in response and returned his attention once again to the plate of cinnamon buns on the counter. Sara continued to stare at Abby. She was sitting in rapt attention on the edge of the stool, her eyes alert. Abby pursed her lips together, her eyes searching the room as she shifted uncomfortably on the stool. She was seeking an answer—hopefully, the right answer—to Sara's question. Could she confess to Sara she had been too afraid to try? Afraid that she would still possess her abilities and once again lack control over them? Dan's time in the hospital after he was attacked by Thaddeus, and the four of them defeating him in the battle at the elemental temple, followed by Dan's slow recovery from the attack had left her exhausted and drained. She was so busy taking care of Dan, too afraid to leave him alone, and even more afraid that if she used her powers around him and—if they worked—that it would remind him of what danger he had faced because of her. After all, Dan never would have been hurt if Thaddeus hadn't wanted to hurt *her*, to take *her* out of the fight.

Sara looked at Abby, her eyes scanning her face as if reading her thoughts. Sara reached across the counter and placed a hand on Abby's, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I know you are afraid to try, Abby," she said softly. "Out of all of us, you've had the hardest time. But

remember what Gabe said to you. You were the only fire vessel that learned to control your abilities, and it is the hardest one to master. You've got to give yourself some credit for being a strong person. You did it before, sweetie. You can do it again."

Abby looked at Sara, her eyes dark. "I never wanted this. I never asked for this."

Joe cleared his throat. "Abby, none of us asked for this. We were chosen. Why we were chosen, I can't answer that. There are answers I'm sure, but we may never possess them. Maybe it is simply that we have the strength to handle it. Perhaps that alone is explanation enough."

"The water sprite said that we are of 'noble birth' or something like that when it sang to us," Sara interjected. "I wonder what that means?"

William snorted. "What didya do, Sara? Memorize the whole damn song?"

"Well, I think it was to give us clues to more than how we had to defeat Thaddeus and restore the veil between our world and Feyland. I think it was to give us clues to why we were chosen to be vessels." Sara tossed her head. "I plan to study it more. I think we'll find the answers." Sara patted Abby's hand.

Abby smiled thinly and then turned toward William. "Aren't you supposed to be taking your show down today?" Abby asked politely.

William looked at her with an eyebrow raised. "Why? Yeh that anxious to get rid of me?"

Abby rolled her eyes. "Gotta throw water on everything. Don't you, William?"

William laughed and smiled. "Yeh, I'm packing up today and tomorrow the movers will be arrivin' to pack the truck."

"Will you be returning home then?" Abby asked quietly.

"Well, some of me work is going to another gallery up in northern Michigan. I can stay for a couple more weeks, so I thought I could do a little sightseeing, check out some of the touristy things before I head back across the pond and home to England."

"What about Rhysdale?" Abby asked carefully. "Won't she be missing you?"

William blushed slightly. "Well, she's almost completely recovered from her injuries. I stayed in Feyland a bit to make sure she was alright, and I can always use the Omphalos to visit her from here."

Joe looked down at his watch. "Hey, we better get going. We've got to get William over to the gallery to pack up, and Sara and I are volunteering there at a new art class for teens that starts today." Joe looked at Sara and then to Abby. "Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't you come along to the class?"

Abby looked at Joe. "You know I'm not good with two dimensional art."

Joe smiled. "You don't have to be. I could give you some clay to toss around, show you how to hand-build a bowl or something. Just come and hang out. You'd be very surprised at how enthusiastic these kids are. It's really contagious." Joe smiled at Abby, waiting for an answer.

They're really trying to help.... Abby smiled back. "Let me check on Dan first and make sure he'll be okay." She started up the stairs as the others moved from the counter and put their coats on. She stopped on the last step. Did they still have their powers? Momentarily shocked by the realization that none of them had answered, she hesitated before making her way down the hall to the master bedroom.

Abby happily donned her sunglasses as she drove to the gallery. While it was still cool and crisp outside, the brightness of the sun shining through the windshield of her van was warming, and it felt good to leave the confines of the four walls of her house. At first she felt guilty leaving Dan home alone, but his enthusiastic urging seemed a little too eager. That made her feel

even more guilty, that perhaps she was being too smothering or, even worse, he was getting sick of her company.

Abby sighed. While she knew their relationship was good and stable, she understood that they just weren't one of those couples that would spend every waking moment together. They would never morph into one of those retired couples that appeared to be perpetually attached at the hip and dressed alike when they went anywhere in public. Abby strained to remember if she'd ever even purchased an article of clothing for Dan. Or knit him a sweater. Maybe she would knit him a scarf for Christmas, she thought idly as she divided her attention between the road in front of her and the fields and trees in the surrounding area. Patches of snow were still evident, most of it fading to muddy puddles in the fields. The box elder trees, sumacs, and maples that lined the dirt road were budding, proof that the Spring Equinox had definitely put winter behind them.

Abby caught herself humming as she followed Joe's truck into the Harmon City Gallery parking lot. Sara and Joe hopped out and quickly entered the gallery while William ambled slowly in the parking lot. He stopped and waited for her as she hopped out of her van and strode over to him. She slipped her arm through his and stepped into pace with him as they walked.

"If yeh gets bored with that lot, yeh tell them yeh need teh come upstairs and help me pack or something. It'll give yeh an out, if yeh need one," William spoke quietly, his expression changing as if he were in some sort of pain. "It's hard at first," William added in a softer tone.

Abby raised an eyebrow. "What is?"

"It's hard to leave them while they heal," William added slowly. "But he'll be okay for a bit. Yeh need a break."

"Voice of experience talking, Wills?", Abby asked as she tightened her grip on his arm and nudged his shoulder as they walked toward the building.

"Yep," he replied. "So yeh better listen to yer elders."

Abby patted his arm gently. "You know, Wills, I just might this time. But don't go thinking I'm gonna all the time."

"Nah, yeh like fighting with me too much."

"Yeah, about as much as you do," Abby retorted as she cast him a sideways glance.

William laughed and pulled open the door for her. Abby blew him a sarcastic kiss and made her way down the creaky wooden staircase to the classroom in the basement.

The classroom was full of bright artificial light that emphasized the bold colorful artwork displayed on the walls. Wooden easels and worn heavy wooden stools were scattered at various angles throughout the room, facing toward a large square platform on which Sara was setting up an array of fruit, some empty bottles and an old, black Victorian ladies boot.

Abby looked puzzled. "What's the boot for?"

Sara set the boot down and stepped back to examine the arrangement. "I thought it would be good to help students draw texture and shadow," she answered as she continued to stare at it. "Why, do you think it's too much?" She bit her lip as she took a step back to examine the result.

"I dunno," Abby shrugged. "It's not my area of expertise."

She caught movement at the back of the room. Joe was setting round balls of clay onto an L-shaped counter, dropping each ball with a soft, wet thud. Joe looked up and smiled at Abby. "Are you gonna try some clay work today, Ab?"

Abby looked at the platform Sara was appraising again. *Too complicated for me*, she thought. She turned back to Joe. "Sure, why not," Abby answered. "But I've never worked with clay before," she confessed, a sheepish look on her face.

Joe was rolling a small ball on the counter with the palm of his right hand. "I could do clay all day," he spoke wistfully. "From the first time I touched it, I knew what I was meant to do."

Abby nodded. "Yeah, it was like that for me too, the first time I ever held an acetylene torch in my hands. Thank goodness I was drawn to metal-work. I think my father thought I was a closet arsonist."

Joe and Sara laughed.

"Well, we better get ready. They'll be trickling in soon," Joe said as he picked up a box, fished out a smock and handed it to Abby.

Before long, the room was set up and teens were milling around, standing nervously in groups in the midst of the room. Some of the girls were talking while others were taking in the room and checking each other out. Abby sat on a stool at the back counter, watching them and waiting. Sara gave her a nervous smile from across the room as she stood quietly beside the still life on the platform while Joe strode calmly to the front of the room. At well over six feet tall, his long glossy hair and handsome dark features definitely made him stand out from the teens. The chattering and murmuring gave way as a silent hush fell over the room. Several of the young girls cast him appraising looks.

"Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome," Joe began. "This program is offering instruction in two artistic mediums. I will be leading a clay hand-building workshop at the back counter and my associate Sara," he turned and motioned toward Sara who smiled in response, "will be leading a still life drawing session."

Abby watched two of the teen boys nudge each other and stare appreciatively at Sara.

Joe continued. "If you would move into the section you wish to participate in, we can begin once everyone is settled. Any questions?" He looked at each of the dozen or so teenagers' blank faces. "No? Good! Let's get to work." Joe flashed a gleaming white smile as he strode to the back of the room.

After much scraping of chairs, it appeared obvious that the majority of seats at the counter were occupied by girls, and the easels were occupied by the boys, some peeking shyly around their easels at Sara, others openly gawking at her.

I forgot how beautiful Sara is, Abby thought as she watched Sara bend over in front of the still life to rearrange the boot once more. Abby smiled. She had also forgotten how blissfully unaware Sara was about her looks. The crash of a toppling easel caused everyone in the room to jump. Sara rushed over to help a very red-faced boy set the easel upright, while his friends watched and snickered.

Joe sighed and quickly turned his attention to the group of mostly teenage girls assembled at the counter. He gave Abby a weak smile before he quickly moved through the steps of hand-building a stoneware pot. After asking if they had any questions, the group donned smocks and began rolling the clay and shaping it in their hands as he had instructed. The clay was cool in Abby's hands, but the sensation of touching it, forming it and even its earthy scent was surprisingly relaxing. Soon she had a mostly symmetrical round bowl in front of her. She looked around the room, checking out the other bowls in what she hoped was in a nonchalant manner. To her left, a young girl was gingerly rubbing her fingers along the sides of her almost perfect bowl. Catching Abby's glance, she gave her a shy smile.

"Why are you doing that?" Abby asked as she peered more closely at the bowl.

The girl cast a shy sideways look as she continued to rub her bowl. "It helps to smooth out the surface, to eliminate fingerprints," she answered simply as she remained focused on her work.

“Oh.” Abby glanced down at her bowl. A few minutes before, she had been proud that her first attempt at a bowl was reasonably respectable. Now that she scrutinized it more carefully, it had more bumps and craters on its surface than Mars, and it had so many fingerprints all over it, it would make a CSI team drool with delight. Abby ran a clay covered hand through her hair.

“Well, I suck,” she blurted flatly as she scowled at her bowl.

The girl beside her gasped loudly. “No! You don’t suck at all,” she offered in a reassuring tone. The girl’s attention was on Abby’s bowl now. She gently picked up the bowl and started to rub the outside.

“See? It smoothes it right out.” She handed it carefully back to Abby. “Go on. You try it.”

Abby shrugged but took the bowl and began to smooth its surface, mimicking the girl’s technique. She was surprised at how effective it was at removing the offending fingerprints and pockmarks.

“Thanks,” Abby said as she gave the girl a weak smile.

“Is this your first time working with clay?” the girl asked as she pulled an elastic from her light brown hair and pulled her hair back into a ponytail again.

Abby looked at her and smiled. “It’s that obvious, huh?”

The girl smiled back, her dark eyes sparkling. “Just a bit. My name’s Aurora, but my friends call me Rory.” She wiped her hand on her smock and extended it to Abby.

“I’m Abby. Nice to meet you.” Abby quickly wiped her hand and shook Rory’s extended hand.

Rory placed her bowl on a newspaper-lined tray and turned back to Abby.

“Not to be nosy or anything, but aren’t you a little old for this class?”

Abby laughed. Usually she would have been pissed if someone had been so forward with her, especially someone so young, but Abby could sense there was no malice in the question.

“Yeah, I guess I am. Joe and Sara here are my friends. The three of us are artists, but I do metalwork mostly. They thought I should get out and come today.” Abby looked at Rory carefully, trying to detect any sarcasm that may have been directed at her that she might have missed. Instead, she saw a pleasant olive-skinned face with large eyes so dark that you couldn’t determine where the irises were, or if she had any at all.

“Cool. What kind of metalwork do you do?” Rory sat attentively and listened as Abby explained the type of work she did, working with found objects and making jewelry. Rory asked the odd question and Abby answered them, marveling at how mature and intelligent this teenage girl appeared to be.

“So, how long have you been working with clay?” Abby asked, hoping to divert the focus of the conversation.

“Oh, since I was a little kid, at least five or six years, give or take,” Rory replied. “I’m trying all things, you know? Maybe find something I’m really good at.” She cast an eye toward her bowl and gave it a last brush with her forefinger.

“How old are you now?” Abby asked.

“Seventeen. I’ll be eighteen this year, and I’m graduating in June.” She pulled the elastic back out of her hair and jammed it into a pocket of her jeans. “I just gotta figure out where I’m going after high school. You know, like, have a plan.”

Abby set her bowl back on the counter. “Yeah, having a plan is good.”

“Are you ladies done already?” Joe’s voice startled Abby. He picked up Rory’s bowl gently and gave it an appreciative nod. “Great work as usual, Rory,” Joe said as he set the bowl down delicately. He picked up Abby’s bowl next. “Great job on your first piece, Abby! I’m

impressed!” he enthused as he turned it over several times before gently replacing it on the tray.

Abby gave Rory a sideways look and a conspiratorial smile. “I may have had a little help.”

“Well, great job, ladies.” Joe picked up the trays and placed them on a wire shelf behind him. “I should have these fired and ready for glazing for next class,” Joe said.

Abby took off her smock and grabbed her coat and bag.

“Are you gonna stick around and wait for Sara and me to finish up?” Joe asked as she put on her coat.

Abby looked up. “Um, yeah. I just thought I’d go up and see how William’s doing with his packing. I’ll see you guys upstairs. Is that okay?”

Joe nodded and smiled. “Sure, no probs. Won’t be long. Class is almost over.” He glanced quickly at his watch.

Rory stood up and placed her smock on the counter. “I gotta jam too, Mr. Asine. I’m meeting my grandma after class.”

“Okay, see you next week, Rory.” Joe gave her a little wave.

Rory returned the wave as she strode out of the room behind Abby. Abby gave Sara a little wink as she headed for the stairs. Rory was standing at the staircase, buttoning her olive-drab military jacket.

“You gonna be here next week?” Rory asked.

Abby watched as she fumbled with her bag. “I dunno. Maybe,” she answered hesitantly.

“Well if you are, maybe after class you could show me some of your work up in the gallery?” Rory looked at her expectantly.

“Yeah, I could do that. Sure.” Abby walked carefully up the dark stairs. “Hey, thanks for your help today, Rory.”

“No problem. Well, I gotta fly. Catch ya later.” Rory bolted up the stair and out the main gallery door as Abby reached the top step.

Abby strolled past a sign that read “EXHIBIT CLOSED!” She made her way into the main gallery room. Wooden crates, cardboard and packing noodles were scattered everywhere amidst the artwork that was hanging on or stacked precariously against walls. The sound of William muttering was coming from the furthest corner of the room, his torso almost completely immersed inside a crate. Unwilling to face his wrath for startling him, Abby wandered over to the front window and sat down on the sill as William emerged, still muttering from the crate and wiping his brow with his hand. Catching sight of Abby he stopped muttering.

“Get tired of playing in the mud?” he asked.

“No. Well, I finished early, I guess.” Abby turned her gaze out the window.

“Well, I think it’s time for a bit of a break. I’ll see if I can get that girl, what’s-her-name, to scare us up some tea. You want one?” William asked.

“What? Oh sure, thanks.” Abby spoke absently as she continued to gaze out the window. She saw Rory standing just off to the side of the gallery entrance. She was looking across the road, waving frantically. Abby followed her gaze and caught sight of a slender, tall, gray-haired woman on the other side of the street.

Must be the kid’s grandma, she thought, observing the similar olive complexion and high cheek bones. From Abby’s perspective, the woman didn’t look like she was in any particular hurry to join her granddaughter. Rory’s grandma turned slightly toward the street, and Abby noticed that her mouth was moving rapidly and she was gesticulating rather wildly with both of her hands. She was obviously having an animated, intense conversation with someone. Abby craned her neck to see if she could catch a glimpse of who she was speaking with, but her body

was blocking Abby's view.

"Hey Abby, I got us some tea and biscuits." William's voice echoed loudly in the cluttered space, and it jolted Abby from the scene outside the window. She smiled as William brought the tray over and set it down on the windowsill beside her and pulled over a chair.

"You know, Wills, they're called cookies over here," she teased as she bit into one.

William took up a biscuit, dunked it in his tea, and stuffed it ravenously in his mouth, chasing it down with a large gulp of tea. "I don't care what yeh call 'em, just as long as yeh can eat 'em," William declared as he joined Abby in gazing out the window.

Rory was standing on the curb as she waited for her grandmother to cross the street. The old woman greeted her and gave her a big hug and kiss on the cheek. Smiling and chatting, they wandered up the street together, followed by their shadows cast long behind them by the bright spring sun. *Whatever had her bothered certainly isn't a problem now*, Abby thought, wondering what had made her so agitated. As she was about to turn away from the window a motion on the sidewalk caught her eye. *The shadows of the two women moved*. The shadows merged together into one humanoid blob and slithered across the road and out of sight. Abby blinked twice, not really believing what she just saw.

"Oh shit!" William blurted loudly, his tea cup rattling as he hurriedly set it back on the tray as he jumped out of his chair. "Excuse me language," he apologized, blushing.

Abby gave him a reproachful look and watched him continue to stare out of the window. "What is it? Did you see that too?" Abby stood up and leaned forward, trying to follow William's gaze. She immediately noticed what caught William's attention. Those leather pants. That vest. And a black fedora hat that looked like it had once been a prop in the Blues Brothers movie. It made his head look like it was all hat on a wild grizzled beard. But there was no mistaking who the diminutive man was.

"Gabe." They uttered in unison as they watched him bolt across the road in just enough time to make the signal. Gabe, a man from Feyland who had been their—for lack of a better word—handler. Sara thought he was a gnome, but Abby wasn't so sure. Whatever he was, he was heading straight for the gallery. Abby and William almost bowled each other over to get to the door as he entered. He scowled at them silently, his beady blue eyes like cold shards of glass.

"Hope you two wasn't planning to spend the day gawking out the bloody window," he said gruffly, his eyes darting from one to the other. They stared back at him mutely. Abby remembered to close her mouth.

"Where are Sara and Joe?" Gabe demanded impatiently.

Abby and William pointed down the stairs to the classroom area.

Gabe straightened his hat. "Well, we're gonna need 'em," he stated flatly. "You've got work to do."

Abby snorted. "What, are we saving the world again?"

Gabe fixed her with a long piercing stare. "Maybe. But you'll be savin' a life first. Yeh got time for that?"

Taken aback, Abby nodded silently as Gabe stood glaring at William. She couldn't help but wonder why she had picked this particular day to leave the house.