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A Path Unfolding

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A PATH UNFOLDING

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

Sarah Lucille Parris

May 2020

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A PATH UNFOLDING

English

Missouri State University, May 2020

Master of Arts

Sarah Lucille Parris

ABSTRACT

A selection from *A Path Unfolding*, an original young adult fantasy novel about a girl named Al, who strives to fulfil a prophecy in order to restore the natural order in the magical land of Anthe. Preceded by a critical introduction detailing the genre and craft influences on the work. The novel explores themes of truth and deception, and asks the questions of what, exactly, it means to be a ‘chosen one’.

KEYWORDS: young adult, fantasy, portal fantasy, prophecy, novel excerpt

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my friends and family for believing in me and supporting me through this journey. My mom, for endless conversations about lore, Rachel for encouraging me to write every day, and my wife, Kas, for moving to Springfield with me three days after our wedding so I could go to school again instead of making a practical living at a desk in a cubicle.

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INTRODUCTION

Truth and Modern Myth in *Tales of Erathe*: Uncanny Machinations in a Hybrid Realm

As a writer, I'm fascinated by what power truth holds, what truth means, and what implications different levels of truth have on the world and the characters in it. Truth is a big theme in my writing, as well as exploring what different kinds of truth there are. Terrible truths, surprising truths, and cursed truths all feature.

I think what interests me about truth and truths is what people do with them, how they influence our decisions, and our thoughts about ourselves, others, and the world. It's always struck me as fascinating that there are truths I don't want to know. There are stories I don't want to be told because I don't want my perception of a person to change. There are also truths that I know I must learn in order to go forward in my personal journey, and they frighten me because I know they will change me. An example might be learning about the terrible treatment of people, and specifically women, in other parts of the world during my undergraduate years when we were required to read *Half the Sky* (2010) by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn and watch the accompanying documentary. On an exponentially smaller scale (and I recognize that this is trivial in the broad scope of other atrocities going on in the world), I find another example in that there are times I've found myself wishing that I hadn't heard about J. K. Rowling's attitudes toward transgender women so that I could continue looking up to her.

While I can't speak for everyone, I know I'm not the only one who sometimes (and perhaps irresponsibly) shuts my ears against sad or infuriating international news headlines, or hopes nothing unsavory comes out about our favorite actor, comedian, or even family member, because we want to keep hold of our idealized perception of those people. It's this aspect of

human nature that I keep coming back to in my writing, whether it be short stories or collaborative work with friends; truth and how discovering certain truths might shift our perception of the world and our position in it.

Series Summary

My main focus of work since 2011 has been my book series, *Tales of Erathe*. Eight novels constitute the series so far, each in varying degrees of completion, from nearly finished to the first stages of plotting. The first three books (*A Path Unfolding*, *Waters of Change*, and *Kilter*) are a trilogy in which the protagonist, a girl named Al, slips through the veil from Earth to the world of Erathe and finds herself in a country called Anthe. Unbeknownst to Al, a prophecy has spoken of her coming in a twist on the classic ‘chosen one’ plot structure that’s so common in Young Adult fantasy literature, the twist being that everyone in Anthe is given a Task by the gods when they’re born, but some, like Al’s, hold more weight than others.

What no one on Earth or Erathe knows is that the two are mirror worlds that were always meant to be linked together, but the veil between them has been sealed for millennia due to destruction caused by the warring gods. Al’s journey is to discover the truth of this, free a goddess forgotten by history from her celestial prison, and rejoin the two worlds together so that the balance of the worlds may be restored. All of this is complicated by the vicious, unnamed queen of Anthe who seeks to turn the prophecy to her own gain.

Meanwhile, the evil queen’s trusted servant, Doon, must learn the terrible truth that the queen he’s adored since childhood has magically brainwashed and betrayed him along with most of the noble families of the kingdom. Not only this, but he has doomed himself by mistakenly killing the prophet the queen has sent him to find. He knows the queen will have his head for this

failure, and that his only way of escape is to disappear into the same dirty streets he clawed his way up from years ago. In the end, he must face the truth that everything he has believed for thirty years is a lie, and he must grapple with the knowledge that the only way to save himself and the whole of Erathe is to betray his betrayer, the queen, and join forces with her enemies.

In the fourth *Erathe* novel, *Ordinary Magick*, Anthe is at war with the goblin nation to the south, Dtamoz. Twelve-year-old Lunete's mother, a soldier, has been presumed dead in battle for over two years. Despite all military evidence pointing otherwise, Lunete is convinced Amrita is still alive somewhere in Dtamoz. Map in hand, her dog at her side, Lunete sneaks away from home to bring her mother back. With the help of Balthos, who she meets along the way, she makes it to Dtamoz and discovers she was right. Her mother is indeed still alive and being held as a prisoner and servant to a goblin general. Upon their reunion in the dungeons of a goblin fortress, Lunete dreams that after so much time apart, her mother might come to live with her again, but it's a childish dream, as her father has already remarried. She must bear the terrible truth that, though her quest proved fruitful, things can never be as they once were.

Earlier, during a misadventure in the faerie woods, Balthos meets the ghost of his great grandmother Killiki and discovers that she was a pixie who made a wish to be human. He realizes this must be how he came to have the magical ability to reverse time. Killiki gives him a moonstone pendant and tells him that it may help him one day when he's lost. This interaction sparks the beginning of his personal journey of self-discovery, growth, and reparation with his troubled past.

In the fifth novel, *The Curse of Tymbriele*, a young princess is born with a "truth upon her lips," but it's a cursed truth that she can never speak, for if she does it will cast her country into ruin. Knowing this, her parents hire a court wizard to enchant her so she must take the form

of a deer by night. This is to ensure she cannot speak at all when there is no one nearby to guard her words.

Theory

In terms of applicable theory, I could make arguments for the presence of polyphony, rhyming action, existential codes, and the horror of forgetting, but the one that's most interesting to me is Lubomír Doležel's theory of the modern myth. In *Heterocosmica* (1998), Doležel describes the modern myth as a narrative inversion of the traditional mythic structure, one in which "[t]he anti-human world is operated by the humans themselves" and that "the alien forces are nothing other than the mysterious, perverse ingredients of human nature and societal organization" (197). These humans doing the work of the "anti-human" domain from the shadows results in "phantoms" that affect what he calls the "semantic structure" and the "pattern of control" over the world, the narrative, and the human characters (197). These "phantoms" drastically influence the narrative behind the scenes and are unknowable to those who are affected. Unlike in the traditional myth structure, where gods are the "anti-human" agents of human suffering, the modern myth grants that role to humans themselves to perform from the shadows, and occasionally to the intentionless movements of nature. Instead of Zeus or some other god deliberately punishing humans for their hubris, it's the human element that steps in and pulls the rug out from under the hero, often for no discernable reason.

With an expansive mythology consisting of about forty named gods and spirits between the human and goblin pantheons, it would be simple and even expected to let the world of Erathe fall into a traditional mythic narrative. However, though the gods are literal entities with motivations and pursuits of their own, they are seldom responsible for the plights of the human

characters. In fact, they are more likely to help the human characters in their quests than they are to hinder them – though this is decidedly not true for the trickster god Krin, or the primordial spirit of decay that the people of Anthe call the Rogue Raven.

In truth, the primary source of trouble for the human characters are the corrupt governments running the show and redirecting the characters at every turn. A good example of this can be seen in the seventh book, *Amulet of Abernathy*, when two thieves, Sarsah and Streeter, are hired by a nobleman to steal a ruby amulet. Unbeknownst to them, this amulet is ancient, enchanted, and protected by shades that exist beyond the veil of worlds. Upon stealing the amulet, Sarsah and Streeter are marked to be hunted by these shades who will not rest until they've consumed Sarsah's and Streeter's souls completely, and every moment of exposure to the creatures makes the soul decay a little further.

Sarsah and Streeter come to find that the nobleman who hired them knew of the shades, and of the amulet's enchantment. They later discover that the amulet once belonged to the evil queen from the beginning trilogy and that the current princess of Anthe wants the family heirloom back. It comes down to these two lowly thieves to keep the amulet out of the hands of royalty and to return it to its rightful home in the legendary Lake Methyrah.

The modern myth here is shown in Sarsah's and Streeter's inability to fight back against their enemies – the royal family who has eyes across the kingdom and inexhaustible resources, and the shades that are literally untouchable. It's also important to note that the shades themselves have no true motives – they are simply doing what shades *do*, much like a lion must hunt. It is truly human manipulation that has set these otherworldly creatures on our heroes, fully demonstrating the human ability to act from the “anti-human” domain.

We continue to see the modern myth at work when, at every turn, Sarsah and Streeter are plagued by setbacks, and forced to find the more difficult workaround to simple tasks, like sleeping (because the shades always come when they are most vulnerable) and getting from one city to the next (because the king's men are searching for them on every road out of Abernathy). At best they are turned away and refused help by citizens who don't want trouble, and at worst, those who recognize them report on their whereabouts. Once again, the enemy isn't something they can come face to face with, but rumors and "phantoms" that spell danger from the shadows of human civilization.

Here I must introduce a similar narrative from a published work to compare against my own and contextualize it in the realm of modern fantasy literature. George R. R. Martin is a widely known figure in the fantasy genre for his book series *Game of Thrones*, which inspired the immensely popular television series of the same name that ran on HBO from 2011 to 2019. Martin is important to talk about because his work is widely loved, and quickly recognizable in popular culture due to the televised series. As Martin makes extraordinary use of the modern myth in *Game of Thrones*, I cannot think of a better (guidepost? Landmark? touchstone?) to hold my story up to in terms of theory.

Sarsah and Streeter's plight is not unlike that of young Arya Stark's, who appears in every book of Martin's series as a main character. Arya's world is one of war, royal politics, and gritty realism in a medieval-esque fantasy world. While young Arya has stolen no enchanted heirlooms, it's true that every time she begins to get close to safety, the machinations of politics and war pull the rug out from under her, whether it's specifically to spite her or not. The first time this happens is when her journey north out of enemy land (owned by the Lannisters, the royal family) with her temporary protector, Yoren, is intercepted by Lannister soldiers and Yoren

is killed. This is followed by her run-in with the dangerous Gregor Clegane (Lannister loyal), who takes her to be a servant in Harrenhal keep, just days away from where her brother Robb and mother Catelyn are staying (Martin, *Clash of Kings*, 1999).

Arya's escape from Harrenhal is complicated when she's intercepted once again, this time by a group of deserters, one of whom, Harwin, had served her family for many years. This group plans to use her for ransom and personal gain, the ultimate betrayal by a trusted family servant. Fleeing from them results in her capture by Sandor Clegane (Gregor's brother), who wishes to take her to her mother in exchange for a place in Robb's service. Finally, she appears to be getting close to her family again, but, as the modern myth would have it, their travel is delayed when the central river floods, causing them to arrive too late to save or be reunited with Robb and Catelyn before the so-called 'red wedding' where Robb and Catelyn are brutally murdered the moment Arya and Sandor arrive on their doorstep (Martin, *Storm of Swords*, 2000).

Again we see the human element acting against our hero's interest from the shadows in a marriage between what is traditionally the human agent and the "anti-human" domain. (Doležel refers to worlds in which the invisible and visible realms are joined in such a way as "hybrid worlds," which I will discuss in more detail later.) As a child, Arya is not privy to information she cannot gather herself. Though she blames and vows revenge on several other characters, it may ultimately seem to her that she's tossed about by some faceless institution, like the senselessness of war, or the uncaringness of politics.

Though unfortunate and unpredictable, the forces at play in *Game of Thrones* are not otherworldly. At best they are intentionless natural phenomena, like the flood, and at worst they are targeted actions of the kind Harwin made when he decided to capture Arya. The modern myth is alive here as Arya is forced to wonder what offense her family made to the Lannisters

and learn how to navigate the universal “phantom” of the stranger. Indeed, we can see the significance of the stranger in Sandor Clegane’s horse, whose name is Stranger, and in the frightening and unknowable seventh god, known only as The Stranger in the religion of the New Gods, or the Faith of the Seven. Where the other six gods represent virtues like strength, justice, or mercy, The Stranger represents death and the unknown, and as a rule, he is not prayed to or mentioned in hymns. The stranger in *Game of Thrones* is the real danger, and this is truer for Arya than for any other character. As a vulnerable child in a war-torn land, her enemy is not war or politics, but the human race itself. Every face is untrustworthy, every promise suspicious, every alliance fraught with danger. To survive, she can rely only on herself, and so the universal “phantom,” in her case, literally applies universally to all humans.

Another way we might think of the modern myth is illustrated in Milan Kundera’s retelling of an (apparently true) story in *The Art of the Novel* (1988). The story goes that a Czechoslovakian engineer is falsely accused in “the official daily paper of the Party” of slandering socialism in Prague and emigrating to London (Kundera 99). “Illegal emigration combined with a statement of that kind is no trifle,” Kundera writes, and “would be worth twenty years in prison” (Kundera 99). Whenever the engineer attempts to get the statement corrected and struck from public record, each new office in the bureaucratic systems in place thwarts him by deferring responsibility elsewhere. The paper’s editor claims he had nothing to do with writing the piece and the engineer should take his complaint to the Ministry of the Interior. The Ministry says he should take it up with the London embassy where they received their information from, and the London embassy refuses to grant a retraction of the statement (Kundera 100). Eventually, the engineer is forced to *actually* emigrate to the West to avoid prison in Czechoslovakia (Kundera 99-100).

Here we see the unknowable forces at work, the human operators of the invisible domain (the bureaucracy), impossible to defeat. Kundera later describes Kafka's uncanny take on the world of bureaucracy, explaining that it is "a world of obedience" where there is "no initiative, no invention, no freedom of action," a world where "people do not know the meaning of what they do," and as "the world of the abstract" where "the functionary deals only with unknown persons and with files" (Kundera 112-113). The human element in Kundera's description of bureaucracy is responsible for the real suffering of other humans, but it's impersonal, intentionless, and uncaring, exactly like Doležel's definition of the modern myth that inverts the idea of punishment as a deliberate action from the gods.

Kundera's description reminds me powerfully of Doon's position in the first *Erathe* book, *A Path Unfolding*. As the queen's trusted servant, it is not his place to question her orders or her intentions. Indeed, he has no desire to question the queen, as he is not only content but enthusiastic to blindly obey. Under her orders, he seeks a prophet to help untangle the enigma of the prophecy of Al's arrival in Anthe. He doesn't know what evil plans the queen has for this knowledge, and he doesn't know how the future of the world will be affected if he succeeds in his mission. He has neither the presence of mind to contemplate the outcomes of his actions, or the ability to realize that his compliance furthers the queen's tampering with celestial forces beyond any mortal's control.

Doon is essentially a "functionary" of the queen in the first book, shuffling around the unknowable and abstract pieces of information, or "files", so that the queen may have them organized and at her disposal later. To Doon the files might be labeled things like – "Prophet: Mysterious", "Prophecy: Important", and "Witch (Don't Kill)". Doon's simplistic and uninterested approach to these bits of information demonstrates his role as an agent of the

abstract, and consequently his role as an agent of organized attack emanating from the invisible domain of the queen.

Kundera further describes the horror of the modern myth as “[t]he hypnotic eye of power, the desperate search for one’s own offense, exclusion and the anguish of being excluded, the condemnation to conformism...” (Kundera 116). These are all aspects of the queen’s reign that Doon must deal with in her treatment of him, as seen in the second *Erathe* book, *Waters of Change*. Doon is a trusted servant of the queen but allowed to know no secrets. He is enchanted with the queen (quite literally, thanks to her magical amulet) and will do anything she asks, but he is replaceable. When he is cast out of her favor it’s for an offense that he couldn’t have known he was committing at the time and he is later forced to conclude that she set him up for failure for reasons unknown to him. This causes him to “desperately search” his memory for ways he might have failed her in the past, reasons she might have to betray him. His fall from favor, his “anguish of being excluded,” is the knowledge that after fifteen years of service, he now finds himself in the same desperate straits she raised him out of, a position he has desperately tried to escape all his life. He realizes that there are countless others under the queen’s employ similar to him – desperates who conform to her wishes and march around her lands doing her dirty work for no other reason than the fear of falling from her favor and what that fall might entail for them.

The Hybrid World

As mentioned earlier, the hybrid world is a term Doležel uses to refer to any world in which the “anti-human” and human elements occupy the same space. The existence of the uncanny, invisible, man-made machine is only one variation of it. Another variation, also present

in Erathe, brings together the supernatural and natural worlds so that the opposing alethic modalities of each merge into a new reality where the differentiation between natural and supernatural events is impossible because they are one and the same (Doležel 187-188). Here I must define some terms.

In *Heterocosmica*, Doležel breaks down several “modalities” of world-building. Essentially, every world, real or fictional, is built of a set of modalities that characterize the facets of that world. The “alethic” modality refers to the natural laws of the world in question and the idea that a world’s natural laws must follow an internal logic. One alethic constraint of Earth, for instance, is that time must run forward in a linear progression. It is against the alethic constraints of Earth to travel backward in time. If someone were discovered to have the magical ability to move backward in time, we would call that person an alethic alien for being endowed with the ability to reject Earth’s alethic constraints (Doležel 115-120). Other alethic constraints of Earth would include the laws of gravity and the fact that humans cannot breathe under water without the help of some facial apparatus.

In a hybrid world that allows the supernatural realm and the natural realm coexist in the same space, these alethic constraints come under tension due to the opposing alethic endowments of the worlds’ inhabitants. For an example of this, let’s look to the world of Greek mythology, where the gods live in the physical realm on Mount Olympus and conduct their godly business from the mortal plane. Clearly, the alethic constraints of the gods differ from the alethic constraints of the humans. Zeus can hurl lightning bolts and Hades can open great rifts to the Underworld to steal away young maidens, while the humans are no different from how we appear today. This does not make the gods alethic aliens, however. Rather, it means that two opposing alethic modalities exist concurrently: one for the gods and one for the humans. An

alethic alien in ancient Greek mythology would be someone who was born under one alethic code but endowed with a power that ran against it, like a natural human who could breathe under water.

Doležel explains that in such a hybrid world, where two opposing sets of alethic constraints exist simultaneously, it is illogical to describe something as ‘impossible’ or ‘supernatural’ because the ‘supernatural’ is, in fact, part of the natural world. Instead, he settles for calling such events as the earth swallowing Persephone into the Underworld “bizarre” (Doležel 187-188). It’s an unusual event, but hardly unnatural in a world where similar incredible acts are performed every day.

Erathe is this sort of hybrid world. Gods and spirits are physical entities that are very much in touch with the mortal realm and can manifest in a number of ways to cause “bizarre” events in the world of the characters. Caedmon, the fox spirit and protector of the faerie forest, appears to several characters throughout the books, offering help and healing where he is inclined to. The Rogue Raven wreaks havoc in the faerie forest, and nearly captures Lunete in *Ordinary Magick*. Krin, the trickster god, appears to Balthos in a short story. Nabia, the water goddess who Al frees from her prison, appears to the kind-hearted goblin prince, Kunxaal, to guide his journey in forging a lasting peace between Anthe and Dtamoz in the sixth book, *The Shifting*.

Kunxaal is triply affected by the presence of gods and spirits in this hybrid world. Aside from Nabia’s guidance, he was blessed as an infant by the god of duality so that he might always be able to see all the paths open to him, and fully understand opposing viewpoints in a conflict, demonstrating the gods’ hope that one day he will be a great king. Thirdly, his mother is a priestess of the Lady of Shadows, the goddess of night and dreaming. She transcended from her

mortal existence into an immortal disciple when she proved herself worthy in a test of the spirit. Though not gone from the world, she is gone from Kunxaal in order to do her work for the goddess protecting the night and its dreamers. Sade, Lunete's sister who died in childhood, becomes a guiding spirit to lost children in her afterlife. The ghost of Killiki gives Balthos his moonstone pendant. The 'supernatural' in here, but it's not *un*-natural.

The modern myth and the hybrid world are integral parts of Erathe's structure. As an inherently hybrid realm, it was perhaps inevitable that the gods and spirits would function as a natural part of the world and its growth, while the human element would create the most conflict. What's interesting to me now is how prominently the conflict between truth and the modern myth comes to the forefront in my work. The modern myth, of course, is about the horror of the invisible and unknowable (human) domain, but it strikes me that nearly all of my protagonists struggle to find the truth of some non-human element (the goddess, the amulet, the curse, the goblin country) that is being obscured by human agents.

Perhaps this is a natural progression of the marriage between the visible and invisible domains in a hybrid world. Doležel comments:

From the very beginning of culture, humans have sought to understand the world in which they live and toil. Both intellect and imagination have been engaged in the service of that search. The most ancient, mythological imagination provided an understanding of the human world by surrounding it with vast alien spaces, seats of nonhuman or superhuman powers and individuals. (Doležel 185)

Because it is such a primal part of human nature to attempt to demystify one's surrounding world by investigating what appears to be mystical (even if that investigation involves the invention of mystical agents), it seems natural, and even inevitable, that my characters would fall into the same tendency. When one must live in a world that is marked by magic and the presence of gods,

but which is plagued by the machinations of unseen human forces, perhaps investigating the visible – the nonhuman – comes more easily.

Perhaps within the narrative confines of the modern myth, one must study the nonhuman, and even the “anti-human” element in order to understand the human condition, the human domain, and one’s own position within it. Because human troubles cannot be blamed on the gods, who are a visible and knowable part of the natural world of Erathe, but on human systems of hierarchy and organization that are relegated to the shadows, the humans of Anthe find themselves in a world where the “bizarre” is the touchstone of reality, where the truth can be found in the nonhuman while untruth and the anti-*human* undoing of human understanding is perpetuated by humans themselves.

In Erathe, humans are the most grounded and the most in touch with themselves and their identities when in the presence of gods and the bizarre. Indeed, in a scenario that casts gods to act toward human interests and uncaring government functionaries to act against them, my human heroes *must* turn to the nonhuman domain to find answers and aid in a true reversal of the traditional mythic structure.

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FRAME BEGINNING

The following pages include the first six chapters of *A Path Unfolding*, the first novel in *Tales of Erathe*, a Young Adult fantasy series. We open with high school sophomore Alice Goldberg on an ordinary Thursday that quickly turns *extraordinary* when she discovers a passage into another world. There she finds magick, mystery, and prophecy, all of which apparently involves her!

CHAPTER ONE

~Al~

Al hurried down the sloped alleyway, avoiding smashed bottles and stray stones. Her heart raced as she turned onto the next street. The bus sat on the corner, exactly the color of crusty mustard, wheezing exhaust fumes. On top, the ominous blinking of the yellow light reminded her of the watchful eye of some great grumbling beast. She recognized the last of the usual morning passengers climbing up the steps and darted forward, slipping between the rickety folding doors just as they were about to close. She'd made it.

Lia, dressed in her usual goth-punk attire, waved to her from the back and Al squeezed her way along the aisle, past the cranky kindergarteners, to join her. It was ridiculous that high schoolers had to ride with the primary kids, but there simply weren't enough buses to go around so the district had to make do. She stepped over a sparkly princess backpack in the aisle and plopped down in the back row next to her sister.

"You could have waited for me, you know," Al said as the bus lurched into motion.

"Then we'd both be late," Lia said. Her plum lipstick was perfect, as always, matched with a liberal amount of purple eyeliner, and her hair was spiked up like some anime character. A black cross sparkling with plastic jewels dangled from a long chain around her neck and several earrings sparkled in each ear.

"I never miss the bus," Al said. It was mostly true.

"I must have imagined last week, then," Lia countered.

“It’s not my fault the stop moved and no one bothered to tell me,” Al said. Someone laughed nearby and she looked to see who it was, but no one was even sitting in the row ahead of them.

“It counts,” Lia said, brushing some lint off her red plaid miniskirt. It clung to her striped leggings as it fell, but she didn’t notice. Al shivered just looking at her. It wasn’t exactly cold out, but the morning was still a bit chilly, especially for that shirt, which was little more than lace from the shoulder blades up. Though they were twins, they couldn’t have been more different. Where Lia was all darkness and chains, Al was jeans and Converse.

She rolled her eyes as her stomach rumbled and looked out the window, trying not to think about how she’d been in too much of a hurry to eat breakfast at home. Watching the same houses and trees and ugly lawn art go by as it did every day was little comfort. They passed the vandalized stop sign on Santa Fe, the dilapidated playground set on Chateau Lane, and the light-up reindeer on Morgan Street, though it was the last day of March. Everything to suggest it would be yet another normal day at Goldman High.

~

The day passed in a haze of daydream and disinterest, setting in about halfway through first hour Algebra II. Alphabet Soup was what it should have been called, she thought. Mr. Brimmer tried his best to make it interesting. She knew that, but even his lame jokes and mildly entertaining one-liners couldn’t make her understand it any better. The simple fact of the matter was that numbers would never mean anything to her, and adding in letters to stand for numbers made it even worse.

Mr. Brimmer underlined a string of numbers and signs on the board that apparently equaled $2a$. She looked at her half-blank sheet of notebook paper, honestly trying to understand,

but it was like a puzzle that wouldn't fit together. Still, she tried the example on the board. Maybe she could get it right. Just once.

A chill ran up her back and she shivered, but not because she was cold. It was more like someone was standing too close for comfort. She turned to look over her shoulder, but nothing was there except the kid sitting in the desk behind her. Strange. She shook her head and went back to her paper. 5.2a. She sighed, scratched it out, and let the haze take her, doodling angry Pacmen eating stick figures until the bell rang.

Lunch was another fiasco all its own. Tossed forks, smashed trays, and something called 'Thursday Turkey Surprise!' for the entree. This place had the works. And she'd forgotten her lunch money. For the tenth time in a row. No way they'd let her charge her account again, and no way was she eating the free PB&J they gave out either. How embarrassing.

She sighed and took her seat at the table she, Amy, and James usually occupied. Though it could seat twelve like all the others, they were the only three who ever sat there. She looked around the room where most of the other tables were crammed full. Some even had extra chairs seated around. Everyone was chatting, munching on chalky carrots, poking at their Jell-O, or making faces of pronounced disgust at their 'Thursday Turkey Surprise!'. Laughter and shouts crowded in from all directions, and Al lay her head on the table, hoping her friends would make it through the lunch line quickly. Once again she got the feeling she was being watched, but she didn't look up this time. For all she knew it could be the ghost of some kid who died in a science experiment gone wrong fifty years ago, and the moment it knew she knew it would eat her soul, and where would she be then? Better not to provoke it.

A tray clattered onto the table, jarring Al from her thoughts. She looked up to see Amy taking the seat beside her.

“Hey,” Al said with a smile. Amy was a kindhearted girl whose hair changed color with the seasons and sometimes got so dry it broke off completely, leaving the top halves to stick out at odd angles. For the past few weeks it had remained in transition mode from spring to summer and looked to be the color of applesauce. She wore spectacles that matched her so well it was sometimes easy to forget she was wearing them at all. She was the smartest person Al had ever met, understanding to an epic proportion, and virtually harmless in every way, except for a sharp tongue when it was needed.

“Hey,” Amy replied. She shook her milk carton before opening it, like every day. White milk, as usual - two percent. Al shuddered. White milk was only good for cereal, chocolate, and cooking.

James took the seat across from them and gingerly poked at his turkey surprise a fork. “Looks like crap,” he said.

“Probably is,” Al said, grimacing at it.

He looked at her. “You alright?” He had dark hair and stormy eyes she could never decide the color of, but today they looked dark grey and shone with a glint of concern.

She nodded. “Yeah, I guess. Nothing to complain about, I suppose.” Though not being haunted might be nice. She still couldn’t shake the feeling.

“So, how’s your day going?” When James got the impression someone was upset, he didn’t let it go easily.

She shrugged. “No different than any other day. Apathetic, as usual.”

“Apathetic?” He’d never been one to study vocabulary.

“You know, like everything’s pointless and nothing matters because the sun’s going to burn the planet to a crisp in a billion years anyway.”

He laughed that goofy laugh of his that never failed to make her smile. “You sure have a way with words.” He turned his attention back to the soupy mess on his tray.

“Why is it *Thursday* surprise?”

“And what’s the surprise?” Amy asked sardonically.

Al laughed. “Can the surprise only happen on Thursdays?”

“Any other day it’s just ‘Turkey!’” Amy bantered.

James held up his hand as if imagining an advertisement. “Turkey! The only surprise is that it’s chicken!”

Al giggled until her stomach growled again, and she looked at James. “Hey, you have a dollar on you?”

He nodded. “Yeah, why?”

She glanced toward the vending machines. “Would you get me some Pop Tarts? I forgot my money. Again.”

“What kind?” She smiled. It was one of the things she loved about him. He was always willing to help out a friend, no questions asked. She made a mental note to pay him back the seventy-five cents later.

A fork flew onto the table with a clatter and landed right in front of Amy. She looked at it as she would a brightly colored ant. “How irregular.”

From the next table, a chorus of guffaws sounded. Al turned around. Typical. Every one of them was wearing John Deere merchandise. An empty milk carton sailed over her head, narrowly missing James’s turkey pile. He let out a string of obscenities. Al

looked around for a teacher. Mr. Linden was in an animated conversation with the evil old Mrs. Wortimer, and Mr. Praffer strolled along obliviously patrolling the other end of the room. They were on their own. Al surmised there were three conceivable options: 1) Play the baby and tattle. 2) Play the bigger person and just walk out. 3) Play the child she was and retaliate.

Another empty milk carton flew onto their table. *Looks like door number three*, she thought. She looked around for a weapon. “Hey, are you gonna eat your Fancy Feast?”

James shook his head. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

“And you?” Al gestured to Amy.

Amy also shook her head, a knowing twinkle forming in her eyes.

Al stood, taking both trays in her hands and marched to the neighboring table. “Hello,” she said as kindly as she could muster.

“Hey, rat girl,” Jeremy Lewis said. An unfortunate name she’d acquired when she’d gotten a haircut based off an anime character in eighth grade and the two long strands streaming out of her short bob had ended up looking like rat tails. The rest just looked at her as if she were a walking pumpkin. That is to say with confusion and some contempt at the irregularity. To be fair, she normally didn’t come any closer to them than she had to.

She smiled. “How’s your day going?”

They exchanged glances with each other and began snickering. A vague smell of chewing tobacco hit her then and she almost wished she had kept her distance.

“Good, I take it? Good. We were just wondering if you’d like some extras since we’re not going to eat it.”

One of the guys spoke. “We don’t want your nasty leftovers.”

Al turned to him. “No? Well, we didn’t want yours either.” With that she dumped one tray on him and the other on the guy across from him and walked away as they clattered to the floor. Behind her, she could hear a sudden hush followed by the guys freaking out. It was doubtless she’d be in trouble for this later, but it had been worth it to see the looks on their faces. Now it was time to find refuge in the library and revel in sweet glory.

~

That afternoon as Al walked up the sloped alleyway leading to her house, she could think only of the unfairness of it all. To think she’d been suspended for three days just for standing up for herself! Turning the corner onto her street, she could see her mother’s car in the driveway. Great. She wouldn’t even have a few minutes to herself before she got home. She swung the door open the front door to reveal the entryway strung this way and that in yarn. It wound underneath all the furniture, up the stairs, down again, and into the dining room. Gerald, the great grey tabby, lay on a side table across the room looking pleased with himself. She dropped her bag by the door and went to pet him.

“Hey, I’m back!” she called.

Her mother’s voice floated in from the kitchen. “Hey, hon. How was school?”

Al sighed and followed it into the next room. With any luck, the principal hadn’t followed through on his promise to call her, or maybe she hadn’t gotten the call. Yes, that would be better.

“Average,” she said, stepping through the doorway. “Is there anything to eat?” She’d never ended up getting those Pop-Tarts.

“There’s some ramen in the cabinet,” her mom said, pointing. Her hair hung in wisps around her face, having fallen out of her bun throughout the day. She looked like she had something on her mind and Al’s stomach sunk a little.

“What’s up?” she asked, trying to look casual as she took a pack of noodles down.

“Your principal emailed me today,” she said, leaning against the sink. Al rolled her eyes. Of course her luck couldn’t be that good. “What happened?” Her voice was nonjudgmental, but Al knew she was still on thin ice.

She took a pot out of another cabinet and, with an air of careful nonchalance, explained, “A group of backwoods hicks decided to treat us like their personal garbage disposal.”

“So you dumped your lunch on their heads?” She appeared to be struggling somewhere between anger and incredulity at her daughter’s actions.

Al scowled. “Well, it wasn’t as easy as it sounds. Their heads are so far up their asses they were hard to find. Besides, it wasn’t *my* lunch.” She held the pot toward the sink, silently asking for access to it.

Her mom pursed her lips. “Al, you’re better than that.”

Al shrugged. “It’s not like anything bad’s gonna happen. Just. I.S.S. for a few days. It’s worth it. I mean, you splatter a dude with gravy and they repay you by making sure you don’t have to see him for a few days. Some punishment.”

Her mother threw her hands up. They’d had this conversation before and Al knew she was getting tired of it. “Being in trouble is not a good thing! You can’t keep doing this.”

“I didn’t *do* anything!” Al shouted, dropping the pot to her side. “Some assholes were using our heads as target practice so I one-upped them!”

Her mom put a hand to her forehead, taking a few breaths before she spoke again. “Maybe that place just isn’t good for you. Maybe we should just take you out or something.”

“And put me where?” Al challenged. “Catholic school? Yeah, *that’ll* work out!”

“All I’m saying is it might be nice for you to take a while off public school and study on your own. Things you actually care about.” Al scoffed but her mom took no notice of it. “Don’t roll your eyes. I’m serious. You’re always going on about how the stuff they teach in school is pointless, and your grades aren’t doing you much good at this point, anyway. I mean, what’s your GPA? Two point five? What if you could make your own curriculum and study things that interest you?”

Al raised an eyebrow. “You mean like homeschool.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Well, yeah. I think it’d be good for you.” She gave a hopeful kind of half-smile.

“No.”

“Why?”

“It’s a stupid idea,” Al said. “I wouldn’t see people and I’d be stuck here all the time!”

“Al, what’s your problem?” Her mom knit her brows together, hurt, but not enough to warrant an apology.

“Nothing,” Al said. “I’m just not especially enthused at the idea of social quarantine.”

“Al-”

“Whatever, I’m going.” She set the pot on the stove loudly and turned from the room.

“Going where?” her mom asked.

“For a walk,” she said.

“Alice-” She could hear her mother’s attempt at sternness, but knew the only threat she had to work with was grounding, and she wasn’t in the mood to listen.

“I have my phone so I can call you if I die.” With that she took her bag and left the house.

It was a cool afternoon. Spring was just blooming into its novelty stage with chirping baby birds and tulips and Easter bunnies. The air was light, fresh, and smelled a bit like rain and magnolia blooms. Sun streamed down between the trees and butterflies flapped clumsily about the new impatiens. Al let her feet carry her along the most familiar path they knew and let her mind wander until, inevitably, she found herself at her favorite place in town.

Kemp Military School was an old-fashioned collection of buildings founded in the 1840s. The campus spread itself over a few acres of land, though fully half of it was park and forest. The buildings themselves had long since been abandoned and subject to graffiti, thrown stones, and water damage. It was said to be haunted, lending itself well to break-ins from the neighborhood hooligans. Though the local authorities did what they could to board the place up, they were bested more often than not. Technically the grounds were public property, open to the citizens of Welton, and for the most part, it was a pleasant place. Behind the school buildings lay a small playground of plastic slides and monkey-bars, a baseball field for the Little League games, and a soccer field where picnics and Frisbee games were often held. Every year on the Fourth of July the bleachers were set up on one end of the field and everyone from the surrounding neighborhoods came out to watch the fireworks go up from an old concrete basketball court Al knew to be about half a mile away. Past the fields, though, was where the real beauty lay - a wooden bridge that stretched over a small streak of water beneath a cove of trees.

The bridge was maybe thirty feet long, and probably fifty years old, weatherworn and splintering. There was nothing grand about it, but it was familiar and peaceful, and that was everything. She picked a spot in the middle of the bridge and sat down, swinging her legs over the edge and resting her elbows on the wooden railing. Here she could pretend she was between worlds, pretend the bridge was a kind of guardian to the path into the 'forest,' as she liked to call the little copse that the stream ran into and where she knew a stray deer or two made their beds every year. The stream beneath was just six feet across and a foot deep on the average day, with a pleasant current. If the weather was nice enough, like today, one could see crawdads darting beneath the silt and tadpoles learning to swim alongside placid guppies.

Dragonflies buzzed lazily about, perching atop the stones while water bugs skittered across the surface, and when the wind blew through the trees, blending the sound of rustling leaves with the rippling water, it was the most beautiful place Al could think of. Once she had even seen a blue heron, majestic and peaceful in its slow-moving nature, take flight from beneath the bridge, startled by her presence. This place somehow always managed to calm her mood and helped her think more clearly. After today it was exactly what she needed. She picked up a fallen leaf and dropped it into the water below, watching it drift on the air. She swung her feet again and lay back to watch the trees sway above her. A squirrel sat in one of the boughs trying to decide whether or not she was dangerous. Al smiled and closed her eyes as a breeze washed over her. The only sounds were those of trees, water, and birds, and it was perfect.

~

Orange and red sunlight woke her as it gleamed through the low-hanging clouds and ran along the ground. Blinking, she watched the trees swaying above her and tried to remember falling asleep. What a stupid place to doze off! Not to mention uncomfortable. She winced as she sat up, her back sore from the splintering wood. Her stomach sank as she remembered how she'd stormed off. It was getting late, too. She'd surely have a few missed calls from her mom, and a lot of explaining to do when she got home. She dug her phone out of her pocket, only to find it dead. Of course. The battery had been wonky ever since Lia had put it through the wash. She shoved it back in her pocket and stood. Judging from the sky, it looked to be nearing seven, meaning her dad and Lia would be home by now, and she was likely missing dinner unless everyone was too worried to cook, which she doubted. They knew she never went far.

She grabbed her bag and turned sadly back toward the soccer fields. This was the only place in town with anything she might call magic in it, and at home there would only be another argument waiting for her, though she had to admit she was starving. But maybe she didn't have to go so quickly. She left the bridge the opposite way she'd come, making her way along the path into the 'forest.' A railway had once run through the historic river town but had long since fallen into disuse. The tracks, over a century old now, were mostly rusted away, and the wood, what was left of it, seemed brittle and dry even on a rainy day. Ducking under tree boughs and avoiding thorny plants, she soon came to the manmade hill where the railway ran and scrambled up it. She kicked rocks along in front of her as she went.

Something rustled in the bushes to her right, and she gasped as she napped her head up to look at it. The underbrush danced for a moment, then settled. *Just a rabbit*, she told herself, feeling stupid. She turned ahead again and hopped onto one of the rails, her arms held out for

balance. Within a moment the rustling came again, however, and she picked up her pace. No sense being here any longer than necessary, after all. Her family *would* be worried.

Soon the old train station came into sight, now only a landmark of a time that once was. It faced the street, humbly watching the days go by, and welcoming the occasional visitor inside to tour old pictures and pamphlets from the town's past. Here she left the tracks for the sidewalk. A rock caught her eye. It sent a satisfying jolt through her shoe when she kicked it and skittered to a stop ahead of her. She kicked it again when she came to it. Maybe she could make it all the way home with this one.

As she watched it bounce along ahead of her, something moved in her periphery, but when she turned to look it was gone. Slowing her pace, she glanced behind her, and then to the other side. Nothing but houses and gardens. In fact, that was all there was. No cars drove by, no one walked their dogs, no children played outside. She was the only living thing in sight. Her breathing picked up again and she walked a bit faster, not bothering with the rock this time. She just had to make it home.

With some relief she turned at the next corner onto her own street, the familiar brick road running charmingly alongside the carefully pruned flower garden of old Mister Tucker. But it was the only thing unchanged. The rest of the street had turned into a sort of alameda that stretched into forest, dim and heavy with foreboding. Though the sky was turning dusky, the walkway was much too dark for this time of day, like midnight with no streetlights.

Her heart raced and her breath caught in her throat, but she stepped forward, enchanted by the ominous aura the forest held. In the back of her head questions sprang up concerning her family and where her house had gone, but drowning them out was the

curious draw of the forest and what secrets it held. There had to be something in there.

Something she needed was in there.

The ground changed under her feet, and she looked down at the new damp silt embracing her shoes. She took another step. The air was different here; warmer, softer, smoother. She breathed deeply, closing her eyes. The new scent of moss and mulch swirled around her, stealing away the smell of cars, cigarette butts, and fast food joints. This air felt alive, like countless souls dancing together, invisible and free. She remembered feeling this way, a young child unrestrained by negative thoughts and expectations, playing with make-believe fairies in the yard. She remembered planting flowers and herbs with her mother in the springs and summers of her childhood and the joy of seeing the first sprout of basil poking through the delicate, moist earth, the first smell of fresh rosemary simmering on the stove, the new mint flavoring her tea, and all the nights spent catching fireflies with Loa and their older brother, Luke, as their mother watched, laughing. She could stay here forever.

She opened her eyes as the memories passed, and looked around. She felt like she should be terrified, and yet nothing about this place seemed to faze her. Trees and darkness met her from either side, a road ahead, Welton behind. She bit her lip, contemplating. A feeling in her stomach told her what she already knew. She didn't belong. The road before her stretched on forever, eerily welcoming. The loose earth almost tugged at her feet and she took another step. But the dirt wasn't satisfied and pulled at her other foot. And so, softly, wonderingly, she followed the earth into the dark forest, never noticing as she went, the boughs and branches weaving quietly behind her until the interlocking tendrils of vines and ivy sealed tightly away the remnants of her world.

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CHAPTER TWO

~ Treath ~

Grimoires and scrolls lay scattered across the worn table, half-buried beneath journals, books, and essays. Parchments were piled high, drawings of alchemical circles and translations weaving a secret story amongst themselves. A porcelain cup of lemon tea long gone cold served as a paperweight to what may have been a line of ancient poetry, and the golden-red light of the setting sun was the only indicator of hours passed.

Mechanically, Treath reached for a tattered book from atop a tier of volumes and studied it yet again through bleary eyes. Every piece of information he'd gathered had led him time and time again to this tome and still, he couldn't understand. Yet, there had to be something here. Surely he'd seen something. His eyes began to sting and he closed them, leaning back in his chair. Somewhere among the papers and parchments there was another document he remembered seeing hours before. Hair hung loose over his ear as he thought. He recounted his steps, mentally searching through the papers at hand and sighed. There were so many.

He rubbed his eyes and retied the ribbon holding his hair back before shifting a pile of alchemical diagrams and a grimoire disguised as a cookbook onto the chair beside him, which already groaned under the weight of books on prophecy and the theory thereof. He scanned the desk again. There! He pulled the document from beneath his own leather-bound journal. The passage was written in an antiquated form of Pykze. Not his most fluent language, but with some scrutiny he'd been able to decipher it.

The Linrel falls to Lenus

Guideless, Belyn resumes in Cycle fourth

Victor Balrok soars again.

From what Treath could make out of his rough translations, this woman, Tieh'rhel Throge, had declared nearly eight hundred years ago that a woman capable of changing the world would come into their midst at the end of the third Cycle, which was due to end in a short eight months. If she hadn't arrived already, she soon would, if the prophecy was to be believed. Belyn was the first goddess of the Arch Triumvirate. She and her sisters, Aeo, and Zemla, created the world, according to Anthene mythology, and now each of them took turns ruling it in nine-hundred-year Cycles. Zemla's reign was nearing its end, and next year Belyn would assume her throne for the fourth Cycle. But what prompted this prophecy to be created in the first place? What could threaten Belyn's place on the throne? Was it all just a metaphor? He knew Belyn was also the name of a mythical tyrant queen who was said to have eyes in all birds. Perhaps this Guide was meant to put an end to a similar figure's reign? Well, this would be about the right time for it, what with the queen passing another horrid decree nearly every week. The capitol hadn't felt right in years. Every day it seemed the city slipped further out of Balance. It certainly wasn't the city it had been even a decade ago. Something in the air had changed, something in the faces of the people and the tenor of their voices.

He rescued his quill from its precarious position atop a pyramid of scrolls and began scribbling into his journal, then stood to pull yet another volume from the library's many shelves. Unlike so many of the others, this one didn't take much searching.

Nol Knows All: Prophecies was a hefty, tattered onionskin affair, which was reassuring. In Treath's experience, the most helpful of books seemed to come in the same condition. He flipped to the 'T' section. Lady Throge was listed, along with the most famous of her divinations. According to this, Throge was known for being a bit batty, something that could

prove problematic, as prophecies were infamous for being vague in the first place. He continued to read as he walked back to his laden table and sat, taking another chilly sip of lemon tea.

At the bottom of the next page was the object of his interest translated into modern Anthenian along with the ramblings of some scholar or another, who was evidently praised as an expert in pixie lore, and religion. Treath very much doubted this, as pixies were known to be recalcitrant and fractious even on their good days. Anything this man knew was no doubt riddled with half-truths, something pixies widely regarded as a good joke. His translation of the prophecy read;

The Ocean Spirit writhes in Godfire

As the third Cycle ends

The Phoenix flies again.

“For centuries, it has been widely believed that the mythical creatures Linrel and Phoenix were mortal enemies. However, if we take into account the pixie belief in metaphysical duality (see chapter six), then we can posit that the Linrel is just as much a symbol for Belyn as the Phoenix is.”

Treath shook his head. That didn't make sense. Belyn was the Anthene goddess of fire and war, and the Balrok, or Phoenix, was her familiar. That much was obvious. No matter the mythology, the goddess of fire wouldn't be represented by the Linrel, the serpent guardian of the seas. But why would the Balrok concern itself with the Linrel? Who was it meant to represent? Certainly not Aeo the goddess of air and joy, or Zemla the goddess of earth and steadfastness. But who besides her sisters had the power to challenge Belyn?

“Sir?”

Treath looked up, irritation flashing in his violet eyes. The girl before him looked timid but continued.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but it’s nearly dark and we have to close.” She looked nervous like she was afraid of being shouted at.

He expelled his frustration in a tiny sigh and smiled. He hadn’t meant to scare the poor girl. “Ah, yes. Of course. My apologies.”

The girl relaxed. “You can come back tomorrow if you like. I can save this table for you.”

“Thank you, but it isn’t necessary. I’ve got what I need,” he said, gesturing to his journal. He took another glance over the table and its many towers, then to the slight girl before him. “I’ll just need a moment.”

The girl smiled gently. “Of course.”

When she was gone, he hastily sorted through the books he’d discarded and those he was still using until he had four sitting by his journal and a scroll - the essentials of his research. Satisfied, he picked them up and made his way through the empty library. His steps echoed through the cavernous atrium of the main entry. Brilliant orange unshine spilled through the two-story windows all around. He checked out the materials he’d chosen and stepped outside into a world bathed in the light of a sinking sun.

Few people were out at this hour, something he attributed to most shops closing with the sunset. He always found it a pleasure to be out, however, without horses and carriages and peddlers making a ruckus at him. The warm spring air crept up his coat sleeves and into his hair. Goosebumps rose across the base of his neck and disappeared just as quickly. A few men in rich

clothes strode out of the yellow stone bank across the way and cast him curious looks before one nodded good-naturedly and they continued on their business. Treath nodded in return and walked on. He watched his shoes as they clacked against the street and let his mind wander with the wind as it meandered through the nooks and crannies of the buildings around him.

A thought came to him then, but not his own. This was of trees, of worms, and of searching. Treath smiled. Raef's check-ins were like clockwork. He could sense the movements of Raef's wings in the periphery of the vision and knew that he must be flying. He mentally acknowledged that he was listening and beckoned for Raef to go on. In return Raef sent an image of a wide forest stretching out before him and only a few miles behind him, indicating that there was still much distance to cover in his search. Treath nodded and sent feelings of warmth and love through the connection. They would be together again soon, he promised. As soon as they found the Guide.

Raef accepted this and sent a final image of a meaty rabbit leg before he dropped the connection. Treath couldn't help but laugh to himself. If he actually managed to do it, the old bird could have a whole rabbit if he wanted. He'd have earned it.

Presently Treath came to a plainer part of the city. Here the buildings were a mix of wood and grey stone, sturdy, stout, and homey, made for function rather than fashion. Street merchants and stray cats were plenty, and children and dogs played in the alleyways. When he came to a familiar café he stopped and looked about. Across the street, at the end of a line of cheery townhouses, stood Clove's Inn, a charming two-story building with flowers spilling from the window planters and smoke drifting from the chimney. The image of a porcupine was branded into the wooden sign hanging over the

door, the spirit creature of Adin, the goddess of travel. Relieved, Treath crossed the street, wanting nothing more than a nice meal and a comfortable bed.

~::~~

~Raef~

The sky was clear and open and the wind under his wings invigorating. He glided along on the gusts and eddies for hours but had yet to find anything like the Gate his Miehkh had been him to seek. Anything strange, he'd been told. Look for anything strange. But there were many strange sources of magick in Caedmon's forest, some larger than others, and all unexpected.

A tiny hint of violet wafted up to him and he dove to the ground, following the vibrant trail of magick to a stone half-buried in the soil and blanketed with moss. It was roundly shaped and porous. A pale green glow of life lingered about the surface. Only a Stone of Maht. Ordinary.

A caterpillar inched its way along a branch above him. A starling called from the east. The wind came again, carrying another tendril of violet magick. He spread his wings and leapt into the sky to continue his search. Surely the Gate was close.

Soon a strong bank of violet drifted up from the forest to the south, stronger than any he'd felt in years. Magick like this was seldom cast, and suddenly, he knew what his Miehkh had meant by 'strange'. He flew toward it, angling his wings against the western currents, and sloped downward to the trees. He alighted on a branch and peered below to the forest path. An ordinary road, but one that had seen through the Veil. Yes, this was it. He'd found the Gate. But it'd already been opened!

With some alarm, he looked about for the supposed traveler, but there was no one to be seen. A light disturbance of the earthy path served as the only proof of her passing. He sent an image of this place to his Miehkh along the bridge between their minds. A wave of relief washed through his mind from the other side of the bridge, and then an anxious wondering and the form of a girl. Raef replied with emptiness. A single thought returned; find.

~::~~

CHAPTER THREE

~Al~

The further Al walked into the gloom, the more she found she was curious rather than afraid. She'd come in here for a reason, after all, and she was going to find out what it was.

There was something here she needed. She felt sure of that, though she couldn't explain how.

Faint rustling noises sounded in the forest surrounding her, just like the ones from the tracks. More rabbits, she suspected. Unless she had been followed. She stopped to look around. Trees grew dense on either side of the worn dirt path. The underbrush was so thick that it would have been difficult, if not foolish, to forge a path through it. No one could be in there. They wouldn't be able to move fast enough to follow her. Besides, she had been alone when she entered the forest.

Minutes dripped by as she continued walking, like a faucet left unchecked. It was impossible to tell how much time had passed, and she had a horrible feeling that more of it was going by than she perceived. Wasn't that always how fairy stories went? High above the trees and vines wove an intricate canopy through which she could only see small patches of dusky evening sky. She could feel eyes watching her, their gazes crawling over her skin like termites, and still that presence lingered just out of sight, just out of earshot, just out of reach. All around her the forest breathed as a wind passed through it, taking up the boughs and branches in a sudden dance. She whirled around as if to catch whatever had caused it in the act, but the wind hushed just as suddenly as it had come and nothing moved. Silence fell. It occurred to her that she could seriously come to some danger here, and yet...

She looked down the path again, leading on and on between the trees. It seemed to her a secret lay at the end of it, and if she only kept moving, she would discover it. The ground

beneath her seemed to tug at her feet again and she took another step forward. She wouldn't turn back. Couldn't.

The rustling started up again as she continued on, joined this time by unsettling chattering sounds that called up images of squirrels or giant bugs clacking at her from the shadows. Still, she saw no sign of any creatures, and nothing jumped out from the bushes, so she figured she was safe enough for the moment. If hunger didn't kill her first, that was. She kicked herself. Why hadn't she just taken the time to eat? And how would she find water? Suddenly she felt weak, painfully aware of just how long it had been since her last meal. Her knees trembled as the thought struck her that no one would even know to look for her here, wherever *here* was. And that was even if they were still alive, or even on Earth. Could her family have wandered into this forest as well? Could they be wandering through the trees somewhere just like her? Should she turn back?

No.

The thought came sharp and unbidden as if it weren't her own. *You came here for a reason*, she reminded herself. *So toughen up and follow through*. She took a deep breath and nodded. Right. If her family was still on Earth, then they were probably safe, and if they were here, then she would surely find them if she just kept going.

"Alright-," she started, but her voice was so out of place in the silence that it startled her and felt her smallness. But she was not to be deterred. This was her adventure, after all, and she was going to take it by the reins. "Let's do this."

~

Her mom was making waffles. Strange, considering they'd never owned a waffle iron before. The room was thick with the scent of batter and steam. A breeze ruffled the

apple-red curtains hanging in the windows. Her mom turned around, her red high heels clicking on the pristine tile floor.

“Here. It’s your favorite,” she said, handing Al a plate piled high with gooey waffles and strawberries on top. Instantly the urge to eat overwhelmed her and a knot formed in her stomach. Her mom looked at her expectantly, wanting her daughter to enjoy the breakfast she’d prepared. Al set the plate on the cheery wooden dining table and began to search for a fork.

“Here you go,” her mom said, and Al saw that she was now holding a fork toward her with a smile. Her teeth were unusually white, and straighter than Al remembered.

Al took the fork in a sweaty palm and stared at the stack of waffles. They looked dense and doughy enough to choke a horse. She glanced at her mother wearing that stupid Valentine’s Day apron and at her perfect nails patterned with tiny cartoon cherries that glistened in the soft yellow light of the kitchen. Sunlight glinted off the syrup dripping off one waffle to the next, but even as they compelled her to eat them, she was repulsed. A sickening sense of doubt tightened her throat. She wasn’t hungry. The strawberries were too red, too firm, plastic.

She cut into a waffle, thinking ridiculously that there was no milk to wash it down with. She didn’t even like milk. She speared a piece of waffle on the end of her fork and marveled at how it could be so crispy and so fluffy all at once. With dread, she lifted it to her mouth, her mother watching brightly with those little black eyes of her glittering in the morning light.

Al woke with a start as a bird called from somewhere nearby. It took her a moment to remember where she was, and when she did a new wave of panic rushed through her. Right. Road. Forest. Another dimension. She’d fallen asleep on the side of the road in the softest, driest patch of dirt she could find, using her bag as a pillow. She’d woken often at every small twitch of a leaf and every unexpected brush of a bug against her arm. Sometime in the small chilly

hours of the morning she'd come to the conclusion that it had to be faeries. The fair folk had opened a door into their realm to play games and have their way with her, and she'd walked right in like every other unwitting mortal she'd read about. It was only a matter of time now before they appeared and took her as their mortal slave.

She stood and brushed the dirt and leaves off her arms and legs as she mentally berated herself for being the stupidest person alive. To think she had become the very person she laughed at in stories. Well, she wouldn't go that easy. It was time to turn back and call the whole thing off. One night in faerie land was enough for her.

She pulled her bag over her shoulder and turned back the way she'd come, toward reality, normalcy, and an average life. Toward her friends and family who would be worried and waiting for her, assuming, of course, she hadn't already been gone a century. Her stomach tightened at that thought and she lengthened her strides. The way was harder going than she remembered, however, and she felt as if she were walking uphill, though the path was flat. In another few steps she felt she had hardly moved at all, and her legs ached with effort. Worse, doubt circled her heart again, and she paused. She had come in here for a reason. *She* had come here instead of anyone else. Something was here for *her*. Who was she to throw that away? Abandon her one chance at adventure? Turn her nose up at an opportunity she'd never dreamed of even twelve hours before? Who did that? And who did she think she was?

She looked back down the path leading toward adventure, magick, and secrets beyond her imagination. Though her brain pulled sharply to home, her gut pulled pleadingly into the forest. She could turn back later, after all. But if she left now, she would never know what might have been. After another moment's deliberation, she set

her jaw and turned to look destiny in the face. If this was the price of adventure, then so be it.

She backtracked to her little sleeping spot and onward, noting how the path was indeed easier to travel in this direction. A bird called nearby again and just as she picked her foot up to take another step a rather sizeable black form swooped across her path, so close she could feel the wind as it passed. She gasped and leaned backward, but with one foot in the air and no way to steady herself she had nowhere to go but down.

A large black bird perched on a bough just above her looking beadily down and cocking its head this way and that. A raven, she thought. Heart pounding, she recomposed herself and frowned at it as she stood. “What, you never seen a human before or something?” It only tilted its head to the other side. “Well, I guess I can’t blame you,” she said. “People seem to be a rarity around here.” It blinked.

She took another few steps but soon heard the beat of wings again. The raven flew over her and landed on another branch just ahead. It returned her gaze as it puffed up its feathers. Al shook her head and kept onward. The raven followed. “Little guy’s gotten attached to me,” she muttered.

She realized with another fluttering of wings, that it could very well be some kind of faerie bird, and that it was probably best she not speak to anyone in this dimension, even if they were animals. Unfortunately, she couldn’t keep it from following her, and the only reasons she could think of that it would do so were less than comforting. She just hoped that if the fae *did* show up to kidnap her as their mortal slave, they would at least feed her first. If she didn’t find water soon, she was sure she would faint.

The good news was that there had to be water nearby for this place to be so alive. Though the trees had taproots to draw water deep from the ground, the smaller plants would have to rely

on rain, and where there was rain there were creeks. As she went, she listened for the sound of running water and licked her lips and thought of something to distract herself. It was Friday. Normally she'd be in school right now, probably in history class having gum wrappers and erasers thrown at her while the teacher wasn't looking. James and Amy would be wondering where she was. She didn't skip school often and was sick even less frequently. Surely they would- No, wait. She'd been suspended from school yesterday. No one there would wonder where she was until next week unless Amy or James tried to call her.

Her stomach growled again and she looked around hopelessly. Some of these plants had to be edible. She'd made a B in botany class last year - maybe that could help her out. She thought back over everything she could remember - all the trees she could name, how to identify poison oak, the minute details of how photosynthesis worked, and the difference between a terminal bud and an axillary bud. Yet, when she could actually use some knowledge about vegetation and forests, she had no idea how to tell what would kill her or not; proof school was useless.

She licked her lips again. She'd seen in a movie once that sucking on a button or other small trinket could stave off thirst more bearably. She dug a dime out of the bottom of her bag and popped it in her mouth, wincing at the metallic tastelessness. After a moment she spat it back out. On second thought, she wasn't *that* thirsty. Instead, she ran her tongue over her budding wisdom tooth, which had started moving again a few days before. The gum was sore to touch, but it was more entertaining than sucking an old coin.

From above there came a harsh squawk of what Al assumed to be alarm. She looked up just in time to see her feathered follower take flight and fly farther ahead than usual. A few ebony feathers drifted to the ground.

“Crazy bird,” she muttered.

After what felt like the better part of an hour, Al noticed that Mr. Bird, as she had taken to calling her fellow traveler, always seemed to look toward one section of forest every time she glanced up at him. He looked to what she guessed was the east, tilting his head as if thinking, or possibly listening. Then he took wing again like normal, gliding gently overhead, but this time he didn't land. Al sprinted after him for a minute or two but stopped when he took an abrupt turn into the forest where Al didn't dare follow. On the road she felt relatively safe. At least here she knew another traveler might pass by her, and that the road had to be traveled somewhat regularly, or there wouldn't be a need for one. In the forest, it would be far too easy to lose her way, and she still wasn't sure she trusted the raven.

She could catch glimpses of him as he flew through the trees sometimes parallel to the road and sometimes drifting away from it. She kept up with him as best she could from the path until a small trail, steep and overrun with weeds, opened to the side of the road. Al hesitated. On one hand, she could sense that the raven was definitely leading her in there and that despite its dubious motivations, she did not want to be alone again. On the other hand, everything in the book of common sense told her never to stray from the beaten path. It was always the number one mistake mortals made in faerie land.

Mr. Bird made one of his weird shrieking sounds from within the forest. She couldn't see him and she knew that every second she delayed he would only leave her further behind. Al glanced around, first to her left, then to her right. No one was on the road as far as she could see,

and Mr. Bird was the only creature that had interacted with her since she'd arrived. Whether she liked it or not, he was the closest thing she had to an ally. Of course, he'd done nothing to actually gain her trust and hadn't yet disproved that he wasn't some faerie familiar, but he'd done nothing to make her distrust him either, and the last thing she wanted was to be alone again.

Another call from Mr. Bird, farther away now, as she had feared. She took a deep breath and stepped onto the rabbit trail, brushing twigs and vines from her face as she did so. Roots and pebbles threatened to trip her with every step and branches tugged at her hair. Soon the brush thinned a bit and the ground leveled out so she could follow the trail more easily. About a hundred feet into the forest she found Mr. Bird again, perched steadily upon a wooden sign that she couldn't read, or even decipher.

Handwritten symbols on a wooden sign, appearing as a series of three lines of cursive-like characters:

5=r_62h =1
nsh 6r nsh
y-fshh~

“Huh. Hope that’s not anything important.” Mr. Bird only tilted his head.

~::~

CHAPTER FOUR

~ Al ~

Al studied the sign for a moment longer before Mr. Bird lifted himself into the air again with a caw. She followed him along the tiny trail, still having second thoughts about trusting a bird to guide her through the forest. But *something* had to be down this trail or there wouldn't be a sign. Maybe she'd finally find some people in this place.

The light shifted to a pale green the deeper into the forest they went as if the sun were shining through the leaves themselves. Mr. Bird stopped on a branch and cawed, looking ahead at something. It took her a moment to realize they'd come to a small cottage, all but devoured by the forest. Trees grew up close beside it, scraping their woody fingers against the walls. Tangled vines, living and dead, scaled the dilapidated chimney and crept through the cracked windows. Green moss grew thick across the rooftop. Al dropped her gaze to a covered well just a few steps from the house and her heart swelled.

Water.

She ran to it, took the cover off, and peered down into the darkness, but it was impossible to tell if anything was down there. She dropped the nearest stone she could find into it and sighed in relief when a faint splash echoed up the shaft. Now for the bucket. A hole was cut into the well cover, apparently to tie a rope to tether the theoretical bucket, but the thing itself was nowhere to be seen. Her stomach sank again.

“Great.” Just her luck she'd die of thirst next to a well.

She could have sworn she heard a laugh then, but it was hard to tell over the sound of rustling leaves and the occasional unsettling chatter of the bug things, or whatever they were.

She looked into the forest. “Hello?”

A leaf crunched behind her and she spun around so fast she nearly hurt her neck. A girl, maybe a little older than her, with deep black hair and dark eyes, looked back at her.

“Hello,” the girl said. Her voice was different than the laugh she’d thought she’d heard, but she lowered her defenses a bit anyway. Whoever else was around was sure to be a friend of this girl, and she didn’t look so bad.

“Uh, hi,” Al said, tentatively. “Do you live here?”

The girl gave her a curious look and then smiled. “I suppose you could say that.”

Suppose? What did that mean? She only lived here sometimes? Al didn’t see how anyone could live here at all, let alone look so clean doing it. The girl’s hair was smooth and shiny and her dress was pristine black and green, even at the hem, though it fell to her ankles. She realized she was staring and snapped herself out of it.

“Sorry, I was, uh, passing through and my bird – well, *this* bird, sorta led me here.”

The girl looked to Mr. Bird up in the tree and then back at Al. “What’s your name?”

“Al,” she answered, unsurely.

“Al. Strange name for a girl.” But her smile seemed to convey reassurance as if to say she didn’t think anything of it. “Come sit. You seem tired.”

Al looked to where the girl had gestured and realized she must have obviously walked right past the fire pit stacked with wood. A couple of logs even lay near it for sitting.

“Um, thanks, but...” She glanced back to the well.

The girl smiled again. “Of course, I’ll bring you some water.” She strode past Al back to the well and produced a bucket from the other side where it had been obscured by the low wall.

Al wasn’t sure what else to do, so she awkwardly took a log seat while the girl drew water. Mr. Bird perched high above her. Surely he’d led her here for a reason. Was he her familiar, and could they truly live here? The cottage looked more haunted than lived in and she could see from here that the plain wooden walls were molding.

“So, what’s your name?” Al asked, mouth dry, and not just for thirst.

“Oh, you must think me so rude.” The girl laughed a little as she pulled the bucket back up to her. “I’m Arabelle.” She came back now and set the bucket in front of Al with a tin dipping cup.

Al drank thirstily, feeling a bit self-conscious but mostly thankful. The water was cool and clear and tasted vaguely sweet. “Thank you,” she said as the girl filled the cup again. Arabelle said nothing and watched her drink until Al felt uncomfortable enough to look back at her. “What?”

Arabelle’s dark eyes were almost frightening in her pale face, black and glittering against the white of her skin. “Why are you here?”

“What? What do you mean?” Al stammered. “I told you-”

“No.” Arabelle shook her head. “Not the bird. That is merely the occasion, the happenstance.”

Al knit her brows together, confused. Water dripped from the tin cup onto her knee. “I don’t-”

“Why are you *here*?” Arabelle asked again.

Al didn't think she was talking about the cottage now. But how could she be asking about the world in general? Was world-hopping the norm around here? Or was she referring to something else? The sense that something was here, just for her?

"I-I'm not sure..." she answered.

Arabelle's eyebrows tensed, but she nodded. "I see."

"What?" Al asked.

Arabelle shook her head slowly, knowingly, it seemed to Al. "You will see."

"See what?" That nothing in this world made sense?

"Patience," Arabelle said.

"Right..." Al dropped the cup back in the bucket. She might die of thirst or hunger on the road, but at least she wouldn't be around weird cryptic people. "Look, I really don't want to impose on you, so if there's a town near here, I'll just go."

"If you're sure," Arabelle said. "But the nearest village is several hours away by foot. It would take you until nightfall if you left now."

Al judged from the dim light that it was likely a little past noon, which meant her trek until nightfall would take about seven hours. "Wow, that's a lot of walking. I'd better get started."

"Wait," Arabelle said, holding a hand out to her. "At least take some food. Apples, maybe." She nodded toward a tree Al hadn't noticed before, thick with green apples. Strange, considering those were fall fruits. But she *was* verifiably starving, and maybe the growing seasons were different here.

She nodded and went forward to pluck one from the tree. Flavor exploded into her mouth when she bit into it, and she couldn't tell if it was just because she was hungrier

than she'd been in her life, or if the apple was extraordinarily delicious, but she couldn't help taking another bite, and another. She took more apples from the tree, indiscriminately plucking down as many as she could reach and dropping them into her bag until the weight of it felt satisfying against her leg.

A twinge of guilt turned in her stomach and she looked back at Arabelle, who stood beside her, smiling. "Take as many as you'd like," she said.

"Are you sure?" Al asked, blushing now. She hadn't even stopped to think how many she was picking.

Arabelle nodded. "Someone should eat them."

"What do you mean?" Al asked. The taste was still sweet in her mouth.

"Just that," Arabelle said, but Al couldn't ignore a light tone of sadness in her voice. She looked at the tree quietly with her wide, dark eyes. "I can't eat all of them, you know."

The small knot that had been forming in Al's stomach untangled itself. "Yeah, right." Of course, no one could eat that many apples. "Well, thanks again."

Arabelle gave another of her soft smiles and, taking that to mean the conversation was over, Al turned and followed the deer path back to the main road, wrestling vines and thorny growths out of her way as she went. Finally, she disentangled herself one last time and stumbled back onto the main road.

"Okay, mysterious cryptic girls in the woods - check," she said, brushing small leaves off herself. Mr. Bird squawked in apparent indignation. "What? None of that was weird to you? Do you know that girl?"

Mr. Bird grumbled, a soft throaty sound, and then took off along the road again.

“Uh-huh. Well, I *was* pretty hungry.” She took another apple from her bag and munched steadily on her new food supply until she truly felt full.

~

She’d been walking for a couple hours when some distance ahead of her she noticed a man pulling a wooden cart. As she drew nearer, she could see that he was probably in his fifties and that he didn’t seem too dangerous, hunched over as he was. The cart he pulled rattled and squeaked along the dirt path, and she imagined him to be some kind of laborer. A carpenter, maybe. If he were a farmer then he would surely have a donkey, or even a cow to pull the cart for him. Or maybe he’d had to sell his animals. For all she knew he had ten kids, a tiny house, and just enough money to keep everyone alive. But something told her that wasn’t the case either. He looked like a lonely sort of guy. The man stopped then and turned around as if he’d just noticed her. She realized how much closer she’d gotten to him while lost in her thoughts.

“Who are you?” It was more of a demand than a question.

“Um, Al. Who are you?” She could see more of his clothes now that he was facing her, and noticed that the material of his shirt was thick and rough, nothing she would have thought to make clothes out of. His pants were faded brown and didn’t look much more comfortable.

He squinted at her. “Why are you following me? What do you want?”

For an old guy facing down a lost teenage girl, he sure seemed paranoid. “I’m not following you, I’m following the road.”

Mr. Bird ruffled his feathers and the guy looked up at him. His face tensed with apprehension. "So you're a witch, eh? Get out of here, if you are. I have nothing, I know nothing."

"A what?" If it hadn't been so dim Al would have thought he'd spent too much time in the sun.

"A witch!" the guy repeated. "Are you a witch?"

"No," she said, taken aback. "Are you?"

His face reddened. "Hag! Don't insult me!"

"I-I wasn't! It was-" Al blustered.

"I don't care what it was. Just stay away from me." With that, he turned again and pulled his cart along with renewed fervor.

"Look, I'm not following you," Al said. "I'm just trying to get to town."

"Then what in Belyn's name is that?" He pointed at Mr. Bird who squawked indignantly.

"I-it's a bird."

"It's more than that, little miss," he said. "If you really don't know, then let the gods have mercy on you, for you've been cursed. Or you're about to be cursed at any rate. It's unavoidable. Now go away. Take another road if you want to get to Reelee." He didn't look at her again, apparently content with giving her the cold shoulder.

She didn't like any of what he'd just said. Had she been right to begin with? Was this raven leading her astray? He had only led her to food and water so far. Of course, if this was faerie land, then eating the food would be the last thing she'd want to do, but it had been two days and so far she had only seen Arabelle and cart guy, neither of whom seemed like sinister servants of the faerie courts. Arabelle had been odd, sure, but this guy was clearly just a human,

and there was no way the Fair Folk would let someone like him just wander around like that, right? She turned to Mr. Bird, who looked back at her. If he was a familiar, he was doing a terrible job of cursing her so far.

“What other road?” she called.

“The one off the mine,” he called back. “Should have passed it a couple hours ago.”

As if she’d turn around just because he said so. Besides, she hadn’t even seen a mine. She made sure to keep her distance from the man from then on, but his warnings about curses stayed with her.

Hours later, as she munched on another apple, her thoughts had circled back to her meeting with Arabelle and her question. *Why are you here?* Why was she here? And why *had* this bird taken such an interest in her? Was there any point in asking? Maybe none of this was real and she was in some kind of coma. Maybe all she needed to do was click her heels together and she’d wake up.

Mr. Bird cawed then, and she was shaken from her thoughts. Though she should have been used to it by now, the sound was still eerie alongside the clacking chatter from woods around them, and the fading light of dusk wasn’t helping her nerves. Anything could be in the woods and the last thing she needed was to be eaten by some kind of nocturnal fae monster, just a mile outside town. She hoped she was only a mile away, anyway. According to Arabelle, sundown meant she should be getting close.

“Do you have to do that?” she asked, looking up at him. He peered ahead as if waiting for something. She followed his gaze and squinted into the dimness where the man with the cart still rattled along faintly. In a moment he was gone. It took her a

moment to realize he hadn't merely disappeared down a hill or around a bend in the path, for there were no hills or bends. He also hadn't turned to follow a side road. She was sure of it. He had simply vanished.

With new interest, she sped up, following the cart tracks until they came to a stop a few feet ahead of her. She stared at the spot where the cart's trail ended without warning as if the cart and the man had been plucked right from the road. Her heart thumped in her chest. What would do that? She looked up to gauge Mr. Bird's reaction but found him no sign of him either. Her pulse quickened. Nothing here *looked* unusual, though obviously, that didn't mean much.

She took a step, then another until her toes were even with the end of the tracks. Still nothing was different. She reached her hand out only to find normal air. She dropped it and, with a deep breath, took another step.

Mr. Bird cawed loudly and she jumped. He peered down from one of the boughs, though she could hardly see him now against the dark forest canopy. Soft lights glowed in the dusk ahead of her, and as her eyes adjusted, she realized they were the lights of a town. The creepy sounds of the forest were gone too, and a pleasant silence enveloped her, broken only by the chirping of crickets. A firefly drifted past her like an ember, and several more nearby twinkled in response. She looked behind her to find that where the tracks had previously been cut off, they now continued normally. She took a step backward and once again the tracks disappeared. The chattering noises popped at her ears and she stepped forward again to the fireflies and the lights hanging in the distance.

Mr. Bird took off to the next branch, and Al followed him, knees shaking. Nothing about this place was possible - her being here, the raven leading her through a forest, a magickal barrier hiding a town from outsiders - none of it. And yet here it was. Not that she was complaining. If

she were on Earth, she'd probably be doing math homework right now. This was better, even if her feet did feel like they were about to fall off from walking so much. Even if she was killed by faeries, she decided, seeing a strange magickal world for herself was worth it.

~::~~

~ Treath ~

Treath sighed as he looked over the tiny desk he'd been allotted. He'd paid extra to get a room with one, but it turned out he would need a desk the size of this room to allow him to spread his work out as he preferred. The stacks of books he'd taken from the library were piled upon it, along with his various notes and scribbles. Scrolls littered the bed and several versions of the same text were strewn about the floor along with charts, illustrations, and folklore. To put it simply, the room was cramped.

He opened the window shutters and cracked the door open, which helped his claustrophobia, but did nothing for the usable space. No, this wouldn't do. He needed more room. He could, he supposed, take what he needed and settle into one of the larger tables downstairs. It would give him access to all the tea he wanted, as well as the sources left in his room. Yes, that's what he would do. He stooped to take some of the notes from the floor, then began to search through the scrolls for things he might need.

Not an hour later he sat at a table in the corner of the common room with his head in his hands, reading the same line over and over again. This had been a bad idea. The table was large, perfect for setting out his notes and papers, and the inn's cafe was calm and quiet enough, but he'd had a hard time getting comfortable. For one thing, the chairs

were slightly too short for the table, and no matter how he shifted in the attempt to make himself taller, he still felt like a child studying with his work at his chest. Even so, he might have been able to work with that had he been able to block out the chatter from the public spaces of the inn. From the kitchen, for instance, he could make out the gossip of the cooks and clerks as they worked.

“Did you ever see a thing like it?” This was the serving girl.

The owner’s daughter replied. “Never. That’s a strange one, alright, what with his looks, and all his book he’s always bringing. It’s a wonder the floor isn’t caved in yet, from the weight.”

“Must be rich, then, to afford it.”

“Not that he’d show it. Always modest, he is. Just a warm tea here or there, and right back up to his books, except today.”

Didn’t they know he could hear them? It never ceased to astonish him how bold people could be. They were young, though, he had to remind himself. Few of them had learned the art of discretion at this age. Still, it didn’t excuse the family taking lunch a couple of tables over from him. So far he’d been able to gather that Dan Stoneson with his wife and two sons had recently left their village in search of a better livelihood, and maybe adventure if it came their way.

“Boys, did I ever tell you about the legend of the forest people?” Dan was saying.

“Come on, Da. That’s kid stuff,” the younger son replied.

“Yeah, what’d you bring that up for?” The older son appeared to have recently graduated into manhood.

“They’re good stories,” lady Stoneson added. “I always liked the one about familiars when I was a girl. I even tried finding my own once.” She laughed.

Dan nodded. “Well, not a right many folk believe ‘em, but those tales’re true. Right as rain.”

“Nah, you’re bluffing. Not a person ever sees ‘em.” The younger again.

“Well, you don’t see air, do ya? But you’re breathing,” Dan countered.

“It’s true,” said lady Stoneson.

The older son cut in. “We’re not saying they don’t exist. After all, everything exists, but I think Con’s trying to say they can’t be as... what’s the word... prom’nent as them tales make ‘em out to be. They keep to ‘em selves. Private sorta folk.”

Dan softened his voice. “Well then boys, turn around. But discreet like so you’re not noticed.”

The boys craned their necks slowly.

“There in the corner,” Dan added.

Treath could feel them looking and focused harder on trying to read the same scroll he’d been struggling with for the better part of an hour.

“His hair’s purple,” the younger son whispered.

Oh yes, this had been a terrible idea, indeed. He lay the scroll down as a familiar presence came into his mind. Images wound comfortably through his thoughts, first of a small cottage with a well, then apples, and a girl with deep black hair, all with a distinct aura of violet around them. Then more of the forest road leading to Reelee from the southeast. They were getting close now, would be there within the hour. And then came one last impression - of longing. Treath smiled as this final message dissipated. Raef was near Reelee with the girl, and he missed him. More importantly, he was near Reelee with

the girl who was living off magick apples and likely had no idea what she was doing in this world.

He reached for his tea, which he was glad to find still warm, and sent a message back. An image of distance mixed with a question. Another message came of the moon and sun in the same sky. Just tonight and tomorrow, then, and they would be together once more. Treath sent back an impression of warmth and love. Only one more day.

~::~~

~ Al ~

Al's wonder only grew as she and Mr. Bird entered the town. The people were dressed exactly like she would have expected from storybook characters; simple shirts and tunics and skirts or dark pants of thick fabrics, all in neutral earth tones. Carts like the one the man had pulled were commonplace, some led by mules or goats. The buildings were made of wood and stone, and every one had a chimney running up its side. Every window was dressed with good, heavy shutters, though many of the windows were open. People chattered all around and she didn't know where to look first.

Mr. Bird called from the rooftop he'd landed on and she snapped her head toward him, trying to break out of her initial shock. Of course, she should have expected something like this. Arabelle and the old man had been dressed in similar attire, but seeing it all together like this was a lot to take in. A child passed her carrying a chicken under one arm and gaped at her. A woman stopped in her tracks just to look quizzically at her, and Al realized for the first time that her own clothes were outlandish here - denim jeans, Converse, and *Doctor Who* shirts emblazoned with Daleks apparently were not common fare in faerie land.

Mr. Bird called again and she looked at him to find that he was staring directly back at her. “You know why I’m here, don’t you?” He made a gruff croaking sound and took off, leading her to the next building, and then the next. She followed him through the streets, heart pounding. If anything could give her answers, she was sure it was this bird.

Soon enough he alighted on the roof of a large-ish building compared to the ones she had seen so far. The decor was modest, with just a vase of flowers or a wreath in the windows, and cheery green curtains stirring lightly when a breeze blew. A wooden sign hung on the door, and though she had no hope of reading it, she thought the words had been painted to look happy and welcoming. Mr. Bird made no move and cocked his head at her as if she was supposed to do something.

“You want me to go in there, huh?” He cocked his head to the other side, staring at her. “Alright, you’re the boss, I guess.” Hesitantly, she walked to the door. The raven landed on her shoulder just as she turned the handle.

Wooden wind chimes clacked together overhead and almost immediately the delicious smell of bread and stew enveloped her. A plump older woman looked up at her from a rocking chair near the fireplace to her right, though there was no fire going. She hurried to set down her needlework and stood to greet her guest saying, “Oh, hello, welcome. Welcome!”

“Hello,” Al said, unsurely. She still couldn’t tell exactly what this place was or if they allowed birds, and she was sure the woman was watching him. If she believed the same thing about witches as the guy on the road, then Al couldn’t blame her. For all she knew, the raven *was* a witch’s familiar. He certainly looked the part. She shifted

uncomfortably, feeling a little lopsided with Mr. Bird on her shoulder. A few of his claws poked through her shirt and, though it wasn't enough to hurt, she was struck with the realization that he could scratch her if he wanted.

“Will you be needing a room?” the woman asked. Her voice was kind and her eyes were soft. Her grey hair was done up in a braided bun that looked pretty with her indigo blue dress.

“Oh, um, is this a hotel?” Al looked around the room more carefully now and noticed a couple of tables and a few chairs by the windows and a doorway leading to a hall near the fireplace. Another door led out of the opposite side of the room, but it was closed. On the back wall a little counter stood in front of a few shelves stocked with candles, soaps, painted wooden charms, and red paper fans decorated with red ribbons. A jar filled with candies wrapped in red paper stood on one of the shelves alongside a beautiful wooden figurine of a phoenix painted red, orange, and yellow.

“Well, I wouldn't go as far as all that,” the woman said with some humor. “We're no travel destination. Welcome to the Olden Oak. I'm Kina. How can I help you?” She smiled.

“I'm Al,” she answered. “Um, I don't have any money.”

“Hmm... This reminds me of something. Let's see.” Kina looked at her thoughtfully for a moment and tapped her chin. Al could feel Mr. Bird tilt his head and rustle her hair as he did so. Almost without warning Kina snapped her fingers and said, “Ah, yes! I thought I knew that bird! Alright, I've made my mind up. You'll stay here for the night, in Room Four.” Kina was already moving to the little counter and Al hurried after her.

“But- But!”

Kina drew a ledger out from a drawer beneath the counter. “Oh, think nothing of it. Call it a favor.” She held a quill now and dipped it in a small jar of ink. “Al, you said your name was?”

“Yes, but- Wait, you know this bird? Whose is it?”

“Last name?” Kina asked.

“What favor? I already said I can’t pay you.” But Kina was paying her no mind, filling out slots in the ledger and making notes.

“Think nothing of it,” Kina said cheerily. “It’s doing no harm to me. That room was empty anyway, so I wasn’t making money on it to begin with.”

Al was troubled by the logic of this. “But if you said that to everyone, you wouldn’t be making money at all.”

Kina laughed a little and glanced to Mr. Bird. “True, of course, but I think you’re a special sort of situation. You don’t look like the average beggar to me.”

Al couldn’t argue with that. She’d gotten enough weird looks in town that she’d begun to wonder if she’d sprouted another head without noticing.

“Now, if you don’t give me your last name I shall have to make one up for you,” Kina teased.

Convinced Kina would actually follow her word, Al answered grudgingly. “It’s Goldberg.”

Kina smiled as she put it in her ledger. “Now, here’s your key,” she said, handing over an iron skeleton key attached to a clunky block of wood. She took it, though a hundred questions still swarmed in her head. Kina was moving to the hallway now, explaining as she went, “Dinner is in half an hour, and I daresay you’ll be hungry.”

Despite the apples, she was, and the rich aromas coming from the kitchen were enough to make her stomach growl. They passed a room that could only be the kitchen, not just because the smell of food was strongest outside the door, but because she could hear dishes clinking from behind it. A couple of doors past that Kina stopped and stood aside.

“Room Four. Make yourself comfortable. I shall be back later to check if you need anything.”

“Some answers would be nice,” Al said.

Kina laughed. “You’ll get them, I’m sure. Don’t worry so much.” With that, she left to the main room again.

With nothing else to do, Al fitted the key into the lock and opened the door. It was a small room, only long enough to fit a bed. A tiny nightstand stood beside the bed and a battered trunk sat beneath the window. The window showed into a small garden that lay between the two wings of the building, and she realized now that the closed door in the main room led to the other. That was probably where Kina lived since she seemed to be the owner of this place.

Al took her bag off her shoulder and sat down on the bed. It wasn’t what she would have called soft, but it was better than the ground, so she wasn’t about to complain. Mr. Bird hopped off her shoulder and onto the bed’s weathered headboard where he began grooming his feathers. He didn’t look evil, but it was becoming clear to her that he was more than he seemed.

“What are you?”

He hardly even looked at her as he drew a few feathers through his beak.

“You aren’t spying for some witch, right?”

More combing of feathers. Al sighed and lay down. “Well, if you are, then at least I’ll see that twist coming.”

Half an hour later she headed back to the common room for the dinner Kina had promised, Mr. Bird on her shoulder. As soon as she walked in, a boy maybe eleven years old caught her attention by the door.

“Are you here for dinner?” Clearly, he had spoken before he’d truly gotten a look at her because now he stared, both at her t-shirt and at the heavy black bird on her shoulder.

“Um, yes,” she said. “Is that okay?”

He appeared to recover a bit and nodded. “Of course! I’ll bring it out for you. What room are you staying in, so I know the tab?”

“Four,” Al said, “but I don’t have any money.”

“That’s alright. You’re number Four. It’s paid for.” He smiled and was off before she could say anything else.

“Paid for?” she repeated to herself. “By who?”

Still pondering, she turned to find a table to sit at, doing her best to hide from the other patrons as she went. Luckily there weren’t many, only a small family at the table by the window, an old man in the rocking chair by the fireplace, and a couple of young women sharing a pot of tea near the door. Al settled in at the last empty table in the room close to Kina’s door. It was as far from the center of attention as she could get, which she was grateful for.

Mr. Bird hopped off her shoulder and investigated the table, walking first to one end, then to the other, before finally choosing a spot near her elbow to wait. She was now less disturbed by him, and more disturbed by the knowledge that whoever owned him was keeping tabs on her and paying for her dinner. Being followed or led into a trap

would have been one thing, but being taken care of and led to food and water? Who would care enough to send him after her? She wasn't anything special. And what did they want? She doubted someone who meant her harm would make sure she'd had a good dinner first. No, whatever, this bird was, it wasn't dangerous, just odd.

The boy returned then with a wooden bowl full of stew, a warm chunk of bread, and a cup of hot tea. Al jumped at the chance to interrogate him.

“Hey, what did you mean, my meal's paid for? By who? What's going on?”

The boy shrugged. “I don't know. That's just what Miss Kina said.”

“Did she say anything else?” Al asked. “Anything about a bird, or me?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. I swear by Daelin I don't know nothing.”

“Daelin, who's that?”

“You know, Daelin. The god of honesty?” He could see that she was lost. “Are you from Rohr or something? I heard they got different gods. Is that why your clothes are funny?”

Obviously, he'd been the wrong person to ask. And what more did she expect? He was just a kid, after all. “Uh, yeah, sorry. Haven't been here long.” She didn't know what or where Rohr was, but the kid had just given her an easy out and she didn't see any harm in taking it.

“Well, welcome to Anthe,” he said. “Hope you like it here.”

“Thanks,” she said. At least now she had a name to call this place.

She looked at the stew he'd brought. Hunks of meat floated in a hearty broth alongside a few carrots, onions, and herbs. She couldn't tell what the meat was, but she didn't care enough to ask. Her mouth was already watering. She took a bite and felt and felt that she could live in this flavor forever. The meat was incredibly tender. Mr. Bird nudged her hand with his beak as she

took another spoonful. In the moment that she paused to look at him he moved toward her spoon laden with meat and broth. Then it clicked.

“Oh, you’re hungry too, huh? Here.” She set the meat down in front of him and watched as he picked it up in one foot and began tearing strips off of it.

To her discomfort, she could still feel the strange looks coming from the other patrons, though she supposed it wasn’t really their fault. It wasn’t every day you saw a girl from another dimension feeding soup to a giant black bird at the local inn.

Some time later, once she was in her room again, there came a knock at her door. She panicked for a moment, wondering if she should answer it before Kina’s voice came from the other side. “Miss Al, it’s Kina. May I come in?”

Al sat up straight to look as polite and presentable as possible and called, “Yes, of course!”

Kina opened the door, smiling kindly, and Al couldn’t help noticing that she carried a length of fabric over one arm. “Are you comfortable?” she asked.

Al nodded. “Oh, yes. Thank you for letting me stay.”

“It’s no trouble, dear,” Kina said. “I looked at you and I asked myself ‘what would I do if my daughter was out there all alone,’ and I tell you, I just couldn’t turn you away. And then I thought- Well, don’t take this the wrong way, but your clothes are rather... unkempt. And I said to myself, ‘well Kina, what would Luri say if she knew you didn’t even bother to offer her a change of clothes?’, and I tell you what she’d say. She’d say ‘Well that’s just shameful, Mother, when you have plenty of my old things lying about useless,’ and she’d be right, of course. So, here. I brought you this. I think it looks

about your size.” She held out the length of cloth, and Al realized it was a dress. It was made of simple linen, dyed light green, and trimmed with white thread.

Al was touched, but she didn’t want to take something special to her, and the way she spoke made it sound like the dress was. “Thank you, but it’s alright. I can’t accept this.”

Kina wouldn’t hear it. “Oh, nonsense. You can’t walk around like that. You look like you’re on the run from someone. And Luri wouldn’t have it any other way, so here you are.” She laid the dress on the bed with such a sense of finality that Al didn’t press the issue. “Is there anything else you need? A bath, maybe?”

“No. I mean, yes. That would be great, actually, but I have some questions first. What’s going on? Why are you doing this? You don’t even know me. You said you knew this bird. And someone else said my meal was paid for. *I* didn’t even know I was coming here, so how could someone else? I don’t understand!”

Kina looked sympathetic in that way only a mom could and Al was reminded a little of her own mother. “I can’t tell you much, just that your way is paid by an anonymous benefactor. A letter was delivered some time ago with payment and a mention that a raven would arrive with the guest. I wasn’t sure what to make of it at first, I can tell you, only I knew it couldn’t be a joke. No one sends money in a joke envelope. I can show you the letter if you like, but I’m afraid there’s really little to go on.”

“No, that’s alright,” Al said. She wouldn’t be able to read it anyway. “So, when you said you knew this bird?”

Kina looked at her apologetically. “I’m sorry, dear, I misspoke. I meant I recognized it from the letter. But it’s at least a comfort to know someone out there’s looking out for you, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” Al said, but it would feel a whole lot better to know exactly what she was doing here in the first place.

~

The next morning Al rose and dressed in the plain green dress from Kina. She'd also decided that no matter what happened today, she would not follow Mr. Bird's advice. Though she appreciated the free food and room, she did not appreciate the anonymity of this supposed benefactor, or their sending a watch bird to keep tabs on her. If they really wanted to help her, they would have met her yesterday, or when she got here, or come to search for her themselves. And who were they to decide where she went, or what she did? She was no one's sheep to be herded around, and she wouldn't play the game any longer. This was *her* adventure.

In the common room she ate a nice breakfast of eggs, biscuits, jam, honey, and tea. When she was finished she asked how much was still on her prepaid tab and maxed it out buying a jar of the jam from the kitchen, a bar of soap scented with rosemary, and a candle scented with flowers, and some of the candies in the jar behind the counter. If she was here on someone else's tab, then she was going to make the most of it and serve this benefactor right for not introducing themselves properly.

As she was making to leave, Kina caught her, saying, “Hold on a moment,” and then disappeared into the recesses of her apartment. She returned shortly with a tattered bit of folded paper. “It's old, but it'll do,” Kina said. “Land doesn't change that much in twenty years.”

Unfolding it, Al realized it was a map. “Oh no, I couldn't,” Al said. She'd already taken so much from her.

“Oh, yes you could,” Kina said. “And you’ll take some bread with you too. Water and bread’s all you need in this world and I wouldn’t let a poor little thing like you go hungry.”

“Thank you,” Al said, tears almost forming in her eyes.

“Think nothing of it,” Kina said. “And good luck to you. If I know what ravens mean, you’ve got quite a journey ahead of you. Now go on!” She smiled widely and pressed a whole loaf of bread and a pouch of water into Al’s hands.

Nearly an hour later Al still didn’t have words for that kind of kindness, but she would make sure not to waste it. She studied the map as she walked. Like everything else, she couldn’t read it, but Kina had pointed Reelee out to her, a tiny speck in the middle of a colossal forest. Other towns were sprinkled throughout the trees and lines had been drawn to show the pathways between them.

To the southeast, from whence she’d come, was virtually nothing except trees. Upon closer scrutiny, she could just make out what she supposed was the mine the man with the cart had mentioned yesterday. The map made the distance seem smaller than she thought it should have been, meaning the map either wasn’t drawn to scale, or the forest was larger than she’d originally imagined. To the west, the forest thinned into a plain, then into hills surrounding a rather large-looking city, and eventually into a coastline where a multitude of what she assumed to be fishing outposts and harbors were labeled. Plains and coastline also lay to the east, with a huge city situated right on the edge of the water a good distance to the north. Dotted lines divided the map into quarters, each labeled something different. She noticed that the eastern side of the country, where she was, held many large, populous cities, while the western side held smaller towns and only a couple of cities. To the north of this country appeared to be two others,

cut off so she couldn't see the size of them, and labeled with a single word each. There also appeared to be two more countries to the south, also cut off and marked with only their names.

She chewed on her lip as she looked the map over. She would have to make do with guesswork. It seemed to her that the best place to go would be where the most people were. She would never find out anything if she kept to the countryside. And besides, she wanted to see what a real fairytale city looked like. But according to this, it could take weeks to get anywhere. If she was reading it right, two towns that looked roughly the same size as Reelee lay a day or two to the north. They would be as good a place to start as any on her way to the big city. She folded the map again and tucked it in her bag alongside the two remaining apples, bread, jam, and water.

As she made her way through Reelee to the main road leading north through the forest, all she could do was stare in wonder at the buildings. None of them were higher than two stories, and those were few due to the trees hanging over the whole town. There were no paved roads here and trees lined every street so that the town blended seamlessly into the forest. A few of them even used the trunks as supports and allowed branches to press right up against the walls or pass through them. She couldn't imagine how this bizarre architecture could be safe in a storm, but it was pretty.

Mr. Bird followed her closely, sometimes even landing on the ground to walk alongside her, like now. She looked down at him. "Could have done that yesterday and saved a lot of branch hopping, you know." He made no response and she went back to watching the people around her.

As she stood inspecting the peculiar roofline of what looked to be a tailor's shop, she was struck once more with the feeling that she was being watched. She spun around to look, but the few passersby who happened to be near paid her little attention. Mr. Bird only scratched at the ground, hunting for bugs, she supposed. She shrugged it off and went into the shop without him. She'd been curious to see some other shops since she'd arrived in Reelee, but so far it had been hard to tell what was shop and what was house. At least this place had a dress in the window.

As she stepped inside, she noticed that it was even smaller than it looked from outside. It might even have felt cramped if the windows hadn't been open. Around the edges of the room a few tunics and skirts hung on display. They were beautiful in their plain way, made of dull maroon or dusky ocean blue. A couple had short puffy white sleeves, the kind every little girl thought of when she imagined wearing a princess gown. These, however, were much more sensible and even looked reasonable for day-to-day wear.

A voice from behind startled her. "Why 'ello, dearie. Were you wanting for a dress?"

A petite woman stood with her hands on her hips. Her long brown hair was tied back with a ribbon, and a simple leaf carved of wood hung about her neck by a length of heavy thread.

Al shook her head. "No, sorry, I was just looking."

"I 'aven't seen you about before. Passing through, are ya?" The woman seemed almost wary of her, perhaps thinking she was a shoplifter.

"Yeah, I just came into town last night," she said.

"And where ya headed, girlie?" The woman's face was severe with dark arched eyebrows and a thin, terse mouth.

"I-I'm not sure. I'm trying to find my family." It was close enough to the truth.

“Ah, so you’re lost, are ya? Poor thing.” The woman’s face softened. “I got a boy of my own. Can’t imagine him being all alone in the world without me.” She tutted pityingly. “I tell ya, this war ain’t worth the price. So, no new dresses for ya, then?”

Al tilted her head. “No, I’m broke, but-”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Broke, are ya? What part?”

“Oh, I mean I don’t have any money,” Al said.

“Ah, well that’s a shame. Young girl all alone in the world and no money. By Kehre’s harp, I hope ya find your family, girlie.”

“Thanks, but, I’m sorry, did you say war?”

“Ya feeling alright, girlie? Don’t tell me ya got amnesia too. That’d have to be a pretty mean conk on the head to make ya forget the goblins!”

“*Goblins?*” Instantly realizing her mistake, she did her best to laugh it off. “Oh, right, the goblins! No, it’d be hard to forget them!” She gave an uncomfortable chuckle and edged toward the door. “Well, I’d better go. Bye, then!” With a smile and a wave, she scurried back onto the street and looked down at Mr. Bird who was waiting near the door. “Goblins? There’s a war with goblins and you weren’t going to tell me?” She didn’t even know what to do with that information for the moment, so she pushed it aside and set her head on straight. “Alright, time to get walking.”

A few hundred feet outside of town she passed through the other side of the magickal barrier and was immediately greeted by the eerie sounds of the creatures living in the bushes and trees around her. Their noise was just as loud and off-putting as always, and the usual gloom hung in the air, filling the spaces between trees and falling into unseen crevices. She could almost feel it settling into her lungs as she breathed and

apprehension crept into her heart. The more she thought about it, the more she came to think the forest must be enchanted somehow to make travelers feel uneasy as they passed through it. She imagined a dreadful atmosphere like this was as much a weapon as it was a shield. After all, what kind of bandit would want to hide out in these trees for long? They'd lose their minds in a week or so. The thought comforted her as much as it unsettled her.

Of course, Mr. Bird appeared totally unperturbed by the forest, which likely meant the atmosphere was only bothersome to humans. Why, then, would anyone choose to build a town here in the first place, rather than keep to their safe little prairies and coastlands? Had these people been displaced and driven here by the goblins? Kina hadn't mentioned anything about them and surely if it were a serious issue she would have, right? She didn't get much longer to think about it because ahead of her she could see the road split in two directions.

She could already feel that the path was tugging her on like it had the night she had wandered into this world, and it seemed to be pulling her to the right. But, in keeping with her resolution not to follow any more magickal directions, she dug her map out of her bag again. Unfortunately, it had apparently been made before the fork had been built and said nothing about it. It didn't even list two places the road could lead to, but it did seem that the nearby towns she had noticed before were just a smidge to the northwest so, against the path's advice, she took a step toward the left fork.

The ground worked against her, shifting strangely beneath her feet. She tried another step with the same results. The earth pushed against the toes of her shoes and slid beneath her so that with her third step she nearly tripped.

"Fine, you want to play this game? I'm in." She stopped for a moment until the ground released her feet, then made a dash down the western path. If she ran fast enough, she might

make some distance. The earth pushed against her feet every time they landed, like a little hand grabbing the tips of her toes until she stumbled and fell, scraping her hands on twigs and pebbles on the path. Even as she sat there, she could see the earth making little ridges against her hands and knees like tiny walls. She didn't need to know magick to know this path was barred.

“Fine! You win!” She smashed one of the little walls with a fist, not knowing which was more ridiculous - that she was sitting here yelling at the ground, or that the ground was choosing her path for her. Either way, this was not the adventure she'd hoped for upon entering a magickal alternate dimension.

Grumbling, she picked herself up and stomped her foot. “I hope that hurts!” The ground gave no response, which was only more infuriating, and she stomped her feet all the way back to the other path. “East it is, apparently!”

~::~~

CHAPTER FIVE

~ Al ~

Grae was a larger town than Reelee by a fair margin and there was so much to see that Al couldn't take it all in, though she tried. The sign on the road into town proclaimed in welcoming letters “*ᠠᠯᠠᠰᠤᠨ ᠠᠯᠠᠰᠤᠨ*” leading her gradually out of the forest and into a neighborhood of little wooden houses on the outskirts of town, some with gardens or chickens or woodpiles in their yards. Children helped their parents with the chores or played with cats or dogs, and few noticed her except to give her a friendly nod as she passed. Eventually, she came to the city itself, where most of the buildings were made of stone and mules pulled carts and carriages on cobblestone streets. She noticed the people here could afford slightly better clothes than those she had seen so far. The fabrics didn't look so rough, or the colors so faded.

Al gazed at the shop buildings, which were vaguely reminiscent of the Tudor style of historic Europe. Most of the shops bore signs with pictures and insignias either painted or carved above the words, such as a spool of thread attached to a needle, a pair of boots, or a collection of clay pots. Almost all of them had some kind of display in the front window, though being segmented into small diamond or square paned sometimes made the wares difficult to see. Aside from clothes and food, there were toys, dishes, candy, music boxes, candles, and contraptions she could only guess the use of.

Mr. Bird flew up to the roof of the nearest building, once again adopting his previous tactic of following her from overhead, away from all the hurrying feet. Down the street to her right Al could see a pack mule stationed patiently in front of a shop, laden with bundles on either side. In the opposite direction a few little covered trading stalls stood open for business in the street. As she passed them, Al could hear merchants and townspeople haggling prices.

“Three fahrs for this here knife,” insisted a gruff-looking man behind a table.

“Three fahrs! Why that’s half me week’s earnings! One and a half, I say!”

“Three fahrs it is, man! Take it or go home.”

Al kept walking, peering curiously down alleyways as Mr. Bird perched warily atop the buildings of Grae. It was nearing dusk when Mr. Bird began trying to lead her again, flitting along to the next rooftop. She eyed him dubiously and remained where she was. He grumbled at her and impatiently shuffled a few steps further away. Stubbornly she turned the opposite direction, which won her an indignant squawk. It was time to start looking for a place to sleep and there was no way she was going to let a three-pound bird get her lost in this town at night, no matter how grumpy he was about it. She would beg at the inn if she had to.

She stopped a woman passing by to ask where the nearest inn was. “Two streets that way and turn right, I think,” was the reply. “Clove’s Inn. It’s got Adin’s porcupine on the sign.”

Al thanked her, though she didn’t know what Adin’s porcupine was, and went on her way. To her dismay, Mr. Bird seemed happy about it and continued to act as if he were leading her as he flew on from one building to the next in the same direction the woman had told her to follow.

She turned on the second street and began looking about for the distinctive sign, trying not to pay too much attention to her small irascible companion. In a minute or two, she spotted it - a wooden sign carved with a porcupine hanging over the doorway of a sturdy two-story building across the street. The roof was mossy, the paint on the window trimming was cracked, and the shutters were weathered, but what it lacked in grandeur it made up for in warmth. It was obvious from the window beds and airy wooden stoop that

someone had done all they could to make the place friendly and inviting. The curved windows, stout stone walls, and wooden porch posts were the image of home and safety, but she couldn't help feeling anxious as she approached, knowing she had no money. Worse, as she drew nearer, Mr. Bird made no move to fly away and she realized with a sinking heart that the woman had directed her to the very same place he had. No matter what she did, this place seemed to script her every move.

Mr. Bird came down to land on her shoulder as she passed under the sign and climbed the porch stairs to the door. Like at Kina's inn, all the furniture in Clove's was wooden; the tables and chairs, the bar and stools on the far wall, the stairs just past it, and the flooring. Most of it was scuffed and dented, but still bright and serviceable. The walls were stone like the outside. A few people sat around the room with drinks and plates. A couple in the corner spoke softly and a man sitting alone in a window clutched a gnarled pipe. A woman stood behind the bar wearing a smudged apron over a faded mauve dress. Al went toward her.

"Good evening! Anything I could be getting ya?" Her round face and messy bun matched her friendly voice.

Al nodded. "Are you Clove?"

The woman nodded enthusiastically. "Aye. Peppermere Clove at your service."

Al looked at her more closely now. She had a kindly disposition, but her build was as sturdy as the building she owned, and Al was sure she'd won many a yelling match.

"Well, I think I need a place to stay for the night," Al answered, trying to imagine where a name like Peppermere could have come from.

"Oh, that'll not be a problem, girlie. Got plenty of rooms, I have."

“Thank you,” Al breathed, relieved. Somehow she’d been afraid all the rooms would be taken.

“If it’s just the one bed ya need, fare’ll be two relahs,” said Peppermere sweetly.

Whoever had paid for her last room hadn’t paid for this one, then. She found some relief in that, along with a tiny twinge of disappointment, since she would now be forced to call her own bluff and beg this woman to let her sleep in the scullery, or the attic, or something.

“Oh, well, um - you see, I don’t-”

“Yes?” Peppermere’s eyes tensed.

“I’m out of money,” Al blurted.

Peppermere’s face fell. “Oh my. I’m sorry, dearie, but I can’t be boarding ya without pay, ya know.”

Al nodded. “I understand. That’s-”

A voice interrupted her, mild-mannered and reassuring. “I daresay money is far too valued in this world.” A pale and delicate hand placed something on the bar, and as it fell away revealed two gleaming bronze coins. Eyes wide, Al looked up at the man who had so generously saved her butt, and nearly fell over when two deep violet eyes looked calmly back at her.

Mr. Bird squawked loudly and hopped to his shoulder to his to nuzzle his head against the man’s cheek. The man laughed. “Why hello, Raef. Yes, I’ve missed you too.”

Al saw now that his long hair was also a deep, vibrant violet and that he was dressed very well in an old-timey black suit with silver buttons. It looked to her like a crazy cross between a waistcoat situation and a longish colonial coat, like some sort of

gothic George Washington. She couldn't stop staring as her mind raced. This was the guy Mr. Bird belonged to? This was her mysterious benefactor who'd paid her way at Kina's inn? This guy, who looked even stranger than everything she had encountered so far?

"Y-You!" Al gasped, heart racing.

"Me," the man repeated. He seemed to be smiling - a discreet inward smile as if laughing at her.

"What- What are you doing here?" Ridiculously, it was all she could think of to say, despite the other hundred questions buzzing in her head.

"This is a public inn, my lady, and I am part of the public," he explained calmly.

"But how did you-? Where did you-?" She was utterly lost for words. How had he known she would be at the Olden Oak? What was his interest in her? Where had he come from? She realized now that there was no way he could be wearing contacts or hair dye. From what she had seen so far, this world didn't have the technology for that sort of thing.

The man raised his palm to her gently. "All will be explained, but first I think we mustn't keep this kind woman waiting."

Al turned. Peppermere Clove still stood behind the bar, her eyes darting between the two of them and the bronze reliefs on the counter.

"What room did you say my young friend would be staying in?" the man asked. Al noticed for the first time his accent was somehow strange. It was light - not strong, but not entirely absent, full of tall vowels delicate consonants, and airy tones. It was beautiful and foreign in a way she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Of course, sir. Room Five, on the west side. I'm sure ya know it." Peppermere gestured vaguely toward the stairs to her right. "First dinner's free of charge."

“Ah, yes. Thank you,” said the man with a courteous nod. He looked back to Al and said, “Well, I’m sure you have questions. I have some as well, but we can discuss them later if you like. Over dinner, perhaps, or after if you prefer your meals alone. I’m staying in Room Eleven at present and will be up quite late.”

Al was stunned at the forwardness of his suggestions, but regained herself enough to ask, “Who are you?”

“Oh, of course! Excuse me. I am Treath of Aleh, Circle of the Stars.” He bowed slightly and Mr. Bird had to balance himself with his wings at the sudden movement. Al was about to ask him what all that meant when he straightened and said, “And you are?”

Al struggled for words. Was he asking her name? As in, he had somehow found her, sent his bird after her, and anticipated her arrival here without knowing the first thing about her?

“I’m Al... of Goldman.” Treath looked at her seriously but was clearly oblivious of any town called Goldman. “House of Goldberg,” she added lamely.

Treath smiled politely. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Al of Goldman.”

“Um, thanks. But...” She watched him closely but saw no sign of malice in his face. Of course, if he were an exceptional liar, he would be practiced at feigning innocence, but to what end? If he were some psychopathic killer, he could presumably have caught up with her at any time over the last few days. It just didn’t make sense for him to lure her here to a public place if he had ill intentions. “You really know nothing about me?”

“That is a somewhat complicated question, but the short answer is no. We are perfect strangers,” he answered. He saw the confusion on her face and went on. “I see

that hasn't helped much. As I said, we have much to discuss, but only when you are ready. You should at least rest first. Raef tells me you've been on your feet all day. Come to me later when you've had some time to get comfortable."

She realized he was right - she was hungry for something other than bread and her feet were dead tired. All this had been brought on in a whirlwind of information, none of which made sense, and some time to decompress wouldn't be such a bad thing.

"Alright. Yeah, dinner sounds good."

"Then you are in good hands. The cook is excellent." With that, he inclined his head in a minuscule bow and left up the stairs to politely that Al was struck with the overwhelming image of a butler.

When he was gone, she turned back to the bar where a young woman was pouring a drink for another customer. Peppermere had disappeared into a back room. She hesitated a moment before calling her attention.

"Excuse me."

The bar girl turned, her blonde ringlets bouncing at her shoulder. Somehow she had managed to find just the right shade of blue broadcloth to set off her hair and eyes.

"Hello!" she said with a cheery smile.

"Hi. Um, dinner's free, right?"

"Sure is, if it's your first night," the girl said.

Al smiled. "Great." Somehow she'd gotten lucky again. She glanced at the wall behind the counter for a menu that wasn't there. "Um, got anything already made?"

The girl's eyes lit up. "Sure thing! Baked chicken and vegetables or Clove's Home Stew. Best stew around and not a doubt about it! Fancy a spot? It'll fill ya right up!"

Al had just had the stew at Kina's the night before so she shook her head.

"Chicken, please."

The girl smiled and went into the kitchen with a "Coming right up!" She returned shortly carrying Al's order on a clay plate and set it down on the counter. "Tea?"

Now Al noticed a tea set sitting behind the counter and nodded. "Oh, please."

"Here ya go," the girl said, pouring her a cup. "And if there's anything else I can be doing for ya, just call me over."

"Actually," Al said, "can you tell me about one of the tenants staying here?"

The girl's eyes narrowed slightly. "Nothing suspicious, I hope."

Al didn't know what she meant by that but went on anyway. "Well he's got purple eyes and hair, and-"

"Oh, you mean Mister Treath!" She was smiling again. "Right strange fellow, he is. Nice, though."

"Strange how?" Al hung on her words. Finally, someone who could give her answers.

"Well we don't get many of his type around here, always bowing and talking fancy. Rich folks usually stay uptown."

"Rich?" Al asked, urging her on. She'd already guessed as much but she wanted to hear it from this lady.

The girl spoke quickly and quietly and Al supposed she didn't want the others to know she gossiped about her customers. "Gotta be, bringing back great stacks of books and staying here every day for a fortnight. Suppose he likes this place for the privacy.

Hardly seems to want anyone to see him, only coming down for a spot of tea or there. Yesterday was the first time I saw him for more than a minute. Came down here with all his books and papers and sat right ‘neath that window there.” She nodded to a table across the room. “Papers and books falling everywhere, I say. Quiet, though. Ain’t disturbed nobody.”

“Any idea what he’s working on?” Al asked, intrigued.

“Oh, no, no,” she replied. “Reckon I ain’t got enough schooling in. Couldn’t understand a bit of it, all in different languages and funny looking circles. Got a glance at it refilling his tea. Riddles and poems all over the place, looked like.”

“Anything else?” Al asked. That still wasn’t much to go on.

The girl thought a moment but shook her head. “No, he’s nice enough. Just funny is all.”

It might not have been much to go on, but at least he was what he appeared to be - a polite scholarly bird owner with a penchant for mystery.

“Well, thanks for your help. And the meal,” she added, picking up the cup and plate.

The girl smiled. “Of course! And a good evening to ya!”

~::~~

~ *Doon* ~

Doon strolled through the bustling streets of Abernathy, his shoulders drawn proudly back, his red hair ablaze with sunlight. His blood-red dragon leather boots clicked against the cobblestone street with every step. Two gold clasps engraved with the noble crest of Anthe fastened together the crimson cape hanging from his shoulders, marking him as a servant of the Queen. A man passing by gave a quick glance to his tunic, adorned with gold, and his shiny boots, and hurried away. Horses pulled curtained carriages shading monocled noblemen from the

evening heat, and middle-aged women fanned themselves as they indulged in tea and sandwiches at their favorite cafes.

The city of Abernathy was said to be the most beautiful of human civilizations. Red and white brick buildings lined wide streets of yellow stone. Gentlemen in silk doublets and the Royal Guard in their silver mail bantered back and forth, while shopkeepers hurried to assist ladies wearing jeweled pins in their hair. At the end of the main boulevard lay a hill, atop which stood the Royal Palace of Anthe where the Queen could look over her city entirely. But every diamond in the rough had an underside, and Abernathy was no different.

Doon turned onto a side street and then another until he came to the lower part of town. Here cats slept on porches and children played with jacks and marbles as their mothers aired out rugs and bedding. He took another side street where the earthy smells of second-hand trade hung around small barter stands and traders far too eager to sell their goods. From here branched a yellowing backstreet full of food scraps and cats, which led to another where a couple of grungy barefoot children played halfheartedly with a stray dog. Past this, behind the once-proud stone buildings of the original city lay a part of the world where only the truly desperate congregated.

Grey stone streets met high grey walls that blocked out the sun. Gaunt, doleful faces stared up at him with hollow eyes. The smell of mildew and death lay pungent on the air. It was an ugly scene.

Doon ignored the glassy stares of wonder and fear, his nose in the air, and allowed his even stride to carry him through the tangle of alleys, careful to keep his boots clean. The witch would be here in an apothecary, his source had promised. Luckily there

weren't many stoops here. The faster he could find the shop, the less time he would have to breathe the dour air of the living dead.

Something caught him by the cape and, slowly, he craned his neck to look icily over his shoulder. An old man held the crimson folds with grimy hands, the likes of which made Doon sick to look at. Knobbly knuckles grasped strangely onto the long, bony fingers, bitten with brittle nails that were chipped and caked with muck. Doon fixed the man with a cool grey stare, daring him to speak.

“P-Please, sir. Sp-Spare coin for old man.”

The man spoke haltingly and was either stupid or foreign, as he had an accent like half his teeth were missing, paired with a disgraceful knowledge of Anthen grammar. Doon gave him a swift kick in the mouth and turned in disgust. He wasn't even worth the breath it would take to speak. Furrowing his brow, he continued toward the apothecary. The witch had been in hiding for far too long.

Finally, he came to a grimy doorstep. A bony dog lay pathetically on the crumbling stoop. Splintered shutters hung over mossy grey-black bricks. He nudged a toe against the moldy wooden door and it creaked open easily. Inside didn't look much like an apothecary, but a dingy one-room house. Sad dented chairs sat around a table gouged with years of use. A straw bed lay in the corner.

Beside the fireplace on the far wall stood another worn table where a frail grey woman ground away at some concoction of herbs with a mortar and pestle. Without turning she said, “Taven, yeh old fool. If I told yeh once I said it a hundred times. I'll find yeh when I'm finished.”

“You should look before you speak,” Doon answered.

The woman dropped the pestle in surprise and turned to face him. “What- Who are yeh? What do yeh want?”

“Information,” he said, striding inside. The door banged shut behind him.

“Forget it,” she said. “I’ve had it with yer people. Find yer own criminals.” Her words were strong, but Doon could see her grasping the table for support. This couldn’t be the witch. Old and horrible as she looked, she was too weak of spirit to be the hag he was after.

“Where is she?” he growled.

“Where is who?” She edged further away along the length of the table.

He frowned, his eyes hard. “The woman. The witch.”

Her face hardened. “If it’s witches yeh want, yeh’ve come to the wrong house. I’m just a healer.”

Doon studied her, unblinking. Her eyes darted from place to place behind brittle wisps of grey hair. The hem of her colorless dress was layered with mud and streaked dirt across the tops of her bare feet. Her hands trembled. “Liar.”

“Liar!” she protested. “Why, I-”

He strode toward her and she recoiled further into the corner of the room. She fought weakly as he caught her arm and dragged her into one of the beaten chairs, then sat clutching the rims of the seat, her dark eyes wide as she looked up at him. He pulled his favorite dagger from his boot and took a second to admire how the light shone dimly on eight inches of iron. The woman’s eyes grew wider still, fixed to the blade.

“Just like starlight. Silent, smooth - like Thana’s river.” His gaze slid smoothly to her.

“Yeh wouldn’t.” Her voice wavered. “Yeh can’t-”

“You will tell me what you know,” he interrupted, turning the knife on her.

She shook her head frantically, grasping for words. “But, please, I don’t know anything.”

He turned the knife lazily in his hand. She was definitely hiding something, but as long as she could pretend she didn’t know who he was talking about, she had a defense. “Tieh’rhel Throge. A witch. She lived here thirty years ago. Her apprentice stayed.”

She shook her head again, eyes wide, breath quick. “Tieh- What kinda name-”

With a shout, he slammed his hand into the back of her chair and leaned down to look into her eyes. They shifted to the knife still in his other hand, now pointed at her face, and she flinched away from it.

“Please,” she begged. “I don’t know anyone by that name. I’d swear it by Daelin himself.” Her lip trembled and her hands shook, still clutching the chair beneath her so tight they ran pale.

He rested the flat of the blade against her colorless cheek. “Another name, then. She may have been in hiding.” He waited a moment as she whimpered. “*The witch!*” he shouted, knocking her chair back again. A thin trickle of blood spilled down her face where the knife had cut her with the impact.

“Orena Irin!” she cried out with a sob. “Orena. Her name was Orena. Now, please...” Another sob escaped her. “Please...”

He searched her eyes but found only fear. “You’re sure? No one else?” He put more force on the blade and she cried out again in fear.

“No one! I swear!”

Satisfied, he removed the blade from her skin and stood up. “Speak of this to no one.” The swirling of his cape as he exited was the last she saw of him.

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The streets of Abernathy had grown dark. Doon rounded a corner onto the main thoroughfare, billowing past ladies and noblemen in his anger. He’d been sure Tieh’rhel Throge would be here, sure the witch from the apothecary would know something, but in all his searching he had never come across the name Orena Irin. Could this be the missing piece of information he needed to find the witch?

Dutifully, he went straight to the city office of records, claiming Queen’s business, and asked for all records pertaining to Orena Irin, but after more than an hour of searching the archives, it became clear that either no one by that name had ever lived in or owned land in the city, or that all the records of such a person had been stolen or destroyed. The clerk apologized profusely, but it was clear he’d had nothing to do with it. He was a prideful man who had greeted Doon with pomp and who had boasted about the organization of his files. No, if Irin had been Throge’s alias during her time in Abernathy, then she had once again given him the slip. She was crafty, he realized. Crafty enough, perhaps, to have been changing locations for months like a child cheating in hide-and-seek.

Ahead of him a door clanged open and two men stumbled out of it, laughing.

“Ah, Larro, you don’t have to throw us out, you know!” said the first, waving his hat around.

“We can behave!” shouted the other.

Above the door hung a sign engraved with a flagon and a word scrawled beneath it that Doon didn't bother to decipher.

"Like kids in a candy shop, you two are!" came a third voice from inside. "Not in the mood tonight for a couple of idiots like you!"

"Now really, Larro, I'm one of your oldest friends! If-"

"You'll leave if you know what's good for you, Farlin." Larro came to the threshold, his arms crossed and a thin scowl over his face.

"Oh, alright, alright," Farlin said, walking away. "Tomorrow night, then!"

"Yeah, tomorrow!" said the other man.

Larro watched them go, then gave Doon a friendly nod and went back into the tavern, closing the door behind him. Doon hesitated, then followed. He wasn't typically a drinking man, but he had coin to spare and a problem to solve.

It was crowded and noisy inside, though the men here were dressed in well-made clothes, some decoratively embroidered, some emblazoned with crests on the sleeves or chest. Most laughed and carried on with each other or teased the serving girls.

Doon found an empty seat at the end of the bar.

"Fine night for a drink," Larro said as he sat down.

Doon didn't necessarily think any night was a fine one for drinking, but there was no point insulting the owner. "Ravenwine," he said.

Larro nodded. "Must be some big troubles you have." He pulled a deep red bottle from a high shelf and filled a flagon. "Two zan," he said, sliding it over the nicked oak bar top.

Doon dropped two small copper coins on the counter and watched as Larro slipped them through the coin slot of a locked box behind the bar. He turned the flagon around a few times, enjoying the feel of the dense, cool metal in his hands and the noise it made against the bar top.

How as he to find a single woman in such a vast country? Tracking the average criminal was difficult enough if they were cunning, but she was a witch and an old one. She was powerful, sure to be hidden in some impossible place behind barriers and spells. And if she knew the Queen was hunting her then he may as well give up now. He took a drink and paused a moment to appreciate the dark, bitter flavor ravenwine was known for. Then, setting it down again, he peered into the flagon, watching the black-red swirls move in the firelight.

He would need to hire someone. After weeks of searching on his own, this much was clear, especially now that it was apparent Throge had seemingly dropped out of existence fifty years previously when she'd left one of the western cities under prosecution for illegal magick. Her last confirmed sighting had been in Lakeport, in 870. If anyone knew where she'd gone, they weren't saying, and not a soul had heard from her in at least thirty years, if the apothecary woman was to be believed. In truth, the chances of her even being alive were slim, anyway. And yet the Queen insisted she be brought to her. He took another drink.

Supposing she was alive, he doubted she'd reveal herself even if every house in the realm were searched and plundered. Blunt force wouldn't do. She would need to be trapped, outsmarted. For that he would need help. But who? Her trail had gone cold and she would have taken steps to cover her path. Huntsmen were good with tracking, but

only in the wild. An assassin may work if he'd wanted her dead. A mercenary would be too reckless. Besides, all these would take time he didn't have to catch wind of leads he'd missed. The Queen was already impatient and had hoped Throge would be found by the end of the week. He would have to find her quickly and without a doubt of losing her.

He ran a hand through his hair and took another drink. A bubble clinging to the side of the flagon popped. He drained the rest and ordered another. Larro refilled his order wordlessly and Doon dropped two more coins on the bar top. He closed his eyes and let the noise of the tavern wash over him. A few men laughed loudly nearby, a serving wench set drinks down at a table in the corner, and a young man across the room called for another round of ale. Further down the bar, a stool scraped across the floor and a man stood. Another set a goblet down forcefully. Larro restocked a bottle on the shelf behind the bar. It was interesting how even in the loudest of places the smallest of sounds could be heard if only someone were listening closely enough. All it took was someone with skill enough to pick them out.

He opened his eyes and looked around the room. A country wasn't much different than a tavern and this mission wasn't much more than a listening game. He just had to find a better player - someone with ears for hire. A terrible thought hit him then, and he shuddered. He took another swig from his flagon. It didn't help except to solidify the idea.

A scrier.

He would have to hire a scrier. They were said to be all-knowing, invasive, cold, and dismissive of rules and boundaries. They were supposed to be able to find anything, see anything. They made the perfect spies and thieves, for a price. He should have thought of it before. Who better to find a witch than another witch? And where better to find a witch than the

Tower? He drained the last of his ravenwine and slapped two more coins on the bar for a third. Tomorrow would be a long day.

~::~~

~ *Al* ~

After she'd eaten Al headed up the creaky wooden stairs, and as she did, she felt a wave of brazenness brush over her. She had to know what was going on. She was tired of wondering what this Treath knew and what he wanted with her. She would go to his room right now and demand information. At the top of the stairs she looked down the hallway where a door stood open, a circle of candlelight spilling out of it. Suddenly her stomach was under storm by a flock of bats, her legs frozen in place. Her mind flitted to her own room, which she hadn't investigated yet, but she pushed the thought away. She wanted this mystery solved and the only way to do that was to step forward. And so, setting her shoulders back, that's what she did.

She could hear voices from behind the doors on either side as she went, lights lining the gaps at the floor. Coming to the room at the end, she could see the light of multiple candles spilling across a sea of papers and books all strewn on top of each other. A shadow in the corner moved slightly. It turned out not to be a shadow at all, but Mr. Bird perched atop the wardrobe, his head tucked beneath his wing. She moved closer, peering around the doorframe. A young man who appeared to be in his late teens or early twenties sat on the bed leaning against the wall, a book balanced on his knees. He wore a loose white peasant shirt, black pants, and dark socks. His jaw-length brown hair hung in his eyes and cast a flickering shadow over his face as he read. Al recoiled, thinking for a

wild moment she'd gotten the wrong room. Mr. Bird, however, convinced her otherwise. Then she noticed Treath at the desk by the window, now in a white shirt, his coat hanging on the back of his chair.

The young man looked up, noticing her for the first time. "H-Hello," he stuttered, breaking the silence.

"Hello," Al answered. She realized she had seen him come in during dinner but had paid him no mind, assuming he was just another patron of the inn.

At her voice, Treath looked up from his work and turned around. "So, we are all here at last! And how fortunate you've both arrived in the same day. I was beginning to worry we'd be delayed."

"S-Sorry I was late," the young man said, setting his book down and looking embarrassed.

"Think nothing of it," Treath said. He then gestured for Al to take a seat in a spare chair near the desk and dresser. "I realize my quarters aren't the most hospitable, but please try to make yourself comfortable. You have my apologies for the clutter."

"It's alright," Al said as she tiptoed over papers and books spread across the floor. When she'd seated herself, Treath spoke again.

"Doubtless you are wondering why you are here." The guy on the bed nodded a couple of times and Al realized he'd been talking to both of them. "But first, you must know who each other are. I do not believe in carrying on conversation with strangers." He turned to the young man. "Clocke, this is Al Goldberg, adventurer of a second world."

Clocke looked confused, but inclined his head politely with a soft-spoken, "H-Hello."

"Al, this is Clocke Turlough, my apprentice," Treath continued.

Al glanced between the two quizzically. Treath looked barely older than Clocke. They could have been brothers had they looked anything alike.

“Hi,” she said hesitantly. Clocke acknowledged her with a tiny wave of the hand.

Treath smiled. “Secondly, you must know where you are before knowing what you are doing there.” He looked at Al. “This world is Erathe, and we’re in the country of Anthe, which you have surely gleaned from your map. Therefore, I will try not to bore you with geography, unless you have many questions.”

“Actually, I can’t read it,” Al said.

Treath raised his eyebrows in surprise. “But surely you can read?”

“Yes, but not this... alphabet, I guess,” she clarified.

A spark came into his eye like he’d just figured something out, and he said, “Ah, I should have anticipated that.” Though he didn’t explain, the gleam in his eye made her think he had questions he wasn’t asking.

“You act like you knew I was going to come here,” she said. “You sent your weird spy bird after me, paid for my room, led me here. I didn’t even know I was coming here, so how could you? What is this place?” She could feel Clocke watching, and it occurred to her that he was possibly even more confused than she was. At least she’d had a few days to wrap her head around this.

“All will be explained. It is complicated. But as for the last...” Treath paused a moment in thought. “I believe there is no way for us to truly know. The best way I have come to describe it is that you have come from a world similar to this one, but separate completely.”

Al just looked at him, incredulous. For a supernatural guide to a new world, she would have expected him to have a better theory than one she'd come up with in five minutes. "I kind of figured that out. But how?"

"A Gate, of course," he answered.

"A gate," she repeated. The image of a white picket garden gate popped into her head as if stepping into new planes of existence were as easy as fetching the mail. If he'd looked like he was joking, she might have laughed.

Treath's expression, however, was quite serious as he said, "A powerful one, bridging our two worlds for a small period of time."

It took a second for what he was saying to truly sink in. "Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. You're saying someone opened some sort of magick space door into my world and sucked me in here?"

Treath just looked at her. "Is that such a difficult thing to believe?"

Al blinked, lost for words. The fact was, it wasn't hard to believe, considering it had apparently happened. "But I don't understand. Why?"

"That I shall attempt to answer in a moment," Treath said. He turned to Clocke then. "Clocke, you are probably wondering why, for so long, my presence at the library has been intermittent."

Clocke nodded and said, "I figured you were working on s-s-something important for Clay."

Treath appeared to think this was a reasonable explanation, but said, "In fact, I have been on a personal pursuit. What began as a mere curiosity has become an inquiry of dire importance."

Clocke's face changed. A wrinkled brow replaced the good-natured shine in his eye and Al's mind was alive with questions.

"D-Dire importance?" Clocke asked.

Treath nodded gravely. "I would seem the Balance is shifting."

"Sh-*Shifting*?" The new concern in Clocke's voice was enough to put knots in Al's stomach.

"For months I have felt the earth changing under my feet, a tingling of unrest in my stomach." Treath turned to both of them in turn. "The southern borders are more dangerous than they have been in years. Tremors run free through the earth and a crooked sky hangs over Abernathy. I'm afraid some foul thing is upon us."

"B-But Abernathy is meant to be the s-safest c-city in Anthe," Clocke protested. "The C-City of Light."

"And yet the stars have never been clearer to me," Treath answered.

"What the hell are you two talking about?" Al broke in, unable to stay out of the loop any longer.

Treath's eyes snapped up at her, and Al could see something in them, almost like sadness. "Allow me to explain," he said.

"Please, by all means!" It came out more rudely than she'd intended, but Treath didn't seem to notice.

"To the south of this country lies the goblin country, DtamoZ, and beyond that an expanse known as the Southern Wastes, or the Badlands. Little is known of what it once was called or who called it home. Some legends say it was a haven created by the gods. Other stories are less grand. Whatever the case, it has long since declined into a place of

ruin and despair. There is a long, tedious history there with much war involved.” Treath shook his head as if in pity. “Suffice it to say that many of the evil creatures of the world live there now, creatures who revel in calamity; chimeras, trolls, various dark spirits, and the like. Only the goblin country, Dtamoz, still functions as a united sovereignty and it is quickly falling into ruin, like the rest of the Southern Wastes.” Al imagined fields of dead grass and razed villages, like something out of a fantasy novel.

“Anthe has been at war with Dtamoz for too many years to bother counting,” Treath continued, “sometimes declaring peace for a decade or so before tensions rise again, like now. Nearly eight years passed in silence until last year when the Anthene government declared an attack on Dtamoz. The border is in tumult with more goblin incursions coming than usual.”

“More than usual?” Al asked. “You mean it’s a normal thing?”

“Goblins are not known for their diplomacy,” Treath said with a dry smile. “If ever they desire something, they feel the need to threaten someone for it, and those living along the borders invariably get the brunt of it. Usually it amounts to burnt fields, slaughtered cows, and similar atrocities. Now, however, there are rumors of people missing as well.” His look was grim and Al didn’t want to know exactly what the goblins would do with the people they took.

Clocke cut in then, shaking his head. “I d-don’t understand. The tremors, the goblins, Abernathy - how do they fit t-together?”

“Ah, this, my young friend, is precisely what I am getting to,” Treath assured him.

Mr. Bird - Raef, Al reminded herself - stirred and glanced wearily around the room. Flickering candlelight danced over walls and books and a large shadow rose up on the wall near Clocke, almost the shape of a person, but it was gone almost as quickly as it had appeared, and,

seeing nothing that could have cast it, Al dismissed it as a trick of the light. Raef tucked his head beneath his wing again and Treath spoke, his eyes downcast.

“*Linrel bore Lenus / Lixhil nei Belyn ysun Shinsef friyn / Torloque Rakke eiah wyn tak.*” Clocke and Al exchanged glances. “It is a prophecy made in the first epoch, just after the Cycles changed,” Treath continued. “It’s Pykze. The prophet was a pixie called Tieh’rhel Throge of the Northern Band. It translates to ‘*The Linrel falls to Lenus. Guideless, Belyn resumes in Cycle fourth. Victor Balrok soars again.*’”

“Is this what you’ve been researching?” Clocke looked nervous as he picked at a loose string on his book.

Treath nodded. “I do not pretend to understand it, but I feel the timing is quite clear.”

“Within the year, it s-sounds like,” Clocke agreed.

“And perhaps sooner,” Treath added.

“*What’s* within the year?” Al could hardly keep the frustration out of her voice.

Treath and Clocke looked at her quizzically.

“I-It’s the turn of the C-Cycles,” said Clocke simply, as if any moron should know this.

“Ah,” said Treath with sudden understanding. “My apologies. A Cycle is built of three epochs, each three hundred years long. We are at the end of the third epoch of the current Cycle, meaning this prophecy is nearly eight hundred years old, by my guess. The new year will bring the new Cycle - the fourth Cycle.”

“Oh,” Al said.

“You will come to understand,” Treath assured her.

Clocke stared at her for a few more seconds before dropping his gaze hastily. Treath paced between the wardrobe and the door a couple of times, expertly avoiding the papers arranged on the floor.

“There are several parts to this prophecy, some of which I understand, and some of which I don’t. First, of course, are the references to the mythical creatures Linrel, and Balrok, as well as Lenus. Linrel is the sea serpent of legend which is said to be as kind as it is vengeful. Balrok, sometimes translated as ‘Phoenix,’ is a creature of fire, and Lenus, translated here as ‘godfire,’ is the fire it has at its command. Second is the clear reference to the turn of the fourth Cycle. Third, the word ‘guideless’. ‘*Guideless, Belyn resumes in Cycle fourth,*’ implying that the presence of a guide would prevent Belyn from resuming whatever it is she was doing. And last, the word ‘victor.’ ‘*Victor Balrok soars again.*’ Belyn’s return is a victory for the Balrok.”

“B-Belyn is a fire goddess,” Clocke pointed out.

“Yes,” Treath agreed. “But something is missing in this puzzle. Why should Belyn and her Balrok fight with the water serpent? What threat does it pose to them? And why should a guide interfere?”

“I-I don’t know,” Clocke conceded.

“In any case, I believe that whatever is happening around us is in perfect accordance with this prophecy. Or, rather, a direct effect of it.”

“What do you mean?” Clocke asked. Al saw that he had abandoned the string on his book and was now chewing his nails.

“Typically, when prophecies foretell an accurate future, it does not create such strife with the Balance - the order of nature,” he clarified for Al. “But everything is strange these days and the land itself seems to be tilting beneath us - a sure sign someone is meddling with the natural

order. It seems to me someone knew of this prophecy and has meticulously planned to see it set in motion.” Treath now put his hand to his chin in thought, and said more to himself than anyone, “It’s the only way.”

“Wait, how can someone deliberately set a prophecy in motion?” Al asked.

“Aren’t they supposed to be left to fate, or something?”

“There are people in the world who possess the power to defy nature. I believe such an individual is attempting to use this prophecy as a means to gain power, though I know not how, yet. First, of course, this person would have realized they needed to acquire the guide the prophecy speaks of, or *not* acquire it, as the case may be, if they wanted the Balrok to succeed.”

“M-Mister Treath? I’m s-still not following,” Clocke protested.

Treath looked at him. “My apologies. I am not being as clear as I should like.”

“It-It’s just... What are *we* meant to do about all this?” That Clocke seemed just as lost as she was, despite his understanding of this world, comforted Al.

“I have an inkling of who is behind the Shift, at least. If I am correct, it shall lead us in the right direction.”

“S-So, who is it?” Clocke asked.

“Keep in mind I am only *fairly* certain,” Treath hedged.

“Who is it?” Al asked more forcefully.

Treath appeared to brace himself for what he was about to say and lowered his voice. “I believe it to be the Queen herself.”

Clocke was speechless for a moment before he recovered enough to whisper, “Th-The *Queen*?”

Treath's face was grave as he went on. "It would explain much. Not only what I have observed for myself, but also the sudden resurgence of the war, perhaps serving as a perfect distraction from happenings in Abernathy after a relatively long interim of peace. The sheer power of the Gate that pulled Al through, for another thing. Certainly, with the Tower at her disposal, any number of magickal feats could be accomplished. And the Shift in the Balance sending tremors through the earth, emanating from the heart of the capitol... It can be no coincidence."

Clocke stared in horror. "A-And you want *us* t-to try and s-stop her?"

"Yes," Treath said. "It must be us."

Al stood up then, knocking her chair a few inches backward. Raef jumped and looked about the room in surprise. "Hold on a minute! You're telling me some super villain evil queen dragged me through a portal to a parallel universe for no reason and now I'm supposed to fight her and goblins and who knows what else because she's trying to set some prophecy in motion to gain even more evil power? Are you crazy? This isn't even my world! I don't know the first thing about it, so what could it possibly have to do with me?"

Treath didn't look the slightest bit phased by her outburst. Quite the opposite, in fact. He met her eye with a serious gaze as a small, nearly imperceptible smile crept over his face, and answered, "You are the guide, of course."

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CHAPTER SIX

~ Doon ~

The proud streets of Abernathy looked bleaker than usual this morning and Doon held his shoulders stiffly as a mild headache throbbed in his temples. The sun shone relentlessly, glinting off the hilt of his sword and the tops of his boots so that even squinting did close to nothing to curb the brightness. Ahead of him, a horse hitched to a carriage pawed at the street. Doon strode up to it.

The coachman greeted him with a nod of his head. "Fine day, sir. Where may I take you?"

"The Tower," Doon ordered.

"T-The Tower, sir? But that's nearly a mile outside the city," the man protested.

"You will take me there," Doon said gruffly, stepping into the carriage.

"Not today, I won't. That's much too-" Doon shoved a large gold coin into his hand. The man looked at it for a moment before recognizing what it was. It was seldom he ever saw more than a silver fahr or two, but a tellah? Why, a couple of those could buy him a new horse. "Yes, sir. To the Tower, sir."

Not an hour later he was stepping off the carriage again with the Tower's shadow looming over him. He had never been here himself, though on clear days he could see if from certain windows in the palace, casting long shadows on the plains outside the city. Now, as the carriage rattled away behind him, he looked up at it, reaching its spire high into the sky. It was taller than a single tower should have been, but it had been built with magick, or so the stories went, and would not fall under its own weight. Neither could storm or wind or fire fell it. Only magick could destroy a place of magick, but then, why would they want to?

Doon walked across the garden courtyard before it, to the front door and gave a few knocks with the large iron ring welded to the iron door. In a few moments, an old man in blue robes answered, swinging the door open wide. Four small blue diamonds were tattooed over his left brow and his beard was thick and short. He gave a curt nod and asked, "What brings you to the Tower?"

Doon was momentarily put off by his direct approach but nodded curtly in return. "I am in need of a scrier."

"Indeed." The old man's eye lingered over the crest of Anthe carved into the clasps of his cape. "Her Majesty's bidding, I presume?"

"That is none of your concern," Doon answered, glaring down at him.

The man accepted this answer and turned abruptly, leading him inside. "Follow."

Doon obeyed, letting the heavy metal door close loudly behind him. The man led him through a large circular dining room with high ceilings to a curved hallway leading to a steep set of curved stairs. As much as he disliked being in a place of magick, he couldn't help being surprised by the size of the inside as the man led him up more staircases and through more twisting hallways, never wasting his breath on pleasantries.

"You need someone swift for your mission, and strong." It was a statement more than a question. "Someone skilled in various magicks."

"What do you know of my mission?" Doon asked, suspicious. He had not sent notice to anyone ahead of time or made any indication he would be coming at all.

"Only what I have Seen," the man said, leading him along another curved hallway lined with doors. They were on the fifth floor now.

Doon narrowed his eyes at him. "Spy."

He seemed almost amused at the accusation. “No, no. Only magick.” He stopped in front of a door identical to the rest and knocked. A moment of silence, and then a voice.

“Enter.”

The man opened the door and Doon followed. The room was modest, with just enough room for a cot, a trunk, a small wardrobe, and a writing desk beneath the window where a young woman sat with a quill scratching something onto a length of parchment.

Without looking up from her work, the woman spoke. “He has arrived.”

“Precisely on time,” replied the old man.

She laid down her quill and stood to face him. Her midnight black hair was pulled tidily away from her angular face, her shocking blue eyes carefully blank of expression. “I am Tallis,” she said, tersely. She couldn’t even have been twenty-five and was probably closer to twenty.

“I am-”

“I know who you are, Doon of Black Snow Pond, child of the Northern Waste. Don’t think I haven’t studied the one come to hire me.”

Doon’s heart skipped a beat and he clenched his fists. He already hated this woman, but he could feel her eyes boring into him, testing him. She knew he needed her. He steeled himself up and stared back, meeting her cold blue eyes with his own cool grey.

“You think me rude, do you not, for speaking so boldly to one of the Queen’s inner council? But you’re more than that, aren’t you? Her personal servant, a person who is meant to slip past watching eyes as if you don’t exist. Yet in your pride you give

yourself away, advertising your allegiance and rank by the royal crest you wear at your throat. I am one of three people in this world who knows everything about you. I know your mission, what you wish to use me for, what you expect me to do, and that you need me more than you want anyone to know.”

She paused, letting her words sink in. Doon stood rigid. He felt open, as if his mind were a chest that had been broken wide and rummaged through. Tallis continued.

“I will do as you wish without question, without judgment, without reservations, but don’t think I follow blindly or don’t have my own reasons. I have a condition, you see. You will help me when you have completed your task, or you will not hire me. Do you accept?”

Doon was lost for words. This slight woman looked to be just over a hundred pounds, barely older than a girl, and delicate as onionskin. Yet she spoke boldly, held herself with such pride and confidence, and had managed to strip him completely of his guard in a mere moment. He gathered himself quickly, scrabbling for something to say.

“You take this favor as your only payment?” he managed.

“Yes,” Tallis said, her gaze unwavering.

That made him uneasy, but from what he had already seen, she was exactly the person he needed. “Then name it,” he said.

“It will be discussed when the mission is through. The only question you need to answer is whether or not you desire my help.” Her eyes were hard and fierce, like cool blades of iron. He had never met a woman with eyes like those.

Doon thought only a moment. Weighing her skill against an unknown favor seemed a bad way to do business, but the Queen’s orders had been clear. Find the witch, or pay the

consequences, and he disliked the thought of the Queen's punishment more than he disliked Tallis's favor. Solemnly he bowed his head. "I accept."

Tallis nodded in confirmation of the deal. "In that case, I shall be waiting for you at dawn. Until then, I'm sure Mera can find a place for you. Good evening."

The old man, Mera, led him out of the room and once again through a maze of curving halls and stairs until they came to an unoccupied room identical to Tallis's.

"You can sleep here for the night," Mera said. "There is a change of clothes in the wardrobe. Dinner will be brought to you in two hours." With that Mera left, closing the door behind him.

Once alone, Doon gave a soft sigh of relief. He was used to tense situations, but for the minor difference that he was usually the one in charge of them. Here he felt he'd been put in his place. These people didn't fear him. Having the ability to invade the minds of strangers had given them power and it was clear they enjoyed it. He couldn't blame them for that, but he didn't enjoy being the hapless victim of such a power. Still, it was more clear to him now than ever that a scribe would be the most effective way to get information, which was now his most precious commodity. He only hoped he would never fall into disfavor with the Tower or its inhabitants. May the gods have mercy on him if such a thing came to pass.

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FRAME END

Here the story continues with Al, Treath, and Clocke searching for the true meaning behind the prophecy. In their travels they discover the existence of a forgotten goddess, Nabia, who has been banished by the other gods for a crime she didn't commit. The "Balance" Treath speaks of will only be put to rights once she is released from her prison and assumes the heavenly throne that her sister Belyn aims to take out of turn.

Meanwhile, Doon and Tallis seek to fulfil the Queen's plans of ensuring Belyn takes the throne. In the process Doon becomes disillusioned with the Queen's vision of the future and, after a betrayal from Tallis, strikes out on his own to defy her, becoming an enemy of the state. While he will never truly join the main party, the two groups will work in tandem to end the Queen of Anthe's rule and herald the reign of her brother, Aeved.