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A FANTASY NOVEL

Spirit Rider

THE SERIES OF KANESHA'S HEART

BOOK I

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*With love,
for all those who are walking the lonely road.
Know that you are never alone,
for great power lives within us all.*

Prologue

It was getting dark, and the moon was rising over the treetops, as the cry of a newborn babe pierced the air. The sound erupted only momentarily from within the thin walls of the house, yet the Kingdom of Raleshire had never heard such magic in a baby's cry.

Inside, the new father surrendered his child back to his wife's open arms. But the mother hastily wrapped her baby daughter in a white cloth, and handed the bundle to her maid.

Still panting from the pains of childbirth, she gasped, "Run as fast as you can with her to Daithi the Wizard. He shall know what to do."

The mother's green eyes filled with tears, mirroring a deeper sorrow; and her dark-blond hair clung to her still sweat-soaked face. "Go now! Do not return. Do not look back. Do not let yourself be followed."

The maid did not move. As if mesmerized, she stared down at the babe in her arms. Its cries had faded now, but its tiny body gave off a faint blue glow. This protective magic surrounded the cloth in a tight embrace, its blue light dancing around the infant's skin.

"Go! Please, you are dismissed! Out the back door, *now*, and take a horse from the stable!" the mother gasped urgently, reaching up from her bed to shake the younger woman's sleeve.

The maid snapped out of her daze, nodded, clutched the child to her breast, and dashed away. The father took one step after the maid, his eyes seeing the last of his only child.

The mother sobbed and sank back into her pillows. The man returned to her side, clutching her hand in his.

"She will be safe, my love," he whispered into her ear. "She has your strength, did you not hear the song of the forests in her cry? She is safe with the maid. She will be safe with Daithi."

New tears broke from the woman's eyes—bitter tears of despair, rather than the pained tears of her long labor. The man held her as sobs overtook her.

She vowed to her husband and the universe, “My heart will live to see our love defeat all evil.”

Part I

Chapter One: The Beginning

The morning sun was just awakening on the horizon as the rooster proclaimed the new day from atop the chicken coop; but already Naomi was hard at work milking the goats.

She looked up from her work at the rooster, still crowing vigorously, and sighed to herself, “Wouldn’t it be nice to not do any chores today?”

Young and slender, with golden hair and green eyes, Naomi was not yet fifteen. She wore a ragged white blouse torn from hard wear, and a long and shabby brown skirt. As she strode with her milk bucket from the goat pen to the house, she moved with natural grace and poise. As a servant for the Gregory homestead, Naomi had worked as hard as an adult woman from the time she was eight. Until that time, Mrs. Gregory had raised Naomi to help clean the house every morning, but then was allowed to play outside. It was a strange working relationship; Naomi was treated more like a “working guest” than a formal servant.

As she reached the house, smoke was rising from the brick chimney above the straw thatch roof. The roof rose to a high peak at the middle of the house, and then sloped down as low as Naomi’s elbow at the edges. It was a simple farm like thousands of others around the Kingdom of Mar. As she entered the kitchen Mrs. Gregory joined her, stretching her thick arms above her head as she yawned.

“Up afore that cock crows ag’in?” observed the plump woman with a smile. She teased, “Ye don’ need to work alone; there’ll be nothin’ far me to do all day!”

Naomi grinned at the motherly Mrs. Gregory, who treated her so well. She did not respond, but set down the goat’s milk and began to make breakfast.

Mr. Gregory's laugh echoed through the small house, "Mah lad! Tis mornin,' get up!" Mr. Gregory entered the kitchen, playfully hauling his youngest son over his broad shoulder. They were followed shortly by the other three boys, who were all hungry and eager to be fed.

When the meal was over, the men went out to the field to tend the cattle and sheep. Naomi and Mrs. Gregory collected eggs and vegetables, drew water from the well, and tidied the house and yard. For lunch, they took cheese and fresh bread out to the men. Then Mrs. Gregory sat on the porch to knit; and Naomi took a reed basket of the family's dirty clothes down to the river.

Naomi was thankful to be alone. The spring afternoon was balmy, so Naomi shed her own clothes and washed them along with the others. Once she was had hung the clean clothes from a rope between two trees, she climbed onto a large rock that jutted out over the bank, and dived neatly into the water. With powerful strokes, she swam against the small current before turning on her back and floating slowly back downstream.

When she emerged from the water, she used her pocketknife to fashion a comb from a piece of wood, and tidied her long, thick blonde hair before binding it back with a cloth. Then she lay down to dry herself in the sunshine and the breeze, and to enjoy a few precious minutes of leisure and solitude.

Naomi was a hard worker, but she never complained; she was thankful for the Gregory's generosity. Sometimes, though, in the depths of her heart, she longed to sail the winds far away from here. She could not help feeling that she was meant to do something greater than daily chores. She wanted to meet people and see different towns and cities. In the intervals of housework, Mrs. Gregory had taught her how to read; and the few books at the farmhouse had inspired her imagination. Yet her conscious mind scoffed at dreams of a different life—she was nothing more than a humble homestead servant.

When the shadows began to grow long, Naomi collected her laundry in the reed basket, and set off back to the homestead to make supper. Little did she know that she would never again visit the river.

With no inkling of what was about to happen to her life, Naomi helped Mrs. Gregory roast a lamb for the family's evening meal. They were just sitting down to eat when the sheepdogs' barking warned of a stranger's approach. Almost immediately, there came a knock at the door.

Mr. Gregory rose and answered the door, then led a guest inside—the most absurd and eccentric creature that Naomi had ever seen or imagined. He was a lean man, a little shorter than Mr. Gregory, with fire-red hair and a short red beard. He was dressed in forest-green robes that looked like fancy drapery; and his silver eyes shone like beacons.

“Tack a look at yerself, Daithi! It's bin almost fifteen years since we last seen ye!” Mr. Gregory cried nervously.

The stranger replied in an odd, husky voice—like surging water—wasting no time on small talk. “You know why I am here. You have taken good care of her, and not breathed a word?”

To Naomi's amazement, Mr. Gregory turned to her and motioned her to stand. Bewildered, she watched the daunting-looking man stride across the kitchen toward her. She had only seen such blind confidence in the strutting young men of the village, in front of a comely girl.

As he stood in front of her and looked into her face, the man's harsh features softened into a boyish grin—one that made him look absurdly like a chipmunk.

“Ah, little Naomi!” he breathed. Naomi could see now that his silver eyes held a look of affection. “You are the very image of your mother.” His red beard puffed all the way up to his cheekbones.

“Wouldn’t ye like to share a bite wi’ us, Daithi?” Mr. Gregory interjected. “We roasted a lamb tonight, ye wouldn’t find its like even in the royal kitchens.”

Daithi turned away from Naomi, and the spell of his personality was broken for her. He became once again a man of stature, business-like and brusque.

“No, thank you, no hospitality is required,” he said. “After your dinner, send Naomi out to the front porch—I would speak with her alone. I shall return in the morning for breakfast, and then we shall be on our way.”

Mrs. Gregory started to protest, but Mr. Gregory silenced her with an urgent wave of his hand. “Of course,” Mr. Gregory nodded subserviently. He bowed low, and the stranger left with a fluid motion of rippling robes.

“Da, who was that?” the youngest boy asked, perplexed.

Mr. Gregory only waved his hand dismissively, and Mrs. Gregory shushed the child. The parents turned their attention to the food, and the rest of the family had to stifle their curiosity and do the same. No one spoke; they only ate, staring at their plates. The boys seemed to feel the strangeness of the visitor as much as Naomi did. Everyone’s eyes questioned Mr. and Mrs. Gregory, but they would not speak. And Naomi knew that the strange man was still outside the house, waiting for her. What did he want with her? How did he know her mother? What had he meant by Mr. Gregory not breathing a word?