

Alafaya

By

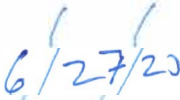

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Alafaya

A novel in stories

By Lee Bentley

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Abstract:

Alafaya is a novel told in stories spread across generations as one girl seeks to renew the bond between her land and magic. Conthesa is a young girl whose only wish was to grow up peacefully with her sisters on the edge of the woods. When a voice leads her to the infected World Tree, Conthesa becomes caught up in an ancient struggle between the shadowy lower realms, corrupted Kings, and the magic she has sworn to protect. The structure of events and varying points of view play a vital role in this novel. The stories shift perspectives to show how the choices made by some lead to new paths for others. Conthesa's journey to understand the truth in the connections we make in life and the power they hold, are showcased through her gains and losses as she progresses through the narrative. Alafaya is a collection drawing on fairytales and legends of old to rethink what we know of the origin of myths.

Tell me the story of the day magic died.

When jealous gods came seeking the greatest prize...

THE FALL OF THE WORLD TREE

Long ago, in the forest surrounding the world's heart a battle had raged for days between the protectors of the land and the Scourge. A race of nightmares who'd ridden out of the shadows on the cloak of their dark god, the Keeper of Lost Souls. Those pledged to the land had fought valiantly, chosen mortals gifted with magic and the forest's first creatures. Twisted amalgams of plant and animal with leafy heads and patterned fur hides. The war turned against the protectors when the Keeper stepped onto the field of engagement on the third day.

The Keeper of Lost Souls wiped the blood of the forest sentinel from his blade and watched as his Scourge lay waste to the creatures. The Scourge swarm like a hive of ants over their target, hard black bodies designed to rip and shred. They were the nightmares of mortals made flesh in the depths of the shadowy lower realms. The Keeper had been directing the Scourge across the battlefield against the protectors of the World Tree, a prize the Keeper coveted. The World Tree was the source of all life that walked across this wretched land and, if the Keeper could make it his, he could unleash the rest of his Scourge from their prisons they'd crawled out of.

The field was littered with the dying bodies of the forest's first creatures. Beasts with branching heads and animalistic hides, half disintegrated, their ash choked the air. The Keeper drew in a breath, savoring the heady tang of death on his tongue. Ages he'd spent crawling out of the lower realms, nothing more than darkness around him, void of all senses. To taste the sweet bite of witch blood and the chalky remains of the forest's creatures filled him with rapture. He strolled across the battlefield. His cloak of living

shadows nipped and supped at the fallen bodies, hungry for magic. His prize was in sight. All but the last of the mortal Stregi remained. The women huddled around a mossy stone, the opening to the World Tree clearing cut into the trees behind them.

The women known as the witches had valiantly battled the Scourge, but the World Tree had chosen so few and his Scourge—even reduced—was still vast. With the world's magic the witches had braved the onslaught, but now only five remained. The women had summoned a barrier of golden light to defend against the Scourge. Their magic depleted they could do nothing more than stand their ground. Beneath the golden light their faces were stoic and steady despite the gore that was streaked across them. The Scourge raged with fang and claw against the protective energy but could not break through.

The monsters parted at the Keeper's approach.

The women stood side by side, one arm out to grasp the shoulder of the woman before her to make a 'V' of protection. The lead witch held her palms out, sparks bursting like shooting stars from her fingertips to supply the necessary energy to the wall. The Keeper stood mere inches from her, smiling down as her arms trembled with the effort to hold the protection in place. He knew what she saw when she looked upon him: scarred, mottled flesh stretched taut to his skull, eyes that had looked into the abyss and now held that unfathomable darkness within. A smile wide with razor teeth and an empty maw desperate to be filled. The other women shrank from the sight, but the lead held her ground. With renewed strength, power flowed from her hands increasing the brilliance of the shield.

The Keeper placed the tip of his sword to the Stregi's defenses.

With clenched teeth the leader said, “The World Tree cannot be taken by force.” Her hair was matted down with sweat and gore, a muscle in her jaw twitched, but she held the line. The others were silent nodding their assent, amplifying the energy held inside. As if it would be enough.

The Keeper broadened his smile now; he could taste their fear.

“Everything belongs to death,” he hissed, driving the blade in deeper with one violent thrust, puncturing the shield and the heart of the woman beyond.

The wall shattered in a cascade of falling stars.

The other women shot off a couple feeble flames of magic before the Scourge was upon them.

The Keeper stood above the one he’d slain, regarding her for a moment. Blood blossomed across her tunic. One hand fluttered above, attempting to staunch the bleeding. The Keeper could smell the death on her. Her mouth moved, but he could not hear what she said. Indulging himself, he leaned closer, attempting to hear over the sounds of her friend’s slaughter.

“The Lady will never fall,” she whispered through blood-stained lips.

He opened his jaw wide allowing the darkness inside to feast on the witch’s dying soul. An orb of luminescent jade bobbed above the hole in her heart before being sucked up into the abyss inside the Keeper.

“We’ll see about that, now won’t we?”

A bright light filled the sky as the Keeper began to stroll into the clearing already believing he owned the place. Snarling, the Keeper huddled in the shadows to watch, the light streaking across the sky, growing ever more brilliant and blinding in its approach.

Crashing through the tops of the trees, it came to a stop in the earth just on the other side of the tree line.

Cursing the sky and his luck, the Keeper hurried through the wooded entrance to observe what was about to unfold.

“They shouldn’t be here.” The Keeper pushed past his Scourge and into the clearing of the world’s heart.

For a moment, the Keeper was awed by the beauty before him. In the center of the clearing sat a crystalline lake of the brightest blue, bold enough to rival the sky reflected in its surface. Six white stones connected the land to the base of the World Tree that grew in the lake’s center. The world’s first tree joined all life together, sharing its vital magic with the people of this realm. Sunlight danced through the jeweled leaves of the tree, refracting the light into rainbow arcs. The only blight to this perfection was a deep gouge cut into the clearing.

From the crash site, a figure emerged and stood and stood and stood until it towered over the World Tree itself. A spectral body swarming with the star bright points of its subjects. The Allight was the Keeper’s opposite in every way but one; they had both come to claim the magic. The Allight must have sensed what the Keeper had. A change had rippled through the ether. Now was the time to strike as his Scourge was vast but against the Allight? Those odds were less in the Keeper’s favor than he would like.

A voice rang out across the clearing, strong and firm. “You are not welcomed here. Leave now.”

The Keeper crouched behind a tree with a view of the clearing. Why should he throw himself into a battle he might lose when he could wait and see how this one unfolded first, cleaning up the scraps when they were through.

A melodic chime rippled through the clearing, and the Keeper realized it was the Allight laughing, the sound coming from the many-voiced chorus that made the being whole.

“Who dare speaks?” the Allight bellowed.

The Keeper looked around as well, finally spotting a figure in white emerging from the base of the tree. She’d been nestled in among the roots when they’d arrived, hidden from sight until she was ready.

She stood proud beneath the tree’s multi-colored leaves, her dress catching the wind and fluttering up around her as she stared defiantly up at the Allight’s radiance.

“I am the Lady of the Woods, this land’s protector, and the World Tree’s guardian.”

The Allight laughed again. “That’s quite a mouth full for such a little thing.”

As they spoke she made her way across the stone path. When her delicate feet touched the soft grass of the other side a tremor ran beneath the ground, startling the Keeper, but the Allight seemed nonplussed.

The Allight leaned closer to the ground, bringing the globe of sunlight that served as its head in the girl’s face. “I’ve come for the world’s heart. Step aside or die.”

The girl stared defiantly back. “I will not repeat myself.”

Her response was punctuated by a clap of thunder. The once clear blue sky now began to roll with a storm on the edge of bursting. Dark grey clouds heavy with thunder

filled the sky above the clearing until on the Allight's bright glow remained. The World Tree reflecting the light in its leaves, reds and blues collided with yellows and greens to create a dazzling display against the forest's natural trees. The Keeper shrank away from the light as it came near.

The Allight looked up, noting now they were the only light in the clearing. Deep shadows were cast in this half-light and the Keeper saw his chance to move closer. Drifting between the moments of darkness, he crouched out of sight. Closer now to the World Tree, but his prize momentarily forgotten as he was fascinated by what this small mortal would do next.

"Who are you to challenge me?" the Allight asked, anger clouding the chorus.

The Keeper watched as the Lady smiled wide.

"Chosen," she replied with another tremor through the earth. The Keeper held tight to his tree for fear of falling; the Allight dropped to its knees.

It chuckled. "What will you do? Shake the earth?"

The Lady lifted the hem of her skirt and ground one foot into the grass. "Yes."

The world shook as ragged spikes of stone shot up from beneath the ground. The spears pierced the Allight's form, soft lights of silver and gold floating away, disappearing into the sky as they went. The Keeper clutched his head to drive out the sound of the Allight's death wails, but still, the Lady remained standing.

"I did attempt to warn you," she said, grinding her foot again, driving the spikes deeper within the Allight's form.

The Allight screeched its dying chorus and a bolt of the purest sunlight broke through the trees, eradicating all that fell in its path. The Keeper shielded himself with his

shadows until the light subsided. When it was safe to look once more, he saw the Allight was still pinned, and the Lady still stood. Now the grass at her feet had been blackened and charred beyond recognition. How she'd withstood that the Keeper did not know, but his feeling of success to claim the World Tree was dwindling.

The Lady looked up into the tree, one branch had been blacked and burned by the sun's onslaught, the jewel leaves flaking to dust. When she turned back towards the Allight, the Keeper was glad not to be on the receiving end of such vehemence and hate.

"You will die!" the Allight cried, struggling to right itself from the ground.

"Not by you," she replied.

She raised one hand to the sky and slashed it across her body. The god bellowed in pain as lightning struck from the darkened skies above, the chorus no longer united, all screeching a horrid cacophony of noise. Thunder echoed across the clearing. Burnt, battered, and still leaking lights, the Allight struggled to stand once more. With so much of its chorus gone, the Allight had shrunk and withered in form. What had once been a leg fallen to a burst of stars as they tried to rise.

At that, she made another motion with her arms, and lightning flashed in the clouds above. The bolts fell upon the Allight, the claps of thunder that followed drowning out the god's anguish.

Above it all the Lady spoke with tranquil authority. Her voice never growing louder, but the Keeper heard it all the same.

"You have been deemed unfit. You will be cast from this form until such time as the world's pulse stops beating."

Thunder rumbled through the clearing until it built into a roar matching the Allight's final screams. A cascade of starlight poured from the rapidly withering being. The light floating off into the leaves and the sky beyond, the chorus now scattered to the four winds, doomed to forever look for their missing pieces.

As the dust settled, the Keeper watched the Lady sniff the air. Her storm had not yet dissipated though sunlight could be seen beginning to poke through the clouds. Still, he was hesitant to be seen.

"When the light dies, only darkness remains. Keeper, what are your intentions this day?"

It sounded like a mere question but if she'd known he was there, she also knew what he'd done to her guardians. She knew he had been there the whole time, a silent voyeur to her decimation of the Allight. Perhaps he could appeal to her sensibilities. Get her to believe they could work together before he ended her life and claimed his prize.

Oozing from the shadows, his form coalesced before the Lady and he humbly bowed his head.

"I...come for freedom, fair Lady," he said, his voice a gasp from a forgotten tomb.

They stood facing each other, her back towards the Tree, his towards the Allight's final resting place, the brittle ground fell to ash as he walked up to her.

She raised an eyebrow at him. This close, he could see the smattering of freckles across her nose, the careful set in her shoulders, the hair the color of a forest fire flowing down her back. Something stirred inside him he thought long frozen over.

"Freedom?" she asked, head tilted to one side. "From what?"

He'd gotten her talking, a part of him regrettably thrilled to have a conversation. He'd forgotten what it was like. The Scourge was never much for discussion.

"From Loehs Fair, Lady. My people long to feel the sun upon their skin and to have fresh air fill their lungs once more." He held his hand out to her, hoping she wouldn't notice the darkened patches of dried blood on his palm. "Please, dear Lady," The Keeper hoped his pleas could be enough. He did not want to have to kill this girl but would if she denied him.

The Lady cocked her head to the side as if listening close to someone whispering in her ear. Her face darkened, a deep scowl cutting her features.

"You come claiming a quest for freedom and to offer your hand in friendship." The water behind her rippled and sloshed against the sides of the lake. "What have you to say for those you've already slain this day?" Her tone had lost all traces of friendliness the Keeper may have thought there. She knew the truth about what he was. All pretense was forfeit.

Softly he said, "I wish only to help my people."

She looked at him, pity painting her face in careful lines. "As do I Keeper. The role you play is vital if not destructive, and for that, I'm sorry. But I cannot allow you to have the power you seek."

His hands itched to summon his blade. "Will you do to me what you did to the Allight?"

She nodded her head, and he could see tears had welled up in her eyes. "If that is Alafaya's will."

Alafaya.

The World Tree.

The very land they now stood upon.

It was all interconnected, spawning from the same source and meaning the same thing. Magic was the world and the world is magic. To take one would be to claim the other. The Keeper needed that power for his realm. With it, the Scourge would no longer be mindless but able to wash across the world, remaking it in his image.

He lunged, but she'd anticipated his attack, summoning a blade from within the heart of the Tree. Their swords clashed ringing like stone against glass. His black blade pushed against her crystalline saber. He could see her straining in its reflection, her hands tight around the silver roots that made the hilt. The Keeper knew he would not win if he played fairly.

Sending a tendril of darkness around her leg, he yanked her off balance and across the clearing before she could react. The ground shook as she fell, the tremors increasing as she stood, her anger rising. The Keeper could taste the power welling up in the air, heavy with the scent of freshly turned dirt. For a moment he savored it.

Only a moment.

Their swords rang together once more, the power behind the blow knocking the both of them back. Now the Keeper stood between the Lady and the Tree. The Lady was ready for an attack, but the Keeper knew he wouldn't win head-on. Instead, he turned and ran towards the tree, jumping between the shadows to hasten his journey.

Flames leapt between the Keeper and his next shadow. He twisted abruptly in the air, the ends of his robes catching aflame. Pain crawled up him like he'd never known. The twin pains of light and fire scorched across the Keepers' exposed body. He reached

for the familiar comfort of the dark and found himself abandoned. The flames made a wall around him, burning bright enough to snuff out any lingering shadows.

The living shadows that had been his robe fought to put out the flames, extinguishing themselves in the process until only the barest wisp of darkness cloaked his broken body. Too weak to do more than attempt to shield him.

The flames parted, and the Lady walked through, closing the gap with a flick of her wrist. She squatted down to look him in the face. He could see himself reflected back in the bright blue of her eyes. Scars covered him from head to foot, reminders of his ascent. The World Tree's roots run deep and grew strong. To climb out of Leohs and into this realm, he'd had to fight through their protection.

She looked at him with what he thought might be sincere sympathy, "I'm sorry it had to come to this."

"As am I," he replied.

He gathered the last of his darkness and drove it through her stomach.

She let out a sound of surprise as the flames died and the shadows came rushing back to him. Blackness slithered around and through him, healing wounds from the fire as he stood, the Lady of the Woods still at the end of his blade. The knife stretching into his sword as the shadows grew around him. The living whips ensnaring the Lady's body in coils of black.

He was not the weak thing she'd thought him to be. He was the Keeper of Lost Souls, a title earned by strength, not right. He'd ascended the lowest realms to reach the power held here. He'd brought the Scourge with him by sheer will alone, a feat none had before dared accomplish. He was better than this supposed Lady.

“You...can't...”

He sneered at her, drawing her closer to him, eliciting a whimper of pain.

“I can do what I please.”

He shoved her off the end of his blade where she landed with a wet thud on the ground.

He looked down at her broken body, so like the other one he'd stabbed. She'd fought harder, but these mortals were all the same: weak and breakable.

“The magic of the World Tree is mine for the claiming.”

His prize was in sight and he felt his cold heart soar with something he thought could be happiness. Finally, his desires would be brought to life and his Scourge will roll across this land.

The stones crumbled to ash as he crossed the path until he stood beneath the Tree. The roots creating gnarled and twisted gaps of darkness above the water. He craned his head back to look high into the branches. The leaves of every color danced merrily in the wind, unknowing what lay beneath them.

“You will claim nothing this day.”

He spun to see the Lady standing once more, her skirts now stained crimson, but still, she walked on. With growing horror, he watched the stones rise up to meet her feet as she walked across the water, never breaking stride.

Gathering the darkness behind him, he sent it out, intending to catch her and throw her back across the lake, but a wave of water rose up to meet his darkness and pulled it below the depths. Still, she walked on.

She wouldn't strike for fear of harming the Tree, not while the Keeper was this close. He had to be quick. If she got to him, it was over.

He called for his sword, and the darkness coalesced in his hand. His thoughts full of his contempt for this land of plenty and light. He turned, and the Lady caught on, a rope of water grabbing his wrist as he prepared to swing.

"You will not!" she shouted, the whole Tree trembling.

The Keeper fought to keep his footing while fighting off the water rope. Every time he pulled away more filled its place.

He needed another plan.

He sighed, resigned. "You're right, fair Lady. The magic is not mine to claim."

The Keeper looked up to find her stopped on a stone, one foot hovered in hesitation before the roots of the World Tree.

"You concede?" She asked, a hopeful air in her tone.

He nodded.

Before she could take the step onto the roots, he drew back and shot his blade of darkness straight into the heart of the World Tree.

Black lines of infection rose instantly along the roots, tracing up through the trunk like worm trails. The Lady screamed, and every branch cried with her, the creaking groans of a tree collapsing and cracking under pressure echoed across the clearing. The lives of all those touched by the Tree now felt the cold sting of darkness in their hearts.

"If I can't have the power, no one will."

The Lady's face was streaked with tears as she felt the world's pain.

"What have you done?" Hate dripped from every word.

The Keeper was proud to have won the day. He watched with something akin to paternal joy as the black lines of his poison buried their way into the World Tree. As the Tree fell so too would magic, and in turn the world itself. From there the Keeper would take his Scourge and wipe out what was left of humanity, bringing his shadowed realm of Loehs up from the depths to claim dominion.

The Keeper should not have forgotten about the World Tree's Lady that easily.

Winds began to build, whipping at the Keeper's cloak and pulling his attention away from the infection. He turned to see the Lady standing tall once more. Magic rolled from her in shimmering waves of crystalline light.

When she looked at him, her eyes were the pale white of the moon, pinning him to the spot.

"You will suffer for what you've done." Her voice held an echo, another speaking through her, more ancient than the Keeper himself. In her cupped hands, water began to swirl into a ball, air flowing in and expanding the sphere. Rocks rose from the ground and joined its companions in her hand, shaping a cage. Fire erupted from her palm, and when it died, a crystal cage sat ready.

She looked to him now. "From the earth you came, and to the earth, you shall return. May this hold your darkness forever."

The Keeper's cries faded away as the cage began to shimmer, his darkness being pulled inside before winking out of sight.

The Keeper's Curse

Full of vengeance and lies you stand accused before us

All of mortality marks you as the first enemy

Darkness in the heart, Darkness corrupts the soul

The Air silences your screams

The Water dulls your senses

The Firelight never wavers in the face of the abyss

Within the Earth, slumber now

By the moon's light your prison is sealed

Bound from now until time's end by magic's selfless will

The Trial of the Kings

Long ago, before the Kingdoms united, there was a garden,
A lush, vibrant oasis tucked within an impossible labyrinth.
No one knows where the garden came from, only that it's always been there,
Only that they've been trying to get in for generations.

The four tribes of Alafaya gathered together in the heart of their land once every cycle of the sun, choosing a Conquestor from each tribe to venture into the maze. Each had the same goal in mind: claim the crown of the Kingdom held inside. The tribes gathered beneath banners of peace to compete for the King's Trial.

From the North, the woodsmen came clad in the skins of animals and bark ripped fresh from the trees they called home.

From the South came the desert dwellers, their faces and bodies wrapped beneath layers of tight bindings to protect from the oppressive sun on their journeys across the sands.

From the East, the sky dwellers. Those who had made their homes atop the steep cliffs of their region, gliding from perch to perch, self-constructed wings holding them aloft.

And from the West, the fisherman and sea people.

The tribes gathered together in clusters, afraid to engage with their fellow man but honor-bound to appear.

The Wisemen broke off from their tribes, each wearing an intricate headdress that spiraled towards the skies. It was said that each cycle a Wiseman held the fate of his tribe in their hands. Another layer of heavy fabric was added to represent the burden that rests solely on his shoulders. It made them look like a bunch of preening nesterbirds. With their long necks and bright colors, the Wisemen had to be careful not to get tangled together as they bowed their heads close to confer.

The war men, those tasked with the day-to-day protection and management of the tribes sat eyeing each other. All wanted to leave with a crown today, tired of always returning home empty-handed. The prophecy dictated that the destined path of the land would be revealed when the four tribes united, and a Conquestor claimed the crown from within the garden. They came together each cycle of seasons but had only lost tribesmen after tribesmen, their Conquestors never returning from the maze.

This cycle would be different. There was a buzz in the air as if everyone was bursting with excitement.

“Conquestors, step forward,” the Wiseman of the western tribe called. The four Wisemen stood on a slightly raised platform set above their fellow tribesmen.

Four bodies stepped forward from the masses.

The North sent forth Sevada, clad in a loincloth of treerunner fur and a breastplate of bark. He roared to the crowd. His tribesmen roared back, eager to watch their Conquestor claim the land for them.

Ropes and the sea’s castoffs decorated the West’s Conquestor, Tigin. His face was obscured by a wild mane of hair that had been interwoven with seashells. He raised a spear above his head, and the tribe behind him answered suit.

The East's Conquestor, Valens, spread their makeshift wings wide, cawing like the hunting osprey. His tribesmen flapped back in return, stirring up a strong wind of dust and debris.

It was the South's Conquestor that silenced the crowd. As the other tribes boasted and cheered, the South had spent their time carefully unwrapping the protective coverings of their champion. A long mane of hair, the color of fresh snow fell freely around her shoulders.

A woman had never competed as Conquestor before.

A din of voices rose amid the gathered people as everyone tried to discuss this new development at once.

"Silence!" The Wiseman of the South slammed the end of a large stick against the platform. A resounding thud silenced the crowd. "Coshitesa, step forward."

The white-haired woman stepped away from the crowd. Walking with her head held high, she ignored the jeers of the other tribes. She'd been chosen before they crossed the vast sand sea. The Wiseman had seen it in the sun. She had just as much right to stand before the maze as any other Conquestors that had come before.

She came to a stop before the Wisemen, dropping to one knee in supplication before she could be asked. Her tribe's Wiseman placed one heavy hand upon her head. The weight of the stones he wore forcing her into a more profound bow.

He addressed the gathered crowd. "We have crossed great distances to join our brethren here this day. Along the way, I spoke with the spirits for guidance. They never wavered in their conviction. Coshitesa is the South's Conquestor."

Mutters rose up like a wave, quickly quashed against the stones by a raised hand. The people knew better than to go against a Wiseman. If the spirits said it was meant to be, then let the woman go. She's no more likely to return than anyone else.

"Conquestors, come take your places."

The four assembled before the entrance to the maze.

Walls of solid brush rose up before them, spreading out in all directions.

He could feel their footsteps rebounding through the ground, vibrant life flowing through every movement. A tendril of excitement coiled up from somewhere deep inside. The tribes had gathered outside his gates once more.

"They've come to play." Words croaked out from the forgotten crypt that served as his throat.

For cycles, he'd waited for this day, through the blistering summer and frozen winter, to at last be greeted by the first days of spring, the early days when his children would return with his meal. Their energy was necessary for the Keeper to continue living within his prison.

The crystalline walls of his cage pulsed with a steady beat of light as he prowled between the bars. Cycles he's spent below the dirt, growing disgustingly familiar with his confinement. The Keeper clings to the last vestiges of darkness he holds within, keeping it safe from the light cage's burning brilliance, waiting for his moment.

Above, four pulses beat stronger than the rest. The Conquestors had been chosen. He could feel the power he craved thrumming through them.

Over time the Keeper has learned to send bits of himself out of his prison. Unable to leave the cage himself, he's found that, with careful patience, he can cast a piece of his soul out into the world above on a wave of darkness. He's been meticulous in his deliberations, waiting until the right hosts presented themselves. His first task had been making the four tribes Wisemen his puppets. Succeeding in that, the Keeper's been using the tribe's champions as sacrificial lambs to bolster his own power.

The Keeper feels change is in the air with this new batch of Conquestors.

Perhaps it's time for the people to finally meet their Kings.

The Keeper smiled to himself, a small feral thing stretching across the taut lines of his face.

"Yes, I think it's time to make a deal," the Keeper whispered into the darkness.

The four Conquestors lined up before the brush wall, their tribes behind them waiting anxiously for the final test. The Wisemen could put forth whoever they claimed the spirits guided them as Conquestor, but it was up to the maze itself to let them inside. Many believed that the South had unnecessarily harmed all the tribes' chances at the crown with their female Conquestor.

Before the four, the hedge began to recede. Slowly at first, leaves shifting and branches pulling away from each other, then more quickly as the roots made room in the soft dirt and the hedge pulled apart, revealing an inner corridor. The branches of the severed bushes flailed in the air, like a nest of ground vipers waiting for their prey.

The four Conquestors were armed with only their wiles and the ceremonial daggers strapped to their calves. Inside, the maze would shift and churn, throwing all

logical direction to the wind. They had each sat outside the walls all their lives, watching their Conquestors enter and hearing the distant screams of their defeat. Yet here they stood, ready to bring honor and a crown to their tribe. They each believed the chance of sacrifice was worth the prize they hoped to claim.

As none made a move to enter once the hedge had opened, Coshitesa made the choice for them. Stepping away from the pack, she entered the maze alone. On the other side sat four branching paths, each with the symbol of the four tribes etched into a stone at its entrance. Coshitesa stood on the branching flame. Warmth bloomed up from the stone as if it has soaked up the sun's rays waiting for her, a welcomed heat in this unfamiliar place.

The other Conquestors entered one by one. Sevada glared angrily at the bold woman as he took his position on the falling leaf at his path's start. Tigin of the West and Valens of the East claimed their spots as well.

The hedge wall closed behind them.

Comforting sounds of their tribes and the reassurance of the midday sunlight was now cut off from the Conquestors. Coshitesa shivered in the sudden cold. The maze's hedges grew tall and close together, creating a woven ceiling of vines above their heads. There was no other way out but through. In some silent agreement, the four Conquestors entered their paths.

"What's this?"

The Keeper had begun speaking to himself early in his confinement. He believed it prevented his fractured mind from slipping further into oblivion in his isolation, but

perhaps it merely pushed it along. The Conquestors were in his maze wholly now. The magic held in their spirits called out to the Keeper, as intoxicating melodies. He danced alone in his cage. One song rose above the others, different than the sacrifices the tribes had sent in the past. Most just had a hint of magic, a tie in the blood that remembered the old ways, but this new song was pure magic the likes of which he hadn't felt since that day in the clearing.

The Keeper smiled to himself in the dark.

The magic held in the soul of a genuine user would be enough for the Keeper to transcend this space. He knew it would not entirely free his physical form but, with that power, his plans for the surface would be more readily accomplished.

This new Conquestor had just given the Keeper precisely what he needed to topple the World Tree. With a bit of concentration, the Keeper called up the last bits of darkness he'd been clinging to. Small waves of pure black undulated in his cupped hands, the scarred nails carefully stroking and feeding bits of his blood to the shadows. He was willing to use the last of it up because he knew it would lead him to more.

"Go," he whispered to the dark. "Bring me the surface world."

A gnat had begun buzzing around Coshitesa's head after the first bend in the maze. By the second turn, it would move from one ear to the next anytime she thought she almost had it. By her sixth turn, Coshitesa was about ready to drive sticks in her ears if it meant drowning out the buzzing sound. It had only grown louder as she ventured into the maze. At this point, she was reasonably sure it wasn't natural in occurrence.

At first, she'd been able to hear the other Conquestors as they'd begun their journeys. She'd listened to a less than manly scream a while back and worried about the state of her other Conquestors. Was she close to the end? Lagging far behind? The only one left in the competition? She didn't know. All she knew to do right now was keep pressing forward. But the buzzing was making that difficult.

With a thought, she summoned the comfort of the flame to her hands. The small cherry-red fire blazed between her fingers as she played with it. The fire moved at her command, safely sliding over her skin without a mark, leaving behind a pleasant heat that distracted her for a moment from the buzzing and the maze. This was why she'd been chosen as the South's Conquestor. Her magic was more reliable than any others in her tribe and, for that, the spirits believed she was the one truly meant to find the crown.

Expanding the flame in her palm, she could better see through the maze's gloom. Blindly she'd been stumbling along, trying to keep track of the turns and twists she'd taken but found it difficult as the maze seemed to continually be shifting behind her. A glance behind now showed a solid wall of hedge that had just been the clear path she'd walked to get here. The end of this corridor lay in shadows. With the buzzing still ringing in her ears, she pressed onward into the darkness.

The time her tribe had spent crossing the vast sand seas she thought had prepared her for the uncertainty of the maze. Out on the wastes in their sand skimmers, there was no telling when the next dust devil would spring up or a sandstorm would cut them off from home. She was used to fear of the unknown in the wild. But this maze didn't feel like the natural phenomena that occurred on the sands. To her, this place felt...controlled.

A wildness lay within, that was to be sure, but, if she wasn't mistaken, there was another's hand at work here.

Hedges shifted, pulling apart with a sound all too similar to the crunching of bones in the maws of the dunedillians back home. Those massive sand reptiles could make a skimmer crew disappear beneath the sand in moments. Through the divide, another corridor could be seen, this one branching off in other directions. Although she knew another's hand was at work, she wasn't going to turn down a way out. Jumping through the hedge, the wall sealed up behind her, catching the ends of her hair in the brambles.

The stench of burning hair filled the corridor as Coshitesa used her flame to free herself from the hedge. A snap farther down the darkened path brought more flames to her aide. The brighter light revealed the huddled mass of the West's Conquestor. Raising the fire higher, she attempted to see what he found so fascinating. The buzzing growing louder now. Coshitesa pulled her dagger from its sheath as a precaution.

"Peace, friend," she offered, shocked to hear the tremor in her own voice.

The man looked up and snarled at her, a bloody chunk of meat clenched between his teeth, the shells of his hair now stained red. The mutilated body of a deer lay beneath him.

Coshitesa's heart hammered out a warning at the sight.

Just moments—or was it now hours—ago, he'd walked into the maze by her side. Now he'd become some wild beast. Dark veins had bloomed around his eyes, themselves now bloodshot and wild with an animalistic pain. Fear choked the voice from her throat and extinguished the fire in her hands, plunging them into darkness.

He sprang with a growl, and she dashed down the path, the sounds of him giving chase on all fours crashing against the maze behind her. She tried calling up her fire, but it flickered weakly between her fingers as fear overwhelmed her. Coshitesa bounced off the hedge wall, scraping her hands as she scrambled to get down the next corridor, the wild Tigin behind her. She felt his hands slip through her hair as she ran just out of reach. She was running blind, fear propelling her. She knew this was not the way; she knew she was better trained than this. But now, in the face of her fear, her training felt all for nothing.

Around the next bend, a clearing opened on to the night sky above. A small fountain lay broken in the center. Coshitesa stumbled over the trunk of a fallen tree, Tigin falling upon her as she struggled to get up. She slashed at the air, unable to make contact as he kept moving out of her grasp. They tumbled over each other, allowing him to grab her arm and knock the blade from her grasp. Coshitesa kicked, hoping to hit something soft and vulnerable. She smiled as she heard a satisfying exhale of air as he grabbed himself in pain.

Coshitesa scuttled away from the rabid man, hitting something solid in the soft grass. She wrapped her hand around the hilt and swung wide and blind. She felt the pull in her arm as she made contact with the soft flesh of the man's chest. Blood flowed hot and thick, slicking her grip on the blade until she let go and they stumbled apart.

It was then she saw the other two men fighting in the clearing.

Over the shoulder of the dying man, Coshitesa watched Valens and Sevada's swords clash. Was this what their predecessors had become? Was this what they were always meant to become? Was the promise of a crown even real? What have she done?

Coshitesa knew this was not in her nature and yet hadn't been able to stop herself from striking. Even now, she found herself stopping short from healing the man, although she knew her power could. She'd done it before when her family had fought off a pack of dunedillians that had swamped their skimmer as they'd traveled to this very tournament the last cycle. Her father had taken a severe bite to the shoulder, the wound already festering with the creature's poisoned spittle. She'd thought nothing of it then. Coshitesa laid her hands upon her father's skin and willed the flame to her hands, picturing deep in her spirit the wound repairing itself. The skin had knitted together as if she were making a tunic. She could do that now. His eyes were pleading with her too, large hands stumbling over themselves in their haste to staunch the flow. Still the buzzing and clanging of metal persisted and she couldn't think straight. She'd never seen a man die before and now she found herself helpless, watching as the spark drained from behind his eyes. Tigin, the West's Conquestor slumped to the ground with a soft *wompf*.

Shaken, she stood, colder than she'd ever felt. Coshitesa was used to the sun and heat and laughter. None of that was to be found here and she knew now she would not hear the laughter of her mother again. The other Conquestors battled on, the men caught between a battle of wills as well as might. They were equally matched. Should she intervene? Wait for them to finish each other off? Now was her chance to find the crown, if there was one to be found and yet, aside from herself, the struggling men, and the body, she could see nothing else of note in the center.

Coshitesa clapped her hands to her ears as the buzzing grew to a crescendo. The noise swelling and building within her head as if threatening to pop. The others crumpled to the ground as she fell to her knees.

As soon as it had come, the noise left and, in its absence, the silence was almost deafening.

Coshitesa looked up to see the shape of a man watching her. He was but a shadow on a shadow and, when she looked entirely upon him, he appeared to fade from her sight into the night around them. Darker shadows that were to be his arms reached towards her, a voice whispering through her mind

At last....

Follow Your Heart

At the time of the fourth generation, cycle 37: Summer solstice

You've grown up hearing the Voice, a simple word or two occasionally whispered on the wind. When it called you to the woods that night, you thought nothing of it but to obey.

Your sister Naenia had just tucked you into bed, her long black hair tickling your face when she gave you a good night kiss. You've always loved how, despite the day's trials, your sister always smells sweet, like cherry blossoms.

"Tell me the story of the day magic died," you asked, hoping for one last story before bed.

She looked at you, a rueful smile on her face. "Not tonight, Conthesa, get some sleep now. May the Lady watch over your dreams."

On her way out the door, Naenia blew out the candle. Your room, once cheery, was now shaded in the full moon's glow that trickled in from the window. Your familiar comforts, dressing table, wash basin and comfortable chair, now unfamiliar dark masses in the night. But the dark does not frighten you like it does your friend Marek. Marek's scared of everything and you enjoy teasing him about it when you are with your families for market day. For you, the dark is a comfort. Nighttime is when the Voice comes to you most often.

Come. See.

The Voice has whispered in your ear as long as you can remember and has become a constant friend.

"What do you want me to see?" you ask in a small voice.

You've asked it questions before, always hopeful that this will be the time the Voice answers, but it has always just repeated the instruction. It has led you to some fun adventures so far, like that time you found Old Woman Cath's favorite mare too far out into the woods for most of the townspeople to have looked. Or the time you found that hidden spring which, according to Naenia, no one had heard of. You wait another breath, the blanket already thrown off ready to follow but hopeful for more.

Come. See. Alafaya.

Chills like long fingers race up your spine at the word. Alafaya. You'd only ever heard it mentioned in Naenia's stories, but she'd said that they were just old legends, not for real.

You're out of the bed, fishing under your cot for your slippers. Carefully you ease the door open to stick your head out into the hall. The house is silent; all you can hear is the chirp of crickets in the meadow outside. Stepping slowly as to avoid any of the boards that squeak, you make it to the back door without incident.

The moonlight has washed out the meadow's greens until it is all a bleak twilight blue, your mind painting in the colors of the leaves on the old oaks, the emeralds of the grass and the bright yellows of the daisies. You can barely see the colors peeking through the moonlight when you squint really hard.

When a creak sounds from the house behind you, you wait in silence, crouching smaller to avoid detection, your breath growing hot in your lungs as you don't even dare let out a sound. If one of your sisters catches you, you won't be able to follow the Voice.

The house settles back into silence. Not wanting to wait for another chance at getting caught you push up the latch, easing the old metal slowly out of the bolt, and slip out into the yard.

The sound of crickets is almost deafening now that you're outside. The summer is turning to fall and it seems the bugs are getting ready for their final concert. You love the sound of the chirps and buzzing that come from all the animals in the garden. Shaking your head, you focus back on your goal. There will be time to sit and listen later.

There's a slight tug in your center, just beside your heart. A feeling as familiar as the Voice, the tug is what the Voice uses to direct you. When you stray from the path it brings you back to focus. Now it is pulling you towards the woods and you skip off in that direction.

These are your woods, the space you've spent countless summer days exploring and resting in. The dogwood tree beside the house you'd spend hours beneath, braiding falling petals into your sisters' hair if they'd hold still long enough. The woods are as familiar as your sisters, your home, yourself. Even in the dark there is still the feel of security around you.

The Voice calls you deeper into the woods, the tug growing more insistent as you go. You scramble over logs and duck under branches, the small cuts stinging your arms and legs from the adventure, but you press on. Melia will have a salve you can put on them when you get home and tell your sisters of your adventure.

What if Alafaya, and the fabled World Tree, is real? Imagine what Naenia would say! The thought brings a smile to your face, your feet quickening in response.

A soft keening fills the air around you, and you find yourself not wanting to continue in the dark alone anymore.

Something is out here with you. There's a crunch of leaves to your right, a snap of twig to your left. It's all around.

The string is pulling tight inside you, but you can't move. The many threats your sisters have made about the woods are playing through your mind: the gruesome forest sentinels, rabid beasts searching for lost magic, even the stray townspeople could lose themselves in the dark. Oh, you don't want them to be disappointed when they find you all alone out here. There's a wetness on your face that you touch and realize are tears. Silently you've been crying as the things in the woods circle.

The keening grows louder.

You let out a strangled yelp, clapping your hands over your mouth hoping to recapture the sound. It's too late, there's another crunch and you can see something rustling in the bushes just across the clearing from you. You watch in horror as the beast steps into the moonlight.

Each of its legs end in grasping claws, its thick body covered in coarse hairs, and ten wide eyes blink against the gloom searching for you. The beast lumbers from one bush to the next, its claws making sharp snick-snick sounds against the stone. The string is pulling at you so hard it feels like you'll topple over, but you can't risk it.

Come. See. Alafaya.

Protects.

The Voice! You look around to finally find the source, momentarily forgetting the beast in your excitement that the Voice has come again. It is accompanied by a streak of flame and the clearing lights up in a flash.

All around you are more creatures, coming towards your hiding spot from every direction. Some more of the spider beasts, large hideous horses with sharp teeth and reaching hands, buzzing things that look like overgrown hornets. One looks as if a fish and an ox had crossed, sharp horns on a scaly face dragged along on fins that smack the ground wetly.

In the center of the clearing stands a woman. In her hand she holds a flame that she brandishes towards the creatures. The light holds them back from getting any closer.

“Conthesa? You’re safe to come out now.”

Her voice. It’s **the** Voice.

You come carefully from your hiding space. Who is this? How does she have the Voice? Can she protect you from the beasts? One question rises above all else.

“Can you take me to Alafaya?” It slips out before you can catch it.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for you to ask me that.”

She brings up her flaming hands and claps them together. A rush of heat and flash of light fill the space, for a moment you’re falling and then the ground is beneath your feet once more.

When the glare clears from your eyes you stand in a new clearing. This one lit softly by the moon’s pale glow.

In front of you stands a massive tree, its branches reaching so far above you can’t see the top. Moonlight filters down through the leaves, glittering off jewel-like blades to

create a kaleidoscope of light and dark. The trunk does not even begin for a good twenty or thirty feet off the ground due to the exposed roots nestled in a dry lakebed. You gape in awe at the World Tree.

“Alafaya,” you whisper.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

You look to your side and see the woman--no, girl--standing beside you. Her hair is such a bright red you can still see its color in the dark. She stands with her hands on her hips, leaning back to take in the tree all at once.

“You said before you were waiting for me. Why?” you ask, the questions finally lining up in your mind.

“Because this is where you belong.”

“Who are you?”

She looks down at you now, pain crumples what would be a pretty face.

“I was Glint once, then mother, a Lady after that, now...I’m not sure anymore. But you, Conthesa, you’re going to do great things.”

Now she smiles and you can’t help but smile in return, eager to believe in her belief in you.

“How?”

“By becoming the Lady of the Woods and defending Alafaya against all those who seek to destroy it. Your first task will be to repair my final mistake.”

She looks off to the tree again and you follow her gaze, this time to see the deep scar running jagged along the trunk. From the wound you can see rot covering the lower levels. Something bad happened here and the dark had been able to cover it up.

“I’ve tried my very best to keep it, us, going. My time has come to an end now. Conthesa, it’s up to you to renew the World Tree.”

“But how? I’m just little.”

You look down at your small hands, the hand-me-down nightgown from Melia with the big hole in the hem. Your slipper clad feet are now caked in mud and flecked with blood from the cuts down your legs. How could you protect the whole world?

She lets out a great laugh at that. “Oh, Conthesa, you’re so very much more. Say yes and you’re going to change history.”

Change history? The idea sends a thrill through you.

“What do I have to do?”

“For now, place your hand on the World Tree and say ‘yes’ when the time is right. Go on.”

She nudges you gently and you stumble a step before catching yourself.

“Your trials will come as you learn and grow. Embrace the changes of destiny and, Conthesa?” You turn to give her one last look as you walk towards the tree.

“Remember, magic flows from the leaves to the roots and into the world. We are all connected. Never forget.”

She motions you forward. You take a breath and walk up to the tree. From up close, it looks even bigger. The lines of black in the trunk are as big across as your hand. You stretch but can’t reach more than a root on your tiptoes .

“Go on,” she urges from behind.

Grabbing the closest root, you can just hoist yourself up, the bark scraping at you through your nightgown, but you press on. Slipping off your slippers, you grip the wood

with your toes and push yourself upward, closer inch by inch to the trunk and the gaping wound.

Now that you're closer you can smell the rot coming from the wound, like when Naenia had found the barncat under the hale bale from last fall. As she'd attempted to remove it and you'd watched on as the acrid scent of death washed over you. That was what you could smell here: the death of the world. Inside, the World Tree has putrefied from the wound. Looking up, it is surprising the rest of the tree is even still alive.

You look down at your hand, glowing white in the moonlight, and up to Alafaya. The dark wood is cool to your touch, the bark scratching like a tickle against your skin. You press your hand closer, feeling the edge of the wound like a spark to your heart.

When you open your eyes, you see a world of golden threads and lavender fog. A new voice whispers through your mind.

Do you, Conthesa, accept the mantle of Lady of the Woods, protector of Alafaya and all its gifts?

You look back towards the girl, but she's gone. It's just you and Alafaya now.

"Yes."

In Training

At the time of the fourth generation, cycle 43: Vernal Equinox

Amaleigh lay sprawled on her back in the dirt, waiting for the final blow, the blade of polished steel poised to strike above her head. She was afraid she'd peed—just a little—in fright.

“That's enough.” Marius's voice was stern and warranted no argument.

Brekan stepped back, giving Amaleigh room to stand. She dusted the dirt from her training leathers and tried to hide the tears she wiped from her cheeks.

They stood within the sparring pit, a circle of sand blocked off with some rope and posts. The stench of horse manure hung in the air, as their close combat training was held in a room just off to the side of the castle's stables. Amaleigh flexed the stiff muscles in her bac. She'd yet to manage properly growing limp as she fell as Marius instructed. Instead Amaleigh knew she'd been spending the hour after practice putting salve on the growing bruises. She'd been hoping to spend less time in the dirt this session, but her late-night solo training wasn't going to be enough. Brekan was just built more solidly than her, and he knew it. The Triumvirate Kings thought it laughable enough she even attempted to train with the other heirs, but Keene was all too happy to give up his turn in the ring, favoring to sit by the sidelines with his current woodworking project or a new book fresh from the castle's libraries. His nose was always buried in a different book no matter what time a day Amaleigh saw him wandering the grounds.

She'd made it a game once and counted twelve different tomes in the older boy's hands in a given day.

Amaleigh grudgingly admitted Keene's superiority in the intellectual disciplines. She refused to concede to Brekan purely because of size. As much as it pained her, each new bruise was a lesson.

She was ready to wipe that self-righteous grin off his face.

"Amaleigh, what is the mistake you made this time?"

Marius's words cut but Amaleigh knew he was right. She'd telegraphed her kick before she tried attacking Brekan. He'd anticipated it and caught her ankle on the upswing, throwing her to the dirt with her own momentum.

Amaleigh took a breath and answered. "I let him know where the attack was coming from."

"Wrong."

The word always came as a harsh bark from the quartermaster, biting through what little resolve Amaleigh could muster.

She could hear Brekan snicker behind her, the tips of her ears flaming with embarrassment. Amaleigh knew she'd messed up the kick but what else had she done wrong? A stone of guilt sank in her stomach before she answered.

"I don't know, sir."

Marius sighed. The old quartermaster had been training the three heirs in physical combat since they were old enough to hold a shield. He knew them better than they knew themselves some days. He bent his wizened body below the rope and entered the circle. Brekan stood to the side, sword at his side while Amaleigh waited for her punishment. Marius circled her, appraising her with his beady eyes.

“You’re too focused on the end result to see the path to victory clearly. You want to prove yourself superior in skill, not win the match.”

She didn’t understand. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

Marius shook his head, wisps of greying hair floating in a halo around him. “Your desire to be better can never overshadow your end goal. They must work in tandem. Again. This time,” he leaned close and whispered, “Keep your stance wide and let him make the mistakes.”

Amaleigh nodded, still not quite sure what she’d done wrong the first time.

Focus on the end goal, she told herself taking another deep breath. Marius left the circle and the two heirs faced each other. She wanted to see him lying on the dirt like she’d been but how to make that happen?

The young prince sneered at his female counterpart. “Just give up now, Ama. No one actually expects you to do well in physical combat.”

He was goading her, Amaleigh knew it now, and her retort died on her tongue. Brekan’s face grew red and she knew she was upsetting him. Good. Let him stew; he was used to a barb being thrown between the two until he eventually bested her. She wouldn’t play his games anymore.

Brekan lunged before she got the chance to think. She twisted sideways, bouncing back up to land a kick square to the boy’s ass, knocking him into the rope barricade. Amaleigh smiled, a warm feeling of victory trickling through her. She could do this.

With a shout Brekan spun towards her, pushing off the ground and launching his larger frame at her. Amaleigh dove into the dirt, her smaller body rolling into a somersault before she sprang back up in a defensive stance, her hands wide, protecting

her face. Brekan hadn't expected her to move so quickly and found himself face-planting in the dirt. He came up spitting, dirt stained red from the broken nose he'd given himself in the fall.

When she saw his face, broken and splattered with blood, a scowl trying to form beneath the wreckage, she couldn't help but laugh. Keene joined in from the bench, grateful he'd looked up in time to see the impact. Both were glad to see the great heir of the First Kingdom taken down a peg. She didn't even really have to do anything; he'd done it all himself.

"That wasn't fair! She cheated," Brekan whined like the petulant brat he was. Born with the sun's blessings, he believed the world existed only for him, not the other way around. Keene and Amaleigh were often stuck cleaning the messes he left behind or smoothing the ruffled feathers of advisors.

Amaleigh wondered what kind of Kings the three of them would be when they took the throne. Their ascensions were still ten cycles away but always on her mind. There had never been a female King before. What if they tried to stop her? It wasn't a thought she let herself dwell on too often. She found the ache in her chest that came with the thought of being denied the crown too great to experience regularly. So, she put it away in a small box in her mind, taken out only on the darkest and loneliest nights in the castle.

Marius was attempting, rather unsuccessfully, to stifle his own laughter. "She did nothing of the sort and you know it, young heirling. You'll just have to be swifter next time."

Amaleigh stood above the boy in the dirt and offered her hand, “No hard feelings, right, Brek?”

She could see in the hard lines around his eyes. He’d rather stab her through right here and now than take her hand. She’s seen the same look on their fathers during war councils. They both knew, though, that Brekan could never act on it. Female or not, she was still the only recognized heir of the Third Kingdom. He took her hand at last and she helped haul him to his feet.

Using the momentum, Brekan swung around her, catching her in a chokehold, her arm pinned between them. She struggled as her air supply dwindled, kicking as her feet lifted off the ground. She could see Marius and Keene coming to help. Brekan’s hot breath hissed against her ear.

“You will never best me again. Remember this.” With that, he pushed her away.

The vein in Marius’ forehead throbbed an angry crimson. “Out, all of you! Never such disrespect.”

Marius took Brekan and Amaleigh’s arms in his callused hands, his grip tight and threatening, and Amaleigh thought for a moment they’d learn just how the old war hero had gotten the coveted position of quartermaster to the heirs.

He seemed to be considering his words carefully, looking between the two of them slowly before saying, “Tomorrow you’ll be running laps from sunup to sundown. Now out of my sight.”

Amaleigh left the ring dejected, rubbing at the spot on her arm where Marius had gripped her, her brief victory crushed by his words.

“And I will be speaking to your fathers about this.” His last threat followed them out of the stables.

Amaleigh’s heart sank. Her father would not take the news of her loss and subsequent disrespect of their sparring master well. She just hoped his supply of Shine hadn’t come in yet. After a couple glasses, he always tried to take out his frustrations of running the Kingdom on the closest body in the room--servants, advisors, daughter, it didn’t matter to King Valens.

She wanted to do anything other than return to her chambers for the day and await his return from councils. She’d even put up with Brekan for the rest of the afternoon. As the only children in the castle, they’d learned they couldn’t hold grudges against each other for long. Once when Brekan had thrown a fit because Amaleigh and Keene had wanted to play alone, they each found themselves wandering the halls aimless. The fun was gone if one of them was upset. Brekan had eventually conceded but they’d never tried to separate since then. It was all or nothing with the heirs.

Brekan was in better spirits as they walked towards the courtyard. After he’d shared his warning, he felt on top of the world. Keene walked cautiously between the two of them, often having to play the role of mediator when things got too heated.

“What do you want to do now?” Keene asked, trying to lighten the tension in the air. Amaleigh just scoffed but Brekan seemed to have an idea.

He jogged ahead of them before turning around, arms out wide.

“Let’s go find the center.”

Amaleigh and Keene stopped, twin expressions of confusion on their faces.

“We’re not supposed to enter the garden maze. We could get lost and never come out,” Keene warned. Though the garden maze had been there since before their births, none of them had ever ventured inside as far as Amaleigh was aware. The rumors of some dark beast lurking within was enough to scare them off, until now.

Brekan laughed loud and arrogant before wincing, the action pulling at his broken face. With more care, he smiled behind his hand as he attempted to staunch the fresh bleeding.

“It’ll be fun! Besides, what else are we going to do today?” He looked back and forth between them before saying, “I dare you.”

They groaned, exasperated.

“Really? Dare us? That’s all you’ve got?”

“Don’t scoff, Ama, we all know none of us will back down when dared. We never have.”

And he was right. The three of them came to the agreement long ago, something to pass the time while bored with only each other as entertainment. They couldn’t dare each other to do anything too dangerous or that could cost them their life, but embarrassment and ridicule was often the prize.

She looked at Keene and he just shrugged, tucking his book into the waistband of his pants.

“Fine,” she groaned. “But we stick together. No sense in us all getting lost.”

Brekan looked like he was about to challenge her but held his tongue, instead nodding once.

They shook on it before making the final turn into the courtyard.

The triple castle's central courtyard was a sprawling affair, connecting the three spires and Triumvirate Kings' receiving hall in a miles-long verdant lawn. Rows of flowers bloomed in little clay pots, cutting the courtyard into sections and paths. Currently they held bright crimsons and vibrant yellows. Amaleigh had watched the changing of the flowers once, the groundskeeper ripping out each still-blooming blossom to replant a new bulb to please the Kings. The freshly pulled blooms were thrown into a burn pile behind the castle. The sickening perfume clouded the air for days after. Nothing living lasted long within the castle walls. The only fixture that never changed was the hedge maze set against the western wall.

The heirs had been told for cycles of the dangers of wandering into the maze unescorted. Their nannies had cautioned of shadows that would reach out and snatch up misbehaving children, of a voice out of nightmares that lies waiting in the dark.

As they approached the maze's entrance, the heir's gazes traveled up the high arch cut from the living hedge. None of them knew who was in charge of the upkeep as they'd never seen anyone enter the maze. Even now a gaggle of house women passed, making the triple sign of protection across themselves. The quick tap of shoulder, shoulder, forehead was meant to ward off all evils.

Amaleigh was no longer so sure of their decision.

"Come on Brekan, you've had your fun. Are we done for the day?"

She hated the slight quiver in her voice. She always wanted to appear braver in front of the boys.

He cut his eyes to her and in his look she felt every embarrassment she'd ever be dealt by his hand, every time he'd made her feel small. She didn't want to shrink in his presence anymore.

"We haven't even gone in yet, Ama. Or are you too scared?" he asked, dragging out the word.

She punched him in the arm, garnering a groan from the older boy.

"I'm not scared," she said, as much to herself as the others.

"We really don't have to go in there," Keene added, ready to bolt at the first chance.

Amaleigh could feel the anxiousness rolling off him in waves and stepped closer. She heard him breathe a little easier and she stared defiantly at Brekan. As much as they may not be able to stand each other at times, they could always draw on the other's strengths in a moment of weakness. That's why the Kingdom had three Kings.

"How can you two wish to be Kings and unable to even enter a garden?"

Brekan stood with his back towards the entrance, framed by drooping vines that, if Amaleigh didn't know any better, looked to be stretching towards Brekan. She blinked and the vines stilled once more. Shaking her head to clear what had to be a stress hallucination, she reasoned with Brekan.

"Fine we go in, but no more than ten minutes. We don't know the way once we're in there; best not to get too far from the entrance."

Keene eagerly nodded beside her and to her surprise, through an ageless groan, Brekan agreed too.

The three heirs of a broken Kingdom stood before the entrance to a maze that should not exist. Trepidation, a cruel fist in their cores.

Now that there were no more talks of turning back all they had left to do was step forward. Something the three of them were finding next to impossible to do. “So, uh, who wants to go first?” Brekan asked, breaking the silence.

Amaleigh wanted to throttle him but it was Keene who spoke up first.

“Let’s go in together.”

He offered out a hand to each of them. Amaleigh hesitated a moment then clasped her hand with his, the warmth of his palm a welcomed comfort against her clammy skin. Brekan looked as if he’d refuse but at last took Keene’s other hand, connecting the heirs and giving them a vague sense of protection. Keene squeezed their hands gently and together they took the first step through the vines.

Inside the air felt stagnant and Amaleigh had to take a moment to catch her breath. The air was heavier than the air outside as she dragged it into her lungs, filling her up with a weight and dread she didn’t yet understand. Outside it had been bright---the midday sun high overhead; here the light came through broken by the mass of brambles overhead so that only a facsimile of light filtered in. Ahead of them lay three branching paths.

Don’t say it, Amaleigh thought to herself as Brekan suggested, “Let’s split up and see who gets to the center first!”

Amaleigh opened her mouth to argue but the thought died on her tongue as the older boy broke from their chain and ran off down the left-hand path. He was going to get himself killed one day.

“Should we?” Keene asked, their hands still holding tight to each other.

On the one hand, Amaleigh never wanted to let go, in fact she'd much rather just turn back now, but on the other hand...she didn't want to let Brekan be the one to find the center first. It was said to hold a fountain made entirely of crystal. That she wanted to see. She hesitated.

"I mean, Brekan's already off and running. Do we really want to give him the added satisfaction of finding the center first?"

Keene's face broke into an uneasy grin, "I suppose you're right, and now that we're in here, it's not that bad at all."

"Exactly, Keeny, you take that one." She pointed to the right-most path. "And I'll take the middle and we'll see who gets there first?"

He nodded, eager to help win out over Brekan's showboating.

"Let's go." They let go of each other and moved to their respective entrances. "Keep your hand on the left side of the hedges. It'll help guide you back."

"Read that in a book, did you?"

He winked, showing off the rare playful side he held tight.

"Don't I always?" And with that he was off into the maze's gloom.

Amaleigh stared down the darkness of her path. Now alone at the entrance she could always back out, leaving the boys to run around in the dark. She shook her head, clearing the thought from her mind. If they could do this, so could she.

"I'm going to find the center first, just you wait," she told herself, placing one hand on the left side of the hedge and running into the black.

Laughing off her fear, Amaleigh ran blindly down corridors, taking a turn whenever one appeared, new dark paths opening up on every side. Now that she was in the maze, it didn't feel as scary as it had seemed from the outside. Now she had a goal to focus on: get to the center before the boys could. She wouldn't let herself focus on the darkness that seemed to creep out from under the hedges or the occasional snap of a branch just out of her line of sight, or the bead of sweat that had bloomed and fallen down her back when she could have sworn she felt eyes on her. No, none of that would stop her from besting the others. After her bittersweet attempt in training, she wanted this to go right.

Amaleigh rounded another corner, careful to stay towards the left but otherwise lost and came upon an open space within the maze. After so long between the cramped walls of brambles, she could breathe a little easier here.

It wasn't the maze's center by any means, but a small rounded cut-out meant to be a dead end. A bench carved from a single block of stone sat before a large mirror set into the hedge. The mirror's glass had clouded with age. Golden rings of rust spread out from the frame, covering the glass until only a small oval of vague clarity remained. As Amaleigh stepped towards it, she could see the shape of herself but nothing more. Honey-suckle bloomed like stars around the mirror, luring visitors closer with their cloyingly sweet scent. Amaleigh stepped up behind the bench, her knees knocking against the cool stone.

It wouldn't be bad to sit for a second, she thought dreamily, trying to find her face in the reflection. She sat with the dignified grace of a child playing at royalty and stared at herself within the clouded surface. A vision like a crown of stars floated above her head and she smiled in the silvery radiance it put off. It was nothing like the painful metal

things the Kings wore atop their heads all times of the day, with their swirling metalwork and faceted gems. The Kings struggled with holding their own necks up at times. No, this was different. The crown was made of the simplest band of silver, crystals shaped into starbursts decorating the band. In the mirror's reflection, it looked as if it belonged on Amaleigh's head.

Reaching out, her fingers grazed the mirror's surface and pushed through. Cold like she'd never felt lanced up her arm and she violently jerked away. Ripples flowed across the glass before it settled into a clear lake once more. Clutching her hand to her chest, Amaleigh stared at her wavering reflection as if it might provide answers. Had her hand really slipped inside the mirror?

Her body responded with hesitance, but her mind raced with possibilities as she reached out towards the mirror once more. The cold had left as quickly as it had come, the fear along with it. When she touched her hand to the glass and found that it was just that— glass once more.

She tilted her head, concern etched across her face as she bent closer to inspect the glass. Had her hand slipped through a gap?

The sound of one of the boys shouting pulled her attention back to the task at hand. Amaleigh spun around, her hand already on the dagger at her side, expecting to find a body crouched behind her in pain. But nothing stirred.

Keene stopped just within the darkness of his path, waiting to listen as Amaleigh ran past in her corridor before he returned to the maze's entrance. He'd put on a brave face but now that the others were gone he found himself trembling in the dark.

Sternidae larus, Accipitridae Buteo, Canis lupus irremotus.

When frightened, anxious, or generally out of sorts, Keene found comfort in listing the animals of the Kingdoms by their scientific names. Over the years, he'd learned the repetition soothed him and allowed him to focus.

He could just wait for them here and feign getting lost. Keene had read far too many books on the subject of what might lie within the darkness.

One particular scroll kept coming back to him as they'd walked up to the garden maze.

The Keeper lies root-bound beneath the Kingdom's heart.

At the time, it had been a throwaway line, something he hadn't even thought of as important enough to transcribe into one of the more permanent tomes, but it came back now. In this place of darkness and shadows, he knew exactly what that past scribe had meant. He felt it like a stomachache from too many sweet cakes after dinner.

The Keeper of Darkness slept, trapped beneath the courtyard's maze.

To reach the center would be to enter his realm. Would finding what they sought with a childish game lead to the destruction of the Kingdoms?

Indecision held Keene's heart in a frosted fist. Being the heir to the Second Kingdom, he had never felt as sure of himself as Brekan or as determined to prove himself as Amaleigh; he'd just always been the one in the middle---the one to break the vote if they ever asked his opinion. Now he knew something the others didn't and not sharing could mean devastation. But would they believe him? Or would they laugh at his learning like they always had?

Salmo obtusirostris, Sphyrnidae Sphyrna, Canis lupus youngi.

He was meant to be a King. A dark maze shouldn't hold him back.

He came to a stop before the path Brekan had run down. He was the most likely to find the center first. Amaleigh was smart but she was also ambitious and would run headfirst into the maze. She wouldn't take the time to pay attention and find the right path. Brekan, for his many faults, was also a sure fit as an heir and seemed to always find his way easily to his goal. Keene knew if any of them would stumble upon the center first, it would be Brekan.

Who would also be the least capable when confronted face to face with darkness itself.

"I can't let this happen," he sighed to himself, knowing full well choosing wrong now would come back and haunt his pre-sleep thoughts for years to come.

Sciuridae Sciurus, Cervidae elaphodus, Canis lupus Lycaon.

With a heavy heart and a guttural squeak, he ran in after Brekan.

Focusing on the ground in front of him and the barest hints of boot prints in the soft grass, Keene trailed the other heir through the maze, willfully ignorant of the dark corridors he was passing by and solely intent on his goal of stopping the others from reaching the center. He knew he should have stopped them before they even came in. He'd been so stupid. The words had been right there on his tongue but instead he'd agreed. He'd thought they'd just keep wandering around lost for a little bit before they gave up. Instead, Brekan had suggested separating and now Keene was exactly where he had hoped not to be. Alone in the darkness, trying to prevent the greatest catastrophe in history.

Keene continued on steadfastly ignoring the branching paths and hidden alcoves that opened as dark indentations in the hedge around him. If he stayed focused on the footprints, he wouldn't remember how terrified he was of the dark.

Sternidae larus, Pandion crissatus, Accipitridae Buteo, Canis lupus irremotus.

The boot prints stopped at an opening cut into the hedge and Keene slowly peered around the corner to what lay inside.

In the clearing, under a woven sky of branches, sat a field of flowers. Keene stepped closer to observe them in detail, brushing off his anxieties in the sight of their beauty. Their stems were of the darkest shade of crimson, almost black, and green leaves grew along the length. Bright red petals bloomed in interlocking patterns with petals of the deepest midnight. Never before in his studies had he seen such a specimen. Something that had been under their noses the whole time? He was giddy with excitement over his potential new discovery. Finally, he could add his own knowledge to the scrolls everyone learned from.

The petal felt like silk as he rubbed it between his fingers, but they came away stained with gray pollen. Wiping his hands clean on his pants, Keene grabbed the flower as close to the root as possible and gave a strong tug, wincing as thorns in the leaves bit into his palm with the action. The flower gave and blood flowed into the void in the earth as if in offering. Tearing off strips of fabric from the hem of his robe, Keene wrapped one around the root ball and one around his hand, staunching the blood. Carefully he laid the bloom in his bag and pulled out his notebook, the need to record an itch in his fingertips.

Keene forgot all about the others in the maze, happy with his work documenting a new species.

Brekan heard the others bickering from where he'd left them at the entrance. He often checked out when others spoke. He just never found them...thrilling enough. They'd spent their entire lives inside the castle walls and Brekan could navigate every inch with his eyes closed by now. Excitement thrummed beneath his skin as he did something different for the first time in cycles.

As the First Kingdom's heir, he'd always known more has been expected of him and has always done his duty, rising to the challenges of the crown more readily than Amaleigh or Keene. Nothing in the world felt more natural to Brekan than sitting upon the throne and governing the Kingdoms. It was his birthright, as it was for all the men who'd come before him, his father the greatest of them all. The King held his son's successes above all else, as if they were his own.

Brekan knew his father would be pleased with his leading the other heirs into the maze; it had been his idea after all.

It had been at the start of the week when the King had sat down beside him over breakfast. Brekan, at first, was alarmed; his father never joined them for meals. But this morning the King had sat with an air of purpose into the seat opposite Brekan, his golden robes heaped around his wizened form, handing Brekan a map.

"This is the route to the maze's center," the King had said, unfurling the scroll with little fanfare.

Brekan hastily shoved away the remnants of his meal to draw the map closer. The parchment was yellowed with age, as if it had been put away and forgotten for quite some time, the ink faded in some places. To Brekan's eyes, the maze seemed larger than what

he'd been able to view from the tops of the towers but if his father said this was the map, then surely he couldn't be wrong.

Brekan looked between the map and the odd glint in his father's eye.

"What would you like me to do with this?" Brekan asked, holding up the map.

There was a dark line that ran from the maze's entrance through the winding paths and ended at the heart of the garden. The King traced it lazily with his finger.

"I want you to take Keene and Amaleigh into the maze. And I want you to be the one to find the center."

This seemed an odd request. Usually when the King wanted Brekan to act against the other heirs, it was something small like messing with Keene's books or sabotaging Amaleigh during training. To suggest losing them within the garden maze seemed spiteful.

The Triumvirate Kings worked in a delicate balance and were forbidden to act against each other by ancient laws. But there was nothing in those laws to protect the heirs of the crowns. The First King had been training his son a long time for the day he'd assume the throne as, they hoped, the sole King of the lands. Perhaps, Brekan thought, this was the beginnings of the grand plan his father had been on about.

Brekan took the map, a warm glow growing in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to do good for his father.

"I'll lead them in father, they won't suspect a thing."

The King had only smiled and nodded, dismissing Brekan from the room.

Now Brekan raced through the maze, tracking his path carefully along the lines of the map. He fought to ignore the cold chill creeping up his spine the deeper he wound into

the maze. Each turn branched off into two, three, four more paths of darkness, each holding more mysteries than seemed possible to be contained within the castle's boundaries.

“Finally,” he whispered, coming to what the map said was the final turn to the center.

He slowed at the darkened entrance. Shouldn't the sun still be up? The shadows were deeper here, more solid in their corners. A man stood in the middle of the clearing.

Brekan's heart stuttered when his eyes took in the fact there was another person inside the maze with them. Had the King known about this?

“Who...” Brekan cursed himself when his voice broke. “Who are you?” The man looked up and Brekan's stomach rolled.

The man's voice crept across the space, pinning the heir in place.

“I'm disappointed you don't recognize me, prince of the sun. I thought they told my story to children as tales before bed.”

He held his arms out wide. The shadows of his cloak flared against the back wall, building and crawling around the clearing, drawing the heir in closer. Brekan struggled against the coils of darkness but could not break free; they gripped his wrists and waist with iron bands. He remembered his bedtime stories of the World Tree's poisoning. He knew in his heart who this was.

“The Keeper of Lost Souls.” His voice was a whisper.

The Keeper smiled and, for a moment, Brekan saw his father's face reflected in the skeletal visage.

The Keeper bowed low, “The pleasure is all mine.”

Brekan struggled against the shadow bonds as the Keeper circled him, trailing one claw along his shoulder, drawing a thin line of blood.

“I’ve been so looking forward to meeting you.” The Keeper stood before Brekan, sucking the drop of blood from his finger, savoring the taste for a moment. “And now here you are. Mine for the taking.”

Panic rose in Brekan’s chest, his breathing growing shorter and shorter in fear. He’d never been prepared for a real battle. Here, in the presence of the First Enemy, he only wished for it to be swift. All thought of the kingdom, his father, the other heirs, gone when confronted with his own mortality.

“Please,” he choked out.

“I need you to be a good boy for me now, and scream.”

The Keeper opened his jaws wide, unleashing the darkness of the void, and scream Brekan did.

When Keene found him, Brekan’s voice had broken his screaming face open and silent. Keene bundled him in his arms attempting to calm his friend, noting that his wrists were the bright pink of raw flesh.

Amaleigh came bounding around the corner a moment later, taking in the sight of the two boys, one crying and burned at his wrists, the other trying, and failing, to hide his bleeding hand. What happened to them in there? She fell to the dirt beside them, taking Brekan into her arms as she tried to calm them down.

Rose Sangue

At the time of the fourth generation, cycle 43: Summer Solstice

Today's the day.

Today I am going to heal the Second Kingdom's heir, whether my eldest sister, Naenia, approved or not. My sisters were all seated around the bare lightwood table for breakfast. We'd draped a simple white lace scarf across it to give the appearance of a tablecloth. A single sprig of lavender sat in a small vase in the center, surrounded by the same bowls of porridge Naenia doled out each morning.

"Oh, Conthesa, good! You're up. I thought we would have to send the barnyard in after you this morning," Naenia said.

She looked up at me over my other sister's heads, a disapproving scowl already in place. She never abided my sleeping late. Every time I stumbled to the table after everyone finished, because the nightmares had kept me up all night, I was met with a scolding from my sister on punctuality.

Since that night in the woods three years ago, when I lay my head down to rest, images of an ever-consuming darkness wash over me. It often takes one of my sisters shaking my screaming body to pull myself out of it. But, in the last week, something's changed.

Within the darkness I could see a boy clinging to life. Each night, I tried to get closer to him to pull him from the dark embrace, but every time I failed, my fingers just

out of reach. It took Reva mentioning the Triumvirate King's ransom the other day for me to make the connection.

The heir of the Second Kingdom was fatally ill, and the Kings sent word of a reward for any who could heal the boy. He must be the one I've seen in my nightmares. What was the darkness that surrounded him?

"Conthesa, are you in there?" Laima poked her finger at my temple and pulled me from my thoughts. "You always wander off in your mind and leave the rest of us to wonder where you've gone."

She joked, but it was true, ever since I returned from the World Tree, I've had trouble focusing on the present instead of getting caught up in what could be.

I looked around at my sisters. The oldest, stoic Naenia and studious Parthenia, were surrogate parents for us since our parents died shortly after my birth. My mother in childbirth, my father soon after in an accident. Melia, Laima, and Reva knocked elbows against each other at the table, the triplets as different in personality as they were similar in the face. I should be glad for our times together and the magic we now share but I've spent the last three years plagued by my failure to renew the World Tree. Even after I'd led my sister to the woods to receive their own blessings of magic, the six of us could find no solution.

If healing this boy could help me in that quest, then I would heal anyone I could to fix what had been done to magic.

“Where is your head these days?” Naenia asked.

Lying, I said, “The Kings’ patrols. I just worry about those being blamed for magic they know nothing about.”

The Kings had increased their patrols for rogue magic in recent months; they believed magic is the cause of the Three-Fold War generations ago. Now any trace must be removed to preserve the integrity of the Kingdoms.

As far as my sisters and I knew, the six of us were the only actual magic users. Those who met their fates on the pyre were innocent women and children caught up in someone else’s lies.

The room grew solemn, the air choked with our combined anxieties. We had this discussion time and time again, always ending up with the same result. Our job was to renew the World Tree. It was not our place to seek justice against the Triumvirate Kings. That day would come when magic flowed freely once more.

Naenia’s voice was but a whisper when she spoke.

“You know we can’t. We would do no one any good swinging from the gallows or burning to ash in the wind. We renew the World Tree; we renew the world. That is why we were chosen.”

I nodded my head, refusing to speak my mind. It would only result in another argument.

“I understand, sister.”

We’ve spent the last three years going into the woods every full moon, loaded down with supplies to attempt to fix the World Tree. We tried herbal remedies and salves, blood magic, an entire book of healing spells Parthenia had procured from a trustworthy bookseller, all with no success. The rot remained, festering the heart of the World Tree. The next full moon would be next week. I hoped to be ready this time. If I healed the heir, I could save the World Tree. I felt the truth in that.

“I’m going to the market, would anyone like to come?”

Melia spoke to cut the tension, steering the conversation into safer waters. I looked up and met her dark eyes. This was my chance to slip away while we were in town and disappear into the forest where I could use my connection to the trees to get to the castle.

“I would.” I volunteered.

She nodded with a bob of her dark head.

“Go get your stuff. We’ll head out when you’re ready.”

I stood from the table, eager to be off, but was caught before I could get too far.

“Finish your porridge, then you may be dismissed,” Naenia called from behind me.

Biting back a smart comment, I stomped back to the table, scooped the rest of the porridge up with my spoon and shoved the whole mess into my mouth in one bite. The goo was thick and tasteless as it slid across my tongue and down my throat. With a wide grin, I stood from the table and hurried to my room before she could call me back once more.

Grabbing my rucksack from beside the door, I filled it with bundles of fresh healing herbs, chamomile, marjoram, and sage, the book of healing spells I'd taken from Parthenia, and an extra change of clothes. I was as prepared as I was going to be. I wasn't sure what would work on the heir, but hoped when the time came, I'd know.

"I'm ready," I said, tossing the sack over my shoulder and coming back into the main room. Reva and Laima had left to tend to the animals while Parthenia had already curled up in her favorite seat, a broken mirror in her lap that I could only assume was one of her inventions. Melia stood waiting by the door beside Naenia.

"Maybe coming to the market today wouldn't be the best idea." Melia started.

Naenia had gotten to her. Naenia's overprotectiveness spread out like a disease to infect my other sister's decisions in regard to me. Naenia felt it their responsibility to keep me safe and protected, which meant never leaving the house, except on rare occasion.

I stuck out my lower lip, hoping to appeal to Melia's weak restraint.

“I just wanted to look in the apothecary shop. We will be back before nightfall. I promise.”

Melia looked to Naenia. Melia’s shoulders slumped in defeat at my protest. Most of my sisters believed I should be allowed to wander the town to learn what the World Tree might need. It was a tricky game they played as to what they let me do with my life.

“Come on, Nae, it’s not even an open market day, just the usual shopkeepers. She will be fine.” Melia said, siding with me.

I leaned against her and together we gave Naenia our most innocent and winning smiles. Lots of teeth, little chance to look at the lie in my eyes.

Naenia looked like she was about to start up again before Parthenia spoke up.

“Let her go, Naenia. She’ll always come back to us.”

My elder sister’s voice was like the cracking of a fresh book spin, sharp and quick, often gone before you get the chance to notice it. Parthenia understood the world around her better through the written word, which limited how often she spoke. When she did, we all took care to listen.

Naenia glanced at Parthenia, who hadn’t even looked up from her perch before sighing.

“Go, have a grand time. But come back before six bells, understand?”

“Yes, sister!” Melia and I chorused, getting outside before Naenia had a chance to change her mind.

We’d gotten a little way down the dirt road before Melia broke the silence.

“Sorry about that, Thesa. You know how she can be.”

I nodded but kept quiet. Melia would be in for the worst scolding of her life if my plan worked. I hoped all would be forgiven in a couple days when I returned from healing the heir with a sack of gold and a stronger ability to heal by my side.

“We all know you’re meant to do great things. I think that scares Naenia most of all.”

The road crested in a hill overlooking the town beside the river below. At this time of year, it was all vibrant greens dotted with flowers sparkling like jewels in the sunlight. I’d forgotten how beautiful the world was just down the road from home.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Melia stood beside me. Wisps of hair floated around her head in the breeze, escaping from the tie at her neck. Her fist clenched around the dagger at her side. Ever since that night, she’s trained harder than any of us to be a good soldier, her powers thriving under a warriors’ determination. She took to any weapon handed her and moved with the fluidity of a cat. I’d only ever seen her fight the straw dummies she set up in the yard but knew she could best even the most seasoned soldiers already.

She dropped her hand and turned to look down the road, hiding her face from me.

“The World Tree chose us for something. We know it has to do with you—it called you first—but the five of us are scared of when that something comes to call.”

They didn’t know how I fought the shadows every night. I’d always just been able to shrug it off as nightmares, how the Voice still whispers in my ears in the woods about a great Lady and a time of transformation. If they were worried now, knowing would only make it worse.

“That’s why Naenia keeps me close,” I said.

Melia turned back, her face bright and cheerful once more. She ruffled my hair in a playful gesture.

“And that’s why I need to make sure we both get back in one piece. Come on, let’s go shop.”

The moment passed, and she hurried off down the road before I could ask anything further. We passed the walk into town in comfortable silence, stopping to pick some fresh thyme along the way. The town felt alive as we walked down the center street. Everywhere I looked people were busy selling their wares: ornate tapestries and fresh produce, metalwork and meat killed fresh this morning. There was something new to see around every corner, and the amount of activity left me buzzing.

I caught a glimpse of a familiar shock of black hair moving swiftly through the crowd.

“I’ll be right back!” I shouted, hustling into the crowd before Melia could stop me.

I dodged and wormed my way through the crowd to come out in an alleyway across the square, where a boy sat emptying his pockets of other people’s treasures.

“Good haul?”

He jumped up, stuffing the shiny items back into his pants pockets before noting who stood before him.

“Conthesa, damn, I thought you were the warden.”

I picked up a large copper piece and handed it back to him.

“You’ve got to pay better attention.”

He smirked, flashing a row of dazzling white teeth. A smirk, he used it to get out of trouble just as much as it got him into it.

“Like a cat, you are. Should tie a bell around you one day.”

I met Marek years ago in the market when he’d tried to steal my coin purse. Laima had been in charge of me that time, and I didn’t want anyone to be disappointed, so I’d chased after the thief myself. I caught up to him in an alley much like this and pleaded my case. When he hadn’t listened, I socked him right between the legs. He’d handed over my purse and watched out for ‘the fierce cat’ ever since. A watcher I was grateful for, as he often helped me get away from my sisters.

Stopping with the niceties of catching up, I said, “I need your help.” He stood and stretched. He was about Naenia’s age and towered over my small stature, but still, I stared him right in the eye, continuing, “I need to get away from Melia and the town without my sisters knowing.”

His grin widened at the suggestion. “Just what is it you’re up to?”

I couldn’t tell him the truth without telling him the full truth, and I knew he wasn’t ready for that. “Just need to get out for a couple of days. Please.”

He looked me up and down, clucking his tongue as he thought.

“Right. I don’t think a young girl like you should be wandering off on her own, but I know if you’ve got it in your head to do it. I can’t stop you.” I nodded. He’d learned. “What do you need me to do?”

I looked out towards the crowd, where Melia was fighting her way towards the alley, pushing against the bustling people.

“Just distract my sister. I can do the rest.”

He smiled and held out his tanned hand.

“A distraction it is, then. Good luck, little cat, I’ll see you soon.”

We shook, and he was off, disappearing into the crowd. I moved to the far end of the alley to wait for his signal. A moment later, an explosion rocked the market, a pillar of fire reaching high above the rooftops.

“I didn’t mean that,” I whispered, but took the opportunity.

As people reeled and ran for water or help, I ran towards the tree line along the town’s border. As long as I could make it to the first tree unnoticed, I would be fine. Another explosion shook the ground below me, and I stumbled a step, catching myself before I hit the ground. I could feel the heat on my back as I ran faster. Whatever Marek had done sure made a mess of things.

“Conthesa!” Melia shouted above the commotion. She’d used her ability to cast her voice as if she were talking next to me, not back in the burning town.

The rumble of thunder overhead was enough for me to know my sisters were already aware of what had happened. They’d summoned the storm to quench the fire and find me.

I turned to look back at the town, half it was on fire now, the other half soon to be engulfed if the storm didn’t break in time. People were running towards the river. I could see the silhouette of a girl standing in the alley I’d run from. Melia. I knew it was my sister without having to see.

“I’ll come back and repair what I caused. Just give me a few days,” I whispered the plea, casting it out so she would hear me. The threat of tears choking my voice. “I have to do this.”

With a final look towards the burning town, I placed my hand on the trunk of the nearest tree and pictured the castles of Midstrum.

When I discovered I could do this the first time, the World Tree had guided me home, keeping my consciousness from spreading too thin along the journey. Since, I've practiced in secret, honing my focus until I can travel where I wish, when I wish. As every life grows from the World Tree, so too, every life is connected, and I could go through those connections. None of my sisters could do it. In an instant, I could feel the fresh ocean breezes along the cliffs in the east, the edge of the frosted forests in the north, and the vast wheat plains spreading through the west. I was everywhere and nowhere all at once, and then I was somewhere.

With a shove from the roots, I stumbled away from the tree I'd found myself beside to look up at the triple Kingdoms castle's high limestone walls, with tall turreted towers crowned in each Kingdom's banner, surrounding the inner keep. Sharp metal spikes were driven into the top of the walls all the way along, giving the appearance of bared teeth open and inviting, ready to swallow you whole. In the last generation, the Kings had kept to themselves, hiding within their stone walls as they amassed great wealth from conquered lands. I had no idea what to expect.

The castle sat atop a small hill, allowing for only one path in and out of the monstrosity. I felt eyes on me as I began the long walk around the perimeter towards the main gate. Distant shouts carried on the wind as the guards along the ramparts took notice of the small girl that had appeared on their doorstep.

My walk gave the guards ample time to gather. By the time I came around the last corner to the main gate, a wrought ironwork of twisted vines and snarling faces, the guards stood at the ready behind it, shields up, swords ready to be drawn if the hands at

their sides were any indication. I couldn't see well in the gloom behind the gate but could tell it wasn't just a handful waiting.

One guard stepped forward, a large gold emblem of the rising sun across his chest marked him as a lead soldier in the First King's regiment.

"State your business!" His voice boomed across space, and I winced at the noise. At most we were four feet apart.

With one eye on the guards twitching sword hands. I reached into my rucksack to pull out the crumpled sheet of paper the ransom notice had been distributed on and held it out for inspection.

"I've come to heal the heir."

The guards shifted; a smattering of muttered replies built up behind the gate before the chief guard held a fist high. Silence swiftly followed. He peered through the metal bars at me, squinting at the crumpled parchment in my hand. The large metal helmet he wore rode low on his head and, if not for his large nose holding the centerpiece up, it would surely fall across his face.

"We've had many try, but all have failed. Do you accept the punishment for failure?"

I balked at his shouted question. Punishment? The ransom said nothing of punishment. Thinking of the fires I'd started back home; I knew I had to press forward.

“Yes,” I whispered.

I had no plans to fail.

The guard waved his hand, and the gate rose with a groan. I stood waiting as the gate slowly rose into the walls above. I had enough time to take in the dirt under my nails and the scorch mark I’d missed on my dress before the gate finally rolled into place. The guards hadn’t moved during the process, but I saw the trembling of legs in the newer recruits as they held their positions. They took up a stance of two flanks with an open pass between them and I knew I’d be expected to walk down it.

“Through there.”

The lead guard pointed down the path confirming my suspicions. There was a large door at the end. Though I refused to look at their sneering faces, I couldn’t help but hear the guard’s taunts as I passed.

“Little young to be on her own.”

“Doesn’t even know what’s in store for her.”

“Going to fail like all the rest and learn what the Kings do to failures.”

“You’re never getting out of here alive. Streggot.”

The last was a whispered hiss. A seldom used defamation of those thought to be witches. I spun on my heel to find the culprit but they all looked away so I couldn’t be sure who said it. I could feel my magic bubbling up inside me, ready to show them what I

was really capable of. Clenching and unclenching my fist to work out the rising energy inside me. Now was not the time to act. I had to refrain. No sense in being arrested before I could even try. With a steadying breath, I finished the walk and wrapped my hand around the iron door and pulled.

Pain flashed white-hot across my palm, disappearing in the next instant. When I pulled my hand away the skin did not appear burned or blistered in any way. What had I walked into?

“Good luck,” one of the guards sing-songed as I pushed open the door and stepped into the front hall of the castle.

Inside, the foyer was lit with sparse candlelight. Every third candle was lit in the various candelabras around the room. Deep shadows swelled in every corner, the light flickering as the shadows rose and fell as if breathing, spreading, growing into every hidden space. I shuddered at the sudden chill in the room. Outside it was spring and sunny; in here it felt as if winter was just blowing in.

Stepping further into the room, I called, “Hello? I’m here to heal the heir.”

“Is that so young lady?”

A man stepped from the shadows. Dressed in black advisor robes, he’d hidden within the darkness. Moving closer, I kept the candelabra’s weak glow between us. His gaze fell on me with a physical weight.

Struggling to stand up straighter, I stared ahead, avoiding looking at him directly.

“Yes, I’ve heard the second heir is sick. I’ve come to help.”

The advisor stalked around the room, forcing me to edge around the table in an attempt to keep distance between us. Something felt wrong about the way he was looking at me. I held up the bundle of herbs I’d packed as if proof of my ability.

“I know I can help him if given a chance.”

A wide grin spread slow as honey across his face.

“Is that how you hope to heal the heir? Smoke and herbs?” He laughed, a cruel bark of a noise. “I’ll tell the Triumvirate Kings to prepare a cell in the dungeons.”

Flames rose around the room as my anger flared. I was tired of everyone underestimating what I could do. Every candle in the room soared, flooding the chamber with the scorching heat of my irritation. The advisor took a step back, eyes wide as he took in the scene before him.

“Take me to the heir,” I commanded in a voice similar to my own, one I’d heard in a half-remembered dream.

As the flames faded into the soft glow of candlelight, now every candle in the room burned with a bright orange spark, and the shadows trickled back in, the advisor’s smile returned. His eyes darted between the candles and me, the bundle of herbs in my hand now casting fragrant smoke into the room.

“I know what you are, young Lady. You’re just what we’ve been waiting for. Come, let us meet the heir.”

He motioned to a door I hadn’t noticed before set into the wall behind him. I’d have to walk past to get through. He held one white long-fingered hand toward me.

“Come along.”

His words unnerved me, but I had no reason to suspect he was lying. Careful to keep a wide distance, I crossed the space between us, trying not to hurry. I was halfway through the door when he called, “I’ll escort you. Wouldn’t want you getting lost.” Before I could get through, he placed his hand on the small of my back. A sharp spike of ice punched through my stomach at his touch and knocked the air from my lungs. I danced out of his way to catch my breath.

As soon as I was away from him, it disappeared.

“Something the matter?”

Smoothing my skirt, I straightened up. “No problem at all. Please, lead the way.”

His long legs ate the distance along the cobblestone path faster than my legs could keep up until I was all but jogging to stay alongside him. The hallway opened along one side to let in the late afternoon sun and was a welcomed change from the dark foyer.

“What is that?” I asked as we came upon a vast courtyard of an emerald green lawn.

Patches of flowers grew in bright spots of yellows and blues along the path. A fountain bubbled merrily in the center, a marble statue of three men with swords held aloft stood within. From their swords, water spewed out and trickled back down the stone blades. Behind the statues a great high wall of shrubbery stood, so dense as to hide what lay behind.

The advisor stopped quickly enough for me to stumble to not slam into his back.

“That is the castle’s garden, and the Kings’ hedge maze.” And he was off again.

A maze within the castle walls? But for who? The Kings were rumored to never leave their thrones, and it seemed too lavish of them to spend on anyone other than themselves.

“Who built the maze?” I asked between breaths as I hurried to keep up.

He looked over his shoulder, one dark eye glinting as he spoke.

“No one knows. There is an old question of what came first, the maze or the castle? Ah, here we are.”

He waved with a wide flourish of his arm at a dark wood door. The crescent moon of the Second Kingdom was etched in its surface.

“Do try your best,” he said, holding the door open for me.

I hesitated before the door, the room full of shadows, and the scent of rancid sickness washed over me. This was my last chance to turn tail and run. Taking a breath to steady myself, I was ready.

“I know I’ll succeed. And when I do, I’ll come personally thank you for the hospitality. Your name was?” I asked, looking him full in the face for the first time.

In the sunlight, his angles were softer than they had been in the foyer. His dark hair hung lank around a broad face. The grin I thought sinister now seemed genuine in the light of day.

“Marius, my lady.” He gave a slight bow of his head.

“Thank you, Marius,” I said with genuine sincerity. He had not gone running to the Kings about the fire; maybe I’d misjudged his initial impression.

“Another healer for the heir,” he called into the room before slamming the door shut behind me.

The drastic shift in light left me blind for a few moments. My eyes adjusted, slowly taking in rough shapes and moving bodies. The scent of herbs and human sickness hung in the air. The sound of a deep racking cough coming from the bed was the only noise in the room.

A man stood beside the palatial bed. I stepped back in awe. All six of us could have slept in that bed and still had room to spare. He wore the stark whites of a healer,

but they were stained and marked as if he'd not had the chance for a proper wash in quite some time.

"I don't know why they bother. You lot never seem to do more than light some herbs and hope." He spoke softly, as someone used to speaking with those who aren't there to listen.

I looked down at the bundle of herbs I still held in my hand, hiding them behind my back before he noticed.

"One can do a lot with hope," I replied, stepping up closer.

A nurse carried off a basin of a dark liquid I couldn't identify in the half-light. The doctor stared off after her,

"I don't know where it keeps coming from. The poor boy doesn't have anything left in him."

"That's from him?"

I motioned towards the bucket being carried out. It had to be large enough to harvest apples in. If he'd been filling it up with what came out of him, how bad was this disease? And what is there left to save?

The doctor nodded slowly. Everything about him seemed slow and drained of energy. He held his hand out to me. Dark stains crawled up his arms.

"Percival, and sadly yes."

“Conthesa,” I replied, shaking his hand. He seemed to stand a little straighter as I didn’t shy away from the mess. “What do you believe to be wrong?”

He looked away, back towards the bed and the sleeping boy within.

“At this point, I honestly don’t know. We’ve treated him for everything. Every sickness or plague that’s been documented in our Kingdoms’ combined histories and, still, nothing seems to work. It’s as if the sickness gets stronger with each attempt.” He slumped into the chair beside the bed, his old bones creaking along with the wood. “Then the Kings went and sent out that missive for help, and every charlatan far and wide has come to try their luck at healing, only to wind up in the dungeons. Don’t they know a boy’s life is at stake?”

He cared for this boy entrusted to him. From what it sounded like he may be the only one that did.

“I’m here to try what I can. I promise you I will help him.”

“How can such a young thing promise so much?”

I smiled at him, placed a hand on his shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze.

“Just trust me. If I fail, then I’ll suffer the consequences. But he deserves every chance.”

Percival nodded. “Well, let’s see what you think.”

If he wasn’t going to leave the room, that could prove a problem for me.

Taking a small candle from the bedside table, I drew back the curtain to see what happened to the heir. A gasp of shock escaped before I could clamp my hand over my mouth. What lay in the bed bore the vague resemblance of a boy. His hair was matted with sweat and sick, making it stick up in sharp spikes around his head. His veins bulged thick and black and, in some places, had burst open into wounds already infected. Shallow breaths came from his small chest. When I leaned close I could smell the hint of sick on his breath. The scent of decay, like when vegetation is left to rot, lingered on the boy.

Over his heart lay the worst of the infection. Black sludge oozed from a wound on his chest, the dark veins all spiraling from his core. The rot looked too familiar to be a coincidence. What had been done to the World Tree had been done to the heir.

My heart hammered in my chest at the truth of what I was seeing. I'd never been able to heal the World Tree and now my freedom hinged on doing what I could not with the full aid of my sisters' magic behind me. My breath came in shallow bursts, mirroring that of the heir, as my mind churned in worry.

"Conthesa, are you alright? I know it is a shock the first time."

Percival guided me away from the bed, placing himself between me and the heir. I took a ragged breath before continuing.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine." I took the glass of water he offered. "I've just..." How do I share that I've seen this before without explaining where?

“Yes?” The disappointment was evident in his voice; he thought I was just another charlatan hoping to make a quick coin.

“I believe I know what’s caused it, but I can’t be sure. I’ll do what I can to fix this. But I need to be left alone with the heir.”

“You do? What is it?”

I held up a hand.

“Please, just let me try. If I’m right, you can ask me all the questions you want when this is through.” I spoke slowly and carefully. I’d come up with some lies later. For now, I needed to focus on healing a wound I’d spent three years failing to do.

He looked between the boy and me before coming to some decision.

“Do what you must, as long as he’s better.”

“I promise.”

Percival stood. “See that you do. Good luck, Conthesa. The kingdoms are counting on you.”

“No pressure or anything,” I said to the now-closed door. “Alright, heir, let’s see what we can do.”

I waved my hands, and the curtains covering the large window drew back. Illuminating the room in bright detail. I pulled open the curtains around his bed, allowing

the sunlight to hit the infection. His body shrunk in on itself attempting to hide from the sun. A rasp of breath struggled from his lips. He wouldn't survive many more failed attempts.

I climbed up onto the bed, sitting cross-legged by the boy's feet and pulled out the healing spell book. There were spells for boils and bumps, rashes, and fevers, but nothing like this. There was never anything like this in the books.

"Alafaya, give me strength," I whispered in prayer.

If the books couldn't provide us with answers, maybe something new needed to be tried. As I gazed outside the trees swayed in the breeze. I stood as the trees bent in hypnotic rhythms. The trees, I could travel through them because they were connected to the World Tree. The World Tree and the land of Alafaya itself connects us all. Could I use my interconnection to look inside this boy and find the cause of his affliction?

"That's it!" I shouted, jumping a little in place.

Just like I could travel through the interconnected roots, maybe I could go through the connections in people. Veins were just another root system, and all life stemmed from the First Tree.

Settling back on the bed, I closed my eyes and placed one hand on his leg. A shock raced up my arm, similar to the one I'd received earlier this afternoon. There was something wrong in the castle. As the shock passed, I could feel the cold sweat across his skin, the barest of heartbeats fluttered beneath my touch. Focusing on that fragile beat, I

let the noise consume my entire being until all I could hear, and feel was his heart, beating slowly on despite the strain. No matter the obstacle, the heart pushes on. The heart was where all life stemmed from and connected directly to the roots of the World Tree. I'd never tried to look into the Tree's heart but if this worked that was my very next step.

Opening my eyes, I found myself standing in a space outside of the waking world. A space between space. The magic thrummed beneath my bare feet. The air crackled with the raw energy of it all. This was somewhere I'd yet to discover. My hands glowed with the pale lilac of my magic, illuminating the space around me. Wisps of fog floated around and revealed the outline of a body floating a couple feet from where I stood.

The heir.

He looked like a hollowed-out shell of a boy. Where his heart should be, a dark mass pulsed, pushing poison out through his veins until the infection seeped into his very soul. No medicine could heal this far into a person. They weren't prepared.

"It's ok," my voice echoed softly around me. "I'm here now."

I stepped up beside him and placed my hands over his heart.

Darkness bloomed at my touch, wrapping thick tendrils up my arms. Vines bit into my skin, shooting lines of frozen lightning through me. I crumbled beneath the onslaught, my chest constricting as the vines sought to infect me. The light of my magic faded as the pain took and took, sapping me of any resolve.

“Didn’t they say you couldn’t do it?”

“Didn’t they say you’d fail?”

“Aren’t you just proving them right?”

The questions came so fast I couldn’t tell if I was thinking them or another voice was speaking to me through the pain. My death would be the justification they’d been looking for. Just another failure to throw into the dungeon. The darkness surged through me, igniting a new frozen fire in my veins. I could feel my body choking in the physical world but could do nothing. The vines held tight around my soul, seeking a way to take root in my heart. My light all but gone as darkness settled in around me. For a moment, the pain shook my focus, and I was back in the heir’s bedroom. Percival had come in at sounds of distress, it seemed.

I fell back into the dreamscape, the darkness now encircling my heart.

“You failed them all, just as you’ve always done.”

A shadowed figure hunched over the heir’s body, cloaked in the darkness of this space. One gnarled hand reached out towards me and the darkness responded, biting into my heart with renewed force.

“Alafaya chose wrong.”

The name held power and echoed through the space. For a moment, I could remember myself again. I'd come here for a purpose, and I would not be stopped. My jaw clenched so tight I feared my teeth would break. I choked out against the pain.

"You're wrong." In the flickering light of my renewed magic, I rose to my feet. "I am stronger than you *because* Alafaya chose me."

I thought of the vines burning to ash from my body and, with that thought, my magic responded. With a pulse of lilac light, the vines fell to ash.

Reaching out toward the mass that infected the heir's heart, I said, "I promised I would help him. I won't let you stop me," and I pushed my light into him.

As his heart began beating with an even rhythm once more, my light spread through his veins, washing the plague from his system.

The cloaked figure's rage rolled off him in palpable waves of crimsons and black. An intense cold burned through my body as they washed over me.

"I will not be defied!" His rage shook the ground beneath us in both worlds. "You are nothing! I was a god!"

Dark shackles rose from within his shadows aimed for me. The heir's body still had more of the poison left to purge. I couldn't fight off this shadow man and heal him. I thought of my sisters and the comfort we found around the fireplace every night and cast out my light, pushing back the darkness around me. The poison within the heir swelled at my magic's absence, forcing me to refocus my efforts. I couldn't fight and heal at the

same time. I shouldn't have come here alone. I could hear the clink of metal as the shackles rose.

"Alafaya, lend me your strength," I whispered, rooting myself to the spot if this is what it took to fulfill my promise.

This was what I was chosen for. I'd been sent to heal this boy; I had to see this through. I'd chosen to pay it the moment I set foot into the castle.

"Do your worst," I said. The heir was almost healed. I just needed a couple more seconds in this space.

"You will live out the rest of your days within these walls." The Shadowman cursed before the clanging of metal shook all around me.

The shackle struck, binding my right wrist as the last of the disease left the heir's body. Before the second shackle could lock me to this place, I let go of the heir in the real world. My physical and psychic halves snapping back together with enough force to knock me from the bed.

The sound of violent retching greeted me as my vision cleared. Percival stood over the heir, calmly rubbing the boy's thin shoulders as a miasma of dark liquids were purged from his body.

"Are you alright?" he asked, sparing me a quick glance.

“I believe so.” My right wrist hurt from where I’d caught myself in the fall. “How is he?”

The outpouring had faded. The heir lay prone over a bucket hiccupping out the last of the disease. Even after such a violent ordeal, his color already appeared to return to a more natural state.

“You did it, girl, you actually did it.” Percival looked towards me, the excitement fading in place of a healer’s curiosity. “How?”

I reached for the answer and found myself drawing a blank. I’d come in to heal him with my herbs and spell book and something must have worked. All I could remember was darkness and searing pain in my wrist, then he was throwing up. I explained all of that to Percival, and he just shook his head, clearly relieved just to have the heir finally better than to question too deeply. At least for now. I hoped I’d have the answers for him when he came asking. He inspected my hand but found nothing amiss.

“Keene, meet Conthesa. She healed you.” Percival motioned for me to come closer.

The heir, Keene, had slumped against the headboard. He was already nodding off to sleep.

“S’Thank you,” he mumbled.

I bowed as was custom.

“Anything, Your Majesty.”

As the heir passed out with a healthy snore, Percival ushered me out of the room.

“I don’t know what you did, but I know you have a long future here in the castle. The Triumvirate Kings are going to want to make use of your talents.”

His words sent a flare of alarm through me. No, I had to get back home. To my sisters. I had a job to do elsewhere...didn’t I? My mind was foggy but that didn’t feel right. My job here was done.

“No, that’s not true.”

The Leech

After

Stories collected by Fireside and helpful warnings from the Dark: by Naenia Aroboralus

Excerpts collected from the section: *Nocturnal Hunters*

Leeches were born of a curse cast in selfish action, twisted by the Dark's hand until a single-minded thirst remained. In the time of Kings, they were but a whispered warning. It was not until after that the Leeches began to spread across the land.

The first encounter with a Leech can be traced back to the murky days of After, when a farmer's wife found a man supping at what she believed to be the teat of their dairy cow. As the sounds of suckling grew stronger, the woman caught a copper scent in the air and, with a broom in hand, attempted to go after the man. When she saw the crimson stain around his mouth, she dropped the broom and ran from the barn. When she told her husband what happened, he gathered a posse, but no man was to be found, just the drained corpse of their cow.

This story has been embellished over time, of course. Some versions say he was her returned lover back from the dead. Some that she'd been so startled, she'd collapsed dead on the spot. Others, that the Leech was still there when the men returned, their bodies not found until the following morning when the farmer's son came to feed the chickens.

We stick to what is known and what is related the most often, passed from neighbor to neighbor, handed down like treasured heirlooms by family lines. The stories always retain a hint of the truth.

Reports of the Leeches spread came from all across the Kingdoms: children disappearing in the night, men with eyes like gold and mouths of crimson and lies, whole

flocks of sheep decimated in a night. Men who could charm and those who could throw others around like the rag doll of a child. From these reports and further inquiries, we can determine all Leech lines have an aversion to the full light of the sun, root vegetables, pure silver, and running water. No known cure exists.

We can classify Leeches into four basic clades:

The Golden-Eyed

Leeches strong in the mental arts. They can be identified by a dusting of gold around their sunken eyes. Said to resemble the coins placed upon the eyes of the dead. The Golden-Eyed have displayed the ability to muddle their victims' senses and ease them into complacency until they believe they wanted to be drained of their lifeblood. This line of Leeches is known to most often keep their victim alive, while also returning to the same victim over the course of weeks. Those who have been found left in a Golden-Eyed thrall have exhibited symptoms of malnourishment, inability to perform basic hygiene, and a loss of general self-preservation. Their sole focus: to feed their master.

The Silver-Tongued

Leeches known to be adapted to spiritual manipulation. By this I mean they seem to be the only line that does not feed on the blood of their victims. Instead, they drain them of their emotions and spiritual wellbeing. Leeches of this line can be identified by a silver cross along their tongues. Though, to be close enough to identify a Silver-Tongued is to be close enough to be a victim of a Silver-Tongued. Victims are found lethargic, often sleeping for days at a time if not fully drained. Victims exhibit rapid and violent mood swings, no longer able to regulate themselves. They eventually become self-destructive.

They can be found to congregate around weddings, funerals, festivals and wars. If you see a man who you do not recognize at your family feasts, best to avoid him entirely.

The Copper-Might

These are the most identifiable of Leech lines as their skin has taken on a copper tone, as if they'd spent too long beneath the dirt and their skin had absorbed the pigmentation.

These Leeches are strongest in body and often the most violent with their victims. Survivors have not lasted past the night after a feeding. The Copper-Might often crushed their victims like a snake during the attack. Although highly dangerous, they are nothing compared to the final line.

The Scourge

As best we can tell, these are the Leeches directly sired by the first Leech, what we referred to as the Alpha. Leeches of this line blend most easily into society. They've exhibited abilities beyond those of their brethren: shadow walking, the ability to move through the darkness, as well as the rare ability to walk in the light. There has been no pattern discerned as to which Scourge can stand the sun and which can't, making them an ever-changing threat. The Scourge take the most joy in their bloodlust, often torturing their victims for weeks on end before finally draining them dry. Withered husks of mortals have been found in the wreckage of Auction Houses, burial sites, or anywhere that has fallen into disuse.

Many have attempted conflict with the Leeches. This is ill-advised, as there has been no proven method of guaranteed termination. In fact, their populace appears to be growing.

The Trial of the Queen

At the time of the fourth generation, cycle 50: Autumnal Equinox

The hedge maze that sat in the castle's courtyard had always puzzled Amaleigh. She stood below its arched entrance now, pondering its history while decidedly not thinking about having to go inside.

The maze had always held a place of honor, as if it were the leafy emerald of the Kingdoms' Crown. Yet she had never seen anyone spend any real time taking care of it. She'd seen chambermaids hustle past the dark entrance, hurriedly making the triple sign in an attempt to ward off the Keeper, the Kingdom's proverbial boogeyman meant to lurk in shadows and keep children away from the forests. Once the Triumvirate Kings had stationed a guard at the entrance, to appease a rumor being spread through the serving class that people were being lured into the maze at midnight. He hadn't lasted the night. She could remember waking up to the sound of the most awful screaming, clutching little hands tight against her ears. No one freely chose to enter the maze. Only one person treated the maze as if an ordinary work of nature—Conthesa.

Conthesa had come to the castle cycles before. Amaleigh had never gotten a clear answer as to how exactly. She could remember some confusion with Keene and then Conthesa was just there, all the time. She was there when they trained in the dirt. She was there when they were taught lessons in the dusty library. She was there when Amaleigh's father, ashamed at having a girl, took his frustrations out on her again. Conthesa had been a comforting companion, much like the cat she knew Keene kept in his chambers.

They'd never been able to get Conthesa to talk of her past. When they tried, she got this faraway look in her eyes. They'd been disappointed, having never left the castle

themselves. They'd hoped for a glimpse of the outside world. Eventually, they'd let it go and Conthesa became a part of life for the heirs.

Amaleigh knew she needed to go inside but couldn't seem to get her feet on the same page. She'd entered the maze once before on a dare with the male heirs of the Kingdoms. Golden perfect Brekan had instigated and Amaleigh took the bait, timid Keene had tried to talk them out of it, only to get swept along as he often did.

She was close enough to smell the sweet stench of plant decay in the undergrowth but still feel the sun's warmth at her back. She, in her worry, had rubbed a hole in the elbow of her tunic, the coarse material between her thumb and forefinger a familiar comfort when she overthought a problem. White roses the size of serving platters grew along the maze's edge. Under the late summer sun, they cast a glare over the courtyard, reflecting back the light, the ivy draped entrance appearing even more foreboding in the recessed shadows. When Amaleigh pulled at a vine in curiosity, her hand came away tacky with sap.

Amaleigh paced in front of the entrance, still unsure if going in was best. Of course, she'd never believed the legends and rumors---but now? About to walk in alone, Amaleigh was having second thoughts. But the King's warning of completion of her trial by tomorrow's sunset spurred her on. She needed Conthesa's help; she was the only person she knew who may have an idea of where to start.

Amaleigh pushed aside the curtain of vines and stepped into the maze.

Adjusting to the gloom, the lack of noise was unsettling. Out in the courtyard, bird songs floated merrily through the air. In the maze, silence hung as if weighted in the air, making the space feel thick as soup as she tried to catch her breath. A panic was

beginning to settle in her chest, a stone ready to pull her beneath the surface. She couldn't back out before she'd even begun. Struggling to take a deep breath, the would-be King assessed the darkness of the maze around her.

She stood in a grassy courtyard, long rows of hedges creating branching paths before her. Crowns, having been left to grow wild, now crossed between each other, creating a dense canopy overhead that blocked out the light. Even at the height of midday, it was as if twilight were just beginning to fall as Amaleigh crept around corners.

A cricket stirred within the maze; the occasional chirp sent a spike of fear through her heart every time.

Her fingers stretched behind her like a pale shadow against the hedge. She'd catch herself occasionally on a branch or briar; once she thought she caught the sight of a bright spot of crimson. When she looked down there was not a scratch of blood on her smooth palm. A glance back to the bush revealed a sea of green, not a speck of red to be seen.

Rounding a corner Amaleigh came upon a forking path. As she'd walked through the maze, hazy bits from her childhood journey had returned, like a dream forgotten by morning. The broken bust of a bygone King, the lonely bench in the hollow of a hedge, and the patch of flowers that twinkled like stars as she passed. But this was new.

Four paths lay before her. The corridor she'd just come from dead ended in this small room. She crouched to look at the stone set at the start of the leftmost path. Mud and grass caked it, digging only resulted in drawings of lines Amaleigh could not distinguish. Examining the others proved similar results. On impulse she picked the path that had the least branching lines in its stone.

Amaleigh moved down the corridor she'd chosen, careful to watch for roots and grabbing vines along her path. Passing by a darkened alcove, movement out of the corner of her eye caused her to stop. Something had shifted in the shadows down that way. An old fear uncoiled in her mind, half remembered memories of grabbing hands and Brekan screaming about a man in the darkness. Amaleigh couldn't recall herself ever having had a worse idea than the one that led her to this moment.

Amaleigh held still, muscles taut, her breath coming in short shallow bursts. She strained to listen for sound over the rapid pounding of her heart. She'd almost let herself forget the rumors of the maze, but now all those anxious whisperings came rushing back in a crippling gasp.

"Conthesa?"

No answer but the wind through the leaves.

She peered closer into the darkness, that fear inside urging her to run, turn back and never return. Amaleigh took another step closer to the dark, one hand outstretched as if to grab on to whatever had passed by.

"Amaleigh, what are you doing in here?" A soft voice called behind her.

Amaleigh turned to see a girl haloed in sunlight, her features blurred in the glare, yet she knew this was who she'd been searching for.

"Looking for you actually."

She stepped away from the path, shaking off the memory like cold fingers slipping through her mind.

Amaleigh stood half a foot taller than the other girl. Where Amaleigh worked every day to be what she believed the people wanted in their first female King, Conthesa won

them over with a smile. She was softness and laughter wrapped in brightly colored shawls whereas Amaleigh never strayed from the royal blacks and copper and was often found with a scowl on her face. Still, the two girls were as best as friends could be and the sight of her calmed Amaleigh's anxious heart.

Conthesa cocked a hip and smiled. "Well, you've already come all this way. Let's sit in the garden, then you can tell me what you've come to say."

Amaleigh moved past the other girl into the maze's central clearing.

Her wildest dreams couldn't have imagined what had lay within. Her thoughts always swarmed with the rumors of dark corners and curses; she'd never imagine it to be so...beautiful. The setting sun's light filtered through the trees in pinks and reds, the fountain indeed bubbled from a crystal stand and the water reflecting the sunlight became a river of diamonds. Birds chirped as they flitted from tree to tree in every color under the sky. To think this had been just inside her home all this time...

Conthesa's hand felt warm on the small of her back as she guided Amaleigh towards a bench carved from a fallen tree.

"It's a little startling at first, isn't it? Coming out of the maze's gloom into this," Conthesa gestured broadly to encompass the center. "Makes that dark journey through the maze worth it, though, doesn't it?"

Amaleigh nodded, refusing to acknowledge the hot ball of tears waiting just behind her eyes. Why would something like nature make her cry? She'd just been so overwhelmed in the maze, the relief, the fresh air, the freedom. It was more than she'd expected.

Conthesa smiled with the fullness of her face, Amaleigh catching the bright sparkle in those lavender eyes. At first, the heirs had teased her for them, thinking she was a witch, but in time they'd learned the truth of her heart. Conthesa just felt in bigger ways than the rest of them.

"It's a little like life isn't it? The dark paths we walk make finding the moments of light that much more important." She moved on without waiting for an answer. "But I know life lessons aren't what you came in here for. What is it you needed to ask me?"

The euphoria Amaleigh had been feeling evaporated as she remembered why she'd entered the maze to begin with.

"The Kings have granted me my trial," she said, unable to meet the other girl's gaze.

"Oh, Ama, that is wonderful news. Thank you for coming so quickly to tell me."

Conthesa wrapped her in a tight hug. Amaleigh couldn't bring herself to return it. "What is it they are asking of you?"

The girls pulled away from each other, Conthesa waiting expectantly while Amaleigh sought the right words to convey her intention.

"They charged me with finding magic. They want me to bring them back evidence of the World Tree."

Wind whipped through the maze's center as shadows lengthened in the dying light. Conthesa shook her head, standing quickly and pacing a few yards away.

"No, no, that's not right. They can't ask that of you." She turned to Amaleigh, wild-eyed. "No one has ever come back from that quest."

Amaleigh nodded, alert to her friend's panic and concern.

“You’re right, which is why I won’t be the only one going. Keene and Brekan have already agreed to accompany me.” A white lie. One she’d easily remedy once she was out of the maze and able to talk with the boys.

“Oh,” Conthesa seemed to deflate, the ire she’d been working up dissipating in the air.

Amaleigh smiled in her heart---it had all gone perfectly.

“But of course, we could use an expert as well.” Amaleigh let her offer hang in the air for a moment before continuing. “We all know how badly you’ve wanted the chance to go back home. Help me to help you.”

Conthesa appeared to be considering the offer. After a long beat of silence Conthesa asked quietly, “You’re going into the woods?”

Amaleigh smiled, bright and bold this time.

“Yes, that seems like the most likely source. The Western Mines have been picked over, the Eastern Sea’s nothing but fish and gambling. And the Southern Wastes,” She shrugged. “There’s nothing worth finding down there anyways. So, it has to be the Northern Forests.”

Conthesa nodded along as if the most logical conclusion she’d ever heard.

“I get to go back to the woods?”

Amaleigh held her hand out.

“Come with us, and you could stay there.”

Her hand fit inside Amaleigh’s as if it was always meant to be.

Amaleigh tugged the other girl behind her as they made their way back through the maze. The sun having fully set now, Amaleigh felt as if she was walking blindfolded. No

doubt the lanterns were lit in the courtyard, but no light seemed to penetrate the greenery. And Conthesa had been no help so far, the girl lost in a fantasy of a home she'd long left behind, babbling inanely about the local plant life she could recall.

A hand gripped the taller girl's shoulder spinning her around. They tumbled together in a heap of arms and legs in the darkness. Amaleigh couldn't tell where she ended and Conthesa began.

"Why did you do that?" she shouted shoving at the other girl to extract her legs.

"Do what? You're the one who fell," Conthesa replied dusting roughly at her skirts.

"Can you even see if they are dirty?" Amaleigh asked.

She may not see but she could feel the glare Conthesa cut her way.

"I just know Amaleigh."

"Well, do you know the way out of here then?"

There was a sound of scuffling in the grass as Amaleigh assumed Conthesa tried to get her bearings.

"This way," Conthesa said after what Amaleigh felt was only slightly too long to not be worried.

Amaleigh reached out for the edge of the other girl's skirt before she could walk off too far. Conthesa hadn't made sure Amaleigh knew which way 'this way' meant, and she damned sure wasn't going to be left behind in this dark maze. The feeling of relief she'd felt in the center had evaporated as they moved, she hoped, closer and closer towards home.

"Wait for me," she hissed, hoisting herself up and trailing after the other girl.

Conthesa moved with a fluid grace within the maze, striding purposefully down paths Amaleigh was sure were dead ends. Once she could have sworn she felt the rough scratch of leaves and the tight confines of being boxed in, only for Conthesa to pull her along into a new corridor. The whole journey felt disconcerting in the dark and, far sooner than she'd thought possible, they were stumbling out of the maze, passing back through the curtain of vines. Amaleigh blinked to remove the stars from her eyes as the candlelight blinded her with its suddenness.

"I must go pack," Conthesa said, darting off before Amaleigh could respond.

Amaleigh found Keene on her first try, in the library, nose buried in scouting reports, a block of wood whittled down into a flower at his side. She dragged him up, dusting the shavings and book grime from his robes and instructing him to follow. Confused, he had agreed, finding it easier to comply. Brekan they'd found in the kitchens, trying to charm a maid for a piece of her leftover cake. With a swift kick to the ass, she guided both boys towards her tower room.

"What's the meaning of this Amaleigh? Are you bitter that the fathers denied your petition to trial?" Brekan asked, rubbing at his back side.

It always sent a cold twist of rage through her when she heard the Triumvirate Kings referred to as fathers. The third King was no father to her, and she knew for a fact the other heirs weren't treated much better by their Kings. They each were trying to survive in their own way until the day the crowns were settled on their brows.

"The Kings didn't deny my petition."

Both boys froze on the stone steps; it took Amaleigh a moment to notice they were no longer behind her.

“What do you mean?” Keene asked, swiping at the brown hair that fell across his eyes.

Amaleigh tried not to let her eyes linger on the jagged black scars that encircled his throat, remnants of a childhood illness.

“Inside, then I’ll tell you.” She held the door to her chambers open and they filed in.

Brekan threw himself onto the lush pillows piled high on her feather bed, propping his muddy feet up on the soft fur she liked to cuddle under when the nights grew cold, while Keene sat carefully at the small table by the window where she took her morning biscuit. She placed herself between the two of them, on a large padded seat she’d had especially made for when late nights reading historical texts grew too tiresome at the library’s wooden tables.

“Well, let’s be on with it. You’ve already cost me one sweet tonight. I’d rather not be dragged away longer than necessary,” Brekan said, waving at her like she was an attendant stuttering through morning announcements. She let her retort die before it reached her tongue before starting with what she wanted to say.

“They granted my petition but, as we all know, the Triumvirate Kings are anything but fair.”

Keene refused to meet her gaze at her proclamation but Brekan took it as a challenge:

“Everything the Kings do is fair. Do you not see the thriving marketplaces? The gleaming towers of the castle? The laws our fathers enact to best serve their people?”

Brekan’s blind faith in their fathers forced an involuntary scoff of disdain from Amaleigh. She’d heard the same speeches made by the Kings at the great audiences.

They were nothing more than pretty words, something Amaleigh hoped to change if she could get her hands on the crown.

She waved him off before he could launch into another tirade.

“Be that as it may, they’ve asked for more than I know how to give. But I have a plan, and you two are coming with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere until I know what fool’s errand you’re trying to get us into.”

“I’m with Brekan this time, Ama. What are they asking of you?” Keene said, finally speaking up.

“I’m to find the World Tree and bring back magic,” she said all in a rush.

The boys leaned closer as if her statement had unleashed a void in the room, pulling them in.

“The World Tree?” Keene whispered.

“Boy, you must have really pissed them off this time. Well, it was nice knowing you. Keene, you want the left or right side of the Third Kingdom? Doesn’t look like they’ll be having a rising King much longer.” Brekan laughed, his deep braying belying all his princely training, a laugh he often only rolled out at Amaleigh’s expense.

“I did not ‘piss them off’,” she aggressively made quotes with her fingers in the air. “I merely was born a woman. The simple act of my existence was enough to upset them. Now they’ve slated me with the most difficult challenge in the Kingdoms and you laugh it off? My life hangs in the balance and you laugh it off?”

She had stunned the older boy.

“Calm down Ama,” Brekan fanned the air between them in an effort to cool her off as he got off the bed. “I’m sure there’s rules against actually killing off an heir. Even a woman is good for something.”

Keene barely made it in time to keep Amaleigh from launching at the golden boy and ripping his eyes out with her bare hands. Gods, how she despised him at times. But she needed him; she needed all four of them if she was going to have the protection she needed to have the chance at finding the World Tree. The Kings wouldn’t strike against all three heirs. Their ensured destruction depended on it.

The following morning, Amaleigh packed her rucksack and met the others at the castle’s gated entrance. A long drawbridge of iron and wood connected the castle to the mainland, the castle itself having been built upon a naturally occurring plateau. From here, Amaleigh could just make out the tops of the buildings down in Midstrum. Just three wrought iron gates and fifty feet of wood stood between them. There was a buzzing in the pit of her stomach she couldn’t identify but she wanted to chase this feeling all the way into the woods. It felt like change. It felt like freedom.

The regular attendant guards flanked the gates in their illustrious silvers. Amaleigh had expected to see them on their way out but she had not been prepared for the sight of three Coraguarde. The King’s elite guards were said to be snatched at birth to begin the rigorous training. Amaleigh had seen them only in passing while she lived in the castle. Their ever-seeing eyes and scarred closed mouths were a frightening image to a young girl. The Coraguarde uniforms were all of the deepest blacks with slashes of gold, silver, and copper adorning their arms and chests.

The Coraguarde from Keene's father's division, marked by the silver bands, held out a tightly rolled parchment. The fractured moon of the second kingdom's sigil shone from the wax seal. Amaleigh took it gingerly, careful to avoid contact with the scarred hands. She broke the seal and unfurled the parchment, Conthesa, Keene and Brekan crowding in close behind her to read over her shoulder.

Amaleigh, Heir of the Third Kingdom,

I have entrusted your care into the protection of our Coraguarde. Only these three will travel with you so as to not draw attention. If all heirs are choosing this quest, then you must concede to some protections. The true task will be up to you.

Time is of the essence.

Travel carefully. The shadows hide secrets.

King Tigin the Third, Ruler of the Second Kingdom, The ever-shining Moon,

The Lord of Mists and Flowing Waters.

Amaleigh clutched the paper to her chest after reading it a second and third time. One of their father's actually thought she could do this. Conthesa was smiling a wide toothy grin when she looked up.

"I just know today is going to be a great day." And Amaleigh couldn't help but agree.

Her father's Coraguarde held up another parcel. This one long and thin, wrapped in polished leather that melted like butter between Amaleigh's fingers as she took it. She could feel the others breathing down her neck but ignored them as she unwrapped.

Peeling back the layers, she revealed the bronzed polish of a sword hilt. Her excitement bubbled up in a strangled laugh as she lifted her father's Kings blade from the wrapping.

Each King was entrusted with a blade and a crown when they ascended the throne. Both items passed down from the first Kings and were never meant to be given until after the ascension. A part of Amaleigh had never thought she'd be able to hold this sword in her hands, let alone claim it as her own. From the large topaz set in the pommel to the razor edge of the rapier, the Third Kingdom's blade was something to behold.

When she looked up there were questions in everyone's eyes. This was very unusual from the Kings, but Amaleigh didn't want to look too closely at the gift, choosing to focus on the good that must be awaiting them at the end of this expedition.

At the sign from the heir, the guards manning the gates began the intricate process of lowering the defenses to allow the group out. The harsh clanging of metal gears on stiff chains filled the courtyard and, for a while, there was nothing to do but stand around and wait. Amaleigh couldn't remember the last time all the gates had been lowered. Often, when it was time for supplies, the servants used the back doors to move more easily about. The main entrance was left fortified and ready in case of attack. Though Amaleigh had never been sure who exactly would attack the castle.

With the gates down, a strong breeze blew through the archway catching Amaleigh's loose curls in its wake. Sullen Brekan marched through the gates first. Keene followed close behind, already fishing out a fresh journal to take field notes in.

"Ready?" Amaleigh asked, turning to the girl at her side.

Conthesa seemed lost in her own world, gazing out in wonder at the open gates. She nodded, taking Amaleigh's hand, and squeezed once in reassurance.

"Let's go get your crown, your majesty."

Amaleigh laughed and the two girls walked arm and arm out of the castle, the Coraguarde in their wake.

Keene was scribbling in a notebook and Conthesa left Amaleigh's side once outside the walls to help guide him by the elbow. She operated as his eyes as he busied himself taking in all their surroundings and recording it all for the library. Amaleigh knew the two of them spent most every day in the library pouring over the records sent in daily from the scouts the Kings sent out to survey the lands. Now that they had a chance to do it for themselves, she smiled to herself, they wouldn't miss a thing.

"Just how unghastly far are we to walk?" Brekan moaned five minutes into the journey.

Amaleigh considered smacking him in the mouth but refrained; it was too beautiful of a day for violence. The Coraguarde walked as silent shadows behind the four, none offering suggestions as to how best get where they wanted to go.

"We could ask him to take us."

Conthesa pointed down the road, towards a merchant's wagon. The large tanned dome above the wooden cart shone like a beacon against the packed red clay of the road. She was already off and down the incline before the others had a chance to stop her.

Keene looked up from his notebook long enough to take in the situation.

"She can't be serious?" Keene asked the group, hopeful.

"She's already talking to him," Brekan replied.

"And now she's inside," Amaleigh added as they watched their friend climb into the back of the wagon. She waved eagerly at them once she'd perched herself on the back rail.

“We have to go with her, don’t we?” Keene asked.

Brekan had already taken off down the road, gleeful to no longer have to walk.

“That’s the plan!”

Amaleigh and the Coraguarde hurried behind. With a resigned sigh, Keene followed after them.

Up close the wagon appeared to have seen better days. A large rip had been torn in the protective dome and a bucket had been placed beneath, brackish water looked ready to slosh out at any moment. The wood of the cart itself was brittle and rotted through in places. Amaleigh hesitated, her hand on the rail, ready to pull herself up and inside, the others waiting right behind her. This was the last step. A part of her had still been hopeful up till now that her father would call the trial off. As she stood facing the dark interior of a stranger’s wagon, she knew this could only end one way.

Hoisting herself off the ground, she climbed in beside Conthesa, ready to see what lay at the end of their road.

The wagon groaned as the others climbed aboard, dipping slightly with the added weight. The Coraguarde clung to the wagon’s sides like spiders, their nails sharpened and coated in special resin. It provided them the ability to cling to surfaces but at the cost of burning and staining the tips of their hands scarlet. As the heirs settled in, Amaleigh wondered just what all the Coraguarde could do, having never taken much notice before. Once aboard but not fully settled, the impatient merchant gave a quick whip of his horses and they lurched away. Brekan knocked into Amaleigh and she quickly pushed him away, causing him to fall into the water bucket and spill the contents. A putrid smell filled the small space.

“That wasn't rainwater he was collecting.” Keene’s voice was extra nasal as he spoke through a pinched nose, attempting to mask the odor.

Brekan sat in stiff backed horror as the realization, and various liquids, soaked in.

Amaleigh stifled a laugh but when she heard Conthesa let out a rather impolite snort she couldn’t hold back any longer. Soon enough the three of them were laughing at Brekan’s expense. The heir had been due some humility for a while now, the others choosing to revel in it.

The skin of Brekan’s face grew pinker and pinker until his cheeks were flaming with a combination of embarrassment and rage and wounded pride.

“I want off this gods forsaken expedition right this minute!”

The wagon lurched to a stop a moment later, throwing the four of them into each other with the sudden jolt.

Amaleigh’s head was under Keene’s legs, the older boy tangled up with Conthesa and the three of them now experiencing first-hand what Brekan had been going through. They struggled and flailed to separate themselves. Conthesa pulled herself up and out of the wagon’s back half to go and speak with the driver once more, while Brekan scrambled to get out before it could move again.

“I think he heard you,” Conthesa said as she left.

“Brekan, wait!”

Amaleigh shot Keene a pleading look, but he merely shrugged. “This one’s on you Ama. It’s your trial so you’re going after him.”

With a mighty sigh she heaved herself over the railing and went after Brekan. The first King's Coraguarde already shadowed the heir, Amaleigh's own dropping down to follow.

"You don't even know where you're going!" She shouted at his back. They'd ridden out of town, that much she could tell. Otherwise it was just trees and fields as far as the eye could see, how far they were from the castle or their destination, only the driver knew.

"I'm sure I'll find it eventually. The castle's rather large, you know."

Amaleigh groaned in frustration. All their lives Brekan had made it his mission to be as difficult as possible, especially for her. He'd argue with her in circles until she felt her point no longer held meaning; he'd challenge any decisions she'd make. Even as children, he'd find ways to get under her skin: bugs in her bed, tack in her hair. She couldn't help but react every time he pushed her. Which was exactly what he wanted. She tried a different tactic this time.

"If you go back, they'll know I failed. I can't go back home without this Brekan. I need your help."

He stalled a couple of feet away, close enough now for her to catch up. The back of his jacket was covered in splotches of varying dryness, his shoulders set in a hard line. Even as she drew closer, he wouldn't turn towards her, but she knew she was getting to him.

"Please, Brek. I need you."

After all this time Amaleigh had learned how to play the other heirs. Like how she knew his desire to be desired would always trump his rationality, playing right into her hand

He turned to her, a wide smile cutting his face.

“Need me, huh? Why, Ama, I’m flattered.”

She fought to keep the disgust from showing on her face.

“We’re stronger together aren’t we? Let’s make history.”

She offered her left hand out to him in peace. He clasped her arm around the elbow, drawing them closer together. The gesture meant to promote peace and civility during negotiations. Amaleigh only felt sweat in fat blobs rolling down her spine and the ghost of a chill beneath her fingertips at Brekan’s elbow. Nodding, they parted, taking up a respectable distance once more.

Their Coraguarde fell into step behind their charges.

When they got back to where the wagon had been, Conthesa and Keene were arguing by the side of the road, not a merchant to be seen.

“What happened?” The pounding of her heart in her ears muffled their response. She took a deep breath; the day wasn’t over yet. “What?” Amaleigh repeated.

Conthesa rolled her eyes having just explained it and Keene stepped in.

“After you two went storming off, this one,” he nodded towards Conthesa. “Got into it with the merchant over directions---”

“He wanted us to take the eastern path, everyone knows the fastest route to the forest is to the north,” she interjected. Hostility billowed off her in rough waves, Amaleigh took a step back just to be careful.

“What do you know about the northern path? You’ve been in the castle for a decade!” Keene said.

“I just know ok!”

“That’s not a viable answer!”

They were back to bickering as if the others were no longer there or needed. Amaleigh rubbed at the deep ache growing between her temples. She was already tired of having to wrangle the cats that seemed to be her traveling companions. Were the Kingdoms really worth all this? She thought of her mother, as she often tried to remind herself when the stress felt like it was becoming too much.

Her last memory of her was her fondest. Amaleigh had been just six when she snuck them out of the castle grounds for the day. There was a festival in the market square, Amaleigh could remember the bright colors and the taste of a sweet roll someone had handed the king consort for the child. They’d stayed among the people for a while, her mother lighter out here than in the castle walls, until she felt a pull on her arm. Amaleigh had been watching a man juggle blades of polished glass when her mother yanked her away.

She’s trailed behind, unable to resist her mother, who refused to stop or answer Amaleigh’s pleads, not until they’d reached their destination. It was a house, if you could call it that. It looked nothing like the home Amaleigh knew but when her mother stepped through the battered curtain that served as a door, she followed behind to discover a cot and wash basin within the room. A little boy lay in the bed, while his parents and sister sat quietly nearby. Amaleigh couldn’t recall what was said, but she remembered her mother handing the boy’s mother the bracelet from her wrist before she pulled Amaleigh

back out into the festival. Her mother had been on alert the quiet walk back, her eyes constantly searching the darkened alleys they passed. Not until they were back through the secret entrance did her mother relax.

Before they parted that night, as her mother placed a gentle kiss onto Amaleigh's brow she whispered.

"That's who we do this for. The Triumvirate Kings won't help the little people. They need a queen to fight for them. Be strong, Amaleigh."

At the time she'd thought her mother's proclamation odd but when she went to look for her the following day, her mother's chambers had been stripped. All evidence of the king's consort stripped away, to make room for someone new. It was also one of her most painful memories.

Amaleigh shook off the memory, a part of her had never let go of the fight her mother instilled in her that day, and she would be damned if these bickering fools would get in the way.

"Shut up, the both of you." She'd brought them along for their help as well as protection. If they'd gotten her into this mess, one of them was going to help her solve it. "Conthesa, you're saying there's a faster route? Which way?"

The boys looked at her like she'd grown a second head.

She crossed her arms and stared them down. "Does either of you have a better idea?"

Silence.

"Alright then, Conthesa lead on."

She waved towards the path for the girl to show them the way but instead Conthesa headed off towards the tree line along the road. She broke through the underbrush and disappeared behind a raspberry bush. Checking to make sure her sword was still strapped to her side, Amaleigh followed Conthesa into the woods. The sounds of crunching footsteps behind her proved the boys, and their Coraguarde shadows, had followed.

Amaleigh caught the tail end of a swish of fabric. Rounding the next tree, she had to admit, she was impressed. A path was carved through the woods, the deep ruts cut into the dirt old, but proof carts had come through here at some point. The entrance to the path was overgrown with brush and trees that Amaleigh felt couldn't have grown up in the last ten years. But Conthesa was right, there'd been a road.

Amaleigh came up alongside the other girl, who'd stopped to wait for them to catch up. Amaleigh was about to speak when she caught the look on Conthesa's face, in the dappled sunlight Amaleigh thought she caught a tear trailing down her friend's face.

"Conthesa?"

The girl quickly turned away, wiping at her face with her sleeve. "Yes?" She asked, her voice sounding only slightly strained by the effort.

Amaleigh wanted to reach out but stopped herself, she wasn't that kind of girl.

"I...just...thank you. For knowing about this."

She switched back into their mode, letting her walls slide back into place.

Conthesa nodded sharply.

"Right." She looked around as the others came around the bend and took in the road. "It was as if something was calling me."

Amaleigh was about to ask what she meant when Brekan hooted, “Look at that, the Streggot actually knew the way.”

The nickname had been one they’d used in secret and not for many cycles, for him to bring it up again here and now, he was merely looking to cause trouble. Amaleigh was preparing to lay into him before Conthesa spoke.

“Don’t call me that.” Her voice had taken on a timbre Amaleigh had never heard before. It was richer, deeper, more confident than Conthesa’s usual lighthearted tone. “You’d do best to watch yourself, or I’ll leave you here.” With that she marched down the path.

Amaleigh could see the tension slacken slightly within the Coraguarde, each poised to strike if Conthesa had tried to lash out at one of the heirs. Brekan stood slack jawed, surprised Conthesa had challenged him. It wasn’t much, but it was more than most ever had. A faint smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, but Amaleigh knew that behind that bite was some truth.

They journeyed on, finding themselves in a quiet she’d never known her companions to be. Keene wasn’t scribbling away or whittling. Brekan wasn’t bragging or boasting, just staring in rapt awe of the still forest as they all were. Even Conthesa’s usual stream of babble had ceased. In fact, it seemed to Amaleigh that Conthesa was another person out here, surer of her voice. As the sounds of the forest grew around them the bugs chirping underfoot, bird’s songs high above them, and the careful crunching of things running in the wilds of the woods beside the road, Amaleigh’s unease rose as the road seemed to stretch on for eternity. She was about to ask when they would be there when Conthesa stopped.

The girl stilled and sniffed the air.

Conthesa was off before Amaleigh could stop her. Amaleigh looked frantically towards the boys before giving chase. She crashed through brambles and branches slashed at her arms as Amaleigh held them before herself in some modicum of protection. She burst out on a short hill a couple of steps behind Conthesa. The wind had caught Conthesa's hair whipping it out in long tendrils beside her. Amaleigh realized in that moment she had never seen the other girl with her hair down before, the light caught the undertones streaking her brown hair with golden hues.

When she turned at the sound of the others crashing out of the woods Conthesa's face was damp.

Below them lay the ruins of a village. The broken, blackened remains of a town square stuck up like broken teeth from the earth that had reclaimed it. The scent of ash still seemed to linger in the air.

"What happened here?" Keene asked, coming up alongside them. The four of them looked down upon the destruction.

"I think I did." Conthesa replied, wiping at her face and attempting to re-pin her hair. The effort proved immediately useless in the winds.

It was hard to pull away from the destruction but what she'd said threw Amaleigh back to the present moment.

"What do you mean you did?"

Conthesa walked away from them, shaking her head slightly as she did so as if trying to dislodge something.

"It's right there, I almost have it," she said more to herself than the others.

Amaleigh's eyes flicked towards the Coraguarde standing still beneath the forest's shadows. They'd strike without question. She went to move towards the girl, but Keene got there first.

"Thesa, what are you talking about? Almost have what? You couldn't have done this." His placating tone grated against Amaleigh's skin. So quick to discredit her.

Conthesa turned back towards them, her eyes bright and hair wild.

"I remember who I am."

She'd refused to answer any further questions, instead leading the group down the hill and out past the destruction of the town. They passed a little cottage where Conthesa stopped for a moment and Amaleigh thought finally she'd speak, but instead they passed onwards, heading back to the woods.

The northern forests of the Kingdoms were once home to the varied magical creatures that called the woodlands home. Once they'd covered the whole of the First Kingdom, until the people started needing homes and products and the cutting began. Great swathes of the forests cut back until the final band of trees hunkered together on the northernmost coast as if trying to flee into the ocean. Amaleigh had never seen trees as old as the land itself, these last guardians the oldest holdouts of a bygone world.

The three heirs stood before the forest's entrance. Trunks grew so wide over time they formed a wall as they grew up into the heavens. Branches weighted down with leaves and nuts provided shade a good distance away. The woods beyond were nothing but uncertain darkness. They'd already come this far, what was a little walk through the dark woods between friends in a quest to find the world's lost magic?

Amaleigh could feel the momentousness of this moment in the base of her spine. An electric hum made her blood sing. They were close to something here. She was ready to follow Conthesa into the woods when Brekan stopped them.

“Now that’s just about enough.”

Conthesa stopped with her hand on the closest tree trunk, Amaleigh and Keene a few paces behind her. Brekan stood in the sunlight, the three Coraguarde flanking him.

“What are you talking about?” Amaleigh asked, a part of her already aware of the answer.

Brekan shook his head, not meeting their eyes. “My father won’t allow you to complete this trial.”

Amaleigh reeled as if physically struck. The world narrowing in her mind to the boy right in front of her attempting to stop what she’d always dreamed of.

“Your father isn’t here,” she seethed, knowing exactly where this was going. Brekan had always tried to undermine her; this was just the latest iteration.

Keene stepped between them, ever the peacemaker.

“Brek, you know we can’t interfere with another heir’s trial. It goes against the code.”

“Code be damned! The Kings will not allow magic to return. Guards take them into custody,” Brekan commanded in a tone Amaleigh was scared sounded eerily like their fathers.

The Coraguarde moved quickly, cutting the distance between themselves and the heirs before Amaleigh could fully blink. Wrenching her arm from the garde’s grasp she made an attempt for her sword only for it to be knocked from her hand.

A scream rose up around them, quickly muffled, as if buried beneath a great weight. The Coraguarde holding Amaleigh, the one who'd supposed to stand behind her Kingdom's crown, froze at the sound, breaking all known vows and giving Amaleigh a chance to pull away. She grabbed up her blade, ready to defend when she saw what happened.

The scream had come from a Coraguarde, ripping his facial scarring in his fright as he was pulled into the forest. Amaleigh caught just the last hint of scarlet fingers as he was dragged from sight. Another root coiled around the base of the nearest tree, Conthesa standing within its protection.

"Con..." Words failed Amaleigh. Keene stood beside her, his hand covering his mouth open wide in shock.

Brekan shook off the shock first.

"Witch! I knew it! Get her!"

The other Coraguarde snapped out of their confusion and moved towards Conthesa. They moved carefully this time, Amaleigh able to track their movements as they approached. A part of Amaleigh wanted to help the girl, but another was more than comfortable watching from afar.

"I remember who I am, I remember what I was chosen for, and you will not hold me back any longer."

Conthesa made a sharp swiping motion with her hand, the nearest branch stretching out and scooping up one of the guardsmen before throwing them clear across the sky. With a snap of her fingers the ground split beneath the final guard swallowing him before he could react.

Silence fell in the clearing.

“What in the gods just happened here?!” Keene shouted.

Amaleigh couldn't recall a time when she'd ever seen Keene this upset. The normally docile boy had grown feral at the sight. No books had been able to prepare him for a witch's indifference to humanity. Amaleigh knew the stories, how the witch hags of old hoarded their magic and sought to break the world. Until the Three-Fold War when the gods of light and darkness had tried to wrest control of the world's magic. They'd weakened the defenses enough for the first Triumvirate Kings to rise up and begin the arduous work of wiping out the magic users from the land. But all this time, one of the most powerful witches had been living under the Kings' nose.

Conthesa stepped away from the trees.

“I'll explain everything just please, follow me.” She looked towards me, her eyes wide and pleading. “I can take you to what you've been after.”

Conthesa had always known where the magic was. The realization came fast, the anger Amaleigh felt over being lied to coming faster. How many lives had been lost over the years searching for the lost magic? But then, what would have been her trial?

Amaleigh's anger left as quickly as it had come, and she wasn't sure anymore what she wanted. The Kings had only given her this trial because they expected failure, if they didn't have this option would she have been imprisoned? Worse? She shuddered at the thought of some of the ways her father had bragged over Shine about how the Kings dealt with trouble. Often with a blade and a deep pit from what she understood.

Amaleigh nodded. “Let's go.”

She held no love for the Coraguarde sent by a scared King and, if Conthesa could do that to people she didn't like, Amaleigh shuddered to think about what could happen to her. Best to let Conthesa believe she's in control for now.

"We're not going anywhere with you." Brekan attempted bravado except his voice cracked on the last word.

"Yes, you are. I'm not leaving you out here to go back and run for the Kings. You're seeing this through, one way or another," Amaleigh replied, brokering no argument.

The four of them stood at a standstill. This morning they had been setting off on the adventure of a lifetime, the fear had been there, of course, but Amaleigh couldn't help but admit she'd been excited. Now everything had changed; none of them were who they thought they were. She knew they could never go back to what once was, only press forward. Brekan shifted his weight from side to side, looking ready to bolt. Keene kept darting glances between the three of them as if expecting someone to grow tails or a horn.

Only Conthesa seemed calm about the whole thing. She was back in her element here. Amaleigh had to trust in that.

"Lead the way," she said motioning towards the tree line.

With a shove, Amaleigh kept Brekan between herself and Conthesa; she'd pull occasionally on his stained coat to keep them in line with the other girl. Keene's hand was clamped in hers. Amaleigh could barely remember the last time they'd been so close. It was the last time they'd been afraid too, walking through the garden maze. Amaleigh wasn't sure if she wanted to find this maze's center. Conthesa kept to a path only she

could see as Amaleigh struggled to guide the hapless men through the woods behind her. When Brekan stumbled and fell for the third time, she hoisted him up by the armpits.

“Get up! You both have got to get your wits about you or I’m leaving you in the dark.” Amaleigh glared hard at the other heirs. “You both are supposed to be meant to run the Kingdoms over me, and you can’t even manage a walk through---”

A deep growl cut her off.

Brekan and Keene’s eyes were so wide Amaleigh could see the bright white that rimmed their irises in the gloom. Slowly she turned, careful not to move too quick or else alert whatever that was. She reached towards her waist and the familiar comfort of her blade’s hilt. There was still a dagger strapped to the inside of her boot but to get that could provoke whatever beast lived in these woods. She didn’t want to risk drawing anything if the beast would just let them pass.

It stood heads taller than any horse she’d ever seen. With matted grey hair and festering wounds covering its body, the animal appeared almost dog-like but with a rounder wider mouth full of three rows of teeth. Spittle flew as it growled again, this time an answer rose up in the woods around them sending fingers of fear down Amaleigh’s spine.

“Just step back,” she said quietly, already backing slowly towards the boys. She felt good about their odds, should the beast attack she knew the others were competent enough fighters to back her up. Judging though by the blank stares of fear, she was on her own with this one.

She drew her sword as the beast roared revealing more rows of sharp teeth than Amaleigh had originally counted in the dark.

“Come on then!” Amaleigh roared back attempting to challenge the beast into submission.

As the beast leaped into the air, Amaleigh dropped into a defensive crouch, planning her attack on where she believed the beast would fall. It was a large awkward thing and, though frightening, she felt sure she could defend them now. She was the only one that could. As she dropped, a gust of wind tossed the beast into the closest bush as if nothing more than a fallen leaf. Amaleigh looked around, her body coiled tight ready to react at the first sign of a threat.

“Really? That’s the trouble with humans, always so quick to violence.” Conthesa’s voice rang through the trees around them.

Keene shook off his stupor long enough to call back, “That’s rich coming from the witch who just killed three Coraguarde.”

Conthesa stepped out from behind a tree to their left; Amaleigh spun to put herself between them.

“I was protecting you.”

“And I was preparing to do the same.” Amaleigh replied.

Conthesa tutted. “We’re visitors in this space. Something you three need to remember. The land gives up its gifts willingly, but we are still just unwelcome visitors. A wild animal defends their home. They cannot be faulted or harmed for that.”

Amaleigh wasn’t sure Conthesa’s logic was sound but her tone left little room for doubt. She knew if they were to make it back out of these woods, they’d need to keep to Conthesa’s rules. She was in touch with her power again and just what that meant terrified Amaleigh, though she couldn’t help feeling a faint inkling of intrigue. She’d

never before known a witch personally. Perhaps when this was all over, they could sit and talk about how she ended up in the castle. As afraid as Amaleigh was, she was equally fascinated.

Here in her woods Conthesa glowed with an inner radiance, a faint wisp of light guiding the heirs deeper into the dark woods. They tramped through the brush, Amaleigh ever vigilant for another attack, the sword never leaving her hand. The boys had recovered, some, but they held close together. The protections they'd relied on in the castle were all but gone out here in the wilds. Conthesa moved swiftly through the woods but never in a straight line; she'd backtrack and cross the path they'd just been on. Once Amaleigh swore she'd walked them in a circle around the base of a wide tree. When she felt like she would have to rest soon the trickling sounds of a nearby stream caught her attention.

After all the buzzing of bugs and crunching of beasts, water brought the promise of change.

Conthesa's eyes lit up when she saw the stream, stepping into it with bare feet before taking off down the water way. Her steps sure and true as if the slick moss that grew on the waterlogged stones was just a dirt path meant to be trod. The heirs hurried after her, sticking to the bank until Conthesa disappeared from sight.

It was not like she just rounded the corner and disappeared from view. Amaleigh rounded the corner to be sure. No, Conthesa had just disappeared into the air above the rock that sat in the middle of the small stream.

"Where? Where did she go?" Brekan asked. He spun around in a wild circle looking for their missing friend.

Conthesa popped back into existence in the middle of the stream.

“Come on now, through here.” She stepped back towards the stone and winked out of sight once more.

Amaleigh steadied her breath. This was it. There was no way anything other than the World Tree would be behind a protection of that magnitude. No wonder no one had ever found it, they’d been looking for a tree, but they had to first find the rock.

Cautiously she walked into the water.

“Let’s go.” She expected them to follow.

“This is as far as I need to go.” Keene said.

His curiosity of the world at its limit. Brekan was nodding along so viciously Amaleigh felt his neck would snap. Neither of the boys wanted anything more to do with their Kingdom's legends being brought to life.

The water was cold and seeping into Amaleigh’s boots and she was really tired of these two running scared every chance they got. They were entitled to what she was here working to claim and the differences between the three heirs had never been more apparent.

Conthesa appeared again, this time sitting atop the boulder.

“All three of you must enter the clearing. Alafaya wishes to see the Kingdom's future.”

Alafaya? The name rang some distant bell in Amaleigh’s mind. But why?

“What does this Alafaya want with us?”

Conthesa laughed softly. “Only what is best for us all. That’s all this land has ever wanted for her children.”

“Conthesa, what’s happened to you?” Keene’s voice held a note of pleading that Amaleigh felt diminished the asking.

He wanted her to be what she once was, unable to understand this was what she’d always been. But Amaleigh could see it. She could see it in the bright sparkle of the other girl’s eyes as she took in the boy, brighter than she’d ever been trapped in the castle’s walls. Amaleigh knew now this was where Conthesa was meant to be.

“I’m home, Keene, as are you. Now please, let’s not wait any longer. It’s still hard for me to understand everything.” She shook her head. “Everything is coming back all muddled.” She looked bright again, chipper even. “But you wouldn’t know anything about that? *Would you?*” she asked the heirs, the air vibrating with a power Amaleigh hadn’t known possible.

That thread of fear was working its way through Amaleigh’s belly again. Something had happened to the girl within the castle, someone had kept her memories from her. Conthesa seemed to think it was one of them.

“I assure you, we don’t.”

Conthesa regarded her for a moment, a careful tilt of her head before smiling broadly.

“No, of course not. You three don’t have the power for something like that. But you could.” And with that she was gone again.

The three stood in silence for a moment before Keene spoke.

“She thinks we did it doesn’t she?”

Amaleigh nodded. “It seems so. But what were we supposed to have done? Someone kept her within the walls and if the Kings didn’t know about her powers---”

“Then who?” Brekan finished.

None of them had an answer for that one.

Amaleigh decided for the group, “We’ll see this through. Then help her find the truth. Yeah?”

Keene nodded and Brekan shrugged. It was good enough for now.

“Brekan you first.” Amaleigh motioned towards the stone.

He balked. “Why me?”

Amaleigh put her hand on the sword at her hip,

“Because I don’t trust you to come through on your own.”

Amaleigh watched him watching her and made sure to school her face appropriately. He was looking for some sign that she was bluffing and she gods sure wasn’t going to give him an excuse. When Brekan sighed she knew she won, and he’d conceded. Kicking up an unnecessary spray as he walked into the stream, Brekan cautiously walked towards the rock. He shuffled slowly closer until he disappeared with a yelp.

“Alright Keeny, you’re next.”

“Don’t call me that,” he said, joining her in the water.

“Yeah, yeah, just get in the rock.”

He shot her a withering look but complied anyway, disappearing without a sound. Now Amaleigh stood alone in the water, her boots all but soaked and her stomach a hot ball of knotted anxiety. She could do this. Steeling herself she walked towards the stone and into the clearing of the World Tree.

After a brief sensation like she was being sucked through a tunnel of wind, Amaleigh emerged in the surprising light of midday. The light was brighter here, the colors sharper in a way Amaleigh had never before experienced, as if the color itself was trying to greet her, pushing up out of the leaves fresh with spring greenery despite the season and flowers that bloomed in the richest of reds, blues, yellows and some colors she'd never seen before in flowers. Amaleigh found herself awed as she took in their surroundings. But as she looked closer, she could see this wasn't the paradise it appeared to be.

There was a deep gouge in the earth cutting through one side of the clearing's trees as if a giant had reached down and scooped it all up. Rocks jutted out of the ground in one area like sword blades. The lakebed around the massive World Tree was dry and barren. And the Tree itself...Amaleigh had expected more from the source of all magic.

Yellowed leaves grew in sickly clumps towards the uppermost branches, the lower ones desiccated by dry rot. In the hollow of the tree a great black wound leaked tar-like black blood upon the ground. Amaleigh felt a sadness in her heart she had never known before and found tears welling. Looking at the others, she saw they were having similar reactions.

Conthesa spoke, answering a question they hadn't yet asked.

"Yes. You feel her pain. Alafaya connects us all and here in this place you can feel it." Her voice taking on a tone of reverence added. "It happened during the Three-Fold War. When light and dark came looking for power. The World Tree suffered a great blow, a dark poison has been rotting it away ever since. I was chosen to heal the world's wound, but...I didn't come back." A sob escaped before she could gather herself again.

Amaleigh hadn't expected to find this. She thought magic was just a closely guarded secret, not the very life blood of the ground they walked on. To take what little was left would be dooming them all. She knew her quest was to return to the Kings, but in her heart her mission had always been to best help the people. She'd thought the only way she could do that was with a crown on her head. But now? Seeing Conthesa like this, feeling the world's pain from that great rot, Amaleigh knew she couldn't be the one to cause that end. She was going to help Conthesa fix this.

"What can we do to help?"

Conthesa began to speak before Brekan cut her off.

"Help? You want to help? Take the magic and let's go, Amaleigh. The Kings are waiting, and they need to know about this."

"No!" Conthesa shouted before anyone could react. "The Triumvirate Kings must never know of this place. If they did...they'd destroy it and then he would rule."

He who? Amaleigh wanted to ask but Brekan was off, something about being confronted by the World Tree's truth seemed to reawaken his arrogance.

"The Kings must always know. This land belongs to them."

"It belongs to the world's people." Conthesa argued back.

"The Triumvirate Kings are the body, mind and spirit of the people. They know what is best."

"They know nothing." The ground shook in response to Conthesa's rage. "They take and take and take and refuse to give anything back. The Kings are what is wrong with this world and we think it is time to change that. Alafaya has a plan to heal. And you three will be the perfect seeds."

“Conthesa, what are you talking about? Seeds for what?” Amaleigh asked, attempting to go to the girl. Instead she was caught up in the winds that were growing stronger in the clearing. As she rose her stomach dropped. How powerful was Conthesa? She watched as Conthesa waved one hand and the currents holding Amaleigh aloft shifted, throwing her into Keene and they fell together in a tangle of limbs. They struggled to right themselves only to find a solemn Conthesa, a wall of fire at her back and Brekan on his knees before her.

“I haven’t been able to heal the magic on my own, and now it may be too late. But she whispers of a plan and I need to listen.”

Amaleigh thought Conthesa looked sorry for what was about to happen.

“Conthesa, there has to be another way than this.” Amaleigh cries were drowned out over the now roaring winds.

“I hope, one day I hope to find one.” She replied.

Conthesa moved with a fluidity not altogether human. Her arms shifted through the air in swoops and slashes while her feet traced out intricate spiral patterns in the earth beneath her. All the while she chanted, a low utterance, like that of the wind rushing between the dying leaves of a tree. The air in the clearing grew thick with her power as it was called from all. Where her tears had collected, the water had grown in size pulling from the atmosphere until a small reflective pool sat between Conthesa’s dance and the trapped Heirs. The fires she’d created moved by the force of her spell to encircle the pool, casting dangerous shadows upon its surface. If they dared look away from Conthesa and into the pool’s dark depths, they saw flashes of futures and dreams they could not fully

understand. She saw waves of blood, a broken crown, a black flower blooming in the moonlight.

Then the witch began to speak.

From Day to Night

From Night to Day

Paths once chosen no longer yours

New paths hence forged

A destiny created and blood binds us all

Unleash the truth from within

Magic begins a new day's dawn

As the Kingdoms suns do set

The Huntress

After

“Conthesa!”

That scream ripped from me with the force of the winds she’d cast us aside in. I found myself on the forest floor with no recollection of falling. The memories of what had just been already fading. Only fragments remained like a nightmare forgotten by morning’s first light. The fear still gripped my heart, but I couldn’t seem to find the reason why.

I was in pain, and I was alone.

But the sound of laughter in the dark ahead promised that wouldn’t be so for long.

My body protested my decision to rise with angry flare-ups in my joints, my back popping like a dropped plate as I stretched and realigned. With the pain came release, and through the release, there was a feeling of being complete. As if some crucial piece had slipped into place as my body snapped itself back together. Bouncing on the balls of my feet with anticipation, I followed the laughter.

Dancers in flashing costumes of gold and silver danced in the street. Musicians with stringed instruments and long flutes following behind as they swayed to the beat. People lined up in their doorways, tossing petals of a rose, daisy, lavender, whatever grew in their garden as they passed. The smells of sweet rolls and roasted boar elicited a growl from my stomach, and I realized it’s been forever since I last ate. Diving into the throng of people, I made my way to a food stall that displayed the whole beast roasting on a spit beside them. The proprietor slicing large chunks off the charred corpse. Looking into the boar’s eyes, I found myself no longer hungry.

Was this what life was like in the towns? Festivals and slaughter?

The Triumvirate Kings had held their ideas of festival days but never anything like this. I could only remember days disguised as overt flattery to the Kings, and excess. Always excess, their tables laden high for only but a handful that resided within the castle. Free now to wander the towns we'd been denied, I was pleased to find the people happy, for the most part. Celebrating with what they have. A boy's wide smile as he bit into a sweet roll handed to him by his father brought a smile to my face, and I couldn't for the life of me remember why the night had started out so awful.

A rumble cut through the night rising up from deep within the earth. Fissures cracked in the road, one throwing the father and child apart. I reacted before thought and found myself across the street, scooping the child up as he fell, jumping across the divide and handing him to his father. The man's grateful words drown out by another groan of the earth.

Buildings shook as a light appeared in the sky above. A single beam of silver moonlight shone down on what I could now see was the castle grounds. I'd never seen my home from this distance, and in the silvery light, the towers shone like gems. The point that had been my bedroom for years winking at me as if to say come home.

With a snap, the castle exploded outwards.

Stone debris burst from the castle's center like a geyser, only to rain back down on the town below. A piece of what had once been a turret crashed through a row of homes, leveling them into dust. Screams replaced what had once been revelry, and the people panicked. Stones continued to fall as people ran about, no one sure where the next strike would land.

I ran.

Pushing with muscles I'd never known myself to have, I ran through the falling debris rushing towards the closest woman. She had a cut above her ear running with blood, her face a frozen scream as I grabbed her and pulled her to relative safety. I dashed out again, bobbing between the stones, someone's hand pushing me out of harm's way before I could anticipate what was coming. I was action, no thought, for once in my life, and it felt powerful. The debris rain stopped though the destruction was vast, and I found myself now closer to the castle grounds. In my rescuing, I'd moved closer without my realizing.

What if whatever caused the explosion came back? Or worse...was still in there?

What had once been proud ironwork gates now sat blown open, one gate hung by the topmost hinge, the other lost. I was surprised to find the bridge was down and in one piece and grateful not to see the bodies of the guards strewn across it. Whether they died in the blast or lay in the town below dying, I wasn't sure.

Wreckage greeted me on the other side. The door of the foyer had been blown out to reveal the garden beyond, now nothing more than a hole in the ground. Jagged rocks cut dark impressions in the night rising out of the hole as if something had burst forth from it as opposed to crashing into it as I'd thought. What could have caused this? Cautiously I walked the broken stones to look into the opened pit, below I could see nothing but darkness. Kicking a rock in, I waited, but after a couple moments, no sound returned to me.

A sound like voices pulled my attention away from the pit, and I was grateful for the excuse. My insides churned painfully as I'd looked down into that darkness. Following the voices lead me to the Kings' throne room. The once beautifully rendered etching of

the Three-Fold War that had been the door lay in pieces in the entryway. The snarling face of the Keeper within the folds of his cloak of shadows looked smug in the moonlight, proud to no longer be in the same piece of art as the World Tree.

Looking at the once lush Tree in the etching brought the memories of the World Tree's current state to my mind and with it, Conthesa's curse. She'd said she was revealing the truth, but what truth? I thought she had been listening and knew I was sincere in my offer to work together to not take the Kings the magic, and she'd done this? I looked to my hand, pale and thin in the light. Flexing it into a fist and back again, feeling the pull of the muscles. Whatever she had done had made me stronger, but why?

And what truth did it say about me?

"We must make haste. Alafaya gathers its army."

The voice sent my heart stuttering and gooseflesh to rise across my skin. It was a nightmare made sound and could only belong to one creature:

The Keeper of Lost Souls.

A fire welled within me and I charged into the room, brandishing the piece of the door I'd grabbed on the way in. I came to a halt at what lay before me.

A mass of shifting shadows collected in the corner of the throne room. The three thrones lay twisted and broken, no longer recognizable as chairs. Lines of Coraguarde stood waiting in the moving shadows, the shape of a man hovering above them. And in the center of the wreckage stood a figure I recognized. The broad shoulders, the golden hair, and he still had the stains down his back from the wagon this afternoon. One of the Coraguarde's heads lolled on his shoulder, a look of bliss on the guard's face.

Brekan pulled away with a wet suck and turned towards me, a dark red ring outlining his mouth that broke into a wide grin as he saw me. Besides his front two teeth, two sets of fangs grew.

“Amaleigh,” he beckoned me forward. “I’m so happy you’ve come; let me show you what the witch has done to me.”

The Beast

After

My skin itches as if it were alive. As if ants crawled beneath attempting to burst free. My heels dig into the dirt as my muscles clenched forcing me into an inverted U. Cracking wracks my body as my ribs stretch with the action. They push through the thin skin of my chest before pain rocks me forward to grip my stomach in the hopes of protection, some comfort against this growing ache, for this to just end. Thrashing in the grass, I saw nothing but the moon above through my pain induced haze.

Salmo obtusirostris, Sphyrnidae Sphyrna, Canis lupus youngi.

The old mantra sprang to mind amid beneath the light, and I clung to it like a lifeline. The simple repetition a comfort from my youth brought back in a time of desperation. Memories bloomed beneath the pain, a momentary distraction as I felt the metacarpal bones in my hands shatter and reform. I was a lump of clay being reformed in the image Conthesa's curse believed I should take. Unleash the truth from within? Wasn't that that she said? What truth could come from this pain?

Sciuridae Sciurus, Cervidae elaphodus, Canis lupus Lycaon.

I could remember the sound of her laugh, low and with a hiccupping choke if she got too worked up. Once we'd been in the library late into the night reading through scouting reports. She'd smiled over some line about the healthy livestock in the First Kingdom. I'd made a joke about cows and she was snorting with laughter before I could finish, the both of us giggling together like children but unable to stop. Until she'd held my face in her hands and kissed me. It had been my very first kiss; I was stunned but pleased. The

memory brought a smile to my stretched face as the bones in my legs broke. Tufts of coarse dark fur poked through rips in my skin.

Sternidae larus, Accipitridae Buteo, Canis lupus irremotus. Salmoobtusirostris, Sphyrnidaesphyrna, Canis lupus youngi.

The Triumvirate Kings. Our fathers sent us on this wild magic chase. They'd thrown their children to the wild in order to prove something for themselves. We had never been more than pawns on the board in our fathers' schemes and deceptions. As my sternum shifted and my body contracted on itself I remembered the last time I saw my father.

It had been four days ago---we didn't often see each other unless we had to—he'd had a woman with him, a nightmare decked from head to toe in garish red, bright as a poppy. Their conversation had stopped when I entered the room, but I could see the scroll they'd passed between each other now. An ever-branching tree stamped across it. He'd known we'd find the World Tree.

SciuridaesciurusCervidaeelaphodusCanislupusLycaon.SternidaelarusAccipitridaebut eoCanislupusirremotus. SalmoobtusirostrisSphyrnidaeSphyrnaCanislupusyoungi.

She'd been so angry when she cast her curse at us, the fire behind her dulling the vibrant colors of her dress into shadows of their former selves. Just shades of gray like the leaves in the rotting World Tree behind her. The dark wound of the poison seemed to pulse in time with her chanting. When she'd finished the curse, the world had gone black in an instant. Now as the bones of my face lengthened and slid into place I was losing track of the truth. Had we been to blame?

SciuridaesciurusCervidaeelaphodusCanislupusLycaon.SternidaelarusAccipitrida ebuteoCanislup---

A figure stepped from the moonlight, placing a gentle hand on my new muzzle
she said, "Come, let's find your way home."

ReCycled

At the time of the fourth generation, cycle 50: Autumnal Equinox

Madame's Curiosities was packed floor to ceiling with...junk. Broken swords laid with a discarded card set, mirrors with no glass sat beside pictures with no frames. Wind chimes of shell and stone clanged loudly against the front door whenever someone stumbled in. Six years ago, Monette had been one of those people.

Pushing through the front door now, she waves the mobiles out of her face, the discordant tones jangled as if angry to be disturbed. The shop never had quite adjusted to having a second occupant. Monette hoisted the sack she was carrying higher upon her shoulder, the weight shifting to clap harshly against her back. Wincing, she tramped through the narrow path carved out of the pile of junk that cut through the shop to Madame's receiving desk

Madame languished behind her desk, said to be carved from one of the World Tree's sentinels but Monette had never believed that particular claim. Elaborate etchings made up the desks front panel, flecks of paint stuck stubbornly here and there a reminder of a past life. Once Monette had gotten close enough to look, the carved figures appeared to be dancing around a fire or was it a cage? She hadn't been able to tell before Madame chased her off. At her throne Madame sat in layers of tulle and velvets in various shades of green. Madame was known for choosing a certain color to match her mood for the day. Today she was feeling greedy. When Monette first came to the store Madame laid out three rules:

1. It is always Madame.
2. Never touch the desk drawers.

3. Never ever come between Madame and a score.

Monette is careful to abide these rules at all times, especially now as she sets the large sack down between them, rubbing at her palm where the rough burlap had rubbed raw and stepping well back into the rusted armor of a bygone knight. Madame leaned in closer, hunger glittering like stars in the darks of her eyes. When the stars shone brighter Monette had learned to avoid getting in Madame's way as the hunger took over.

Madame dipped one bejeweled hand into the sack, gingerly extracting the contents. Inside Monette had crammed in what had been advertised as genuine fae wings. Madame twirled one gossamer strand between her fingers, the light from the desk's oil lamp catching and refracting the rainbows held within the shard of wing.

"Delicious," Madame cooed, throwing her head back and slurping up the shining thread. She shivered from head to toe, bliss softening her features for just a moment before the dark need for more set back in. Fae wings were only an appetizer for a magic addict. Bits of magic that, according to Madame, led her to feel hungrier than she had before. Still, she sent Monette out to gather any and all she could.

Monette had found herself the unwitting assistant to a hag, a magical glutton, when she wound up cast adrift from her home in the Third Kingdom. The Triumvirate Kings had been sending more and more raids into the countryside to "recruit" able bodies for the mines and military service. They'd taken both of Monette's parents and burned the town behind them, leaving Monette running for her life in the forest's darkness. A week later, she'd found herself in this outer Second Kingdom town and attempted to steal a bite of food from Madame. That one action cost Monette her freedom; now she was

Madame's "apprentice" until one of them died or the world ran out of magic for Madame to feed on.

Madame pulled another wing from the bag. She'd sent Monette last night to a grove deep in the woods where the fae were said to dwell. She'd been told a bag would be waiting for her. She hadn't expected to find the desecrated fae bodies littering the grove, the burlap sack left to sit primly amid the carnage. Monette had long known she was often the middleman in Madame's schemes, but this was the worst it had ever been.

Walking into that grove had changed something in Monette. She'd decided on the long walk back, with the weight of the fae wings on her back and their broken bodies in her heart, she needed to get out of her deal.

"Monette, darling, come closer. Look here, dearie."

Madame beckoned with one skeletal finger; the tip dipped in the brightest of red pigments. The color bled into her nail beds like lines of ink. Monette shuffled a step closer but did not risk getting within the larger woman's reach.

A quick twitch of her left eye was all the indication Monette received before she felt the sting across her cheek. Monette recoiled with a hiss, rubbing at what was sure to be a bright welt. Madame's rings were worn to inflict the most damage.

She shook the bag at the startled girl, as if through her pain Monette could see the answer.

"There's not enough!" Madame raged and Monette shrunk back against the wall.

"Where is the rest? Did you take it!"

Monette shook her head violently from side to side, attempting to ward off the accusations. She knew better than ever to cross Madame. She would never have taken from her.

“Well someone seemed to have helped themselves to my wings.”

Hot fetid breath billowed over Monette. She willed herself to remain neutral faced for fear of invoking further wrath.

“I apologize, Madame,” Monette managed through a throat choked with fear.

That hungry look was back.

“I cannot feed on your apologies, little girl. And if I cannot feed, we know who will be to blame.”

Monette shuddered at the thought of what happened the last time Madame had gone too long without a fix. She’d started to grow...unfocused, blurring at the edges. It was like her colors were running together, becoming something twisted and darker than the creature already was. Any semblance of the human face she wore had begun to dissolve away with Madame’s form until she’d attacked Monette with jaws like that of a bug, snapping pincers and prying claws that hunted for Monette’s heart. If she hadn’t had that last bit of fae dust, a hallucinogen their wings give off, Monette never would have been able to calm her down enough to have gotten Madame a bigger score. Monette had done her best to prevent that from ever happening again.

“Yes, Madame, I will not fail you.” Monette said from beneath her mass of curls, an effective shield between herself and Madame.

Seemingly pleased for now, she dipped her hand back into the bag to pull out another wing.

“See that you don’t. Take this.” She held a slip of paper between two sharp nails.

“Bring this to me by midnight tonight and I may forget this oversight of yours.”

Monette nodded and snatched the paper, careful not to touch Madame’s clammy skin, before rushing out into the safety of the main street and the midday sun.

People bustled from stall to stall trading scraps of cloth or bits of jeweled stones for meats and cheeses or vegetables. The Triumvirate Kings taxes were growing higher and higher with each passing month. People were getting desperate to feed their families. If things didn’t change soon, Monette knew most people would be out working in the mines for failure to pay. And soon enough these market days would be as empty as those in her hometown had been right before her parents were taken.

The Kings always get their due.

A commotion down the street caught her attention. A group of festival goers decked out in scales that reflected the sun’s light in arcing rainbows were arguing loudly with someone Monette couldn’t see. As the arguing grew louder Monette watched as the King’s guard moved to intervene. A flash of silver and one of the festival goers was on the ground clutching his stomach, his friends rushing to his aide. Behind them, for just a moment, Monette could see who’d they’d been arguing with. By the time the guard got to the groaning man, the Coraguarde had disappeared back into the crowd.

Monette felt a deep chill of fear settle over her that the bright sun could not abate. In her years as a thief she’d encountered all the Kingdoms forms of security but the Coraguarde struck fear into all they passed. Those boys must have been well into their Shine already to strike an argument with one. If there was one, she could be sure there were more close behind. The Kings never allowed their pets to travel alone. Her

assignment from Madame was already a concern. In need of comfort, Monette followed the scent of baking bread, where a familiar and smiling face was waiting for her.

“Nettie!” Amara, the baker’s daughter, swooped Monette into her arms, giving the girl a much-welcomed squeeze. Amara always smelled of sugar, yeast and the elderberries she pressed into jam every morning. Monette basked in the scent for a moment longer before pulling away to be scrutinized by the older girl.

Amara frowned as she cradled Monette’s face between her hands. A deep line of concern formed between Amara’s brows. Monette rested within Amara’s embrace; it had been so long since someone cared. It always shocked and warmed her when Amara showed concern for what Madame did.

“What did that vile woman do to you this time?” Amara dropped her hands, much to Monette’s disappointment, and stepped back taking a sweet roll from her apron pocket and offering it to Monette. “Here, eat. Tell me what happened.”

And Monette did, as best as she was able. She was careful to keep mention of magic out of her story. When most people heard about magic, they immediately took it to the Kings and their Inquisitors.

“She gave me a new assignment.” Monette said when her tale was done.

The red welt had faded by the time she’d finished her sweet roll, Amara’s forehead crease of concern growing ever deeper, her eyes widening at the revelation.

“You can’t be serious? Are you going to do it?”

“How can I not?” Monette asked. She couldn’t resist a direct order from the Madame. If she did it would only result in pain. She rubbed at her arm with the memory of her last attempt at disobeying. Madame had attached a string of soul leeches to Monette’s arm

and left her in the dark for three days with only the whispers of the leeches against her soul. Monette would not allow herself to return to that dark place ever again.

Amara stood up, dusting loose dirt from her skirt.

“Well then, I’ll just have to help you. Let’s see it. Where does she want you to go this time?”

Monette balked, unable to stop Amara from snatching the paper still clutched in her hand.

Amara unrolled the scroll, the wrinkles around her eyes growing deeper, belying her age. She handed it back to Monette silently.

Monette quickly scanned the page, if it had scared Amara what was she being asked to do?

Go to the Auction House at the eleventh chime.

In the safe is a box.

Bring me what’s inside by true night’s chime.

An hour—Monette was being given an hour to get inside the Auction House and get back to Madame, while trying to crack the Auctioneer’s safe, the most secure location in all the Kingdoms.

The Auction House held the nobles’ most prized possessions and coveted treasures. While the Kingdoms suffered, the nobles would go and spend the entire budget of a small town for some metal worked statue or other nonsense. Madame wouldn’t even tell Monette what was inside the box, how was she supposed to know the right one?

Monette groaned, dropping her face into her hands and scrubbing harshly, as if she could make the truth disappear behind her closed eyes.

“This isn’t fair.”

Amara sat beside the frightened girl and held her while she cried.

Exhaustion overwhelmed her and Amara had allowed Monette to sleep in her bed after the younger girl recounted her story. After walking a solid day straight in order to get the Madame’s bag of wings returned to her in time, Monette had been nothing more than a rock in the bed until the sun began to set and the festivities began.

Monette awoke to the sound of rifling. The sound of fabric being rubbed together and at first had just believed it to be Amara busying herself in the room. Monette groaned and covered her head with the pillow.

“Amara please,” she whined hoping the girl would allow her a few more moments rest.

Silence filled the room.

Monette jumped up to see the Coraguarde standing at the window, her jacket held between its hands. Monette had time to register the silver slashes across his chest and the stained finger he held before his scar of a mouth in a quieting gesture before he leapt out the open window and into the revelry getting started down below. Monette’s heart beat an unsteady rhythm in her chest as she ran to the window, catching only festival goers, no flash of silver to be seen.

Monette stood at the window a beat too long before yelling, “Amara!”

She grabbed her discarded jacket and ran down the stairs. She skid over the last two, coming to a tumbling halt in the bakery.

A rotund man with a face like a smashed biscuit looked up from where he was kneading a big heap of dough on the counter. Amara was busy bagging up some loaves for a customer, but all turned to see the wild-eyed Monette pull herself up off the floor. Amara's father grunted something disdainful that Monette couldn't catch, and their customer left before the bag had fully left Amara's hand. Monette felt her cheeks flame with embarrassment but remembered what she'd just seen, and the fear came flooding back.

Amara perked up when Monette entered the room, oblivious to her distress. Amara finished waiting on her customer while Monette fidgeted in the corner. When the woman at last left Monette was practically bursting and she cut Amara off before she could speak.

"There was a Coraguarde in your bedroom."

Amara's face drained of color until she matched the pile of flour heaped on the counter behind her.

"Here?" she at last squeaked out.

Monette nodded. "He was after me, but let me live?"

Saying it aloud, Monette realized how confusing the interaction had been. Coraguarde were meant to solve the King's problems without incident or witness. For Monette to still be standing here, something felt very wrong to the girl. Monette knew she needed to see this through but the reality of what may lie at the end of her journey terrified her.

"You're going," Amara looked behind her to make sure her father wasn't paying attention before loudly whispering, "to the Auction House, aren't you?"

“I have to, Mara,” Monette lay her hand on her friend's arm, stopping her from interrupting. “This is bigger than me or Madame if the Triumvirate Kings are involved. This could be my chance to hurt them for what they’ve done to us. Whatever they are after is important, and if it is important to the Kings then it must be something that could help the people and they are yet again planning to hoard it. If I can get it and use it first, maybe I can do some good.”

“You don’t even know what it is.”

“I know it’s important, and it’s powerful. Madame, the Auction House, and the Kings want it bad enough to send a Coraguarde. That doesn’t happen often.”

Amara nodded, seeing some sense to Monette’s reasoning. Monette hoped her friend recognized the fire Monette was starting to feel inside herself. The spark of change was burning its way through Monette’s fear and intimidation. Something was waking up within her and it brought with it a warm comfort.

“I have to go back to the shop.” Monette said it as if she just realized it herself. “Madame has tools I can use to help.”

Hidden within the many drawers of Madame’s desk were secreted the important magical items that were the true source behind the curiosity shop’s income. From within the many drawers Monette had watched Madame remove a cloak that turned the wearer invisible, a glass eye to see through walls, a broken stick said to heal crops, and on and on. Monette had never retrieved one of these items for Madame and often wondered where they’d come from. One in particular stuck in Monette’s mind now.

A key that allows entry through any lock.

With any luck she could sneak back, find the key, and get to the Auction House before the Madame even notices.

Monette turned to go but Amara caught her arm.

“You can’t go back there. You can’t do this on your own.”

“I won’t let anyone else become involved with that,” Monette was at a loss of words for a moment. “Hag,” she spat the word before shoving herself through the door and into the crowded street.

The Festival of Feasts was in full swing as Monette burst out of the shop. In her slumber she’d missed the sounds of instruments tuning, of children running screaming down the street as fish tail kites followed in their wake. Market stalls were decorated in shimmering banners of the bright blues and silvers of fish scales. There had been loafs of sweetbread shaped into little schools of fishes on the counter of Amara’s shop.

Monette smiled. The chaos of the festival would be a welcomed advantage.

No one would be looking for a girl among the crowds. She slipped into the sea of people, angling her way back towards the shop.

The shop stuck out like a tumor among the other buildings. It’s awning was once large and garish in vibrant reds and blues now washed out and hanging in tatters along the sides. Madame had had Monette stack piles of junk around the entrance, ‘to entice people inside’ she’d said. It had then and now just looked like garbage.

The front door with its rusted hinges and brass bells above would be a dead giveaway, Monette moved to the side of the building where it butted up against its neighbor. There in the small alley were three windows about shin height from the ground. They seemed to

serve no other purpose Monette had found than allowing her an ease of escape over the years.

Careful not to be heard, she pushed the dirty glass out from its frame. Setting it in on the ground beside herself before lying flat and shimmying through the gap. Monette dropped down into the back-storage room, or as she referred to it, her bedroom. There draped over the end of her bed was her bag, stuffed with the tools she used on an assignment. Rope, lengths of chain, lock picking set, a mask that would change her face (a rare gift from Madame) and a bag of coins she'd been slowly saving. The weight of it was a comfort against the small of her back as she settled it into place. Surveying the room quickly there was not much else to take.

The sound of glass breaking in another room froze her to the spot. Monette strained to hear what followed but it was too far away.

Monette silently made her way across the room, keeping to the soft pads of her feet to muffle the noise. Leaning her head against the wooden door she pressed her ear against, hopefully avoiding splinters in order to hear better.

"You'll have it by tonight." Madame's loud voice carried through the door. She was talking to someone. Madame never talked so casually before.

Monette strained to hear but the response came back muffled. She debated about opening the door a crack to better hear but stopped, her hand on the door handle, when Madame next spoke.

"The would-be thief will do her job. She'll get caught which will put the leaf right where I want it. You just have to be patient. Then the road to the Tree is ours for the taking."

Leaf? Tree? This heist was all for some plant? That didn't sit right with Monette and she shook off the thought, something more was happening here. Why did Madame expect her to get caught? And how would that help them?

Abandoning her plans to steal from Madame, Monette slipped away from the door before hearing anymore, if she could make it back out front first maybe she could see who Madame had been talking to. Hurrying back to the window she carefully pushed back out into the alley before dashing down to the end where she could peer around the corner unnoticed.

A moment later a man emerged from the shop. He was dressed in tattered robes, his face a grubby mask of dirt. A note of familiarity rang inside of Monette, but she couldn't place it. The top of his head was covered by a tightly wrapped headscarf, giving his skull the appearance of small horns. The man hurried off into the crowd, Monette gave chase before she could lose him in the mob.

The sun had set while they had been in the shop, now the streets were aglow in candlelight as garlands were strung between the buildings, metal orbs full of candles draped delicately from them. The festival of feasts was well underway, Monette could hear the full band playing farther down the street. Their lively chorus causing a few people nearby to start swaying together, blocking Monette from getting closer to the man.

She last saw him turn down a known dead end, when she caught up she found the alley empty.

Monette scoured the alleyway, running her hands along the rough stone walls looking for a seam or a tear. If there was something to be found, she'd find it. Something

Madame never gave her much credit for, Monette was an accomplished thief. Her fingers caught in a groove that felt too smooth to belong to the brick wall.

Remembering where she was in the town should place her behind the chemist shop. But why should a chemist have a back door? Curiosity itched through Monette; all she'd need to do is pull the latch then she would know exactly what the Madame was up to. But to do that would be to expose herself. Monette's hand fell from the latch, she had to be smarter about this. At least now she knew the Madame wasn't working alone.

Coming back into the throng of people Monette moved along the outsides of the festival goers, heading out towards the edges of town. She had a small window of time left now to get in place at the Auction House before the item was to be put up. She had to get in and out before then. Sparing a glance at the clock tower set nerves spiking through her. Monette had an hour and a half to get out of town, get to the House, get in and get out. And she had no idea what lay inside the Auction House.

Madame had taken her once, early in her apprenticeship back when she still thought she was merely an apprentice. She could remember gilded halls and a statute of the World Tree all done in gold and black metals. It had looked so sad, a tree trapped indoors. Monette hadn't been following the security well enough at the time to remember. She'd need to be quick to pull this off.

Monette was glad to find the tavern at the edge of town full of revelers. The sound of smashing glass and drunken shouts filtered out through the open windows. Monette smiled to herself, where there's a full tavern there's a drunk that's forgotten to check on their horse. Taking her pick of the geldings tied to the front post, Monette climbed atop a stunning jet-black steed and cantered off into the night.

She pushed her knees into the beast's flanks to drive them faster across the wastes

The Triumvirate Kings had deemed the Auction House illegal within the town's radius. What the proprietors did out in the desert between town and the King's Keep was their business. Thinking about it now it all seemed like yet another ploy from the Kings to keep the people beneath them. The Auction House had good paying jobs for the locals but moving it out in the desert meant less and less time for people to return home. Some just ended up living out their days in the smoky gloom of the House.

Alone amid the desert's copper sands, the Auction House gleamed like a stone fresh from polishing. They employed servants to constantly scrub the sand from the exterior as the winds were wont to blow up storms at a moment's notice. The road curved beneath dropping trees the likes of which were not found outside of the First Kingdom. Just to keep them watered required a special caravan every day from the eastern seas. The whole place stank of privilege and excess.

Monette hitched the horse to a tree on the edge of the property, making sure she had ample grass to graze on nearby, Monette made her way towards the Auction House.

Carriages were lined up down either side of the circular path. The item up for sale tonight had a bigger draw than Monette had thought, cursing Madame for her lack of preparation—it was no wonder she was expected to be caught. Monette needed another plan.

The front doors were etched from marble drawn up from the western mines. Carved across them was a striking triptych detailing the first Triumvirate Kings. They had heralded a new era of prosperity between the Kingdoms, this Auction House one of the last holdouts from that time. The doors were also crawling with security guards in tight

close clothing in the style of the Coraguarde. Dressed all in black the only variance were the lines of gold, silver, or copper that ran down their arms. All of the guards here sported silver slashes.

Creeping around the building Monette peered into windows looking for a way in. Here were couples gambling, a woman excitedly slapping the table when her card came up. There a sugar girl took an older man into her bed, Monette quickly turned away, her face blazing with shame. Finally, what appeared to be an empty storage closet. She'd have to jump to get back out, but she'd handle that.

Bottles of ale and wine were stacked to the ceiling along one wall. Large crates lined the other. Monette peered inside the lid of a crate that had come undone. Nestled in a bed of straw sat orbs blacker than the darkest night. They reflected no light back from the dim candle that swung overhead. When Monette reached a hand in, she pulled away quickly as the chill raced up her arm. Something was very wrong with these things.

Using a corner of her cloak, Monette dropped three of the orbs into her bag. She never knew when it may come in handy, either as a weapon or something to sell after this assignment. Monette knew if she made it out of this, she wasn't going back to the Madame. She'd leave for another Kingdom tonight.

A clamor rose from out in the hall. The sounds of guards shouting and heavy boots on stone grew ever closer. Had they found her out already?

Monette leaned back against the wall by the door, the cold stone helping to tamp down the rising anxiety in her stomach.

The stomping stopped right outside the door.

One hand on the dagger at her side, Monette held her breath and waited.

The handle rattled in its frame. A single crack of light breaking through as the door opened.

“Over here! We found them!”

The shout came from further down the hall. The guard outside the storage room quickly closed the door and tramped off after whoever had shouted. Monette breathed a heavy sigh of relief. She enjoyed a moment of peace before what just happened sank in. If the guards are out, who are they looking for?

There was no sense waiting any longer, while they were distracted, she could get to the item.

Peeking out from behind the door she looked left and right, noting the current absence of guards, before slipping into the hallway. There were doors lining either side with golden numbers stamped onto them. It seemed she had found her way into the pleasure wing. Monette needed to find a staircase and get higher, the safe would be kept in the Auctioneer’s office.

Choosing a direction at random Monette hurried between the shadows in the hall towards the back end of the Auction House. There she found the servant’s stairs. There was always a back staircase for the undesirables to move about in places like this.

Monette liked to use the elite’s blind eye to her advantage.

The guards must have put everyone on lock down as Monette passed not another soul as she ascended the stairs.

The top floor of the Auction House was a vast improvement over the bottom. Lush carpeting squished under her boot as she stepped into the hall. Candelabras flickered merrily before golden mirrors that cast the whole space in a rich warm glow. There were

only three doors on this floor. One to her left, one to her right, and one directly at the end of the hall.

Monette passed the other doors as she moved towards the large one at the end. Judging by the lavishness displayed so far, the Auctioneer would keep his best stuff here.

With one last glance behind her, Monette pulled the door open and slipped inside.

“Well it’s about time. Just sloppy if you ask me.”

There was a man standing in the middle of the room, between her and the large stone desk which held a small wooden box on top. Something tugged at her core, the same thing that had been leading her this whole time. What she’d come for was inside that box.

“Who are you?” Monette wanted to keep him talking while she sized up the situation. A large expanse of windows exposed the night sky behind them. If she could get between the man and the box maybe she could make a break for the window. It couldn’t be that far of a drop?

The man looked between the girl and where she was staring, “I wouldn’t suggest that if I were you. Would be a nasty fall.”

She clearly wasn’t as subtle as she’d thought.

“Are you the Auctioneer?”

The man laughed, a sound like grinding gravel. Monette finally took in the man before her. He was dressed in elegant robes embroidered with silver and onyx along the edges. His long white hair was piled in braids atop his head and down his back. But it was the silver points that sparkled like stars around his head that drew her attention.

“You’re a King.”

The man’s face twisted into a cruel smile.

“Now she’s getting it. And you still have a part to play in all of this.”

The earth rumbled beneath them shaking the Auction House. Monette flinched at the sound of glass shattering somewhere nearby.

“Right on time.” The King said before taking up the box on the table. “The master’s plan is finally coming to life.” He stroked the box reverently. “Do you know what this contains, girl?”

Monette shook her head. Things had changed so quickly so fast she didn’t know what to do anymore. The tugging inside of her was stronger now, but she wanted nothing to do with this man and whatever was inside the box.

“Here, look.”

He lifted the lid, a shimmer of blue colored light shone through the crack. As he lifted the lid the light dimmed, Monette couldn’t help herself but take a step closer and peer inside. On a bed of red satin sat a single leaf, the color of the clearest sky. Three pronged veins spread from the stem across the leaf in a darker shade of blue. She wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch it in that moment.

“This is what you’ve come for.”

Monette hadn’t realized she’d raised her hand until she almost had the leaf in her grasp. She stumbled away, cradling her hand as if it had betrayed her.

“It calls to you doesn’t it. We’ve been looking for its match for generations now. When Madame found you, we knew it was only a matter of time.”

“What? What is all of this?”

“This,” the King held out the leaf, its silent siren song echoing around inside of her. “Is one of the last true leaves of the World Tree. Pure magic. That can only be wielded by the one it was meant for.”

The World Tree? Monette had heard rumors but this? This was unlike anything she’d encountered. This was magic in its rawest form, not the diluted messes she’d been bringing back for Madame.

Monette watched as the King’s body seemed to shake with pleasure.

“Yes,” he moaned. His eyes rolled back in his head, his mouth moving as if in conversation with someone else. “The first blood has been spilled. It has begun. You will be our witch. You will help us claim the heart.”

Monette didn’t know much about what was happening, but she knew whatever the King wanted from her would never be good. One hand hidden within the folds of her cloaks, she took out one of the orbs from downstairs.

“Now is the time. Take it!”

And that’s just what Monette did. She lunged for the box pulling the orb out in the same motion. She smashed it to the ground and a cloud of darkness billowed up and exploded outward from the impact. Monette had just gotten her fingers around the lip of the box before she was thrown backwards out of the window, the leaf in one hand.

She didn’t feel the pain of the impact, she didn’t see the night’s stars as she fell. All Monette knew was a contentment the likes of which she had never known. A warmth blossomed in her core as what she’d always been missing found its way home.

When she opened her eyes, she was surprised to find herself standing in a field. A woman with a crown of stars and a robe of moonlight stood before her. A sword held point down in the dirt.

“Look, I don’t know much more about this than you do,” the woman said, her voice a lot younger sounding than Monette had first thought.

As she stepped closer, she could see the dark red along her collarbone blending into the fiery orange of her hair. She held the sword out towards Monette.

“Take this, find Conthesa. She’ll have answers.” The girl thought for a moment and shrugged. “At least I hope so, but it looks like it’s up to you now. I’m stuck on this side.”

Monette stepped forward and took the sword without hesitation. The hilt fit perfectly in her palm, as if it was always meant to be there.

The girl placed her hands on either side of Monette’s face and placed a kiss on her brow. Where her lips touched a tingle spread across Monette’s skin, until it had settled like a buzzing beneath the surface.

“Good luck,” she said before the whole scene disappeared.

Dazed Monette found herself on the ground outside of the Auction House. She could see the shattered window above where she’d fallen but upon inspection found no sign of injury. Shouts were coming from inside, every light in the place ablaze as the guards started funneling out. Monette stood. Time to find some answers.

The Witch

After

What had I done?

As the flames around me snuffed themselves out I found myself standing alone in the dark clearing. The only evidence of the heirs having been here were three dark stains, and a lone sword, in the grass.

Had I killed them?

My knees gave way beneath me and I crumpled to the dirt. The once bright colors of my skirt, the happy yellows and cheery reds now stained and torn. Broken beyond repair. Was that what I had done to my friends? Broken them beyond repair, cast them to a place I could not reach them?

In my...our...the World Tree's anger—it was all still so muddled as I tried to piece together what happened—the connection we shared had been exploited. The World Tree used the power it had given me to enact the curse. Now I felt hollowed out, as if an essential piece of me had been taken in the casting. I called to my magic and found it weak within me. My soul was depleted and my magic along with it.

Without power, without friends, without a purpose what was I supposed to do now?

Looking up at the World Tree in the moonlight I could see how it had once been beautiful. Like another image of the past laying over this present reality. Instead of wilted leaves, they sparkled with the colors of sunsets and wildflowers. Vibrant in their life. The bark was a healthy burgundy color once more and the lakebed glimmered like a mirror in the sunlight.

“It was beautiful wasn't it?”

A woman's voice spoke beside me. One I recognized as if from a dream.

“The Voice?” I asked momentarily a child again.

The woman who had found me in the woods all those cycles ago laughed like water over stone. Bubbly and light.

“Yes, dear one. That is what you’d call me wasn’t it? Now in this place between places I’m just Glint, a girl once more.”

She looked younger than the last time I’d seen her, fresher in a way I couldn’t understand. She knelt beside me in the grass, her white dress tucked delicately around her legs. Even in the dark her red hair glowed like an ember.

“It’s up to you to be the Lady,” she said startling me.

Tears threatened to choke me as I spoke, “How? I was chosen for this as a child and in that time I’ve managed to fall for the Keeper’s trap and curse anyone that cared for me.”

The tears slide down my cheeks, fast and hot blurring my vision as I released the pain of the last decade, the loss I hadn’t even known I was missing for so long.

With a gentle rocking motion Glint pulled me into her arms and held me while the tears came. She whispered sweet words into my hair as I cried. Rubbing my arms soothingly in a way I could only assume a mother would. This thought brought with it another round of tears I couldn’t seem to control.

“That’s it dear one, let it out. It does the soul a world of good to expel that emotional pain. Just breathe, this will pass.”

She continued to whisper and rock me until at last, with a hiccupping sob the tears began to stop. Wiping the snot from my face I looked up at her smiling face.

“That’s better now isn’t it?”

I nodded, afraid it was too soon to speak or else the tears would begin anew.

“Why don’t you tell me again how you’ve acted as Lady since the World Tree chose you?” She prompted, the question confusing me.

“I...just did?”

She shook her head and laughed again.

“You told me all the things you’ve done wrong. But I know you’ve done much more correctly.”

She was right. I was so focused on how I’d failed and how I’d done wrong that I couldn’t remember those moments of success. Hesitantly I started thinking of my accomplishments.

“I made friends with the Kingdom’s heirs helping them know about the world outside the walls. I healed Keene from a violent sickness. I shared the power with my sisters. And despite all the obstacles I still made it back here.” I replied, smiling a little by the time I was through.

She nodded. “That’s more like it.”

The world had faded back to normal as we’d spoken. The night and truth overshadowing the pleasant memories of the past.

“But I still cursed the heirs, are they...” I couldn’t bring myself to say dead.

“No, they have not yet left this world.”

She waved her arm and three rips in the night appeared before us. Like windows onto another world I could see Amaleigh, Brekan and Keene on the other side. Each suffering in a different way.

Darkness swirled around Brekan so strong I could barely see the prince.

Amaleigh ran through falling rocks, trying desperately to save people before they were crushed.

And Keene. Alone and screaming in the woods as his body rebelled against him.

My heart broke as I watched his mouth form a silent scream.

“What can I do?”

She looked sad now unable to meet my eyes.

“Your greatest challenge is yet to come. The World Tree must still be renewed, but, you may go and help ease the pain—”

I jumped up at the chance.

“—From one of them.” She finished.

“Keene, take me to Keene.” I replied without a second thought. Whatever came next he would help me through this. Amaleigh I could trust to handle herself and Brekan...I’d have to see what came next for him. But the look of pain on Keene’s face confirmed it for me, if I could change the curse for any of them it had to be him.

“Very well, good luck Lady of the Woods and be strong.”

With another wave of her hand she disappeared from view and the window looking down on Keene filled my vision until I was no longer alone.

The Keeper's Rose

...is a flowering perennial found in the Northern forests and in rare cases, along the outskirts of Midstrum. The flower can be spotted by its blood red sepals that grow beneath the flower's five onyx black petals. Defensively the *Rosa Sanguie*'s leaves have developed serrated edges along their verdant surface. The dangerous reason why this plant has been pushed towards extinction is what occurs during its first blooming, when fields of *Rosa Sanguie* unleash a gray dust storm of their pollen bearing the deadly Bloodbloom virus. If a blooming occurs, evacuate to the neighboring kingdom.

---*The Triple Kingdoms' Flora: Blessings and Curses* by Parthenia Aroboralus

Excerpts collected from the section: *Poisonous Blooms*

---The Bloodbloom virus has seen a resurgence in the last ten cycles. Caused by a reaction in the blood to the *Rosa Sanguie*'s pollen, the Bloodbloom begins to manifest within four-six hours from initial infection. Though faster declines have been noted. At this time no cure is known for the Bloodbloom and if you or your cherished ones exhibit any of the following symptoms, consult your town Medii immediately.

---**The Blackening** is characterized by a darkening in the veins. As if ink has been dropped into the blood. If treated in time many have recovered from this early stage of the virus. If left to progress beyond the Blackening...no known cases have survived.

---**The Hacking** occurs when the body's fluids begin constricting the airways. In an effort to expel this the body will go into violent coughing fits, one such case resulting in hours long fits. The force of the Hacking results in burst blood vessels in the eyes and

throat often resulting in the infected coughing up great spouts of blood. The Hacking can last the duration of infection or pass as soon as the Burning begins to take effect. Each infected has proven different as their body reacts to the contagion.

---**The Burning** is characterized by an increase in the infected's body temperature. Infected that have reached this stage of the virus often do not survive into the next developmental stage. As the blood and body fight the infection internal temperatures have been recorded upwards of 110 solar degrees. The body is unable to handle these temperatures and begins to shut down one life function at a time.

---**Consumption** is the final* stage of the Bloodbloom virus. If an infected body has progressed into this stage, I fear for those attempting to treat them. As the body has undergone increased internal temperatures, the blood thickens until it has nowhere to go but out. The screams still haunt my nights of those infected whose insides tried to flee the virus. Great rends in their veins leaking a mixture of blood, pus and poison. It is best to put your cherished out of their misery before this stage occurs.

---Over the last ten cycles advancements in the containment of the *Rosa Sangue* have been made. Witches have been scouring the Kingdoms, charged by the Triumvirate Kings to eradicate the flower from the lands. Whole villages have been contained by powerful workings to keep the infection within. Within the last cycle no new cases were discovered as opposed to five cycles before when *Rosa Sangue* appeared throughout the lands. If recent findings are to be correct it appears, we have been successful. I hope for future generations sake the Keeper's Rose never blooms again.

*In recent weeks villagers living nearby these contained settlements report sightings of movement within the towns. One child's claim described the sight of a man charging out of a town at him only to be thrown back by the protective barrier. Based on the child's description it would seem the man had already undergone Consumption, his veins broken and leaking. We will look into the matter but as with most children, it could be just their imagination.

Consumption

It had started as a gray film against the red of the house's wood. When rubbed between two fingers it felt gritty. I had to scrub my hands three times in the basin before I could get the gray off my hands.

"What is all of this?" Jay asked dusting the gray from his blonde hair. It clung to him like ash from the festival pyre.

Just last night we'd been dancing beneath the moonlight harking in the fall season. The first harvests were to be starting but outside all was gray and hazy.

I went to help brush him off.

"Did you see anything?"

He'd been coming home from the market while I tended to the kids when the cloud had fallen.

"No, one minute the sky was clear. The next it was as if the sun had been blocked out." He handed me the sack from the market, and I set about unpacking.

My fingers squished against something inside.

They came away slick and sweetly smelling.

Carefully I pulled out the rotten orange from the bag.

"What happened here?" I asked spilling the rest of the bag's contents across the table.

The lettuce had wilted and putrefied, the apple mealy and rotted. Maggots had already begun to crawl across the flank of beef. I retched at the smell and hurried to open the door, gulping in a gust of the gray grit as I tried to find fresh air. Choking I slammed the door shut, resting my back against the cool wood once it was closed. The grit coated my tongue and teeth as if encased in lamb's wool.

Jay just balked, seemingly unable to comprehend what happened.

“It was just fresh. I picked those out myself.” His voice was quiet, as if convincing himself of the truth.

As if in a terrible flash my childhood teachings flooded back to me.

“Take off your clothes. Burn them in the fireplace, Jay.”

He looked at me, his blue eyes wild and wide. “Mel? What’s happening?”

I needed him to remain calm. If the children saw him upset, they would only panic as well. I grabbed his biceps in my hands, forceful enough to get him to pay attention still gentle enough to not raise alarm.

“I think it’s best, until we know what is happening. To remove all potential contagion.” I could still taste the sugary film of the grit, careful to place a kiss atop his forehead as opposed to his lips. “Go change and gather the children.”

He could only nod and began to disrobe. If this were any other night, I’d enjoy the sight of my husband revealing the hard muscles he’d built up on the farm. But now was not the time. I stoked the flames, tossing in the thin material of his pants and shirt. They burned bright in the blaze. He stood awkwardly, cupping himself in his hands, unsure what next to do.

Normally my husband was the first to jump into any situation. Just last fall he’d been the one fast enough to catch the falling hay bales before they’d crushed little Jon. Now he stood before me, vulnerable and frightened, the sight of the spoiled food more than he could comprehend.

I took his face between my hands, willing a little of my power into him. It coiled inside me tight and tired but answered my call. The light behind his eyes grew a little brighter.

“Melia?”

“Go, darling, get dressed and lay with the children. I’ll be in in a minute.”

He nodded and walked off towards our room. My stomach turned at the sight of the flush of scarlet creeping across his back.

I reached inside my apron pocket for the little mirror I’d always kept there but hoped I’d never need. The metal now a cool touchstone, I took a moment to center myself before what I had to do next.

The mirror was small enough to fit comfortably in the palm of my hand. The glass had been broken so as to resemble a fractured five-pointed star. Its frame was made of delicate gold strings that wove together as if they were a thicket of morning glory vines reaching towards the mirror’s center. The metal thrummed a soft vibration at my touch as my power awoke fully inside me as I whispered the words.

Cast my gaze, cast my voice. Find my sisters where they roam.

I looked to the shard that was to hold Conthesa’s image, hopeful she’d be found anytime I’d cast this spell. As with all the times before the shard just clouded over into darkness. Reva appeared first, her hair falling in a mess across her face. It looked as if she was in the middle of a fight.

Laima appeared next followed by Naenia and Parthenia crowded into the same shard. Our two eldest sisters had never separated, spending their time hunting and cataloging

wayward magic. Laima traveled the countryside as a medicine woman and Reva, judging by the grunts coming from her shard, had found herself in another bar room fight.

“Honestly Reva, will you ever learn?” Naenia chastised from the other side of the continent. She was nothing if not keen for any opportunity to scold.

Reva snarled and appeared to struggle against a heavy weight. With a grunt she cleared herself of the problems. Light flashed as she walked back out into the sun before continuing.

“As soon as they do Nae, until then I’ve got a lot of teaching to do.”

“Girls,” Laima called out, silencing our sisters. “Something is wrong. Melia, why did you call?”

Even from far away I could feel their focus on me, each trying to suss out what had changed. What made me want to call after four years of silence.

“I’m scared, sisters, I think.... I think something has come for our village. I fear it may be the Keeper’s Rose.”

Reva swore in the language of the south, a harsh dialect. Laima looked aghast and my eldest sisters appeared to be hurriedly talking between each other.

“I’ve sealed the house and instructed Jay to lay with the children, but I fear it may already be too late.” I turned to show them the spoiled food rotting on the table. “It came like a cloud over the whole village.” Was that a flicker of light in Conthesa’s shard? Did they see that? I pressed on. “We can’t let the virus spread beyond this village.”

They knew as well as I the devastation a pollen cloud this large would do to the Kingdoms. After we’d lost Conthesa to the castle, the five of us spent our time researching the sickness that had seemed incurable. Sure, that it had taken our sister as

well, for that could be the only reason she had not returned, and Naenia wanted to be ready. Along the way we'd met other practitioners of the old ways and learned of the Keeper's Rose, or *Rosa Sanguine*, and the dark poison that the flower spread. I could still feel the thorns biting into my flesh from the last infestation we'd rooted out. I'd left my sisters after that. Hopeful the flower would remain nothing but a painful memory of our growing up.

"We'll try and make it." Naenia said her voice strained, and I knew she was lying. Judging by the trees behind my eldest sisters, they weren't going to make it in time, no matter how fast they traveled.

"Reva and I are the closest. We'll be there by sunrise tomorrow. Melia, be strong." Laima's gentle reassurances did little against the cruel reality that had walked through my door. Still it lit a lantern of hope inside me. My sisters were coming.

Linen and down had been stuffed into door jambs and cracks in the foundation. Ground salt in fresh spring water sprinkled over the boundary lines in hopes for natural protection. When all that was through, I went to check on my family.

The candle's flame Tesa insisted on keeping lit throughout the night provided me with enough light to see into their room. My husband's large form had nestled in beside the children, one tucked under each arm. I'd encouraged him to rest and was pleased to see my spell had worked. I'd made a point not to use magic after meeting Jay, other than small tricks to keep the milk from spoiling or our vegetable garden to be more fruitful.

We'd established a good life here in a farming community that straddled the line between the Second and Third Kingdoms. We knew all our neighbors and this place was

a true home. Something we had never been able to achieve as children living on the outskirts of town. I'd promised myself I would fulfill Conthesa's wish for a family after she was gone, and here I'd finally found it. Now magic was coming to take it away again.

A wet hacking pulled me back from my thoughts. Jarrod's little body convulsed in harsh coughs against his father's side. I patted and soothed, rubbing my hand in small circles against his fevered back and still the cough persisted. Jay sat up with Tesa in his arms, cradling her close as if to protect her while I got Jarrod sitting upright. At last the coughs subsided. He collapsed against me. My heart shattered in that moment. The shards of my resolve eclipsed by the love for my children. Whatever it takes, I won't let this virus take them.

Reva and Laima would be here soon, I just had to keep us safe until then. Together the three of us would find a way to fix this. I tried to use the thought to comfort me, but I knew the truth. In all our years we'd only ever stopped the flower after the fact. We'd never been able to heal those already infected by the virus. I had to hold on to the hope that maybe my sisters had discovered something without me.

"Come little one, let's get you some water." I hoisted Jarrod into my arms, and he flopped against me exhausted. His small head fitting perfectly in the crook of my neck. He was my first, born during a howling windstorm, he'd never quite been able to settle. Always off getting into some kind of mischief. For him to be this calm for this long, I didn't want to think of that reality.

Jay followed me silently, with Tesa in his arms. She was only two and named after our youngest sister we'd never gotten the chance to see grow up. Already Tesa was growing into a precocious creature, always following in her brother's shadow. Wise

enough to stop just shy of getting in trouble, leaving that to her elder. Jay sat in the older rocking chair beside the hearth. It had been our first purchase, a place for me to sit by the fire and rub my aching belly as Jarrod grew within me.

Now the fire was dying to embers and Jay sat huddled with our child, both looking smaller than they should in the waning light. I laid Jarrod down on the cot beneath the window and stole a glance outside. The grey had settled over everything. The poppies I'd kept in the window box, once bold oranges now wilted and browned. Sir Rubnic across the way stood on his front stoop, attempting to sweep the gray from his home. It only seemed to stir the mess up and he fell back inside after a horrible coughing fit.

No one else walked the streets. Even the stray animal or two that would be known to wander looking for scraps appeared to have vanished within the gray.

Please sisters, hurry. I sent the silent pray to whoever it was that would listen.

Although I'd gone out into the woods that night with my sisters, I still never fully believed that our abilities had come from the earth. Instead I'd always thought they were a part of ourselves we happened to wake up when we all spoke honestly that night. The Kingdoms honored the old gods of light and dark, and the changing seasons but none had felt right to me. When I sent up a prayer, I sent it in hopes that the world would just smile in our favor. You can do a lot with a little favor.

"Melia," Jay's voice was a croak in the darkness that was quickly becoming our home.

I crouched by his side, taking one clammy hand between mine. "What is it my love?"

Tesa had still not stirred but it calmed me to see the gentle rise and fall of her breath against his chest. For now, she was ok. The rash had spread across my husband's neck and shoulders, threatening to creep into his heart.

When he looked at me his eyes were red and haunted. "Have you spoken to your sisters?"

His question confused me for a moment. "You know?"

He nodded slowly, "of course Mel, you've never been as careful as you think. Are they coming?"

"Yes, Reva and Laima should be here soon. I hope with an answer."

"But you know what this is don't you?"

There was no sense in lying.

"Yes, I do. It's the poisoned pollen of the *Rosa Sanguie*, someone must have planted a wide patch of it nearby." I hung my head in shame, "I should have been better about patrolling the woods. Family life has made me sloppy."

He took my chin in his hand and lifted me up to meet his eyes. "No, my love, your family has made you strong. If anyone could fix this, I know you can."

Tears threatened to spill over, and I dashed them away, pressing my cheek firmly into his palm. "Stay strong my love, I'll get our family through this." I promised.

A knock on the door pulled me from my work. I'd been busying myself around a fresh fire. Pots of herbs and roots simmered or lay discarded around me as I mixed and blended what I had stocked. Anything outside was now useless and I had to make do casting with what we had one hand. I was ashamed to see I had not kept a good stockpile.

The children had woken up an hour ago and I'd distracted them by having them help me pull rosemary leaves from the stem. This had exhausted them, and they'd quickly passed back out on the cot. Jarrod's coughs continued and worsened throughout the day as the same rash bloomed on his skin as his father. For now, the worst I felt was a constant tickle irritating the back of my throat, but I'd found myself sending power there to quell the itch at times.

"Who is it?" I called through the wood. Jay feebly tried to grasp the poker beside the fire in an attempt to help.

"Melia are you daft open the door!" Reva's voice called out strong and clear.

My heart flipped in happiness and I pulled the door open enough for my sisters to slip inside.

The pollen had spent the day settling across the town and it appears my sisters had been fortunate enough to make it through the streets less saturated than I'd expected. Their heavy cloaks of blue and gray only fringed with a darker stain along the hemline. As they pulled their hoods back, I was greeted by the sight of my sisters in the flesh for the first time in cycles. A sight that brought those tears I'd fought down bursting to life once more as I sank into their arms.

I wasn't alone anymore.

"We have time enough for that later Mel," Reva said, though she gave me an extra tight hug before pulling away. "I think we need to meet our niece and nephew."

A wide smile cracked her face mirroring a deep white scar across her neck. Smaller scars dotted my sisters' face and arms but otherwise she appeared unchanged. It was odd to see my own face reflected back two-fold once again.

Laima knelt beside Jay, her hands already glowing a soft silver as she called up her power.

“It’s good to see you again too,” she whispered to him. “Though I wish it were under better circumstances. You didn’t have to take our sister from us.”

He chuckled and I loved my sisters more than I thought I could in that moment. They had come in, knowing full well my panic and instantly diffused the situation. By pretending this was an ordinary visit from family they’d allowed my sick loved ones to feel a moment’s reprieve. Reva stood up from the cot, a wan smile on her face as she pulled the two of us away.

The look in her eyes told me what I already knew.

“I know it’s not good, I didn’t ask you here for that. I need solutions. I can’t lose them.”

We stood huddled together by the dining table, the bowls from breakfast sat discarded beside the bag Jay had emptied from the market. Just this morning everything had seemed so normal.

“We know Mel, and we’ll do what we can. But we need to seal the town first. This can’t go any further.” Reva said.

“It needs all three of us.” Laima added, trying not to meet my eyes.

I was fully aware of what the sealing spell required as I was one of the ones who helped write it. In order to protect towns from further contamination we’d developed a spell that used the combined power of three of us to cast. At the time it had seemed easy that three of us would always be together in some way. Now I couldn’t bear the thought of leaving my family.

“Can’t we cast the spell from here?”

My sisters shook their heads. “We need to be at the three points of entry into town.” Reva explained slowly. I could feel their annoyance but worry still tugged at my heart.

“We can weave some extra protections into your cloak if you still have it.” Laima offered.

“It’s not the protection I’m worried about,” for I feared I already had the virus though I did not share those fears yet. “It’s leaving them.”

Laima took my hand. “You know as well as I that the virus has not yet progressed that far. There’s still time before the burning and the blackening.”

That would be when they would suffer the most. I would need to be here to try and ease that pain.

We’d separated as soon as we got outside. Laima heading off to my right, Reva to my left. All towns by design in the Kingdoms have three roads that lead in or out. One towards each neighboring Kingdom and the last was always directed towards the castle. An act the Triumvirate Kings of old had passed to always remind even the farthest flung citizen of their power.

The five of us had used their narcissism to our advantage. Learning through some trial and error that we are stronger the more of us that cast together, we’d begun to create spells that worked off of multiple energy sources. We’d had to find a way to slow infection down and short of killing the weed before it bloomed, sealing in the town’s infection was the only way. It worked as a barrier that only allowed those uninfected to pass through. If the virus had already taken hold inside you, even if unaware, the magic

would prevent your passage. It had been a sure way to evacuate the healthy and let the infected die with the town.

Kicked up pollen floated in noxious clouds in my wake as I moved down shuttered streets. Houses that had just been thriving with life were now closed off. Their inhabitants confused and hurting. Part of me wants to go knock on each door, take them into my arms and provide some comfort in this time. But I had to refrain. It would only serve to spread infection further and delay me. I had to leave them to their own fates.

The sack of ingredients chaffed my sweating palm. I could feel the virus wrapping itself around my lungs as I struggled to take in each new breath. It was spreading faster than I wanted to admit. A wet rattling cough ricocheted through my body and out into the night. When it had passed, I felt spent, weaker than a coughing fit had any right to leave someone. Wisps of pollen carried on the wind reminded me of my purpose, allowing myself a moment longer against the cool stone wall I pushed off down the street once more.

Salt and quartz. Well water and birds feather. Herbs. Burned and spread in a circle in the center of the road.

I made quick work tossing the ingredients into the brass bowl I'd brought. The flint struck with a flash, catching the bundle of herbs filling the air with the clarifying scent of sage. I took in a breath of the white smoke, wisps whispered through me, clearing and attempting to purge the virus inside. My power responded to my call. I sat behind the bowl, the town at my back the open road before me and began the spell.

Three times round we seal and bound,

In salt and stone, we bind thee.

The pure may pass, the tainted may not part,

In feather and ash, we bind thee.

Till the day the cure is found,

In water and root, we bind thee.

Magic poured from my lips in rippling waves of green tinged light. I could smell the freshly shorn grass behind our cottage, the rich scent connecting me to ancient workings. The vibrations of my sisters working their magic thrummed up through the ground, buzzing beneath my skin and I reveled in it. To hold the world's heartbeat in your hand is intoxicating.

With effort I pushed it from my body, forcing the energy into the world to work. A tracery of starlight began weaving an intricate pattern in the sky. Lines of light connecting and growing off of each other until in a flash a dome of light formed and faded from sight.

The hacking of a cough pulled me from the post glow of casting.

"Who's there?" I called out, striking the flint and setting a torch ablaze. The sudden flare in light revealed three figures moving towards me. "Kind sirs, please return to your homes." Had they seen our magic light up the sky?

"You did this." I couldn't tell from which body the accusation had come from.

Gods above. "I assure you sirs, I only meant—"

The first stone came as a surprise, the second I should have been prepared for. The third was just overkill. Pain flared from what was sure to be a bruise along my shoulder.

Blood dripped from a cut above my eye, obscuring my vision. Dizzy from the attack I wasn't ready for when they came reaching for me. The virus already blackened their hands and arms. Veins burned and burst open as the virus burned through their system. These men were wild with their pain.

Power welled inside of me and with a shouted "Enough!" I expelled it. Propelling the men across the road. One crashing against the barrier illuminating the night as it flared to life in protection, allowing me for a moment to see his face clearly.

Sir Rubnic.

He'd been our neighbor and friend. A gentle giant of a man with a beard as full as a blackberry patch.

"I'm sorry. I should have protected you." I said crouching down beside his crumpled form and laying my hand on his chest. With a mental push his heart slowed, and he slumped to the ground.

Tears and blood trailed down my face by the time I made it back to our cottage. Inside my sisters huddled around the fire. They'd lain Jay down between the children on the cot. They looked so frail together like that. An inspection of his neck confirmed the worst. His veins were bright and inflamed beneath the surface of his skin. The burning was soon to begin.

"What happened to you?" Laima tutted and pulled me closer. Dabbing at my face with the sleeve of her shirt.

I brushed her off. "It's nothing sister. I take it the spell went smoothly?"

Reva stood from tending the fire, “It’ll hold. Though normally we’re on the other side when we cast this.”

“You could walk back through the boundary at any point.”

Laima held up her torn cloak, the protective wards slashed through. Reva’s had met a similar fate. “They were waiting for us. Once I cast the spell, they were on me.”

Laima pulled down the neckline of her blouse. Black already spread through her veins.

“There’s more to this than infection Melia.”

I knew that tone in my sister’s voice. Laima had never gotten worked up about much. She spent her time watching and observing others, and when routines shifted, that’s when she’d come alive. Laima could look through seemingly innocuous events and find the pattern. If she thought there was more to this town being infected, I had reason to believe her.

“What do you think is going on?”

She ushered Reva and I into the bedroom, taking care to shut the door behind us.

“Something happened at the castle last night, we felt it and I’m sure you did as well.”

I had woken last night in alarm clutching my midsection. As soon as it had come it had passed and until this moment, I hadn’t given it a second thought.

“So, you think the *Rosa Sanguine* came from that?”

“It could make sense...” Reva started only to trail off into a hacking cough. I knelt beside her and placed my hand to her heart. I could feel the virus in her breath, just beyond my physical touch. It was as if a greasy rat had slipped between my probing senses, leaving behind trails of what felt like the echoes of screams across my mind.

I stepped back, severing the connection as Reva continued to cough.

“What can we do other than wait to die?” I asked. My ability to heal wasn’t strong enough to remove the contagion from myself or my family, let alone the whole town. Even if all six of us stood together, I couldn’t think of a way to make it work.

Laima handed Reva a cup of water, “I think this has something to do with Conthesa, and if that’s the case then there may still be hope.”

“How could she be involved?”

My heart wrenched thinking of Conthesa. When we lost her I’d blamed myself the most. It took a long time to get over that pain, the thought that your sister's death was by your hand. To think that mistake could cost me and my family yet again...

“The *Rosa Sanguie* had not been seen for generations, not until Conthesa went to the castle.”

Reva recovered from her coughing attack and picked up Laima’s train of thought.

“After that it ran rampant, but we beat it back and there hasn’t been a sighting in cycles.”

The piece beginning to click together. The return of the flower, Conthesa’s shard shimmering during the connection, the townspeople making sure we were infected...

“Conthesa’s left the castle.”

“We already know and we’re working on it.” Naenia’s no nonsense tone shuttered the flame of hope I’d been harboring.

“What do you mean you already know? What is going on Nae?”

The three of us stood in a circle looking into our separate mirrors while Naenia dominated the other end of the conversation. Parthenia couldn't be seen and Conthesa's shard had not reacted when we made the connection.

Naenia sighed with the deep exasperation of a mother hen and held the glass away from her face. In the background I could see Parthenia standing beside a man and two other women in a clearing I recognized, wooden boxes lay scattered around their feet. Laima's gasp confirmed it.

"What are you doing back there?"

"How did you get back?"

"Where's Conthesa?"

Our questions overlapped in our eagerness to know more.

"I'm here sisters."

A voice I never thought we'd hear again cut through the din of our clucking.

"Thesa," Her childhood pet name came out in a sob as I saw her again for the first time in ten cycles.

The woman on the other side of the glass had the same dark hair as us. She stood almost as tall as Naenia, taller if she stood straight. A fuller frame than the wisp of a child I remembered but the smile was all the same. A gentle kindness that reached all the way into her bright eyes. But now those eyes looked troubled.

"I'm so sorry to have caused you all so much worry." Conthesa said. "But unfortunately, we must cut this reunion short."

She didn't seem to want to go on and Naenia's scowl returned to the glass.

“The Keeper is free. He sent the virus to your home. I’m sorry Melia. The old war is starting anew, and he’s already decimated our forces.”

I met my triplets’ worried gazes above the mirrors. The Keeper was a myth we told children to put them to bed. But he was also the vengeful god that had poisoned the First Tree and the world itself with his hate in the beginning. If he walked the earth now, he would not stop with just this village.

“What is the plan?” Reva asked.

Naenia actually cracked a wan smile. We had a united goal for the first time in a long time. Even if it was an ancient god, it was good to see my sisters working together once again.

“We’re on our way to you. We think we have a way to use the Keeper’s own trap to his downfall, but there’s a price.” Naenia explained.

“Isn’t there always?” I feel like we’ve never stopped paying the price for our magic since that first night.

Naenia paused a minute and Conthesa took over again.

“We’ll have to lose the village Mel, and everyone inside it.”

No, no that can’t be. The six of us were supposed to find a solution. Together. “That would mean...”

She nodded. “Everyone, Mel. We need the three of you on that side to cast the spell.”

“What spell is this?” Laima asked her face ashen but determined.

“We need more power than we have to save the World Tree before the Keeper comes and wipes us out. So, we think we’ve found a way to connect more life energy to renew

the Tree.” Conthesa attempted to explain. “These boxes,” she waved towards the wooden boxes piled around them, “will act as containers for the energy.”

“You want to use the town’s deaths as conduits of power?” Laima connected the dots the fastest.

The man now poked his head around the corner. “According to the town charter there’s roughly three hundred people living inside. If we combine their lives through your connection to the World Tree, we believe it will be enough to stop the Keeper.”

“And who are you in all of this?” Reva asked.

He darted his eyes to my sisters as if asking permission before continuing.

“My name is Keene,” he gave a small bow of his shaggy haired head. “Heir to the Second Kingdom.”

One of the heirs? But where were the other two? What did the heirs have to do with any of this?

Naenia took over again before we could ask questions. “Meet us at the southern gate.”

For the first time in ten cycles the six of us stood within arm’s reach of each other.

The barrier hummed invisibly between us, preventing me from wrapping my arms around my youngest sister in the tightest hug I could manage. Her namesake cooed in my arms. We’d had to leave Jay and Jarrod, an action that broke my heart.

But none of us could find a trace of infection in Tesa.

“I’ll protect her till my last breath,” Conthesa swore holding her arms out for my baby. The white tips of her fingers breaching the barrier. Stars lit up the afternoon sky.

Tesa could still pass through the barrier and grow up. Without me. Looking into my sister's eyes I knew she spoke the truth and yet—I couldn't bring myself to give her up. Tesa's soft warmth a comfort against my blistering skin.

The Bloodbloom was taking its hold on me. My magic at its limit as I've been using it to stave off the infection and attempting to heal others. Either the virus or the burn out will end my life this afternoon. I just wanted one more moment with my child. Reva and Laima had made short work of the boxes already, three ordered rows of a hundred boxes lined the street behind us. All that was left was this.

I don't know what my sisters are planning to do next, but I know they wouldn't ask this of us lightly. I can see it in the sharp lines that have grown around Conthesa's eyes, the determined set of her lips I'd only ever seen smiling. She was ready for what was to come. As her older sister I had to be as well. Nae had always tried to get us to lead by example.

"I know you will," I said before passing my daughter through the barrier.

Her little body slipped through as if nothing was there, only the barest ripple in the air showed the truth. And then it was done. She was gone, and there was only one thing left to do. What a part of us had been longing for and until this moment been denied.

The chance to cast together.

My weakened spirit fluttered brighter at the thought.

Conthesa handed Tesa off to the heir and we took up our places in the circle. Laima to my left Reva to my right. Parthenia and Naenia held their hands out towards the barrier meeting my sister's offered hands as close as we could. The winds whistled down the street, stirring our hair and skirts in its wake. Across the circle I matched Conthesa's

actions taking my sister's hands as she did the same. Completing the circle for the first time. The winds grew wilder, kicking up dust devils, their wails melding with the groans of the infected.

My magic burned bright inside me and for a moment I no longer felt the pain of the virus.

Keepers at death's gate, hear our six-fold cry.

Our greatest sacrifice opens the way.

Infected bodies with pure souls, guide them to another chance.

With death comes the greatest life.

Hear our six-fold cry.

Help us renew the bond.

Around the circle my sister's spirits shone in their multitude. The spectral lights of our magic calling out to the power locked away within every mortal's soul. A glance behind me showed my triplets shadows stretching down the street, each of us falling over a row of boxes. Bright colors swirled and danced along the rooftops, their songs rising in a chorus with ours. The wooden boxes rattled against the stone, a rapid knocking that built with our cries. With the final words our spell was cast.

So, will it be.

Three hundred wooden lids clacked open and swallowed the light.

The Allight's Curse

Arrogance and greed your sins be true

By rock be bound and broken

Malicious gain meant all for you

By flame be broken and cleansed

The one as many, now the many as ones

By wave be cleansed and freed

May your light piece the night's true veil

By winds be freed into skies to dwell

All light fails when the heart's beat stops.

The Renewal of the World Tree

“Sister, something’s changing.” Parthenia said her nose in the air as she scented the wind.

My younger sister was a woman of few words, when she spoke I listened. I closed my eyes and focused on that inner place where my power lay in waiting. That quiet space that allowed my senses to soar but try as I might I couldn’t feel what she did.

“What do you think it could be?”

We’d just wrapped up in the village of River’s End of the Second Kingdom. A village that had found themselves with unnaturally sparse crops and withering livestock. The usual signs of errant magic activity, we’d hurried here from the far side of the Third Kingdom. Only to find out they had been planting on salted earth and their livestock wasn’t getting enough of the rations they had to spare. Together Parthenia and I got them started on a fresh garden, pushing our magic into the earth to encourage early blooming.

It had been hard to hide my disappointment the job wasn’t more challenging.

Parthenia squinted against the rising sunlight, lost down the road in her own thoughts. We’d left at first light, having learned a long time ago the villagers' patience ran out as soon as their problems were solved.

When the five of us had started out, each job was rewarding and pushed our magic to new limits as we sought solutions to the outbreaks of Keeper’s Rose or those darkness poisoned hags that feed off magic. The dregs of the last age that would find their ways into new villages and drain them dry. Magic is found in much more than the common person knows. It exists in all of nature, and a hag could drain it from everything around them if left to their own devices.

But the last one we encountered was two cycles ago, lately it had all been this. False alarms and small fires that barely tested our true abilities.

The look in my sister's eyes told me that was all coming to an end.

There was only one question when she got like this. "Where do we need to go?"

She said the one word I wasn't expecting.

"Home."

The closer we got to the main roads the more villagers there seemed to be. The day after the Festival of Feasts was usually spent nursing a headache from Shine or pillaging the leftovers. A mass exodus from town was not normal.

"Pardon me," I grabbed the arm of a farmer as he walked past, oxen cart in tow. His tanned face looked stricken beneath his straw cap. "What's the hurry?"

"It's the Triumvirate Kings misses, there's been an attack on the castle." He explained with tears welling in his eyes. "We're going to Midstrum to see what we can do to help."

I thanked him and Parthenia and I fell away from the mass of people to discuss. We held no love for the Kings, despite ever increasing taxation and lack of social resources the general populace did not hold our same sentiment. Most villagers believed the Kings walked on air and granted immortality to the babe's heads they kissed. It was enough to churn my stomach on a good day.

"It looks like we've found our change in the air." I said.

We'd found ourselves on a path through the crop fields. Walls of corn and barley rolled in the wind as we walked by. We could freely discuss here among the plants. I

trailed my hand lazily behind us, running my fingers through the green stalks. Sparks of energy flowing between us as I connected briefly to their innate magic.

Parthenia was doing the same along her side of the path. Neither having said it but both of us knowing we would need to keep our strength up for whatever is to come. Connecting and siphoning off bits of the world's natural magic was a quick way for us to replenish ours.

"It would appear so. Though what this all means..." Parthenia trailed off.

She leaned away from me listening to the movements around us. That's when I could hear it too, a rustling growing louder and closer amid the crops.

I reached for the familiar comfort of a potion bottle in my hip bag. Ready to throw at a moment's notice. Parthenia's lips were moving in a rapid blur, magic clouded the air. I could feel it like a prickle against my skin.

The rustling grew closer.

"Wait," I cautioned.

Parthenia was close to the end of her spell, unleashing it early could result in more notice than we wanted right now. The rapid prickling against my skin eased, slightly. She held the tide back with a careful breath.

From the green stalks burst a small girl with a thundercloud of hair clutching a sword to her chest. I could see the whites of her eyes as her panic played out across her face.

"Please." She whispered before another shape broke through the green line.

Parthenia unleashed her spell catching the Coraguarde by surprise and lifting him into the air on the winds she'd called up. I was by the girl's side by the time Parthenia had thrown the man clear to the next Kingdom.

“Is there anyone else?” I asked, needing to be ready if another attack was on its way.

She shook her head, her black curls bobbing with the motion.

“No, thank you. That was the last one. I didn’t think I was going to be able to lose him. What did she do?”

Her words spilled out of her mouth in a gushing torrent. She was going to be alright; it was the sword she was holding that gave me pause.

“That’s a King’s Blade.”

Parthenia had come to join us, crouching down beside me. The girl looked between the two of us and down to the sword in her hands.

“That girl just gave it to me in my dream and when I woke up it was at my side.” She held it up to us. “Here, I don’t want this.”

“Um...” This day has taken a drastic turn.

“Please, I shouldn’t be here. You two,” she waved the sword between us. “Are clearly prepared for something like this. I mean look what you did to that guy! Wait...are you witches?” Her demeanor changed from open and bubbly to frosty in a moment.

I spared a glance towards Parthenia before answering. “That depends, what do you know about witches?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “I know enough to know they’ve never done any good. Just magic users desperate for their next fix.”

The tension that had been building in my heart slackened just a fraction. This girl had clearly had dealings with a hag.

“Who was it that exposed you to such truths?” I asked the question knowing it would throw her off. She wasn’t expecting me not to contradict her.

I stood and offered my hand to help her up as well.

“Madame. She...she made me do things for her fix. Steal her things I don’t think I should have.”

“My name’s Naenia, and I promise you, that life is behind you now.”

She sat up a little at that, her shoulders lowering from where they’d been living up around her ears.

“I’m Monette.”

“Nice to meet you, this is my sister Parthenia,” the aforementioned sister nodded her head in greeting. “Now, where were you heading?”

“I’m not that sure actually. Since the Auction House I’ve been running from the Coraguarde.”

“Why?” Parthenia’s cool voice startled Monette.

She looked down at the sword again.

“I took something I wasn’t supposed to. I think I know something I’m not supposed to too.”

We’d started walking again among the plants, unsure now where we were heading.

“What makes you think that?”

Monette stopped and pulled a bundle from within her cloak.

“Here.” She shoved it at me and moved a couple of paces away as I got to work unwrapping the cloth.

Inside nestled in a bed of velvet was a leaf from the World Tree. It’s color matching that of the bright clear sky above us. The power held within it enough to vibrate through

my fingertips. The last time I'd seen one of these, was the night the six of us got our magic. When we found our own leaves on the tree.

Parthenia arched an eyebrow at me. The meaning clear. This girl didn't know what she had if she was so willing to hand it over. So how had she gotten involved in all of this? And where had a leaf come from in the first place? Her next words chilled my blood.

"I stole it from a King."

The thought that one of the Triumvirate Kings had this in their possession filled me with a rage I'd never known. The Kings were selfish lazy bags of entitlement that would destroy everything if they had even a fraction of the power contained within the World Tree. If they had one leaf, what's to say they don't have another.

"I think you need to tell us the whole story." I said,

And with a heavy sigh, she did.

"And then she handed me this sword and told me to find Conthesa. She said, 'she'll have answers, I hope'. Honestly she didn't sound very convincing for a guiding spirit." Monette finished her tale dropping one last twist on us.

"Conthesa? The woman with the star crown told you to find Conthesa?" I asked, needing to be sure.

Monette nodded, "That's what it sounded like at least. I'd never heard a name like that."

That brought a small smile to our faces. When mother told us that she was going to have another little girl, it had become a game between us as to who would get to name

her. In the end, we named her after our mother, in honor of her passing. Uncommon here, but mother had always claimed it was revered in the southern lands of her home.

“Do you know where to find her?” Monette asked as we made our way out of the fields and back onto a less busy road.

A fork in the road up ahead. Towards Midstrum and the apparent chaos there, or home to the woods of the north.

“I think we have a pretty good idea. Come with us and we will help you see this through.” I offered standing below the signpost.

The weathered wood knocked and gouged by passing travelers. The belief that the watchers of the crossroads will protect your journey. Parthenia made a quick mark with the dagger at her hip while I waited for Monette’s response.

Although she’d offered to give it up she was clutching the sword like it was her salvation. Dark emotions brewed behind her eyes.

“I don’t know what’s happening, or why me, but I want to see this through to the end. I feel like I need to.”

We could understand the pull of destiny all too well. I’d felt it that night in the woods, a cord tying my heart to the first tree. And I’ve felt it every day since as we’ve worked across the Kingdoms, doing the best work we can. Now, there was a humming in the air I couldn’t quite place, like a choir falling into harmony. This was where we were meant to be.

“Good answer Monette.”

I turned back towards Parthenia who was already waiting in the middle of the road leading back towards home.

“Really Keene, you’re not helping.”

He hadn’t stopped reveling in his newfound senses. After finding him in the woods half shifted into a beast. I’d attempt to rework his curse. The dredges of power I had left enabling me to guide him back into his mortal self. Though it appeared he’d retained some degree of animalistic senses and had been enjoying experimenting their limits. We’d been on our way to the castle when we heard of the destruction. The stones I’d seen in my vision of Amaleigh making sense now.

I tried looking for her through my interconnection, but nothing appeared on the other side. No trace of her energy remained. Brekan was still shrouded in darkness and I could only conclude that the Keeper really was free and somehow swayed Brekan to his side.

“Sorry Thesa, I know we need to focus.”

He came trotting back over like one of the kitchen hounds, and I couldn’t help but match the big smile on his face.

At least he didn’t hate me.

He tucked his notebook back into the waistband of his pants and threw his arm around my shoulders. The curse had changed his physical form as well. He was more than the timid boy I’d known, the power I’d given him seemed to awaken a truer self. He wanted to take up the space he deserved now, rather than shrink from the world. His touch was a comfort that I couldn’t allow myself to revel in too long, or else I’d never figure out a solution to all of this.

We stood in silence a moment staring up at the broken tree.

The Keeper's poison had climbed up the rest of the trunk now, the roots already blackened and decayed. If I squinted up into the branches I could still see the barest flecks of color. Once the poison spread to the leaves it would be all over—by the looks of it—we didn't have much longer. Magic had once flowed through every fiber of this Tree, moving out through the roots and leaves into the hearts and souls of the world's people. Alafaya hadn't been able to make a new connection in generations—aside from my sisters and myself. To connect anyone else to this tree now would be a death sentence.

Since coming back to the clearing and using more of my power I could feel the Keeper's stain across my soul. Leeching into me from the shared connection. I'd been doing everything I knew to counteract the spread; meditation, trying to focus on the positive, drawing strength from the energies around me. Still, it was only a matter of time before it became too much. We needed to renew the source of magic once and for all.

Keene wandered over to the edge of the lake. Now a dried and cracked lakebed, six off-white stones lay sunken in the lakebed. Like the bleached bones of a half-buried corpse. The desiccated roots that had once grown submerged beneath the water were now split and broken from the sun exposure and poison. It was truly a testament to World Tree's strength that it was still standing at all.

I watched as Keene lowered into a squat before launching himself across the divide. Landing with grace upon the roots. He turned back to me with a broad smile lighting up his face.

“Come on Thesa, we need to check things out.”

“And you’re just showing off.” I shot back, before carefully making my way down the embankment and across the lakebed.

The more I watched for the repercussions of Keene’s curse the less I could seem to find. The power his change was drawing from didn’t seem to be wholly from the World Tree, or me, or the Keeper. It appeared like our combined working had shifted some innate spark within the heir. Maybe the answer to our problem lay within the curse. If only I could remember what all I had said. At the time the World Tree’s rage had consumed me and I was just a puppet for the Tree to work its magic through.

“Where are you right now?” Keene asked me, offering his hand to help me climb the roots.

I took it and he pulled me up beside him, with more strength than a normal man should. He held me close against him for a moment. His body temperature radiating out through his clothes. He was burning hotter than any mortal as well. Before when we’d speak I could comfortably look in his eyes as he had always been about my height. Now I had to look up to meet his dark brown eyes, something darker lurked beneath his joy.

I sighed, leaning into his chest and glad when he didn’t pull away. Just pulled me closer into him.

“I’m here. Trying to find a solution with no idea what to actually do.” I pulled back looking up at him and continuing my gaze up to the Tree again. “I was chosen for this as a child, but I’ve never known what I was really chosen for.”

The wind blowing through the trees created a gentle hum. The elements working in tandem to create sweet music.

“That’s it!” The realization shocked me enough to shout. “I’m not the only one.”

I scrambled out of his arms and back down the roots, hurrying now across the lakebed as I tried to piece together my thoughts.

“Thesa!” Keene called behind me before a shape flew overhead. A soft thump told me he’d made it back over. Show off. “What are you talking about?”

He helped me up the side of the lake again.

“I mean, I’m not the only one connected to the World Tree. I haven’t been since the start, but I always thought I was the only one who could fix things. But that’s not true. We were all chosen, so we all must play a part in this ending.”

I was talking fast and walking faster. Moving us back towards the clearing’s entrance.

“Who?” Keene asked.

A ripple filled the air before us as we reached the entry point. Three women stepping out from the rip in space. My face hurt with the smile that welled up all the way from my heart.

“My sisters,” I replied, already running to meet them.

After much shouting and hugging we’d settled ourselves in a circle within the clearing. Keene and I sat across from Parthenia and Naenia, the stranger Monette sitting a little off to the side. She held a wrapped parcel in her lap that I couldn’t be sure of, but thought was a sword.

“Speak Conthesa,” Naenia said, her tone strict. “We know pieces, but we need to know the truth.”

Her tone hurt, but I wasn’t surprised. Nae had always been our surrogate mother and that clearly hadn’t changed in the last ten cycles. Best to start at the beginning I suppose.

“You know I left for the castle to heal Keene.” I motioned to the man at my side and my sister’s finally seemed to take notice. Parthenia appraising every inch of him with a careful eye. My stomach did a jealous flip I didn’t feel comfortable diving into right now. “It was Bloodbloom, I still don’t know how he survived until I got there.” I hadn’t told Keene this before and he looked a little stunned. “It generally works very quickly.” I explained.

“I healed him and then all was a fog. I think the Keeper had set the trap waiting for me specifically. By the time I was done I had no memory of who I had been and no reason to leave the castle. Until two days ago when Amaleigh wanted our help on her trial.”

“A King’s trial?” Parthenia asked. Monette had scooted closer while I talked, now hanging onto my story with rapt attention.

I nodded and continued. “As the first female, she’d never thought she’d have the chance. But the Kings said yes. Her task was to find the World Tree, something many before had died from. Fearful she enlisted the rest of us. It seems a loophole the Keeper hadn’t expected. Once I was off the castle grounds my memories started coming back. I...” The memories of what happened as my emotions clashed with the pain of the World Tree had resulted in the worst of mistakes.

Keene took my hand in his, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Go on,” he encouraged.

“I wasn’t ready for any of it. I didn’t remember how to separate myself from the world’s feelings and it resulted in an act of selfish magic. I released the Keeper because I cursed the heirs. I’d thought they were the ones who’d kept me locked up and in my anger, I couldn’t see the truth.”

“What happened to them?” Monette’s voice was a whisper.

I looked to Keene again before continuing. The pain of the loss of his friends and family clear as tears slide from his eyes. I’d been the cause of that pain and still he sat here with his hand in mine. As if I was still the innocent girl he’d grown up alongside.

“I cursed them to reveal their truths and scattered them to the four winds. I found Keene in the woods, a broken animal. I used the last of the rage inside me from Alafaya and the glow of the moon to bring him back.”

“Now I can shift as the moon does.” He boasted proudly. We still weren’t sure what all that would mean.

“Amaleigh seemed stronger, faster than she’d been when we saw her. But Brekan...he’s the hate of all the Kings personified. He’s become the Keeper’s monster. I didn’t know it would change him so much. I didn’t know how much he’d hide from us. I didn’t mean to cause this.”

Pain welled behind my eyes, the hot pressure of tears I was so tired of crying.

“What happened to her?” Monette pressed.

I knew the words but couldn’t say them. They stuck in my throat, painful and raw and the act I will never be able to forgive myself for. “He killed her.”

For a moment, even the insects and winds fell silent in respect.

“That can’t be true.” Monette said, her words sure. “She told me to find you. She gave me this.” She held out her parcel, the wrapping falling away to reveal the gleaming silver beneath.

Amaleigh’s King’s blade.

I looked to the burnt circle where I'd cast my curse. The broken grass where that sword had fallen when I'd held them in my vines. A sword that had still been there, even after I'd sent it's mistress away. How had it made its way to this girl?

"She told me to find you," Monette finished pulling the sword free, the steel singing against the scabbard as she drew it. Sunlight catching and shining off the flashing silver. For a moment, in the sun's glare, I thought Amaleigh was standing before me again. "There has to be a reason." Monette's voice cutting through my vision.

I nodded, "And we'll find it. The curse worked in ways I couldn't have imagined." The hurt in her eyes broke my heart. "I'm sorry you've been dragged into this. I promise I'll keep you safe." I moved to pull her into a hug only to be cut off by Naenia.

"That's all well and good," she said. "But how do you propose to do that?" She gestured broadly to the Tree and clearing at large. "If you haven't noticed, your tantrum sapped the last of the magic. Without that we're as good as dead when the Keeper and his new army of hate come tearing through that opening."

"You think I don't know that Nae? You think I wanted this?" The clouds above grew dark, rolling in response to my anger. "I've ruined countless lives! Short of chopping the whole thing down, I don't know what to do anymore."

Thunder cracked and the rain began to fall in heavy drops around us. Beating down on us as I beat myself up.

"Wait!" Keene said and the rain held in suspension a moment before fading to a light drizzle. He wiped the wet hair from his eyes. "You might be onto something."

“What is he talking about?” Naenia asked, looking between us. I just shook my head having no clue what he was on about. Parthenia watched eagerly on, water dripping from her glasses.

Keene was bouncing on his feet as he dug around in his bag before at last pulling out his whittling project. He’d been carving a small box out of a lump of cedar; I’d seen him working on it before we’d left the castle. I hadn’t realized he’d still been carrying it around.

“I’ve been working on this,” his hands fidgeted around the box before he continued. “For a while now. But it gives me an idea. You told me yourself, magic is in every fiber of the World Tree right?”

I nodded my head slowly, trying to catch on.

“Right, ‘from the roots to the leaves magic flows’,” I replied quoting the old song.

He pointed with his whittling knife.

“From the roots,” he dragged our gaze up the massive trunk to the sparse branches overhead. “To the leaves. But what does that leave in between?”

It clicked.

“A trunk full of wood. Wood we could use...but how?”

“The leaves have magic in them too. What if we found a new way to connect them?”

I was up and racing towards the Tree ideas sparking and my magic singing beneath my skin for what felt like the first time. This could be the answer. The World Tree needs connections to survive, that was severed by the Keeper, but if this worked. We may have found a way around that. I leapt across the lakebed in a single bound, the currents of air answering my call to carry me across.

Looking up into the skeletal branches stretching above me. The spots of ruddy colors where leaves are still clustered in the joints. Down the branching network that grew from one solid trunk. Placing my hand upon it I could feel the faint hum of life, it was withered but still the World Tree clung to this realm and its people. Desperate to help us as much as we could help it. I closed my eyes and dropped into the space between worlds, where the interconnection of all things flows freely.

When I looked around I was back in that space I had entered when healing Keene as children. The place where the spirit and body no longer were one but all. Traces of the World Tree's roots spread up from my connection to the ground. I could see it, golden threads spinning around my heart and through my soul branching out towards my family and friends and back towards the World Tree. Every connection building and growing off each other.

It was through these connections we could renew the World Tree.

Within the World Tree sat a great void. The poison the Keeper had injected into the Tree resulting in ever-growing decay, most of the wood would be unusable. I feared contamination leaking into the new World Tree and all of our sacrifice being for nothing. I had to make my cuts count. I pictured Amaleigh swinging her blade in training, so sure of herself even when she thought she was failing. I thought of Keene's careful hands working a piece of wood in thought as we spent a night in the library deciphering old texts. Even Brekan came to mind, the way he'd charm his way through any situation. Building bridges where before there'd been nothing but hostile air.

My thoughts pooled in my hands. A sphere of swirling light in purples, blues and golds that spread at my command. Growing until it resembled an axe floating in the air

above me. I was surprised at how light it felt as I wrapped my hand around the metal, taking an experimental swing through the air. One strike, that's all I'll get.

With one twist of my body I plunged the axe into the side of the World Tree.

My connection to that space between space broke with a violent snap that threw me back into my body. I awoke with a jerk, Naenia's hands already at my shoulders holding me in place. The sound of falling wood stopped the question that sprang to mind. I looked up to watch the World Tree shatter. The branches fell inward, the wood collapsing together into the trunk. The leaves were stirred by a sudden wind. The colors briefly flashing bright and whole for a moment in red, orange, green and blue. The leaves spiraling around the collapsing Tree before diving into the wood. Then, as if a bubble burst, wooden boxes fell from above. They landed with thuds and thumps in the soft mud of the lakebed.

In silent agreement we rushed down the bank, careful as more boxes continued to fall. I stopped to pick one up out of the muck. It was a rich cherry in color about the size of a loaf of fresh bread. Inlaid on the lid of the box was a leaf from the World Tree. I traced my hand over the delicate loops and swirls that had burned into the wood in intricate patterns. I could feel the ache in my jaw before I realized how wide I was smiling. My sisters and friends coming to join me, each with a box in hand.

"We need to count up and organize this, but Conthesa I think you've done it." Naenia said. I didn't think I could smile any wider, but I sure tried at that compliment.

Parthenia held open a large sack and began tossing the boxes inside. I watched them go in, but I never saw the bag grow larger. It was just an average brown potato sack. "We

still need to connect these to a host if we're to really make a change. And judging from that we don't have much time." Parthenia pointed towards the stump of the World Tree.

Most of the wood had been shorn off with the cut. Black poison bubbled up from the wound now spilling over the roots and collecting where the roots met the lakebed. It appeared to drip slowly but was already growing in size across the mud. A couple of boxes were too close, turning to ash as the poison came in contact with them.

"Hurry, gather them up and get to higher ground!" I pictured the boxes at my feet lifting into the air and the winds answered my call. I floated the boxes to higher ground and scrambled up after them. Parthenia and Naenia worked together, one tossing the other a box so she could stuff it into the bag. Monette ran up to where I was leaning over the edge and tossed some up to me. Keene was daring to get the closest to the poison, grabbing boxes just about to become ash and spiriting them away. The black lake continued to spread.

Safe on the grass we could do nothing but watch the poison continue to pour from the World Tree stump and fill the once barren lakebed.

"How do you expect to renew the Tree now?" Monette asked.

She was right, we'd need to be connected to the original World Tree if anything were to be renewed. But to get there now would be to cross darkness itself. A chiming sound from Naenia's skirt pocket saved me from having to come up with an answer just yet.

"Is that our old chat glass?" I asked suddenly sad for my missing glass. I couldn't even remember now when I'd lost it or where. But seeing it now reminded me of the hours spent at night trying to perfect the spell. Being able to communicate across

distances with my sisters in a single moment. My heart ached for how badly I had needed a connection like that during my cycles within the castle.

Naenia pulled the glass from her pocket, cupping the small iron frame. “It is, but we rarely use it now since we split.”

“What do you mean split?”

The glass continued to ring its alarm chime.

“Now’s not the time Conthesa.”

Parthenia shot me a pitying glance but crowded over Nae’s shoulder to watch the glass. Something Naenia saw made her scrunch her face up in disgust.

“Honestly Reva, will you ever learn?”

The thought of my rough and tumble sister just on the other side of the glass had me taking a step closer but they weren’t the same girls they were ten cycles ago. Neither was I. Would they want to see me again after all this time? Judging by Nae and Parthenia their lives hadn’t been easy since I’d left.

Reva’s voice called back, gruffer but still my sweet sister.

“As soon as they do Nae, until then I’ve got a lot of teaching to do.”

“Girls,” Laima’s voice cut through the bickering. “Something is wrong. Melia, why did you call?”

Melia? Why was Mel in trouble? I stood just on Naenia’s other side out of the glass’s view. I could see in the set of her mouth she didn’t approve but wouldn’t call me out for it in front of our sisters. Then she’d have to admit I was back. And since she hadn’t done that when they first spoke I had to assume my sister had a reason.

I could hear the fear Melia in her words. “I’m scared sisters, I think.... I think something has come for our village. I fear it may be the Keeper’s Rose.”

“What’s the Keeper’s Rose?” I asked before I could stop myself, Reva’s swearing kept the triplets from hearing me.

Parthenia spoke up before Naenia could stop her. “The Keeper’s Rose, *Rosa Sanguine*, Bloodbloom, it’s all the same. It’s what took you away.”

The three of us looked at Keene over the top of the mirror’s frame. That had been what had poisoned him, a flower? I remember the dark roots that had wrapped around his heart and soul but to think a flower had caused that damage.

“And it’s much worse than you think.” Naenia said, her gaze far past the tree line as if lost in some memory I couldn’t reach.

Melia was talking again “—to lay with the children but I fear it may already be too late.” She showed a table of rotted food. “It came like a cloud over the whole village.” I pressed closer wishing I had my own glass again, trying to see my sister’s faces. “We can’t let the virus spread beyond this village.”

Naenia seemed to come back to herself with that, “We’ll be there as fast as we can.” But I knew she was lying; how could we make it all the way to the Third Kingdom before Melia fell to the virus? Keene had lived a long time until I’d been able to heal him but by how pale my sisters were I don’t think we have that kind of time.

“Reva and I are closest. We’ll be there by sunset. Melia, be strong.” Laima said gently before the connection broke.

“Nae,” I asked when after a moment she hadn’t spoken. Her gaze set on the blackened stump.

“I think I know where we’re going to get our connections.” She said finally snapping out of her daze and pocketing her mirror.

Monette and Keene came closer now to hear.

“What are you thinking?” Parthenia asked.

“We use Melia’s village.”

Her statement stunned the rest of us to silence. Was she talking about using hundreds of innocent lives to renew the World Tree? I’d hoped we’d find those willing to take on the connection, but this was forcing it upon people’s souls for the rest of time. Was this what it would take to save the future of magic?

Yes.

I couldn’t deny the timing was too perfect and trying to find willing witches in a world that’s shunned and spurned magic for generations would not be an easy task. I looked towards the stump, the poison rising up the roots. If it covered the whole stump we’d be lost. We needed to move.

“She’s right.” I said, three heads turned towards me, but I kept my gaze on my eldest sister. “If what you know is true and those people are going to die anyway. The best we can do is give them another chance at life one day.” Naenia nodded. “So, we need a spell and we need to get to Melia before it’s too late.”

“I can work on the spell,” Parthenia offered, pulling out a pad of parchment.

“And you can get us to the Third Kingdom.” Naenia said, taking my hand.

What was she talking about?

“Your connection to all life. It may be weaker now that the Tree is broken but if you could travel across the Kingdoms on your own at thirteen I think you can carry the two of us with you.”

Root-walking.

I hadn't had a chance to walk through the tree's connections in cycles. But placing my hand on the bark of a nearby elder wood felt like coming home. I held Naenia's hand in mine and closed my eyes, focusing on Melia and the urgency to help.

Stumbling out of the trees I was careful to keep Tesa snug in my arms. The toddler had surprised me by not struggling as I carried us back through the interconnection, instead she'd absorbed the journey with wide eyes.

Naenia came stumbling out behind me, already barking orders to Keene and Monette. “We need these boxes unloaded and as close to the stump as we can get them.”

I caught her arm as she moved to brush by me.

“Nae,” I hissed, not wanting to draw the others attention. They'd crowded around Parthenia already handing out the boxes. I could see the leaves on the lids shining bright once more. “What we just did back there---”

“Needed to happen.” She cut me off, gripping my hand in hers and pulling it off her arm. “The Keeper will be at the gates at any moment. I grieve for our sisters but now is not the time Conthesa. Let's win this day, then we can cry for them.”

Her tone turned gentle and I could see how much this decision had destroyed her too.

I nodded sharply. I hated to admit it, but she was right, the Keeper would be here at any moment, sure to have felt the magic we'd used to cast the boxing. If we weren't prepared to fight before he arrived the six of us didn't stand a chance.

"You're right, after we talk."

"After." She replied, moving to join the others.

Working quickly, we unloaded all three hundred boxes and set them in place around the lakebed, perfectly encircling the stump of the World Tree. Melia, Reva, and Laima's boxes sat at my feet, their leaves of emerald, sapphire and opal stared back at me. What if their sacrifice wasn't enough? What if after all this...I lost my sisters for nothing?

"Hey," Keene nudged my shoulder with his. "Where are you at?"

"Grieving," I replied. "But I'm here and ready to finish this."

"How are you expecting to finish this, exactly?" Monette asked.

I pointed out towards the stump. The poisoned darkness had reached midway up the stump by now. We have only a window of time left to do this in. "Naenia, Parthenia and I need to be there. With the triplet's boxes. After that..." I wasn't too sure what would come next.

A cracking sound from across the clearing cut me off from a solution.

The Keeper was at the gates.

"Conthesa, find a way across." Naenia directed the gentle pinks of her magic illuminating her arms as she called it to her aide. Parthenia was already at work whispering up a spell, orange vapor trails pouring from her mouth. The unsheathing of a sword told me Monette was at the ready as I watched Keene in fascination.

Energy hummed in the air around him, lifting his hair in gentle winds. His body shuddered and he bit back a scream as his energy swirled together in a cloud of woodsy browns and starlight. As the light faded a great wolf stood heads above me in his place. The wolf looked at us with what could best be described as a lopsided grin, his long pink tongue hanging from one side of his muzzle. Keene let out a howl that shook the trees in answer to the cracking at the stone gate.

From the trees around the clearing animals parted the underbrush. Common ones like deer and rabbits, the birds that flew from tree to tree. But then there were the predators, the bears and panthers, snakes and wolves. Behind them came the forest's ancient sentinels called up in this time of need they'd answered Keene's howl. They blended with the trees around them with great branching leafy heads but held the characteristics of the world's creatures as well. Leopards spots and dunedillian hides. Claws and fangs of the wilder beasts. They were the World Tree's first attempts at life.

They stood at the ready behind Keene's great wolf form, the animals acting as an army we didn't know we had. My sisters stood behind magic lighting up the clearing. Perhaps we could actually do this.

A blast of shadows cut through the space where the world connected to the clearing and sliced clean through one of the sentinels. The creature falling to ash without a sound. With a great tear darkness spills out from the connection, rolling like ink spilled in water. Freely flowing through the air before coalescing into the Keeper of Lost Souls blade as black as night in hand.

The dark god stood just inside the clearing, a crooked smile on his face.

“How nice of you to welcome me home.” He called out before his dark army poured from the rip in reality.

They still bore the uniforms of the Coraguarde. Filing into ordered rows of gold, silver, and copper, but now they appeared more frenzied in their energy. Those of the Third Kingdom appeared almost red skinned now and those of the First had eyes that shone like gold coins. From here I couldn't see a change in the Second Kingdom's Coraguarde, but it was what stepped from the hole next that truly surprised me.

Flanked by a Coraguarde of each Kingdom, these with fangs I could see from here hanging over their bottom lips, was Brekan. With a mouth crusted red with crimson leading them. He stood beside the Keeper. A broken crown sat crooked on his dirty hair. He looked worse than I'd ever seen him but the fire in his eyes made him more alive. With a snap of his hand the Coraguarde charged the creatures and chaos erupted.

“Go Conthesa! Get to the Tree!” Monette shoved me behind her as she ran to intercept the Keeper. Her silver King's blade flashing at her side. As the blades struck together in a thunderous crack I scrambled to my feet. Tesa clutched to my chest, the Keeper's dark abyss waiting when I closed my eyes.

Monette moved with a grace I hadn't yet seen from the girl. As the Keeper slashed she'd dive and dance out of his reach or under his swing. She seemed to be coming alive in the fight, for a moment a flash of red hair and a musical laugh stopped me. Amaleigh danced around the Keeper, her blade singing through the air as she fought. When I looked she was Monette again, holding her own against the dark god. The girls were one in the same now, lending strength to each other. As much as I grieved for Amaleigh, I had to make peace with this.

Leaving the huntress to her prey, I held my niece tighter and ran for my waiting sisters. Across the clearing the monsters that were the Coraguarde fought the forest sentinels. Keene's howl cut through the din.

He and Brekan were attempting to take shots at each other.

One would snarl or bite before the other retreated, neither able to fully move in for the killing blow. Brekan was guarded by his three Coraguarde and Keene couldn't seem to break through the line.

Tesa cried into my blouse, her tears muffled amid the sounds of battle. They were just on the other side of the lakebed. I could see Naenia and Parthenia waiting for me within the circle, energies already rippling in hazy rainbows around them. The triplet's boxes waiting at my sister's feet to complete the ritual. They just needed me.

As I leapt to clear the distance, pain lanced through my shoulder dropping me to the earth. I rolled into myself at the last second, protecting the child in my arms.

"I can't let you do that my Lady." The Keeper's cold voice rolled over me.

"You have no say in this." I replied struggling to rise.

Pain coursed through me distorting my vision. When I probed the wound with my magic I could feel traces of the Keeper's poison already working into my system.

He bent in close, his living robes writing and biting the air, trying to get closer to me.

"Look around Lady, you've lost." Keene's broken cry punctuated his words. The sound ripping my heart from my chest.

"Keene!" I cried attempting to get to him only to be cut off by the Keeper's robes. A wall of darkness flaring up in front of me.

“Looks like your pet won’t be coming to your aid this time.” He snarled, raising the sword above his head, pointing down as if to stab through us.

I turned away as he brought it down, too afraid to watch the final act. The sound of metal clashing and lack of pain encouraged me to open them again. Monette stood over me. The King’s blade held against her shoulder as she’d blocked the Keeper’s attack, with a grunt she shoved him away from us a couple of steps.

“Get up Thesa.” She said and in her voice I heard Amaleigh.

I scrambled to stand the two of us facing down the Keeper, shifting the child in my arms I called my magic to my aid. Lilac energy swirled down my free arm.

“You failed before. You will fail now.” I said releasing the magic to catch him where his heart should be and throw the Keeper into the throng of war behind him.

Without waiting Monette and I turned towards my sisters and sprinted with all we were worth. Nae and Parthenia had been able to float out onto the stump but I couldn’t with Tesa in my arms. I’d have to brave the jump. Monette watched in horror as I stepped back a couple paces and launched myself over the void, the darkness of the lake rising up ahead of me too fast. Bracing myself I felt my foot land on something smooth.

Looking down a single white stone had risen to meet my foot.

With a grateful smile I jumped the last bit into the circle with Tesa in my arms, the magic my sisters had raised a gentle ripple over my skin as I passed through their lines. They stood arms out and magic radiating off them in the oranges and pinks of the sun’s rise and set. I set Tesa down beside me, the noises of the war far beyond us now as I stepped up to join my sisters. The purples of my magic joining in with theirs dancing in the sky above us.

It's time.

The Voice that had started all this whispered in my ear. The encouragement all I needed to let go and find myself back in the space between space. This time I stood on an island of light amid a writhing sea of dark water. My magic's glow is not enough to penetrate beyond my island's perimeters.

"You were a fool to come to this space. You barely understand while I've spent generations learning." The Keeper's snide tone cut through the silence of the world between worlds and was honestly getting on my nerves.

With a stomp of my foot a pulse of light flashed around me pushing back the oppressive force I was feeling from the Keeper who'd yet to fully appear.

"You know, I'm really tired of you telling me what I shouldn't or can't do. Last I checked, you don't have power over me."

The Keeper laugh was like the falling of headstones, loud and mournful.

"No power? Child I exist in every heart that walks this land. Every mortal will fall to me in time. Hate grows too quickly in the heart for anything else."

"You're wrong."

I thought of those I loved. Those I knew stood beside me when hate should have been much stronger. Who continued to fight beside me now when hate would be the easy answer. I thought about my sisters who welcomed me back with open arms and grudging smiles. I thought about Monette a new and old friend wrapped in one who'd helped without question. To the triplets gone but always in my heart and the niece now in my care. I thought of Amaleigh and her strength, her friendship to me over the years. To Brekan and the pain I felt over what our choices turned him into.

And to Keene, the man I was beginning to admit I may love. Who I'd cursed into a beast and still found it in his heart to hold my hand and make sure it was ok. That was the true power of humanity, the ability to love beyond reason.

"You're wrong." I said again, louder this time as I pulled my family and loved ones into this space along with me. Their love and support adding to my strength. Their light and magic swirling together as we acted as one to bind the Keeper.

The bright oranges and pinks of my sisters mixed with the crimson stained gold of Brekan. Monette's sky-blue magic blended with Amaleigh's oxidized copper, the green light and playful. Keene's wood and starlight mixed with the triplets rolling energies that spread out into the boxes that surrounded us with threads of silvery light. In my mind I gathered the strands together, the connections that bind us all and move us through life and cast them out like a great net over the Keeper's energy.

"You say you live in every heart. Then every heart shall be your prison."

I pulled and the energy net pulled tight around the Keeper.

"Never again shall you know freedom as every connection made in love shall further bury your hate."

I spoke with an authority beyond my own but knew to be true. The final act of the World Tree was moving through us now. Channeling the love, I felt for the world around us I poured it all into the final spell, whispering,

"Forevermore."

When I opened my eyes, I could only see Nae's worried face looking down at me. The moon and starless sky hanging overhead.

“Did it work?” I asked, attempting to rise and look around.

We still sat on the stump but now the poisoned lake had turned to solid onyx. The black stone reflecting the brilliance of the moon above. Beyond that the war had seemingly ended. The animals and creatures of the woods returned to their homes. It didn’t look like Brekan or his new Coraguarde had stuck around after the Keeper’s banishment.

“You did it!”

Keene whooped yanking me up into his arms and planting a kiss on my lips. He let go of me quickly and we stumbled apart. Whistles and hoots came from the girls behind us as I pulled him to me and kissed him back. All the love in my heart expressed in that moment.

“Thank you.” I said against the skin of his neck.

We had survived. I could feel the tug of my magic in my core and knew that magic had been renewed. It would take a new shape as we learned and found those to use the boxes but finally we were on the right track to something better.

“Hungry!” Tesa shouted suddenly, eliciting a round of laughter from the rest of us.

Naenia scooped her up and Parthenia swung her arm around Monette’s shoulders.

“Come then little one,” Nae said. “I know where we can get you something to eat.”

And together with love in our hearts we left the clearing for our little home on the edge of the woods.