

LIAR'S TEST

THE SILVERLEAF CHRONICLES BOOK I

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I slammed into the altar of the sun and howled as something broke. Well, something *else*. The high priest had been beating on me for a while. Lots of things were already broken.

It hurt to scream. It hurt to breathe. It hurt.

Please. Stop. I tried to say the words. They wouldn't come out. My mouth was full of something salty and hot. Blood. I spat it out. It sprayed onto the gold of the altar. Only it wasn't so gold anymore. Everything was coated in red. Who'd have thought I had so much blood in me? And more was coming. Filling up my throat. I was choking.

I was dying.

I was dead.

Except I still hurt, and it seemed like being dead should mean no more hurting. But the pain was fading, the high priest had vanished, and everything had gone shadowy and grey.

Something soft brushed against my skin. The wind? It smelled of trees and whispered with a thousand voices. Okay, *not* the wind. This was the Ancestors.

The last of the pain disappeared, along with all of my fear. There was no need to be scared now. Not when I was out of the sun-temple and with my kin, who'd look after me the way Ancestors always did. They lifted me up to carry me away, and I knew I was going home. Away from the sun-priests and the moon-sisters. Back to other Treesingers. To family and green and life.

But instead the Ancestors brought me to an empty space. White light and nothing else. No trees. No life. No— Wait.

There was a blue spark, floating in my direction. Feelings that weren't mine flowed over me. Shock. Confusion. Fear.

The spark was *alive*. Some kind of spirit?

"Hello," I said. "I'm Bell." But the spark (Blue, I decided to call them) didn't seem to understand me.

The Ancestors spoke: *Long seasons, he's been lost here.*

Poor Blue. I'd been lost ever since I'd been taken into the sun-temple, except I'd always had the Ancestors. Blue didn't seem to have anybody.

A leaf appeared in the whiteness. It was followed by another and another, until there was a long line of them leading off into the distance.

"Look, Blue! That's got to be the way out!"

But he didn't seem to understand that either. Words didn't work on him. Only feelings. So I sent him exactly what he'd sent me. *Shock—confusion—fear*. Telling him that I'd felt all those things too. That I understood.

For a moment nothing happened. Then Blue drifted closer. He was listening.

I radiated out my own presence. Trying to say *I'm here and I won't leave you*. Because I knew what a difference it made, not to be alone.

Blue went all shimmery. I got the impression he was . . . thinking? Then new feelings came. First a bitter, freezing cold. Then a sense of

a hand closing over mine, and the cold disappearing. As if someone had reached out to draw me into a warm room.

Oh! I knew what he was saying. *Found.*

"That's right, Blue. You're found." I took off after the leaves, slow at first to make sure he'd follow, and then quick once he came after me. We soared together, flowing along the trail the Ancestors had made until we were out of the white void.

And the pain tore me apart.

Someone was making wet choking noises. *Me. That's me.* I was back in the sun-temple, and not dead after all. Just close to it.

The wind stirred my hair: *Holdonholdonholdon.*

In the next minute something buzzed through my body. A wave of fizzing, zapping energy. Blue. He was helping me. He was *healing* me, although I didn't think he could make me all the way better.

But I knew I was going to live.

Then everything went black.

I shot up in the bed, gasping for air. Drowning in pain. A scream tore out of my throat. I slapped a hand over my mouth to cut it off.

Shut up, Bell Silverleaf. You're not hurt. Not now.

Pathetic whimpering noises leaked out from between my fingers. I sank back down, curling into a ball as I waited for my body to catch up with what my mind already knew.

It had been four years since high priest Alasdar had nearly beat me to death. Four *long* years, and all of them spent here in the sun-temple as the so-called blessed ward of the sun-priests and moon-sisters. Being trapped in this place was still real. But being nearly dead wasn't, and Alasdar had never hurt me that bad again. The priests and sisters wouldn't stand for it, although they happily

overlooked bruises and the odd broken bone. (“Blessed ward,” my arse. Some guardians they all were.)

I tried straightening out my legs. Only they wouldn’t unbend, because they thought they *couldn’t* unbend.

“You’re not all smashed up,” I growled at myself. “It’s just a memory.”

Except there was no “just a memory” for a Silverleaf. My family were memory-walkers, able to visit moments in our past and experience them as if they were happening right *now*. But we weren’t supposed to do it by accident! I hadn’t fallen into a memory since I was a little kid. And now this one wouldn’t quite let me go. The pain had begun to fade, but my heart was pounding and my breath was coming too shallow and too quick.

I hauled myself up, switching on the glow-orb by the bed and staggering over to my mirror. It helped, sometimes, to see myself in the *now*. So I studied my own face. Brown skin. Round cheeks. Short dark curls. Fierce eyebrows. I had Mum’s eyes, but the rest of me looked like Granny, except I didn’t have her dimple, the one that only came out when she smiled (so hardly ever—my granny wasn’t a smiley sort of person). And I was fifteen, not eleven.

My breathing eased. My heartbeat slowed. I abandoned the mirror for my window, opening it up to lean out into the cool of the night breeze. And thought of Blue.

He’d been with me ever since the day I’d saved him and he’d saved me back. Until two months ago, when he’d disappeared. The invisible presence that had been at my side for so long had just . . . vanished! I kept trying to find him (even in my dreams, apparently, because that had to be why I’d memory-walked tonight). But I had no idea where he was, or why he’d gone, and without

him I felt—well, a bit lost. And horribly afraid that something bad had happened to the only friend I had here.

My blood hummed, beating out a gentle rhythm under my skin. The Ancestors. Telling me the same thing they'd been telling me since Blue disappeared, which was that everything would be all right. I got the strong sense that they thought I should just be patient and wait for events to unfold. Except I didn't want to. I also didn't have to, because there *was* a place I could look. A secret place here in the temple that was connected to Blue. And, okay, I'd looked there before, more than once. But it couldn't do any harm to check again.

I climbed out the window and darted into the night.

I swerved left and then right, following familiar twists and turns as I wound my way onwards. The sun-temple was a confusing mess of buildings, but after four years I knew this place better than most of the priests. And it was a good night for sneaking. There was no moon in the sky, which meant it was about as dark as it ever got. It still wasn't totally black, because the temple (like the rest of the city-kingdom of Radiance) was built out of brightstone. That horrible golden stuff had been a gift from the sun-god himself, and it was always shining. But tonight the shine was weak, not like how it was when the moon was full or the sun was up.

My run gradually became a jog and then a walk. Okay, a stroll. That memory had taken more strength from me than I'd thought. I kept going anyway, until I came to a tall, narrow building in an out-of-the-way area. Then I launched myself upwards, hands and feet easily finding the gaps and bumps I needed. The moment I reached the roof, I grabbed for the tiles, pushing them out of the way to make an entrance into the room below.

I dropped onto a heavy bookcase, scrambled down to the floor, and hit the orb in the wall to light the space. It looked the same as always. Desk, a couple of armchairs, and a thick rug on the floor. No door, and no windows. But you could see where they'd once been, before they'd been blocked off and this room had been forgotten by everyone but Blue. He'd led me here not long after I'd recovered from nearly dying. This was *his* room. Or at least it had been two centuries ago, when he'd still been alive. When he'd lived here, in the sun-temple.

When he'd been a god.

And, yeah, hadn't *that* been a surprise?

There were four gods in total—Tomas the sun-god, Allora the moon-god, Elodie the dawn-god (Tomas's sister), and Ronan the twilight-god (Tomas's baby brother). It was Ronan who was Blue. I could still remember how shocked I'd felt when I'd realised that the spirit I'd rescued was related to the sun-god I hated. But Blue wasn't anything like his brother. He'd never convinced a bunch of folks to worship him or led those same folks across the seas to invade Mistfall, the Treesinger homeland.

The story of the gods, their followers, and us Treesingers goes something like this: There were once some folks living in happy ignorance of gods until Tomas and Allora came down from the skies to "raise them up". The newly enlightened folks called themselves the Risen, and they went on to lead much less happy lives as the gods' chosen people. Then about a hundred and fifty years ago Tomas got it into his head to raise up Treesingers, so he and Allora set sail with a Risen fleet to land on our shores. My people told them where they could stick their enlightenment, and the Risen attacked, slaughtering half of Mistfall before Tomas got hurt bad in a battle with our trees. He slunk back to Radiance,

and Allora and the Risen followed after, dragging a bunch of Tree-singers along with them.

But none of it was Ronan's doing, or Elodie's either. She'd fought the sun and moon gods with us until she'd mysteriously disappeared, which probably meant Tomas had killed her. He'd certainly killed Ronan, decades before then. My Blue. Dead because of a book.

I crossed to the shelves, running my hand along the spines. The gods each had their own special books, or as they called them, testimonies. Tomas's *Testimony of the Sun* was twelve volumes devoted to his own greatness; Allora's *Testimony of the Moon* was all cold science; and Elodie's *Testimony of the Dawn* was about peace, love, and equality. But Ronan's testimony was filled with such terrible "blasphemous falsehoods" that Tomas had murdered him and destroyed every copy of his work.

Well. *Almost* every copy.

I pulled the twilight testimony from the shelf and carried it over to the desk. Then I flipped it open and waited for it to recognise me. This book was a little bit alive, enough to hide itself from the wrong reader by pretending to be a volume of the *Testimony of the Sun*. After a moment, the words on the page shifted, becoming the first of the "lies" that had gotten Blue killed: *There's no such thing as gods*.

Turned out, the so-called gods weren't gods at all. They were visitors from another world, and while they could do some amazing things, there was nothing holy about them. Ronan and Elodie had tried to tell the Risen that, but none of them had wanted to listen. So Ronan had written the truth down in the hope that someday, someone would believe. And I guessed he'd realised that anyone who did would have to be good at deception to evade the

sisters and priests (not to mention Tomas and Allora), because most of his book was a manual on lying. Which had been hugely helpful to me. Of course I'd already been a liar when I'd come here, on account of speaking truth to the Risen being bad for Treesinger health. But Ronan had made me a better one.

I pressed my hand onto the page, hoping to feel . . . something. This book had given Blue a voice, at least in my head. He spoke only in buzzes of energy, but after reading his words, I knew what he sounded like. Clever. Sarcastic. And always making fun of himself or the world. Every time Blue buzzed, it'd been Ronan's laughing voice I heard, and the two of us had mocked the powerful together. But he wasn't really in this book. He wasn't anywhere.

I'd actually had an idea for a while now about what might have happened to him. An idea I'd been ignoring. Hiding from, really. But as Ronan himself had taught me, true liars don't lie to themselves. I sighed, letting go of the *Testimony*. And faced the thing I didn't want to face.

Blue was a spirit, and spirits didn't stay in one place forever. At least, Treesinger spirits didn't. After we died, we were born into the world again as a human or tree or bird or some other life. Not always right away (some of us stayed spirits for a long while and became Ancestors). But Blue was no Ancestor. I'd known from the start that he wasn't much older than me. He'd been twelve when he died, and I didn't think he'd started growing again until he left the void. But after that, he'd seemed to age as I had.

Which meant that maybe he'd gotten old enough to become something new. To move on to his next incarnation.

Maybe he was really gone.

It *hurt* to think that. Pain spiked through me, making me gasp for breath. I gritted my teeth and let myself feel it, knowing

I couldn't keep looking for someone who might not be there to be found.

Then I felt something else. A sense of . . . presence.

I'm here.

I gasped for a different reason. *Where? Where are you?* But there was no answer to that. Or if there was, it wasn't one I could hear. My awareness of him was faint, like he was a very long way away.

I focused in on that distant hint and listened as hard as I could. Until, finally, there was something else. A promise I'd once made to him, echoed back to me.

I won't leave you.

My legs went trembly in relief, and I sagged against the desk.

I still didn't know where he was, or why he'd gone so far that even now I could barely find him at all. But he wouldn't break that promise.

Blue was coming back to me.