



about our age.

"Ranire, Rion, meet your new mother," our father introduced his bride like the fathers in fairytales do when they bring in their new wives. He gestured to the boy, "And this is your brother, Linden."

I could sense Rion's hand trembling in mine. Did Rion sense what lay in the future? I cannot quite remember now how I felt about Leila back then. But honestly, I did not feel any fear. Actually, there was no reason to fear Leila. She was not like any of those evil step-mothers.

Leila was a witch and hence the people of our country were not very welcoming toward her. She was very beautiful in a foreign sort of way with her pale white skin and blond hair. She dyed her hair with henna to look more like us. The result was startling as the dark hair contrasted strangely with her icy white skin. I must admit that she was strange in many ways. When I played my Tobowa (a violin-like instrument of your time) in the garden, she would lurk behind the pillars. Once she said that there was so much pain, nostalgia and languidness in my music that almost paralysed her. She laughed as she

added, "You're too young to play that kind of music." I could often detect a sadness in her eyes that I did not understand. Now I think that was the sorrow of time. She was a witch after all, and much later I learnt that she was a hundred and fifty years old when she married our father. It must be sad to live on when all your brothers and sisters are already dead, right? I should have understood that in spite of her apparent indifference to Linden, she loved him much. After all, he was all she had.

I often sat beside her and compared my honey-warm hands against her pale ones. No, I never felt even a tinge of jealousy. In those early days, she was more like an elder sister I never had. Rion and I were great friends with Linden, her son from a previous marriage. As it turned out, Linden and Rion were of the same age. Since he did not have any sibling, he took to us. He was very different in his looks though. He was not golden like us, not was he white like his mother. He had a swarthy complexion which Leila attributed to his father's side. Who was Linden's father, you ask me? That was one question she always evaded.

In the last thousand years I have often

wondered when exactly Leila turned against us. Rion was my father's heir and there was no chance of Linden ever ascending the throne of Ukh-Tarar. In case of Rion's death, I or my husband would have been the heir. And if we perished without heirs, the throne would pass on to one of our seventeen sturdy cousins scattered all across the kingdom. Even if Leila had them all killed, she could not become the ruler. You see, a foreigner could never become the King or Queen of Ukh-Tarar. Our people would never allow a stranger to take over the land. They would plough the land with salt before letting a stranger become the ruler.

And yet, Leila aspired. As days passed she grew silent. She watched us with those glassy blue eyes of hers and I saw a steely gleam in them. Strangely enough, Linden was the first one to start avoiding her. His dark eyes turned stormy whenever he looked at his mother. He spent most of his time with us. I still remember when he suddenly burst into my room one evening. He was tall for his sixteen years. He was breathing heavily as he said, "Promise me one thing, Re." He had shortened my