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Tree Song

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TREE SONG

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Amie Elizabeth Case

December 2018

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TREE SONG

English

Missouri State University, December 2018

Master of Arts

Amie Elizabeth Case

ABSTRACT

The Grace that flows through the three realms is fractured, and it's Mauhiyn's fault. She is a Daughter, the only living and direct descendant of the line of women who are vessels for the Grace that sustains the realms in a state of perfect balance. Because Mauhiyn is the first Daughter unable to carry the Grace, she is blamed for the turmoil and darkness in the realms. King Darbrend of the western realm claims Mauhiyn's Grace is simply dormant, not absent. Mauhiyn is sent to King Darbrend with the hopes that his dark power will restore the Grace within her and heal the realms. But his secret intent to destroy the Grace entirely puts Mauhiyn in more danger than she's ever faced. Mauhiyn must find a way around what is expected of her, what is being forced upon her, and who she is to right the unbalance and protect the Grace from destruction. Through her suffering, Mauhiyn discovers that what was meant to break her, will set her free and bring restoration to the realms.

KEYWORDS: young adult, epic high-fantasy, coming of age, female protagonist, identity

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December 2018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their support during the course of my graduate studies:

To my husband Christopher for always loving and protecting me and for listening to me brainstorm at the oddest times and places.

To my committee, friends, and family for their honest critiques and encouragement.

To Valerie Turner, the wind beneath my wings and the fire beneath my feet—your minion extraordinaire thanks you greatly.

Above all, to my Lord and Savior for putting this story on my heart over and over again, even when I was determined it wasn't meant to be.

I dedicate this thesis to Roben, my Black Lab Newfoundland who pulls me back into the light even on the very darkest of days.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. John 1:5

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Tree Song is an epic high-fantasy story of Mauhiyn, a young woman who has lived her life in exile in a high mountain valley. She is a direct descendant from the angelic-elvish race that once inhabited the three realms that are now diverse, warring human realms. She is a Daughter, a line of women who are vessels for a Grace which sustains the realms in a state of perfect balance. This Grace for the land was a secret and cruel spell disguised as a blessing from the angelic-elvish race to men, and it has passed down through the line of Daughters for generations. Mauhiyn is the first Daughter who is unable to carry the Grace, and because she is not who she was born to be, the land has fallen into turmoil. Even though she cannot control her inability to bear the Grace, Mauhiyn has been rejected by her people since birth and removed from her status as a Daughter.

Because she appears worthless to her people, they use her as a pawn in their political schemes, exchanging her for peace with the western realm. King Darbrend of the western realm claims Mauhiyn's Grace is simply dormant, not absent. Furthermore, he claims to have the ability to restore it. Secretly, he intends to remove the Grace from the line of Daughters for his own power.

Mauhiyn will have to find a way around what is expected of her, what is being forced upon her, and who she is to right the unbalance and to keep the Grace away from King Darbrend. King Darbrend's actions, which were intended to cause great harm and destruction, are actually what gives Mauhiyn the chance to break free of the fractured Grace and bring restoration to the realms. *Tree Song* is a coming of age story that deals with parental neglect, abuse, identity, and perseverance in the face of adversity.

Three Prominent Christian Themes in *Tree Song*

While there is no mention of a God or religion in the book, *Tree Song* has strong Christian themes at the heart of the story. There are three prominent themes. The first is finding an identity in Christ and knowing the truth of who He says you are through Him versus who the world says you are. We see this theme clearly as Mauhiyn is denied her birth right as a Daughter, and, instead of being cherished, she is told she is worthless and broken. As she comes to learn her true identity, that she is not broken beyond repair, we see the theme of God calling us by name instead of calling us by our sin. The second theme is how God shows his strength through weakness, taking devastating circumstances and using them to strengthen and empower us for His glory and greater purpose. There are many echoes of this theme throughout the story, but perhaps the most obvious is King Darbrend's attempt to ruin Mauhiyn to obtain the Grace for himself. Through his unforgivably evil actions, Mauhiyn learns critical information she otherwise would never have understood. Because of the harm done to her, she is able to triumph.

The third Christian theme in *Tree Song* is the fall of man and ushering of sin into the world. When the angelic-elvish race cursed the realms, they disguised it as a gift and tricked the original Daughter into accepting the Grace. The Grace, though it brings beauty and balance to the realms, actually represents sin. It is a lie. The beauty is an illusion, and when King Darbrend fractures the Grace, its true nature begins to leach into the realms. The original Daughter, like Eve in the Bible, was deceived and allowed sin into the world. Mauhiyn, like Mary, is a second chance for the world.

We find Christian themes in other epic high-fantasies such as J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (2002). In the overarching story of *The Lord of the Rings*, the One Ring symbolizes

the sin of the world, Frodo Baggins symbolizes Jesus Christ, who bore that sin, and Gollum symbolizes the death and darkness that sin creates. The character Aragorn also symbolizes Jesus Christ in that he did not have to become King, but he was the only one who could save the race of men in Middle Earth. We also see Christ reflected in Gandalf who comes back from the grave until his task is done. Like *Tree Song*, in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, there is no mention of God or religion, in spite of the many obvious Christian themes.

***Tree Song* and the Epic High-Fantasy Genre**

Epic high-fantasy stories like *Tree Song* and *The Lord of the Rings* are often written in trilogies, have extensive backstories, and cover a timeline of several years. Epic high-fantasy is typically set in a world similar to our real world, but with significant rule changes and magical elements. This genre also oftentimes deals with deep internal conflict and good versus evil themes. *Tree Song* will be the first book in the *Daughter* trilogy. Though I have not developed my story world to even a fraction of the depth that Tolkien developed Middle Earth, I have a strong history and background for my characters that spans many generations before Mauhiyn's time. Similar to *The Lord of the Rings*, I have created my own names, though again, I have not gone to the depth of language creation that Tolkien reached. Whereas Tolkien created an entire language, in *Tree Song*, I only designate the use certain vowels to each of my three cultures in the names and words I create.

Tree Song covers the course of several years. It has a Tolkienesque atmosphere; however, the point of view is limited to one protagonist. This book has subtle, but key, magical elements, an extensive backstory, and a quest that requires Mauhiyn to grow into the person she was created to be so that good may triumph over evil. *Tree Song* focuses on complex internal

conflicts, rather than epic battle scenes. While originally I planned to write one book with little to no magical elements, in my world building, the magical elements leapt to the forefront of the story and are now deeply involved in every aspect.

Łaskiewicz (2017) discusses how fantasy narratives, like *The Lord of the Rings*, are full of enchanted forests and sacred trees that hold a prominent role in fantastical worlds. These trees often have original traits and functions. As the title suggests, a large part of *Tree Song* has become centered on trees, or *a tree* as we learn in the chapters I've written beyond the scope of this thesis. The sacred tree in *Tree Song* is critical to describing the fracturing and restoration of the spell and will also clarify Mauhiyn's purpose and identity.

The Writing Process for *Tree Song*

My writing process for *Tree Song* has been quite an adventure. I wrote the first draft of this book when I was sixteen years old but could not find a way to further develop the story beyond a rough sketch. Twelve years later in pursuit of my graduate degree, I finally overhauled my ideas and began the intensive world building I had long neglected. While the heart of this story has remained the same, only one line from the original draft has survived.

In preparing this thesis, I wrote and organized over nine hundred pages of scattered scenes, messy ideas, supporting outlines, character sketches and constellations, magical and cultural elements, histories, maps, and other world-building details. It was incredibly overwhelming to organize my work. I felt I could not even begin to write new drafts of the story until I understood the world I was creating. That took all of two years to figure out. In this process, my biggest hurdle was determining the details of my backstory. Jessica Page Morrell's *Between the Lines: Master the Subtle Elements of Fiction Writing* (2006), which studies well-

crafted fiction writing, discusses how backstory raises the stakes and expresses the innermost fears of the protagonist. Backstory also clarifies how a world works. In these key areas, I struggled with my plans for *Tree Song* throughout my writing process until I was able to rationally determine these details.

After I spent over a year brainstorming how my world operated, who my protagonist was, and my purpose for telling the story, I did not know how to organize my ideas. I tried outlines, but so many aspects of my world interconnected that a typical outline did not let me see everything clearly. At the suggestion of a friend, I used note cards to lay out each chapter with four main bullet points per chapter. This kickstarted my ability to layout the framework of my book. I was able to establish a solid timeline, evenly pace out my chapters, analyze the rising and falling of events over the course of the story, and to see any gaps in the layout.

From the note cards, I was then able to transfer that information into a traditional outline where I then began to piece together my scenes and details into their appropriate chapters. Once I had all of my notes organized into the outline, I could begin to write. I hesitated to write serious drafts without this outline because I didn't yet understand critical things about my character and her situation in this world. Without the outline, I struggled to find the voice of the story. Lack of a deliberate narrator was causing an inconsistent voice, and the story's pacing was off and unnatural. Once I decided who needed to tell the story and why, everything clicked into place and writing was a breeze.

Writing the draft from my outline was an interesting experience. It was as though I was piecing together a puzzle. The outline acted as completed edge pieces around the major chunks of the puzzle I had already placed. As I wrote, I filled in the missing pieces as necessary and was still able to maintain my organization and overall plan. Jeff VanderMeer's *Wonderbook: The*

Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction (2013), which details the stages and steps of fantasy writing, explains how the outline process I used was similar to a reverse outline. In a reverse outline, after completing a first rough draft, it is best to list each scene, every action in that scene, and then determine if the scene is truly necessary for the story, and, if so, what else is missing. Similarly to a reverse outline, I had a first rough draft, but I had to change so much of my story that while I wrote from an intricate, carefully planned outline, I did not deliberately go through my old draft and cut out what was no longer necessary. It was more of a total rewrite.

***Tree Song* and Other Female Protagonists**

While the heart of this story has remained the same as it was when I first wrote it twelve years ago, my intentions for *Tree Song* have drastically changed from the original draft, and the scope has grown tremendously. My original goal was to simply tell the story of a girl being traded away from her homeland, much like we see in Rebecca Tingle's *The Edge on the Sword* (2001) and Kristiana Gregory's *Eleanor, Crown Jewel of Aquitaine* (2002) wherein both of these historical fiction books, the young female protagonists are being traded away against their will to strengthen alliances between countries. These stories were set in Old England in the 800s and in France 1136 respectively, and while I was drawn to the time periods of these stories, I wished to add a more Tolkienesque feeling to my world. I was able to combine the idea of a young woman losing control of her life with magical elements in a world that retained a sense of authenticity from a time bygone. For Mauhiyn to regain control of her life, I've sent her on a quest in which she must sacrifice what she knows to be normal and good, such as we see in Rebecca Tingle's *Far Traveler* (2005), which is a sequel to *The Edge on the Sword*, and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (2002) epic high-fantasy trilogy. In these examples, we see quest as the driving

center of the stories. These quests demand all from the protagonists and require great and irreversible sacrifice. This is something that Mauhiyn will also face in her attempt to restore health to the three realms.

Conclusion

Because this thesis only contains the first few chapters of *Tree Song*, we do not see that Mauhiyn is about to be traded away against her will and that she is to undergo a torturous season at the hand of King Darbrend from the western realm. However, after she leaves her home, she will have greater problems than simply being homesick or forced into a marriage she doesn't want as in the above-mentioned stories. Her quest to right the wrongs done to her and the Daughters before her will lead her to victory through great suffering.

I am excited to continue writing this story in preparation for publication. One of the biggest things I learned in writing this thesis was to cut, cut, cut. Holding onto ideas, characters, storylines, and pretty sentences was a bad habit that had to go. As I wrote my final drafts, the most freeing and helpful thing I did was to delete *everything* that did not feel normal and right. Even if I was in love with that particular thing, if it was not good for the story or time, instead of hanging onto it "just in case," I deleted it and kept moving forward.

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TREE SONG

Prologue

They were being followed.

It was luck alone that Dayron noticed. The figure, a woman, her cloak stained and moldy, could have been mistaken for a woodland creature. Her cloak was one with the pines and aspens. He'd felt her watching them since dawn and had kept a nervous eye on the trees as his small company journeyed up the rough mountain road. He'd not noticed her until he'd glimpsed a small light. In her open palm, she held a single flower. Beneath the darkened forest, it glowed as brilliant as a scoop of snow from the sunlit mountain peaks.

He was no fool. Recognizing the light, he immediately spurred his company onward and reined his horse closer to the small girl in their midst. He was torn with the need to flee. Outrunning a woman on foot would be simple enough but doing so would be disastrous. It was illogical to fear what she carried. Illogical, but human, to associate the omen with the cure. There was no choice but to carry on as normal.

The young girl's small gray gelding tossed his head against her grip on the reins. Anxious, he pranced, tripping on the rock and roots of the neglected path. The horse rose on his hind legs in distress as the child's hold on the leather tightened.

"Easy, my lady...." Dayron drew his warhorse next to her and reached down to steady her hand. "He's nervous on the strange road. Soften your hands so you'll not hurt his mouth. When you hold the reins, imagine you're holding two small birds. You don't want to crush them, but you don't want them to fly away."

The young girl cast a confused glance up at her Grand Captain. "What's a bird?"

Dayron paused. He'd only meant to teach her to ride as his father had taught him. But she wouldn't remember the birds. They had been the first to disappear, as if they felt the darkness approaching and so fled in the night. If only the entire kingdom could seek such safety from the rot spreading through the mountains. In the three days they'd journeyed the Forgestorth road, Dayron and his guardsmen noted signs of decay. The pines and aspens were darker and more brittle than they had been in recent years. The color of the rocks, which a few years ago had been a soft blend of tans, pinks, and steel gray, now seemed to slowly be turning black, as though something strangled their inner lights.

"Birds were winged creatures. Some were fierce hunters larger than my reach." Dayron stretched his arm out to demonstrate as the girl watched intently. He continued, "Others were tiny enough to cup in your palm, and if you were kind to them, they'd sing you a sweet song."

The girl's pale expression turned wistful as it often did upon learning of the things she would never experience. Then, almost instinctively, she began searching the canopy of leaves arching over the grassy road. "What kind of song? Won't they make the trees sing again?"

Unease iced along Dayron's spine. It had not been the mountain birds flitting from branch to branch that made the trees once burst with song, but he saw how she could make that mistake. The birds were only drawn to the land where the Daughter's Grace flowed. The Grace itself brought the trees alive with their silvery, melodious song.

He hushed her. "Now is not the time, my lady."

This was exactly why he'd been forced to remove her from the King's city of Ceerbrynth. Over the years, he'd hidden much of her uncanny knowledge, but not enough. The things she said and the things she knew had already brought grief and turmoil to King Aeldyn's family. In return, the child's punishments had been severe, and though Dayron was certain she knew not

the danger of her words, he feared King Aeldyn's intolerance. At nine years old, the child was already past the age when she should have shown signs of having inherited the Daughter's Grace. The land, even in the realms to the east and west of Mimmairhyn, diminished as the child grew. Over the years since her birth, the forest animals were increasingly difficult to hunt, and the crops, though still edible, grew thin and dry. Most recently, conceiving new life had become a struggle for human and animal alike.

While the child's mother, grandmother, and every Daughter before her had been revered throughout the three realms as a living testament to the flourishing land and life, Dayron feared the unrest in the cities and villages. Ceerbrynth was wrought with whispers as to why the land was decaying under this child Daughter's years. Perhaps because she had no mother? No other Daughter had died while giving birth to the next Daughter. Had the illness that took Lady Gaelowynn cursed the child and therefore the lands? Perhaps killing the child would bring life back into the land? Or was it something beyond their control? From generation to generation, a single, natural element in the realms would flourish during a Daughter's years, magnifying the beauty and goodness in that element such as grass, fire, rain, soil, flowers, rivers, rock, wind, light, and even the creatures of the forests and fields. Perhaps, since no two Daughters had ever graced the same element, there were now no more elements left to flourish?

None knew the answer. Division within Mimmairhyn boiled and festered, and talk of war between the realms grew louder. Some who blamed the child for their ruin, called for her death, while those who believed she would eventually return the Daughter's Grace to the land were driven from Ceerbrynth for the sanctuary of villages.

Dayron would not leave the child in the hands of an increasingly frightened and divided city. His desperate suggestion that the child might acquire the Grace if she were kept where

generations of Daughters once lived, granted him King Aeldyn's favor to steal her away in the night. Dayron had no proof that being at her mother's castle Wayshofflyn would fix whatever was wrong with the orphan child, but at least King Aeldyn acknowledged it was their last hope.

The King had given him only a handful of guardsmen, who were each elderly beyond commendable skill. He allotted them one supply wagon, which creaked painfully over the grassy road, and a single replacement mount. Though it was a massive warhorse of very fine breeding, Dayron protested the animal's accompanying them, for it was a dangerous beast, having already killed multiple riders foolish enough to attempt mounting him. The young stallion had fought ferociously against the chains that tethered it to the wagon, but as the whips bit its hide, it had no choice but to be dragged along. Now, exhausted from days of struggle and the occasional repercussive lashing, it tugged fretfully at its chains, its dark bay hide foamy with sweat. At least, Dayron finally consented, if game in Wayshofflyn was as scarce as it was in Ceerbrynth, the beast would feed his company well.

They journeyed into a small clearing along the road. The men were quiet as their horses danced nervously beneath them. One guardsman motioned urgently to the trees just ahead. The mid-morning light shifted, and suddenly, the clearing was unhappily dim. Dayron glanced about for the woodswoman, but she was nowhere to be seen. The pines grew thick, the aspens colorless. The Forgstorth road was suddenly little more than a trail leading higher into the western mountains of Mimmairhyn. The guardsman motioned again.

Masking his worry, Dayron smiled down at the girl. "Remember, hands soft and keep your heels down—eyes up. Good girl."

She nodded, her narrow chin set in grim determination as she studied the overgrown road ahead. Dayron felt a surge of pride. Though she tried to sit tall and ladylike, she was visibly

tired. She'd never traveled this great of a distance, and a full-day's journey was yet before them. Her dawn-blue skirts draped over the saddle, and her hair tumbled down her slender back in a wild swoop of ashen curls. She was a miniature vision of her mother in every way. From her spirit and grit to her startling winter eyes, the resemblance made his heart ache. How different both their lives would be if Gaelowynn had lived.

The child's gelding whinnied and tossed his head. She cast a worried glance to Dayron, who keenly watched the forest. "Do we have to go this way?" she asked.

"There is but one way into the Wayshofflyn valley, and I'm afraid the trail will only get worse from here. But it's a good thing, it makes the valley the safest in Mimmairhyn. Do not fear."

Everything happened at once. The stallion snorted, rearing against his chains. The responding crack of a guardsmen's whip echoed through the trees, concealing the swift *schwoop!* of many arrows loosened into the clearing. Horses and guardsmen screamed as arrows pierced their bones. A wild cry rose from every side of the clearing as hooded men swooped upon them. The harsh clash of steel rang through the mountain side.

The child shrieked as her gelding stumbled, releasing a horrific groan as an arrow sank deep into his throat. Dayron drew his sword and hauled the child to the front of his saddle. His mount bolted forward but was instantly brought down in a rain of arrows. Dayron felt a hot tip plunge into the back of his shoulder where his armor was weakest. They went down with the horse, but, as they fell, Dayron twisted just enough to keep from crushing the child. The impact thrust the arrowhead through his shoulder, ripping through bone and tissue, piercing the front of his armor. White light burst in his vision as agonizing pain exploded through his body.

The child bawled, clinging to him. There were too many, and the strength of the guardsmen waned. Dayron's useless arms would not grasp his sword. Roaring, he staggered to his feet, dragging the child upright. The sickening, coppery scent of blood flooded the clearing as men cursed and shouted, landing heavy blows, swords sparking. In three strides, Dayron was behind the wagon. He had but one choice, and it was the worst of all he'd ever made.

The stallion, unharmed, danced in place. The beast would likely kill the girl, but crazed with its instinct to flee, Dayron hoped it wouldn't throw her until it had carried her well away. The child wailed and would not be removed from his waist. His arm felt numb and swollen to the point of bursting. Bellowing against the pain, he forced his grip on the girl's waist, ripped her from him, and tossed her astride the stallion's bare back.

The animal didn't have time to react to the new weight on its back as Dayron released its halter. For a moment, it hesitated at the freedom. Then, more arrows fell upon them. Miraculously, none touched the girl, but many punched through Dayron's armor. He reeled back in pain and fury. An arrow shot into the stallion's rump, entering and exiting the top of his hindquarter. The beast squealed and bolted up the road, tearing past the last of the falling guardsmen, carrying the child faster than any who could catch her.

"No! Dayron! No!" the child shrieked above the raging horrors of the clearing, but she was powerless to stop the thundering warhorse and clutched, terrified, to his dark mane.

Roaring, Dayron began to fight, but hooded men had left him to chase the girl. Dayron ran several strides before he stumbled and fell hard to the ground. His men screamed around him; they painted the pine needles red. Dayron rose again to his feet. He must follow her. But his eyes felt heavy, as though someone were crushing his skull. His arms hung limp at his sides. Blood coursed his body. He collapsed to his knees.

The girl's skirts billowed around her as she galloped onward to Wayshofflyn. Hooded men chased her, their arrows flying after her, but the stallion raced towards his freedom with nary a look back.

His vision blurring, Dayron saw a small light floating nearer.

No, he thought. Save her.

Far away now, the child shrieked Dayron's name.

Such a tiny thing. So much like her mother.

Chapter 1

The castle Wayshofflyn stood on a knoll at the west-most end of a high mountain valley. It guarded the entrance to the abandoned Rellswen Pass, which twisted west into the tallest and fiercest of the mountain peaks surrounding the meadow. The castle was small and would have been more accurately named an overly confident cottage were it not crafted of ancient stone and owning several high-topped towers. Flowerless and overwhelming, dark ivy climbed the crumbling walls. The windows, which had not been shuttered in the night, gaped narrow and black. No longer a cherished fortress, it appeared much like a child's rock creation with which the child had become frustrated and, in her temper, poked holes in it all over.

The dewy air still smelled of night as dawn burst into the sky behind the mountain peaks. Mauhiyn ran from the castle; her bare feet skimmed the damp ground as she dashed to the stable nestled at the foot of the knoll. Much like the castle, flowerless vines had long since overcome the stable's cracked stone walls and splintered beams. Beneath the overgrowth, ancient and unnoticed, an intricate leafing scrawled across the arched doorways and windows. Yet, despite its age, the low-roofed structure stood stubbornly against the strong mountain sun and winters.

As she ducked into the dim interior, the smell of horses, hay, and leather filled her nose. She breathed deeply for the first time that morning. The dirt aisle, which had been raked clean of straw the night before, felt soft and cool beneath her bare feet. This was the one place she felt completely at home. Hastily, she freed the knot at the back of her head and ashen curls tumbled to her waist. Freedom tingled across her scalp. Usually, she didn't dare let her hair down until she was well away from the meadow. Her hair had grown longer and darker in the last few years. To hide this, Lowynn, her Grand Lady, forced her to keep it bound in a heavy bun or thick braid down her back. But this morning, she felt sure she could escape unseen.

Light trickled through the windows in the stalls lining either side of the aisle. A few horses started from their slumber and gave a joyous whicker in hopes of breakfast. Since Arroh had yet to turn the horses out, they expected Mauhiyn to be so kind. They stretched their necks over the stall doors, imploring her with doleful eyes.

"Soon enough," she assured them, quietly, petting a few noses as she passed. Halfway down the aisle, there was a sharp kick against a wooden stall door. It trembled on its hinges, dust fluttering from the worn-polished edges. Mauhiyn steadied the door, whispering, "Quit it, Ursynn, he'll hear you!"

The massive warhorse swung his head around and whickered a deep hello. He lumbered to her, nudging her shoulder with his giant nose as if to say, *What took you so long?* She smiled, stroking his forelock and sculpted face. In the early light, his dark bay coat was little more than a shadow. His ears swiveled forward as he regarded her with stern eyes, softened only by dark lashes. He snorted, sharply, the noise rolling through the still morning.

Suddenly, sounds of jingling metal and discarded tools drifted from the workshop at the end of the stable. *Dog's breath!* Mauhiyn cursed. Why was he awake?

Arroh normally did his leathercraft and mending in the evenings. He must have squandered last evening on yet another half-stewed attempt to charm Ellewryn, the maid who both cooked and cleaned, therefore having little time for Arroh's nonsense. Mauhiyn cursed again. If he'd stop being brainless, he would complete his tasks on schedule and sleep when he ought to sleep. Now she must hurry.

Mauhiyn slipped into the tack room neighboring Ursynn's stall. Saddles, bridles, blankets, and trunks neatly lined the walls. It smelled of sweet grain, and leather, and dust, and dried horse sweat. Fumbling, she grabbed Ursynn's bridle, then dug underneath his saddle for the plums she'd smuggled from the orchard the day before. She'd hunted all afternoon and finally found a few fruit clusters at the top of a drooping tree. They were small, less than palm-size, but they were ripe and yellow under their blue skins. She felt a pang of guilt for not sharing the fruit, but she'd deliberately left her usual portion of halfwaef, traveler's bread, in the storeroom to make up for not sharing the plums. Carefully, she stuffed them into her satchel along with several handfuls of grain.

A breeze, sugary with the golds and reds of turning leaves, swept through the tack room window. It smelled of snow, though whether it was from the icy mountains or a building storm she couldn't tell. The sky was cloudless through the window, the stars slowly winking out as the sunrise strengthened. Pink and purple hues blazed against the cragged mountain peaks. It promised to be a sunny day; still, the air had a bite to it that seemed too soon for mid-autumn.

Mauhiyn hesitated at the doorway, listening. Arroh was still working, punching holes into leather with his awl. Though he had been her only friend since they were nine years old, if Arroh felt pressured, particularly by Dayron, he'd not hesitate to squeal where she'd gone.

Chirping softly for his attention, she entered Ursynn's stall and tossed the long, looped reins over his neck. He eagerly opened his teeth for the bit, delighted at the prospect of leaving his stall ahead of his friends. Mauhiyn stretched on her toes as she struggled to reach his ears. He stomped, and she had to dance away, fearful his massive hoof would cripple her bare feet. She growled in frustration. If only Lowynn allowed boots during the warmer months, she wouldn't be in constant danger working around the horses. But boots lasted twice as long if they were only used half the year, and Lowynn refused to allot her another pair. If Lowynn hoped this would eventually keep her out of the stables, she was grossly mistaken.

"If you lowered your head, I could do this faster," Mauhiyn grumbled, finally slipping Ursynn's ears one-by-one through the crown of the bridle. He was so tall, it was easier for Mauhiyn to walk under his belly than to reach up to the gentle slope of his back. She stretched on her tip-toes in the straw to brush bits of dust from his back. Her fingers rippled over the odd indentation in the top of his left hindquarter. The arrow had left its scar but had done little to slow Ursynn over the years.

Dayron had not been as lucky. The arrows Dayron took that day so long ago, had crippled the Grand Captain's once unmatched skill with a blade. He never complained, but Mauhiyn knew his wounds still grieved him terribly. Weeks after the ambush, a woodswoman had delivered Dayron to Wayshofflyn. They'd thought him dead, and had she not found him, he would have been. Mauhiyn gave Ursynn an extra pat. If the cantankerous beast hadn't fled with her on his back, she would have died with the guardsmen in that clearing. Instead, she had arrived in Wayshofflyn, unconscious, still astride Ursynn only because her hands had knotted in the horse's mane from which she had to be cut free.

Mauhiyn bunched her skirts and gathered the reins and a handful of the coarse black mane that waterfalled from Ursynn's neck. In one running leap, she hooked her heel on the top of his rump and scrambled astride his bare back. She adjusted her skirts, pulling the crudely woven folds high—scandalously high—above her knees so her legs would touch Ursynn's sides unencumbered. Her faded emerald gown draped heavily along the edge of the rough weave of her shift. She could scarcely tell the embroidery from mending-stich, and she no longer noticed the stains and tattered hems.

Suddenly, Mauhiyn realized the sounds of Arroh's leather crafting had quieted.

She gasped and locked eyes with the tall figure blocking the stall door. His shockingly blond hair tied at the nape of his neck accentuated the narrow angle of his jaw, and his lanky build was only magnified by the obvious suggestion that he was accustomed to poor or no meals.

Fingers fisted, arms crossed, Arroh tilted his head to the side. "Good morning, beautiful. Happy birthday."

"Arroh," she warned. No thanks to him, she'd almost forgotten what day it was.

"Were you going to invite me?"

She paused. In the morning light, his pale, azure eyes were glowing stars. She would welcome his company as long as he didn't pester her with annoying suggestions such as, "Since it's your birthday, you should be generous and share the plums you've smuggled." As someone who loved his birthday, she knew he didn't understand that to her, every congratulatory *Happy birthday* was just the same as *Happy day-your-mother-died-bringing-you-into-the-world-so-you-could-fail day*.

As she asked, she knew the answer, "Would you come with me if I did?"

“No.” He flashed her a smile, and she suddenly felt as though he’d thrust several birds under her ribs. They beat their wings in a panic to break free.

Birds.

Why had she thought of birds, of all things? She knew of them, but she’d never seen one in all her life.

Arroh ran a bony-fingered hand over Ursynn’s neck as the horse stirred the straw bedding with an impatient hoof. “You know Dayron’s orders, Mauhiyn.”

“Oh, you heard about that?”

He grinned. “I did.”

Mauhiyn shot him a scowl. He was definitely going to be trouble. She tamped down her frustration. She didn’t have time for this. “If you’re so worried, come with me—but I’m going whether you tell on me or not.”

The lines on his high forehead deepened. “It’s not a good idea, Mauhiyn. Stay in the valley until we can figure out if the rumors are true.”

Her brows sprang up. “We? As if you’ll have anything to do with it. Since when are you a guardsman?”

She shifted her gaze from the hurt that immediately flickered in Arroh’s eyes. Worked to the bone from a very young age, he’d never had the chance to train as a guardsman. Though Dayron had personally ensured Arroh was capable of defending himself, Mauhiyn was almost certain Dayron had also ensured that Arroh’s place had always been, and always would be, the Keeper of Horses.

Finally, Arroh said, “Maus, you don’t know.”

“Don’t know what? You’re *always* telling me I don’t know. So, if I don’t, then tell me! What have you got to say?”

The apple in Arroh’s throat bobbed wildly as he swallowed. He stared into her eyes as though he could will her to read his mind. But, after a long moment, he stepped aside and motioned her out.

“Just go,” he said, not looking at her. “But don’t ride so hard; you’re going to break your neck one of these days, you know.”

Tentative, Mauhiyn squeezed her calves to Ursynn’s warm sides. The horse lurched forward, narrowly grazing past Arroh.

“You know where I’ll be!” Mauhiyn called over her shoulder as Ursynn trotted to the end of the stable.

Arroh wouldn’t come. Part of her wished he would, but she knew better. As of last night, Dayron had forbidden anyone to ride beyond the meadow, and Arroh would obey him. She would never understand that about him. Dayron had raised them both, the fallen Daughter and the orphan stable boy, close as brother and sister. When he was younger, Arroh had never hesitated to join Mauhiyn against Dayron’s orders. However, in recent years, he cowered to Dayron’s authority, ducking out of rides, and flinching at Mauhiyn’s antics.

It was probably for the best he wouldn’t follow today. She worked faster when he wasn’t around to tease her. If the weather was any indication, she had mere days to finish the harvest before the first frost.

Whisking through the doorway, the sunrise flooded over Mauhiyn and Ursynn at full strength. The Wayshofflyn meadow stretched from east to west. A river meandered the length of the valley. Surrounding the long meadow on all sides, mountains rose high into the morning sky.

Snow capped the cragged peaks, painted with the pinks, purples, oranges, and brilliant reds. Pines roared in the wind, carrying the sound from far off mountains to sweep the valley laden with the wild, cold scent of snow.

Mauhiyn turned Ursynn west and let him run.

Shadows of dragonflies scatted from the gold-tipped grasses as Ursynn's hooves shook the meadow like quick thunder. He bucked once, twice, three times, joyous to leave the crumbling stable behind. Mauhiyn sank deep into the rippling muscles of his back, squeezing the reins threaded between her fingers. She tightened her calves around his sides, urging him on. They swept past the castle, and Lowynn's unmistakable shriek erupted from the door near the kitchens. Mauhiyn galloped on. Let Lowynn do her worst, Mauhiyn thought bitterly. Whatever punishment awaited her upon return, she cared not. She was free, and none could match Ursynn's swift stride.

Sunshine sparkled off the river just ahead. The dark water glided between grassy banks, slowing at the turns and rippling across polished pebbles. Ursynn didn't slow. They plunged from the bank into the swollen current, and the water waved up like a curtain of crystal beads, drenching Mauhiyn's legs. Snowmelt kept the water icy year-round. It darkened Ursynn's coat and beaded in his mane, shimmering. Mauhiyn stretched her legs around Ursynn as he leaped and lunged through the water. In one, two, three, strides, Mauhiyn leaned forward as he gathered his power and sprung again, propelling them onto the far bank.

They sprinted on, west, where the cragged Rellswen mountains towered above the Mimmairhyn ranges. Ursynn did not tire as they swept into the pine forest ablaze with reds and yellows from the changing aspens. They raced alongside the river, rising through the darkened ferns and moss, gaining in altitude with each powerful stride. Here, the river turned violent,

crashing over boulders, tumbling through the narrow canyon in the crevasse of the mountains. The sunrise gleamed pink off the dark water.

Guilt pulsed within her. Dayron would be furious if he found out she'd journeyed up the Rellswen Pass. Even when he hadn't commanded the small population of Wayshofflyn to remain in the meadow, he hated when Mauhiyn snuck away. The Rellswen Pass was untouchable, wild, and Mauhiyn had felt its calling all her life. It was more than a wanderlust that drew her, for she did not want for adventure. She'd ridden Ursynn beneath every tree within a day's ride of the castle. She'd even ridden more than half a day into the Pass before an eeriness clutched her heart and chased her home. Her yearning for the Rellswen mountains was more than curious desire to visit the fern valley along the river, or the bountiful grasses in the hidden upper meadows. It was more than a need to know where the river was birthed or to taste the snow gleaming blindingly above the tree line. She could never explain the physical pull she felt, as though the Pass drew at the threads of her chest, insistently tugging her near.

To ease the threat of Dayron's wrath in her mind, she reminded herself she was still in Mimmairhyn. It wasn't as though she were crossing the border into the western realm. And at certain points in the canyon, she could look down upon Wayshofflyn and still feel at home, so, technically, in a round-about way, she was abiding by her promise to stay within sight of the castle. She didn't understand why Dayron was so paranoid, anyway. No one other than the yearly tradesmen from Ceerbrynth or a few villagers ever ventured to Wayshofflyn. Still, Dayron seemed to think there was something to the rumors that bands of Headourflane rangers from the east had ventured this far south into Mimmairhyn. Even so, Wayshofflyn was perfectly secure. Nothing would pass the guardsmen at the eastern neck of the meadow where the Forgstorth road began. Besides, she was headed west towards Rellswen, not east. Mauhiyn felt perfectly safe

alone with the trees and the wind and the water. No one had used the Pass to travel between the realms of Mimmairhyn and Rellswen since before her mother's time as Daughter. Though the Pass was now little more than a deer trail, it hummed with the secrets of travelers bygone.

Mauhiyn gripped her knees to Ursynn's warm sides and hovered over his neck as he clambered up onto a slab of rock protruding above the river. She could feel his muscles gathering beneath her as he carefully placed each giant hoof on the moss-pocked slab of gray. In one swift lunge, they were atop the rock and facing the next stage of the deer path that wound up the canyon. He huffed steamy breath through his large nostrils. The dark river tumbled next to them, roaring, drowning out the sound of the wind in the pines above. The river here was violent, crashing wildly into the boulders standing in its way.

Mauhiyn looked down the mountain from where she came. The river meandered like a silver thread through the long meadow that stretched eastward between the mountain ridges to the north and south. She was pleased that the autumn leaves still set the mountains ablaze. Somehow, she felt that by next year they would be colorless. In the magic of the morning, Mauhiyn could almost pretend that the mountains weren't discolored by the discreet darkness growing deep in the core of each pine needle and blade of grass. Each year the mountains faded just a bit more. Each year, something else was gone, dried by the black, chalky dust that seemed to come from within. It was said that once something in the realm had died, new roots, black as an abyss, rich and powerful, took hold of the earth in its place. The darkness was coming to her home, Wayshofflyn, the last corner of Mimmairhyn untouched by the decay. It was only a matter of time.

Mauhiyn turned Ursynn away from the river, moving north into the forest. Dread gripped her heart as they walked on. In the thrill of the ride, she'd almost forgotten what awaited her.

But, she thought, steeling herself, today she didn't have time to spare. With harvesting days numbered, the kitchen storeroom couldn't afford for her to lose focus. Not today.

She let Ursynn carefully pick his way through the rocky, broken trail. At age eleven, two years after she'd first come to Wayshofflyn from the King's city of Ceerbrynth, Mauhiyn had found faint remains of a path, now a broken, overgrown trail, which lead to an upper meadow. She'd followed the secret trail, knowing every turn as if she'd journeyed it hundreds of times before. Dayron had tried everything short of chaining her in the dungeon of the castle to keep her from the meadow. As she grew older, he relented, only if she agreed never to go there alone. They both knew she'd broken that rule too many times to count, and they both said not a word about it.

Soon, she reached the edge of the small, steep meadow overlooking the border between Mimmairhyn and Rellswen. Mountains stretched as proud blue shadows beyond sight into the north. Meadows, rivers, and forests adorned the land, though even from a distance, Mauhiyn could see they were graying, darkening every day. A silence clung to the slow-withering land. The rivers were empty, and the pines lacked the fresh green of those closer to the Wayshofflyn meadow. The aspens bore no leaves. A mirthless wind swept the thin grass.

Then, it came from the west edge of the meadow where the brittle pines were darkest.

A baby's cry.

A sad, lonely sound.

Mauhiyn scanned the deep shadows that not even the strong, noontday sun could light.

No. Not today.

She forced herself to wait. The stillness of the forest stretched as the cry echoed back from the mountain rising high and jagged behind the stream gliding at the feet of the dark trees.

Ursynn shifted beneath her. He pricked ears forward and tugged impatiently against the reins. He hadn't heard the cry; he never did. He was only anxious for the sweet meadow grasses spread out before them, moving gently in the sudden breeze

The cry came again, louder this time, carried on the dull wind sweeping up from the north plains below. Mauhiyn's chest tightened miserably. As always, a desperate longing to take the babe in her arms swelled within her and crashed against her ribs. The feeling was purely instinctual. Mauhiyn had never seen a baby, let alone held one. Still, the cry tore at her soul.

No.

She bit the insides of her cheeks until she tasted blood.

The cry came louder, tormenting.

Mauhiyn swung her leg over Ursynn's back and dropped to the ground. Her fingers shook as she removed his bridle and set him free to graze. He trotted off at once, starved for the healthy green shoots that no longer grew in the valley below. Mauhiyn waited, her feet felt rooted with the grass where she stood. She balled her skirts in her fists to stop her hands from shaking.

No.

She would not look for the babe, not this time. Not even for a moment.

Chapter 2

Every time Mauhiyn visited the meadow, it was the same. Helpless to stop herself, she always searched the dark forest, frantic to find the abandoned infant. But she was not to be found. Mauhiyn knew the search was in vain, but rarely since she first found this meadow did she have the courage to refuse the call.

Not today. No more. She may loathe her birthday, but Mauhiyn reasoned, at nineteen, she should at least be old enough not to chase an echo. She'd been eleven years old the first time she'd followed the Rellswen Pass to this meadow, the first time she'd heard the baby crying. She'd been beside herself with grief. How long had the poor babe squalled for rescue? Who would abandon such a wee thing? And, most of all, who had given birth when no baby had been born in ten long years? Mauhiyn could not find the babe, though its cry echoed all around her, in her. It was well past midnight when Dayron had finally found her, tear soaked and hysterical, racing back and forth through the dark forest at the meadow's edge.

"There is no baby. You're hearing things!" Dayron had shaken her shoulders so hard her teeth rattled.

"I heard her, Dayron. She's here."

"Who?" Dayron had asked, familiar unease flickering across his face in the moonlight. He'd known what she wouldn't say. *My mother. Me. I remember.*

But when she couldn't answer, he'd warned, "Say nothing of this to anyone. Say you were lost."

Mauhiyn had wanted to scream for him to understand. *My mother! Me! I remember!* But the caution in Dayron's bright azure eyes had made her bite her tongue. She'd known this was once her mother's meadow. As well, she'd known it was no mere chance that Dayron could follow her trail even at night. He, too, had traveled it a hundred times. She *remembered*. She *knew*. Just as she knew Dayron had loved her mother, just as she knew her mother had met a man with dark hair in the meadow, she knew the baby's cry was her own.

Dayron had scooped her into his arms and carried her to his horse. “You must say nothing of this to anyone,” he’d warned again, forcing her to look at him. Weeping in sorrow and exhaustion, the baby’s cry still in her heart, she’d nodded.

Dayron worried more and more after that day. Often, when Mauhiyn shared her memories, he paced and rubbed the blond stubble on his chin. He’d forbidden her to ride until he returned after an undetermined number of days. If she ever uttered the words *I remember*, he flinched. So, she’d learned to keep her memories to herself.

But that first time she’d heard the baby, she’d been so distraught that when he’d left her in her Grand Lady’s care, she couldn’t hide her inner turmoil. When Lady Lowynn pressed her in question, Mauhiyn could not tell a lie, no matter the punishment. Without Dayron around to check her cruel nature, Lowynn had locked Mauhiyn away in an ancient herb cabinet. She still smelled the musty stone floor and the ancient wood. The herbs had long since dried, useless. No one had replenished them for almost a decade. It was a forgotten cabinet. Forgotten by all but Mauhiyn. And Lady Lowynn. The silver light that had threaded through the door latch had faded as night approached, gripping Mauhiyn in darkness. Darkness had never bothered her, but small spaces did. Thinking of the cabinet brought terrible shadowed memories. Cold, empty feelings swarmed inside her. She’d had no air nor room to turn her head in the hard, unforgiving space.

At last, the babe’s cry weakened, then on the wind, vanished. Mauhiyn took several large breaths until the urge to seek the infant lifted from her. There. She could breathe again.

Mauhiyn waded through the grass across the meadow. She skimmed her palms across the tops of the grasses, brushing wildflowers here and there. Joy sped through her veins. Of all the wondrous places surrounding her home, this was her most favorite. Here, the grasses grew undisturbed, flourishing. Green touched the roots of the long golden stalks, showing new growth

that even the Wayshofflyn valley couldn't boast. Despite the meadow's rich potential, no one else ventured here. Most were afraid of the Pass and saw little value in a laborious climb for a meager harvest of roots. For the small band of inhabitants at Wayshofflyn, the baby's cry—even though only Mauhiyn could hear it—was enough to keep everyone away. In fact, most at Wayshofflyn would refuse to eat the harvest Mauhiyn supplied if they knew where she foraged.

As Mauhiyn picked her way through the meadow, her trained eye paused on a snow-white flower nestled deep within the grass. The joy she felt froze in her veins. It nearly glowed in the shadow of the grassroots. It was small; its five, pointed petals barely spanned the width of her hand. She didn't dare touch it, but if it was indeed what she feared it was, she must.

Quickly, she withdrew her knife from her satchel. It was heavy in her hand. The polished white-bone grip was silky to touch. For generations, this knife had been used to gather herbs. Her mother had held it, and her mother before her, and her mother, and so on. It was supposed to remain in the herb cabinet, but once after Lowynn had cruelly used it to threaten her, Mauhiyn had elected to keep it in her satchel where it couldn't be turned against her.

Carefully, she studied the blade. Tiny white flowers etched along the length of the thin steel matched the flower perfectly.

It was just as she feared.

An ithirmil flower.

Her heart racing, Mauhiyn cast her gaze around the meadow. Ursynn grazed peacefully, and now and then the shadow of a dragonfly would dip and dart across the grass. All else was quiet, safe, but a chill coursed through her. Ithirmil, the healing flower, only bloomed in snow, moonlight, and rain—or if someone would have dire need of its healing abilities within a day. Often, guardsmen would come across an Ithirmil the night before a battle. It was both a curse

and a blessing. The omen that they would be mortally wounded also gifted them with a chance of healing, to stop the flow of blood. Dayron had been saved by such a flower after the hooded men left him to die in the clearing on the Forgstorth road. While Dayron himself had not crossed an Ithirmil before the battle, the woodswoman who found him had. She'd saved him, delivered him to Wayshofflyn, then disappeared.

Mauhiyn trembled as she knelt to pluck the flower head from the stem. Either by sunlight or the flower itself, the petals gleamed as white as the snow-topped mountains. It had no scent and was surprisingly heavy in her hand. She wanted nothing more than to hurl it away, far away. Was she to be attacked? Was someone she loved to be killed? Never did the ithirmil needlessly present itself. If it was here, then she would need it. Soon.

Checking her surroundings again, she felt sure that she was alone. For now at least, she could work in safety. She shouldn't let the fear of the flower keep her from the harvest that the people at Wayshofflyn would need this winter. If she had the ithirmil, that meant that with its help, all would be well.

Still wanting nothing more than to cast it way, she pocketed it within her satchel and moved forward with a shaky, trembly feeling in her stomach. She felt now that something was about to change and there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

She made her way to a patch of *brehdroot*. The flowers dangled limply from their stalks, pale, blue, and dry. They smelled sharply, spicy in contrast to the bland taste of the root. The stems of the roots bore large, waxy leaves larger than her hands. She bundled the leaves together with strips of leather. Ellewryn would soak them in brine to store for winter soups. Mauhiyn's mouth watered at the thought of warm broth. She hadn't eaten since yesterday morn. She'd wait a while still before eating her plums. She needed to last as long as she could without sustenance.

She began digging with her fingers through the thin soil to the roots and severed a spongy bulb with her blade. It should have sliced crisply. But it had been a year since the roots were little more than edible, even in the meadow. A healthy root tasted wonderfully with just about everything, especially when one of the guardsmen shot a deer. The roots should have been almost sweet in flavor, crisp and crunchy when raw and smooth and milky when boiled. But the decay made them spongy. They absorbed the taste of musty soil. But for now, they would fill the bellies of both horse and human. For that, she was grateful.

Mauhiyn gathered the roots and lay them out to dry.

Mauhiyn listened carefully as she worked. The sun was warm on her back. The wind quiet, empty. Though she was glad not to hear any more of the baby's cry, the silence didn't bring her the relief she sought. Her thoughts begun to turn against her will. It always seemed to happen when she was here. Despite how she loved this meadow, the darkness from the forest seemed to seep into her mind. She knew the decaying land was her fault. Lowynn reminded her daily that had she received the Daughter's Grace through mother Gaelowynn, they would not be living off roots, exiled in the most remote corner of the kingdom. If she had received the Daughter's Grace, there would be no famine. No death. No cause for war. All because nineteen years ago on this day, Mauhiyn wasn't born as who she was supposed to be.

It shamed Mauhiyn to look down from the meadow, but she couldn't help it. Perhaps, if she looked at the decay long enough, she would know why her mother's Grace never passed to her. The pull she felt to the Rellswen Pass and this meadow confused her, for it was here where she felt most damaged, most worthless. The colorless world spanning below the mountain was a sharp reminder of who she should be but wasn't. She had no idea what she'd done to bring about the gradual decay which plagued the realms since her birth, and she certainly had no idea how to

fix it. Everywhere in the Mimmairhyn, the trees, grass, roots—all growth—were darkening by the year. Even the rocks seemed dulled. Below the meadow, the land turned gray. No children had been born anywhere in the three realms since Mauhiyn was nine years of age. Trade with the King's city of Ceerbrynth for what they at Wayshofflyn couldn't forage, make, or grow was becoming more and more costly. Wayshofflyn's only savior was its ability to breed horses, which flourished unlike any others because of the once rich meadowland. But three years ago, the mares stopped giving birth, almost as if they knew the decay would soon spread through the valley. Herds of deer and elk thinned without young, and the rivers flowed barren.

Except for here. Here in this meadow, the grass grew. The trees in full bloom turned gold and red as the sunsets as autumn deepened. Once when she asked, Dayron admitted this meadow had been her mother's favorite. He even agreed with Mauhiyn's belief that somehow her mother's Grace lingered here. Her mother's element had after all been grass. In Gaelowynn's time as Daughter, grass in Mimmairhyn, Rellswen, and Headourflane alike flourished beyond all dream. Such as it was for Mauhiyn's grandmother and every Daughter before her. No two Daughters shared the same element. In their time, the element of the land, be it grass, water, fire, leaves, birds, deer, and other would flourish in celebration of the Daughter's life while she lived.

All Daughters except for Mauhiyn.

The people used to hope that her element would be horses. She loved them so, and they her. The people had long ago given up hope.

Mauhiyn worked for several hours. The silence which filled the meadow quieted her soul. At least here the stillness was comforting, safe. Everywhere else, it set a great unease in her heart. It was as though a bit of Gaelowynn's soul lingered between the grassroots, hidden beneath the green blades along the musty, wild soil. But her soul must be lonely here, Mauhiyn

thought. For where once there lived tiny creatures among the grass, there were now none. Just as there were no flying things in the air. Mauhiyn missed the dragonflies that flitted around the meadow only last summer. She'd seen not one this year. But their shadows she saw constantly, as though their memory darted through the sunny air, refusing to leave.

The darkness was spreading.

And while the brittle decay seeped down from the north like tea spilled from a cup, Mauhiyn could still hear the bees zipping from flower to flower. She caught glimpses of winged shadows from dragonflies and birds soaring across the meadow. She heard their songs in the trees, but like the baby who cried, Mauhiyn could never see or find them. Not in her life had she seen a bird with her own eyes.

Suddenly, Ursynn startled and swung his head up to look over Mauhiyn's shoulder. Her blood froze in her veins. Someone was approaching.

She looked back, but she was still alone. *Dog's breath!* Why hadn't Arroh come with her? What if Dayron's command to stay near the castle had been founded on something more substantial than rumors?

Then, Ursynn nickered *Hello* around a mouthful of grass. A tall chestnut mare emerged from the forest on the same trail Mauhiyn had followed. She released the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding.

"I thought you weren't coming?" Mauhiyn concealed her sudden relief. Standing, she brushed her hands on her skirt.

Arroh scowled. "I yelled for you to wait up."

Mauhiyn's mouth twitched. "I must not have heard you."

Arroh scoffed as he slid from his mare's bare back and sent her off to graze with Ursynn.

“You heard me, Maus.” He plucked a blade of grass, which he promptly mashed between his teeth. “Though I guess Lowynn was screeching loudly enough.” He planted his knuckles on his narrow hips and looked down at her. She met his scowl, standing as tall as possible but couldn’t challenge his height. He grinned, displaying how the blade of grass fit perfectly where a side tooth had been knocked out one day when Ursynn hadn’t been particularly pleased with him. It wasn’t Arroh’s fault. Ursynn was often displeased with everyone but Mauhiyn.

“I’m sorry I was cross earlier,” she said, brushing her hands clean on her skirt.

“You’re always cross with me. It wounds me deeply,” he told her.

“It does not.”

“Here,” he laughed. “This is for you. Happy birthday.”

Before she could protest, he retrieved from his pocket a small brick of soap. “There’s more hidden in the tack room. I had Ellewryn make it.”

“Oh, Arroh!” Her protest forgotten, she cupped the soap to her nose. It smelled of the meadow wildflowers, spicy and sweet and pure. Arroh had to have snuck up the Rellswen Pass without her to retrieve the flowers. He barely tolerated the meadow when he had to chase her there. How he must have hated going alone. But he’d known how she longed for scented soap. Lowynn had never allowed such a luxury, especially not for a Daughter as undeserving as Mauhiyn.

Arroh fidgeted. “I know you don’t like today, but some of us are glad you’re here.”

She offered him a reassuring smile. “I’ll never use it,” she promised.

He laughed. “But that’s the point.”

“But I want it to last forever. It’s like holding the meadow in my hand. I can take it with me wherever I go.” She looked at him with her heart in her eyes.

His eyes were a warm blue. “You’re welcome.”

“Thank you!” She laughed and threw her arms around his waist and squeezed. Chuckling, he wrapped his lanky arms around her and spun her about as he had when they were young. Laughing, he set her down, but kept her in his arms a moment longer. She breathed, content. Arroh never made her feel wrong. Unlike every other person she’d ever met, he had never once made her remember things she didn’t understand. With Arroh, Mauhiyn could relax in peace. The things she could never tell anyone, the things she somehow knew, she trusted Arroh never to tell. And he didn’t.

“Did you hear anything today?” he asked, looking to the sky, hopefully. He never heard anything, or saw the winged creatures’ shadows, but he felt rather special to know she did.

She turned to the stream. Not until he fell into step beside her did she nod.

“Did—”

“I didn’t look,” she said, darkly. She knew he meant well, but his support was only carefully cloaked worry. She knew Arroh couldn’t always decide if he should be severely concerned for her, or if he should admire her oddities. She didn’t like discerning whether he asked out of genuine curiosity or to merely appear supportive.

“Don’t do that, Maus. You know I believe you, yes?” He tugged her hair.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

A stream trickled along the meadow’s edge. It wasn’t nearly as wide as the river at Wayshofflyn, but it pooled cold and deep. She stripped down to her shift and dove into the pure water. The initial plunge was always shocking since snowmelt kept the water icy year-round. As she surfaced, a loud splash cascaded over her. Arroh emerged next to her, “You know, we really should be getting back.”

The pool wasn't very deep. She could stand on tip-toes and keep her head comfortably above the water. She lay back and let the water hold her afloat as she paddled further into the pool, "We have at least an hour before sunset."

Mauhiyn knew better than to tease Arroh for wanting to return to Wayshofflyn before dark. Night was falling sooner each day, and not because of winter's approach. Everyone was growing more wary of the darkness and the moon which stayed in the sky from early dusk through late morning every day. Mauhiyn seemed to be the only one who found it magical.

"You know what Dayron said."

"Arroh, how many times has he forbidden me to ride and nothing ever comes of it? I could return tomorrow, and he wouldn't raise his voice to me." Mauhiyn floated on her back, watching the clouds turn pink above the mountain. Her worries and dirt from digging drifted away in cold, soothing ripples.

"There's been more talk," Arroh began, slowly. "The king's march south has yet to turn to battle."

The three kings, from Mimmairhyn, Rellswen to the west and Headourflane to the east, had drawn their armies south in attempt to put an end to the looting and raiding along the borders.

"Negotiations would be good."

"Yes, but, Mauhiyn—"

Mauhiyn stopped floating and looked at him. He was only an arm's length away, his shirt clinging to his wiry frame. Water beaded in the light beard on his jaw. She knew every sharp angle of his face, every laugh line at his mouth, every place where dirt liked to smudge. And she

knew the anxiety in his azure eyes, the exact color of the deep blue behind the bright autumn sunset.

“What won’t you tell me?” she asked, quiet. “It’s *me*.”

“And you tell me everything?” His suddenly joyless laugh hit her coldly. He was her closest friend. She adored Arroh. He was the only person on earth she felt right around. Never had he made her remember things she couldn’t explain. Around everyone else at Wayshofflyn, she remembered things, good and bad. Things she didn’t understand, shouts of anger and laughter, conversations she’d never had. With Arroh, and Arroh alone, she could relax and be completely herself.

She swallowed. “You know I do.”

“Yeah.” Arroh looked away then slapped the top of the water with his hand. “Dayron may not raise his voice to you, but he’ll whip me if you’re caught missing. Let’s go.”

Another excuse.

She crossed her arms as he turned towards the bank.

“Arroh.”

“Now, Mauhiyn! Let’s go.”

“I found something today,” she blurted.

He paused, the water waving against his hips. “I thought you said you didn’t look for—”

“Of course not the baby,” she scowled. Then she bit her lip. “I wasn’t sure I should show you. I was afraid it might be bad luck to.”

His features twisted, confused. She treaded through the water and hoisted herself onto the bank.

“Here,” she reached into her satchel and held out the ithirmil. It was as bright as the moment she’d picked it, not at all wilted from spending the day suffocating in her bag.

Arroh seemed to turn to stone.

“Well, say something.” Nervously, she laughed. “It’s quite rare, I know.”

“We have to go!” Arroh leaped from the bank, whistling for his mare.

“Arroh, what should I do?”

“Not remain *here* of all places! Dog’s spit, Mauhiyn! What were you thinking!”

“Don’t curse at me!” She blinked, stung by his anger. She didn’t know what he was so upset about. *She* was the one who’d found it; *she* was the one who’d need to use it.

“Hurry. Up.”

“I am!” she shouted back, struggling to pull her dress over her wet shift. By the time she’d gathered her satchel laden with roots, Arroh had ridden back with Ursynn in tow. She stomped over, yanking Ursynn’s reins from his hand. Ithirmil or not, the roots needed to be harvested. He had no right to be cross with her. Without a word, they trotted from the meadow and down the trail home. The sunset turned the aspen grove gold. Mauhiyn missed the colors that used to light the mountains afire in autumn. She glared at Arroh’s back as he rode just ahead of her. If he wasn’t here, she’d remain in the grove, soaking up the color and the sweet scent of the aspen bark until the darkness swallowed the last rays of light. What if next year, the meadow didn’t have color at all? Her heart ached at the thought.

Then, both horses halted so suddenly Mauhiyn barely maintained her seat. Just around the bend in the trail stood a warhorse, a striking dapple gray. His sides heaved, lathered in sweat from his hasty ascent up the canyon. Dayron’s unfathomable azure eyes bore into hers, the hard

lines and deep scars of his face without smile. He was wearing full armor, she realized. He was never unarmed, but actual armor? She hadn't seen that in years.

Dayron spoke only to Arroh, "Go. Now. Wait for me in the stable, and I'd better not have to look for you."

Immediately, Arroh heeled his mare and tore down the trail. Mauhiyn almost called out to him. How could he completely abandon her? He always did, she reminded herself. He'd never change.

Dayron sat tensely astride his mount. Mauhiyn shifted under his hard gaze. He hadn't looked at her like this since she was a child and wouldn't stop climbing out of her tower window to look at the northern sky.

"I knew the moment I forbade you to leave Wayshofflyn, you'd run."

Mauhiyn flinched at the sternness of her Grand Captain's voice. It had also been a while since he'd used that tone with her. As usual, when Dayron looked at her, she knew he was remembering times past. The anger melded with the memory into a powerful expression she didn't understand. Bitterness, regret, heartbreak. And yet whenever he turned this gaze upon her, all she felt for him was overwhelming love. She felt that she alone understood. She knew he'd come here with her mother. Dayron had been young when he was her mother's Grand Captain. As all Grand Captains before him, Dayron had trained from childhood to protect the Daughter. This responsibility was passed, much like the Daughters' Grace, from generation to generation, and was revered by all. Somehow, Mauhiyn knew he hadn't hated the meadow when her mother was alive.

Ursynn danced in place as she fumbled with the reins.

"I didn't think it would matter."

Dayron seemed to grow in height as he shouted, “You put yourself in danger for weeds and roots, Mauhiyn! And now when I’m needed most in the valley, I have to come find you because you can’t follow simple instruction! Let’s go; at this point it’ll be midnight by the time we make it home!”

He turned away, expecting her to follow, but she felt frozen, slapped. It had been such a while since Dayron had scolded her she’d forgotten how much she hated it. His disappointment was suffocating, and his anger burned her face in hot embarrassment.

“Dayron?” she called, quietly. Mauhiyn’s heart suddenly raced as she withdrew the Ithirmil from her satchel. “I thought you should know.”

Whipping his horse around, he demanded, “When did you get that?”

“As I crossed the meadow to the root patch.”

“*When!*” he roared.

She stuttered, eyes-wide, “M-Midday!”

“I can’t believe you *stayed* out here after you found that thing! Mauhiyn, do you not listen to anything I teach you?”

He was frantic, incredulous, and the intensity radiating from him made Mauhiyn doubt every decision she’d ever made. Dayron was already galloping down the trail. Without a cue, Ursynn bolted off, recklessly chasing after them.

Chapter 3

Nightfall took the mountains with unnatural speed and forced Mauhiyn and Dayron’s pace to crawl down the Rellswen Pass. Night laid heavily under the trees, almost as if the decay had manifested in the air, slowing the breaths they drew. Even the scrape of the horses’ hooves

over rock and root seemed oddly muffled. Moonlight only partially reached past the high canyon walls to the light the trail. Mauhiyn worried for Arroh. Though probably not far ahead of them, he was alone. She assumed Dayron had sent him on because he wished to speak with her, but not once did he look back.

At last, they reached Wayshofflyn. The valley grass was thin and quiet in the breeze, but the stars above sprayed rich and wide in the black sky. The moon was full. It never waxed or waned and remained extraordinarily white. It repainted the mountains with its own arrangement of silver-shadowed color. It reflected in the river gliding through grassy banks. There should have been sound, Mauhiyn thought. She could almost hear a high, tinkling music in the moonlight.

They waded into the river and stopped midway to let the horses drink their fill. Water swelled around the horses' bellies and slid icily through Mauhiyn's toes. Dayron rested a hand on his leg and smoothed his mare's mane. With the castle near, he relaxed. He sat tall, his once broad shadow cast proudly against the moonlit bank. In the shadows, he looked tired. Too tired. He was so often away doing *things—nothing-to-concern-yous*—it saddened her to realize it had been a season since she'd spent a full day in his company. He was the closest to a father she'd ever known. Though often the memories he evoked were some of the most powerful she experienced, they were her favorite, for they often involved her mother.

"I'm sorry, Dayron. I should have obeyed you."

"Yes, you should have," he agreed, quickly, then added, "but you're forgiven."

She hid her smile. It warmed her soul to hear the tenderness in his tone. "Please don't be hard on Arroh."

"He knows better." And just like that, the tenderness was gone.

“He only followed me because it was my birthday.” She waited, breathless for Dayron’s reaction. But he didn’t show the barest hint of surprise at this unsubtle reminder. It was the same as every year. But, for once, could he not tell her what she wanted to hear?

“I remember you there, Dayron.”

He grunted.

“My mother was already sick when she gave birth to me.”

Sharply, he said, “We’re not discussing this.”

“You don’t deny it because it’s true.”

“I won’t discuss it because you can’t possibly remember what happened to you as an infant, Mauhiyn.”

She bit her teeth together until they ached. “I do.”

“Why do you do this? Why do you insist on bringing this up every year?”

Of all the things for a Grand Captain to fear, he feared her memories above all. But his refusal to listen changed nothing. She remembered his cries for Gaelowynn. She remembered him carrying her as she screamed. She remembered what it felt like to have tiny legs and feet. She remembered the wretched squawk of her own first breaths. She remembered the moment the Grace passed to her and something went horribly wrong.

“I just hope that some year you’ll tell me more.” She watched the shadowed water swirl around Ursynn as he continued to slurp thirstily. “I’m the decay, Dayron; I’m the darkness. Why won’t you tell me what my mother did?”

After a long moment, Dayron sighed. “Your mother was simply ill, Mauhiyn. She was an innocent, nothing more. You must not mention your memories to anyone. Not to me, not to Lowynn, not to Arroh. How else am I to protect you?”

“Arroh knows.”

Dayron opened his mouth, but she continued, “You think I don’t tell Arroh everything? *He* listens to me.”

Dayron didn’t respond, so she added, “Besides, you tell Arroh what you won’t tell me. Why shouldn’t I do the same? When were you going to tell me why you’re so worried about the rumors?”

“I’m not obligated to tell you,” he said, in a very Grand Captain voice. “It’s wise to be careful.”

She scowled.

“But you’re right,” he continued. “Arroh does know, and I should tell you. Headourflane rangers have been spotted less than a two days’ ride from here. I didn’t want you riding out that far alone, but now,” the edge returned to his voice, “I don’t want you riding at all until they’re found. If you leave the castle, you either stay with me or in the stables with Arroh.”

“What? I can’t even ride in the valley?”

It could be days—weeks—before the rangers were found. If they were found. And when they were, it could be even longer before the news reached Wayshofflyn, for Dayron would not spare his own men to hunt them. Wayshofflyn only received word from Ceerbrynth a few times a year, and though there were several small villages sprinkled north, east, and south of the valley, it was rare for a courier to journey to and from home.

“I’m astonished you’re astonished,” he quipped. “After the Ithirmil you found, you’re fortunate I’m letting you leave your bedchamber.”

Mauhiyn paused, shocked. She’d forgotten the ithirmil in her satchel.

Noticing, Dayron smiled, ruefully. “You see it’s true. Those who find the ithirmil flower often forget they carry it, and so die, lost and anguished, even though healing is available to them all along. It’s almost a cruel trick—the gift of life already bestowed upon them is left unopened because they’ve not the faith to use it.”

She thought on this. A small part of her hoped finding the Ithirmil had been a mistake. Maybe it wasn’t meant for her? “When’s the last time anyone found Ithirmil?”

“I assume all the time,” he answered. “It seems to be the one bit of the Grace that remains strong throughout the realms. It’s been some time since I’ve had need of it or been around any who did. Since you found it, you’ll need it before nightfall tomorrow.”

“Then don’t you want me to stay with you?” she asked, hopefully.

“You must understand: there will be little I can do. If it was preventable, you wouldn’t need it. Whatever it is has already been set in motion. It came to you; therefore, you’re the only one who can use it.”

“How come you didn’t find your own ithirmil that day we were attacked on the Forgstorth?”

He answered quietly, “Because the woodswoman found it for me. Sometimes that’s just how it works. Mauhiyn, you may have a choice to make. You can only save one, and there may be many who need saving.”

A cold chill swept over her. Did he expect a full attack on Wayshofflyn, or was he simply remembering his own choices made long ago on the battlefield?

“But shouldn’t I know who it’s meant for?”

“You’ll know.”

“Did my mother not find the ithirmil?”

He looked as though he didn't want to answer, and for a long moment he didn't. "Of course. And she accepted it willingly. But her illness was too great, and the ithirmil sped her death."

"That's what Lowynn told me," Mauhiyn said, bitterly.

"The ithirmil was not merciless to your mother, Mauhiyn. She went painlessly. It gave her that at least."

"Someone should tell that to Lowynn," Mauhiyn bit out. Lowynn's taunts rose in her mind until she asked, "Do you think—was my mother secretly—dark or mean spirited?"

"Mean spirited? Why ever would you ask that?" Even in the shadows, Dayron's blue eyes turned suddenly tumultuous as they always did when he was intent on making her see the truth. "Of course not. She was as real and good as the grass in the meadows she loved. Just as gentle as swaying stalks in the wind and just as strong. She withstood a lot, your mother. But she never lost her kindness or her courage. I've never known another soul like hers."

"Lowynn says she was twisted. Deceitful." Merely saying so brought a bitterness to Mauhiyn's mouth. She had long adored her mother's image which she had built in her head over the years. At times, she thought she could almost remember her.

Dayron said, "Your mother struggled the same agonies all Daughters face."

"Except for me."

"You're unlike the other Daughters."

Though she caught the touch of pride in his smile, she couldn't fight back her doubts.

"Lowynn says that, too."

"I've asked you not to engage her, Mauhiyn," he then scolded, gently. "Let her tell her lies, then brush them off."

“I’ve tried.”

“Try harder. She’s got a lot of sway with the King, and you don’t want to give her any more reason to be hateful towards you. Right now—especially now—we have to keep the peace.”

“Especially now? There is more to the rumors, isn’t there?” she tried again, unable to resist. “Arroh already told me everything you just did, so you might as well tell me the rest of it; or I’ll just ask Arroh, and he’ll tell me anything.” That was stretching the truth. He might share more than he was supposed to, but Mauhiyn knew Arroh wouldn’t cross certain lines.

“That boy is far too fond of you. You shouldn’t abuse that fondness.”

“He’s a brother,” Mauhiyn laughed.

“He doesn’t think so,” Dayron replied, seriously.

Mauhiyn avoided his gaze, “He prefers Ellewryn.”

“Ellewryn is currently available to him. He prefers you.”

Heat spread through her face. Did he? Carefully, Mauhiyn dribbled a handful of water into Ursynn’s mane which a he promptly shook off. “So, what else about the rumors?”

“You’ve asked a lot of questions tonight.”

“I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I know.”

Mauhiyn waited. Her legs had gone numb in the water. She suddenly realized she could see her breath turning to foggy clouds.

Dayron said, “The rumor is there was no battle.”

“I know that already.”

Dayron grumbled inaudibly.

Mauhiyn chuckled. It was oddly satisfying to turn the table and tell on Arroh for once.

“King Aeldyn has made an alliance.”

Finally, something new.

“So, that’s good,” Mauhiyn concluded. “Headourflane has long asked for peace. But if so, why are Headourflane rangers nearby a threat?”

“Because the alliance wasn’t with King Thaedren of Headourflaen. Mimmairhyn is now in alliance with King Darbrend of Rellswen.”

“Darbrend of Rellswen?” Saying the name shot a cold spear into the pit of her stomach.

“That’s the rumor. And Headourflane is having none of it. We know they’ve placed people throughout Mimmairhyn for the last year, but we cannot root them out. Some of our own villages seem to be concealing them.”

“For what reason?”

“Many villages do not see the Headourflaen presence as threat. They now look to Thaedren to protect what to Aeldyn will not—*you*.” He regarded her, quietly.

Just then a shout erupted from the castle.

The sleeping castle had deceived them. While only a moment ago, there’d been a single lantern to guide them home, now light and commotion erupted in the yard. Someone shouted again, waving a torch, desperate to draw their attention. Even across the distance, Mauhiyn knew it was Arroh.

Chapter 4

Swiftly, they galloped to the castle. As they neared, they saw light spilling from the kitchen. Guardsmen scrambled about, not at their usual posts.

Arroh waved frantically, “Dayron, they’re looking for you!”

“Who?”

From somewhere deep inside the castle, a ferocious noise tore through the air. It was an animal’s cry of fear, pain, and aggression unlike anything Mauhiyn had ever heard. Then, in a slow, dizzying sort of moment, she saw coarse hair—short, silver mane.

“A dog.”

Dayron and Arroh stared at her.

The sound came again, strangled this time.

“It’s a dog. I’m right, aren’t I?” she said. The ithirmil in her satchel suddenly felt a hundred times heavier than before.

“Mauhiyn, be quiet! Not another word!” Dayron’s look could have burned her to ash.

“You stay with me!”

Arroh interrupted, “They caught him trying to get through the east end of the valley!”

“Where are they?” Dayron demanded.

“In the dungeon! Hurry!”

Mauhiyn leapt from Ursynn and was half-way to the castle before either man could stop her. The ferocious barking drowned out their shouts. She followed the barking through the kitchens and to the dungeon where she hadn’t ventured in years. She was dizzy with excitement. She’d never had the chance to match the animal to the sound she heard. Silvery fur. Eyes bright as stars. Dangerous. Loyal.

Answers.

“Mauhiyn—wait!”

Her satchel bounced against her hip as she fled down the twisted stairs. She felt Dayron not far behind her, but drunk with the need to see the animal, she neither slowed nor looked back. As she fled into the darkening depths of the stairwell, the ferocious barking pierced her ears. It was stunningly loud, blurring her vision in the dim torch light. Her wet skirts tangled about her bare ankles, and she stumbled, slicing her palm on the stone wall.

“Mauhiyn, stop!”

She pushed on. A heavy cold engulfed her as she descended to the dark cavern carved into the rock beneath Wayshofflyn. The cells had been empty for years. Any who ventured unwittingly into Wayshofflyn was more likely to receive a hot meal and a bed than a prison cell. Branching from the cavern like spidery veins, were the tombs of the lords and stewards of Wayshofflyn. Though both lines had fallen generations before her time, as she descended, familiar chills raced up her legs to the top of her spine. She couldn't shake the faces of the dead she'd never met.

Reaching the bottom stair, she slowed. The hollow room was smoky with torch light. The moldy air hummed with an angry fear. She was shocked to find the room brimming with people. It seemed everyone who inhabited the valley, nearly thirty bedraggled souls, clustered in the middle of the room, immune to the deafening bark.

In the corner, bound and beaten by several guardsmen, an enormous black dog snarled and snapped his pointed teeth. Bloody froth slung from his long jaws. Coarse, unforgiving fur stood on end along his shoulders. His color was more black than a moonless sky, not silver at all. Mauhiyn fought disappointment. He should be silver. Still, the strange joy she felt at seeing the dog bewildered her.

Eyes gleaming, ears pinned back, the animal lunged for a guardsman's arm but was kicked back by another's boot. The dog scrambled to stay upright, claws scratching on the stone floor. Helplessness radiated from the animal as he raged against bloody ropes. Mauhiyn's heart twisted.

Dayron seized her arm. "What are you thinking!" he shouted in her face.

She'd never seen him in such a state, but somehow, it didn't matter. "There's a dog," she whispered.

He looked as if he'd like to shake her until her teeth broke.

Across the room, in the center of the mob, guardsmen threw their fists. The sickening crack of bone against flesh melding with the dog's desperate cries. The scent of blood, coppery and sharp, permeated Mauhiyn's nose.

"What's going on?" Dayron bellowed above the commotion.

Everyone stilled. The dog growled.

The people stepped away, making a path to the center of their midst. There, a man was doubled over from the blows the guardsmen dealt. Even in his stooped stature, Mauhiyn could tell he was larger in breadth of chest than even Dayron. Slowly, he straightened to an unimpressive height, hardly a foot taller than Mauhiyn herself. The Mimmairhyn guardsmen towered over him, their bodies slender, some clad in hastily donned silver armor. The man's deep-red skin contrasted harshly with their fair features. He looked as though he had spent a lifetime in the sun. Though the man could not match the Mimmairhyn guardsmen in height, he was built far sturdier than they, broad as a great tree with the strength to rival a warhorse. Mauhiyn marveled that they had been able to beat him as thoroughly as they had. Even

obviously pained, there was a savage, cat-like agility about the man that made Mauhiyn fear for every soul in the room.

As the beating ceased, the dog's cries turned to hateful growls.

As the crowd edged away, the man raised his head and locked eyes with Mauhiyn.

She felt it coming.

Panicked, she tried to tear her gaze from the man's eyes, but she was helpless. Held.

Something stirred in her, a memory of sorts, something that had long been swept away into a dusty, cob-webbed corner of her mind. The air whooshed from Mauhiyn's lungs in a painful, wretched twist.

She'd seen those eyes before.

Old eyes in a young boy's face.

They were an inky color, but for the brown. They were terrified, awestruck, and pleading.

Dread gripped her body and squeezed, hard, as if the cavern walls closed around her, suffocating, pressing from all sides until she couldn't move. Trapped. Time stilled; darkness spread.

No. Finally, Mauhiyn dragged in a thin breath. It couldn't be. This man's eyes were fierce, defiant, and brutal. Although his face was bloodied and battered, it bore no resemblance to the boy's fine features.

But the child's pale face hovered in her mind.

Cold sweat burst onto her skin. She trembled. She forced several deep breaths into her lungs until her chest burned, and the memory faded.

Fury pinched the man's rough, reddened features. From beneath his dark hair, blood and sweat trickled into his beard. He was wild. Barbaric. He straightened his back, straining at the

ropes binding his wrists. Fear sliced Mauhiyn's heart—he could shred the rope at any moment. He chose to remain captive.

His eyes pinned Mauhiyn where she stood, searching her gaze for something.

Then, he spoke, his voice was raspy from thirst, fatigue, or a guardsman's grip around his neck, "Lady Gaelowynn."

Mauhiyn didn't have time to respond.

The First Sergeant named Halhryn swung his gloved fist into the man's stomach. "That isn't Lady Gaelowynn, you mutt." Halhryn spat at the man's boots.

Sneers and murmurs of surprise chorused from the crowd. "Stupid mutt!"

The man gasped, eyes brightening with controlled rage.

Dayron moved Mauhiyn behind him and stepped forward. Halhryn fell back, sweat dripping in rivulets from his blond hair. He extended a thick parchment to Dayron. "We found this on him, sir."

Dayron took the parchment. Dangerously quiet, he asked, "Who opened this?"

No one answered. The crowd stepped back.

"This message was addressed to the Lady Mauhiyn—who opened it?" Dayron demanded. His voice echoed deeply through the cavern.

Mauhiyn frowned. The message was for her? She'd never received a message. Moreover, why would they beat the courier? Mauhiyn tried to peer around Dayron's shoulder at the parchment he gripped, but suddenly a cool voice came from the back of the crowd. "I did."

Mauhiyn cursed. She didn't look up. She didn't need to. The familiar voice sunk an icy hook into the pit of her stomach.

"Lady Lowynn..." Dayron began, warningly.

“I am her Grand Lady; I have every right to monitor the girl’s affairs.”

The crowd split as a greying woman strolled near, her neck stretched high so as to tower over the others. Her thinning hair was woven atop her head in place of the crown she could never wear. Her hollowed, high-cheeked face matched her skeletal frame, and deep beneath a sagging brow, her eyes were the hard blue of her gown.

Dayron fired back. “Your right does not extend to breaking the seals of two kings on a message addressed to Lady Mauhiyn.”

Kings?

“You like feeling powerful, don’t you, Grand Captain? You just have to be in control.” Lowynn smiled, her stony eyes alight with pleasure. “Savor it...while you still can.”

Lowynn glanced to Mauhiyn. Mauhiyn straightened her shoulders and glared back. She could feel Lowynn’s mirth while she accessed and memorized every detail of Mauhiyn’s haphazard appearance. The elderly woman was already delighting in the misery she would inflict. Mauhiyn tugged at her skirt, suddenly wishing the emerald weave wasn’t so threadbare and didn’t reek of horse sweat. Her cheeks flamed, knowing the hem wasn’t long enough to hide her bare feet, which had trailed mud across the stone. Her hair, haphazard and tangled with bits of grass and leaves, tumbled past her waist in wild, ashen tendrils. Sweat streaked her thin face, and dirt packed her broken nails from her hours of digging. Her day’s harvest of roots and leaves peeked out of her satchel. Mauhiyn’s stomach swelled, nauseous. She tried to edge behind Dayron, but he held her elbow fast.

Halhryn interrupted, “You should read it, sir.”

Dayron didn’t and instead handed the message to Mauhiyn.

Trembling, Mauhiyn took the blood-splattered parchment that obviously had passed many hands already. The wax seals had indeed been broken. One was the rainstorm blue of Mimmairhyn with a simple leaf centered in a delicate circle. The other was a twisted, diamond knot, which had been stamped, or rather crushed, into a blood-red wax.

Rellswen.

That's why the guardsmen beat this man, called him mutt, dimwitted scum, as hated as the Rellswen wardogs which tore apart Mimmairhyn guardsmen on the battlefield. She glanced to the corner where the dog panted in distress.

When she looked up, the man's barbaric eyes were unfalteringly upon her. She took in his armor, which had been torn from him and cast to the floor. The leather was crafted in the same red, nearly black, color as the wax seal. Each piece was branded with the crest of Rellswen, a tight, hard knot cragged as their mountain peaks. She'd seen Rellswen men before. Dead. Lined up at the edge of the pass. Their swollen faces vulnerable and pale. This man's expression was hard, heartless.

Mauhiyn read the message. Once, twice, thrice. It didn't make sense. The muddy ink swam against the stained parchment. At the foot of the parchment were two signatures, large and scrawling set next to a red-knotted diamond and a rainstorm-blue leaf.

Two kings.

They'd made a treaty.

The rumors proved true. But most unexpectedly.

"Give it here," Dayron snatched the paper from Mauhiyn's numb fingers. He glanced over it several times, his face growing still and somehow more frightening than Mauhiyn had ever seen him.

“Clear the room,” he ordered, and all but Lowynn, Halhryn, and the guardsmen holding the Rellswenien scurried up the stairwell.

“Are the signatures true?” Halhryn asked, earnest.

“They seem to be,” Dayron answered, his lips a hard line.

Mauhiyn felt light headed. “Dayron? What does it mean?”

“It means what it says it means,” Lowynn snapped. A strange mirth spread across her face. “Dayron is no longer Grand Captain.”

“They can’t do that!” Mauhiyn turned her back on Lowynn, pleading up at Dayron.

They couldn’t replace Dayron. He’d been her Grand Captain since the day she was born. He’d served faithfully, done his duty to her and to his country. They could never just dismiss him. That wasn’t how it was done. Grand Captains were practically born into the role. Dismissing them just wasn’t done.

Dayron ignored her, his bright gaze boring into the parchment, as if he could rearrange the words until they made sense. His broad-knuckled hand crumpled the parchment edge.

“We won’t accept it, sir,” one of the younger guardsmen said and was then joined by the others proclaiming similar treasonous vows. In the isolation of the Wayshofflyn valley, it was easy to utter such dangerous words against a faceless king with whom they had no contact. Though she knew their allegiance to Dayron wasn’t born of concern that the Daughter should retain her Grand Captain, Mauhiyn’s heart swelled with pride and relief at their loyalty. Of course, they wouldn’t let this happen. King Aeldyn of Mimmairhyn had obviously lost his mind. Other than forgery, it was the only explanation for such a decree.

Dayron ignored his guardsmen and stepped towards the Rellswenien, “What are you called?”

“Roben,” the man answered, the sound harsh in his throat.

“And you were at the battle?”

“There was no battle,” the Rellswenien said, his voice regaining strength, his thick accent becoming prominent. A warm, clipped sound.

Incredulous, Mauhiyn stepped around Dayron. “The king’s armies headed south only a month ago. It must have taken them nearly three weeks to meet on the battlefield. How is it you are already here?”

The Rellswenien looked at Mauhiyn as though she were terribly simple-minded. “I ran.”

Had his face not been so battered, Mauhiyn was sure he would have smirked. Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment, and she straightened her back, narrowing her eyes at him.

Swirling behind her like an angry cloud, Lowynn threatened, “Mind your place, girl.”

Mauhiyn could feel Lowynn’s all-consuming desire to rip Mauhiyn’s hair from her scalp. But almost as quickly as she’d angered, Lowynn said with true admiration in her voice, “Mutts were always so fast.”

Then, turning to leave, she added, “Mauhiyn, come, we’re done here.”

Dayron bit out, “Lady Mauhiyn stays with me.”

Lowynn glared for a moment, then her look cooled to hard stone. “For tonight, Grand Captain, you may have her one last time.”

Mauhiyn flushed in anger as Lowynn disappeared into the stairwell. Crude, foul woman.

Halhryn interrupted, “What do we do with him, sir?”

“Leave him here.” Dayron turned away, steering Mauhiyn alongside him.

Suddenly, the Rellswenien called after him, "Have you so little disregard for your king's direct command? No wonder I'm replacing you." He spat a huge gob of snot and blood at Dayron's feet.

In an instant, Dayron stood face-to-face with him.

Dog's breath. Mauhiyn froze. For a moment, she was certain Dayron would shove his sword through the man's throat. She'd never seen him this close to losing control. She's seen him more angry tonight than she had all her life. Previously, she'd only known him as endlessly patient and kind with her when she rarely deserved it. Suddenly, she felt a twinge of loss, as though she'd never truly known the man she loved as a father.

"I don't give a damn about your orders, mutt." Dayron's voice was low, lethal. "You're my prisoner until I have more proof than a hastily scribbled note and two broken seals. You'll go nowhere near the Lady Mauhiyn. You nor your wardog."

Dayron moved to the stairwell with Mauhiyn in his wake. "Post a guard, three of you at once, at all times."

"What of the mutt, sir?" A guardsman kicked the dog back again as he snapped his teeth. "Should we kill it?"

Mauhiyn immediately answered, "No."

Dayron gave her a shake. She knew he was at his wits end with her.

"Not yet, but if he bleeds out before morning, I won't complain."

As they ascended the stairs, Mauhiyn glanced back and caught the Rellswenien still following her with his dark eyes. The dizziness returned, and the pale face of the boy hovered in her mind. He'd known her mother, somehow. And of that, she was insatiably jealous.

Chapter 5

Dayron escorted Mauhiyn to her bedchamber in Wayshofflyn's southern tower. The wood stairs creaked dangerously under his weight, but he ushered her on, torch held high to light the way. The air shifted as they reached the top. It smelled of snow and pine and ancient dust. He motioned for her to wait as he stepped through the door which swung silently on leather hinges.

Alone in the darkness, she hopped from one foot to the other as the cold crept up her toes. A midnight breeze swept down from the window above her head. She felt watched. Haunted by the young boy's eyes. The Rellswenien's gravelly voice addressing her as Gaelowynn chanted in her mind, and the ithirmil weighed heavier in her bag.

She spooked as Dayron appeared suddenly in the doorway, and the torchlight shocked her eyes. He motioned her inside, "We need to talk."

One by one, Dayron lit the lanterns spaced between the windows around the circular room. Candlelight bounced off the gray stone. Her chamber was plain, adorned here and there with drying wildflowers, scattered sections of half-written parchment, and an old bridle that needed mending. The lanterns on either side of her bed glowed cheerily. The quilt covering the thinning mattress had once been a vibrant display of Mimmairhyn's rainstorm-blue encircled leaf. The window shutters stood thrown back just as she'd left them that morning. Several colorful aspen leaves had somehow found their way all the way up through the tower windows. They skittered across the stone floor to huddle near the door.

Tell him, she thought but couldn't.

"You've done nothing wrong; why would they dismiss you? I don't understand."

"Nor I," he answered.

"Why did he address me as my mother?"

“He’s a mutt; they’re all daft.”

“You know it’s more than that.”

With dirt-lined fingers, Dayron cupped her face in his hands as if she were still a child. He held her gently, his touch steady.

His eyes swam as he whispered, “I can’t protect you.”

She stilled. Tears sprung to her eyes. The candlelight danced on his face and across the stubble of his beard. Greying hairs peppered the blond, and Mauhiyn was startled to see how the night had aged him. With such pain in his eyes, she knew he spoke not just to her, but to her mother, as well.

“You always find a way to.” She smiled. “I do try to make it challenging.”

For the first time in a very long time, Dayron smiled back. He chuckled, the sound warm and comforting deep in his chest. He kissed the top of her hair.

“So much like your mother,” he said, then pulled away. “Everything will be fine.”

“Why don’t you just kill him? Burn the message.”

His eyes were grim. “He’ll be dead by morning.”

“Really?” Mauhiyn smiled, hopefully. She’d never been so relieved.

Dayron shot her a warning look. “The dog, not the man.”

Mauhiyn stopped. “Please don’t kill the dog.”

“I don’t understand you—”

“I *remembered*.”

He flinched. “You’ve never seen a wardog.”

“I *know*,” she whispered, “and you know I do. Why won’t you believe me?”

After a moment, he answered, “I do believe you.”

He'd never admitted as much. Just hearing the words lifted a weight from her soul.

"His wounds will kill him."

"I could save him," she said.

Dayron stopped, eyes-widened. "I forbid you to go near that animal."

"You said I'd know who the ithirmil was for."

"That thing will rip your throat out before you can blink. Do not go near it."

"But what if the ithirmil came to me just for him? You won't let me use it?"

"I've been lenient with you all your life, but I swear, Mauhiyn—" he stopped himself. He seemed at a complete loss, and Mauhiyn regretted bringing him such stress.

"I need you to heed me this once. Swear it, Mauhiyn."

Mauhiyn blinked. Suddenly, she couldn't breathe.

"Swear it."

"I can't," she whispered.

He shook his head. "You will, or you'll stay in your tower, and Lowynn will see to it."

Mauhiyn reeled back. He knew how Lowynn treated her. How could he do this? Just agree, she thought. He was right, after all. She'd never had an ithirmil flower before, so it was possible she was mistaken and there was someone more important for her to save. Her chest spasmed at the lie. She couldn't breathe. Tears sprung once again to her eyes and this time spilled over.

"I can't."

He nodded once and turned into the black stairwell. "Okay. Don't leave. I'll send Lowynn to you in the morning. I'll be back tomorrow night."

"Please, don't!" she begged. "Can I not go with you?"

“No.” His booted step echoed into the darkness. His scabbard slung low on his hip glowed, eerily as the darkness suppressed the torchlight.

“But.”

“Swear it.”

Her chest constricted again. She gasped, “I can’t!”

“Okay,” he said, leaving.

“Dayron—” her voice froze in her throat. Her words hovered at the back of her tongue, thought but unshaped, racing, screaming to be set free. *I remembered something. I saw him. I know him.*

“Ask your question,” he said, impatient.

Her stomach burned, cold and empty with dread.

“Nothing.”

She blinked, and he’d gone.

From where he’d vanished, a draft rushed towards her, sweeping the cold night into her bedchamber. Shivering, she slammed and bolted the door. She burst into angry tears. Blindly, she dumped her satchel at the foot of her bed. Roots tumbled out and rolled across the cold stone. She yanked her dress over her head, tossing it in a heap in the middle of the floor. She slammed the shutters closed on each window, rattling the lanterns on the walls.

He didn’t understand. No one did. No one ever would. He said he believed her, but how could he? She didn’t understand.

The only thing she knew for certain with every passing moment was that the ithirmil was meant for the wardog bleeding far beneath her feet. Even if she could sneak out after Dayron left

the valley, the guardsmen would never let her near the dungeon. She'd have to wait and hope the dog lived out the night.

Lady Gaelowynn.

Dayron thought the Rellswenien was daft, but Mauhiyn had seen it in his eyes. He'd momentarily mistaken her for her mother. *Lady Gaelowynn.* His deep voice repeated in her mind until she grabbed at her ears in frustration. Yes, she looked like Gaelowynn. Almost daily, Lowynn reminded her that she had the same horrible freckles and a too-large nose and with a too-large smile to go with it. Too-large everything for her slender frame. She wasn't particularly tall, but her feet and legs were long, eyes open and round. But how could the Rellswenien have mistaken her for a Daughter who had been dead for nearly twenty years when he must not be more than thirty years himself. *Everyone* knew when Gaelowynn died. The Daughters had always lived in Mimmairhyn as a central location to equally sustain all three realms. The realms had a single commonality—the Daughters.

There was no way he could have known her mother, Mauhiyn decided. He would have been a child when Gaelowynn's illness took her swiftly at Mauhiyn's birth. Still, jealousy panged in Mauhiyn's heart at the thought of a stranger having a moment with her mother while she had none.

“Rellswen mutt.”

The slur felt good on her tongue. Rellsweniens were a people as filthy as their dogs. *Mutt. Mutt.* The more she thought it, the better it made her feel. What madness drove King Aeldyn to replace Dayron with a Rellswenien? Seven terrible years, Mimmairhyn had warred with Rellswen and Headourflaen for resources that scarcely existed. As the Grace diminished from the mountains, Rellswen had not fared well. The barbaric people raided and tormented the

Mimmairhyn border villages, stealing the harvest, women, horses, and everything that didn't belong to them. Even Headourflaen to the east, though they too suffered the decay of the lands, didn't pillage as Rellswen did. At Rellswen's hands, Mimmairhyn suffered doubly, forced to stretch already thinned resources over too great a need. It was said King Darbrend of Rellswen had invited an ancient evil into his land. He'd spawned even more decay and rot throughout his mountains, which were already higher and more treacherous than the Mimmairhyn and Headourflaen ranges. And yet the Rellswen people thrived in the barren rock. Everything about the Rellsweniens was foreign and wrong. Forming an alliance with such a people after years of warfare was simply inconceivable.

Mauhiyn reopened the shutters of the southern window, ignoring the nippy air which cut through her still damp shift. From the top of the tower, she could almost pluck the stars from the sky like plums from the orchard. The sky was bright with starlight, the moon full. It was always full and round, never changing. The mountains in her south eastern view were monstrous giants, sleeping. A breeze roared in the pines, sweeping the crisp scent to her face. Far below the tower in the meadow, sounds of the river trickled up. The stable and pastures lay quiet. Very faintly now, she felt rather than heard the mournful howls of the dog captive far beneath her feet.

Hugging herself, she leaned against the smooth stone ledge. Mauhiyn carefully pulled back the memory of the young boy's face.

Where had she seen him before? Who was he?

He was the Rellswenien, of that she was sure. Their eyes were identical, though the soul behind them had changed with loss of innocence.

Ruefully, Mauhiyn inhaled the chilled, piney breeze. It had been many years since this had happened. She'd thought—hoped—it never would again, but so it had. Sure, she

remembered little things here and there, but none of them hit her like this. Hearing the baby's cry in the meadow had been more traumatizing, but this meant more. Perhaps if she could talk to the Rellswenien?

She scoffed. That conversation would go splendidly. *Hello, mutt, can you please tell me how you knew my mother, and while I'm at it, how would you like to die?*

His unreadable, intense gaze flashed in her mind, disturbing.

Dayron wouldn't listen. She longed to tell Arroh. But perhaps for now it was best they both believed this was behind her. Claiming to have memories of things and people whom she couldn't possibly have met never had and never would win her any favors.

The next morning, the first bands of sunrise slowly rose into the blue where stars twinkled. Fog covered the valley so thickly she couldn't see the stable below or the mountains around her. It was as though she were high above the world, hidden. She tugged the warm quilt she'd stolen from her bed tighter around her shoulders as she studied the thin fingers of ice on the stone window ledge. As she dozed throughout the night, a spider had constructed a web across the window above her. Frost laced the delicate threads. The deep frost had come even sooner than she expected. The remainder of the roots in the upper meadow would be lost if she didn't harvest them today.

She wished for just a moment to forget the previous night's events. If she'd only slept, then perhaps, for a second as she awoke, everything would still have been normal.

Suddenly, a sandy voice came from across her chamber. "Whatever did you do to your Grand Captain to get yourself banned to your tower?"

Lowynn crossed the room, high-stepping over the heap of Mauhiyn's discarded dress. She seemed far too chipper for this early in the morning. Mauhiyn's suspicions spiked as Lowynn smiled. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it's of little consequence."

Not unkindly, Lowynn smiled again. "Here, I've brought you a peace offering."

She held out a ring. Mauhiyn recognized it instantly but said nothing.

"Gaelowynn's ring." Lowynn sounded as though it were a trivial thing. Trivial, but still too good for Mauhiyn to have ever worn, though it was her birthright.

She dropped it into Mauhiyn's awaiting palm. Mauhiyn felt its weight deep in her palm. A large jewel at the center was white and round as the moon with smaller jewels set like stars into an intricate weave along the wide band. Her mother's ring. Other than the knife from the herb cabinet, she'd never had anything else that belonged to her mother and the other Daughters.

Instinctively, Mauhiyn slipped the ring onto the third finger of her right hand.

If Lowynn noticed how Mauhiyn instinctively placed where it was traditionally worn, she said nothing. "I do care about you, Mauhiyn, so I hope you'll listen to me when I tell you that now things are changing, it's imperative that you maintain appearances."

Against Mauhiyn's pale skin, the ring glowed nearly as bright as the ithirmil still hidden in her satchel. A great calmness filled her. She was oddly content, as if she'd just finished winter chores in the stable and entered the kitchen, warmed with baked breads and bubbling stews.

Calmly, Lowynn said, "We'll be leaving today."

Mauhiyn tore her gaze from the ring. "Leaving?"

"A courier came in the night; did you not hear? We've been summoned to Ceerbrynth. Come let me brush your hair." She patted the back of the only chair in the room.

“It really doesn’t need it,” Mauhiyn said, hastily wrapping her hair in a clumsy braid. The tangles snagged sharply. Bits of grass rained down, scattering across the floor.

“Come here.” Lowynn smiled. “Sit.”

“I can do my own hair.”

“*Sit.*”

Lowynn began to drag a comb through her hair. It snagged painfully. She clucked her tongue. “It wouldn’t be hurting you like this if you would do what you’re supposed to do.”

“*It’s* not hurting me.”

“Good.” Lowynn yanked hard, breaking a tangle completely free. It drifted to the floor at Mauhiyn’s feet.

“Your hair is darker this morning,” Lowynn commented. “Your mother’s hair was gold as the sun, as were all other daughters. But this.” She gave another sharp tug. “This is growing from the rancid darkness within you.”

Lowynn held the lengthy ends of Mauhiyn’s hair in her fist so Mauhiyn could see.

To Mauhiyn’s astonishment, it was a whole shade darker than it had ever been. It resembled new ash from a fire. The tint of gold it once held was significantly dull. Her mind reeled. The decay couldn’t spread directly to her; it didn’t work that way. It affected land, not people. If anything, she felt more vibrant, stronger.

“Why is it getting worse?”

“Truly, I don’t know,” Lowynn answered. Then, she gathered Mauhiyn’s hair at the base of her neck and said serenely, “I’m going to cut it.”

Mauhiyn froze.

“It’s getting darker,” Lowynn repeated. “You can’t go to Ceerbrynth like this. It shows too much. It’s proof for all to see that you’re still not a Daughter.”

“I can’t exactly change my hair.”

Suddenly, Lowynn’s fingers wrapped around Mauhiyn’s hair at her neck, and she pulled, forcing Mauhiyn’s head back. “I’m going to cut your hair,” she whispered into Mauhiyn’s ear.

“No!” Mauhiyn jumped up, but Lowynn’s hold was amazingly strong. The elderly woman jerked Mauhiyn back down in her seat, forcing her head back further than before. She whispered nastily, “If you can’t keep your hair bound while we’re in Ceerbrynth, I’m going to cut it off. All of it.”

“Okay—”

“Dreadful as it looks, it’s your one and only attractive feature. I’ll cut it off if you can’t keep from using it to draw attention to yourself. Do you understand?”

“Yes!” Mauhiyn couldn’t nod because of the grip on her hair. “I’ll keep it hidden!”

“We’ll see.” Lowynn braided and twisted her hair so tightly at the back of her head that Mauhiyn’s skin stretched until she felt she couldn’t close her eyes or stop her mouth from being pulled into an unnatural smile.

Her scalp burned, and her neck hurt. “I can’t wear it like this! It’s painful!”

“And how painful would it be to have your head removed completely? If you go to Ceerbrynth and they see you like this, they’re going to know you’re worthless. They’re going to know you’re the cause of the decay. The less they know about who you truly are, the safer we’ll all be. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t *yes* me like I’m some inconvenience to you. Apologize.” Lowynn hovered uncomfortably close, gray eyes boring into Mauhiyn’s. This close, Mauhiyn caught the lingering scent of burnt hair on Lowynn’s clothes. She must have just sealed another of her letters as she always did, with a strand of hair melted into the seal. Her skin glistened with the unpleasantly strong mint oil she massaged into her hollow cheeks.

Outwardly, Mauhiyn didn’t flinch, but she could feel a cold tremble starting deep within her. Briefly she wondered how her life would be if her mother stood in Lowynn’s place. If the stink of burnt hair and oil were instead replaced by the smell of warm grass and the mountain stream.

Mauhiyn’s reply was schooled to please. “I apologize.”

Lowynn’s voice dropped to a sandy version of her usual off-key squeak as though to share a special secret. “You don’t mean it. Say, ‘I’m sorry, Grand Lady’.”

An odd, trembling part of Mauhiyn felt relieved to have been told exactly the right words to say so to end the conversation, while the other part of her seethed in humiliation. An awful ache roiled in her stomach. In what she hoped was an appropriate demeanor, she repeated, “I’m sorry, Grand Lady.”

Their gazes held, unblinking. As always, the look was enough to freeze Mauhiyn where she sat. It was as though the older woman gripped Mauhiyn’s jaw, crushing her cheeks against her teeth. Mauhiyn’s eyes watered. Her lungs begged for a breath.

Then, as if nothing were out of the ordinary, Lowynn said, “You should pack your things. We don’t know how long the King will require your presence.”

“Won’t we be coming right back?”

“Dog’s breath, I hope not. If we’re lucky, we will all winter in Ceerbrynth.”

Mauhiyn bit the inside of her lip until the pain overrode her panic.

“Are you going to pack, or do I need to help you?”

“All the things I want are in the stable.”

“You’ll not see King Aeldyn reeking of horse. This is your last and only chance to trick him once again into thinking that you’re more valuable alive than dead. Pack your gowns and shoes.”

“My boots are too small for me.”

“Oh please,” Lowynn laughed. “The people already think you a simple commoner; don’t confirm their opinion of you. You’ll wear shoes and your best gown.”

Mauhiyn tried to recall having a best gown.

“Anything you don’t have packed by noon is staying here, and you may not see it again.”

“But we’re coming back?” Mauhiyn’s heart thumped in her chest.

“Things are changing, Mauhiyn, and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. No matter how you kick and scream, things will no longer go your and Dayron’s way. You better get used to it. And do it with a smile on your face. Though you’re so ugly when you smile.”

Mauhiyn bit her lip until she tasted blood. She knew that’s why she never smiled around Lowynn.

Lowynn reached out and pulled Mauhiyn into her embrace. This time Mauhiyn couldn’t stop the tremble that rose from her core. She didn’t speak; she didn’t move. She couldn’t have pulled from the elder woman’s embrace if she were to hold a hot brand to her back. Instead, Mauhiyn waited, taking shallow breaths of burnt hair and mint oil.

“Thank you for the roots,” she said as though Mauhiyn had gathered them especially for her. Then, more gently, she added, “I’m so proud of you.”

When Lowynn stepped away, she searched Mauhiyn's eyes for defiance or any hint of displeasure or hate. Mauhiyn breathed slow and deep, schooling her face as she had done since childhood.

"Thank you."

Chapter 6

It was well past noon when there came a knock at her door. It seemed Dayron was taking no chances, for First Sergeant Halthryn himself had come to escort her from her tower. She was used to Halthryn being in command of the valley in Dayron's absence, but she couldn't help feeling betrayed that Dayron hadn't returned before their departure.

"You good?" Halthryn asked.

She nodded.

Mauhiyn thought him the handsomest man in the valley, and he was always quick to offer her a friendly smile. He was older than Arroh, and not as fine-featured, lending him a less boyish appearance. He towered in her doorway, even taller than Dayron. His gold hair spilled around his armored shoulders, which had been polished free of any speck of blood from the night before.

"I'll carry that, my lady." He reached for her satchel, brushing her hand.

"Thank you," she said, pretending not to notice.

He winked.

It had taken her moments to pack. Her second dress was too small. Even as slender as she was, the bust and hips were far too tight now. She packed it, anyway. Along with it, she'd

packed Arroh's brick of soap, her comb, her only cloak, and her ill-fitting boots. The ithirmil and the herb knife she hid in her pockets.

She had a raging headache. In the bright sun in the castle yard, the pain spiked behind her eyes. Despite the frosty morning, the day had warmed significantly. Halthryn deposited her satchel in the back of a wagon and left her standing alone in the bustling yard. Several wagons stood ready and waiting to move, packed to the brim with provisions and things to barter for Ceerbrynth goods. Lowynn busied herself in the lead wagon, which she'd claimed all her own.

"Where have you been?" Arroh asked, appearing suddenly beside her.

"Napping."

"Oh? Is that why your hair looks all fancied up?"

"Just *maintaining appearances*."

"Uh-huh. I've been packing all by myself, and I don't even know what to take to a city." He glowered pointedly as if she'd deliberately abandoned him. He shouldered a large sack onto the back of the stable wagon, then hefted a stack of empty buckets into a corner.

"Well, sounds to me like you should take your grievance to Dayron. Speaking of whom, where is he?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you."

"That's not fair—I should know, as well."

"Sounds to me like you should take your grievance to Dayron," he mocked.

Just then, Mauhiyn felt eyes boring into her back. She turned. The guardsmen had bought the Rellswenien from the dungeon. He'd been freshly beaten. Yet, no amount of ropes binding his person could diminish the threat of his presence.

Anxious, Mauhiyn waited for the dog to be brought out, but when the call came to mount up, he was nowhere to be seen. Mauhiyn trembled. The ithirmil in her pocket sagged heavy as a stone. Halhryn was distracted. She could slip down to the dungeon if she moved quickly.

“Mount up, Maus.”

Dog’s breath.

Arroh halted his horse behind her, and for the hundredth time, she wondered if he could read her mind. For somethings his knowing her so well was a blessing, but most times it was a bitter inconvenience. At least Arroh had packed Ursynn’s things for her and even smuggled her another bar of soap. Ursynn stood patiently, unaware that he was about to journey back down the same path on which he’d carried her to safety so many years ago. She gathered his reins.

“Do you need a leg?”

She gave Arroh a look. Since when did she need a leg-up? Then, she felt the Rellswenien’s eyes from across the yard. She had the strangest feeling that Arroh’s offer had to do with the *maintaining appearances* Lowynn was so keen on. Mauhiyn didn’t know why she should care if the mutt thought her riding abilities were inappropriate for a Daughter. She wouldn’t pretend to be who she wasn’t.

Her mother’s ring caught the sunlight, taunting her.

She ran and swung by Ursynn’s mane onto his back.

As the wagons started to roll, two guardsmen dragged the dog from the castle. It balked halfheartedly against the ropes, sides heaving, head low, teeth barred to bite anything within range. They maneuvered him away from the yard

“Don’t,” Arroh said quietly. “Just keep it, Maus. We might need it on the trail.”

She ignored him.

“Don’t do it. Dayron really will whip you this time.”

“Maybe the ithirmil knows more than Dayron? It’s an innocent animal, Arroh. What if it were one of the horses?”

“It isn’t innocent—do you know how many men that thing has killed? He’ll kill you if you give him the chance.”

“Perhaps.”

“He isn’t like Ursynn, okay? You can’t just walk over there and expect him love you.”

The guardsman withdrew his sword.

“Wait!”

It was the Rellswenien. His voice as hoarse as though he’d not had a drop of water.

“Wait! No! He’ll leave you alone; he’ll cause you no harm! Please!”

Halhryn smirked, pleased to have found something the Rellswenien cared so much for.

“He’ll cause no harm! Please!”

Halhryn snarled, “No harm? He’s already wounded half of my men!”

“And he would have killed you all had I commanded him—he stood down! Release him, and he’ll not harm you anymore! Put him in a cage! Please, turn him loose!”

“You’ll have him rip out our throats on the trail.”

“I won’t! He follows my command and my command alone. You’ve my word.”

“Exactly.”

Halhryn nodded and the guardsmen quickly drew his sword along the animal’s throat.

“Mauhiyn!” This time, Arroh was ready for her to run, and he, too, leapt from his horse. But it was Halhryn’s arms which seized her waist.

“Let me go!” she screamed. She kicked and elbowed him with all her might, bruising herself against his armor.

The dog convulsed, as his dark blood sprayed the ground. The Rellswenien now fought in earnest through his bounds, beating the Mimmairhyn guardsmen back one by one. Even with every guardsman now surrounding him, not one of them could land a blow.

Halhryn held her back, bringing her tight against his hips. His arms molded to her body, cradling her close.

“Shush. Be still.”

“Let go!” She flailed her fists wildly and connected with soft tissue. Halhryn yelled, and Mauhiyn wrenched herself from his loosened hold. She sprinted to the dog who lay spasming on the ground. His blood soaked the thirsty ground. Hastily, she took the ithirmil flower from her pocket and crushed it in her hands. It wept a warm, milky substance which was dry to touch. Without hesitation, she pressed the ithirmil to his throat. Hot, sticky blood flooded through her fingers. Maybe she wasn’t doing it right? His eyes were wide, sightless. It won’t work, you’re doing it wrong, it won’t work, chanted in her mind.

It had to.

It had to work.

It took only moments for the blood to stop, then Mauhiyn pressed the ithirmil to his other wounds. For Mauhiyn, time stilled. Tentatively, she touched the top of his head between his folded ears. The fur was surprisingly soft under the coarse outer layer. There was something about him she couldn’t let go. A familiarity, not with this dog particularly, but with the animal.

He amazed her.

A drunken joy flooded her veins. She'd never *touched* something she'd remembered. He was real. Perhaps the other things she remembered were true, as well. Perhaps she wasn't crazed after all.

As she studied the small whiskers which sprouted from his muzzle, he licked her palm. His eyes watched her now. They were a warm, liquid amber that looked deep into her soul.

"Go," she whispered.

He growled, menacing.

She began to back away but hit something solid behind her.

Halhryn yanked her to her feet. He dragged her further away as the dog struggled to stand.

"You're a crazed woman," he hissed. "I'll kill him myself this time."

The dog fell, then tried again, weakly, panting.

She stood between them. "You would let ithirmil go to waste? It was for him! I was supposed to save him!"

Seeing Halhryn's swelling eye, she winced. She'd hit him so sharply blood burst into the clear part of his eye. She wouldn't have to wait for Dayron's punishment. Halhryn would whip her himself. His injured eye seemed to have difficulty focusing. It looked terrible. What had she done? He had only been obeying orders. She was well aware that she alone could survive disobeying Dayron's command.

"I don't care," he snarled, his grip painful.

She reminded, "If you defy the ithirmil, it'll never come to you."

This gave him pause.

Everyone stared. So much for maintaining appearances. Lowynn seemed too stunned to react, either that or she'd no wish to be anywhere near the mess. Blood soaked Mauhiyn's skirt and arms and had somehow gotten into her hair, which streaked her face. The Rellswenien had stopped fighting and the guardsmen had put him to his knees. He watched her, blinking through the fresh blood trickling from his scalp to his eyes.

Behind her, the dog made it to his feet and limped off to the trees, looking back to the Rellswenien every few strides as if he wasn't sure he should go.

"This isn't over," Halhryn assured her and turned back to the company. "Move out!"

Chapter 7

No one, not even Arroh, had spoken a word to Mauhiyn since leaving Wayshofflyn. Halhryn had moved them along quickly, and Mauhiyn hadn't attempted to wash the blood from her hands. It seemed he wanted Dayron to see her in all her bloodied glory. Lowynn hadn't intervened. So, thick, sticky blood and traces of the ithirmil dried to her skin, covering her mother's ring. Her clothes crusted. Mauhiyn sat tall astride Ursynn, refusing to feel the shame and embarrassment they wished upon her.

The Rellswenien looked strange on a horse, as though he'd never ridden in his life, and, of course, he hadn't. The Rellswen mountains were too treacherous and too steep for horses. They relied on their wardogs and their own incredible stamina afoot. His horse ambled along, tethered behind a guardsman's mount. He was unbalanced, awkward, and judging by his pinched, glaring expression, the rough trail jostled his wounds. After having demonstrated what happened to them when he fought back, the guardsmen had gagged him and doubled his binds. They'd tossed his weapons and armor carelessly into the rear wagon.

Earlier that day, Mauhiyn would have delighted to see him in such discomfort. But saving his dog had subdued her resentments. Twice, she caught the flash of black fur through the trees. The dog maintained a careful distance from the small company, always keeping sight of his master. The Rellswenien didn't seem to notice, or else he was deliberately ignoring his dog so as to not single him out for recapture and more abuse. He need not have worried, for Halhryn would not hunt the animal. It was one thing to not use the ithirmil, but it was quite another to deliberately destroy what the ithirmil had saved. He was safe, at least for now.

Dayron would whip her for sure.

But Dayron did not return.

It was well after dark before they made camp. It was colder tonight, but the moon was no less bright. Patches of moonlight beamed through the forest trees. Still no one spoke to Mauhiyn as they went about laying out their beds. Her stomach ached with hunger. She couldn't remember when last she ate, but there would be no meal until tomorrow.

She tethered Ursynn away from the others under a large pine, but still safe within the guardsmen's secured perimeter. She didn't care what Halhryn wanted. And taking her new brick of soap, she stomped past the guardsman to a stream that trickled between the rocks. She scrubbed the dried blood until her skin was raw. The stains wouldn't lift from her skirt.

Oh, dog's spit on appearances, she thought and pulled her dress once more over her head. In her shift, she continued to scrub her skirt. She shivered. As the familiar scent of the upper meadow rose from the suds, Mauhiyn's heart ached. She wished for the meadow, for her valley, for more water to wash with than this meager stream. She wished for none of this to have happened.

She sat back on her heels. It was no use. Her dress was ruined. She'd have to wear her other dress sooner than expected. She growled and tossed a rock over the stream.

She stilled.

She recognized this spot.

Ursynn had stopped to drink here. She'd wanted water so badly but knew she'd never get back on the stallion alone. Besides, her fingers had become so tangled in his mane they'd swollen painfully and she couldn't pull them free. She'd been afraid. But the trees were quiet, familiar. It almost felt like she was going home to a place she'd never been.

She could still hear the hooded men pursuing her and feel the arrows swoosh past her.

What had been the purpose of it all if she was being sent back to Ceerbrynth? What was the purpose of the deaths and the war if a Rellswenien was to replace Dayron as Grand Captain? What was the purpose of *her*?

She'd kept looking back during that ride, but Dayron hadn't come then, either.

Her other dress was indeed far too small, but she struggled into it. The skirt was longer and the bodice lower and tighter. The plain cream material was ungentle, unused. She hated it. She wrapped her cloak about her and drew the hood low as she huddled under the tree. The sounds of Ursynn trying to graze on the sparse grass only made her more homesick for her valley. Even there, the grass was more plentiful than this.

Across the camp, most had bedded down. Lowynn snored from her wagon, sleeping soundly on the only mattress. They'd secured the Rellswenien to a tree. His hulking shadow sat motionless, and it unnerved her that she couldn't tell if he watched her or not. She closed her eyes but couldn't begin to quiet her mind until the last sounds from camp diminished.

She drifted into the veiled world between consciousness and unconsciousness. She hadn't been here since she was a child. She'd hoped to never come here again. But here she was, trapped between the dark, shimmering veils. Through one veil, she saw the tree under which she leaned, and through the other veil was the blissful darkness of slumber. Either of these places would have been welcome, but she was trapped. Something told her not to try to cross to either side.

The memory came to her softly, almost dreamlike. Nothing slowed or flashed. It was a simple memory as though she were recalling yesterday's supper or of the plum grove in full blossom.

She saw him then, the young boy with old eyes who stared at her in fear, trembling where he stood at the left hand of a man with dark hair. Even in the starlit night, she could see he was small and too thin for mountain travel. He hopped nervously from one barefoot to the other, holding a bag away from his body, terrified it would scald him. The welt of a handprint swelled across his dirt-streaked face. She stared into his eyes. They were an inky color, but for the brown. They were terrified, awestruck, and pleading.

She didn't know the man beside him. Equipped for mountain travel, his clothing bore no crest. She caught flashes of silver hair and a liquid crystal gaze from beneath the hood of his cloak. His wardog stood at ready by his heel. The beast was ferocious, and Mauhiyn instantly feared him.

The man was angry, though his features indiscernible through the veil. He was pointing at her, commanding her to do something. The veils closed around her and drew the air from her lungs. A jolt of pain struck her body.

A terrible twisting spiraled through Mauhiyn. She was helpless. Not breathing. The veils constricted around her. She would die.

She gasped. Her eyes flew open.

She knew. She remembered.

They boy was the Rellswenien; there was no doubt. She didn't know the man or why he was angry, but she'd never felt such vicious cruelty.

Her breaths came in sobs. She gasped in the heavy night air, desperate to calm her heart. She hadn't had a memory like this since she was quite young. Of all the memories she'd forced to the back of her mind over the years, this one was certainly the strangest. There was more to it. She'd woken up before she could remember the rest.

She glanced around, hoping she hadn't cried out. The camp was still. The guardsmen on watch hadn't seemed to notice. However, she felt sure the Rellswenien watched her, though his form had not moved.

It was him. The boy. There was no mistaking it.

She needed to tell Dayron.

But what she expected him to do, she didn't know. When had he ever been able to do anything about the memories she shared with him. He'd only brush her aside and worry. She could tell Arroh. He would at least let her talk, keep her company. She didn't feel like being alone anymore. She felt the man could manifest in the darkness between the trees.

She stood. Ursynn blew a rolling breath through his nostrils, startled from his slumber. Silently, she picked her way through the sleeping forms to the one closest to the horses.

"Arroh," she whispered. He didn't budge.

She shook his shoulder.

“Arroh!”

“I’m awake, Maus,” he whispered.

“Well why didn’t you answer?”

She heard him smile, “Wanted to see if you’d try to poke my eye out.”

She winced. “You saw that?”

“We all saw that.”

She began defensively, “I—”

He interrupted surely, no longer whispering, “I know.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“What do you need, Maus?”

She sat next to where he lay, his boots sticking out from beneath his blanket which was too short. She pulled her cloak tighter and hugged her knees. Haltingly, she told him everything she’d remembered. Much to her surprise, he didn’t advise her to tell Dayron.

“Why not?” she asked.

“He’s got a lot on his mind right now. Give him a break. You’ve got to quit going against him.”

“I’m not trying to.”

“Then stop.”

“But I remembered the dog—a dog—as soon as I heard it at Wayshofflyn. The ithirmil came to me for him. What was I supposed to do?”

He sighed, deeply. “I don’t know, Maus....”

“What’s wrong with me, Arroh?” Mauhiyn bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

“Nothing’s wrong with you....” His voice trailed sleepily. He reached over and patted her foot which was peeking out from the hem of her cloak. He left his hand there, warming her toes as he drifted to sleep.

Mauhiyn rested her head on her arms. For now, she was safe.

Mauhiyn jerked awake.

Across the camp, she met the Rellswenien’s eyes. Dawn-lit fog rolled between them over sleeping forms. He was completely unreadable. Did he look on her in hate, curiosity, or indifference? The soul had changed, but the eyes were the same as the boy’s. Glimpsing him as a child somehow made him seem less threatening. The bruising on his face looked tender, but not out of place on his rough features. He contrasted harshly with everything around him. He didn’t belong here. And how strange their company must seem to him. What must he think of her? Had he expected to find a Daughter? He should have mistaken her for a poor maid, which made it curiouser that he momentarily confused her with her mother at first sight.

His gaze shifted to the forest behind her. Turning, she spied the dog watching them from the cover of a drooping pine. He appeared perfectly healthy. He waited patiently, eyes ever on his master. Mauhiyn smiled. But when she glanced back to the Rellswenien, his eyes were as intensely unyielding as before. He could be a little more grateful, she thought.

The guardsmen began to stir. Mauhiyn hated the thought of moving. Arroh’s hand still rested on her foot, the only warm place on her body. She didn’t think she had the energy to force her frozen limbs to move. Frost coated her cloak.

She and the Rellswenien both looked to Halhryn, who stood slowly. His eye was discolored and swollen. He didn’t even glance her way. She winced. Other than the occasional childhood scrap with Arroh, she’d never injured anyone before. Perhaps if she apologized?

The gray legs of a horse stopped in front of her, narrowly missing her toes.

Dayron glowered down at her. “Come with me.”

Mauhiyn stood at once. Dayron removed his foot from his stirrup and held out his arm. Her dress pinched her, protesting every movement as she stretched her toes up to the stirrup and climbed up Dayron’s arm to behind his saddle. Mauhiyn didn’t dare speak a word as they rode down the trail, leaving camp behind. Her heart beat. He really was going to whip her.

When they were well out of earshot, Dayron dismounted and motioned for her to do the same.

“Have a seat.”

She perched herself upon the rock he pointed at and clasped her hands tightly. He stood in front her, his mouth twisted in a frown, his hand resting casually on the hilt of his sword.

“You don’t stink anymore.”

What? She blinked.

“S-soap,” she explained.

Did she normally stink?

“Your hair seems darker.”

“Because I remem—”

“Don’t.”

She glared for a moment, then asked, “What’s my punishment?”

He shook his head. “There’s no point, Mauhiyn. I’m not going to be with you much longer.”

“But the message might not be real.”

“It is.” Then he added, seeing the questions bubbling up inside her. “I just know.”

“It’s because of me, isn’t it? It’s because I’m not who I’m supposed to be.”

“You’ve got to watch yourself. I’m technically not your grand captain anymore.”

“It’s not real.”

“It’s *real*, Mauhiyn. Accept it.”

“Then what’s going to happen to you?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“King Aeldyn will kill you?”

“He’ll likely send me elsewhere. You need to prepare yourself for the very real possibility that I won’t be with you after we reach the city—no—listen to me. You need to watch what you’re doing because the Rellswenien’s keeping an eye on you, and you’re a fool if you think he’s not keeping a note of everything you’re doing.”

“But I can’t—but I don’t want you to go!”

“I don’t want to go either.” He studied her. “But you need to accept this.”

“I can’t! You—he’s going to send you? Really? I thought Aeldyn was just mad?” She was babbling, and she didn’t care. This was wrong. This couldn’t happen.

“King Aeldyn is mad. Mauhiyn, you have to accept this.”

“NO!”

“Pull yourself together!” he commanded. “You must pull yourself together. You’re strong. Take a step. You can either stay here and wilt and wear away like a coward, or you can be strong and use the strength I know you have in you. Take the step.”

She stilled. *Take the step.*

“Listen to me. While we’re there, you keep your head down, you don’t speak unless you’re spoken to, and, even then, speak carefully, as if your life depends on every word, because it will.”

“What of Lowynn?”

“Forget Lowynn. You keep a low profile. I don’t care if you remember flying horses, you keep your mouth shut.”

“Is that a thing?” She tried to laugh.

“Of course not.” His mouth twitched. “Can you do this for me?”

She nodded, “Yes.”

“Swear it.”

“I swear.”