

LIAR'S TEST extract

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.