

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Katelyn Joy Dorrell for the Masters of Arts in English presented on March 16th, 2018

Title:

Running from Moonlight: Reading Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Word for World is Forest* as Models for Writing Characters

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This project presents an original manuscript of speculative fiction, which is contextualized within a discussion of fictional techniques in selected writings of Ursula K. LeGuin. By examining some of the ways LeGuin's science fiction achieves social critique, the foreword attempts to answer criticism that suggests speculative fiction creates environments for the purpose of escapism. While some scholarship maintains that science fiction and fantasy are simply diversions from the realities and troubles of everyday life, creating fantastic and easy solutions to complex problems, the foreword to this thesis posits ways that speculative fiction uses the creation of imaginary environments to enlarge ideas in our current society and to offer social critique by extrapolating or speculating upon potential outcomes.

The foreword explores the role of characterization, suggesting that the characters through whom readers view the stories are integral to the understanding of the concepts therein, and thereby key to offering social critique. This scholarship speaks to the need for characters that are formed not from simple stereotypes, but thoughtfully as an amalgamation of the events that have shaped their lives.

This foreword argues the benefit of creating characters from their environments, identifying techniques in Ursula K. LeGuin's science fiction *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Word for World is Forest* to contextualize the original fantasy novel *Running from Moonlight* in the position that speculative fiction can offer social critique through characterization and other elements of fiction craft. This discussion argues that writers who wish to write fiction that critiques social issues such as gender can emulate LeGuin's character- and world-creation in order to create complex characters and facilitate social critique. Analyses of characters in LeGuin's novels provide context for analyzing the construction of the character Saelana in the manuscript *Running from Moonlight*.

Keywords: Creative Writing, Science Fiction, Fantasy Literature, Social Critique, LeGuin, Characterization

Running from Moonlight:

Reading Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Word for World is Forest* as Models for Writing Characters

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Introduction:

In her book of essays, *The Language of the Night*, author Ursula K. LeGuin explains that she understands the science fiction she creates as a thought experiment, the purpose of which “as the term was used by Schrodinger and other physicists, is not to predict the future... but to describe reality, the present world” (Night 156). She is of the opinion that one of the ways in which speculative fiction, the genre which encapsulates science fiction and fantasy, can function is to investigate issues in our present-day society in order to propel us toward a brighter future. To achieve this goal, LeGuin creates environments in which to do these “thought experiments,” and then creates characters for the specific circumstances she places them in. I argue writers who wish to write fiction that critiques social issues such as the construction and inequality of gender can emulate this environment and character creation in order to create complex characters and to facilitate new ways of thinking in their readers.

The purpose of using speculative fiction to critique social issues in our present world, LeGuin posits, is because it “has a major gift to offer literature... the capacity to face an open universe” (Night 206). This means, in her words, that speculative fiction offers the ability not to escape “from a complex, uncertain, frightening world of death and taxes into a nice simply cozy place where heroes don’t have to pay taxes, where death happens only to villains, where Science, plus Free Enterprise, plus the Galactic Fleet in black and silver uniforms, can solve all problems, where human suffering is something that can be cured” (Night 204). This, she says, is phony, and something that critics of pulp science fiction have held against the genre for a long time. Great speculative fiction, she says, excels at “escaping a world that consists of Newsweek,

Pravda, and the Stock Market Report, and asserting the existence of a primary, vivid world, an intenser reality, where joy, tragedy, and morality exist” (Night 204).

Speculative fiction offers “an intensification of the mystery of the real,” creating larger problems and investigating them more rigorously than in our reality, instead of shying away from those problems and allowing technology and magic to fix them (Night 204).

This is where the deliberate creation of environments is important—to change, exacerbate, problems that are seen in the present world. Creating these environments is a powerful way to show injustices that readers may have become too familiar with to notice in their everyday lives. In fact, much admirable science fiction and fantasy grapples with social, political, economic, and ecological ideas in ways that challenge the reader to see these issues in a different perspective. Speculative fiction examines the struggles of the world of the reader but on a larger scope, often putting issues of class, race, or gender in different physical locations or time periods and seeing what the outcome would be.

These environments affect the way in which the characters are created and the way in which the characters position themselves in their minds and to those around them. This foreword examines characters from three novels, *The Word for World is Forest* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, both by Ursula K. LeGuin, and my own novel, *Running from Moonlight*. It speaks about these characters in relation to different aspects of their environments: physical setting, social structure, and social positioning.

Environment: Physical Setting

When science fiction was first conceptualized, the setting was one of the most fascinating components of the story for the reader, as in Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, or Frank Herbert's *Dune*. The world in which a speculative fiction novel is set is part of what makes it speculative fiction. The physical setting of the book can take many forms: it can be on our planet or another. It can take place on several planets or entirely in space. It can be in our time, the future, or sometimes even in the past. While the setting is not generally the focal point of speculative fiction novels written today, the setting still plays a monumental role, as it affects the characters who are placed in it.

The Word for World is Forest takes place on the fictional planet Athshe and is centered around a colony focused on military logging. The colonizers are humans from Earth, known in the story as Terra, and the native people are Athsheans, also called Creechies by colonists. Athsheans are about three feet tall and covered in shaggy green fur. Tension between native and colonial people is central to the plot of the story, as is each species' relationship to the natural world. The two narrators of this story who best reflect this difference in viewpoint are Athshean native Selver and Terran colonizer Davidson.

Selver and the Athsheans have an emotional connection to the physical environment, their planet. It is the only world they've ever known. All the land masses on the planet are covered in different kinds of trees, and, as the title suggests, the word in the Athshean language for "world" is the same as their word for "forest." LeGuin explains the Athsheans' relationship to their planet through the eyes of the Terran scientist and

environmentalist Lyubov and through the language of her prose. Lyubov explains the Athsheans' language for their own planet in this section:

Athsheans' names for their own lands and places, sonorous two-syllabled words... above all Athshe, which meant the Forest, and the World. So earth, terra, tellus meant both the soil and the planet, two meanings in one. But to the Athsheans soil, ground, earth, was not that to which the dead return and by which the living live: the substance of their world was not earth, but forest. Terran man was clay, red dust. Athshean man was branch and root. They did not carve figures of themselves in stone, only in wood (World 103).

The fact that the Athsheans carve their figures out of wood instead of stone is significant because it connects to the way they care for their physical environment. Wood is alive, reproductive. They have to take care of it for it to be available to them. So, by carving themselves out of it instead of stone, which does not need to be taken care of or nurtured, they are showing their connection to the land and their willingness to nurture it.

Additionally, this quote shows that the life of Selver and the Athshean people is connected directly, even in their own language, to the life of the forest. This relationship with their physical environment shapes the decisions they make and the way that they make their homes. The Athsheans build their lodges, where their men meet, into the ground, with the entrances being tunnels that must be crawled through (World 35).

The language of LeGuin's prose in the chapters that Selver narrates is distinctly image driven and not explanatory or narrativized. This lack of intrusions gives an organic and natural feeling to the chapters. The reader first encounters this in chapter two, which opens in this way:

All the colors of rust and sunset, brown-reds and pale greens, changed ceaselessly in the long leaves as the wind blew. The roots of the cooper willows, thick and ridged, were moss-green down by the running water, which like the wind moved slowly with many soft eddies and seeming pauses, held back by rocks, roots, hanging and fallen leaves. No way was clear, no light unbroken, in the forest. Into wind, water, sunlight, starlight, there always entered leaf and branch, bole and root, the shadowy, the complex. Little paths ran under the branches, around the boles, over the roots; they did not go straight, but yielded to every obstacle, devious as nerves. The ground was not dry and solid but damp and rather springy, produce of the collaboration of living things with the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees; and from that rich graveyard grew ninety-foot trees, and tiny mushrooms that sprouted in circles half an inch across (World 33).

This narration style focusing on the organic world and the images it evokes does several things for the story. It shows the pacing of Selver's lifestyle, and thus, the pacing of Athshean lifestyle. They have time to study the ways in which the shadows fall through the leaves and find these things worth remarking upon. Additionally, it shows the beauty that they are willing to find in chaos—not everything has to be ordered, a concept the reader may be unfamiliar with. This narration of the natural world and Selver's relationship to it enhances the readers understanding of Selver's character.

The Athsheans live close to the natural world and harmoniously with it. This means that the Selver and the Athsheans see no reason to change their natural environment, as they don't see it as something that needs to be changed or tamed. This viewpoint is in stark contrast with the attitude of Davidson and the Terrans, which makes

the story an avenue for critiquing the way in which people in our present-day society treat nature and the natural world. The story shows an alternative view, as science fiction and fantasy have the power to do, and creates space for readers to think about old relationships and feelings toward nature in a new way.

The only value Davidson and the majority of the other Terrans in the novel place on the natural world is monetary value. This is apparent in both the way that Davidson talks about New Tahiti, which is the name that the Terrans have given Athshe, and the way that he talks about Earth. He calls the Earth, his home planet, “worn-out,” as if he and the humans have gotten all the use that they can out of it and it no longer holds any worth (World 12). His feelings that Athshe or New Tahiti is just a thing to be used for personal gain appears outright in the following passage, where he expresses his frustration about a farming project gone wrong:

The erosion had begun before he left Dump Island to run Smith Camp, and being gifted with an exceptional visual memory... he could recall it all too clearly. It looked like that bigdome Kees was right and you had to leave a lot of trees standing where you planned to put farms. But he still couldn't see why a soybean farm needed to waste a lot of space on trees if the land was managed really scientifically. It wasn't like that in Ohio; if you wanted corn you grew corn, and no space wasted on trees and stuff. But then Earth was a tamed planet and New Tahiti wasn't. That's just what he was here for: to tame it. If Dump Island was just rocks and gullies now, then scratch it; start over on a new island and do better (World 10).

Davidson's perspective demonstrates a striking lack of remorse for what has been done. The Terrans have effectively destroyed an entire island—making it uninhabitable for any creatures that may have lived there before. However, the way that he speaks about this shows his lack of acknowledgement or caring for any creatures other than the humans and (as we see later in the novel) any humans who do not share his visions. In this passage LeGuin gives the reader a glimpse into Davidson's values with relation to the physical setting, which creates conflict and tension with him and the Athsheans.

Additionally, Davidson does not see Athshe as a world that is inhabited by creatures like himself—he sees it as a clean slate to explore and to conquer. LeGuin uses the larger scale of science fiction (the creation of a new world) in this way to show the way that colonialists can go to new places and destroy it for their own material gain, without registering the place as someone's home, or a place of inherent value. Davidson himself narrates, “this world, New Tahiti, was literally made for men. Cleaned up and cleaned out, the dark forests cut down for open fields of grain, the primeval murk and savagery and ignorance wiped out, it would be a paradise, a real Eden” (World 12). Equating Athshe to Eden, which God created for mankind, shows how strongly Davidson feels that he is destined to be using the planet for his own gain.

Davidson's actions do not go without self-justification, however. He tells Luybov, a scientist who is working to protect some of the environment and all of the Athsheans, “Earth needs wood, needs it bad. We find wood on New Tahiti. So—we're loggers. See, where we differ is that with you Earth doesn't come first, actually. With me it does” (World 13). He goes on to explain that he doesn't mean Earth as a place (as I spoke on earlier, humanity has destroyed Earth) but he means Earth as a people. He believes that

his actions are justified because they allow the human race to prosper. This brings up the point that when creating characters, no matter how distasteful, it is necessary for them to be able to justify their actions to themselves so that they will be believable and so that the audience will care about them.

In the creation of this new world, LeGuin offers a critique of colonialism as a practice of destroying resources for material gain. The imagined world shows and critiques the tendency in our own world to overlook value of the natural world to native cultures.

Another world that LeGuin created and populated with characters is Gethen in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The planet Gethen, called “Winter” by Terrans, the people of Earth, is in a perpetual ice age. There are two countries focused on in the novel, Karhide and Oreogyn, the only two countries on Gethen that are close enough geographically to one another to cause tension. There are two protagonists in this novel as well, Genly and Estraven. Like *The Word for World is Forest*, one of these protagonists is a native and the other is a Terran alien. The relationship of these two characters to their setting is important to the creation of their characters and the action that they take during the novel.

Genly Ai is an Earth man, and this shapes his worldview. He is perpetually cold, as he is not used to the temperatures on Gethen. Most importantly, as an Earthling, he is used to a person being a “man” or a “woman,” which is not the case on Gethen—the people here are androgynous, not a man or a woman, but a manwoman. This shapes Genly’s view of Gethen, whose inhabitants he tries to identify as men or women, as that is the way he is used to interacting with those around him. He comments on this while at dinner with Estraven in Estraven’s home for the first time:

Though I had been nearly two years on Winter I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian first as a man, then as a woman, forcing him into those categories so irrelevant to his nature and so essential to my own. Thus as I sipped my smoking sour beer I thought that at the table Estraven's performance had been womanly, all charm and tact and lack of substance, specious and adroit. Was it in fact perhaps this soft supple femininity that I disliked and distrusted in him? for it was impossible to think of him as a woman, that dark, ironic, powerful presence near me in the firelit darkness, and yet whenever I thought of him as a man I felt a sense of falseness, of imposture: in him, or in my own attitude towards him? His voice was soft and rather resonant but not deep, scarcely a man's voice, but scarcely a woman's voice either (Darkness 13).

This viewpoint helps define Genly's character and his interactions with the people around him, especially with Estraven. It also creates conflict between the two characters related to the distrust that Genly touches on here. Had it not been for the physical environment that LeGuin created and populated with these androgynous characters, this exploration of interactions without sex would not be possible.

It is important to note that the use of the masculine "he/his" identifiers, both in this analysis and in the novel, for Estraven is a deliberate choice on LeGuin's part. In "Is Gender Necessary?" LeGuin explains, "I call Gethenians 'he' because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for 'he/she.' 'He' is the generic pronoun, damn it, in English... but I do not consider this really very important" (Night 168). Personally, I

agree with this sentiment—the ways in which we show that male and female characters can have a blend of social characteristics outside of being just “him” and “her” is vastly more important than issues of grammar. However, LeGuin also admits that she feels she did not do an adequate job showing Estraven in roles that we as readers would classify as feminine, which she would change if she were to write the novel again.

Unlike Genly, Estraven is a Gethenian and is accustomed to the world on which the story takes place. His body is suited to the constant cold, and more interestingly, he finds Genly’s sex foreign. Genly is the first Envoy, or ambassador, from an interplanetary alliance called the Ekumen, and this means that he is the first person who is singly sexed that the Gethenians, including Estraven, have ever interacted with. Because of their androgyny, the Gethenians find the constant state of sexedness in which Genly resides perverted, and so it takes a while for Estraven to get used to the idea (Darkness 34). Estraven’s point of view on sex, which is based on his environment, helps to shape his character because it means that he does not view any people as less than others based on anything except their actions. This fact allows Estraven to judge people based on their merit rather than their lineage or any other inconsequential factor, which is an interesting point of view for a reader living in our highly sexed, stratified world.

Finally, *Running from Moonlight* is set in a pre-industrial low fantasy world—there is magic, but there aren’t really creatures that don’t exist in our world such as elves or fairies. There is a decentralized governing system that doesn’t quite have control over its people (parallel to the wild west). While this environment lends itself to a lot of individual freedom, it also creates avenues for a lot of organized crime. This environment creates the character of Saelana, the protagonist of the novel.

Saelana is from a tribe of people who support themselves by harvesting various foods from trees they maintain. They live on the outskirts of a small village and are quite isolated from the larger city. She works in the trees and is familiar with the ways in which they can serve her ends, from gathering food to concealment to serving medical needs.

Also, Saelana has quite a bit of experience in the seedy parts of the towns surrounding her village. Much of Saelana's interaction with that aspect of her physical environment builds her character before the story begins and is the framework on which the conflict is hung. The physical environments of bars, taverns, and drug dens are those which she is familiar with from earlier in her life and help to shape her character, making her more street smart and observant, quick to make a judgement about someone's character and intentions but not condemn them for it.

Environment: Social Structure

The environment of a novel also includes its social structure. This could be like George Orwell's technological totalitarian government in *1984*, the 1818 European social class system in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or the governments run by corporations seen in Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*. The social structure of a novel is included in its environment because it effects the lives that the characters live and the way that they interact with other characters. This is not only the larger social structure, such as government, but it also trickles into the ways in which the characters interact with one another on a basic human level—the way they interact based on ideas about gender divisions of labor and what interactions with people are appropriate. All these things are included in the environment because they change the character's outlook on life and shape who they are.

One relationship LeGuin foregrounds in both *The Word for World is Forest* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* is the relationship between the sexes. In the viewpoint of Davidson and the Terrans in *The Word for World is Forest*, "Good women" are talked about using the same language that is used when talking about good land: beautiful, fertile, reproductive, wholesome. Much like Davidson views nature as a resource as stated in the previous section, women are also viewed as a resource through his eyes. Davidson views women and the Athsheans, which he calls "creechies," as being on the same level, and he only sees them as good for two uses—being productive for him or being used for pleasure. This characterization on LeGuin's part allows for the reader to be faced with obscene statements about women and disadvantaged persons and think about the way in which those populations are treated and viewed in their own society.

For example, the very first page of the novel Davidson calls the women that have just been shipped to the colony “prime human stock,” calling to mind the word “livestock,” animals that are kept to produce meat, milk, or offspring (World 9). Further along that same page, it is told that 212 women have been sent to the colony to be brides or “Recreation staff” for the pleasure of the more than two thousand men on the colony. Davidson makes a point to go see the women as soon as they arrive because “[the women] wouldn’t last long... and like the first batch, probably most of them were Colony Brides, and only twenty or thirty had come as Recreation Staff; but those babies were real good greedy girls and he intended to be first in line with at least one of them this time” (World 11). This way of speaking about women is disturbing on several levels.

The fact that Davidson says that the women “won’t last long” has some chilling implications: either they will be subjected to have so much sex that they die, or they will be “used up” and no longer worth anything, even if they are still alive. Second, calling the women “babies,” thus associating them with infants, is a rhetorical way of dismissing any agency they might have and justifying using them in whatever way he desires. Finally, when he says that he is going to be the first “in line” to have his way with at least one of these “Recreation Staff,” it implies that they are being sullied by having sex with other men and that they lose their value based on the amount of men who have them. This implies that women can be used up and will lose their worth, thus making them expendable. In this way, LeGuin creates a hyperbole of the relationship between genders in our society to make a point about the viewpoint that some men have of women.

The Athsheans hold gender roles that contrast with those of the Terrans. The tasks that Athsheans spend their lives accomplishing are separated by gender, as is the structure

for their society. Lyubov, the human anthropologist who studies the Athsheans, notes that the Athsheans “are governed, in so far as they have government, by old women. Intellect to the men, politics to the women, and ethics to the interaction of both: that’s their arrangement. It has charm, and it works—for them,” (World 115). This means that while the men and the women have jobs of equal importance, they are not seen as interchangeable—that is to say, men and women do not do each other’s jobs, except in extremely special circumstances.

In fact, when Selver tells Ebor Dendep, the headwoman of the village in which he’s staying, that they sent the men ahead to make a place for the women, she tells him that ““They’re like the people in the Elm Dream who come at your rump-first, with their heads put on front to back. They make the forest into a dry beach...and call that making things ready for the women? They should have sent the women first. Maybe with them the women do the Great Dreaming, who knows? They are backward, Selver. They are insane”” (World 55). This shows how ingrained these gender roles are for her, and since she is the only one whose opinion is placed in the book, presumably how ingrained the gender roles are in the entire society. That contrasts this novel with *The Left Hand of Darkness*, because instead of making gender obsolete, LeGuin rearranges the power dynamic—while there are still “male” and “female” tendencies, these tendencies are a blend of those that are found in our society, and one is not seen as superior to the other. This characterization allows for the reader to examine the way that they themselves think about gender.

Selver’s relationship with his wife, Thele, shows the respect between genders in the Athsheans. Even though she is dead before the story’s opening, her death is the

catalyst for all the events that unfold for Selver (and thus, all the Athsheans) thereafter. When Luybov wants to take Selver to a better location instead of having him enslaved with the rest of the Athsheans at his camp, Selver says that he will not go, his reason being, “My wife, Thele, is in the pen” (World 118). This shows the dedication between the couple for one another, and his reaction to her rape and murder shows how much affection he has for her.

Equality is seen between the genders between Coro Mena and Ebor Dendep, brother and sister who run the colony where we first meet Selver. The narration gives a long list of the things that Ebor does to ready her people for any upcoming catastrophe, but a shortened version of the quote is as follows:

The headwoman listened to Coro Mena’s reports and prophecies, and acted. She put the town of Cadast on alert ... For Ebor Dendep was a practical woman. When a Great Dreamer, her brother, told her that Selver was a god, a changer, a bridge between realities, she believed and acted. It was the Dreamer’s responsibility to be careful, to be certain that his judgment was true. Her responsibility was then to take that judgment and act upon it. He saw what must be done; she saw that it was done (World 46).

This quote shows a balance of power between the genders and a respect for each other’s abilities and opinions, although they might not have the same skills. I think that this is something that is valuable to show in any society but would function better if the different traits weren’t associated with gender and were perhaps just associated with people with different skills.

The Athsheans portray healthier relationships between men and women than the Terrans in *The Word for World is Forest*, but there are still some things that are problematic from a post-gender perspective. The inability of the two genders to understand each other is seen several places in the book, such as when the headwoman of one village says, “I wish he was a woman and would talk sense” shows that the communication system between sexes is something that still is flawed in this society (World 40). While a reversal of gender roles can serve to show their absurdity to people (particularly men) who do not see it, it is not a solution to the problem of gender inequality. It is being used as a “thought experiment” to get the reader to investigate their relationship with those of the opposite gender.

In a collection of her essays titled *The Language of the Night*, LeGuin said that the main focus of *The Left Hand of Darkness* was to explore the themes of fidelity and betrayal, and that to achieve fidelity, finding balance between the masculine and feminine parts of the self is essential. She states:

If we were socially ambisexual... our central problem would not be the one it is now: the problem of exploitation—exploitation of the woman, of the weak, of the Earth. Our curse is alienation, the separation of yang from yin. Instead of a search for balance and integration, there is a struggle for dominance. Divisions are insisted upon, interdependence is denied. The dualism of value that destroys us, the dualism of superior/inferior, ruler/ruled, owner/owned, user/used, might give way to what seems to me, from here, a much healthier, sounder, more promising modality of integration and integrity (Night 169).

Knowing from the author that this was one of her main goals in creating this book is helpful in the dissection of its two main characters and helps to make sense of what can be seen as quite a complicated narrative. I will begin with a brief plot summary of the novel and then move into the study of each character.

As stated earlier, the people of Gethen are androgynous—they have no sexual organs or sex drive apart from a few days a month, when they enter a phase called “kemmer.” During kemmer, if a Gethenian meets with another in kemmer and they both consent, their hormones will interact and they will develop sex organs, one becoming male and the other female, and have heterosexual intercourse. Individuals do not develop a habit of being one sex or the other, and “the mother of several children may be the father of several more” (Darkness 97). This means that “everyone between seventeen and thirty-five or so is liable to be... ‘tied down’ to childbearing, [which] implies that no one is quite so thoroughly ‘tied down’ here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be... Burden and privilege are shared out pretty equally; everybody has the same risk to run or choice to make” (Darkness 100). This is seen as normal to the people of the planet, and their lives make room for this monthly cycle. However, for Genly Ai, it is very foreign. Genly is a masculine black man from Earth who has been sent by an interplanetary alliance, called the Ekumen, as an Envoy to Gethen to convince them to join the alliance for the purposes of trade and the sharing of knowledge.

Because of his inability to see Estraven not as a man or a woman, but simply as himself, Genly alternates between trusting and distrusting Estraven throughout the novel. He finally reaches a point where he can understand Estraven as he is near the end of their

journey across the ice in the north between Oreogyn and Karhide, when Estraven enters kemmer and they bring the tensions between them, sexual and otherwise, to the surface:

We were both silent for a little and then he looked at me with a direct, gentle gaze. His face in the reddish light was as soft, as vulnerable, as remote as the face of a woman who looks at you out of her thoughts and does not speak.

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not to see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality... I had not wanted to give my trust, my friendship to a man who was a woman, a woman who was a man.

... it was the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us (Darkness 234-235).

In this passage, we see the tension between the two characters brought to the surface, and finally released, as in the confession of true love in a well written romance novel. As someone who studies androgyny in literature, I think that this passage is especially powerful because it explains that Genly could not trust Estraven until he accepted all of him. Not only could he not befriend Estraven, but he also could not accept the friendship that Estraven freely gave. This shows that being trapped in gender roles when interacting with other people, or stereotypes in general, cannot just hurt your ability to form a connection to them, it can also keep you from accepting the friendship and goodwill they

extend to you. The internal battle that Genly must overcome in order to fully love Estraven is accepting him as not a man or a woman but as the androgynous individual he truly is.

Along with the difficulty presented to Estraven and Genly's relationship by the way they perceive each other in terms of gender, another concept that impedes their ability to understand each other is shifgrethor. While Genly is well versed in speaking to important people, such as Kings and government officials, his Terran upbringing causes him general frustration with the Gethenian concept of shifgrethor— "prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority in Karhide and all civilizations of Gethen" (Darkness 14). In the opening chapter of the novel, when Genly and Estraven dine in Estraven's house, Genly expresses his frustration about shifgrethor and its intricacies, which he perceives as "effeminate." It is interesting that he uses this word to describe his frustration, for effeminate itself is an adjective that is applied to a man that exudes feminine qualities, and Genly's inability to see Estraven as a manwoman is key to their inability to trust one another.

This difficulty with shifgrethor also creates problems with Genly with the King, because, "whole areas of that relationship [shifgrethor] were still blank to me, but I knew something about the competitive, prestige-seeking aspect of it, and about the perpetual conversational duel that can result from it" (Darkness 35). His inability to effectively participate in the "duel" makes him unsuccessful in getting the King to want anything to do with the Ekumen and thus spurs on his journey to Orgoreyn. So, while it is inconvenient for his character that he is unsuccessful, it makes sense, as he has not had a lifetime of practice in the intricacies of the language, and it propels the story forward and

creates new conflicts. It also increases the message about how difficult communication and communion can be between two people who have different backgrounds and the steps that must be taken in order to bridge that gap.

On the other hand, because of his background in Gethenian politics and being a native to that land, Estraven is well versed in shifgrethor. This has to do with his need to interact with people in this way his whole life—to play the King’s oral games, and do his job well to the benefit of the people on Gethen. Genly comments that Estraven “often speaks, frank yet cautious, ironic, as if always aware that I see and judge as an alien: a singular awareness in one of so isolate a race and so high a rank” (Darkness 5). This self awareness is vital to being of power on Gethen, and shows the way in which, in LeGuin’s thought-experiment, people may interact without the barriers of sex to dictate their relationships. This has the effect on the reader of making them question the way in which they interact and the reasonings behind this.

His in-depth understanding of the social structure also makes Estraven patient. This stems not only from being a Gethenian, but also from being a man in power and from practicing the religion of Gethen Handdarata. All of these factions of his life favor methodical movement and careful planning over brashness. He is willing to take several months of planning and convincing to help Genly get an audience with the King, because he thinks that it is worthwhile. This slow pace juxtaposed with the power and influence that Estraven has is a bit shocking to western readers biases, which tell them that bigger and faster is better and is the way in which to get what you want, as in Davidson of *The Word for World is Forest*. This both makes sense for the civilization she’s created and

serves a purpose—to allow the reader to visualize new social situations and to question the ones in which they interact daily.

In *Running from Moonlight*, the social structures shown most clearly are in Grace's home and in Kambal with Valeria. The family structure in Saelana's world is matrilineal—husbands join their wives' households and children take their mother's last names. This is significant because Grace and Saelana are sisters—their familial bond may not be as strong or their physical location be so close if they were in a patrilineal society.

In their tribe there is a head couple in each household who organizes the family and helps to make decisions for them so they all have a joint vision toward success. Since the death of Grace and Saelana's parents, Grace and Ren have taken on that responsibility. Together, they make decisions to benefit the whole. If the family has grievances to be taken to the tribe, it is their responsibility to do so. I think that this arrangement is a happy medium between the relationship between the sexes in *The Word for World is Forest* and the lack of sex division in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. There is still a division of sexes unlike the Gethenians, but there is not a division of labor in the same way there is with the Athsheans. This is also shown by Ren and Saelana doing the same kind of labor. Moving forward, it may be good to show a male figure doing the kind of labor that Grace does in upkeeping the house. Grace and Saelana are completely different women, but the prose works to make sure that one of their skill sets is not favored over the other in general, only situationally.

Later in Kambal, we see the same kind of division of labor along lines of skill rather than gender. Valeria has built herself up a profitable business not because of or in spite of her gender, but because of the skills she possesses. Weston is the same way—his

strengths and weaknesses are the cause of what he can and cannot accomplish in his life and are connected to his background instead of his sex.

Environment: Social Positioning:

Lastly, environment includes the social position in which the specific characters are placed and the way that character is permitted (or not permitted) to interact with those characters in different social positions. For example, the boat captain that frames the story in *Frankenstein* has a frank and cordial conversation about what has happened with Victor because of both characters' social situations and the overarching social structure. This would not be the case if he were in a different social position than Victor—the story would be told from an entirely different perspective. Authors' conscious decisions about the social position in which they place their characters is important in all writing, but especially in science fiction and fantasy, because it is the lens through which the readers understand the characters and their worlds.

The Terrans in *The Word for World is Forest* are militaristic, which effects the way that Davidson views the world around him and his place in it. The use of language like "Captain" and "Colonel" shows that even among the Terran men, who they feel are the superiors on their planet, there is an established hierarchy, an order to be kept and followed. Being a man in the military, he has an "us vs. them" mentality and a tendency toward solving his problems with violence. He understands himself to be a person who can use his body to get what he wants, and perhaps has not considered other avenues to success.

Davidson's military background means that he and his men have experience killing in large groups. This seems obvious, and thus, insignificant, but it sets them apart from the Athsheans in a significant way. This understanding of killing and death is one of the most life-altering things that Davidson and the Terrans bring to Athshe.

The Athsheans are non-militaristic, called “intraspecies non-aggressive” by several non-Athshe people in the story (World 26). They have been this way for as long as their species has existed, which is why it is such a shock to them when the Terrans mistreat them. Selver voices this mindset about killing other people after he does kill a large group of Terrans, whom the Athsheans call yumens, as described in this passage:

‘It is altogether bad,’ Selver said, ‘there’s nothing good left,’ and he began to shake... ‘You haven’t done what I did, you have never dreamed of it, making two hundred people die... We killed them as if they were not men... Do men kill men, except in madness? Does any beast kill its own kind? Only insects. These yumens kill us as lightly as we kill snakes. The one who taught me said that they kill one another, in quarrels, and also in groups, like ants fighting. I haven’t seen that. But I know they don’t spare one who asks life. They will strike a bowed neck, I have seen it!’ (World 43).

This shows how deeply disturbed Selver is by violence against another person and how rooted in their being non-violence is. When Lyubov meets the Athsheans, he had believed them to be “incapable of killing men, his kind or their kind” (World 62). Instead, the Athsheans “use a kind of ritualized singing” among males, which “are not only aggression-releases, but an art-form. The best artist wins” (World 72). The creation of this alternative to violence allows the reader to consider what alternatives to violence may exist in our own world.

This creation of this kind of culture calls to mind questions of how introducing large scale violence to a nonviolent people would affect them. In Lyubov’s view, the Athsheans, led by Selver (who they view as a god), may be adapting to the Terrans. He

asserts, “For four years they’ve behaved to us as they do to one another. Despite the physical differences, they recognized us as members of their species, as men. However, we have not responded as members of their species should respond... It wouldn’t be surprising if they’d decided that we are not human” (World 73). This shows Selver responding to the change in his environment by turning toward violence against the people who have brought it upon his world.

Genly’s place in society also shapes his character in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. As previously stated, Genly is the Envoy of the Ekumen, sent to invite Karhide (and thus, Gethen) to become a member of their interplanetary union. He has been hand-picked for this job, trained for a long time for it. This means that he has characteristics relating to his position as the envoy. Some of these are that he is independent, well versed in speaking to important people, patient, and in general, trusting.

Genly is independent. This is shown through his traveling alone throughout a foreign planet and his ability to create his own path. This is useful for the investigation of Gethen in the novel and allows the reader to go places that Genly is not necessarily required to go for his job as the envoy, such as the foretellers. In fact, Genly revels in his ability to travel easily on Gethen, when walking from Karhide to Orgoreyn, saying,

over the summer I had learned what a pleasant land Karhide was for walking in... I meandered across the splendid slanting land between the Sess and the Ey, taking my time, working out my keep a couple of mornings in the fields of the great Domains, where they were getting the harvest in, every hand and tool and machine at work to get the golden fields cut before the weather turned... in fact I

was reluctant to leave this land, which I had found, though indifferent to the envoy, so gentle to the stranger (Darkness 115).

This easiness at traveling alone, making new acquaintances and working in new environments not only serves Genly as the Envoy but also serves the reader, as their narrator is unafraid to put himself in new situation in which they will get the fullest view of this strange planet.

Genly is also patient, as he must be as the Envoy. He understands that what he is asking new worlds to fathom is frightening and new for them, which is why the Ekumen only sends one person at a time to these new worlds. Additionally, he understands that he might not be able to convince the king in the time period that he arrived at, as he says in a meeting with the king, “If I left Gethen now for the nearest world, Ollul, I’d spend seventeen years of planetary time getting there... If I simply turned around and came back, my few hours spent on the ship would, here amount to thirty-four years; and I could start all over.” This is a concept that he understands and is willing to deal with—the idea that he might have to speak his message several times without being listened to or understood. He must be patient to be the Envoy, so obviously, by writing him as the Envoy, LeGuin fashioned his character with patience.

This being said, he is not without the earthly tendency to want things to be done his way and on his schedule, which contrasts the Gethenian way of life and creates interesting tension between Genly and Estraven. On Gethen, it is always the year one—they do not seek progress in the way that people on Terra do. Because of this, Genly is sometimes frustrated with the pace of life on Gethen. This is due to his place of birth and

is something he must overcome both as the Envoy and as someone residing temporarily on Gethen.

Estraven's character has also been built from his rising to and holding a prominent position of power. At the book's opening, Estraven is "one of the most powerful men in the country... the Karhidish word for it means the King's Ear. He is lord of a Domain and lord of the Kingdom, a mover of great events" (Darkness 5). He also heads the *kyorremy*, the upper chamber of parliament in Karhide. When speaking about Estraven's character in relationship to power, Genly says:

In Estraven... one feels the man's power as an augmentation of his character; he cannot make an empty gesture or say a word that is not listened to. He knows it, and the knowledge gives him more reality than most people own: a solidness of being, a substantiality, a human grandeur. Nothing succeeds like success... I feel and respond to his authority as surely as I do to the warmth of the sun (Darkness 7).

This shows not only Estraven's position, but also his awareness of his position and ability to place himself in the world around him. Because of a certain lack of selfishness innate in Estraven combined with his position of power, Estraven is patient, well versed in shifgrethor, caring, and focused on goals larger than himself.

Estraven is also a caring individual. He cares for the people around him and for his country and he does not want there to be conflict between the people in his domain or with those in other domains. When the reader first meets Estraven, Genly is asking him about different banners for lands in Karhide at a large event, and Genly comments, "I ask

Estraven what this banner is and that one and the other. He knows each one I ask about, though there are hundreds, some from remote Domains, Hearths and Tribelets of the Pering Stormborder and Kerm Land... [he says] 'it's my business to know the Domains. They are Karhide. To govern this land is to govern its lords. Not that it's ever been done. Do you know the saying, *Karhide is not a nation but a family quarrel?*'" (Darkness 6). He loves Karhide and its people as he would love a large family.

Even though he is caring, Estraven isn't patriotic. Though he is caring on a large scale, it is on an individual level, in a feminine way. Because of this, Tibe convinces the King that Estraven is a traitor. However, in Estraven's view, it doesn't make sense to have fidelity to a nation for "what is love of one's country; is it hate of ones uncountry? Then it is not a good thing" (Darkness 228). Lacking the binary logic of difference, Estraven doesn't fully understand how someone could love an abstract concept as one's country, as, in his mind, it would require to hate an abstract concept as everything outside of it. He has loyalty to his people, but not in a way that would put them above the people of another nation. I think that this aspect of Estraven's character makes him more likely to help Genly because he believes that becoming part of the Ekumen is good for Gethen, and will keep peace in Karhide and help avoid bloodshed on their northern border.

Lastly, Estraven is focused on what he believes is right, and is willing to pay the price to bring about positive change. This is something that he and Genly have in common. He thinks critically about things and he challenges his own morals when he meets Genly Ai, and then he makes decisions to help him be successful on his mission. In fact, this focus causes him to break most of the laws on Karhide—he steals, forges his passports, lies, and ultimately goes willingly to his death, which is seen as suicide in the

eyes of the Gethenians. He sacrifices his place in society, his money, his friends, and ultimately his life, for what he believes is the right thing to do—helping Genly with his mission for the Ekumen.

Like Genly Ai, Saelana in *Running from Moonlight* inhabits an interesting place in her world that allows the examination of guilt and substance abuse in her society. Before the story opens, she was dependent on Moonlight, a drug similar to opioids in our society. She was also a successful distributor of the substance and built relationships with many people in that sect of society during the five years that she was using. However, now she is out of that sphere and can examine the ways in which it operates with the knowledge of an insider but the perspective of someone from the outside looking in. This gives her a unique perspective on the use of substances and a different way than many characters of navigating through her society. Additionally, Saelana is a wallflower, someone who knows how to listen to the spaces between the words people say to glean their true meaning and someone who is talented in hearing things she was not meant to. She is also well traveled from this work, which helps her along her journey, as she has to go to many new places to find Jerikki, the man with the staff.

Additionally, her position as a person in the tribe also helps her along her journey to save Brynn. It helps her to know how to live on the fringes of society—she has skills about living in the outdoors and using medicines and gathering food from the forests. She also is used to being an outcast in society, so it doesn't bother her that she has to figure things out for herself when she and Caroline continue on toward the coast.

Conclusion

In each of LeGuin's novels, the characters are created as a result of the environment they are placed in, which allows the author to engage in social critique. Likewise, in *Running from Moonlight*, her environment and her unique place in it allows the author to engage in critique about substance abuse and guilt. I believe that LeGuin was completely correct in her statement about the power of speculative fiction to create new worlds and critique the one in which we live.

All of these elements create environments that allow the author to envision alternative realities and create possible alternative outcomes for social and political problems they see in our present-day earth. These authors then place characters in these environments. The characters are built from the environments: from where they are physically, where they stand socially, and whom they interact with.

As we move forward, I believe it is important to continue to create these kinds of social critiques in writing, because it allows for new avenues of thought for readers and writers to come up with solutions to complex problems in their societies. Whether that problem is colonialism, gender inequality, or substance abuse, reading stories that critique those situations gives the readers a chance to empathize with the characters and think about their situations in a new way, creating the possibility for change in the future.

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Chapter One

Even for the tenth month of the year, it was dark. The trees of the Rhysand Forest were mostly silhouettes, black against the gray purple horizon. The sky directly overhead was black, too, dotted with unending starlight. The ground mirrored it, the darkness pinpricked by small constellations of torchlight.

Melodies learned in schoolhouses and taverns could be heard in pockets around the lights as people worked in the trees. They gathered from the branches with their sophisticated pulley systems. Three or four people worked in the trees and two or three on the ground, sorting and emptying baskets of soft-bodied fruits into horse-drawn wagons. Men and women chattered around the wagons as they worked. They contemplated changes in weather patterns, talked of fixing roofs and barn doors, and exchanged recipes and ideas for preserving food for the coming winter months. As the sky continued to darken, a few of the families secured their cargo and waved to the others, their light soon blending into the darkness.

Saelana stood next to her wagon, far enough from the workers around the fruit trees that she could not make out the specifics of their conversations. She took a drink from the container in the wagon, then stretched her neck, rubbing the sore spot on her left shoulder. The full day was coming to a close, but she had time to make one more climb. She looked up from the ground into the tree branches by torchlight before beginning her ascent, realizing her shadow would block out much of the light once she began climbing. Her muscles ached. She checked the security of the straps on her knapsacks and hoisted herself up the first branch.

Saelana's long limbs made for ease of climbing, but it was her sharp eyes and quiet nature that made gathering from the nut trees an ideal job for her. She worked

alongside Ren, her sister's husband, in relative silence. Their communication was easy, through calling out to one another, 'dropping' when one of their knapsacks was full. They would tie and toss the full bag and listen for the soft crackle-thud as the nuts hit the ground all at once.

When she had filled almost two sacks, she heard Ren whistle to her from where he was perched, about a dozen arms lengths above her. "I think it's time to head in. Getting dark. Grace will wonder."

"Alright." Saelana tied the half full knapsack, tossed it below, and began her descent.

She and Ren took turns pulling their wagon, nearly three-quarters full, while the other carried the torch, not that they really needed it once they reached the path. It was the only path, and it led in one direction: home.

Grace opened the door for them before they had even passed her blackberry bushes, as if she had felt them coming. August, her brand new baby boy, nursed at her breast, and Marge, her second oldest child, was standing just behind her, one hand on her hip. Saelana took the wagon and Ren extinguished the torch, kissing his wife and rubbing the baby's head before stepping inside. "Margie, sweet girl, did you make cinnamon rolls again? I think I smell those famous cinnamon rolls,"

Taking the wagon around to the back of the house, Saelana heard him just before she turned the corner. She smiled and rolled her eyes. The girl was 11 years old, but to her daddy everything she made was famous, and everything she sewed was the latest fashion. But, Saelana supposed, we all have our favorites.

She came to the back door of the storage pantry just as Grace undid the latch from inside the house, the warm light from inside the house making Grace's blonde hair seem to glow before falling on Saelana and the wagon.

Grace pushed some flyaway hairs back away from her forehead before taking the front end of the wagon and pulling it into the storage pantry. "Looks like you did well today," she remarked as she picked up the first sack and untied it.

"Not bad. Muscles started to get stiff toward the end. I think the cold might come early this year," Saelana answered, beginning to scoop the walnuts from the wagon and into large storage sacks that sat on the floor.

"Is it your shoulder again?"

"Mostly."

Grace tied the last storage sack and looked Saelana up and down carefully. "I'll get you the rice bag tonight,"

"Thank you."

The women were quiet for several moments, rearranging storage sacks and not looking at each other.

"You know you can't keep working like this forever," Grace said softly.

Saelana exhaled. "I know. But what else can we do."

Saelana wheeled the wagon out to sit next to the house. Around the corner and out of Grace's sight, Saelana massaged her shoulder, feeling the scars and trying to press out some of the tension. If Grace knew how much it really hurt her, she would tell her not to climb anymore, starting tomorrow, and no one would benefit from that. She could make

it, at least through this season. Then maybe she'd take to the ground. For now, she'd take it one day at a time.

When she and Grace entered the house, Marge already had the table set and Grace's five oldest children were sitting, waiting on them. Grace took baby August, now asleep, from Ren's arms and placed him in the crib next to her rocking chair in the next room and took her spot next to her husband. Saelana sat at the opposite end of the rectangular table, Caleb, Marge, Annabelle, Brynn, and Xander sitting between them on either side.

Ren said their evening prayer and then took his first bite of stew, signaling that everyone else was free to begin eating. Grace helped Xander, the youngest at the table, butter his bread before taking her first bite of stew. Brynn, the second youngest, was seated next to Saelana, who cut her meat and carrots into small, bite sized pieces on her plate. Saelana smiled at Brynn, her curly brown hair bouncing as she took bites of stew meat, brown eyes shining in the lamplight. She tried not to look too concerned at how flushed the little girl's fair cheeks were or at the blanket that covered her from the waist down. Brynn was always cold, since she'd fallen sick in the summer. The other children had recovered after a few days rest, but the heat in Brynn's skin still held her tight. She was always saying she was cold, but hot to the touch, and she was getting worse. The last few days Grace had told her Brynn hadn't wanted to get out of bed, only for meals. She says she's cold, and tired. No matter how many blankets Grace covered her with, she couldn't sweat it out. Brynn coughed and Saelana placed a hand on her back, rubbing in small, comforting circles. Brynn brought her hand from her mouth, speckled with blood. Saelana's eyes widened and she tried to wipe the red spots from her niece's hand before

they frightened her, but it was too late, and the six year old began to cry. Saelana scooped her up into her arms, murmuring soft words and carrying her up the stairs to the loft, where the children slept. She motioned for Grace to follow. There was no sense in scaring the other children too badly.

She stood and rocked the child, resting Brynn's head on her shoulder and bouncing slightly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as she whispered to her.

"It's okay sweet girl. It's okay baby."

"It was red!" Brynn cried, wrapping her hand in a fistful of Saelana's hair as a comfort.

Saelana rubbed her back, continuing to rock and bounce. "I know. It's okay. Everything will be okay."

Grace walked up the stairs and took her daughter from Saelana, seeing the bloodstain on Saelana's shoulder from where Brynn's head had been resting. She looked like she might start crying too, but she just shushed Brynn and held her tightly, resting her cheek on top of the child's head.

Chapter Two

Saelana took a couple drags off her pipe to get it going before putting out the match. She sat on a stump a little way away from the house, smoking and trying to relax the muscles in her neck and shoulders. She glanced up above the trees to the black sky. There were no stars.

“I thought you quit.”

Saelana jumped and the pipe nearly fell from her mouth. She turned to see Caleb, Ren and Grace’s eldest son, walking toward her, his hands shoved in his pockets.

“That’s why you shouldn’t ever start. You never really quit,” Saelana said, moving over on the giant stump so Caleb could sit next to her. He was only 14, but he already had some sparse hair growing on his face, and he was almost as tall as she was.

“How was Ben’s today?” Saelana asked.

“We didn’t get too much done. His mare needed a new shoe, so he had to go see if he could trade for one.”

Nobody in their tribe did metal work, so they had to get everything they needed through trade with the men who came through from the North, in the mountains. Old Ben was one of the only craftsmen among them, building chests and wagons from the hard wood they cut from the Rock Elm trees. Caleb had always been good with his hands, and since all of Ben’s sons had taken to the trees, he took Caleb as his apprentice.

“Have you had any interesting projects lately?” she asked.

“Not really. Two sets of dressers this week. And a coffin,” he picked up a rock off the ground, rubbing his fingers over it contemplatively for a few moments. “She’s really sick, isn’t she?”

Saelana smoked deliberately, buying time. “She hasn’t gotten better,” Saelana said finally.

“She’s getting worse.”

Saelana didn’t try to lie to the boy.

“We had a rider come through with post today while I was getting more kindling for our fire. He said there’s a caravan a day or two behind him, heading down from the mountains for the winter. He thought there was a doctor with them.”

Saelana didn’t move. They’d seen the doctors, and none of them understood what was wrong.

Caleb stood, tossing the rock back onto the ground. “It’s worth looking into.”

“It’s worth looking into,” Saelana repeated, ashing her pipe and following him back into the house. They had tried everything else.

Ren and Grace were sitting in the kitchen when she and Caleb walked through the threshold. The children were all in bed, and no noise came from the direction of the stairs. Grace had someone’s socks in her hand, mending the hem. Ren stared into the fireplace, barely moving even as he breathed. Saelana had the feeling that they had been arguing and only stopped when their son opened the door. Caleb said goodnight to his parents and lumbered up the stairs, while Saelana took the rice bag that Grace had set on the table for her shoulder and placed it on top of the lid of the kettle, hanging it over the fire to warm. They stayed silent like that until Saelana took the rice bag and lid back off the fire, wrapping the bag in a towel on the table and draping it over her shoulder, then sitting across from Grace at the table.

“Caleb says that a doctor is coming through here in a caravan on his way south,” Saelana said finally. They all understood that she didn’t mean through their tribe—nobody came this far into the forest except the occasional trader or men delivering post. She meant they would go through Trilgen, the town 9 miles east, just outside of the tree line.

“Do you think we can afford to delay him?” Ren asked. They no longer had much that would be of value to a doctor, and it would be expensive to get him to come all the way to the tribe and see Brynn. They had spent most of their gold and silver on the other doctors, the ones who hadn’t been able to help.

“I could take her to town,” Saelana said.

“Do you think that’s wise?” Grace said sharply “She barely gets out of bed. She’s in no condition to travel.”

Saelana looked at her sister in surprise. She hadn’t expected resistance from her, when Grace knew they needed help.

“I’m not going to have her walk there,” Saelana began.

“So you’ll pull her all the way to Trilgen in the wagon?” Grace said.

Saelana hadn’t thought that far ahead, but she realized that she would have a hard time with Brynn on horseback.

“We should wait until harvest is finished. Then we’ll have money to bring someone here, maybe someone who can afford better medicine,” Grace said.

Saelana looked to Ren for help, but he had returned to staring at the fire. She tried again. “Grace, the caravan won’t stay for long. Everyone traveling will try to make it west before the snow begins to fall. The doctor—”

“None of the other doctors have been able to do anything!” Grace cried, rising from her chair.

Saelana thought she heard a sound from up the stairs and turned in that direction, Grace following her gaze. Grace looked upset about her outburst when Saelana turned back, but her face was still hard and angry.

“We have to do something,” Ren said softly.

Grace sat back into her chair, placing the sock she had just finished with on top of a pile. “What else am I supposed to do?”

Saelana stilled her tongue and really looked at her sister. She saw anew the dark circles under Grace’s eyes, the bit of blood speckling the shoulder of her dress. Still, strength shone in Grace’s eyes. New baby August was lying in a basket on the table beside her, asleep. The small pile of mending next to her was quickly being accomplished. Everything Grace did protected and cared for the family. She only wanted to protect Brynn.

Ren finally turned from the fire to look at his wife. “I could get the carriage from Maddix. He owes me a favor.”

“Will he come through for us?” Grace asked her husband. “He’s a backward—”

“I know,” Ren said, putting a hand on Grace’s shoulder. They looked at each other, a silent conversation. She put her hand over his, and he kissed her forehead.

“I’ll speak to Maddix in the morning,” Ren said.

“I suppose that’s what we have to do.” Grace stood, taking August’s basket on her arm. “I’m going to bed. August will wake me in an hour or so, and I’d like to get some sleep before then.”

Soon, it was just Saelana and Ren, as it had been in the forest. Ren was still watching the fire, but spoke first. “She would rather you not go, especially not on your own.”

Embarrassment and anger heated Saelana’s cheeks. “And what do you think?”

Ren turned to face her, quiet for a few moments. “I’m worried too.”

“I can handle it. Frost is coming soon: you need to be here, working. And the trip may take two days: Grace can’t leave August home alone for that long and wouldn’t want to have him along.” It was all true.

“You’re sure you can handle it. Even if something goes wrong?”

“I know Trilgen much better than either of you.”

“That’s not what worries me.”

“I’ll have Brynn with me. I’m not going to do anything brash.”

“Even if the doctor can’t help her?”

Saelana paused. Ren’s face was not judgmental, but open, and honest. This was what he was worried about—her ability to keep her head about her if no help could be found.

“I promise.”

Ren stood to follow his wife back to their bedroom, and Saelana stirred the fire, spreading out the hot coals so it would die out while they slept. She looked above the mantle at the carvings Ren had done for each of the children when they were born, an outline and etching of each child’s tiny feet with each name burned into the bottom of the slab of wood. She ran her finger along each name, feeling the indentation of each individual letter. She stopped on the fourth of the seven feet, the one unlike the others.

Ren had made this one for her son, Michael, when he was born. It had been finished only two days before he died.

Right next to it, the next youngest child was Brynn. Saelana ran her fingers over Brynn's name, then the print of each individual toe. This little girl had saved her when she wanted to completely give up. She would do anything for her.

Chapter Three

Saelana woke early the next morning and filled her travel pack, putting on her riding pants instead of her climbers. When she walked into the kitchen, she saw Grace already up, rocking a happy, babbling August. There was a pile of clothes and blankets on the table: Brynn's things.

"Ren left already," Grace said as Saelana packed Brynn's belongings into her bag. "He's hoping to be back with the wagon soon after breakfast. We need to get you on the road soon, or you may miss the caravan."

"I'm coming too," Caleb said from the middle of the staircase.

"Keep your voice down, boy! You'll wake the other children," his mother said, motioning him down the stairs.

The idea of taking Caleb along didn't sit well with Saelana. "Ben needs your help in the shop, Caleb," Saelana said.

Caleb crossed his arms. "I drive a wagon better than you do, and Brynn will be crying scared the whole journey in the back of a wagon by herself. She's never left the tribe before. She'll fare better with you by her side."

Saelana pondered this. Caleb was right, but it didn't seem best to have the boy along. Saelana looked to Grace for help.

Grace sighed and dried her hands with a white flowered cloth. "Go along to Ben's and tell him you won't be in, then. Best be back by breakfast, though, your aunt's not waiting for you."

"Yes Ma," The boy dashed out through the front door, pausing only to pull on his boots.

“He’s barely been out of the tribe himself,” Saelana contested, even though she knew it was too late.

“And you’ve been out of the tribe too much,” Grace retorted. “Perhaps the two of you will balance each other out.”

There was no sense arguing. Saelana stayed silent.

Breakfast was quieter than usual. When the children made their way downstairs from their rooms, they picked up on the somber mood of Saelana and Grace. Brynn was still in bed. They had decided to let her sleep before her long day of travel. Ren returned with the wagon before anyone had finished their oats and sat silently, sipping coffee. Before long, Caleb came back through the front door. Ren raised his eyebrows—usually Caleb didn’t come home until close to suppertime.

“Your boy is going to drive the wagon,” Grace told him.

Ren just nodded, looking at his eldest son, who was sitting up straight in his chair, trying to look like a man. “Take her straight between the fruits and evergreens, and you shouldn’t have any trouble. The road to the village begins about a quarter mile past the last pear.”

Caleb nodded quickly, shoveling his oats into his mouth. He then took his things to the wash bin and kissed his mother’s cheek, rubbing little Xander’s head before heading outside.

Saelana finished her breakfast and headed to Brynn’s bedside. She placed a hand on the little girl’s forehead, smoothing back her curls.

“Wake up, sweet girl. We’re going on an adventure today!” Saelana whispered.

Brynn's eyelashes fluttered open and she looked up at Saelana, smiling sleepily.

"Where are we going?"

"Caleb is going to take us all the way out of the forest! Can you believe it?"

Saelana said.

"That's a long walk," Brynn worried.

"That's the best part. We're going to ride in a carriage. Like princesses," Saelana said.

At the mention of princesses, Brynn's face brightened, though there were still shadows under her eyes. The little girl could sit for hours and listen to Saelana or Grace tell her stories about princesses, knights, and dragons.

"Come on, let's find your boots and your coat. Caleb will be ready to leave soon."

Ten minutes later, Saelana and Brynn were tucked into the wagon, surrounded by blankets and supplied with enough fruit, jerky, and sandwiches for several days, even though Saelana planned to be back by dusk tomorrow.

Saelana did not mention the doctor to the little girl. It was best to let her enjoy the special magic of her first ride out of the tribe. They passed the time on their ride by naming different kinds of trees.

"Apple."

"Plum."

"Pear."

"...Walnut?" Brynn asked.

"Oak." Saelana corrected.

"Sycamore."

When they passed gatherers working at the bases of the trees, Saelana and Brynn exchanged waves and pleasant good-mornings with them. Caleb nodded to each of the groups, his hands on the reins and his eyes straight ahead. None of them asked where they were going. The word had traveled quickly. The people all put on happy, smiling faces for the young girl wrapped in her mother's wedding quilt, but Saelana saw their worried glances exchanged once they passed.

They reached the path to the village without trouble, the jolts in the undergrowth between the trees exciting rather than terrifying little Brynn. They should reach the village soon after midday.

Brynn was beginning to drift off to sleep on Saelana's lap when shouting was heard up the path.

"What is it?" Saelana asked Caleb.

"Four, five people. A chase, looks like."

Saelana laid Brynn gently into the nest of pillows. "I'm going to help Caleb. You stay right here."

Brynn nodded, too close to sleep to be afraid. Saelana said a silent prayer of thanks and joined Caleb on the driver's seat of the wagon.

A man was running in their direction, followed by four others. The man looked to be a craftsman, or perhaps a low-income trader, and his followers were obviously famers, and, more obviously, fatigued. The man in front didn't seem to be feeling the effort he was exerting at all, however. His eyes watched purposefully ahead of him, and his stride stayed long and quick. He carried a long rectangular container in one hand.

The man at the front passed the wagon. His eyes locked with Saelana's for a moment. His face seemed ordinary, if not slightly gaunt. But his eyes were the brightest green, almost not of this world. He smirked at her, then ran on.

Saelana watched him as he passed her, then looked back to the farmers, still shouting and running after him. When she turned back in his direction, he had vanished, and the farmers had begun yelling at her.

"Why didn't you stop him, tree hands?" the closest farmer yelled at Saelana.

Saelana was a little taken aback by the slur, but recovered quickly. "I didn't realize it was my business." The man was the color of a radish, and the others were so winded she didn't think they could even speak. "I thought the four of you had it under control."

The man fell into an infuriated silence.

One of his companions, a man the shape of a cornstalk with hair to match, stepped forward, folding his hands. A man with some respect of the tribe, no doubt.

"Johnathan, it doesn't matter. He's gone now. The Forest Lady could not have caught him any more than we could." His companion stayed silent as the man looked up at Saelana. "Are you and your children going to Trilgen?"

"Yes, we're going to the village. A caravan was said to have arrived today," Saelana said.

"The caravan is not in the village," The corn haired man responded. "Or wasn't when we were there."

The man's gaze moved beyond Saelana and she turned to see Brynn poking her head out of the wagon, her face sleepy and flushed. She rubbed one eye and coughed,

catching the last half of her cough in her hand. The corn haired man smiled to her and waved before turning back to Saelana.

“The child is ill?” the man asked.

Saelana nodded.

“I am sorry,” He said. “I hope that you can find what you’re looking for in Trilgen.”

The man bowed slightly, his two silent companions following suit. The man who had called her tree hands averted his gaze, watching along the path in the direction of the thief as if he had lost his only chance at a promising future.

Saelana nodded her head back to the men and then motioned for Caleb to continue on. Caleb, who had looked so sure of himself while in the tribe, had the face of someone who had taken too big a bite of stew and was trying to figure out how to swallow it. Still, he clucked at the mare and nudged her forward, and Saelana climbed back into the wagon with Brynn.

The village of Trilgen had been built along a tributary of the great river that ran west from the mountains, with most of the shops and inns close to the tortoise shell bridge. The bridge allowed passage across the expanse of river to the farmland on the other side and to the docks where the fishing and lumber boats were kept. Saelana watched the streets for any sign of a caravan from inside the wagon. Women hanging freshly laundered quilts watched them as they passed by. Little children were sword fighting in an alleyway as they passed, and Brynn watched in wonder. They passed a bakery, and the smell of rising dough made Saelana’s stomach grumble. She took one of Grace’s sandwiches from inside their food pack and tore it in half, giving some to Brynn

and taking some for herself. Perhaps after they met with the doctor she could take them to get pastries, as a special treat.

Saelana leaned forward and said to Caleb, “The Elk’s Head Inn is on the left, next to the bridge. Stop there, and I’ll see if there has been any more word of the caravan.”

Caleb nodded and did as she asked.

Saelana tried to leave Brynn with Caleb and the wagon once they reached The Elk Head, but the child started crying before she had even begun to walk away. The boy looked overwhelmed enough by the task of haying the horses and watching their belongings that she didn’t trust him to deal with a screaming child on top of it all. So she walked into the dusky front bar in her traveling clothes with a snot-nosed child on her hip in the middle of the day.

She hoisted Brynn up to sit a little higher on her hip bone, ignoring the way the hoppy smell soaked into the wood floor made the back of her throat feel. She walked determinedly straight to the bar, where a woman with sand colored hair and eyes like sea glass was cleaning steins and lining them up on the low shelf behind her.

“Marguerite?” Saelana called.

Like most village women, Marguerite was a half head shorter than Saelana and took a small step back when she saw her, eyeing first Saelana, then Brynn in her arm.

“Lana,” the girl registered her face and smiled. “It’s been ages.”

“It has,” Saelana agreed, smiling. “I was hoping you could help us.”

Marguerite’s stepped forward, her eyes on Brynn. She motioned for Saelana to come closer to the bar and poured her a whiskey shot. “What can I do for you?”

“We were hoping you would know about a caravan that’s supposed to have arrived in town today.”

“The performers?”

“They had a healer with them.”

Marguerite looked at Saelana, then at Brynn. “The caravan didn’t stop. They said there’s a hard freeze following them in, and they needed to make it down the canal before everything froze for the winter.”

Saelana’s heart dropped into her stomach, and she put her hand on the back of Brynn’s head, as if to protect her from the news.

“The child?” Marguerite asked.

Saelana nodded, not trusting herself to speak without tears forming in her eyes.

Marguerite leaned forward on the bar, touching Saelana’s arm lightly. “Maybe I can still help.”

Saelana raised her brows. “How?”

Marguerite looked around the crowded room. Everyone was absorbed in their pints or their conversations, nobody paying attention to the two women and the child next to the bar. “There is a man upstairs,” Marguerite whispered. “He helped the baker’s son with his burns last week. The baker took him up there covered in red and pink burn sores and brought him back down nearly healed.”

Saelana’s eyes widened. “I have to speak to him.” She turned toward the stairway, but Marguerite grabbed her arm.

“Wait,” she said. “He’s been angry today. Viciously angry.” She looked at the clock behind the bar. “I usually take him his lunch around this time. I’ll give it to you, and you can take it up there, then ask for his help.”

Saelana placed her hand on the barmaid’s shoulder. “Thank you, Marguerite.”

Marguerite smiled softly, setting the glass on the counter and wiping her hands with the dirty rag before setting it down as well. “Come on, then. He’s upstairs.”

Saelana squared her shoulders and followed Marguerite around the end of the bar and down the dim hallway, finally standing at the base of a long set of wooden stairs. She set Brynn down and held her hand.

Marguerite stopped, handing the lunch tray to Saelana. “He’s in the second room on the right. Bring the tray to him, and then wait by the door.”

Before Saelana could thank her again, Marguerite had flitted down the hallway, back in the direction of the bar.

Chapter Four

The second room on the right. All the other doors were firmly closed, but this one was open slightly, and a beam of midday sunlight shone on the wooden hallway floor.

From inside the door, she could hear the voices of two men, one younger and one older.

The young man said something she could not quite catch, his tone timid. The shout of the old man made Saelana take a step back, pulling Brynn back by the hand.

“I am not to be taken advantage of! I will not be made a fool!”

The younger man said something a little louder, sounding like an apology.

“Enough! I don’t want your excuses. Leave, and forget you ever saw me!”

Saelana thought the light cast on the floor turned slightly orange for a moment and then faded. The door opened and the young man walked out, looking dazed. He looked in her direction, but she did not think he actually saw her. She backed against the wall to let him pass and watched him walk down the stairs. She did not begin breathing again until she no longer saw him.

Brynn gripped Saelana's hand tighter, not making a sound. Her face was pale, eyes wide. Saelana knelt before her, eye to eye.

"I need you to stay right here while I talk to this special man for a couple minutes," she explained. "He might be able to help you feel better."

Brynn's lower lip quivered, her eyes wide. "A doctor?"

"No, not a doctor. Just a nice man who can maybe help."

"Like a knight?" Brynn asked.

"Exactly. A knight who can maybe help a little princess get better," Saelana said.

Saelana let Brynn knock and listened nervously for the reply. She wondered how this man had healed the baker's son, what kind of miracle worker he was, and if he could be trusted.

After what seemed to be a long while, Saelana heard a deep voice from beyond the door telling her to enter.

The room was brightly lit and disastrously cluttered. Small piles of coins and little stones littered the dresser, and the small desk was covered in bits of parchment, writing supplies, and knick knacks. The bed was unmade, and a pile of socks and other linens sat at its foot. In the corner farthest from the door in an armchair that had faded from a deep red to a sort of brownish pink sat a man, as old as her grandfather, with small streak of

brown in his mostly grey, shoulder length hair and beard. He had a blanket draped across his lap and a pair of small glasses sitting on top of his head as he read from an ancient looking grey bound book, his eyes squinting at the words as if they had done him a great disservice, his mouth in a tight line. Saelana set the lunch tray on the desk and then stood in silence for a few moments before he finally looked up, startled.

“You aren’t the woman who brings my lunch things and coffee,” he said, sliding his book away from himself on his lap. “What are you doing here?”

Saelana watched his hand float down next to him in the chair. Another person might have missed the gesture, but Saelana realized he was probably grasping for a weapon. Her hand casually floated to her waist and to grasp the hilt of her hunting knife, but she did not draw it. This was a delicate encounter.

“I’m looking for a healer,” Saelana said, her eyes fixed on where the man’s hand was, barely out of sight behind his thigh.

“Go down along the riverside. I’m sure there are healers there,” The man said nonchalantly.

“I have. They can’t help me.”

“What is it? Infertility? One leg shorter than the other?” His voice was clipped, without humor.

Saelana hesitated. She didn’t want to bring Brynn into the room until she was sure that it was safe, didn’t even want to allude to her presence outside the door. “Fever. Cough. Fatigue. No appetite.”

“Sounds like a cold.”

“It’s in its fifth month now,” Saelana said. “She’s beginning to cough up blood.”

The man's eyebrows raised, "She?"

Saelana cursed herself silently. It was too late now. "My niece."

The man studied her. "Come closer."

Saelana obliged, taking one step closer to the man in his chair.

He looked her up and down, squinting at her face. "What's your name?"

"Saelana, of Imogene, daughter of the trees," she replied.

"Ah. But not just of the trees any longer, are you? Saelana of many places, and many people. Saelana of dim lit streets. Saelana of tavern brawls. Saelana of Moonlight."

Saelana's jaw tightened and she resisted the urge to take a step backward. "What brings you to such a conclusion?"

"I see many things that others cannot see, the marks that life leaves on people. Marks like yours aren't difficult to discern, however. Substances like Moonlight leave traces on every person who uses them."

"Used them," Saelana corrected him.

"Used. My mistake." He slowly brought his hand back onto his lap, and with it, a long piece of white wood close to the length of her forearm. It reminded her of an ornate wooden spoon handle, perfectly cylindrical, the wood whittled with fine patterns near the grip and ornamented with red dye in the crevasses. "I am Damien, once of the Hill Men, and now of the Crystalline Mountain."

Saelana didn't move from her position, but her leg muscles tensed, prepared to flee. She knew flight would be worthless, though, if the man decided to attack her. She had trapped herself in a room with a wizard, with only a simple wooden door between the man and Brynn.

“We’ve heard of the drug trade in here, even back in the Southern mountains. The merchant caravans that make it this far north say this region is one of the best. Not that I of course indulge myself in such pleasures.”

“I’m not that person anymore.”

“Are you sure?” Damien asked.

Saelana clenched her teeth. “I’ve been going straight and sober for four years.”

Damien didn’t respond, just raised his eyebrows pointed his wand to the door.

The handle turned and the door opened only slightly. “Show me the child.”

Saelana brought Brynn in, and Brynn hovered behind her, holding onto the back of her cloak.

“Come child, let me have a look at you,” the man beckoned to Brynn. She stepped timidly next to Saelana, who nodded for her to approach. The man smiled at her and put one hand on her cheek, looking in her eyes.

“How long has the fever persisted?” he asked.

“Just past 5 months,” Saelana replied.

“What a resilient child you are,” he said kindly to Brynn, who smiled. He reached to a box by his bedside and pulled out a red candy, handing it to Brynn. While Brynn was focused on the candy, he flicked the wand and a wooden box appeared in the corner of the room. “There are toys in that chest by the bookshelf. Why don’t you go play for a while? I need to talk to your mother.”

Brynn didn’t correct him, just stuck the hard candy in her mouth and toddled away in search of something to play with.

“Have a chair, miss. There are some things we need to discuss.”

Saelana obliged.

“I can help you, if you first do two things for me,” Damien said.

“And what would those be?”

Damien looked to the door. “First, I need a place to stay for a little while. There are people looking for me, and I don’t want to be found.”

“Like the man you were yelling at?” Saelana asked.

“No,” Damien’s eyes narrowed. “Much, much more dangerous men.”

Before she could stop herself, Saelana looked toward the door as well, as if they were expecting some dark force to enter at any moment. She looked at Brynn, who had propped herself up against the wall, half-heartedly playing with the pile of blocks on the floor.

“You’re sure you could make her well?” Saelana asked.

“Yes.”

“How long would it take to heal her?”

“She could be running outside by morning.”

Saelana’s chest clenched with hope. Brynn running, singing, as soon as tomorrow. It was almost too good to be true.

“What’s the second thing you would require?”

Damien studied her quietly, making her squirm slightly. “An item of mine of great value stolen yesterday. My staff. I need you to retrieve it.”

“A staff? If that’s all you require, my tribe has one of the finest wood craftsmen in the region,” Saelana said.

“This staff cannot be easily replaced,” Damien said. “It has a powerful enchantment. Without it, I have no use of my legs.”

Saelana looked at the blanket on Damien’s lap, noting the way the room was laid out. Everything, she realized, was in reach of the chair—the desk, the books, the dinner tray. Without the staff, Damien was trapped in the room.

“So when I retrieve the staff, you’ll heal Brynn?”

“The child will not live long with the affliction. If you accept the task, and can give me a safe place to stay until the staff is retrieved, I will heal her today to the best of my ability. But much of my magic I cannot do without my staff. If you do not return in three months’ time with my staff, the healing magic will not last, and the child will not live to see another harvest.”

Saelana was filled with a peculiar mixture of delight and dread. Such a risk. She looked to Brynn. The child had fallen asleep next to the tiny block tower she had constructed. Her wrists were becoming thin enough that the bones were easily visible. She thought of Brynn being well again, able to play with the other children, to run. But what if she failed to retrieve the staff? Perhaps it was best to wait for the doctor in the caravan to see the child first.

“The doctor will not be of any help,” Damien said, as if reading her mind.

Saelana turned back to him, studying his face. “How do I find the staff?”

“The men tracking the thief had reason to believe he was going to Kambal,” Damien replied. “It should be no more than a week’s journey, and if you leave tomorrow, you may be back within the month.”

Damien was giving her three months to complete a task that could possibly only take a third of that time. A generous man, a desperate man. Saelana saw him look at Brynn again, his eyes soft, the corners of his lips turning up slightly.

“I’ll take you to my sister’s house to stay, and I’ll go on your quest,” Saelana said. “I’ll need money for the journey. Enough to borrow a horse, if you have that.” The faster she could track the man and get back, the better.

Damien took some coins from the side drawer of the desk, counted them, then handed them to Saelana in a small velvet bag. “This should be more than enough.”

Saelana nodded her head in thanks. “I’ll return your staff to you as swiftly as I can,” she promised.

“It’s settled then,” Damien said. “Have the barmaid come up and help me with my things. We will away at once.”

Chapter Five

Before long, Saelana and Brynn were situated in the back of the wagon again, this time with Damien sitting across from them, propped up in the front corner. A few minutes into the silent drive, he began to ask questions about Brynn and the time of her birth.

“Was anything strange going on when she was born in the town? Any travelers?”

“We’re in the tribe. We don’t get much in the way of travelers,” Saelana said carefully.

“Changes in the family? Sudden deaths?” Damien pressed.

Saelana hesitated, thinking. “No. Not at the time of her birth.”

Damien looked at her seriously. “This is the child’s life. It’s no time for keeping secrets.”

Saelana exhaled, looking to Brynn. She was playing with blocks she found on the floor, paying no attention to their conversation.

“Brynn is my sister’s child,” Saelana began softly, “but she is my life. The day she was born was the day I stopped having anything to do with Moonlight.”

“The day Brynn was born,” Damien finished.

Saelana nodded. “I saw her and she reminded me of... my son, Michael. The child I... lost,” She swallowed forcefully. “I saw her and I felt like I had something to live for.”

“From the moment you held her,” Damien said.

Saelana stared at him. “Yes... how did you know that?”

“The child is showing all the signs. This happens sometimes with children, especially after a family member has experienced serious trauma.”

“What is it? Why is the sickness lingering?” Saelana said, looking at Brynn sleeping on her chest.

“She took on your affliction,” Damien explained. “She didn’t take your craving for *Moonlight*, exactly, but she took the part of that craving that was making it impossible for you to control yourself, made it impossible for you to just leave the substance and walk away. Now, the part of you that could not let go of Moonlight is not allowing her to let go of this sickness.”

Saelana sat silently. The child she loved more than life was suffering the consequences of her past mistakes. “What can be done?” she asked, desperate for the wizard to have some solution.

“Don’t worry. I will be able to help her.”

Brynn was still sleeping when Caleb pulled the wagon up to the house, her head resting in Saelana’s lap. Saelana's stomach reeled as she thought about coming face to face with her sister and explaining everything. Her private shame was enough to bear: how could she tell her that Brynn’s sickness was her doing?

Grace and Margaret were in the front lawn before the wagon had even stopped, waving at them with floured hands, white aprons tied around their waists.

“Give me a moment to talk to my sister,” Saelana said to Damien.

“Of course,”

She scooped Brynn into her arms and exited the wagon, facing Grace. Grace looked Brynn, and then at Saelana, inspecting her. Her face went from curious to judgmental, the soft line of her mouth going hard. “You’re back earlier than expected,”

she said finally. She held out her arms and took Brynn from Saelana, getting faint white handprints on Brynn's dark blue dress.

"We have a house guest."

"What?"

Saelana told her what had happened, beginning with the men on the road, going to the Elk Head, and meeting the wizard. Grace looked past Saelana and to the wagon, where Damien still sat, facing away from them.

"He said that he could help her. I made a deal with him."

"What? What did you agree to?" Grace said, eyes wide.

"I told him that I would find an object he needs if he would heal Brynn. He's given me three months to do it." Saelana described the staff to Grace, its power, and the magic that Damien possessed. How he could save Brynn.

Grace's face went wide as Saelana explained the terms of Brynn's healing. "Why would you do something like this?" she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

Grace pulled Saelana by the elbow away from the wagon. "You said you were going to find a doctor, and you bring home a wizard?"

"The doctors have done nothing. He can help her," Saelana said.

"And then you bring him into our home?"

"It was the only way he would agree to help her," Saelana said.

"You risked my daughter's life on your ability to follow some crazy man's quest?"

"She is going to die!" Saelana was nearly shouting now, she realized. Margaret poked her head out of the doorway, checking to see if all was well.

Saelana took a deep breath. "I've already made this promise."

"Now we will all face the consequences," Grace said.

"She will be well."

"We don't know that."

"Something has to be done."

Grace didn't answer for a moment. "Bring him to the front room," she said sharply. "And wash up, all of you, before you do anything else. You smell like the inside of a keg."

Saelana didn't answer her, just went back to the wagon to get Caleb's help to assist Damien inside.

Once Damien was situated on the couch, Caleb left to return the wagon. Grace stood in the kitchen with Brynn in her arms.

Damien nodded in return. "Bring me the girl."

Grace approached, Brynn now awake, simply resting in her arms. Saelana met her halfway to the couch and Brynn reached for her. Saelana scooped the child into her arms, holding her tightly. "The knight says that he can help you to feel better! Isn't that wonderful!" Saelana said softly to Brynn.

Brynn looked at the old man skeptically, gripping Saelana's forearm in her little hand. "Will it hurt?" she whimpered.

"I could never hurt someone as beautiful as you," Damien smiled at her. "Just rest your head and close your eyes. You won't feel anything."

Brynn wrapped one arm around Saelana's neck and buried her face into her shoulder. Saelana held her, feeling Brynn's eyelashes on her skin as she closed her eyes

tight. The smile on Damien's face was replaced with a look of concentration, the lines around the corners of his eyes vanishing as he pointed the wand at Brynn. Saelana felt Brynn's grip relax on her forearm, her whole body losing its tension.

"I've put her back to sleep," Damien explained as he saw Saelana's shocked expression. "This will not hurt her, but it won't be pleasant. Best not to scare the little one if we don't have to."

Saelana nodded.

"You can hold her. It will probably make things easier on you both. Will you unbutton her dress, please? I need to see her shoulder blades, that part of her back."

Saelana did as she was instructed, first taking off Brynn's jacket, then unbuttoning the first few buttons on her blue-green dress. She felt the strong heat coming off Brynn's body. She would be better soon. Damien was to make her well.

"What are you doing?" Grace demanded from where she stood behind Saelana.

The wizard reached into his bag on the couch beside him and retrieved a glass jar, with a little liquid that looked like lamp oil pooled in the bottom. He removed the lid and handed it to Saelana. "The sickness is seeded along her spine. I'm going to remove it."

"How?" Grace said, but Damien ignored her, pulling his wand from his bag and turning to Saelana again.

"Keep that jar close. We'll want to close the container as soon as the sickness is contained."

"Will it take long to remove?" Saelana asked, readjusting the lid in her hand so she could quickly tighten it onto the jar.

“Hopefully not,” Damien replied. “She’s had it since she was born, though, so it may be buried quite deep.”

“Born with it?” Grace said. Saelana’s stomach clenched. She still had to tell Grace what had happened. How it was her fault. But not now. Not yet.

Damien did not even register he heard her. He touched Brynn’s back gently between the shoulder blades, as if he was examining her for something. Crawling his fingers up and down her spine between her neck and the base of her shoulder blades, he finally stopped his hand about two-thirds of the way down, holding his index finger between two of her vertebrae. Saelana looked down over Brynn’s head to see the wand in the other hand. Damien touched it to her spine where his finger had just been. He closed his eyes, his lips slightly parted. His wand hand shivered, his lips moving almost imperceptibly, reciting a spell, or a prayer. To Saelana, they were nearly the same.

Damien pulled the wand away from Brynn’s back slowly, a finger’s width at a time. Saelana gasped as the scent of decay hit her nostrils. Despite its repulsion, she yearned for it. Barely masked by the smell of desperation was the alluring scent of Moonlight. Less an actual smell, more a feeling, a lightness in the exterior parts of her mind. The end of Damien’s wand pulled a thick, black substance from Brynn’s back. It looked like Moonlight on black water, flowing like liquid tar from the wand into the jar Saelana held.

Saelana watched her fingertips of her other hand reach for the dark liquid, the piece of her mind that screamed at her to stop submerged beneath a deep desire to feel the liquid on her skin, experience the lightness. She swirled two fingers in the stream of

blackened silver flowing into the jar, feeling the tingling sensation glide up her arm and fill her mind, her chest, the bottoms of her feet.

“Close the jar, close it!” Damien shouted, breaking Saelana’s trance. The hand with the lid moved as fast as she could move it, closing the jar. She brought the jar to her chest, longing to feel its warmth against her skin, but Damien tore it from her. “What are you thinking?” he yelled.

Saelana tried to focus on the words. What was she thinking? Brynn’s weight against her felt warm, but not hot, as it normally did. She looked down at the little girl’s face, a healthy color in her cheeks. Brynn was sleeping, Brynn was safe. That’s all that mattered. Everything felt right. What else was there to think?

“Hand me the child,” Damien said sharply. Saelana looked at him, brows furrowed. Brynn was hers. She would do no such thing. “You are a danger to her. The Moonlight is in you. Hand her to me,” Damien repeated.

It couldn’t be true. “Brynn is safest with me,” Saelana said.

“Not in this state,” Damien countered.

Grace swept between them and tore Brynn from Saelana’s arms, horror on her face.

Saelana looked at them, confused. The silver. She understood that’s what she’d done, what she’d wanted to do. Follow the Moonlight. Her heart began to race, anxious underneath the fabricated calm. She looked into her sister’s face, but Grace was focused on Brynn, one arm holding her and the other petting her hair softly watching her sleeping face for any signs of trouble or discomfort.

Saelana looked back to Damien, “Sleep, child,” he said not to Brynn, but her. He put one hand on her shoulder and pointed the wand calmly at her chest. Her eyelids became heavy, and she succumbed to slumber.

Chapter Six

Saelana woke to the sound of August fussing in his crib. She was lying on the couch. The pillow beneath her head smelled like mint. She heard Grace shush the baby, and Damien say something to Grace. Their voices sounded far away, and she was confused to see them sitting just across from them when she willed her eyes to open, Damien in the armchair where Ren usually sat and Grace in her rocker. She couldn't see Brynn or Margaret, but heard the lilt of their voices somewhere in the room, playing some kind of made up game.

The front door opened. Saelana turned her head and saw Caleb standing in the doorway, his hair standing up in six different directions and his hat crumpled between his hands.

Seeing Saelana prone on the couch, Caleb's eyes widened. "What happened?"

Saelana looked at Grace, then Damien. Neither one spoke. "Damien has healed Brynn. The fever is gone. When he was healing her... I don't know, I must have passed out. It's been a long day."

Caleb studied Damien, then extended his hand. "Thank you for making my sister well, sir. I'm Caleb, I work for the wood craftsman in the village. If there's anything I can do to repay you, we are in your debt." The men shook hands.

"You are well spoken beyond your years, Caleb. Your sister is lucky that you care so much about her," Damien said.

Caleb stood up straighter.

"I have collected payment from your aunt, but I do have a job for you, if you are as skilled as Saelana says," Damien rummaged around his bag and found a wrinkled piece of parchment. "Something like this."

Caleb studied the drawing. “When do you want it by?” he asked.

“As soon as you can get it finished,” Damien responded.

“If I ask my mentor to help with the difficult pieces, it can be done... maybe by the end of the week.”

“Very well.” Damien handed Caleb three silver coins. “This should be enough to get you extra supplies, if need be. I’ll give you the rest when it’s finished.”

Caleb nodded.

Grace cleared her throat. “Will you take your sisters outside? We have some things to talk about,” Grace said.

Caleb took Brynn by the hand and led her through the doorway, Margaret following behind, the latch clicking behind them.

“How did I get on the couch?”

“You fell to the floor. I picked you up,” Grace replied. “Drink this. It should clear your head.”

Saelana sat up stiffly. The room tilted. She blinked hard a few times to reorient herself and took the glass in her sister’s outstretched hand gratefully. “What is it?”

“Orange juice.”

Saelana drank a mouthful, overwhelmed by the sweetness on her sandpaper tongue.

“Do you remember what happened?” Damien asked.

“Yes.”

They sat in silence for a while, Saelana avoiding Damien’s eyes. She still felt it, the last bit of sweetness of Moonlight, making her feet tingle. It would be gone before

long, and she would begin to need it again. She wondered how she had existed this long without it, and how she was going to continue to live without it now.

“What happened?” Grace said. “He said you needed to tell me yourself.”

Saelana knew what she meant, and faltered. She knew that Grace loved her, and it would benefit them all if she could tell her the truth. But she wasn't sure she could come to utter the words, even though Grace needed to know about the Moonlight, and how it had filled Brynn and made her unwell, and how it plagued her own veins once again.

Finally, the words came forth like a rush of water down a mountainside—what Damien had told her about Brynn's sickness, and what had caused it. What she had just done, reaching for it once again.

"I contracted it," Saelana said. She didn't think that she was going to cry while she talked about this, but she found herself tearing up. "I wasn't strong enough to withstand the pull... when it was leaving Brynn, I dipped into the Moonlight."

"Lana..."

"Don't call me that," Saelana said sharply, tears falling now. "They used to call me that. I don't want to be that person, not anymore. But it looks like I am."

Grace was quiet for a moment. "I can't send you out into the world like this," she said finally.

"What?"

"I don't want you going on this quest. It's too dangerous for you now. Perhaps wait until you're better. Wait until the pull of Moonlight has left your system. Wait until the end of harvest. Ren needs you. I need you."

Saelana thought about this for a few moments, looking out across the tree line.

"Brynn needs me."

"She's better."

"She won't stay that way if I don't succeed."

"What?" Grace said, looking at Damien.

"The magic I used to make her well is only temporary. Without the staff, I cannot be sure she will stay well."

Grace looked at Saelana desperately, then at Damien.

It was Damien who spoke, "I can't remove the sickness from you, Saelana, like I did for Brynn. Your body clings to it. The sickness is much stronger, because you chose it."

Unable to listen any further, Grace stood and left the room.

Saelana sat quietly, listening to Damien and feeling the strange, welcome sensation of need pressing on her chest. The craving for Moonlight. She was unsure what she had been without it—a free woman, or a hollow vessel, waiting for purpose to return?

But she had purpose. Damien needed her to retrieve his staff. Brynn needed her so she could remain well. Her life was not just her own, so it couldn't be spent chasing after Moonlight. The need in her chest turned to an aching in her stomach.

"What do I do?" Saelana said.

"I don't know," Damien began. "This changes things."

He was right. Before, when he had said that he would heal Brynn, she had been willing to do absolutely anything he asked. Now, she was unsure.

"Why did you choose me to help you?"

Damien thought for a moment. “It’s not going to be an easy task. The staff makes whoever is wielding it faster and stronger than they would ever be normally, both in mind and body. I knew that you had a better chance than most, because of your knowledge of the area, and your connections with people who may be less inclined to follow the laws. Plus, Brynn’s illness gave you ample motivation to even attempt it. But now...” he trailed off.

Now, he and Brynn had competition, since she cared about the Moonlight once again.

“I’ll fight it. Brynn needs me. I... I don’t know how, but I have to do this.”

“You’re going to have to fight your temptations, just like anyone else would,”

Damien replied. “More than just your life depends on it.”

“I understand.”

“Our agreement was that you would have three months to obtain the staff and return it to me. It seemed fair at the time, but now, with everything that’s happened... I need the staff by next harvest. Especially with me staying close to the child, I should be able to keep up my end of the bargain that long. Your nephew will build me a wagon to give me some mobility. I should be able to manage myself for one full season set.”

Saelana nodded, saying a prayer of thanks for Caleb. “Thank you, Damien, for saving Brynn. I will repay this debt.”

Chapter Seven

After helping Damien organize his things in the downstairs bedroom, Saelana ascended the stairs toward her room with soft steps, closing the door behind her with a nearly silent click. She stripped out of her traveling pants and tunic and stood in her underthings in the middle of her room, hands over her face. She took ten slow breaths, attempting to picture a blank wall inside her mind. Her stomach ached, and her ribcage felt too large, too empty. She wrapped her arms around her midsection in an attempt to make the ache stop. All she wanted was to crawl into bed and sleep for a few days, but she knew that she had other things to do before she could let herself be weak. She changed into her normal attire, climbing pants and a loose shirt, not bothering to put her shoes back on before striding back down the stairs.

Brynn had found her baby brother, August, in the front room and was playing with him on the floor, making him clap his hands together and scrunching her face in different ways to make him laugh. Saelana smiled at the child and then turned toward the door, opening it into the cool autumn air.

"Where are you going?" Grace asked, trying not to sound harsh again, trying not to push Saelana away.

"I'm going to get some air. It's been a long day," Saelana replied. A small lie, but not a hurtful one.

If Grace perceived it, she said nothing. "Dinner will be ready in an hour. Meat pies and apple dumplings," she said softly.

"I won't be long." Saelana closed the door behind her without making a sound and strode left along the path, not toward the village, but further into the tribe.

The fruit gatherers were working, as usual, in their trees, chattering amiably. They nodded or smiled as she passed, heading further into the trees to find Ren. She whistled five short, shrill notes, and listened. Hearing nothing, she repeated the pattern. This time, she received an answer. She sat on a stump and pulled her pipe from her pocket. Footsteps sounded behind her as she brought it to her lips. Ren's tall frame and long face appeared.

"You're back," he said.

Saelana looked to the other gatherers, and, judging that they were far enough away to hear nothing, recounted the events of the day to Ren, in full detail. Ren let her speak, only stopping her twice: once in a joyous exclamation for his daughter's health, and once for clarification about the wizard, and what little she actually knew about the magic he possessed. When she was finished, they sat together for several minutes, just watching the leaves and thinking. It had always been this way with them—no minced words, only silent respect or blunt observations. Saelana supposed Ren's silent steadiness balanced out Grace's whirlwind of preparedness.

"Do you trust him?" Ren asked.

Saelana looked at Ren, unsure from where exactly that question had arisen.

"Damien?"

Ren nodded.

"I have to. He saved Brynn."

"It could be a trap. She could fall sick again as soon as you leave. He could be sending you to take something that isn't rightfully his."

Saelana hadn't thought of these possibilities. "Grace doesn't think I should go either."

"You have to," Ren stated.

Saelana was surprised. "What do you mean? I just met this man this morning. We're unsure whether or not to trust him. And now I'm craving Moonlight. Grace is right, the odds are stacked against me."

Ren picked some dirt from under a fingernail, then looked at Saelana again. "Grace is a mother, through and through. She wants to keep us safe. That's her job, and she's good at it. But we all have jobs to do."

"You're right."

"I think that you probably can trust this wizard, that he really needs this staff. He wouldn't make himself so vulnerable as to come to our home if he wasn't desperate. He doesn't really know the territory here, and if he really can't walk on his own, he's at our mercy." The wind picked up slightly, and Ren looked up into the trees, thinking. "The fates brought you and Damien together today. It wasn't a coincidence that you found each other. I think that you are the person who is going to be able to get what Damien needs. Not me, or Grace, or anyone else, but you. Because of who you are."

That hit Saelana like she'd been punched in the stomach. Because of who she was, because of the things she had done and seen and learned.

Finally, she took the bag of coins that Damien had given her from her jacket pocket and dumped them into her hand. "This is really what I wanted to talk to you about."

Ren's mouth fell open. "Where'd you get these?"

"From Damien. To fund my trip to find his staff."

Ren didn't say anything, just counted the coins, placed them back in their bag, and handed it back to Saelana.

"Five hundred gold pieces," he said.

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. She had known it was going to be more than enough, but five hundred gold pieces was absurd. Especially since the trip was only supposed to take three months. Even if the trip took her an entire year, this much money could feed two or three people for that amount of time.

Saelana took a handful of the coins out of the bag and counted them out. Two hundred and fifty. She handed them to Ren.

"Take this."

"Saelana, you know Grace won't—"

Saelana cut him off. "I know Grace wouldn't take the money, which is why I'm giving it to you." Saelana cupped her hands around his and closed his fists around the money. "I don't want to be worrying about you while I'm gone. I don't need that kind of distraction. This will make up for the lost labor."

"You know you don't owe us anything," Ren said.

"Family takes care of each other," Saelana replied.

Ren looked at the coins, then nodded. "Thank you."

"Of course."

"You need to take care of yourself while you're gone. My girl loves you. We all do," he said.

"I know. I will," Saelana said.

Movement down the path caught Saelana's eye and she turned to see Caleb walking down the path toward them, coming home from returning the wagon. He walked up to them silently, his hands in his pockets.

"You did good work today," Saelana told Caleb.

"Thank you, Auntie." He paused. "What did that man want from you?"

Saelana explained to him the quest that Damien was sending her on. "What did he ask you to make for him?" she asked.

Caleb pulled the piece of paper Damien had given him from his pocket. "It's a chair that moves like a wagon. A wagon that you can push while you're sitting in it." Saelana looked over the drawing and saw that's essentially what it was: a chair with two big wheels for steering, and two smaller wheels for balancing.

Ren and Caleb began talking about the specificity of the chair design, and Saelana excused herself, telling the boys that Grace will have dinner ready in the next half hour. The two men bent over the small piece of paper was the last thing Saelana saw before she began walking barefoot home.

Saelana was still a few minutes early for dinner, so she took a seat on her smoking stump. Caleb was growing up. Getting smarter. He still hadn't taken a liking for any of the girls in the tribe that she could tell, but that made some sort of sense. His parents and his siblings needed him now. Perhaps when things got better, he could find himself a lady, a bit of happiness in the tribe. Or the village. Or wherever he wished to be.

With his skillset, almost anything was possible for him.

Saelana wondered about herself, and the skills she possessed, the skills that Ren had hinted at her needing to use. She had learned a lot about business during her time

with Valeria, and she was comfortable with the way the world operated in the village, and what she had seen of it beyond. Still, what did she have that would allow her to fare well on this quest? She seemed to be the least qualified person she knew for such a task.

She supposed it didn't matter, though. This wasn't a task given to the most able-bodied person; it was given to the person who was the most desperate.

She heard the front door open and Grace whistle out for everyone to come to supper. Two of their grinning boys appeared from the trees to the west of the house, their hands, knees, and cheeks covered in dirt. Saelana smiled to them and followed Ren back into the house.

Dinner was thankfully short, and a quiet affair between the adults at the table, which was vaguely masked by the chatter of the children, who stole occasional curious glances at Damien, who sat next to Ren. Brynn and her sisters filled most of the gaps in conversation, Brynn telling the others about her journey in going into Triligen for the first time. Saelana smiled at her excitement. She had been asleep for most of the journey, but she talked about it with such authority that she could have been alert and absorbed the entire experience.

“Will you take us all into Trilgen next time, Auntie?” Annabelle asked, eyes shining.

“Yes, please? Can we go soon?” Brynn echoed.

Saelana's heart caught in her throat. Brynn hadn't been this vibrant in so long, and now she had to leave, didn't even get to enjoy time with the child before setting off to ensure that she stayed healthy, and safe.

Caleb saved Saelana from having to speak. “I’m going to need to get some special supplies for Ben in a couple of days. Maybe we can all go together then?”

The girls were pleased with that idea and left Saelana alone about going into the Village. She watched them talk and laugh and eat their portions of meat pie, soaking in the joy that they radiated. She would need these memories of positivity in the coming days and weeks.

Soon enough, supper was ended, and the children put to bed. Damien requested one of his books from his room and stayed seated at the table, reading. Caleb and Ren stayed up, the boy talking more to his father about the machine he was going to make for Damien. Ren listened carefully, asking appropriate questions. He was so obviously in love with his children.

Saelana pushed her thoughts away before they had time to fully surface. Seeing Ren in this way sometimes brought them on—thoughts of her son, and her husband. He had never been soft, but that’s what had drawn her to him. What had cost the life of her son. A lump rose in her throat as she looked to the mantelpiece.

Grace saw her looking at the mantelpiece and stood from where she wiped the table, putting the rag back into her apron and picking up her fussing baby from where he lay on a blanket on the hardwood floor.

“I know it’s hard,” she whispered.

“I don’t think you do,” Saelana said without thinking.

Grace was a pained quiet. When Saelana finally tore her eyes from the mantel, she saw there were tiny tear streaks on Grace’s hard, steady face. “You’re right. I don’t.”

Saelana held her tears back. She knew when they began to fall, there would be no stopping them.

The baby grabbed along the neckline of Grace's dress, and Saelana pulled his hand away, letting him grasp onto her forefinger.

"I don't know the pain you felt when you lost Michael, but I've thought for months that we were going to lose Brynn," Grace whispered. "I am so grateful that you were willing to do this for her."

Saelana wrapped her arm around Grace's shoulder, the baby still grasping the forefinger of her other hand. Grace rested her head on Saelana's shoulder. Saelana said, "I love them too, all of them. I just show it differently than you do. That's why I have to do this."

"I know," Grace said, breaking out of the embrace and wiping her eyes with one of her sleeves. "I'll fix your pack, and wrap your shoulder before you leave tomorrow. Best foot forward."

Saelana nodded, still holding back her emotions. "Best foot forward." She gently pried the baby's tiny fist from her finger and ascended the stairs to her bedroom, closing the door.

Saelana stripped off her mask of confidence and duty as soon as the door closed, smelling the bar on her traveling clothes, seeing her knives and climbing gear strewn about the bed and the floor. So much had happened today. She was leaving tomorrow morning. It terrified her. Her hands shook slightly as she removed her pipe and tobacco pouch from her pants pocket and set it on the dresser.

She sat on the floor, her back against the bedframe, head in her hands.

In her chest, behind where her heart sat, she felt an aching. The Moonlight, calling to her. She didn't have time for that, not today. Not ever again. Brynn and the family needed her. Still, her hands wouldn't stop shaking. She ran them through her hair and took a blanket from her bed, wrapping it around herself. Oh gods, what had she done?

The quest was dangerous enough, and she had put herself in more jeopardy. Herself, and Brynn. Her mind raced. She needed to be calm, needed to center herself, but she couldn't regulate her breathing. She hugged the blanket closer around her shoulders, balling it up in her fists, running her thumbs along the soft material, trying to establish a soothing rhythm. She studied the material, squares of differing shades of blue and green patterning its surface. She had cut, sewn, and quilted this while she was pregnant with Michael.

Michael. Her son.

The tears she had held back since she had left the bar with Caleb fell freely now, dripping onto the hardwood floor. They weren't enough to wash away the guilt that she felt. She was guilty from the beginning. She chose the wrong husband, couldn't protect her son, let the Moonlight consume her, let Brynn be taken by it.

Had almost let her die.

And when she finally had gotten the strength to save her, gone to Damien to get her help, she had fallen again. Put them all in more danger by succumbing to the Moonlight. She could do nothing right. It was just against her nature.

She let her body fall to one side, her cheek pressed against the cold hard wood. Her feet stuck out from the other side of the blanket, but she couldn't be bothered to

cover them. She lay there, eyes closed, shoulders shaking, until she could cry no more, and finally slept.

Chapter Eight

Saelana woke with a pounding head, her mouth dry and tasting like soot. She sat up and squinted toward the window. It was just before daybreak. Her brain felt hazy. She had forgotten how difficult the morning after taking Moonlight had been. But, she remembered dimly, that's because she had often done more as soon as she awoke. Her knees and ankles ached, and she knew it wasn't just from yesterday's climb, but her body begging for Moonlight.

She rubbed her cold face with her hands, her palms sweaty. Someone had covered her with another blanket after she had fallen asleep, one of the down quilts from Grace's room. Next to where her head had been sat a cup of water, a wooden box, and a note. Saelana rearranged the blankets so they covered her shoulders and read it.

I put these together this morning. They should help with the pain in your shoulder and the Moonlight cravings while you're away.

Grace.

Saelana picked up the box and opened it. Inside were small bags of herbs and bottles of salves, the inside of the lid marked with the name and proper dosage of each. Warmth grew in Saelana's chest, nearly overpowering the nerves that still steadily built in her stomach. Grace always knew what to do, especially when Saelana felt completely helpless and alone.

Saelana took the bottle labeled *Morten* and put five drops of the liquid under her tongue, as instructed, to quell the Moonlight craving she felt in the back of her throat and her ribcage.

With renewed courage, Saelana set about packing her things into a small bag. A few extra changes of day clothes, her hairbrush, and cold weather and rain gear things went into the bag first, followed by her sleeping system and finally Grace's box. Her hunting knife, small medicine kit, a fire starter, and her pipe and tobacco pouch from the dresser went on her person. She double-checked to see if she had everything and then set about getting ready herself. Once her boots were laced and her hair was braided, she headed down the stairs and outside.

The cool forest air was moist and inviting as Saelana set foot outside of Grace's house, as if the forest was attempting to ease the beginning of her journey. A butterscotch colored mare waited for her in front of the house, Ren holding the reigns. Grace was filling one of the saddlebags with bread loaves, bags of nuts, dried meats, and cookware, and Saelana put her other supplies in the one on the opposite side. She traveled light to make better time, and planned to buy most of the food and extra things she would need along the way. The money from Damien was tucked away in several places on her person and in her bags, and she checked that they were secure before turning to Grace and Ren.

Grace kissed her on the cheek, and the sisters embraced. "You packed the box?" Grace asked.

"Yes, thank you so much," Saelana said.

"Of course," Grace brushed a strand of Saelana's hair from her face. "Send word when you can, and travel swiftly. The children will miss you dearly."

"I will." Saelana hugged Grace once more before turning to Ren and embracing him as well. He squeezed her tight once and then pulled away, unstrapping something from his side.

“I had Caleb fetch this from the woodcraftsman for you,” Ren said, handing her a hatchet with a handle the length of her forearm.

Saelana thanked him, attaching the hatchet to the outside of her saddle bag, making sure that the sheath was secured around its sharp metal head.

Ren put his fingertips on one side of her face and began the blessing for their tribe. “May the trees protect you...”

“...in life and death.” Saelana finished, her fingertips on his cheek.

Saelana mounted the mare and, having checked that her bags were secure, took the path away from the house not turning back to look at her family, fearing her tears may fall.

When she reached Trilgen, she rode around the village, not in the mood to see anyone. She reconnected with the road heading Northeast, toward Kambal.

It had been almost five years since she had headed this direction, yet little had changed in the forest. The few farmhouses along the road were nearly identical to the way they had been, save a new barn here, a fresh coat of paint there. When she was in sight of the first few buildings that made up the town itself, she stopped for a little while, tearing a piece of bread from the loaf in her bag.

She studied Kambal from the distance. It was the largest town in the east, almost big enough to be deemed a city. The trade here bustled, for Kambal was built at the base of the mountains, where one great river from the snowmelt forked. One fork headed straight west, the other dipped south, and both trafficked supplies and fresh water to most of the lesser villages.

Her plan was fairly simple: if she could find the man with the staff quickly, great. If she couldn't, she'd ask around and see what other people had seen. She had plenty of money to throw around, and she was hoping some of her contacts would still be willing to exchange information.

If things were as similar to what they had been five years ago in Kambal as they were in the forest, she knew of only three places a traveler might go for lodgings, as she assumed the man with the staff would. One was a bed and breakfast for the merchant types and could be ruled out based on the cost of the establishment. Another was the upstairs of a bakery, but she doubted that the man with the staff would know about that, unless he frequented this area often, as she once had. That left the tavern, sitting on the southern fork of the river, a dusty place where at one point in her life she had known nearly every name and face.

Saelana tucked the rest of her bread inside the saddle bag once again and straightened her cloak, pulling on the hood so it covered her hair and shadowed the top half of her face. The tavern would be the most likely place to find the man. She took the wooden box of medicine from her saddle bag, dropped five more drops of medicine underneath her tongue, and placed the box into her bag again. She exhaled a long breath, then kicked the mare's sides gently. With her current cravings, the tavern wouldn't be an easy place to begin.

She made her way into town slowly, following the path past the outlying houses and small farms, then a church, until the path came to the south fork of the river and began running parallel to it. She followed the river fork upstream, surveying the people

who passed her on both sides of the clear mountain water. Part of her hoped she would run into a friendly, familiar face. Most of her hoped to only cross paths with strangers.

Reaching the tavern, she dismounted and approached the stable. She would keep her mare there so the horse could have a bag of oats and rest for a while, since she had business to attend to inside. A boy too young to grow hair on his face sauntered up to her, looking as if he felt very important.

“I can help you if you’re looking to stable your horse, ma’am,” The boy said.

“I am, do you know if there are any rooms available upstairs for tonight?” Saelana asked.

“Should be,” the boy replied. He took the reins from Saelana and stroked the mare on the nose. “does she have a name?”

“No,” Saelana said, giving him one of the gold coins in her coat pocket and taking her saddle bags from the mares back. “take good care of her. Unless I tell you otherwise, we will be departing at first light.”

The boy took the gold and nodded, turning the mare to the stable.

Saelana inhaled deeply, staring at the old wooden planks that made up the face of the tavern. She thought about how she had stood here many warm nights and more crisp mornings, smoking her pipe and waiting for a delivery to be picked up or dropped off. The sound of coins hitting her hand, the smell of Moonlight... it was almost unbearable. She opened the faded green door and stepped inside.

Her eyes took a minute to adjust to the dimness of the bar, but the sounds and smells were something she had long become accustomed to. She sauntered to the bar and

paid the woman behind it for a room. She then turned down the back hallway, through a swinging door, and to her room, the third one on the left.

The room was small, but it smelled like the sheets had been washed recently and it was often aired out, so Saelana was pleasantly surprised. Many times when she had stayed in this tavern and ones like it, the rooms smelled foul, a mixture of mildew, vomit, and stale tobacco smoke. Although, now that it was in the forefront of her mind, the tobacco smell did not fail to permeate the space.

After checking in the sheets for bugs and discovering none, Saelana set her saddle bags and her jacket on top of the comforter. She stashed the key the bartender had given her in her pants pocket along with a good portion of her money and her pipe. It amazed her how much people would say in front of her if she was sitting in front of a building having a smoke.

Saelana looked around the room for somewhere she might be able to stash some of her extra money in case someone came in and messed with her saddle bags, but didn't find any place suitable for that. In fact, the room was quite sparse even as far as overnight lodgings were concerned. The bed and a small bedside table were the only things in the room, aside from a mirror scarcely larger than her face. She shrugged, touching the key inside her pocket once again. The room would be secure for a few hours until she occupied it again. She checked her hair in the mirror before leaving the room once again, locking the door behind her.

Saelana sidled up to a bar stool and sat down, watching the bar maid pull draws of honey-colored ale from the tap. She waited patiently for the girl to finish with the other customers. Once she was done, Saelana would pull her aside, and ask about the man with

the staff. She glanced in the mirror behind the bar, scanning for him in the dusky, crowded space. She saw no one but strangers, no one looking suspicious. Then her gaze fell on a familiar ear. A man facing the back of the bar away from the doorway, with two notches cut into the top of his right ear. She recognized it, then the sandy hair nearing his jawline, then the unevenness of his shave, cut with a shaky hand.

It was Weston. Her heart pounded in her ears, eyes wide.

She turned back to the bar, keeping her face on the mirror. She saw Weston's eyes fixated on her back, and cringed.

"Hey Lana!" Weston called.

Saelana tried to ignore it. She felt a large hand squeeze her shoulder just tight enough to be intimidating.

"You weren't going to walk in and out of here without saying hello, were you? By the gods, it's been years," Weston said, his eyes shimmering.

"Weston, I really have to go," Saelana said, prying his hand off her shoulder and still feeling the shadow of his fingers on her collarbone. He had a habit of losing any concept of personal space when he was drinking.

"So soon, sugar? At least let me buy you a drink. One of those big mugs, like you used to like," Weston said.

"Thanks for the offer, but I quit. You know that," Saelana said, beginning to panic. She had to get out, now.

"Come on," he touched her arm gently and leaned in closer, his lips almost touching her ear. "Just a couple drinks. You've filled out since I've last seen you undressed."

Saelana took a step backward, goosebumps racing from her neck down her arm. She didn't know why seeing Weston here had surprised her, but she had things to do. And yet, the smell of hops and tobacco on his breath appealed to her. But it reminded her of long ago nights when she had willingly shared adventures in scratchy sheets after four pints and a journey in the Moonlight. The memories hurt her, but the sensations called to her. She almost shuddered at the thought of what she would be doing if she hadn't taken the medicine Grace had given her.

She debated on whether she should stay and gather information from the girl working the bar or see what she could learn standing outside the bar. Either way, she would need to get Weston to leave her alone. He didn't give her very good options, as he stood between her and the door.

"Do you want to start with whiskey or beer?" Weston asked, putting one hand on the wooden bar top, leaving the other on her shoulder.

"I need to go," Saelana answered softly.

Before Weston could respond, Saelana saw a hand with scarlet fingernails reach up from behind him and pull him gently to face the other direction. "Weston, don't you have something better you could be doing?"

Even though Weston obscured her from seeing the woman, Saelana recognized her voice as it wafted through the bar, the color and texture of maroon lipstick. It was Valeria.

Valeria didn't wait for Weston to respond to her inquiry, only dug through her pocket and handed him three coins. "Grant has an order for me I need picked up. He's supposed to be behind the hog market just after midday."

Weston looked at the money, then glared at Valeria. “This isn’t enough.”

“That’s for the product. Bring it all to me, I’ll give you a cut and your pay.” She tapped the bar twice with her long fingernails, and the barmaid handed her a pint. She motioned to Saelana, and the girl handed her another. “Two lunch specials, Hannah.”

Weston looked at the money again, then at Saelana, scaling his eyes down from her face to her chest. “I’ll be back within the hour.”

“No big rush,” Valeria said, moving in front of Saelana. “I’ll be here all day.”

Before long, Valeria and Saelana were settled in a corner booth, two hunks of bread and a platter of meat between them.

“You look good, Lana,” Valeria said. She tore a bit of bread from her piece and maneuvered it past her painted lips, washing it down with three swigs from her pint.

Saelana took a bite of her bread and, after chewing a few times on the stale mouthful and finding it impossible to swallow dry, followed suit. The bubbles tickled her throat. This must be top of the keg, a lucky find, in a place like this. She supposed that the fact that she was with Valeria had helped with that.

“It’s been a while,” Saelana said.

“It has,” Valeria agreed. “Time’s moved, but not much is different around here since you were last here.”

“Weston is definitely the same,” Saelana commented.

“He’s harmless, really. He’s more of an annoyance than anything.”

“Is he working for you now?” Saelana asked.

“When I need him. He’s not one I trust with big assignments or one to be paid before the job is done and done right.”

“Do you have a lot of business?”

“Yeah, somebody always needs something, even with people like you cleaning up,” Valeria replied. “Where you been hiding out?”

“I’m still living with Grace. Helping her take care of the kids. She has seven now.” Saelana replied. She raised her pint to her lips. It was empty. She wasn’t sure how that happened. She felt for the bottle of medicine in her pocket, slipping it out underneath the table. She unscrewed the cap and dipped her forefinger in. She feigned like she was getting something out of her teeth, but licked the medicine off. It wouldn’t help with the drink, but taking it made her feel more confident.

“Grace is good people,” Valeria commented. “Does she still hate me?”

“What do you think?”

Valeria laughed. “I suppose I deserve it,” She took a long drink from her pint. “You know, I didn’t just ask you over here to save you from Weston.”

Saelana’s stomach turned, and she was pretty sure it wasn’t the alcohol.

“I’ve been looking for someone that I can trust.”

Another pint appears next to Saelana's arm. She takes a deliberate drink from it and tries to look contemplative. What kind of work could Valeria be wanting from her? She didn't think it could be anything good.

"I have been needing someone who can be here and run the operation while I'm gone." Valeria says. "I have quite a bit of business brewing in the south, and I'm leaving almost every week now to tend to it. The boys around here can handle some of the small tasks I give them, but most of them either have sticky fingers or absolutely no business

sense." She takes a drink and looks around her, as if the company in the bar proves her point.

"I have a lot of duties to take care of right now," Saelana says. "I'm here looking for someone." Saelana described the man with the staff in detail, without mentioning the staff or its value. Valeria was a friend, but also a successful businesswoman, and loyalty was not one of her better-known traits.

Valeria listened, but seemed uninterested. "No one like that has made his way by here this morning, but ask around. Not too many strangers around this time of year—all the travelers are heading south and west in anticipation of the winter."

"It's important that I find him and return home soon," Saelana continued.

"I know family means a lot to you," Valeria said, leaning back in her chair with her palms pressed to the table. "Taking care of your sister's children, feeding her family. It's a shame that shoulder won't keep up with you much longer, you're going to be out of the trees before long."

Saelana's throat tightened. She wasn't sure how Valeria had found out about that, but she wasn't at all happy.

"If you worked for me, all the children could go to school in the city. You could have your own wagon, instead of borrowing from other people in your village. You could live in your own house, nearby Grace. You would never have to worry again."

Valeria's gaze was steady, looking in Saelana's eyes. She was being truthful.

"When would you need me?" Saelana said.

"Whenever you could start. I leave again in three days."

"I'll need time to think," Saelana said. Damien's staff and Brynn's life were her first priorities, and even after the journey, she would need time to herself before making such a big decision. Still, it was tempting—the thought of what she could do with all that money. It wouldn't even be difficult work. She'd just be doing business with people she used to know anyway, and all she would really have to worry about is watching her back.

Valeria inclined her head to the barmaid, who took their plates away, and then stood. "Let me know what you decide," she said, and Saelana nodded to her before Valeria turned and walked into the mess of people crowded around the bar.

With the silence of Valeria's absence, Saelana realized how fuzzy her surroundings were, how everything seemed louder, brighter. Her stomach knotted and her face darkened from the cherry it was from the drink to scarlet with shame. She had important work to do, and she'd let herself get distracted. She had succumbed.

Saelana stood on slightly wobbly legs and headed toward the front entrance of the tavern, passing people of all types and kinds that were beginning to fill the tables crammed together around the bar. She pushed open the wooden door and took a step outside. Fresh air would help to clear her head.

Chapter Nine

It was still a few hours before dark, but the air was beginning to cool. Despite being angry with herself for straying from her original plan, Saelana couldn't help smiling at the leaves as they whispered in the late autumn wind. It was a clean sound, like water crashing over river stones and leaving them polished and smooth. She pulled her pipe from her pocket, packed it, and lit it, leaning up against a hitching post. She ran her thumb along the smooth wood of the post with her free hand, first with and then against the grain. The sensation calmed her.

She went over the information she had gleaned thus far: she still didn't know where the man with the staff had gone. Valeria's business was picking up, and she was spreading out, toward the south. That must mean that either more people were in need of substances than before, or Valeria had pushed those who had run those areas out of business.

Weston was working for Valeria, if only occasionally. That might be of use to her, to find out exactly what it was that had made Valeria so successful. This could also be beneficial because it could give her some idea on why the man with the staff came here, and if here was where he was staying. She would go back inside and ask the barmaid after she finished her smoke. It would be alright, somehow.

Her mind less jumbled, Saelana decided to check on the mare before retiring to her room. She followed the path that the stable boy had led her horse in earlier, around the side of the tavern to behind a store that sold soap and different kinds of beautiful fabrics. The stable door was open to let in the breeze in, but an older man was sitting next to the door, mending a bit that seemed to have bent.

“Sir, can you please show me where my horse is stabled? A butterscotch colored mare, about fourteen hands high.”

The man did not look up from his work. “We only have three horses stabled here miss, two of mine and a chestnut belonging to the blacksmith’s son.”

Saelana thought the man must have misunderstood her question. Or perhaps he hadn’t seen the boy stable her horse earlier that day.

“No, a boy who works here stabled my horse this morning, around midday? He was maybe twelve, blonde hair.”

This time, the man looked at her. “Ma’am, I don’t know who you gave your horse to, but the only people who work here are me and my son-in-law, and he’s a dark fellow with curly hair.”

Saelana’s eyes widened, but she tried to conceal her shock. “Thank you, sir, I must be mistaken.” She dipped her head and walked back toward the street.

The edges of her vision had become crisp with panic. She tried to calm herself, to slow her breathing. Her horse was gone. She had given it away to a stranger. Worse, she had paid the stranger to steal it.

Still, she tried to remain calm. Worse things had happened. She remembered them, even through the Moonlight blur.

The difference was, though, she hadn’t been alone then. She also hadn’t been relied upon, not in the way Brynn relied on her now.

The road to find the green-eyed man with the staff seemed infinitely longer. Hopelessly long, unless he was still close by.

That was it. She had to find him, before he moved on again. With renewed resolve, Saelana reentered the tavern. She approached the bar, unaware of the people staring at her, not caring that her purposeful stride was sending whispers across the tables.

The girl at the bar was handing three pints to a bony young man when Saelana caught her attention.

“What’ll it be?” The girl, who Saelana remembered was named Hannah, asked.

Saelana slid a silver coin across the bar. “I’m looking for someone.” There was nowhere else to get information at this hour of night, and she had been gone long enough that she didn’t feel she adequately remembered where she stood with most of the other people she had run with before.

“I need to talk to Valeria,” Saelana said to the woman behind the bar.

“She’s not in,” The barmaid said.

Saelana slid another coin across the bar. “Take me to her.”

The woman glanced to her left and right, making sure all seemed right in the tavern. Then she called to a young man who had been clearing tables to watch the bar for her, and led Saelana down the back hallway.

Saelana had done deals with Valeria many times before, but never in Valeria’s actual place of residence. She preferred to go out when she worked, claiming not to like

to “shit where she ate.” They would meet at brothels, marketplaces, or pubs, where they could do business, then drink and chat. Thus, Saelana was unsurprised when the barmaid opened a door labeled STOREROOM. The room smelled earthy, potatoes, onions, and carrots shelved on the right side, while bags of flour and barrels of ale lined the left. A shelf of smaller wine barrels lined the back wall, and the barmaid wheeled it aside to reveal a heavy wooden door. She knocked five times, and Saelana heard a heavy bolt being turned before the door opened a crack.

“She’s here, miss.”

Saelana didn’t catch any response from the other side of the door, but the barmaid stepped aside and held the door open for her. Saelana raised her chin and stepped across the threshold.

Valeria was seated on a plush red armchair, her legs swung over one of the armrests, her elbow propping her up on the other. At first glance she looked graceful and relaxed, but Saelana knew her better. Valeria’s knee-high leather boots were still on, the hilt of a knife barely protruding from the one that Saelana could see. She didn’t see evidence of it, but she was almost certain that there was a small blade in the heel of that boot as well. It was built in. Those boots had been a gift from Saelana. The chair was purposefully situated on the other side of an ornate coffee table, halfway between the door that Saelana had just entered through and another door on the opposite wall, presumably leading outside.

“What a pleasant surprise,” Valeria said, swinging her legs off of the side of the armchair and taking a bottle of dark liquor from beside it.

“Surprise, indeed,” Saelana said, purposefully situating herself on the loveseat closest to the door to the storeroom.

“Have you reconsidered my offer?”

“I’ve come to ask for your assistance.”

“What can I help you with?”

“A village kid ran off with my horse today, and I’m hoping you can help me. I need to find the man I told you about earlier. Urgently.”

“I told you already, I haven’t seen your man.”

“Do you have a horse I could borrow from you? Or purchase?”

“That doesn’t seem like a very sound investment to me. From what I’ve gathered, you aren’t sure where this man is, or how long it will take you to catch him, if you catch him at all. I wouldn’t let you borrow an animal if I wasn’t sure when it would be returned, and I would advise you against purchasing one. You aren’t sure how long you need to stretch the funds in your boot.”

Saelana flushed. “Then at least help me to find out who it was that stole the horse.”

“I’m sure I know most of the people in this town,” Valeria said. Saelana caught the noncommittal way she phrased the response. “You know who might know even better than I do, though, is Weston.”

Saelana blushed. “I am not asking Weston for anything. You know where we stand.”

Valeria held up her hands innocently. “I’m just saying, he’s been here much longer than I have, and he would probably know the kid that you’re looking for.” She

then averted her eyes from Saelana, picking up the liquor bottle and removing the cork. She swirled the liquor around in the bottle, smelled it, and then re-corked it.

“Why do you really want me to go talk to Weston?” Saelana said.

“I have a handful of things that need to be picked up from him. I don’t want him to come directly here, and I have other business that requires my attention, so I can’t go myself. And if he doesn’t know, then you and I can go sniffing around for the kid ourselves,” Valeria smiled knowingly from the side of her mouth. The look made Saelana seethe.

Saelana considered the situation, and the woman who sat across from her. “Okay. I’ll take care of this for you. But it’s imperative that I leave town tomorrow.”

“I completely understand,” Valeria said. She handed Saelana a small purple velvet coin purse. “Weston should be around the bakery. That’s where I asked him to meet me. Give him this and he shouldn’t give you any problems.”

“I understand,” Saelana turned to exit the room.

“Oh, and Lana?” Valeria said.

Saelana turned to face her.

Valeria winked. “Try not to start any trouble.”

Saelana faked a smile, turned, and tossed the coin purse once into the air, smoothly exiting the room through the cellar.

Chapter Ten

Before long, she exited the bar, the inside now filled with the night crowd, mostly travelers or drunks, nobody doing any kind of respectable business. She looked up at the starlit sky and thought about Brynn. Grace will have put her to bed by now, fast asleep in her bedroom underneath lovingly stitched quilts. The thought of her sister and the children made Saelana's chest feel empty. She had worked outside of the house many times before, but had never felt this sort of emptiness while she was away.

Her stride relaxed and her eyes determined, Saelana made her way out the front door of the bar and down the dusty street, pulling her hood over her hair and sliding the coin purse into her back pocket. These streets were so familiar, so unchanged since she had been here last. The bar was next to a potter, a shop selling assortments of cloth across the street. Leather goods were sold in a small shop a few doors down from there: a shop not run by the tanner himself but by one of his daughters. The tannery itself had such a distinct smell that it was kept on the outskirts of the town. Saelana was glad of it, for just down from the leather store was the bakery, whose flour she smelled even at this late hour, though they were not to begin baking again until just before first light.

Coming closer to the bakery she saw Weston, leaned up against the railing that lined the front porch of the bakery. His tall, thin figure clothed darkly was starkly contrasted against the ash wood of the bakery wall. Saelana approached casually, glancing at the other shop fronts to see if there was anyone loitering nearby. She felt like she was being watched, even though she hadn't seen anyone during her approach. She looked along the side of the bakery as she approached the staircase onto the porch where Weston stood, and realized she was looking for Grace. Her sister would be ashamed if she knew what she was getting herself back into tonight.

But she wasn't getting into it again. She was making one deal, asking one favor, and then going on to find the man with the staff, and go home.

Part of her saddened when she thought about this. She felt powerful, with the weight of the coins in her pocket, the cool night air on her face, standing straight and tall in the silent openness of the dark streets. She ascended the steps and sidled up next to Weston, placing her hands casually on the railing. Her hood obscured Weston's face from view, but she felt him edge closer to her, heard his weight shift in her direction.

"You're earlier than I expected," Weston said. He had sobered up since she'd met him in the bar; his voice more like gravel than it had been before.

"You have the order, I assume?" Saelana replied.

Weston took her by the shoulder and turned her toward him. "Lana?"

Saelana took the money pouch from her back pocket. "Valeria sent me to pick up product."

Weston smiled. "On the job again," He handed her a package wrapped in brown paper, closing the distance between them.

"Not on *the* job, just on *this* job," Saelana said firmly, unsure whether she was convincing him or herself. She took a step backward and closed both hands firmly around the package. She didn't want to look at it any more than she had to, but somehow, it was hard to put it into her pocket where the money had been.

"Shame," Weston said. "I've missed having you around." His voice was genuine. He turned into the moonlight, and Saelana could see the flecks of green in his eyes. It was those eyes. They had always suckered her in. Saelana turned back to face the road and the buildings opposite them. The moon above reflected on the pair of windows set into the

building like giant white pupils in oddly rectangular eyes. Somewhere far away, an owl gave out a short cry.

“A lot of people thought you died, you know,” Weston said. “When you left us, what, four years ago, to go see your family? When you didn’t come back, a lot of people thought you must’ve never made it.”

Saelana chanced a glance at him, and caught him glancing at her.

“What did you think?” She asked, looking straight ahead again.

“I knew you were alright.” He kicked a rock off the porch, and it bounced across the dirt road in front of them. “It was going to take more effort than it was worth for any of those low lives to put you down.”

Saelana smirked a little at this, and realized she was blushing. She shook her head, then took a deep breath. “I could use your help, Wes,” she said finally, turning to face him.

Weston swiveled to sit on the railing “Of course.”

The intensity in his gaze, the lack of hesitation in his voice, made Saelana’s stomach flip. “Some kid stole my horse this morning, and I need to get her back,” Saelana started. She described the incident, the boy, and her conversation with Valeria.

Weston listened intently. “That doesn’t sound like... I’m not sure.”

“Doesn’t sound like what?”

“Anyone from around here. I know everyone in this town,” Weston said carefully.

“Absolutely no one?”

Weston thought for a moment. “The tanner gets new apprentices about once a year. We can go look on that side of town and see if we can dig anything up.

Otherwise...”

“Otherwise?”

“Did anyone know you were coming, was anyone watching or waiting for you?”

Saelana thought for a moment. “No, I don’t think so.”

Weston chewed on the inside of his cheek, thinking. “Alright. We’ll start at the tanner, then.”

Saelana smiled. “Thanks Wes.”

Weston winked at her. “Why are you thanking me? We haven’t found it yet. Let’s go.”

Saelana followed close behind Weston as he descended from the bakery front porch and onto the road, walking in the opposite direction from the pub. They headed across the bridge over the second fork of the river, into a part of Kambal that was less familiar to Saelana. The houses were bigger and fancier on this side of the river, but Weston passed the big houses, passed the main shops. Saelana thought he was going to take her into the forest, but stopped short, at a cluster of squat buildings, well put together, but not becoming.

The foul, salty smell of the tannery hit Saelana as she stepped from the road. She followed Weston along the dirt path between what appeared to be the main building and the outhouse, past a pair of worn wooden sheds, and to the largest of the buildings, the stable.

“Shouldn’t we ask the tanner if he has the blonde boy here?” Saelana whispered.

“It’s late—he’ll be asleep by now,” Weston said quickly. “Besides, we’re after the horse, not the tanner or the boy.” He quietly unlatched the stable door and slipped inside.

Saelana hesitated, looking back to the house for any signs of life. There was no light in any of the windows, not even any stirring of the white curtains on the first story windows. The house slept, along with the people inside. Still, she felt uneasy.

Weston poked his head back through the doorway. “Coming?” He held out his hand to her. Saelana looked back at the house one more time before taking Weston’s hand and following him into the darkness.

Their footfalls were nearly silent on the soft, dry dirt inside the stable. Three high windows on either side of the barn were their only sources of light. Saelana’s eyes adjusted, looking to the line of thick stall doors to her left, the tall stack of hay bales and bags of grain in the back corner, an assortment of tools and equipment on their right side.

Saelana realized her hand was still cupped in Weston’s and took it from him, pointing toward the stalls. He followed her as they peered inside each of the five doors. Two of the stalls were empty, and three were occupied, one mare in each of the first two and a mare and her colt in the third. None of the horses, however, resembled Saelana’s.

“Mother above. Nothing,” Saelana turned to Weston.

Saelana saw Weston bite his lip, then shake his head, the top half of his face enveloped in shadow. “We’ll have another look around town tomorrow morning.

Whoever the kid was, they couldn’t have gone far.”

Saelana was about to reply when the stable door they had entered through crashed open.

A squat, bow legged man appeared in the doorway, looking furious even just by silhouette. The man carried a dagger in one hand and a pitchfork in the other. “Boy, when I find you, I’m going to whoop you to next Sunday!”

Weston gripped Saelana’s forearm and led her into the shadows. The door to the first empty stall was slightly ajar. If somehow they could squeeze through without making any noise...

“I knew you was too much trouble to take in, I should have never listened to your mama. Boy, by the time I’m through with you, you’re gonna wish you was just starving in that rat shit covered hovel!”

Saelana tried to get up to explain that they weren’t any boy of his, but Weston pulled her closer to his chest, one hand cupped around her mouth. In the darkness, all Saelana could really make out were Weston’s eyes as she turned to face him, but they said enough. She should not look for mercy from this man.

The tanner walked all through the stable, kicking over buckets and cursing the boy who had apparently taken a sock full of money from him and disappeared while he was supposed to be running errands on the other side of town. Saelana remained silent, studying the rollers on which the door was fastened. The tanner was getting continually closer to their hiding spot. If they wanted to get away without being trampled, slipping into the stall and out of the window appeared to be their only option.

“I know you’re in here,” the tanner glowered.

Saelana pushed the door less than a knuckle’s width. Then another. Then another. No sound came from the hinges. She pushed it four more times, just barely wide enough

for her to fit her shoulders through. She untangled herself from Weston and slipped inside.

It was not until she heard the creak of the door being shoved quickly aside that she realized how much broader Weston's shoulders were than hers.

Saelana thought she could hear the tanner smiling as his footsteps stalked toward them. Hiding was out of the question now, they needed to run.

"I'll boost you up, then you pull me over." Saelana whispered as she laced her fingers over one knee to boost Weston over the window.

"No, go!" Weston didn't allow her to protest, just picked her around the thighs and hoisted her to the high window. She grabbed the windowsill and pulled her legs over, half jumping and half falling onto the short grass on the other side.

Weston was an idiot, and now he was trapped in there. Her fingertips barely grazed the bottom of the windowsill, there was no way she could pull him over from this side. The tanner let out a pain-filled yell from inside, then a curse.

"I'll have your head, scum!" The tanner shouted.

Weston grunted. Saelana heard rustling inside the stable, then another yell. Not the tanner's. She had to get Weston out of there.

Saelana looked around for something, anything, to distract the tanner long enough for her to get away with Weston. She saw an axe propped up against the side of the barn. No. She had never spilled another person's blood before. It was one of her last purities. A purity she intended to keep.

A lamp hung outside the front door of the tanner's house. A wheelbarrow next to the house. A hoe, a bucket, a line of piss pots. A well, just to the left of the stable.

Saelana's hands worked before her mind had fully realized her plan. She grabbed the bucket and the lamp, making her way to the well. She drew a bucket of water, then walked back to the entrance of the barn, taking five steps back from the still open door. The tanner was still shouting, some curses, some cries of pain. Weston seemed to be holding his own.

Saelana poured the bucket of water into a large, rough circle in the dry grass. She looked at it. She should get another bucket. There wasn't time. She pulled a handful of long dry grass from outside the circle and caught it on fire from the lamp, just in case the flame went out when she held the lamp above her head and smashed it on the ground.

"Fire!" she yelled. "Fire! Fire!" She then ran and hid alongside the barn. The tanner flew past her, still cursing and limping as he ran into the house for help. Saelana sped the other direction, into the barn, blindly searching for Weston in the blackness. If anything happened to him, it was her fault. After stumbling several times and running into one support beam, she finally found Weston by his haggard breathing, crouched behind several bags of grain.

"We have to go now!" Saelana yelled, pulling him up and leading him out of the door. Weston stumbled after her, his fingers wet and sticky as his hand clutched hers. Only once they had exited the barn could Saelana see Weston's blood-soaked thigh and the heavy hammer he carried in his right hand illuminated by the light of the slowly spreading grass fire. Saelana cursed, but continued to pull Weston along, through the un-singed grass and back to the road.

They had not made it three blocks before Saelana steered Weston into the shadows beside a small brick house. Weston sat down hard on the ground, extending his

injured leg and procuring a handkerchief from one of his pants pockets. Saelana took it and began examining his wound. A steady trickle of blood still flowed down his leg enough to worry her, but not enough to pool on the ground.

“It’s a slice, not a stab, so that’s lucky. It’s pretty deep though.” Saelana wrapped the handkerchief tight around his leg and tied it. “Can you make it to…” Saelana stopped. She wasn’t sure where they were going. Just away from the tanner.

“My house. Yes,” Weston said, attempting to stand on his own and wincing from the pain. Saelana helped him to his feet.

“How much farther is it to the bridge?” Saelana asked.

“Four blocks.”

Saelana calculated the distance in her head. His house was on the other side of the bridge, but within sight of it. She threw his arm over her shoulder in case he needed her support and they began walking as quickly as Weston could manage back toward the bridge, keeping to the shadows. There was no sense in asking whether or not Weston thought he could make it that far. They didn’t have a choice.

Chapter Eleven

Weston's house was really nothing more than a two-room shack, but Saelana sighed with relief at the sight of it. She tightened her grip around Weston's waist and hurried their pace as they turned off the road and up the walk. She took the key from Weston, unlocked the front door, and maneuvered them both inside.

Weston's house had begun as a brick outdoor kitchen for one of the homes next-door. When he purchased it, it had been a single room containing a large stove and three walls of drawers and cabinets, with a big work table in the center. Not long after moving in, Weston had knocked a doorway in the back wall and added on a second room of strong oak slabs, just big enough for a bed, a dresser, and a desk. Saelana eased him through that doorway and to the feather mattress, helping him to lay on his back. He groaned with the effort of the movement, but settled his head quickly into the pillow.

"We should get you something for the pain." Saelana headed back toward the kitchen to take stock of Weston's cupboards.

"Take some from the pouch I gave you. Valeria can be pissed off."

In the commotion of events of the evening, Saelana had forgotten about the tiny brown pouch in her pocket. She put her hand over her pocket, feeling the small lump inside, identically to the one growing in her throat.

"Alright. Stay here."

Saelana went into the kitchen and found Weston's blackened tea kettle hanging above the stovetop. She filled it and carefully lit the stove, noticing how clean the stovetop was. It made sense—even though his life was generally rather chaotic, Weston took good care of himself, and his things.

Taking a great breath, Saelana found a cutting board and a knife in Weston's kitchen, and removed the small, brown pouch from her pocket, untying it slowly. The Moonlight only had a faint odor, but she caught a whiff of it as she unfolded the leather of the pouch. She sectioned off a generous portion of the dried, white mushrooms onto the cutting board and left the rest on the leather, binding the pouch again. Using the knife, she chopped the mushrooms into fine pieces and piled them in the middle of the cutting board as she had done a thousand times. It felt so strangely natural, like she had last done it the day before.

Saelana wiped her hands on her trousers and went back to check on Weston. "Let me see that cut again. The tea should be ready soon."

Weston tried to sit up, looking at her with kind eyes. "Lana... you know that won't be strong enough for me."

Saelana's cheeks flushed. Of course she knew. Healers had been the first to use Moonlight Toadstools, to ease pain with injuries like Weston's, or help people struggling with grief to sleep soundly through the night. They would boil water, pour it over the mushrooms in a bowl, strain it, and have their patients drink the tea produced. But preparing the Moonlight in that way wouldn't be strong enough for Weston, or anyone who had taken it as much as they had. She returned to the kitchen and retrieved the cutting board with the finely chopped Moonlight, bringing it to Weston's side.

She sat next to Weston, scooping the Moonlight into her cupped palm as she tried not to think of the last time they had both been in this bed. With her other hand, she took a big pinch of the Moonlight between her thumb and forefinger and settled it into the front of Weston's lip. He closed his eyes as the flavor hit his senses, taking a deep breath

through his nose. The true effects of the Moonlight wouldn't begin to take place for a minute or so, but the relaxation associated with the taste was nearly instantaneous.

Saelana smiled at Weston, and brought her hand to his forehead to wipe away a loose strand of hair.

Weston opened his eyes and they held each other's gaze, her hand resting on the side of his face. She watched the way the lamplight glinted off the sweat on his forehead, following the light down to his prominent cheekbone, across his stubbled jaw. Her eyes rested on the soft curves of his mouth, and he smirked.

The tea kettle began to screech, and Saelana jumped. Weston laughed softly, and Saelana blushed.

"I'll get the hot water. Your cut needs cleaned." She stood swiftly and raced to the screaming kettle. The kettle quieted as she removed it from the hot stove, setting it on another burner and searching until she found a large bowl and a handful of rags. She poured some of the water into the bowl and draped the towels over her arm, carrying the bowl carefully with both hands into the next room.

Weston was still laying down when she entered the room, but he had his hips lifted and his trousers halfway down his thighs as he attempted to wiggle out of them without standing. Saelana almost dropped everything, her face darkening to the red color of his underwear.

"Stop, let me help you with that," she said, setting her things on the desk next to the bed.

Weston tried to smile, but it came out like a grimace. Still, he managed to wink at her and say, "Sure thing sugar."

Saelana rolled her eyes and went to the foot of the bed, first removing Weston's shoes, then stripping him of his trousers. He had done the difficult part already, getting the fabric away from the gash.

"I'm glad you're back in town, Lana. Things were getting just too quiet around here," Weston said, sitting up in the bed.

"Sit still and be serious," Saelana said, laying him back down.

"I am being serious."

"You're lucky nothing worse happened," Saelana said softly, more to herself than to Weston. "What were you thinking, pushing me through that window?"

Weston said nothing, just watched her as she dipped the cloth into the bowl of steaming water and ran it gently around the wound on his thigh, her eyes focused solely on her work. Weston hissed as she came closer to the opening, but he didn't pull away. Saelana rinsed the cloth and began again, working her way closer and closer to the center of the wound as the skin around it was cleaned.

"The way that man was attacking you... it seemed personal," She said. She rinsed the cloth again and looked him in the face.

Weston stared at the ceiling, unable to meet her gaze. She focused instead on his leg, continuing to clean.

"His son died almost a year ago. It was an accident, but," Weston paused, taking a deep breath "the kid was using. His father blames me. Said he would kill me if he saw me again."

Saelana felt her chest cave in but tried not to let her face show it. "A kid? How old was he?"

“I guess he wasn’t a kid. He was 17 when he started. 19 when he died.”

Saelana rinsed the cloth of Weston’s blood again, and set it aside. The bleeding had slowed to a trickle, thank the forest. “That’s... not many start that young,” Saelana mused.

“The tanner asked me if I was having the boy warm my bed as well as supplying for him. The malicious way that he suggested that his son would... I think that’s why the boy was so keen on... what he was trying to get away from.”

Saelana’s heart clenched. The sorrow of being misunderstood often drove people to such ends. She knew the sadness for the boy that fell over Weston’s face was echoed in her own. “What was he using?”

“Cave water.”

Saelana sucked in her breath. She didn’t think that potent substance, aptly named for the caves in the west where it had been discovered, had made it this close to the eastern mountains. “Cave water shouldn’t kill anyone.”

“If you know what it does, you know it can. Powerful hallucinogen. Kid told his father that he was going to fly away to somewhere people cared about him. They say he looked behind him like he was flexing a pair of wings, and leapt from his second story bedroom window. Broke his neck. Died instantly.”

Saelana was quiet.

“It’s okay that he hates me. It was my fault,” Weston said. “If I would have known how bad it was...”

Saelana put her hand on top of his, running her thumb along the back of his wrist. “It’s never anyone’s fault.”

“But we still carry the blame, don’t we. Even when nobody places it on us.”

Saelana sighed. “We do.”

Weston stared at the ceiling, then clenched his eyes shut. “It’s not our place to decide how anyone else chooses to live their lives,” Saelana had heard him say those words, had said them herself, over and over. To justify the role they played when tragedy like this struck. He turned his hand over and squeezed hers, opening his eyes to look at her.

“The only people we can control are ourselves,” Saelana agreed, lacing her fingers with his.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said as he turned his head to one side on the pillow.

She smiled softly. She could hear it in his voice—the Moonlight had fully taken hold.

“Get some rest,” She tried to take her hand from Weston’s, but he grasped it tighter.

“Lana?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t leave me.”

Saelana gazed back toward him. He looked like a child, his hair splayed across the pillow and one arm clutching a bundle of the blanket. Here was Weston unmasked: vulnerable, caring, and laden with guilt, as she was.

“Don’t worry,” she said very softly, laying down to settle in on the mattress at his side. “I won’t.”

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, after Saelana unwrapped, cleaned, and redressed Weston's wounds, the pair traveled back to the bar to drop off Valeria's package and retrieve Saelana's saddle bag. Now that she didn't have a horse, she decided to sell the saddlebags and buy a strong backpack, traveling on foot.

On the way from the bar to the shop where the bags would be most durable for their price, Saelana told Weston the truth, beginning from the last time they had seen one another.

"Do you remember the day I left?"

"I remember. I was there when Tom delivered you the letter."

Saelana smirked. "Stinking old Tom."

"Hey, don't speak ill about the dead," Weston warned.

Saelana looked at Weston in surprise "Tom's dead?"

"Yeah, syphilis, two years ago."

"Huh. I guess I have been gone a while."

"Anyway, you got Grace's letter and you left that afternoon," Weston said. "You said you'd be back within the month, but we never heard from you again."

Saelana looked at her hands, avoiding the betrayal in Weston's eyes. "The letter said Grace was expecting another child, and it would mean everything to her if I was there when it was born."

Weston studied her face, listening intently.

"The child was the first to be born since..." Saelana faltered.

"Michael," Weston finished for her.

Saelana stopped walking. "You remembered."

Weston stopped a few paces in front of her, then closed the gap between them and smiled softly. “It may not always seem like it, but I do listen when you talk.”

Saelana didn’t know what to say.

“Did the child make it?” Weston prompted as they began walking again. Saelana had forgotten what they were talking about and thought he meant Michael, “Grace’s child.”

“Yes, she did. A healthy baby girl, named Brynn, born a day before the spring equinox. I held her and…” Saelana faltered. She didn’t know if she wanted to tell Weston all these truths, though he would be the only one she knew who might come close to understanding the burden of what she had unknowingly done. “I held her and I fell in love.”

Weston nodded, like he understood.

Saelana sped through the rest of her tale, how the children had fallen sick that summer and Brynn had not recovered, meeting Damien, and the deal she had struck with him.

“What does he want you to find?”

Saelana described the staff in as much detail as she could.

Weston’s mouth gaped. “I saw that, yesterday.”

Saelana stood abruptly, eyes wide. “Where?”

“There was a stranger at the fountain, between the cobbler and the bakery. He was asking for directions to the mage’s house.”

Saelana tensed. “Was there anything special about this stranger, besides the package?”

Weston thought for a moment. “His eyes. They were green—greener than any I had ever seen before. Almost glowing.”

Saelana scrambled around the room and found a torn piece of paper and a nub of pencil. “Wes, I need directions to this mage’s house.”

Weston put his hands up, somewhat intimidated by Saelana’s urgency. “You already know where it is,” Weston said.

“Where?”

Weston’s hands were still out in front of him, as if to protect himself from falling victim to Saelana’s sudden burst of energy. “Don’t panic,” he said, and Saelana stopped moving. “Remember Caroline?”

The positivity and hope Saelana felt faltered slightly. Her jaw clenched. “I remember Caroline.”

“You know where her garden is?”

She tried not to let memories of the place redden her vision. “I know.”

“The mage is Caroline’s father. Their house is down the path from her garden.”

Saelana rolled her eyes. “Of course it is.”

Though it had been years since they’d see one another, Saelana could see Caroline perfectly in her mind’s eye—long blonde hair in large ringlets falling down her back, a soft dusting of freckles across her nose, and a snide smirk across her perfect mouth.

“You probably won’t even have to talk to her. But that’s where your stranger is heading.”

“For both our sakes, I hope I don’t,” Saelana said.

By that time, they had made it to the store. Saelana wandered around, feeling the quality of several of the hiking packs, asking a few times for prices. Weston followed her silently, her saddle bags slung over one shoulder, barely limping on his injured leg.

“I’m glad that you were there last night,” Weston said, running his finger along the stitching of a day pack.

Saelana glanced at him. “If you wouldn’t have been helping me, you wouldn’t have gotten into trouble in the first place.”

“Well, you’re worth the trouble.”

Saelana didn’t know what to say.

Weston didn’t look at her, but continued, “I wish you would’ve told me what happened when you left. I worried. I missed you.”

Saelana looked up at his face, then looked away. “I’m sorry Wes. I just couldn’t... I can’t be around it. It’s too tempting.”

“I understand,” Weston said. They were now facing each other, mere inches apart. “Just remember, it’s not just your family who... well, you know. Cares about you.”

Saelana didn’t know what to say. She laid her head on his shoulder, breathing in the smell of dirt, beer, and faint traces of Moonlight. A single tear slid down her nose and onto his shirt.

“None of that, now,” Weston said.

Saelana nodded, and took the bag she had decided on from its shelf. Weston followed her to the counter, and then they walked out into the midmorning light.

Weston didn't offer to accompany Saelana, and she had not expected it. He simply wrapped his arms around her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "If you make it home, will you write me this time, Lana?"

Saelana gave him a sad smile. "I'll try."

Chapter Thirteen

It was less than a mile from Kambal to Caroline's garden, but the journey was long enough to give Saelana plenty of time to reminisce about her previous interactions with the petite, dimpled blonde. Whenever Saelana had been in Kambal on market days, they had invariably run into each other in the square, Caroline with her basket of tonics and cures for various ailments and Saelana lounging near the fountain, waiting for someone who needed their fix to come up and make her a good offer.

What made Saelana the angriest about Caroline's looking down on her was that they essentially offered the same service: they were there at market to make people feel better. They just had different ways of going about it, and Caroline treated Saelana like dirt.

It wasn't just the questionable nature of Saelana's business that Caroline chastised her for. Everyone knew Saelana had a reputation for coupling up with whatever man she fancied, and Caroline made it clear that in her mind, that made Saelana a whore. Caroline always wore sleeves that covered her arms at least to the elbow and an ankle length skirt, and rarely even interacted with the men in town, unless they were widowers who needed something for themselves or their children to cure a cough or an aching belly. So the last time Saelana had seen Caroline and Caroline was starting to show visible signs of pregnancy, she had been shocked, and when one of the older women at the market had remarked, "He bed ya but he didn't wed ya, eh? That's hard," Saelana had smirked and pretended not to see the tears in Caroline's eyes. Served her right, acting all high and mighty. Saelana knew she wasn't perfect, but at least she didn't look down her nose at everyone else she passed on the street.

Within very little time, Caroline's garden was in view. Saelana shook the memories of Caroline's overly confident, judgmental voice from her mind. Saelana's past with Caroline was unimportant to her dealings with her father: Caroline's father, the mage, the person whom the man with the staff was trying to reach, for whatever reason.

The house she approached looked as though it had once been impressive, but lack of essential upkeep diminished the effect. One of the shutters on a front window was hanging lopsided from a single hinge, there were tree branches littering the roof, and the siding was in desperate need of a coat of paint. (something about the shrubs). Up the front path from the house strode a twig-like old man covered head to toe in dark purple and lavender fabric. As he continued up the path, Saelana could see that like the house, the cloak the old man wore was not in its best shape. Saelana approached the man, but did not remove her pack or make any attempt to make herself more comfortable. In the darkness of the doorway she glimpsed a glint of gold and a pair of watching eyes. Caroline was just inside the doorway, standing in the shadows.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm Saelana, daughter of Imogene. I'm looking for a traveler, and I've been told he was heading this direction," Saelana began, dipping her head.

"A traveler, you say?"

"Yes, a green-eyed man carrying a white staff. He came here from Kambal."

The mage's face showed no emotion. "A man such as that came through here,"

"What did he want?"

"What concern of that is yours?"

"He has something that I require."

“What”

“The staff”

“What do you know of that staff?”

“I know of its rightful owner, and he wishes to have it back.”

“It’s rightful owner?”

“Yes,”

A look of recognition crossed the mage’s face. “He has Damien Vanhaisguard’s staff? No wonder he got away unscathed.”

“He took something from you, too, didn’t he?”

The mage attempted a nonchalant scoff, “nothing of import.”

Saelana could tell he was lying.

“Ah, so you’re a friend of the wizard,” The mage scratched the side of his clumsily shaven face. “very well. I’ll tell you what the man with the staff required. I’ll even tell you where he went. If you do something for me.”

Saelana clenched her teeth. Something about this man put her on edge. “What exactly do you need me to do?”

The mage looked over his shoulder at Caroline, still shrouded in shadow. “From what I’ve heard, you’ll do just about anything.”

Saelana cursed the golden-haired girl. “I have standards.”

“Really? Hmm. I didn’t realize you were above any kind of... filth,” The mage said, his smile revealing gaps where a tooth was missing on both the top and bottom row.

“Well, now you know,” Saelana said evenly.

The man smiled wider. “I need you to retrieve three stones for me. They’re hidden just a few miles from here.”

“And why can’t you get these stones yourself?”

“I’m old, and not as agile as you.”

“And why else?”

“No other reason.”

Saelana felt as though he wasn’t being truthful. “I don’t go into places without knowing what I’m walking into,” she said.

“You do when there’s something you need from me, and that’s what I require,” The mage answered. He then turned toward the doorway where Caroline still waited. “Girl, tell her what must be done.”

The mage strode back into the house without another glance at Saelana, and Caroline emerged from the shadows. She was in a long dress that had faded to a pale blue, her hair pulled back and fastened at the nape of her neck. She attempted to paste the confidence she exuded in the marketplace onto her face, but Saelana could see through it easily. Caroline had a tired look about her.

“My father needs the three stones from inside a cave down the hill and to the west of us. He used to keep all sorts of things there for safety, but the stones are all that is left. You’ll go down the hill until you reach a little brook, and then go south, keeping the stream to the west. You’ll stop where a bunch of foxgloves are planted together and enter a cave. Keep your hand along the left wall of the cave and walk until you reach a small side tunnel. At the end of the tunnel will be a room where the stones are on an altar.” Caroline took three kerchiefs from a pocket on her dress. “Do not touch the stones. Don’t

look at them for too long either. Wrap them up with these, then bring them back here. Oh, and don't let the stones touch each other either."

"What happens if the stones touch each other?"

"Don't let them touch each other," Caroline repeated.

"There's no catch?" Saelana said cautiously.

Caroline pushed some stray hair behind her ear. "It's not going to be a difficult task."

"Then why didn't he send you to do it?"

"Someone has to stay here and look after him," she said. "In case the man comes back again."

Saelana's ears perked up. "What happened?"

Realizing her slip up, Caroline blushed. "None of your business."

"Your brothers or sisters couldn't look after him?"

"I don't have any siblings."

This made Saelana stop for a moment. Nobody didn't have any siblings, except the very poor, and those who had horrifically lost all their family, perhaps in a fire.

Caroline cleared her throat, "Look, father doesn't trust me to bring it back without using it. Doesn't think I can handle that kind of temptation."

"And my kind of *filth* can?"

"He knows he has leverage on you."

"Are these stones valuable?"

"Priceless. They're very powerful."

"What do they do?"

Caroline hesitated. "I can't tell you anymore," she said, looking back toward the house.

For some reason, Saelana knew better than to push. "I'll be back by nightfall," She said.

Saelana climbed slowly down the steep hill, leaning her weight back to avoid moving too fast, organizing her path so she could grasp the most saplings on her way down. Before long, she could see the entrance to the cave, exactly where Caroline said it would be. She lit her torch, checking her knife at her hip. Then taking a deep breath, she took the first steps inside.

Saelana felt the pressure of the cavern's walls press against her ears and along her chest even though she wasn't actually touching them. It was so dark, with shadows cast in peculiar places along the crevasses and cracks of the deep cave.

"Just keep breathing," she whispered, "In and out. In and out. You can't die if you just remember to breathe."

Caroline had said there would be a side tunnel along this path, but that it could be easily overlooked in the dimness. Saelana carefully side shuffled toward the left wall and placed her hand on it's slimy surface as she continued onward. She had been initially grateful for the shoes the mage had given her to silence her steps, but now she wished for the familiarity of her footfalls. With the sound of her feet on the rock or any view of the sky, she felt as though she could be floating, or not even moving at all. Maybe her body had ceased to exist.

No, she scolded herself. She couldn't begin thinking that way. She could still feel the cold of the cave wall on her left hand and the smooth torch handle in her right, and

her shoulder and knees still ached from the descent into the canyon. She was here, this was real, and she had a task to complete.

Her hand slipped from the wall and caught air. The side tunnel. She positioned herself so the torchlight gave her as much visibility as possible. The tunnel was little more than shoulder width, and she could see how easily she could have missed it. It went straight almost as far as her light would allow her to see and then veered right, but no obstacles seemed to obstruct her passage. Carefully, she began down the side path.

The heat of the torch in such a small space began to make her sweat before Saelana had ventured far into the tunnel. She tried not to look back, knowing she would see nothing but blackness. The tunnel turned right, then left, then left again. After a few dozen paces, the passage opened up into a small circular room with 12 passages leading off of it. Saelana stopped abruptly. Coming out was just as important as going in, if not more so. She could see the prize she wanted in the center of the room—a large stone structure jutting from the floor, just as the mage had described. A stone box sat atop it, or rather, was carved from the same block to look as though it rested on the stone table's surface. She removed her necklace and placed it in the doorway she had entered through, stepping toward the stone table.

The box lid was made from the same stone as the rest of the table and carved with the image of a beautiful woman wearing a crown of leaves and diamonds, a raven on her shoulder, seeming to whisper something into her long, wavy hair. She held a dagger in one hand and a staff in the other. The dagger was dripping with fresh blood.

Saelana's courage faltered. The box was dangerous, and the stones inside held power she did not understand. Magic was not something to trifle with. If she obtained the stones, could she be certain she would make it out of this cavern alive?

Brynn needs to remain well. Damien needs the staff. I need these stones.

Saelana opened the box, setting the lid, as heavy as a toddler, next to the box on the table. The stones were the size of small fruits, two red, one white, each nestled in its own compartment in the box. There was a fourth, empty compartment, but Saelana didn't allow herself to dwell on this for long. The mage had asked for three stones. Perhaps the fourth had been lost or destroyed.

Saelana pulled the three kerchiefs Caroline had given her from her bag and carefully grabbed the first red stone, wrapping it in the cloth. The box lid had been cool to the touch, but she could feel the stones warmth on her fingers, even through the cloth. She thought she felt it pulse under her fingers, like a beating heart, but dismissed it as her imagination before her fear of it caused her to drop the stone and walk away. She nestled the stone in its kerchief in between her coin knapsack and her extra tunic so it wouldn't be too jostled in case she had to leave quickly. The other two stones she wrapped and tied in knapsacks she strung on her belt, one to each hip. Once everything was secure, Saelana pulled her pack onto her shoulder and exited through the door from which she entered, picking up her necklace on the way.

The hall between the stone table and the larger cavern seemed significantly shorter than it did on the walk down, but just as uncomfortably warm. Saelana kept her torch out in front of her as she scanned the darkness, periodically checking the blackness behind. The stones on her hips felt heavier than the gravity pulling on them should allow.

The path opened into the cavern and Saelana froze, mesmerized. Diamonds covered every surface, littering the stone floor and high ceiling with iridescent light. They were mostly small, no larger than an acorn, but some were as large as plums. She stood, awestruck, for a moment before dread filled her stomach. She had not seen this on the way in. as careful as she had been, she had taken the wrong path from the room.

Saelana took her pack off her aching shoulders and set it onto the stone floor to think of a plan. The room darkened, and Saelana lost all ability to see, save the blinding spot of light that was her torch. She dropped her staff to draw her blade and stood silently, knees bent to fight or flee. She waved her torch in front of her and listened for any approaching footsteps.

She heard nothing.

After a breathless minute, Saelana sheathed her dagger and shouldered her bag, bending down to pick up her staff. When she looked up, the room was once again alight with diamonds. She froze, half standing. She placed her staff back on the ground, then her bag. The room went black. She touched the bag again. The light reappeared.

It had to be the stones. Somehow, possessing the three stones allowed her to see the shining lights. This was the cavern she had come from, but the stones showed her a completely different place. Saelana looked at the knapsack on her left hip, thinking. Caroline had told her not to touch the stones. Do not touch the stones. But they had caused the diamonds to appear in the walls when they were simply touching her, even from inside the cloth. Curiosity was overwhelming her. Would the stones look different inside the cavern? She didn't have to touch them, just unwrap them. Even just one. Only a little peek inside.

No. It was too risky. Foolish decisions were what had gotten her into this mess in the first place.

Saelana quickly made her way from the cavern and back up the steep slope to the mage's house. The stones seemed to grow heavier with each step. Something felt wrong, but Saelana couldn't place it.

Saelana came up the hill a little way away from the house, and Caroline was outside, picking strawberries from a patch nearby. She knelt beside the plants, her dexterous fingers plucking the ripe fruits from the plant and plunking them into a basket next to her. Saelana called to her.

When Caroline turned, Saelana froze.

Caroline's face, unmarred when she had left, was dappled with bruises in various stages of healing. Her shoulders curved inward, as though she was trying to make herself invisible.

"What happened?" Saelana whispered, soft enough that she wasn't sure Caroline could have even heard her.

Before Caroline could answer, the mage appeared from the doorway, a feline smile crossing his face when he saw Saelana had returned. "I'm glad to see you in one piece, little retriever," he said. He held one hand out in front of him, the dark colored gemstones on each of his four fingers glinting in the sunlight. "The stones."

Saelana barely registered the sound of the mage's voice. She continued to stare at Caroline, taking in the sallow planes of her face. Her blonde hair was still in its perfect ringlets, pulled away from her face, and her dress was still the clean, pale blue it had been before, but otherwise, Caroline could have been a different person.

The stones weighed heavy on Saelana's hip as the mage called to her again.

She locked eyes with Caroline and had a sudden shock of memory. It was as if she had gone back in the past seven years and was looking into her own face in a mirror, eyes hopeless, heart broken. Her gaze went to Caroline's forearm, where a hand-shaped imprint was visible. The bruise was darkest along the place where each of the fingers met the palm—the imprint of four rings.

Saelana looked at the pouch on her left hip, the stone still securely inside. The cavern changed when she was holding the stones. She looked at Caroline again. Their eyes met longer this time, and beneath the sadness, Caroline gave her a look of confusion, raising her eyebrows.

Saelana reached for the pouch, untying it slowly from her beltloop. "Here is the white stone," she said, approaching the mage. She could feel the white rock's heartbeat-like pulse, even though the cloth still enclosed it. She adjusted her path slightly so that she would pass directly by Caroline. Not enough adjustment to be noticed, just enough that when she passed by, she was only one quick sidestep away from within reach of Caroline, slipping the stone out of the cloth and into her hand.

All Saelana saw was the stone contact Caroline's hand, then nothing but blinding white light. The mage yelled in pain, and before Saelana had registered what had happened, she was running, a small calloused hand pulling her away from the mage's cursing. She stumbled and regained her sight slowly, dodging roots and underbrush as Caroline led her through the trees.

They ran like this until Caroline was wheezing in front of her and came to a stop. Saelana breathed heavily as well, still holding onto Caroline's hand. She decided she had enough of dealing with wizards and mages for a good long while.

Caroline pulled her hand from Saelana's, wrapping both her hands in her skirt to stop their shaking. Her skin was paling, eyes wide. She turned from Saelana to put one hand on the bark of a gnarled tree and vomited twice, remaining doubled over for a good while.

Saelana approached her slowly, circumventing her so as not to startle her from behind. She took the water from the side of her bag and opened it, pouring some on her handkerchief and extending the wet cloth to Caroline. Hesitantly, Caroline accepted it, wiping her mouth, face, and neck.

Saelana hesitated, then reached out to Caroline and put a hand on her back. "It's okay," she said, "I'm not going to let him hurt you anymore."

Caroline looked up at her, astonished. "You... see me."

"Yeah," Saelana answered. "I guess I do."

The wind whipped through the trees and brought Saelana's attention back to the surrounding woods. It would be dark soon, and the air had the damp feel of a cold night

ahead. The trees were growing thicker as they proceeded away from the mage's house and steadily made their way uphill to the West.

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