

Spring 5-1-2017

The Valley of the Dead

Morgan A. Frazier
Arkansas Tech University

Follow this and additional works at: https://orc.library.atu.edu/etds_2017

Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Frazier, Morgan A., "The Valley of the Dead" (2017). *Theses and Dissertations from 2017*. 4.
https://orc.library.atu.edu/etds_2017/4

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research and Publications at Online Research Commons @ ATU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations from 2017 by an authorized administrator of Online Research Commons @ ATU. For more information, please contact cpark@atu.edu.

THE VALLEY OF THE DEAD

By

MORGAN FRAZIER

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate College of
Arkansas Tech University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
MASTER OF LIBERAL ARTS
May 2017

Permission

Title: The Valley of the Dead

Program: Liberal Arts

Degree: Master of Liberal Arts

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment for a graduate degree from Arkansas Tech University, I agree the library of this university shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted to my thesis director, or, in that professor's absence, by the Head of the Department of the Dean of the Graduate College. To the extent that the usage of the thesis is under the control of Arkansas Tech University, it is understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to Arkansas Tech University in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Signature

Date

© 2017 Morgan Frazier

Abstract

Fay, a princess, lives in a secluded valley realm whose inhabitants were slaughtered 45 years ago. She has chosen her eighteenth birthday as the day she will commit suicide to join them. When her mentor and guardian learns of her intentions he stops her and tells her about what he remembers of the event and reminds her that it is her responsibility as Queen to live and take care of them. With this knowledge, the new Queen leaves the valley on a quest to find the truth about what happened the day the villagers were massacred so that she can set their spirits free.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	iii
PROULOGUE	1
CHAPTER ONE.....	2
CHAPTER TWO	9
CHAPTER THREE	14
CHAPTER FOUR.....	19
CHAPTER FIVE	21
CHAPTER SIX.....	33
CHAPTER SEVEN	39
CHAPTER EIGHT	43
CHAPTER NINE.....	51
CHAPTER TEN.....	57
CHAPTER ELEVEN.....	62
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	68
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	73
CHAPTER FOURTEEN	76
CHAPTER FIFTEEN	81
CHAPTER SIXTEEN.....	84
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	87
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.....	91
CHAPTER NINETEEN.....	94

CHAPTER TWENTY	98
CHAPTER TWENTY ONE	106
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO	110
CHAPTER TWENTY THREE.....	114
CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR.....	123
CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE.....	128
CHAPTER TWENTY SIX.....	135
CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN.....	142
CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT	147
CHAPTER TWENTY NINE.....	152
CHAPTER THIRTY.....	157
APPENDICES	161
Appendix A. Arcady Elevations Map.....	161
Appendix B. Arcady Map.....	163
Appendix C. Armag Denu Elevations Map	165
Appendix D. Armag Denu Map.....	167

Prologue

Fay knew that she had chosen well, just as Martha, a witch woman and her adoptive mother, had taught her. Sunrise was the perfect time for taking serious action and that golden green clearing, close to the cliff's edge and the waterfall would be the right place. Her connection to the clearing was strong; it almost seemed like it was tied to her soul. So, if anything important were to be a success it would need to be done here. This was the place to take her life.

The hazy dawn light would soon reveal the clearing almost exactly she had found it, as a child on her eighth birthday, exactly ten years ago to the day.

The ground of the clearing was covered with a thick, soft dark green moss with the occasional rock or patch of dirt peeking through. The air had the earthy smell of decomposing leaves and the occasional hint of mint in the summer. On the cliff side, the clearing was open; the trees would never grow there. So, when standing in the middle of the clearing looking out she could see the entire span of the valley. As if to make up for this gap, the rest of the surrounding trees grew very large and their branches spanned the entire upper space of the clearing. At noon, this would create the effect of a randomly patterned, green stained glass window, and at all times of day there was usually a green tint to the light. All of this together, the sights and smells always calmed and centered her, her soul.

Ten years of living in the valley below had caused her to come to the conclusion that she needed to die to finally live.

Chapter One

“Child, I want you to go to the market. You will find your birthday gift there.”

Martha called out to Fay from the kitchen as she finished making a pot of tea. She walked to the front door, opened it, and waited for the girl to leave her room. Fay slowly left her room. The sunlight brightened the room and shone on her dark brown hair.

She looked at Martha, with wide brown eyes with silver starbursts around the pupil, eager and ready.

“What is it? What does it look like?”

“You will need to guess my dear.” It was answers like these that helped build Martha’s reputation as an outsider. When it was combined with her knowledge of medicine, she was labeled as a witch woman. She also happened to be the only person with fiery orange-red hair in the valley.

Fay became impatient with her answers. “Martha, just tell me what it is!” She was beginning to become visibly impatient. Her left hand held to her side repeatedly scrunching up and releasing the skirt of her dress. She slowly rocked back and forth.

Martha gave Fay a kind smile, amused at her childish impatience. “Fay, my child, just go. You shall know it when you see it. Now shoo.”

Martha gently pushed Fay out the door, then stepped back and closed the door. Fay shook her head exasperated by Martha’s answers, and then sprinted towards the village.

The forest blocked out the sounds of the village, but eventually Fay could hear the villagers as they conducted business in the village square. The sounds of the market day activities were varied and predictable. She is soon out of the cover of the forest, and able to see the village. As she entered the market, Fay's attention was immediately drawn to the potter's table and a blue bowl there. As she hurried to look closer at the bowl, she accidentally knocked into one of the horses the farmers used to bring their goods to market. It was a big nervy blue roan that quickly shied away from her, giving a hard jerk to the farmer holding it. Fay turned her attention back to the bowl, forgetting the horse and the farmer.

“Fay, have you come to play?” A young boy ran up to Fay, evading his father's grasp. His clothes and hair show signs of recently playing in the mud. He looks to be a year or two older than Fay.

“No, I'm getting my birthday gift. I'm eight today. Martha said my gift would be here.” Fay said all of this with a big smile, looking over the boy's shoulder at the bowl.

“What is it? Is it fun? Can we play together once you get it?”

The boy was out of breath by the time he finished speaking.

Fay was becoming impatient, ready to get her gift. “I don't know, Johnny. Martha just told me it would be here.”

“Martha is weird. She's always weird. Daddy says people with red hair are weird.”

“No she isn't. I'm going!”

Fay resumed her path to the potter, shoving Johnny as she passed him. All of her attention was on a deep blue bowl. When she was closer she could see that the inside of

the bowl was a beautiful bright blue, the same color as the center of the deep pool at the base of the waterfall when the clear summer sky reflected on and in it. The outside of the bowl was a deep dark blue like the pool on a cloudless night with a full moon. The bowl fit in her hands perfectly. It was like the potter knew the colors she dreamed of and placed them on the shining bowl.

Fay didn't think that this could be what Martha had sent her for. There was nothing like it in the cottage. Everything in the cottage was all earthy browns and greens, but this, this was not. Martha believed in things of the earth and practical. This was too beautiful to be either.

Fay moved to set the bowl down, but was careless in her placement. The bowl fell to the ground, in its way was a large earthy brown vase, something that would have fit in Martha's collection. As the two pieces of pottery connected, they shattered and created a loud sound.

The pieces of the blue bowl, small and delicate, were covered up by large dull brown chunks of the vase. It felt like even in this the bowl was delicate because the pieces were small and beautiful, but not jagged or too big.

Behind Fay, the nervous horse broke free from the hold of the farmer. The horse ran into the market. In its path was Johnny, playing in the mud and oblivious to everything outside his puddle. Fay was only able to stand and watch as the horse ran up to Johnny. One hoof went down, then the next, through Johnny's body. He continued playing and the horse continued running.

As it ran, the horse passed through several more people. They did not seem to notice, and no one was hurt. The only person that was moving because of the horse's actions was the farmer as he ran to catch it.

Fay finally began to move from her completely frozen state. At first, her eyes widened as shock took over her emotions and face. Finally, her body began to move, as she turned and ran to Martha's cottage.

When Fay threw open the door, she saw that the room was just as she had left it, bright from the sunlight coming in the large windows. The smell of the dried plants hanging from the ceiling and jars on the shelves filled the air. Martha was next to the table preparing herbs, cutting and mixing and placing things in various jars. Martha looked up at Fay as she rushed into the room.

"I...I saw something Martha. At the market. It was, I just, I had to come to you. I knew you would know the answer. You have to tell me."

Fay stood by the door as she spoke to Martha. She was out of breath and on the edge of panicking.

"Stop. Child just stop and breathe. Tell me what you saw and what you need to know."

Fay took a big breath and slowly walked a few steps closer to Martha.

"There was a horse; it ran through the people like they weren't there. It ran right through Johnny while he was playing and he didn't even stop playing."

"Well child, I guess I should explain what happened, or at least how it happened."

Martha motioned for Fay to sit at the table as she walked to the kitchen to make Fay a pot of tea to calm her nerves.

“The first thing you should know Fay, is that what you saw was normal. Well, at least normal for here and the villagers.”

“But, but the horse went right through them, Martha! I don’t see how that can be normal.”

“Everyone can do that, or have that done to them. We’re dead, spirits, so our bodies are different.”

“How can you be dead?”

“You see child, we all died forty-five years ago. You know the Great Death you heard about; well that’s when it happened.”

Fay looked confused as she tried to understand everything Martha was telling her.

“How are your bodies different?”

“Besides not always being solid you mean? Well, unlike the living, we are not always visible and we can go through solid objects.”

As Martha was explaining, she picked up the teapot. She held it in one hand and moved the other through it. The moment her hand passes through, she turned invisible for a second.

“Our skin is also paler than it was in life.”

Martha brought Fay a cup of tea and went back to her work.

“Drink this, but take your time, it’ll help you calm. The herbs in that are for calmness and a few for clarity of mind.”

“You should know that you have no reason to worry about our being spirits. It won’t have an effect on your life, so don’t worry about it.”

Martha let Fay think about everything she had said and drink her tea.

“Why’ve I never seen anything like that before?”

“You just never paid attention and you have never seen a living person to notice the differences. Besides, everyone just went on living like they had before they died and could do what they can now.

“Now, you finish your tea, and then help me with this.”

Fay sat at the table trying to understand everything that she had seen, and that Martha had told her, but she just could not take everything in. She had known a bit about the Great Death, but she did not know about the spirits. The only thing she knew, for certain, in that moment was that she needed to be alone.

She slowly stood from the table and walked out of the cabin. Martha let her go, understanding that she needed to be alone. Fay walked slowly at first, and then picked up speed the farther she was from the cabin, until she was running.

She did not have a specific destination in mind. She just knew that she wanted to be alone and in nature. Eventually she was at the cliff face. She began to climb without thinking about the height or the path. She just followed the feeling that told her she would find the peace she would need to think everything over.

Once she was in the clearing, she finally felt peace. She took a moment to look out at the valley in its entirety. She saw the villagers performing the actions of their daily lives. They were working in the fields and trading in the market. The scene was confusing because of its familiarity and disturbing because of what she realized the villagers were.

The villagers were tending fields, trading goods in the market, cooking meals, and working jobs to keep a village and kingdom running. Their figures sometimes faded out

of view in the bright sunlight and would reappear a few feet down the road. She had to cover her eyes against the bright light to see their faded figures hurrying about the valley.

As she watched, she realized that their actions were completely unnecessary. The villagers were all spirits, ghosts that died long before Fay was born. There was no need for a market or farmers or even a potter because all of the people in the square that she saw were dead, and for some reason they just preferred to continue on like they were alive.

Chapter Two

The day was hot, and that was fine. But what was not, was the oppressive humidity and near wetness in the air that told Fay and everyone else that there would be rain, there needed to be rain. To get away from the air that was too heavy to breathe, she decided to skip her lessons with Bernard and swim in the pool at the base of the waterfall. The water was cool, coming from the mountain, and the way it sprayed in the air as it fell into the pool helped take away the humidity.

She quickly grew bored of just swimming back and forth, so she grabbed a small gray stone from the side of the pool and wrapped it in blades of the long, bright green grass that grew beside the pool. She left out a feathery tail and tied it so the grass would not slip off, perfect to fetch from the bottom of the pool.

She found it easy to see the wrapped stone and its grassy tail on the bottom of the pool; it mainly had pebbles and dark, large mossy rocks on the bottom. Every time Fay threw the stone, she threw it closer to the center where it was deeper. Every time she grabbed the stone, the pebbles beneath it were disturbed and scattered. She had worked her way to the center of the pool.

Just as she was going to let the stone drop onto the bottom of the pool again, she saw a bright glimmer. None of the pebbles or few fish in the pool glimmered. The fish were only moving shadows or colors and the pebbles or rocks were dark and dull. She let the stone drop from her hand without noticing.

She was waiting for the glimmer to happen again. She tried to stay in place, looking down intently at the bottom. She had drifted slightly, but there, there was the glimmer. Keeping the spot in her mind, she dove down, deep.

The glimmer was deeper than she ever swam and the water was colder. She almost went back up, feeling the pressure of holding her breath, but she was determined to know what it was. Her fingers finally touched the glimmering, metal something. Fay was having trouble moving the pebbles. She was too buoyant, but curiously only in her rear. Leaving her folded in half trying to stay on the bottom and move the pebbles at the same time. She saw a small ledge near the piece of metal and wedged her shoulder and hip under it.

Fay could use both hands now, and did, uncovering the metal as her chest grew painful with the lack of air. The feeling of pressure built.

Just a bit longer and she would be able to see what she had found. It looked like the edge of a round shield, similar to the ones lining the castle's entrance hall. It was silver, with engraved lines, and small tacks forming a larger pattern.

She found the edge of the shield and pulled it towards her. The tacks circled the edge and crossed in the middle, disappearing where the engraving took over, which was normal, like the shields Fay had seen before. The engraving was different from any she had seen in the castle.

The engraving was of a woman's severed head with drops of blood formed by diamonds falling from the neck. There were so many drops near the bottom, that she could barely see any metal around the diamonds. The woman's eyes were wide and pleading, her mouth was open like she was screaming, but it was silenced by the water.

Fay abruptly let go of the shield, startled by the gruesome details. It slowly settled back on the pebbles. She did not want anything more to do with it, and started to swim out from under the ledge.

She was stopped. Then tried to swim out and up again.

She was stopped again. She was stuck, caught under the ledge.

She was wearing a short tunic and pants, something appropriate for swimming, how could she be stuck? She nearly breathed in as she started to panic.

She was reminded of the ache in her lungs and the need to breath. She had to get free.

She turned away from the shield and the picture of the dead woman, and tried to look under the ledge. Her eyes were getting tired from being open so long under the water. She could only see the blurry tan shape of her torso against the gray of the rocks.

As Fay started pulling at her tunic, her hand scraped painfully against the ledge. She gasped and could not resist the urge to breathe in. That was it, the hot pain in her mouth and chest was replaced by cold as the water came in.

Cold sharp pain and her hands were grasping, trying, trying to get free.

Her head began to press in with a dull pain that started at her ears and pulled behind her eyes. The cold pain in her chest intensified. The muscles in her arms and legs started to cramp and tense from pain and fear.

She tried to move but was unable to do so.

The water closed in tighter. It was death, the end.

She stopped.

Then, she could see movement.

Still stuck. Still in pain.

But, warmth and suddenly...air.

She was trying to breath. A voice.

“Water, I ask that you leave her lungs. Let the magic of the valley work to let her live. Please, I ask that you let her live. Do your work to help her. Please, I beg that you let her live.”

Bernard spoke with urgency and strength as he desperately watched her. The fear was clear on his face.

“I have tried to raise this child; please do not take her now, when she is still so young. She is alive, bright, and vibrant. I cannot, we cannot lose this child.” This was said almost as a prayer.

The water slowly flowed out of Fay’s mouth, weakly at first, then stronger. She started to breathe in, coughing to get rid of the little bit that was left.

“Thank you for saving the child. I know that she is reckless, but thank you.”

She opened her eyes. They were wide, and she was clearly frightened by what happened. As her eyes adjusted, she could see Bernard, her teacher and other guardian. His face was haggard and creased with fear. His brown hair was wet from the water. For a moment, she wondered at the fact that it had not turned white with the stress she put him through, before remembering, he was a spirit.

“Bernard! I, I almost... Thank you!”

“Fay, what do you think you were doing? You could have died if I had not seen you from the castle. How can you be so careless?”

“I’m sorry Bernard. I didn’t mean to have that happen. It isn’t like I would do something like that on purpose. I was just swimming.”

She sat up slowly, still trying to catch her breath. Bernard tried to give her a stern look, but worry still seeped through.

“Why are you so reckless, Fay? I just want you to be more responsible and safe. I know that it is my job as the head of the royal guard to protect you, and I have grown accustomed to protecting the vulnerable. I will not let you die because I neglected my job, and from now on I will not let you risk your life.”

“I didn’t know, I didn’t think. I’m sorry Bernard.”

“Do you understand me? If it had not been for the magic of the valley, you would have died.”

Fay begins to answer, but Bernard stops her with a look. She looks down ashamed, chastised by Bernard. She does not look at him as she responds.

“I’ll just go clean myself up. Good afternoon, Bernard.”

Fay slowly walks away from Bernard towards the cliff. She needed to think. Martha told her two years ago that the villagers were different from her, that they were dead. She never thought about how that meant that she was alive, how she could die. It gave Bernard’s arguments against her actions more strength, now that she realized the outcomes she was worried about. It was hard though, to think about how death applied to her when she lived among the spirit.

Chapter Three

Fay did not want to stay for her lessons with Bernard, they usually ended up being boring and long. He had decided to educate her because he thought Martha was too dangerous. Especially after he found her showing Fay how to make poisons and how to distinguish between the three, the key was taste.

He dragged her out reciting a list of rules that were boring and funny. “You will not use fire. You will not be using herbs, roots, or anything of that sort. You will not be using knives. You will not be using potions, tonics, tinctures, brews, remedies, or anything else you make with Martha.” Bernard took a breath so he could continue. “You will write with the quill I provide. You will not sharpen it; I will do that for you. You will not learn to make your own ink. You will read what I tell you to, and only what I tell you. You will learn what I tell you to learn for that day. You will sit where I tell you. You will arrive on time and stay for the length of the lesson. Do you understand?”

He gave her one last rule and it was the hardest to follow, “I will allow you to ask questions, but only at the end of the lesson.” In the end she decided to ignore that one, after all how was she expected to learn anything if she had to wait so long to ask a question. Besides, questions were an important part of learning, or annoying, depending on how you used them.

Fay sat across the table from Bernard, trying give him her best pleading look. She had just asked to go outside again to avoid another long boring lesson on math and she hopped he was weakening. Bernard tried his best to look determined, despite the

frustration just under the surface. He took a moment to look at the large skylight and calm down.

“Fay I would like you to stay and listen, you cannot avoid lessons every day. I know that this is a topic you have wanted to discuss before, many times before, so, seeing as you are fourteen, I think you are old enough to learn about your family.”

Fay immediately interrupted what he was going to say next. Fay leaned in, eager to hear what he had to say. She had never known her family and no one spoke of them, so this was something she just had to hear. She kept her eyes focused on him, instead of letting them wander across the three floors of bookshelves.

“Your grandparents were the last official king and queen of our valley kingdom; they were also the only people in Arcady to survive the Great Death. They did so by keeping the castle closed when the attack occurred. It was well stocked and had a source of fresh water. That is important because, after the attack they decided to never leave the castle grounds.

“They had been young at the time of the Great Death, but it took five years before your mother was born. She was the only one to be born alive. They stopped trying to have children after her birth.”

Bernard stopped a moment to collect his thoughts for what he was going to say next. Fay was a bit surprised by how much he was telling her. She could understand now, with the actions of her grandparents, why the villagers did not like the royal family. They had been abandoned and left to die.

“They did not even look out at the valley during their time in the castle. The three lived in the castle for the next twenty years. The king and queen raised your mother as if

the Great Death never happened and the valley did not exist. They eventually died of a cold that Martha could have cured, had she wanted to. Even in death, they did not leave the castle. They had told your mother that they wanted to be placed in crypt beneath the castle when they died.

“Your mother decided to leave the castle after this. She noticed the work that had happened and thought it was the magic of the valley. Because of this, she decided to move into a small home on the edge of the town near the castle. She lived like that for two years before meeting your father.”

Bernard let out a large breath and placed his hands on the table. He looked like he had finished reading from a history book. He was waiting for Fay to say something about what he had told her.

“My father wasn’t from Arcady, was he?”

“No, he was not of the valley. He happened upon the valley while on a mission for his king. He rode into the village, by the house where your mother chose to live. Like your mother, he was not able to see us. He only saw her.”

“I think it would have been that way even if we were not spirits. Your mother, Loah, was beautiful.”

“How is it that my parents couldn’t see all of you?”

“I think it must have something to do with their connection to Arcady. They were not close enough to the spirit of the valley, what helped make us I think, to see the dead.”

Bernard is about to continue with the lesson when Fay interrupts him again.

“So, I’m different from them because I can see all of you?”

“Yes, you are. However, I also think that it had something to do with our willingness to be seen, or not, by your parents.”

“Now, back to the lesson,” here Bernard paused to give Fay a look that told her to not interrupt. “Loah was glad to see your father; after all it had been a long time since she had seen anyone living. The two spent the day together, and the night. Then, the next morning your father left.”

Fay waited for Bernard to continue the story. She knew that he never returned when she was alive, but what about between the first meeting and her birth?

“Well, did he come back?”

“No. He never returned. Your mother however, she eventually had you and died while giving birth.”

“But my father, there was never any sign of him again?”

“No, Fay. I have told you everything I know about him.”

Bernard could tell that she was disappointed, but there was nothing he could do. Her father was the only loose end, and she would never know everything about him like she did with the rest of her family.

Fay slowly got up from the table and left. She wanted to think about everything she learned. She decided to leave through the portrait hall. It was the place that had started her questions about her family years ago, and it had been some time since she had been there.

There was only one window that was only a foot high, set right under the ceiling that ran the length of the room. All of the frames were tarnished and dusty with an abundance of carvings. The walls they hung on were made of the same stone as the cliff.

It caused the paintings to look even darker against the dark marbled gray of the stone.

The main source of light came from the torches that were affixed on either end of the hall and the candlestick Fay carried in her hand.

The shapes in the portraits barely resembled human beings under the weight of heavy fur cloaks and a thick coating of dust. The faces though, they were hazy but familiar. She could just make them out, usually at the palest points of the picture. The dust softened and blurred the features so that all of the faces looked alike, and many of the women's faces looked similar to hers.

They all had dark brown eyes that had radiated silver from the center and were ringed with a band of dove gray. She had only ever seen eyes like that the few times she glanced at her reflection. The gray ring was something all of the inhabitants of the valley had, but the silver, what she thought of as a starburst, was something she had seen only in her eyes.

Until today, these portraits were the closest things she had to family. The villagers avoided her, for reasons she now knew. Moreover, Martha and Bernard were more guardians and mentors than family. By finally getting Bernard to tell what he knew, she gained more family member.

Chapter Four

The villagers would be celebrating in the town that day. Fay decided that she would join them in the evening when they would be playing music. If she could celebrate with them, then she would be one step closer to being part of the community.

As she left Martha's cottage, she was nervous. She had never tried to join in on celebrations before. She always knew that the villagers did not like her because of her family. She hoped that things had changed over the years as she had interacted with them. There had never been anything extraordinary in her interactions. She just tried to be a good person and show the villagers that she was different.

When Fay arrived at the village center, night was just starting to fall. There was a large fire that showed the villagers and many tables laid out for a feast. The villagers were happy and loudly celebrating. They were already dancing and playing music. Martha was the only villager not present.

The music was joyful and Fay could not wait to join in. She hastened her step so that she was at the edge of the celebration. At first, no one noticed her as she swayed to the music. Then, as they saw her, they moved away or stopped what they were doing. The music's volume lessened and its joyfulness dimmed. Instead of singing, there were whispers.

Fay knew that it was all her fault. She was the reason the celebration had stopped. She slowly turned around and left the villagers. The further she got away from them the

louder the music became. They started celebrating and dancing once she was out of the village.

As she walked on the path, she could hear someone running behind her. When she turned around, she saw Johnny, the same messy little kid she knew when she was eight.

“Fay, where are you going? Why didn’t you stay to listen to the music?”

“I’m just going home. No one wanted me there. I thought that might have changed, but I was wrong.”

“I want you there, Fay.”

“That’s only you Johnny. I care so much about all of the people of Arcady, and it hurts that they don’t like me. I have tried to make them like me for eight years, but nothing has changed.

“I have tried to belong here, to become part of a family, but it hasn’t worked. You just wouldn’t understand Johnny.”

Fay left Johnny and walked home.

Chapter Five

It was her eighteenth birthday, and it was time for her to act on her plan. She had been thinking about what she was going to do for many years. It was the last chance she had to get what she wanted. Fay made sure that she would wake up early enough to walk to the clearing unnoticed and have enough time to carry out her plan by sunrise. She knew exactly what would be waiting for her in the clearing; she knew every aspect of its life. What was unknown was what would happen in-between there and Martha's cabin.

She had dreamed that she was looking down on the valley in the springtime. Everything in the clearing was bright and green around her. The air smelled like it had just rained. When she woke up she felt happy and calm, if superstitions were to be believed this would mean good luck for her endeavor. But, where else would she dream of than her favorite place in the valley. As Martha said, "It is better to accept all of the good luck and magic that comes to you because it can only help."

She had taken precautions and gone to bed dressed so that she would not wake Martha. She was in her riding outfit: a dark green sleeveless dress with side slits in the skirt over a close fitting long-sleeved brown tunic and pants. She had chosen the outfit because of the stealth and ease it would offer while climbing. And when Fay died, she thought it was something she could live with wearing for her afterlife.

She had prepared everything she would need to take in her pack the day before when Martha had been tending the garden and would not notice her riffling through their

stock of dried herbs and other things. She only had to quietly put on her boots and grab her bag before slowly walking out of her room and then the cottage.

With the door shut quietly behind her, Fay started towards the wooded path that would take her around the village and away from any people. The large trees were spaced far enough apart that the moonlight could come down and light the familiar path. She still needed to be silent, but this part of her journey would be the easiest. She would not have to worry about accidentally waking Martha or anyone else; no one would be on this path this early.

This was the wrong time of year for anyone to be out on this path. Winter was the last time she had been out at this time.

Martha had forced her out of bed early to go digging for roots. That would be fine if it were not for the fact that it was the height of winter and Fay had just fallen asleep, burrowed deep in a pile of furs and woolen blankets. She had hurriedly dressed in her daily wear, a mid-weight off white linen chemise and heavy dark brown wool sleeveless overdress, and added a black fur lined cloak to try and maintain some of the warmth she had. As Fay left her room, she started with questions in a hope that Martha would get frustrated and call the whole thing off. Of course, that had only worked with Bernard so far, but there was always the possibility that she might get lucky with Martha.

“So, why are we going out now?” Simple, easy, and guaranteed to annoy with enough repetition and variation.

The path was dark and empty, except for the two women and patches of snow.

Martha was quick to reply. “Moonlight, child, moonlight.” That was not a real answer. And Fay found it more annoying than her pestering.

She needed to try harder. She had just stepped in a snow pile that went up to her knees. She was quickly losing her feelings of sleep and warmth.

“Yeah, but why now?” She made sure that she drew out the words just right and added just enough whine. For good measure, she rolled her eyes, even though Martha was walking in front.

“These roots are cold roots; you should know that child.” Fay did know that, and almost felt ashamed by the disapproval that Martha placed in the last portion of her reply.

She had to take a moment to consider her next attempt. It was obvious that her standard Bernard level questions were not going to cut it. She decided to study Martha a moment to see if she could think of anything better. Fay knew that Martha knew everything about herbs and potions and healing. The woman could cure almost anything and had books that covered every possibility, all of which Fay had read, most of which she was not supposed to even know of.

She sometimes wondered if Martha was even human, it would not surprise her if she were not. She was the only villager with red hair, and she had a golden bronze color skin that was not from the sun. She had a natural intuition for herbs and plants and animals, but not people. She was quickly walking down the path, barely using the light from the lantern she carried, seemingly unaffected by the snow and cold.

The villagers all thought she was a witch, but maybe she was something even more magical, like an elf. In some ways, she reminded Fay of the magical creatures in the books that she read. There. That was the question. Fay knew she had found something Martha could not dismiss in just a word or two.

“Martha, what are you? Are you even human?”

Martha stopped. Obviously, Fay had found the perfect question to stop the journey and go back to her warm bed. Martha turned towards her.

“Child, I do not know what silly idea you might have, but I am just as human as you. Now get over here and start digging. These roots can only leave the earth in moonlight, and if you dawdle too long the sun will be up.”

Fay ended up doing all of the digging. And carrying. And only got to bed right as the sun rose completely above the mountains.

Before she found the clearing, the path and its many offshoots was a place of refuge. Fay could remember a time when the small pond she was passing was the only place she was allowed to swim. She loved it because it was out of Martha’s direct sight, but it was still close to the cottage for her safety. She did not realize at that age, just how much Martha and Bernard did to keep her safe.

Fay stumbled and kicked a rock off the path, causing leaves to crumble in its path and finally a twig to break as it stopped. There was only a slight pause as she breathed in showing that she heard the abnormally loud sound of the rock. She could not waste time stopping to see if anyone heard.

As the path began to curve towards the castle, she looked towards the village. There was a small light moving in the trees. It was coming towards her. Fay started to walk faster despite the darkening of the path as the trees’ cover became heavier. She was sure that she would not be noticed by the villager with the light, but she did not want to take a chance.

When she could not resist the pull of paranoia anymore, she looked behind her and saw that the light had gotten closer. She walked faster, faster than she should for the darkness and roughness of the path.

The light had moved fast and was at the point of the path where she had kicked the rock. This worried Fay. If the person was walking that fast, then they would definitely catch up with her. There were also very few people who would be confident enough to walk that fast in the dark woods.

It might be Bernard. He would never let her kill herself, of course neither would anyone else in the valley, but he would take action to make sure that she could not ever do it. Even if he did not figure out what she was out here to do, he would not be happy about her being out and about at this time of night. “Too dangerous.”

It would not surprise Fay, though, if he were patrolling the entire valley. She had seen him many times, patrolling the village and checking the defenses of the castle.

She had followed him to the armory once, and watched as he took care of each of the weapons. When she asked him why he wanted all of the swords so shiny he told her “They kill better that way, a dull weapon is of no use”. As soon as he realized what he had said, he hurried her out of the room apologizing while she was asking him to show her how to use them.

He never did show her how to use the weapons and he kept the armory locked from then on.

As she turned her head to check on the light, her long dark hair caught on a low branch. Fay silently cried out in protest as she felt the pull on her scalp. As she worked to quickly untangle her hair without breaking the branch, she looked back at the light.

No, for the light. She could not see it.

That worried her, until she looked down at the path directly behind her. There. Making a small weaving path was the light. It was a firefly. It was following her, but it would not stop her. She was pretty sure it would not tell on her either, even if it could talk.

Once the small bug caught up to her it flew up to where her hands were working on freeing her hair. In the small amount of light it gave off, she could see her pale hands finally pull the last loop of dark brown hair away from a leaf. The firefly stayed in place for a moment and then flew away having done its good deed, as if apologizing for the scare it had caused.

Fay walked at a slow and deliberate pace; recovering from the scare the firefly had given her. She needed to take extra time with the next portion of the path. Fortunately, she had already planned for it.

The cliff and mountain on her right and the tall gray castle to her left blocked out most of the moonlight. It created a narrow corridor of trees that were only bright at noon when the sun was directly above.

Fay knew she did not need to worry about anyone in the castle seeing her. The only people who ever entered it were herself and Bernard. It made this a good place to be completely alone without anyone bothering her. She only ever had to worry about encountering the animals, and the animals of the valley could tell when a person wanted to be alone. There was something about the valley that made it so that the animals were very perceptive.

It had always been her opinion that the woods were always the best place to get away, to think, or read, or just exist in one place. If she had told anyone her plans, she would have told them that it made sense that the place she chose to die would be in the woods. However, she never told anyone, the only people she had to tell would stop her. Bernard always blamed Fay's preference for solitude in the forest on Martha, and Martha always told her to listen to nature because it told no lies. That might be why even at a young age Fay loved to be in the woods.

She had finally reached the cliff face. That was the point where the path becomes slowest to travel, not only because of the rough path, but also because of her worry that this time she just might fall. Though when she first came to the clearing it was far from other people and without a path, there was now a well-worn path. She may have worn a path, but it was still rough and slow to walk.

This was always the moment when Fay questioned her sanity for continuing up the path, considering her fear of heights and being so near to falling while walking higher up the cliff, meaning farther there was to fall. She always wondered at the fact that she braved the cliff face, but when she remembered the desperation she felt that day, she was less surprised.

After years of following this path, Fay was confident in her steps, even if she was afraid to look out to the valley or put her foot too close to the edge. Here she knew exactly what she was doing and what the path would do. She let her hand skim over the smooth dark marbled gray rocks, balancing herself more out of habit than necessity.

If Fay turned her head just right from where she was on the path, she could see the fireflies in the town square where the horse first showed her that the villagers were

spirits. It may have happened ten years ago, but she remembered the details of what happened so well. She would have remembered the day anyway because it was a birthday, her eighth, but with what happened, it became important.

Fay kicked a loose stone over the cliff. She never did bring anything back to Martha, but Martha never mentioned that. She did not regret that day, but she did regret that she broke the bowl. She never found the shards and the potter never made another one like it, it was practicality brown from then on.

She continued walking up the path thinking about the situations that brought her here. She never did understand why the villagers decided that they wanted to continue on with their lives like nothing had happened. They did not need the food they grew. The country they lived in might as well not exist as far as the world outside the valley was concerned. Yet, they worked the same jobs they had been before they died. Fay always thought that they had the perfect opportunity to change their lives or take new jobs, but they chose not to.

Fay could see the glinting pearly haze coming off of the waterfall as the last of the moonlight shone through it from behind her. The path would be at its midpoint and turn to continue to the top of the cliff and the clearing.

Fay looked behind her at the moon as it slowly moved below the rim of the mountains that surrounded the valley. She had time to sit and rest beside the water, to let herself remember why she was doing this. There was a large stone, the perfect size and shape for sitting, near the falls and only a little damp on the far side. As she felt the cool water on her skin, she thought of the hot autumn day.

It had been terrifying, to almost die. She had known about death, and that it applied to people for two years. But, she had never thought about how it applied to her. She had never taken care of herself to avoid death. She had done many dangerous things before and somehow survived. It was only after, that she started to be careful.

She slowly stood from the boulder she had been resting on and began walking again. She had been very depressed after that. Realizing that you are the only person you know who can die is a bit of a shock. That was when she started to see the big separation between her and the people she knew.

She took her knowledge, that the villagers were spirits and she was alive, and came to a conclusion. As long as she was alive, she would never really belong with or fit in with the villagers. The easiest solution was death, but to not just passing on. She did not think of that right away. It was not until she was sixteen and she tried to join them in their celebrations that she thought of her plan.

Fay put her hand on the cliff face to steady herself as she walked. Once she learned about the sunrise magic from Martha she was sure that a sunrise suicide in the clearing would leave her a spirit. Every inhabitant of the valley knows that it has its own magic, so if she added the magic of time and place, she could not fail.

Eighteen, that was an age that would mean she was an adult. Who would choose to be a child forever? It would also give her time to learn more about the valley and the spirits, which just made Fay all the more sure about her decision.

Even though she preferred to be alone, she felt that the people of the valley were her family and she wanted to truly belong with them.

Fay looked out at the valley. She saw one of the tall towers of the castle silhouetted in the predawn light. That was another reason why she was different from the rest of the villagers.

By rights of family lineage and inheritance now that she was eighteen, and in her majority, the castle was hers, along with the rest of the valley. This was not something she could change, but she had not ever acknowledged it, so over the years it became less of an issue.

When she was young, Fay knew that Martha was not her mother, but that was it. Martha would not tell her about her mother because “when the dead pass on you let them rest,” and it wouldn’t change anything.

Martha tried to raise her, not like she was her child, but like she was an apprentice or a small growing adult. Bernard always had to step in and remind Martha that, “just because she looks like a small adult, does not mean that she is a small adult.”

In some ways, she felt like a duckling. When she was young she followed Bernard around as if he were her parent. He was possibly a father but definitely not a mother; he wore too much armor for that.

Fay never asked the villagers about her parents because of the way they held back around her. She knew that the villagers treated her differently, but then she did not expect them to do otherwise for a child that was raised by a woman they thought of as a witch.

That had left only one person to tell her about her mother and the rest of her family, Bernard. It was a role that he was familiar with by that time. He had been acting as her teacher and lecturer for many years, ever since Martha had declared she would begin educating Fay when she was eight or nine.

He had described her father more like an event than a person, but considering how he came to the valley there is no better way to describe him. He was a just a series of facts, even more so than her mother and grandparents. Bernard told her everything he could remember.

After the lesson, he remembered a few more details. Her father was a very tall man with pale amber colored eyes, dark honey colored hair, and a dark tan from spending a lot of time outside. Her mother appeared to handle the fact that she was alone for the pregnancy with grace. Then came the night that she was born, that left her with another reason why she did not belong. Luckily, Bernard had taken to following her mother everywhere in the last month as an attempt to carry out his duties as the head of the royal guard. He tried to save her mother, but he did not have Martha's knowledge or skills. He then took Fay to Martha so that she could raise her because he knew he would not know how to care for a child. He had not considered taking her to one of the villagers because they would only see her as part of the royal family. He told her that when she was born she looked right at him; that is when he knew that she would be able to see the spirits.

After Bernard told her about the royal family, Fay knew that she wanted to try even harder to make sure that she would belong to the family she had with the spirits, and once she was dead that would be even easier. It was worth the worry and the work to climb to the clearing. Now that she was nearly there, she started to feel some apprehension about what she would be doing. Her feet felt heavier on the path, like it was made of mud instead of rock. Her reluctance and apprehension about what she was going to do made it difficult for her to walk. She was tempted to take another break, but there

was nowhere to stop on the path and the sky had gone dark again. It would not be long before dawn, and after that...sunrise.

Chapter Six

Fay put her hand on the cliff again. It steadied her nerves and was a tangible reminder to continue walking. She started to walk faster. If she carefully looked up, concentrating on her balance and not falling, she could see the very top of the cliff. She could even smell mint as a breeze drifted over and down the cliff.

The mint was invigorating and helped her rid her mind of the reluctance to continue on. There was a purpose for this trip and she could not let these last minute worries stop her. Fay had had years to plan out exactly what she would do and consider the reasons why. She had also had years to think about what she would gain once she had killed herself. She would gain a true family from the villagers instead of the more distant relationship she had now. She would be able to read everything that was contained in the library. And she would finally be able to convince Bernard to teach her how to use the weapons in the armory, because after all, you cannot hurt a spirit.

The small amount of pain she might feel from cutting her wrist would finally allow her to connect with her family. With her mind clear, she began watching the path closely. There was something that she would need to collect on the way to make the plan turn out the best.

The path was growing closer to the end and there were fewer loose stones. Sweet mint had somehow found a foothold on this part of the path and grew in the junction between cliff face and pathway. This was, surprisingly, the only place on cliff face where

any plant had managed to grow. The mint that grew here was a type of sweet mint that grew nowhere else in the valley.

Fay carefully kneeled down and broke one sprig off that had only five leaves, exactly what she would need for the taste of the brew. It would hopefully be enough to help with the taste that the brew would have, without being overwhelmed or turned bad.

With the mint collected, she carefully placed it in her pack so that the leaves would not be bruised before she used it. She slowly stood up, put her hand back on the gray rock and started walking. Fay made sure to not step on any of the stems of mint that had reached out into the path.

Behind her, the sky was just beginning to lighten as dawn finally arrived. The path was at the end. Instead of touching the steadying smooth gray rock, Fay felt the soft and sometimes prickly feeling of the moss that carpeted the clearing under her hand as she moved ahead. She kept to the path until the very end, not out of necessity but habit.

Here it was, the clearing. The dim light was slowly growing, and she could just see the opening to the clearing in the nearly purple colored light. The walk had not taken too long, but today Fay could feel the years that it had taken to get to that moment.

She moved forward, off the path, into the clearing and it's still dark light. She walked to the very center and let her pack slowly slip down off her shoulder. She closed her eyes. She stood still and breathed in and out with deliberate calm, taking in as much air as possible. She focused of the smell, the sharp mint that grew on the cliff and a hint of sweetness from the mint she had picked. The decomposing leaves and damp earth.

She listened to the sounds of the clearing, a light breeze through the leaves and needles of the evergreens. The rush and release of the water as it traveled down the mountain, over the edge of the cliff, and down into the pool below. Peace.

Fay walked to the far edge of the clearing where she had placed the stones and firewood she would need to brew the variant of dwale she would be using to aid her suicide. Once she brought them back to her pack, she set the firewood around the central stone she would use to place the pot on. Finally, she lit the fire so that it could grow while she finished her preparations for the rest of the ingredients to brew the dwale.

As the fire was growing, she picked some of the sharp mint that grew at the edges of the clearing. She then took out everything from her pack, placing the knife to the side gently and with care. The only thing she had left to get was water, and a quick trip to the river that fed the waterfall solved that.

Fay sat next to the fire watching the flat rock in the center, waiting for the color to turn the right shade of dark orange red, a color not too dissimilar to that of Martha's hair. It always felt like cheating to use that as a guide, but she never got it wrong if she did.

She sat with her back to the valley. It was easier to see what was happening in the fire that way. It was also easier to ignore the fact that the dawn was steadily coming. This way the dawn light was just a hazy colored light trying to get past the thick branches and compete with the brightness of the fire directly in front of her. Once the right heat had been achieved, Fay placed the pot of water on the rock.

To let the pot boil in peace, Fay distracted herself by preparing the pouches of ingredients and the mints. She had already measured everything, but she tried to judge from the weight in her hands if the measurements were correct, if they were not the dwale

would kill her instead of numb her. Her best chance to become a spirit was to spill blood, and the brew would not do that.

She could see all of the ingredients laid out in front of her easier. The light of the dawn and the fire were beginning to fill the clearing. She uncorked the jug of wine so that it would be ready to add the right amount of brew when the time came. Everything was laid out in front of Fay, measurements double checked, ready to place in the pot when it boiled.

She glanced up and saw that the pot had begun boiling. The mint went in first and was the best smelling of the ingredients. Then she uncorked the vial containing the gall, eysyl, and hemlock juice and poured those in. Next went in the wild neep, lettuce, and pape. Finally, she added the henbane and belladonna.

The sour smell of the gall and eysyl almost overtook the mint, but after a few seconds on the heat, the mint was able to overpower them. The sharp sweet smell of the mint mixed with the smoke from the fire. Just under that was the smell of the clearing and the sour gall and eysyl.

It got to her head and reminded her of afternoons learning from Martha. There would be jars of herbs and liquids open, perfuming the air. A fire would be burning under the cauldron or a pot adding smoke to the mix of smells in the air. Even the light was similar, hazy half-light struggling through trees and competing with the light from the fire.

She had been taught how to heal various wounds and illnesses, all in theory of course. Spirits do not get sick and Fay only ever had minor illnesses or wounds. She had

also been taught to respect and appreciate nature. “If you ask it, the valley will try to give it.”

Fay knew that she should only take so much of a plant when she was gathering for her brews. She had been told many times that she should try to never harm the natural world around her, and as an afterthought “people are included in that.”

The dwale was boiling down into a muddy liquid filled with wilted greens. Sunrise was getting closer, but the liquid was not ready. She looked to her side to check on the knife. It was still where she had carefully placed it. And the wine, it was open and sitting next to her.

Finally, the pot contained a smooth dark liquid. It was ready. Fay carefully picked up the pot and poured three spoons of mint dwale into the wine. She closed the wine and shook it so that it mixed thoroughly with the dwale.

To let it rest, she set it to her side while she put out the fire. She was not sure how long it would take for her to come back as a spirit and she did not want to burn down the clearing just because she left the fire burning.

Now that there was nothing left to do, Fay picked up the bottle of mixed wine and the knife. She stood up taking care to not drop anything. Slowly she turned towards the opening of the clearing and walked forward. The light was much brighter, a light peach color that was quickly changing as the sun got closer to the mountaintops.

The knife in her hand was sturdy and solid. She had taken it from the table that she and Martha used to work with herbs. A blade that is used to create things that heal and create should hold some magic, and she could use that. Besides, it was sharp and always made a quick clean cut.

The bottle that held the wine was typical of Martha, dark brown like the earth when she dug deep after a rainstorm. The outside was dull, no shine or anything to pull attention to it. Thick sides that made it difficult to break when it was dropped.

Fay momentarily felt like she was not alone in what she was about to do. She stopped what she had been doing; she was so overcome by the feeling. Martha and Bernard penetrated so many aspects of her life that it seemed like they were right there with her as she prepared the final steps. She felt like Martha had helped her prepare the dwale, and she was not too sure that she would not if she were actually there.

The feeling of not being alone made her pause. It almost brought a tear to her eye. The whole purpose of the suicide is so that a moment like that could be real. It made her feel sentimental for times past. She felt melancholy and almost listless; she was so overcome by the desire to not be alone.

After reminding herself that the point of this was to not be alone, Fay took a breath and let go of the melancholy sentimental feeling that had been dragged up. She looked to the side and blinked away any tear that thought it might have had a chance to escape.

Chapter Seven

She walked to the edge of the clearing so that she could have the perfect view. She tried to stand exactly in the middle of the opening of trees at the cliff. She stayed back about a foot though, so that she did not take a chance of losing her balance and accidentally falling over the edge. Sure she might die, but she could just as easily only seriously injure herself and that would not work for the plan.

Fay pulled the cork out of the wine jug and was hit with the eye watering smell of warm alcohol, mint, and dwale. A breeze came from behind her and quickly, thankfully, took away the smell. The warmth of the jug was comforting, and made it easier to pretend that she was going to be drinking mint tea or something pleasant like that.

The smell from the jug had mellowed some. All that was detectable was warm mint wine. It was just to help. She had to trust that she mixed everything correctly and added just enough. If she added too much of the poisons it would kill her. If it was just right, but she had too much in the wine then that would mean she would sleep through sunrise and possibly into the evening.

A big quick breath in, held, and released in a rush.

A false start. She was going to have to drink this eventually because she knew that there was no way she would be able to make the cuts without it. The pain from nearly drowning made her wary of all pain, especially when it was associated with dying. For some reason it seemed like it would hurt more when she was dying.

She has closed her eyes tight, so much so that her nose was wrinkled up and her mouth was in a tight grimace.

Another repeat of the big breath, and then...

She drank the dwale in a rush. She drank nearly all of it, but the taste, the smell, they prevented her from emptying the jug.

She was gasping for air, leaning over slightly. Somehow, she managed to keep hold of the knife and the jug. Once her breathing evened out, Fay stood up straight with both hands by her side.

She felt the weight of the partially full jug in her hand. Without turning, she tossed the jug behind her and heard it softly thump against the thick moss.

The light had finally started to turn a pale pink color. Dawn was nearly done. It was getting close to the time for her to take action. She just needed the sun.

Her shoulders fell as her posture relaxed. Her hold on the knife became loose. Tension left her body. Her thoughts began to slow and she was filled with calm.

The herbs and wine had begun to work on Fay.

She looked to the side to see that the sky was caught between the pale pink color and a pale yellow.

The timing would be perfect for her to make the cut. Just a few minutes more and the sun would be at the right place. Just a few minutes more and she would not feel anything.

As she watched the sky, a stray strand of hair floated in front of her face. Automatically, she reached up to tuck it behind her ear. The sensation was off, wrong.

She could feel the pressure of her fingers moving across her cheek, but not her cheek. And the strand of hair, that was nonexistent.

It must have been the numbness. With any luck, the process would stop there.

As she focused her sight back on the mountain tops for the sunrise, Fay saw that the only color in the sky was a pale buttery yellow. It was time.

She looked down at her hand to make sure that she was still holding the knife. There it was, just as she had last seen it.

She checked the sky one last time and saw a bright shimmering gold line that clung to the outline of the mountains. That was the sun; it had finally started to rise.

Fay raised both her arms, bending them only at the elbow. The tunic she wore under the dress had three-quarter length sleeves, so she did not have to worry about them getting in the way of her wrist. She held the knife in her left hand, the base of her wrist pointing down along with the sharp part of the knife.

Fay turned her right wrist up so that she could see where she would be cutting.

She adjusted her hold on the knife, slowly sliding her fingers up the wooden handle so that she would have more control over the blade.

She positioned the blade over her wrist. The tip was angled slightly downwards.

She straightened the knife and caught a bright ray of orange gold sunlight. She tilted the knife to the side to get rid of the bright light.

She finally set the knife down against the skin of her wrist, pressing down just enough to see the knife sink down into pale flesh of her wrist without actually cutting it. If she chose to stop now or change the position of the knife there would be a red indentation left as a reminder of where the knife was right now.

Fay looked to her left at the rising sun. It was high enough that she could see its curved shape independent of the mountains. The color was a rich orange golden color that reminded her of the yolks of the duck eggs she gathered to make Martha's birthday cake.

She looked out at the valley. It was starting to be filled with color. First there was a wash of yellow and orange, then green and brown. There were so many shades of green and brown, from the green of the fields and trees to the browns of the village buildings and tilled earth. It was still and quiet as everyone slept.

Keeping her eyes on the valley, Fay pressed down harder on the knife and began to pull.

Fay then took the knife and positioned it on her right wrist, pushing down slightly.

“All to join them, my family, my only family.”

She looked down at the knife and adjusted it, leaving a red indentation where it had been. She then looked up and out again. The sun began to rise to her left. Light slowly filled the valley.

Fay inhaled and held her breath, then quickly let it go. She began to pull her left hand and the knife towards the sun across her wrist.

Chapter Eight

“No.”

Bernard’s voice was firm and strong, just like his grip on Fay’s wrist. She wanted to ignore him and continue, to continue making the cut, but she could not. Even through the drug-induced numbness, she could feel his hand around her wrist. It was a strong and insistent pressure.

“I am supposed to protect you Fay. I told you this many years ago, and I meant it even if it means that I must protect you from yourself,” he said as he moved her hand away to her side. His body was tense, but he was trying to make his face appear calm and nonthreatening.

Fay quickly glanced down at her right wrist to see just how far she had gotten. There was a long scratch like the kind gotten from a thorn on a rose bush and a small, very tiny bead of blood right by the heel of her palm. Next time she tried, she was going to have to actually look at what she was doing, because that scratch was just pathetic. The indentation from where she held the knife to her wrist before cutting was worse, and that was not meant to draw blood.

She looked back up at Bernard. “I could order you, if I wanted to you know because today I’m-”

He cut her off, “because you are of age today and you are the queen. But I still have my duties to the royal family, Fay. I will protect you and keep you safe, which means I will disobey your orders if I need to.”

He leaned in at the end of that sentence, trying to make her understand that he really meant what he said.

She huffed out a laugh because he did not understand her. “I want to die Bernard. It’s the only way for me to be with every one, to really be with everyone. You’re all dead and I’m alive, it’s too different. If I were dead everything would be perfect, or at least better.”

Her eyes were wide and pleading, the star bursts shining in the sunrise.

“I’ve thought about this for years Bernard. I chose this day because I’m officially old enough to make my own decisions, and this is it. I have decided to die.”

Bernard looked like Fay had let him down somehow. He finally let her hand go, but before doing so, he made sure to take the knife from her hand and put it away so that she could not get to it. Because of the lingering numbness, she could not really stop him, and she knew that even without it he was still stronger than she was.

He stepped back from her, body still very tense but less angular and more rounded from a creeping sadness. It was mainly in the way he held his shoulder and the downward cast of his head that told of the sadness. His worn face looked like it would have aged decades, if he could age anymore that is.

Fay did not really see why he was so sad about the idea of her dying. She would just come back as a spirit, so she would not really be gone at all. He did not even have to worry about the possibility of her being in pain because she took the perfect remedy, after all Martha taught her things like that.

He let out a deep sigh, “I just do not want to see you stuck like this Fay. Permanently stuck the way you died. This is not something that I chose for neither

myself, nor anyone else in the valley. And, I doubt that they would want for anyone to deliberately choose to be stuck like this.” He turned and faced the valley, “We are stagnant here, Fay. Nothing changes, no one grows older, no one dies, no one moves.”

He turned to look into her eyes. “There is nothing new here, we just are. The only things that have changed in this valley since we died have been the seasons and you, and to lose you would be to lose the last tie to the living that we have.”

Fay looked away from his desperate gaze out into the valley. She had never thought of how the villagers viewed the fact that she was alive. She never considered the fact that she was the last tie to a real life, because the lives they had now were just imitations of what they had before they died.

“I do not want you to be stuck like we are, like this. I realize that we have done you a great disservice by keeping you here among us for so long, but we loved you. We should have taken you outside of the valley, to living people.” Here he looked down blinking hard like he was trying to keep back tears. “Then you would not be here, wanting to die.”

She had to stop him then, “You’re wrong Bernard, I don’t want to die. I want to finally live. All of my life I’ve been so different from everyone because of what happened with the Great Death and this’ll change that, mostly. I’ll be the same as you except for not having been there during the Great Death. And maybe then I can finally have a family with them.”

By the end of telling him, she was almost smiling and almost crying from the feelings that she had finally given voice to. Fay closed her eyes and took a deep breath, smelling the sharp mint that grew in the clearing. She could also smell the new dirt that

had been exposed when Bernard had grabbed her arm and she had pulled back and scuffed the ground with the heel of her boot.

She cared for Bernard and she just wanted him to understand that she didn't want to die, she wanted to finally live, live in a way that made her feel like she belonged instead of being an odd outsider who didn't belong in her community. How could she rule a kingdom if she did not really belong in it?

Bernard interrupted her thoughts and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Fay, what truly separates you from us is the Great Death, that is all there is."

He seemed almost desperate when he started talking, like he was trying to bargain with her or convince her of something very important.

He took a half step back, "Fay, let me tell you what I remember about the Great Death. Then you will not be any different from us. You will know just as much as the rest of us. I believe that you are old enough to deal with the information I will tell you."

Here he paused and looked uncomfortable, but continued on convinced that what he was going to say was important.

"Over the years I have spoken to all of the other citizens, and my memory of the event is the most complete. Although I am going to tell you, I would rather spare you and have you never know the details of what happened."

Here Bernard paused again. Fay could tell that his sentence ended with *and you won't need to kill yourself*. She had to think about what he was telling her, what he was offering her. No one ever spoke about the details of the Great Death. It was really the only thing that she did not know about the spirits in the valley. She could finally learn about the event that had such a presence in the valley, even though it had happened so

long ago. She also felt kind of proud that Bernard felt that she was mature enough to deal with whatever he was going to tell her.

As she thought about it, she realized that she could always change her mind and kill herself later. After all, like she had told Bernard, she was eighteen and officially the queen.

She nodded her head in agreement to his terms.

He stood still for a moment, making sure that she meant it, and then he walked over to the trees and sat down. He nodded for Fay to sit next to him.

“As you know, the Great Death happened during the rule of your grandparents, before your mother was born. There was an army that rode into Arcady through the Stangeat Pass. They did not announce themselves by sending a messenger ahead of themselves or even pretend at being in the valley for peaceful reasons. They were wearing full armor ready to fight.”

Bernard shook his head in disgust at this.

“The armor was dark and gray, just like the day came to be. I cannot remember the details on the armor or tell you their country, but I think that they came from a country close to ours. The army was riding in formation and prepared to fight. I do not think that they tried to negotiate with the king, but if they did, it did not go well. I remember thinking when I first saw them that they were here to take. There were more of them than the able villagers and our guard put together.”

She could tell from the look on his face that the story was only going to get worse. She resisted the momentary urge to reach out and comfort him knowing that he would not like it, especially when he was so vulnerable.

“The king told the guards to gather at the edge of the forest to meet the army before they came to the village and the castle. He had the villagers prepare to fight in the town as well. I was back at the castle with the close guard to protect the royal family. Everyone was very tense. The summer breeze brought the smell of fresh sweet greenness from the fields where the villagers had just been harvesting greens and melons.

“The king and queen were trying to hide, and keep anything from happening to them. The king wanted to go to the crypt and hide, but the queen objected due to the dirt. She decided on the portrait hall because they could go to the crypt if it became necessary and it was very clean.”

Bernard stared out at the village center as he got ready to continue his story.

“The next thing I remember was the army was slaughtering the villagers. The men were yelling and shouting so loud that we could hear them in the upper rooms of the castle. The high cries of death and yelling and shouts of fighting.

“They did not spare anyone; even the children and infants were killed. I could see the army just slaughter our people, and they could do nothing to stop them. I had to do something so I told the other guards to take care of the royal family, they were cowering and trying to hide and I went to help the villagers. I ran out of the castle as fast as I could, but I knew it would not be fast enough because I could still hear the villagers die as I ran.

“I was standing in the town square and a heavily armed soldier was bearing down on me. Everything was at once bright and grey and cloudy. There were so many dead around me, but they were only from the valley. The baker’s child, Johnny, lay on the ground next to me. He had his head nearly cut off and his torso was covered in his blood. It seemed like the army though, had not been hurt at all. They had barely been slowed

down by our resistance. Even their horses were hardly injured because of the heavy armor they were wearing.

“The soldier drew his sword. He was closer. He leaned down towards me from on top of his horse. I saw the sun shine on something on his hand.

“Then I was standing in the town square. The grass was too long and the trees were starting to turn for fall. I started to notice other villagers standing around me. Johnny was standing next to me. He looked just fine, like he had just bathed and was as healthy as could be. It was then that I knew we were dead. It took us a little bit of time to realize that we were spirits.

“All of the villagers had come back like nothing had happened. I do not know why, but we started to take care of things that needed fixing. After that, it felt natural to just continue with the same things that we had been doing before we died. I think part of it is to take care of the valley and the village, but the other part I do not know. I only know that I continue as a guard because that is what feels natural to me even as a spirit.”

After Bernard finished speaking, they both looked down at the mossy ground of the clearing. It was almost like a mutual apology, him for the telling of the story and her for the asking of it. Fay had known the basics of the Great Death, but to hear it as Bernard remembered it was very different. She had finally learned, and she was glad that she knew because it removed a barrier that had caused her to feel very alone for much of her childhood.

Bernard angled his body as he looked out at the valley. He had never been one to open up and share with anyone, and this, this was very personal. It was a raw wound and she could see the pain that this brought him. She knew that some of it must come from a

feeling of failure and loss, not loss of his life or the fight, but the loss of the lives of the villagers.

Chapter Nine

His story also made Fay think of something she had heard or learned as a child. She started thinking of the memory the moment Bernard jumped from the man with the sword to the field after he died. The way that there were gaps or jumps in time really got her thinking. The way he described his memories made her think of a story she had been told.

The person in it described their memories the same way. She realized when he finished that his story had something to do with the old spirit. She had met a very old spirit; he had been around long enough that she thought he could have been part of the first settlers of the valley. Fay called him the Faded Man. She had not really thought about the information he told her until now. It was not important to her until Bernard had told her his memories about the Great Death.

She had been wandering near Nierwett Pass when she saw him, just a wisp or glimmer of a person. It would have been easy to think that she did not see him, he was so faded; and that was when he was at his most present. She considered calling out, but kept quiet and walked closer to where she had seen the flickering shape. She was just at the edge of the tall hardy grass when she saw the faded shape again. She was sure, then, about what she had seen.

It was an old man sitting among the rocks that covered the upper portion of the pass. He had his knees up, with his arms resting on them and his head angled down as if he was thinking about something very important.

Fay called out to him in a calm voice. "Hello."

He popped and disappeared; the sound was very loud and echoed off the surrounding hills. He must have been very surprised.

"Hello." The voice was male, older, and faded like the appearance of the man she had seen.

"I apologize for my sudden disappearance, girl, but you didn't give any warnin' and I don't get any visitors here. Least not for a long time, I haven't."

As he spoke, the Faded Man started to reappear. He was walking towards Fay at a slow pace, like he was not used to moving anymore. When he was a few feet from her he suddenly stopped, like he was frozen in place, then he backed up a bit and sat down.

"You'll excuse me if I don't come closer, but this's far as I go. I'm tied here you see. This pass, it's the only place I can go, can't go any farther. Part of bein' dead I guess. It's been a long time since I saw anyone 'cause not many people come out to Nierwett."

"And I'll warn you now, I might just fade away. It happens. I'm just so old, it gets hard to stay all together, but you don't have to worry 'bout my mind. That's one thing that never fades."

He said all of this in a rush, as if he was trying to convince Fay to stay, but she had not tried to leave. She had just stood at the edge of the grass watching him the whole time. Once he was done, she sat down where she was, deciding to stay at a safe distance, and thought about the questions she wanted to ask him.

"What's your name? Oh, and how old are you?"

The Faded Man smiled, took a moment, then answered. "I don't rightly know on both accounts. But I know I've been a spirit for hundreds of years. Think that's why I'm so spotty on my presence an' all."

"If you've been a spirit for so long you must know a lot." Here the man nodded his head. "Can you tell me what you know about being a spirit?"

"Well, I can tell you what I think I know if that's good enough?" He looked at Fay and waited a second. She could tell that he was going to tell her whether she said yes or no, but she nodded anyway.

"Not all of us spirits have to stay spirits. Some can move on to the proper state of whatever the hell happens after death. Now I think that this has something to do with memory. The ones that can move on have something in their memories that was taken when they died, an' usually it's about how they died. Now not all of them have the memories missin' about their death, sometimes it's something else."

"Now, take me for instance, I don't remember how I died. Will I don't remember how I lived now, but that was a choice. When I was first a spirit I didn't remember how I died and that was the only thing I was missing. I'm still here 'cause I'll never know."

"Now my boy, Billy, when he passed he didn't remember me. He wandered up this pass dead as could be and didn't remember a thing about me, but he remembered exactly how he died. Well now, I couldn't have my boy not remembering his own father, especially if we were gonna be dead together. So, I started to tell him all of my memories of the two of us. Soon enough all of those blanks in his memory were filled. He looked at me and told me he was sorry for forgetting me and then, well he was gone. You could feel it in the air that he was gone and it was final. That he had passed on."

“Now, I don’t mind that my boy got to pass on an’ all, but it would’ve been nice if he’d had the time to tell me how I died ‘cause he was the only person that I have seen in all my time bein’ dead that would know.”

The Faded Man had been fading out during his story and was completely gone by the end of it along with his voice. Fay waited a moment to see if the man or at least his voice would come back before standing up.

“Um, thank you for talking to me sir.”

She slowly walked away; half hoping that he would call out and have another story to tell her.

As Fay remembered the incident from her childhood, she looked at Bernard. She could still feel his sadness, about her wanting to die, about the Great Death, and about telling her everything, he knew about it.

She could see the static life he was trying to tell her about in his profile as he stared out at the valley. He had the same light wrinkles around his eyes and his hair was just barely turning gray, as it had been since she was born. She knew with all of the scares she had given him in her childhood, let alone today, he should look much older.

All of the villagers were stagnant like him, and she was beginning to see the toll it could take on their soul to be stuck like that, possibly for eternity. If someone were already batty like Martha, a hundred years stuck as a spirit would be hell.

That was something else she remembered about the Faded Man. He said he had been dead for hundreds of years. If it was the destiny of all spirits to eventually, fade away until the only thing that remained was their mind, it would be very difficult to take.

Of course, that might just be because he did not socialize much and had gotten out of the practice of needing to be physically present.

He had also been very upset that the one person who could help him pass on did not. It could be the same for the villagers. The information that could help them pass on is on a time limit. It would do her no good to become like the villagers, and then have them find out that she could have helped them pass on. That would make her worse than her grandparents, she would be dooming the villagers to an eternity as spirits because that was what she wanted.

She stood up and walked away from Bernard. She wanted to think this through before she told him what she would do. The sad resigned look on his face was distracting, and she needed to consider all of the possibilities without being swayed by him, even if he did not know he was doing it.

If Fay could find out what happened with the Great Death, then she could help the spirits of the villagers move on. Now that she knows what they really know, or in this case do not, she should do the right thing for her people. To continue with killing herself would be acting selfishly. Both Bernard and the Faded Man had shown her that she should think about the villagers. For Bernard, it was her duty as their queen to take care of them in every way she was able. For the Faded Man, it was her duty to help the villagers pass on if she had the ability to do so.

Another reason, one even simpler, was that she would be able to learn. She would get to know. She would learn about the Great Death and the outer kingdom and about living people. The prospect of encountering living people was something that heavily encouraged her to say yes.

The spirits of the valley are her family and her citizenry. She made the point of telling Bernard that she was now officially queen, so she will act for her people and go beyond the valley to find the answers that will allow them to move on. She will join the unknown world of the living. She will live so that her people may finally completely die.

If, when she returned, she still wanted to be a spirit, she could just not say anything about what she learned and kill herself then. It was not like she could not go back on her word to Bernard.

She turned to Bernard, sure in her decision and ready to command him to begin preparations.

“Bernard, I am going to leave the valley. I intend to find out why the Great Death happened. I am going to leave today. You will need to leave now to start preparations.”

“What do you mean Fay?”

“I am going to leave Arcady, and I need you to begin preparing for the trip.”

“I think it would be better, and safer for you to stay here.”

“I will go, Bernard, you can’t convince me otherwise. The only thing you can do is pack what I will need and come with me.”

Fay walked away from him and slowly started to pack the supplies she brought with her, waiting for Bernard to leave. Once he left, she quickly finished and started back to Martha’s cabin.

Chapter Ten

She was not sure what she would need on her journey, so she decided that she would pack a range of things she might need. As she made her way down the cliff face, she decided to take not only a change of regular clothes, but also some of her mother's court clothing and jewelry. That way whatever situation she may encounter she would at least be properly dressed. The dresses were not good for traveling or every day ware. They were made of fine cloth with beautiful embroidery that was more suited for a royal court.

There would also be some basic herbs and salves she would need to pack. Just in case she got hurt, Fay needed to be prepared to heal herself. She knew how to do it but was unsure about what supplies would be available. She did not know about the plants she would encounter or not, so it would be best to bring her own. That would really be all she could take for safety, the herbs. Bernard had never taught her how to fight, so she would have to depend on him to protect her in that manner.

Poor Bernard. When she told him to go prepare for the journey, he looked so shocked and confused. When he walked away, he was so consumed by his thoughts that he walked right over the edge of the cliff. He always tried to set a good example for her; she had never seen him be so careless.

When she finally got to Martha's cottage, she paused at the door. She put her hand on the honey colored wood of the door, right on top of a carving of an owl, and listened for inside movement. There was not any sound that she could tell. If Martha was

there she was asleep, but she would never sleep this late. “Rise with the sun and start your day, just like the sunflowers.”

Fay let her hand fall down to the handle of the door and took in the rest of the carving, it was of a tree filled with birds, surrounded by animals, the branches had every type of leaf, and it had different flowers growing from it too. The carving was like a sign for what a person would find in the cottage. Fay stepped inside and was momentarily overwhelmed by the smells of the various plants and potions.

All of the wood inside had the same coloring as the door, which made the space feel cozy, but open. The ceilings were, thankfully, high and the rafters had bunches of dried or drying herbs and roots hanging from them. Every wall had shelves built into it, even if the shelf was only as wide as two fingers and equally deep, and they were all full of various bowls and bottles. Even the interior walls of the fireplace had shelves.

Fay slipped the jug of dwale on a high corner shelf where it probably would not be noticed. The windows were already opened and the sun was able to brighten the room just enough to see the carvings on the doors on the other side. The door to Martha’s room had a small oak leaf carved on it, a large amount of strength in that small sign. The door to her room had a large spray of five gladiolus flowers carved on it. Martha told her once that the flower stood for strength of character, honor, and conviction; a fighter’s flower.

Her room was small and cozy, with a bed built into one of the walls right under a small window. Most of the shelves in this room were filled with her things. She had her clothes of course, but also books from the castle, and one or two of Martha’s, spindles, and wool that she was spinning, and even some embroidery projects. There were other small bits and pieces, some herb and potions, papers with work she had done for Bernard,

a beautiful stone she had found, a dried flower, scattered on the remaining space. In one corner she had her loom and spinning wheel under a piece of cloth she had woven.

It did not take her long to find where she had put her mother's dresses on one of the high shelves that she put things on to be stored forever. The jewels were easier to find; she had been looking at them only a year or two ago. With the clothes in her pack, Fay looked at her room trying to decide if she would need anything else. Just as she started to pick up her wound kit, she heard the cottage door open.

"So, you'll be leaving the valley, child." She had not heard Martha cross the cottage, let alone open her door.

"Yes, I'm going to be going out of the valley Martha." She was not sure how much Martha knew, so she did not want to give away too much with her answer.

"Well then, just wait a moment before you leave. There is something I need to give you. This is the perfect time for you to receive it."

Martha quickly left her room. Fay had finished packing her wound kit and a few other herbs and potions she might need. She sat on her bed and listened to Martha knock things down in the room next door as she waited for her to return. She had no idea what Martha might give her. The way Martha's mind worked it could be anything from a dried leaf to a ruby, symbolizing something she should know or learn. Just as she was about to stand up and go to Martha, she heard her begin to return.

"Here you are. This was left with your mother. It was your fathers."

Fay put her hand out to take what Martha was holding in her closed hand. Martha dropped a ring in her palm. It was a signet ring, a rectangular carnelian stone set in silver,

on a delicate silver chain. It was difficult to see what the carving was, but it was not like any in the castle.

“I found it in your mother’s home. He had left it for her with a note. It was meant as a sign that he would return. Apparently, he had just been given the ring by his father. It’s a family piece, that’s why he was so certain he would return. Now that you are leaving the valley, you can find your father and this ring will help you.”

Fay put the necklace on, and felt the weight of the ring as it pulled against the back of her neck and lay on her chest. Martha looked happy that she had put the ring on, but she would rather take it off. It was an unusual weigh and a bit annoying. Martha had put so much emphasis on the fact that it would help her find her father, but why would that matter? Fay had never known her father and had never really cared to, so finding the man was not very important to her. She tucked the ring under her overdress, not wanting to see it.

“Sure, thanks Martha. I should be going. I don’t want it to be too late before I leave the valley.”

Fay got up and started walking out of her room. It really was getting late in the day.

“Oh, by the way dear, you did a good job brewing the dwale.”

“When did you?”

“I saw what was missing when I woke up, and I saw the jug when I came in. I had to see what you had made, and I think that you did a good job. I had to judge from smell and color of course.”

Fay was surprised that she had been found out. She was not quite sure what to tell Martha in response.

“Oh, well, thanks.”

“Good luck child.”

Fay walked out past Martha, and out of her room. She was ready to get going. She was glad that Martha did not have anything negative to say about the dwale. She had a feeling that Martha knew what she had tried to do, but she did not say anything. That was the thing about Martha; she would never focus on the negative.

Well whatever was to come, Fay was starting out on a good foot. She had everything she needed from the cottage, and all she needed was Bernard to be ready. Fay left the cottage and started towards the village square.

Chapter Eleven

Bernard took his job very seriously, and made sure that he had a full complement of guards to go on the journey. He found his twelve best men the moment he recovered from his fall and Fay's decision. He would rather have had more, but he knew that she would object and not allow anyone to accompany her. When the men complained about the job, he reminded them that it was their duty, dead or not. He then set them to gathering the rest of the supplies for the trip.

As Fay walked towards the village, she could see the villagers moving around in a hurry. Some of the villagers were carrying preserved food from the castle. There were farmers bringing in their horses, some from the fields and others from the communal stables. Other farmers were bringing fresh food for the journey, just enough for Fay to eat for a few days.

Some of the guards were saying goodbye to their families or looking for their armor. Bernard was standing in the middle of it all, calmly making sure that everything went where it needed to go.

As she got closer, she could hear Bernard giving directions.

"Make sure that the horses have ample food supplies for a long trip. All men need to wear their light armor. The horses need to be prepared for a long journey; I do not want any horses that cannot make such a trip. This is an important trip."

"Bernard, how soon until you will be ready?"

“Fay, I will have everything ready soon. Just wait and I will let you know when everything is ready to go.”

She stood off to the side and watched as the final preparations were put in place. It seemed like nearly everyone in the village played a part in getting the group ready to go. She thought about making an announcement before she left to tell the villagers what the purpose of the journey was, but she decided not to. She decided that it was better to not say anything, that way if she did not find out anything or decided to not tell the villagers would not be disappointed. And if she decided to tell them, it would be a surprise and more of a gift.

Once everyone was ready, Bernard called her over. He pointed out the horse she was to ride; it was right next to the nervy blue roan from her childhood. She got on her horse and the guards moved to surround her. Bernard moved to ride on her left and motioned for the group to move forward.

She had never really interacted with the guards before. The men had seen the king and queen at their worst. These were the men that Bernard had tasked with protecting the king and queen while he went to help the villagers. They had seen the king and queen cowering in the portrait hall, hiding from the fighting. These men, more than any of the villagers, blamed the royal family for the death of the villagers. They avoided Fay whenever she was in the village.

The villagers started to go back to their homes. As the group slowly rode through the village, some of the villagers kept pace with them. The villagers did not seem to be interested in what was happening once they had finished doing their part. Fay could tell that Bernard had not told them why he wanted everything to be put together.

They were soon out of the village and in the orchards. The trees had been part of the valley for centuries. There was a mix of apple, peach, pear, and various nut trees. Some of the peaches were ripe, and as Fay passed she picked a few. The valley was always generous when it came to food.

The orchard gradually thinned out until there was just tall grass. There was a light breeze that caused the grass to gently sway, changing the color from a light green to a silvery blue and back. She could hear the honeybees that were kept there as they flew from their hives to the fields and flowers. The sun was shining bright and the sky was a clear light blue. The journey was starting off calmly, and Fay felt like it could not last.

As they finally made their way to the edge of the fields, away from all of the villagers, Bernard started to speak.

“I know that you would rather not be here, on this journey but it is your responsibility as guards of the royal family to do so. Now that we are starting to climb the mountain, through the trees, I will tell you why we are on this journey.”

She decided to stay silent and let him tell the guards what this was all about. Fay watched Bernard as he talked.

“I told Fay about the Great Death today. She decided, after listening, that she would go to the outer kingdom and find the answers about why the Great Death happened. She feels that if she can find out that information she might be able to help the villagers.”

Bernard finished and looked at the guards to see how they felt about what he had told them. The guards just continued riding, looking out at the trees and watching the mountain as they passed. Fay tried to subtly look at the faces of the men. They did not tell

her much, just that they were thinking about what Bernard had told them. She knew that they would do whatever he told them to, even if they did not agree with what she was planning to do.

Finally, one of the men decided to speak. “You’re right that this is our duty, but if she wishes to make up for what her grandparents did, then I will gladly do my job.” He spoke with a low gruff voice, as if he was not used to speaking much. During his proclamation, for that is what it was, he looked straight ahead and never blinked. He had a very serious appearance, and seemed like he was respected by the other men in the group.

The other guards nodded their heads in agreement, though some were slower than others. Bernard relaxed next to her. Fay had not noticed that he was worried about what the men would think. She had just assumed that they would do what Bernard told them to do or asked them to do, because he would never give them orders that were bad. She had grown to know and trust him, and she knew that he would never ask anyone to do something that was wrong morally or legally. She guessed she underestimated just how much the villagers, and especially the guards, blamed the royal family for the deaths.

To take her mind off of the animosity, Fay concentrated on her surroundings. She did not go to this side of the valley often. The slope was gentler than the northern side, with the cliff and the clearing. The trees were less dense too, though it was rare to see the sun through the heavy leafy branches. The ground was covered with leaf litter and small green shoots, some of young trees and others of young shrubs and vines. Birds had made the place home and crowded some of the trees.

While there was more brown on the ground, there was less on the tree trunks because of the ivy that had taken over the far edges of the forest. The ivy had a dark green stalk with thin bands of deep purple wrapping around it. The leaves were as large as Fay's hand when she spread out her fingers. They were a lighter green than the stalk, but had veins of purple, the same color as on the stalk, spreading out from the center.

The closer the group got to the edge of the forest the more the ivy had flourished. It was wrapped around the trunks of the trees and started to cover the ground. Eventually the ground disappeared under the ivy, it was so thick. It smelled like fresh spinach as the horses walked on the leaves and tore and bruised them.

As they left the forest, Fay could see the easy pass further up the mountain. In between, where there should be an empty rocky field, was a vibrant green and purple field of ivy. They paused their horses, wondering if they should go on. The ivy was not natural to grow like that, even for the valley.

Fay spurred her horse forward. "I know the plant, it's ok, it just grew odd. That's all. Besides, if anything's wrong, we can turn back."

She looked at Bernard and then out of the corner of her eye at the guard who had spoken a moment ago. Both of them seemed to agree with what she had said and started moving forward too.

While she was not worried about the plant, she was not going to hurry through it either. It was odd, almost too odd. If she had found something like that outside of the valley, she would not go near it, but the plants in the valley had a tendency to grow really well and sometimes really oddly. There was a cherry tree in the orchard that had a

summer and winter harvest, and that was odd, but the fruit was good. It was just something about the valley.

Their pace was slow, almost ambling, and the horses seemed confused by it. The pace made the distance feel even longer. As Fay got closer to the pass, she could see that the vines had grown up the sides and across the opening. There was no way they were going to be able to just ride right through it. They were going to have to cut away the vines. She started to look at the guards to see how they felt about this as they realized what would need to be done.

Bernard seemed fine, as did the guard who spoke, but some of the others that she could see started to shift in their saddles. They were uneasy to begin with, and then the near wall of ivy that was stopping them from going on. That was a bit more than they wanted to deal with.

Once the group got to the path, they could see that the wall of ivy was not as bad as it had seemed. It was not very thick or very tall. It only seemed that way because of the green trees on the other side. Bernard asked a few of the men to cut down the vines.

Once the way was clear Fay rode through the pass. Bernard began to follow her with the rest of the guards.

Chapter Twelve

“Wait, I can’t.”

The voice was one that she had not heard before. He sounded distressed. Fay turned in her saddle and saw that one of the guards was stuck right in the pass. He looked frozen, just like the Faded Man when he had reached the edge of his boundary. The sun was directly overhead, so the pass was bright. Bernard and the first guard to speak were the only spirits that had crossed the pass before the man got stuck.

Fay turned her horse around and rode back towards the men. Bernard looked worried and tried to stop her from coming closer when he saw her. The other guard put his hand out as if to stop her as well. She ignored them and continued forward until she was right in the middle of the pass, her horse drawn up beside the trapped guard.

She could see that he was afraid. The look on his face reminded her of the feeling she had when she nearly drowned. That was more than afraid, that was terrified. She put her hand on his arm to try and calm him.

“You’re ok you know. If you just relax and move back you’ll be fine. That’s it. Good. I wouldn’t try to go forward again if I were you; you’ll just get stuck again.”

The guard looked calmer now that he was unstuck, but he was wary. The rest of the guards were too. She was going to have to explain.

“You’re dead and as a spirit you’re tied to a place. It looks like you are tied to the valley. That means if you try to leave you’ll get stuck like that when you reach the edge of your space. Sorry about that.”

She backed her horse up outside of the valley as the spirits thought that over. It might seem like she was trying to lie, but they saw the proof. The first guard to speak was nodding his head. He appeared to understand what she had told them.

“All of you should try to come through one at a time so that we can deal with the men who get... stuck. I’m David by the way, your highness.”

The guard, David, took control for Bernard who was still processing what she had told them. He started calling the guards through one by one to make sure that they could make it, or not. While David took care of the crossing, Fay rode over to Bernard to see if he was alright. He had been silent and did not take charge of the situation, and that was not like him.

“Bernard, are you alright?”

It took a moment before he looked at her in response.

“The ring on your necklace Fay, where did you get it?”

At first, she didn’t know what he was referring to. Then she remembered the ring Martha had given her before she left. As she did so she looked down and saw that it had slipped out from under her overdress. With the sun directly overhead, the silver picked up the light and was shining brightly around the red stone.

“Martha gave it to me. It was my father’s. She found it with my mother’s things and the note that my father left, saying that he would come back and this was his token proving that.”

“Oh, I see.”

Bernard was looking out into the distance again. He was thinking about something and Fay knew it had to do with the ring. He seemed to be very unsettled by it, almost more than he was when she tried to kill herself.

“Why did you want to know?”

“No real reason Fay.”

“Bernard, I know that you aren’t telling me why you wanted to know about the ring. Please just tell me. It’ll be a lot easier on both of us if you do.”

He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. She could see his shoulders slowly sink down as he gave in.

“That ring reminds me of something I saw right before I died. I know that there was a flash of light on something on the man’s hand, and then I was dead. I apologize, Fay I should not worry you with such matters.”

She had already tucked the ring back under her dress, but she checked again just to make sure. For all she knew, the symbol was a common one, but whatever the case she felt bad about the pain she caused Bernard.

Fay looked up in time to see David watch as the fourth guard rode through the pass. He turned towards Fay and Bernard and started over.

“That’s all of them. The rest of the guard is unable to go through the pass, sir.”

Bernard looked up, did a quick count, and saw that only five of the twelve guards he had brought had been able to make it through the pass. While he was not happy that some were unable to make it through, he was glad that some made it through instead of none.

He rode his horse over to the pass and looked at the seven men that would be staying behind. They were good men, but not his best. When Fay looked at the men, she could see that they were all glad to be staying behind. Obviously none of them were too disappointed to find that they could not go on the journey.

“Men, you will be staying behind. It will be your responsibility to take care of the valley and the people in it. If I come back and find out that you have not done so, I will make you regret your decision. When you go back you will not tell the villagers what the purpose of the journey is. They are only to know what I told them before we left. You will not discuss the purpose of the journey between yourselves either. This way you can avoid being accidentally overheard. Do you understand what I have told you? Good. Now you may leave and travel safely.”

We just sat and watched as the men rode away and down into the valley. Now that they knew the ivy was safe, they went a lot faster and soon disappeared into the trees. Once the guards were out of sight, Bernard turned to face the rest of the remaining party.

“Well, this is not how it was planned for our journey to be. I want you remaining men to be doubly vigilant about guarding Fay now that she has half of the guard she should have. We are also out of the valley, so I need you to be careful about everything you do. You will need to attempt to appear alive at all times in case we encounter a living person, or they encounter us first. Finally, remember that we are out here to find out what happened during the Great Death and why it happened, so look for that information.”

Bernard finished his speech by looking each person in the face, including Fay. She had never seen him look like more of a leader than he did now. She would bet that he would not even be shaken by her questioning right now, if she were to try it. She thought

that maybe he had been waiting for a moment like this, where he could really be a leader and take care of his group of people in an unknown situation. That was probably one of the effects of being a spirit, and stagnant, he never had the opportunity to really be a leader in a semi dangerous or potentially dangerous situation.

If this was how Bernard reacted to change from the outside world, Fay could not help but wonder how Martha would react. Would she benefit from the outside influences and plants and illnesses, or would she suffer and become worse and more extreme than she already was? It really changed how she thought about all of the villagers. Just how much had they suffered from the lack of stimulus and change like that that was found out of the valley? Just another reason for her to find the answers she needed.

Chapter Thirteen

Bernard was the first to resume riding down the mountain. The path on the mountainside was steep and more difficult to travel. Fay could see that there had once been a well-traveled path, but nearly a half century of disuse had caused it to fade away. She set her horse following that path, sure that it would eventually lead to people, and started looking around her.

The trees on this side of the mountain grew higher up the sides, but they were not as healthy. None of the plants were. Everywhere she looked, the plants looked puny and weak. Their coloring was off too. A tree's leaves that were supposed to be a deep dark green looked instead dusty green even though the leaves did not have any dust on them. The dark purple heather was the color of light lilacs and the light purple heather was almost white.

Just the look of the plants made Fay glad that she had brought her own herbs from home. She was not sure that these plants would have the strength to heal a little cut, let alone something bigger. And the smell, the horses had just walked through a thistle patch and she could barely smell torn leaves and disturbed flowers. She had to lean down towards the ground to smell anything, and even then she mainly smelled the warm body of horse.

This would be a place that she had to get used to. It was so muted and dull compared to the valley. There were only two things that were the same. The first was Bernard and the group, which is to be expected seeing as she brought them with her from

the valley. The second was the sky. It was just as clear and blue and maybe a little bit bigger, but that was ok.

The guards were contentedly riding next to her. They did not seem to notice just how different and wrong the mountainside was compared to home. They were idly glancing around at the view and the path. She did not know if she was more annoyed that they did not notice or that that they seemed to not care.

“Miss, stop. The path is this way.”

She was jolted from her thoughts by David as he called out to her. She looked around, wondering what he was talking about. She saw that he was pointing at a line of rocks. There were two of them on either side of what she had been calling the path. She had not noticed them though; she had been following the worn flat part in the middle. The real path was wide enough for two carts to travel side by side. It was no wonder that she did not notice the lines of rocks when she was sticking to just the middle.

Fay turned her horse back towards the path and started moving again. There was no point in lingering too long, not when they did not know how far they would have to travel.

“David, you can call me Fay. Bernard does. Actually all of you can.”

It had been odd having him call her Miss. She knew he did it out of respect, but it felt wrong just like the heather that looked like lilac and baby’s breath.

Besides, there were enough barriers between them, she did not need a made up one there too. If the guards could see her as Fay, then maybe they would be able to look past the fact that she was part of the royal family. If they did that, then they would be able

to see her as a normal, although living, person. If she could win over these guards, then the rest of the villagers would be easy. She would have a real family.

Chapter Fourteen

The sky was starting to get dark. Dusk was on the way. Everyone was a little on edge about the approaching darkness. This was the first time that any of them had been away from the valley. None of them knew what the darkness would bring out here on the mountainside. Fay felt more vulnerable and out in the open than she ever had, even though she was in the middle of a forest. Her mind started whispering the names of all of the things that could be out there lurking in the shadows ready to attack, and kill, and eat her.

It whispered names like *bears* or *mountain lions*, but she was able to push those away. She had not seen any tracks or markings that either animal would leave, so it was very unlikely that either one would be out there.

A branch snapped in the darkness, a loud crack that had a small echo.

A wolf.

There were no footprints for a wolf, but it was a good suggestion. The guards were sitting at attention in their saddles, surveying the forest and the shadows that surrounded the group. It was still getting darker, but there was still plenty of light for traveling.

There was a small light off in the distance, off of the path and down the mountain, but still near where the group would be passing.

A will o' the wisp.

The light was not flickering and there are not bogs on mountains. As the group continued, the light grew closer, it was not moving. It did seem to grow brighter, though Fay tried to convince herself that it was because it was getting darker.

There was a loud crack as a tree fell. It sounded like it came from the same place as the light.

A dragon.

Now that was the most useless suggestion yet, but the light was very bright and something brought down that tree. Fay wanted to say something to Bernard or David or one of the other guards, but she did not want whatever it was that made the light to overhear her. So, she just sat in silence as her fear and worry grew, and the group continued down the path, closer to the light.

She caught a movement out of the corner of her right eye. David had moved one hand from the reins to his sword. Bernard did not need to move his hand; he had been like that since the group went through the pass. The horses were starting to pick up on the tension and Fay was glad that the rider of the blue roan had not been able to make it through because that horse would be causing all kinds of trouble right now.

Once the group was parallel to the light, they could hear strange sounds, rasping and rhythmic. Bernard silently signaled a halt. Then he started to slowly ride towards the light. At first Fay thought he was crazy for doing so, and then she remembered he was dead so it was not as big of an issue. He signaled for David to follow him, and the two moved slowly and quietly forward.

Fay waited a few minutes with the other guards before deciding to follow. She wanted to know what was causing the noise and the light, and they were the two most

capable fighters so it would be a good idea to stick close. She knew she would have to be silent if she wanted to sneak up on them without causing the two to cry out in alarm.

It was difficult to navigate the horse through the trees once she left the path, but she had the light shining in front of her as a guide. She caught up to the men when they were three quarters of the way there. Bernard had quickly turned and started to draw his sword. David was about to say something and try to hit her. Then they realized who she was. She could tell that they were both angry with her, but she kept moving her horse forward giving them no choice but to continue.

Now that they were so close, Fay could see that the light was coming from a lantern. The sound was a long saw being worked across a tree by two people. This intrigued Fay. She had never seen living people. She stopped her horse and got off so that she could get even closer and see more of the people than the shadows she had. David tried to grab her wrist to stop her, but she got loose.

The people using the saw were men. They were of average height and had mousy brown hair, not very different from the spirits of home. There was something about them though, their skin was dark and tan, similar to Bernard, but it had more presence. Bernard's skin was present, but at times it was almost like if Fay tried she could cause him to pop like a bubble. And the men's eyes, the reflections stopped, whereas with the spirits the depths go on forever. They never wavered in their presence and one of the men hurt his hand.

Fay allowed Bernard to push her back to her horse. They went back to the path and started moving again.

“What did you think you were doing, Fay?”

“I just wanted to see what was making the light Bernard. Besides, if anything happened you were there to protect me.”

He did not look angry, he looked disappointed.

“You could have been killed Fay.”

“You wouldn’t have allowed that to happen to me. You don’t understand Bernard. I’ve never seen a living person and they, they were so different. You and David were there the entire time, so nothing could have happened to me.”

She looked at him pleading for him to understand what she was trying to say. She trusted him to take care of her and she needed to see the people.

He just looked away and shook his head in defeat. She did not want Bernard to feel defeated, but she needed him to understand.

She had never seen someone with so much presence, someone who was so there. When she saw the men, they were both like that. She had never imagined that there was such a big difference in the presence of the spirits. How could a person’s presence be felt from ten feet away? They did not even know that she was there, what would it be like if she was interacting with a living person who was focusing on her? That would just be overwhelming, but she wanted to know.

She was starting to see how static applied not just to the circumstances, but also the energy of the spirits. She wondered if she would be able to feel the difference between the energy levels once she died. She was starting to want to live, if only to find out more about the living, but it was an interesting question. Now that she was able to compare the two, the living and the dead, she wanted learn as much as she could to figure out what the differences really were between the two.

Bernard decided that it was finally time to stop and camp for the night. The guards did not let her do anything to help, so she just sat of to the side thinking. As she lay down watching the sky, she realized that the stars were different from home.

Chapter Fifteen

The group set out early in the morning. The path stayed mostly the same. The trees started to get larger and grow closer together. The journey was mostly uneventful during the day. As the day started getting closer to ending though, the path started to change.

David was the first person to notice that the rocks were disappearing from the edge. He pointed it out to Fay as an oddity she might enjoy pondering. She points out that they did not disappear, they were taken away. Eventually the lining rocks are gone, but there is a trail that has replaced the path. The trail looked like it was well traveled.

The plants were not improving, but the sky was getting bigger, when she could see it. Fay gave an experimental sniff and caught the scent of a fire. The smoke was coming up the mountain from wherever the path was leading. She thought that the fire might mean people, although this was not the right time of year for a fire so big.

“Bernard, I can smell a fire in front of us. I think that there will be people ahead.”

He looked at her a moment studying her face, possibly trying to tell if she was telling the truth or not.

“Ok. When we encounter them you will do exactly what I tell you to, or what I expect you to. You will not repeat what you did last night. I know that you want to meet more people and you want to find out your information, but you will do it on my terms. Do you understand?”

Fay felt bad about all of the worry she had given him over the years. She knew that he only gave her rules to protect her and take care of her. “Ok, whatever you say.” This time she was going to do it his way. She wanted to make things easy, or at least easier, on him.

They continued traveling, beyond the time Bernard normally would have.

“Are you sure that they are near Fay?”

“Yes, Bernard. Can’t you smell the smoke? It’s so close now. You should see the town any time now.”

A few feet later Fay saw the first lights. She knew that she was right.

“Now, we are going to go into town quietly. You will follow my lead. I will do all of the speaking. David, make sure that you stay on Fay’s right.”

Bernard and David moved in closer to her as they continued on.

Fay could see that the town was bigger than the village in the valley. All of the buildings she could see were short, no taller than two stories, and wide. They were made of dark wood and looked very heavy. The logs were very big, which added to the weight. The roofs had a shallow pitch, so shallow they were nearly flat. Those made Fay wonder about the winter snows, how did the roof stand up under the weight of a heavy snowfall?

All of the buildings had small horizontal slits for windows. The buildings were all placed close together; there was barely any room to walk between two unless it was on the main path. There were heavy dark shadows moving between the spaces. It took her a moment to realize that the shadows were actually people.

As the group got closer, Fay could see that the people were dressed in heavy dark clothes. The clothes were nearly shapeless and made it difficult to tell if a person was

male or female. Whenever one of the people caught sight of the group, they would stop and stare for a moment then hurry inwards.

When they got to the first building, Fay saw that the planks were as wide as her torso was tall. She also saw that the wood had been painted with something to make it so dark, and from the glimpses she got in the windows, she could see that the wood was the same color inside.

Everything about the place was small and oppressive to Fay. The squat dark buildings all shoved in close to each other. It was as if the people here did not want to breathe. She felt like this was confirmed as she traveled into the town and the buildings grew closer together. The closer the group got to the center of the town the smaller the houses got which meant they could put even more closely together.

Now she could see some of the people up close. They had the same mousy colored hair and darker skin as the men in the woods. Their eyes, well Fay supposed they were brown, but everyone was glaring and it made their eyes look black. All of their faces looked unfriendly and accusatory, as if the group had come to rob the town or something.

Fay was really glad she had Bernard and the guards with her. She would not want to deal with these people on her own, even if she had more experience with people.

They finally reached the town center and saw that there was a pub. Bernard indicated that the group should take their horses there.

Chapter Sixteen

“I will go in and enquire about accommodations, and you can ask about information in the morning Fay.”

She nodded her head in consent. The less she had to deal with these people the better.

Bernard hopped down from his saddle and confidently walked into the pub. Fay leaned towards David feeling vulnerable now that Bernard was not at her left side. The group was quiet as they waited.

The guards kept an eye on the people around them and Fay watched the door. It suddenly opened. There was yelling and a knife was thrown out of the opening. Fay could hear a bell ringing inside the building. It sounded like Bernard was trying to talk to someone.

He suddenly came outside and got on his horse. He was followed by a large person that looked like it was a man.

“We are leaving now.”

Bernard jerked the reins on his horse and started to lead it out of the town, in the direction that would lead down the mountain. He was moving quickly and did not stop once the group had gotten past the town. Every time someone tried to ask him a question, he would raise a hand to hush them.

One of the guards pulled his horse to a sudden stop.

“Stop. I’m stuck. I can’t go any farther.”

The rest of the group, with the exception of Bernard, stop and look at the man. Bernard looks behind the man towards the village, worried about what might be behind them.

“I’m sorry sir. I don’t want to stop; I just cannot go any farther.”

“It is not your fault that you are unable to continue.” Bernard’s tone is brisk as he attempts to reassure the man.

Fay speaks up, seeing that Bernard’s attention is focused on the possible threat from the village.

“You need to return home. I want you to be careful so that you don’t run onto anyone.”

Bernard absently nods his head in agreement.

“Yes, your highness. I wish you luck.” The guard was earnest as he spoke. He quickly rode up the mountain, towards home.

Bernard finally spoke up. “We are still too close. We need to move farther away.”

The moon was high in the sky before Bernard slowed down and finally stopped his horse. He got down and indicated that this would be where would make camp. No one tried to ask him anything, they could tell at this point that he was going to talk only when he was good and ready.

Finally, everything was ready for the night. Fay was starting to think that he would never talk about what had happened in the pub.

“I only went in and asked if they had accommodations for seven.”

He took a breath and looked up with pleading eyes, begging everyone to believe that he was telling the truth.

“The man behind the counter looked up and saw my armor and began to curse at me for being one of the king’s soldiers. I attempted to explain that I was not a soldier, I was accompanying my charge. At that point, he began to throw knives. While I know they will not hurt me, they will hurt Fay. And besides, the man was clearly beyond reasoning. So, I decided it would be a good idea to leave.”

“Sir, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but why did we have to leave the town entirely?”

“That is a reasonable question David. I thought it prudent to leave town when I saw that the patrons of the pub were beginning to get up to assist the barkeep in his assault. I felt that the attitude of the town was a bit hostile and it was best that we leave entirely.”

“Sorry you had to go through that Bernard. Let’s just go to bed and start a new day?”

He was nodding his head, looking back up the mountain.

Chapter Seventeen

As the group proceeded down the mountain, the land began to level out and the trees started to thin. Fay was glad that they were going to finally be off the mountain. She remembered from her lessons with Bernard that there was a town somewhere close to the base. She hoped that the town would still be there, and that someone would know about the army. Footpaths began to appear in the woods. They cut between the sparse trees and tall grass that had started to take the trees place. The paths were old, but had been used so much in the past, that nature was still unable to take over the path and make it disappear. The only sign of recent travelers was the occasional path left by an animal. The group eventually crossed an old wagon trail leading down what little incline was left of the mountain, which Bernard decided to follow.

Fay looked like she has not slept well, and her appearance showed that she had been traveling for the last three days. The skin under her eyes had darkened after resting poorly for the first time in her life. Her clothes had a light coating of dust. The creases had set in and darkened with dirt over the three days of riding. Fay's hair was braided away from her face, yet it looked messy and unkempt. Her companions in comparison were unchanged, perfect. It was a result of their being dead and unchanging.

Fay started to feel more hesitant about continuing, as the signs of people increased. They were finally at the base of the mountain, on flat land. The trees were replaced completely by long grass. People had transformed the land into fields. They had

recently been planted, so the land was flat and empty, exposing the group to anyone who might look their way.

Fay let her horse slow, until she was lagging behind at the back of the group. It was a hopeless attempt to delay getting near the people on the road ahead. She had lost the enthusiasm she had when she spied on the men in the woods. After the village, and seeing that people posed a very real and very near threat, she felt a bit more wary about interacting with the living.

She could see a large walled town made with red stone. There were two roads leading in, one from each side, that had many people traveling in both directions. The travelers were mainly farmers taking produce and animals into the town. Most of the travelers were walking. They wore muted drab colored clothing that looked almost like rags. They made a slow moving group that looked very weary and dull.

“We are going to go to one of the roads, and use it to enter the town. I do not want to draw attention. Fay, I want you to stay close to David and myself.”

Bernard led the group towards one of the roads. Fay hesitated before following and joining Bernard and David. She maneuvered her horse right between the two, so that she felt close and protected. She was thankful for them and the distance they would put between her and the travelers.

They joined the road far from the town, and slipped into the crowd without notice. The people quickly surrounded them. The travelers were more concerned with their own issues to take notice. They were talking about various things as they made their way to the city. Fay could hear the travelers talking as they moved around the group. It was mostly about the king and taxes. The crowd was grim as it pressed in against them.

The people spoke loudly when they were at a distance from the town, not caring if their conversations were overheard. But, the closer they got to the large imposing red stone walls, the quieter they were. As someone would begin to speak too loudly, their companion would gesture to the walls to make them speak quieter or not at all. She did not know what was in town, but the travelers were not eager to meet it.

Fay could feel her group react to the tension of the other travelers. In her peripheral vision on her right, she saw Bernard sit up straighter in his saddle. She could see David fidget a little on her left. The rest of the men were not any calmer. They subtly reacted to the tension. Fay was nervous, but unlike her companions, she felt a sense of calm. She knew that they would be there to help her if anything were to happen.

The road had become even more crowded with people traveling both directions. The guards rode close to Fay, making sure that she would be safe in the dense crowd. The smell of the horses, and people, and animals going to market grew until it was a disgusting stink. Fay had never experienced anything like it, and made her long for the open spaces at home. She occasionally caught a whiff of the fresh earthy smell of the various types of produce the farmers were bringing in, and it was relief to Fay.

By this time, Fay was extremely uncomfortable. She had never been around this many people in her life, living or dead. The amount of people surrounding her on the road was at least two times more people than what lived in the valley, including herself and the faded man. This was also the first time she had been so close to a living person.

If she wanted, she could reach out and touch one of the travelers, not that she would be so rude. She felt closed in and compressed by all of the people and the noise they made just in moving. She had not realized just how quiet the dead were, until she

was on the road. The living make noise when they walk, with every movement, even when they breathe. The dead did not breathe, so there was no noise.

As she came to the city gates, she hoped that the knowledge she needed would be easy to find. The sooner she could return to the familiarity of the valley, the better. She would be happy to just be there. She would be happy to be alone, if it meant that she was away from the crowd she was currently in. She would be fine with being ignored by the villagers, if it meant that she could get away from the noise and smells.

Chapter Eighteen

Just inside the walls, people are conducting various business transactions. There were stores that lined the street, and stalls in front of them. Many people were slowly moving past these towards the center of town. Fay and her group were among them. Due to the stalls and independent trades taking place on the sides of the streets, their pace had been reduced to a slow walk.

There were soldiers in light armor wandering through the crowds. They seemed more interested in the business that was happening, than watching the people moving around. They did not seem to care when the occasional person noticed that they were all of a sudden missing their money or a piece of jewelry. However, the moment a person had trouble with their business, they were would immediately pay attention.

One particular group of people stood out to her. There were two poorly dressed farmers arguing with a well-dressed man, some type of businessman from the looks of him. Both groups were gesturing wildly, mostly at the farmer's wagons, which were filled with heads of cabbage. The businessman finally called over some of the soldiers that were near. It did not take the soldiers long to reach them, because they had already been watching the exchange anticipating trouble.

Fay was finally near enough to hear some of the exchange over the noise of the other people.

“Sir, how can we assist you?”

“These men will not accept the price we negotiated. They refuse to hand over their goods.”

“This man is withholding half of the price in the name of taxes. That is an unfair amount. We refuse to sell for so little. It’s not enough.”

“If you agreed upon a price, then you must hand over the goods. The king declared that half of all sales shall be paid in taxes, and the buyer will pay them for you. Now, take your money and go.”

The farmers took the small amount of money from the businessman and started to unload their carts. As Fay rode past them, she heard the farmers continuing to talk.

“This has been happening too often.”

“It’s the king; he raises taxes and takes the money for himself.”

“No one can make enough to pay all of the other taxes the king has created.”

As Fay looked at other groups along the street, it looked like all of the people selling something were disappointed with the amount of money they received for their goods. She saw the soldiers being called over frequently to settle disputes over money. Each time sellers reluctantly give in, and then take a small amount of money for what they were selling.

The group finally reached the town square. The majority of the farmers had been heading here to conduct business. Directly across from the street’s entrance was a large building made of the same red stone as the walls. The walls were carved with intricate designs that made it the showiest building in the town so far. Fay guessed that it might be some type of government building.

Bernard directed the group towards the building. It was difficult to get through the crowd, but eventually they were able to make it through the crowd to the front of the building. Bernard was confident about what he was doing.

“I will go in and see if this building is the right one. I want everyone else to stay here.”

“Bernard, I think it would be a good idea if I went in too. That way I can do the research right away if it is the right place.”

“Fay, I will let you come with me if you do what I tell you. I still want the rest of the guards to stay outside.”

Chapter Nineteen

Once Fay and Bernard were inside the building, it was very obvious that it was a government building. The people that were rushing around inside were nicely dressed. Men kept coming in with bags of money, reporting that they had taxes to turn in. Others were discussing law with one another.

Bernard was able to stop one of the people, and ask about any records they may have. They were shown to the records room and its keeper. The records keeper was a short elderly man that was just as dusty as the room around him. He was writing in a logbook when they came in, and spoke to them without looking up.

“How can I help you?” His voice sounded dry and unused.

Fay was hesitant about answering him, “I would like to know about an army that passed through here on its way to Arcady forty-five years ago.”

The keeper finished his writing, and then walked away from his desk into the shelves of books. Fay and Bernard stood at the desk for a moment, confused, waiting for the man to return. Just as Bernard moves to follow the man, he returns with a large, thick ledger. Still without saying anything, he lets the book loudly fall to the desk.

He starts thumbing through the pages, muttering, “Here it is, this is the book. Right time. Now, for the army. Ah, yes. Here it is.”

The keeper looked up at Fay and Bernard for the first time.

“Forty-five years ago the Armag Denu army passed through Andefera on its way to Arcady by order of the king.”

When the keeper stopped, he just stared at them, silent.

“Is that all you have? Do you know any more?” Fay was impatient to learn more.

“That is the only information about the army in the books here. If you wish to have more information, you should go to Emnet. The records in the capital city will be more complete. However, the best resources are in the royal record room.”

“Where is the royal record room?”

“It is in the palace. You must be invited to be able to go to it. Now, if you have no more questions, leave. I have work to do.”

The keeper went back to writing in his ledger, ignoring Fay and Bernard. They watched him a moment before leaving the room, neither one having more questions.

“So, it was the king’s army. At least we know where we will find answers. It shouldn’t be too far to travel Bernard. Now we know who sent the army. What I need to find out now is why the king sent them.”

They left the building quickly, ready to gather the rest of the guards and leave the town. As they walked through the main room, Fay accidentally bumped into one of the many tax collectors coming in with a bag full of coins. The man dropped the bag spilling the coins across the floor. The noise was extremely loud, echoing due to the vaulted ceiling, gaining the notice of one of the soldiers watching the people.

The soldier immediately made his way over to what was happening. Fay and Bernard stopped to help the man pick up the coins, but he pushed their hands away so that they could not help.

“Do not touch the king’s money. Only official collectors for the king are allowed to handle the taxes collected for the king.” His voice was very stern and clipped.

“Get away from that money. Back away from the area and let the man pick it up on his own. If you do touch the money, you will be arrested and charged with trying to steal the king’s taxes.”

The soldier’s voice was strong and forceful. He was very menacing as he watched the coins and the man picking them up. His gaze was focused on the floor, ignoring the people that had stopped to watch what was happening. The other soldiers watched what was happening out of the corner of their eyes, ready to act if they were needed as backup.

Bernard was the first to react. He led Fay through the people so that they could leave the building unnoticed. At first, he had to pull her, until her focus left the money on the floor and moved to Bernard and the act of leaving.

Once outside, Bernard and Fay got on their horses and led the group of guards out of the city. No one spoke as Bernard slowly led the group through the loud crowded streets and out the red stone walls.

Fay looked back at the city, thinking about her first interaction with the living. She noticed that the guards were lagging behind before eventually stopping. She stopped her horse and turned around, riding back to the guards. Bernard quickly noticed and turned to catch up with her.

“I know that we just arrived here, but we will start for Emnet today. I do not want this journey to take longer than is necessary. Now, will you continue?”

David looked a bit sheepish when he answered Bernard, “We will not be able to go with you sir. We have all gone as far as we can.”

The other guards looked uncomfortable while David spoke.

“That is fine David. I didn’t think that you would be able to make it as far as you did. I will continue on my own.”

“If you cannot continue, then you must return home to Arcady. I know that none of you would abandon your duty if you did not have to.”

Bernard looked at the men a moment longer, then turned and rode slowly away. Fay lingered, thinking of something more to say to the guards.

“Please, be safe as you travel. If you tell anyone back home about the trip, only let them know that we are making progress. Thank you for traveling this far.”

Fay left the guards and followed Bernard.

Chapter Twenty

As she rode away, Fay worried that the guards would have trouble making their way back home. She had grown accustomed to their presence and she had grown to care for them. While she knew that they could not be hurt physically, she still worried that something might happen or change so that they could be harmed. There was also the worry that they could be lost. There was not really a trail to show the way home.

If she thought about her worries for the guards, she could see that she was really worrying about all of her people. Something she should have been doing for many years. It was her responsibility and burden to worry about their safety and wellbeing. As the ruler of the valley, she needed to think about the people who lived there. But, as a good person, she needed to think about the people around her.

She never took the time to worry about the people in Arcady because she did not have a connection with them. She had only ever been selfish and focused on herself. She occasionally spared a thought for Martha or Bernard, but that was all. Now that she had come to know David and the other guards, she realized that she had not been a good person. She had seen how the guards interacted, how they were worried when one might be in trouble. They helped each other when they set up camp each night. All of this was done, not out of obligation, but because they wanted to help care for each other.

When she thought about it, she realized that Bernard and Martha helped her and took care of her out of obligation at first, but they grew to care for her. Bernard felt obligated to the memory of the royal family, so he naturally felt obligated to help her.

Martha had been given a baby, and felt obligated to keep it alive. Over time, she got older and they got to know her. As they came to know her, they came to care for her.

This trip was her chance to change the person she had been. She now had the opportunity to learn and grow. If she is successful in her journey, then she will not be able to use what she learns with the people in the valley. But, she will know how to be a good person with the people she meets in the rest of her life.

Andefera's red walls were a small dot in the distance when Fay noticed a small woman riding next to her. She had curly red hair and a wild air that reminded her of Martha. Her clothes were dark brown, wrinkled, and stained with fresh mud at the hem and knees. Just like Martha when she had been digging in the garden or woods. The longer she looked at the woman, the more she missed Martha, and the more she wanted to speak to the woman.

She looked at Bernard to see if he noticed the woman too. He was looking at all of the travelers, not paying any of them any special attention. He did not seem to notice the woman's similarity to Martha.

Fay was not sure how to start a conversation with the strange woman. Every time she wanted to speak with someone in Arcady, she already knew them. When she spoke to the record keeper in Andefera, she had a purpose and it was his job to speak to her. She had never spoken to a stranger just because she wanted to. Watching the people on the road, it seemed like the people never spoke to strangers, yet it must happen. She had read about the people in her books doing it frequently. Her parents were strangers when they

met. If no one spoke to strangers, then people would become isolated. Therefore, there must be a method to speaking to strangers.

She rode for the next hour in silence, watching the woman and the other travelers. She was able to tell that the woman was traveling alone, something she would be terrified to do. The woman never spoke to the other travelers or acknowledged them in any way. This made it even more difficult for Fay to think of a way to start a conversation with her. She had observed that the other travelers started conversations with strangers when they accidentally bumped into one another or somehow came into each other's space. They would acknowledge the other person and speak to them. Sometimes the contact resulted in a long conversation. Other times it was just a brief exchange of words. But, if the woman did not acknowledge the travelers around her, how was Fay to start a conversation?

The only thing she could think of was to address the woman directly, but that would be too bold. Moreover, she would not know what to say to start the conversation. The first thing that came to mind was, "Hello, you make me homesick for a friend who you resemble who happened to raise me." That seemed a little forward and with too much personal information. Finally, she remembered something she noticed about the woman's appearance, the dirt. She could ask her about the dirt.

"I see from the dirt on your skirt that you have been digging recently. What were you digging for?"

Fay made sure that the woman could tell she was speaking to her by looking directly at her and speaking loud enough that she would hear her. For a moment the

woman did not react. Fay worried that she did not hear her, or worse, that she was not going to acknowledge her. Then, the woman slowly turned her head and looked at Fay.

It was a good sign; she was being acknowledged. This was the first time the woman had acknowledged when any one spoke to her, that Fay saw. The woman looked down at her skirt, and the places where the mud had finally dried. Then, she returned her gaze to the road ahead.

Fay watched her, waiting for her to say something. The woman quietly watched the road ahead. She looked like she might be thinking about something, but Fay was not sure. Then the woman faced her.

“I ran out of roots. I needed to get more before I continued on my journey.”

She spoke in a flat voice and did not really seem to want to interact with her.

When she spoke again, it surprised Fay. The woman had been silent for so long that Fay thought she was done interacting with her.

“Emnet doesn’t have fresh herbs available, and they don’t grow near the city walls. I did not want to go to the city without a full store of medicine.”

“Oh, well it’s always good to be prepared when you travel. I made sure to be well prepared before I left home.”

“That is good. You should always be prepared girl.”

The woman rode her horse further down the road so that she was ahead of Fay and Bernard. The tone the woman had used to speak to her reminded her of Martha again. She could remember Martha telling her to be prepared frequently as she grew up.

While she wished that the woman had stayed and continued to speak with her, she felt that her first interaction was a successful one. The woman responded to her even

though she ignored everyone else who interacted with her. Fay felt like she was prepared to speak with other people after speaking to the woman.

She looked at Bernard and saw that he was watching her. She realized that he had probably been watching her the entire time she spoke to the woman.

On the first evening, they stayed at an inn along the road. Fay decided to eat in the common space and Bernard sat with her. The inn was large, so the common room was also large. It was filled with travelers. There were only a few open spaces to sit. Bernard moved Fay so that they could sit in the corner. It was shadowed and away from the majority of the crowd of people.

As Fay sat, she realized just how tired and hungry she was after the long day of traveling. Being around so many people while on the road was exhausting, mainly because they made her nervous. She was accustomed to being around only a few people at a time or alone. She never realized that having to be alert and aware of all of the people around her was tiring.

While they waited for food to be brought, they watched and listened to the people in the room. Many of the people were traveling to Emnet, discussing the next two days of the journey. Their general disposition was downtrodden and morose. It became worse whenever a group would discuss the king.

Fay had a feeling that when she got to Emnet, the people would be even more displeased with the king. It seemed like all he did was take money and food from the people without providing anything in return. He only interacted with the nobles of the kingdom and his army. There were whispers about how the only time he let money leave

his hands was when he was buying off a noble or paying for a personal luxury, like robes woven with thread made of gold.

It made Fay think about the relationship between her and the people in the valley. Her people, while not taxed, did not gain anything from their royalty. They had suffered because of the selfish decisions of the king and queen. Until now, she had not helped them with anything. She was even gladder that she had decided to look for answers to help the spirits pass on. By doing this, she was helping her people in the only way she could. As she grew closer to the guard, she realized that she wanted to take care of them and the rest of the villagers. This was because it was the right thing to do as a nice and good person. After listening to the travelers and the people in the inn, she knows caring for the valley is the right thing to do as the Queen of Arcady.

“I know you wish to be prepared for the city, Fay. There is not much that I can do to help you ahead of time. I have never been there and my reports are at least fifty years old.”

Fay and Bernard were camped in a field the next night. They had traveled from dawn until just before dusk on the road. Fay had had a restless sleep the night before due to the sounds made by the other travelers. So, when they came to the inn late that afternoon Bernard told Fay they should move on and camp outside.

“I know you’ll try and help as much as you can. We are both facing an unknown when it comes to Emnet, Bernard; I read the same books about it as you. I just hope that we can find the information we want once we are there.”

“I can help you with that, Fay. Once we find where the records are kept, I will help you any way you need. One thing you will not need to worry about is records that are difficult to get to.”

After he said that, he smiled and let his hand fall through the bag sitting near him, reminding her that he could go through solid objects. The moving light from the fire made it difficult to tell where the leather of the bag began and where Bernard’s arm passed through it. Both his skin and the bag had the same worn light tan appearance. This near invisibility reminded Fay of something else.

“Bernard, if you are fine with it, I think you could use your invisibility if we need it. We may need to get in somewhere without being seen and you can do that.”

Bernard’s head snapped up as she spoke. He opened his mouth to respond, but she quickly interrupted.

“I know you don’t think it is right to deceive people or be dishonorable, but this is information we need know. I want to help the people back home, and I will need your help to do that.”

Bernard sat back and considered what she had said. The shadows created by the fire made his face look even more serious than normal as he thought about what she had said.

“I do dislike being dishonest or doing something that is less than up front. However, I see your point and I will assist you however I can, even if it includes dishonest actions.”

He sounded like he had just made a great proclamation and his face looked like that of a man who had settled on a great decision. He was normally very serious, but at

that moment it was extreme. He was giving in quite a bit to agree to help her any way she needed. He very rarely compromised or gave in, but it seemed that when he did it was to do something for Fay.

He was set in his decision to aid her. Fay was glad that she would have all of the assistance she needed. It made the anticipation of the unknown of Emmet a little easier to face.

Chapter Twenty One

It had taken another full day of travel before they could see Emnet in the distance. The capital city was on the only hill in the flat landscape. It was composed of grey stone buildings that grew in height as they came closer to the center of the city. At the very center, Fay could see towers from a castle. All of this was surrounded by a tall imposing wall that was patrolled by guards. The entire city was nearly as large as the valley.

The closer Fay and Bernard got to the city, the more crowded the road became. The land around the city became more crowded as well with farms and small shoddy homes. All of these buildings were built out of earth and weathered pieces of wood.

The people in the city created a dull fluctuating sound that reminded Fay of crickets droning on in early evening. The noise would rise and fall without any discernible pattern. One moment it sounded like a hum, the next it was like the rush of water over rocks. Once Fay noticed the sound, it was all she could hear for hours, even though she and Bernard were still almost six hours away. Eventually, she became used to the sound of the city in the distance and started to hear most of the world around her again.

The road filled with more than the travelers that Fay and Bernard had been with until then. Farmers from the surrounding fields and the people that lived in the small shacks joined the travelers on the road heading towards the city. Soon there were enough people on the road that there was no room to move or spread out.

People constantly bumped into Fay and Bernard. They were constantly touching the people next to them, bumped side to side. When Fay looked at Bernard, she could see a look of concentration on his face. It took her a moment to realize that he was concentrating on staying solid while being bumped into. He had his gaze focused on the city ahead, but he was not actually looking at anything.

Fay noticed the closer she got to the city, the brighter the surrounding people's clothes became. The colors were a distinct contrast to the gray stone of Emnet and the dull browns of the earthen shacks. There were vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds. The farmer's clothes were dull worn versions of the vibrant colors.

Fay could see the light shining on the armor of the guards on the city wall by the time the sun was directly overhead. She gave up on trying to count their number, but she estimated it to be at least as many people as there were in Arcady. The number of people on the ground was at least ten times that. If they wanted to change anything about the direction they were riding, they had to push and fight, and even then, they could not make much of a difference.

Fay felt almost suffocated by the amount of people pressing in on her and Bernard. The people were overwhelmingly warm as mass. Fay felt like she had to fight to breathe, even though she was somewhat elevated above the majority of the people by riding on her horse. Any air that she did get was saturated with the smell of the people. It covered the smell of the fresh goods many were bringing towards Emnet.

She was finally aware of just how present people could be. She realized that if she had grown up outside of Arcady, she would have noticed how not present they were.

Instead, she had grown up in a place where people did not have a smell. They did not press into you and overwhelm you. They were just there without affecting you.

As she got closer to the wall, Fay could see the large gates. It was late afternoon by the time she and Bernard got close enough to see this. They were open, accepting the crowds continuously passing through. Regularly stationed across the opening were armed foot soldiers. Mounted soldiers were sitting at the edges of the gate and directly in the middle.

The soldiers silently watched the people that passed through, doing nothing but being intimidating. There was a strange bubble of silence around the gate, as if the people passing through were afraid to speak for fear of not being allowed through.

When Fay and Bernard finally passed through the gates, it had just passed into dusk. The soldiers started to move to the edges of the opening, and there was movement to show that they were going to close the gate soon. They had made it to Emnet just in time to make it in the city. People were rushing to leave or enter the city before the gates were completely closed. It seemed like, from the way they rushed, the guards would not make any allowances for anyone who was stuck on the wrong side of the gate.

Once Fay and Bernard were on the other side of the wall, things were instantly darker. The tall buildings and the height of the wall blocked out what little light was left from the day. The dark gray color of the stone leached out the rest of the light.

The street was narrower than Fay had expected. Emnet was such a large city, and yet the streets were narrower than the ones back home. The buildings that loomed overhead were more confining than the large trees in the forests back home. The people squeezed past Fay and Bernard on their way into the city. The dark, overwhelming press

and confinement of the city made Fay long for the open freedom of her clearing in the valley.

“We should make our way to the center of the city, as close to the castle as we can get. This way we will be closer to the castle, and its library, in the morning.”

“We will need to find somewhere for me to sleep too, Bernard.”

“I think we should find somewhere that is away from people for you that way we can do as we please and not need to worry about anyone else.”

They pushed their way through the mass of people near the gates and rode towards the center of the city.

Chapter Twenty Two

The closer to the center of the city Fay and Bernard got, the larger and more ornate the buildings became. The streets began to widen, making the previous sections look like they had been jammed together because the city was running out of room as it expanded. The large blocks of stone making up the walls began to look less intimidating and light started to return to the street. The people thinned out, until there were only a dozen in sight at any moment.

The detailed carvings around the doors and the light spilling from the windows reminded Fay of the castle in Andefera. Everything spoke of wealth and an easy life. She had a feeling that this area of the city was reserved for important people only, possibly nobles. She was sure that Andefera did not have such divisions as these.

The castle grew larger as they got closer. At first, Fay could only see parts of the towers between the openings of the buildings, then she could see the entire upper portions of the towers. Finally, they got close enough to see that the castle was surrounded by its own walls. The walls stood out from the homes near it because of their stark utilitarian appearance. They had armed guards patrolling the top, ready to defend the walls if needed.

Though Fay and Bernard did not know how to get to the castle, they did know that as long as they kept riding towards it they would eventually get there. The buildings on either side of the street began to separate and become distinct buildings instead of one long stretch from crossing street to crossing street. Each building, or home Fay suspected,

had its own distinct style of carvings and ornamentation. The space between the buildings was usually filled with grass and shrubs and other plants.

By the time they reached that part of the city, it was well into evening. Only the bright moon and the many windows produced any light. There was no one else on the street, which made Fay glad and yet nervous. At first, it puzzled her that she felt wary about being out on the street without anyone but Bernard. She had not realized just how accustomed she had grown to having other people around.

When they finally passed the last of the buildings, they saw the castle in its entirety. It was dark and intimidating, surrounded by a high wall. The castle itself was bland, without any visible ornamentation. Fay could tell that it was purpose built, and no time had been spared for anything that was not useful. The castle was at least as big as the village, making it two times larger than her castle. It was surrounded by open ground, a neatly kept field from what Fay could see.

The street that they were on split in two. In one direction, the street curved around the outer wall, until it could not be seen anymore. Fay assumed that that direction would lead to the main entrance in the wall. It looked like it was frequently traveled. In the other direction, the street narrowed curving around the castle in the opposite direction. It looked like no one had traveled down it for years. There were tufts of grass and other plants growing between the flat stones that paved the path.

Bernard led his horse toward the second path, nudging Fay's as he passed her so that it would follow. The openness of the space was a nice reprieve from the crowded streets. Fay was able to allow herself to relax. As she did so, she realized that she felt extremely tired, worn out from all of the people.

When she looked towards the road ahead, she could see a group of tall mounds of earth surrounded by a fence. As they got closer, she could see what looked like large stone slabs leaning on the ends of the mounds. She could tell now that she was looking at graves, most likely of the kings and the royal family. They were reminiscent of how the villagers buried their dead.

Once they passed through the gates, they rode to the middle of the burials. The stones had writing on them that Fay could not decipher in the darkness. Once she neared the mounds, she was certain that they were burials. Bernard stopped his horse and got down. This would be the place that they would camp for the night.

Fay looked for a good place to sleep, while thinking about her surroundings. She found the soft forms of the burials comforting in their familiarity. She felt at ease for the first time that day. The only other person she could see was Bernard. The city had finally quieted, and only the insects could be heard at the top of the hill. A light breeze removed the smell of the city and its inhabitants, leaving the smell of the newly trodden long grass. Everything was calm.

“We need to make some type of plan for tomorrow, Fay.”

He stood to the side taking care of the horses while watching her settle in for the night. His face looked tired and somehow more worn than when they had left the valley.

“Well, we need to get into the castle, and I don’t think that we should go through the front gates.”

Fay yawned after she finished, and looked at Bernard to see what he thought. He stilled, and thought about what she said, his forehead creasing with concentration.

“I would rather enter the correct way. But, if you think it is better that we do not, I will do whatever you suggest. I would like you to explain why you feel this way though.”

She was not surprised by his response. Bernard was always about following the rules, no matter the situation.

“I do not think that they will be very accommodating if we tell them we want to search their library to find evidence that they murdered nearly an entire kingdom. We will be able to achieve more if we can look unobserved.” Bernard’s face was stoic, but his eyes told her that he understood. “If you can find a way into the castle that is unobserved, then we can look without worrying about being stopped.”

“In the morning, I will look along the wall to see if there is a place that you can use to get in. I want you to wait here while I look, so that you will be safe and out of the way.”

Fay thought about arguing about staying behind, but she realized she could always follow him in the morning and make him let her come along. She nodded her head agreeing to his plan.

“Good, now go to sleep and rest up for the morning.”

Chapter Twenty Three

Fay woke up early the next morning. Bernard sat by the remains of a fire with a hot tea and breakfast waiting for her. He watched as she stretched and walked over with her hand out, ready for him to give her the meal. Once she took the meal, he began speaking.

“While I look for a way through the wall, you should pack up everything.” With that, he walked away.

Fay took a moment to finish her meal, then followed him.

“I might as well go with you. This way we save time, I will be with you when you find a way in. I want to find way in so that we can start looking for answers.”

“It would do me no good to try and make you go back now. But, I want you to be quiet while we are near the wall. It would not do for one of the guards that are on patrol to notice you. They would most likely try to harm or even kill you for being suspiciously near the walls.”

“I promise that I will be silent, or at least as silent as a living person can be, while we are near the walls, Bernard.”

They reached the wall quickly, walking as silently as possible while trying to not be seen from above. Once they were next to the wall, they were covered by a cool shadow. The two walked along the wall, continuing in the same direction they had started the night before. All they could see was a large expanse of dark gray stone. The blocks were as tall as Fay, and had about the same length.

As they walked, Fay could hear the city to her left wake up. The noise steadily grew as she walked. The people were waking up, at the outer wall first then moving slowly towards the center and the castle. Eventually the faint noise of people preparing for their day came from behind the wall. The city was finally up and awake.

The graves were just faint spots in the distance and the sun securely in the sky. They still had not found a way thorough the wall. The large stone blocks were dark and imposing. Fay was beginning to feel like there would never be a way through except the main gate.

Fay was the first to see the doorway. It was a small gap between the stones, wide enough for a person to walk through. A solid wooden door had been placed in the gap with a large heavy metal lock placed on the door. By the time Fay and Bernard were standing in front of the door, they could see that if they had had the key, it would not have mattered because the lock was completely rusted shut.

“I think, Fay, that this will be the only alternative entrance that we will encounter, which is a problem.”

“I don’t really think so, Bernard. This side, the outside, does present a challenge, but the inside is unknown. It is no wonder that the outside is rusted after being exposed to the elements for who knows how long, but the inside has not had to face the same weathering. If you go through and try the door from the other side, it might just open, and you might just have to let me proceed with my plan.”

Bernard stood silently for a moment, considering what she had said while studying the door. He slowly walked forward, through the door. He seemed to melt as he passed through it. Eventually he was completely out of sight.

Fay focused on the lock, waiting for something to happen. Bernard was taking his time. What he needed to do was simple. Once he was through, he needed to take his sword and use it to pick the lock. All very simple. Something that could be done in the dark, which it most probably was.

What if he was waiting on the other side, doing nothing for a bit? All so that he could come back through and tell her that it did not work and she should consider going home, or at least getting a new plan.

A small flake of rust fell from the lock to the ground. That could have been because of Bernard, but it could have just been that piece's time to fall. She was not going to get too excited and think that something was happening on the other side of the door.

Another piece, larger this time, fell. She could hear the faint sound of metal moving against metal. Now, she could be excited. Bernard was definitely trying something; she just hoped that he would be successful.

It seemed like an hour passed before another piece of rust fell, this time taking a piece of the lock with it. Shortly after she heard the sound of something snapping, and hoped that it was not Bernard's sword. Pieces of the lock were starting to move, jerking up and down. There was an awful grating sound each time a piece moved.

Finally, the entire lock fell out of the door. She could hear Bernard pushing against the other side of the door, trying to force it open. As she looked to see if there was anything blocking the door, she noticed the hinges were placed so that the door would open inwards.

Fay smiled, holding back a laugh, as she readied herself to attempt to force the door. She momentarily thought about warning Bernard about what she was going to do, but she decided it would be more fun to surprise him. Besides, she would not hurt him if she accidentally hit him with the door.

She counted to five in her head, and then started over again when she decided that she just was not quite ready yet. Finally, at the fifth five, she threw all of her weight against the door. At first, nothing happened, then the door slowly started to move inwards. Once it had moved back enough that she was definitely leaning at an angle, it whipped back with a depressing sigh.

She nearly fell to the ground, but was caught by two arms reaching out of the swirling cloud of dust that the door had raised up. Once again, Bernard was there to save her. His face showed that he was not as amused as she was by the door opening. He immediately set her on her feet, then waited for the dust to settle before he spoke.

“Why did you not tell me that you were going to try the door?” The tone of his voice betrayed the barest hint of anger and frustration.

“I did not want to speak while I was outside the wall. I told you that I wouldn’t, and I felt it best that I keep quiet while you were not there to protect me.”

Fay smiled after she finished, daring Bernard to contradict his previous orders. When he said nothing, she continued.

“Now that we are in the wall, we should continue our path inwards and see where we end up.”

Bernard turned to face the dark tunnel behind him.

“I will lead, and please stay safe and quiet.”

Fay gestured for him to lead, making an obvious show of being quiet. Once he was a few steps ahead of her, she turned and pushed the door shut. She heard Bernard start to say something, then snap his mouth shut. She gave him a moment to compose himself, and then followed after him, walking as carefully as she could.

The tunnel was long and dark. Fay could feel thick layers of dust under her fingers every time she accidentally bumped into the walls. She went slowly in an attempt to avoid tripping on the unknown. She could hear Bernard muttering what sounded like curses as he walked ahead of her. If she had to guess, she would say it had to do with the remains of spider webs that kept brushing against her.

At least he would be able to disappear and get rid of the dust and web remains that clung to him. The only thing that would help her after this tunnel would be a good washing. This was not anticipated. Bernard would definitely be going back to get their things once she found a place to hide. She did not think she would be able to pull off acting as if she belonged in the castle if someone spotted her while she was all dusty and webby.

She heard a small thud. Bernard must have run into something. Hopefully it was not a wall. She stopped walking to make sure that she did not run into Bernard and his dust.

“Why are you stopped, Bernard? I would love to get into the castle proper sometime soon.”

“There is a wall.”

He did not add anything to his description. This was worrying and typical of Bernard. Also, not what she needed to know.

“Well, there is a wall. What else? Is there another passage, a door, a way over, a way under, is it solid, can we break through? I need to know more, Bernard.”

She was a little frustrated with the lack of information.

“I think there is a door.”

“And? Check Bernard, give me more information.”

She could hear him finally move in front of her. All of the sounds were dull and thudding. She started to grow anxious as she waited. She did not want to turn back; she was ready to continue, to keep moving.

“There is a door.”

“Yes, Bernard. Continue.”

Her annoyance at his refusal to explain irked him. He was finally annoyed, and when he was annoyed, he was wordy.

“There is a small door. It is as high as my waist. It is about two inches narrower than the tunnel on either side. There is a handle in the middle to the right side. There is no lock on it. The handle is not rusted, but it is dusty. The door feels like it is made of heavy wood. It feels like it is made of only one piece. It feels like the door opens inward. That is all I can tell about the door. Now, is there anything else you want to know about the door?”

It was clear that he was very annoyed with her. However, she knew all she needed about the door now. If the door were not rusted, then they would have an easier time getting that door open. Also, with it opening inward, it would be easier to sneak out to wherever the door opened to. They would be able to open the door without being noticed from the outside.

“Well, aren’t you going to try and open it? We won’t be going anywhere if it stays closed, Bernard.”

“I will, just give me a moment to figure out how to work it in the dark.”

She stayed silent so as to not aggravate him further. He started making noise as he tried to work the door. She could hear it moving as he worked at it. It took him a few minutes before he managed to get the door open.

There was a high thin creak as he pulled the door open. A string beam of light entered the tunnel as the door opened wider. The intensity of the light was near blinding against the darkness of the tunnel. Had they been outside, the light would have been barely noticeable, but after the extended time in the dark, it was extreme.

Fay put her hand on Bernard’s now visible arm to stop him from opening the door further.

“We should look to see what is outside the door, before we open it anymore.”

She could just see him nod as he moved in front of the opening and the beam of light.

“There is just an empty hallway. On one side is an open space filled with crates. The other extends in a hallway past where I can see. It is dusty, but mildly so. Definitely not as much as the tunnel.”

“I think we should be safe if we go out. The dust probably means that it doesn’t have many people walking down it. If we do see someone, we can blame our dust on what is in the hallway.”

She pushed Bernard lightly on the back so he would get the idea to open the door and go. He slowly opened the door the rest of the way. After it was open, he ducked

down, stuck his head out the door and cautiously exited. When he heard Fay move to follow, he stuck an arm back in with his hand motioning for her to stay.

Once he was fully out, Bernard slowly stood up, like he was worried about being attacked while he was vulnerably transitioning from crouching to standing. Once he was standing straight, he slowly turned in a circle, hand on his sword ready to defend himself. Finally, once he was sure that it was safe for her to come out he stuck his arm back through the door and motioned for Fay to follow him.

Fay rushed through the door, practically throwing herself out. Once she was in the hall, she allowed her eyes a moment to adjust to the light then she quickly scanned the space, taking in all of the details Bernard had mentioned and ones he had not. One of the details he had not mentioned was the tapestry that hung above the door, partially disguising it. She could see that when he had described the hall as mildly dusty, he was slightly exaggerating. This meant that she would have to work even harder to sell her story if she happened upon anyone, but she would try.

They quietly and carefully walked down the hall. They were both anxious for the end to appear so that they could get to the main body of the castle. Once they passed the curve in the hall, they could see a bright light at the end. Finally, the end was near. After they left the hall, they would be able to look for the records room and the information that they needed.

As they got close to the light, Fay decided that it was sunlight. It was much brighter than the light in the hall. A light breeze brushed across her face, bringing the smell of flowers and plants with it. Fresh turned earth accompanied the fragrance of growing things as an undertone.

When they finally got to the opening, they could see that it was partially obstructed by hanging vines heavy with large purple flowers. The vine was nearly as thick as Fay's wrist, showing that it had been there for quite some time. Leaves from seasons past littered the ground and were piled in low drifts against the walls.

Now that they had reached somewhere that would get them to the main portion of the castle, Fay and Bernard hesitated. Fay pushed past Bernard's restraining outstretched arm, and looked at what lay outside.

There was a garden. It was large, larger than she would expect to find within the walls. There were many raised beds, about as high as Fay's knee, placed around the garden in what appeared to be a decorative pattern. Each bed was filled with plants, many that Fay had only seen in books about faraway places. Each plant was large and thriving. The walls were covered with various types of vined plants and there were a variety of trees placed throughout the space.

Right in front of the opening was a man, sitting with his back to them, working in one of the raised beds. Fay could tell when Bernard, who had been hovering over her shoulder, saw him. It was a disappointment. The only way into the castle was through the garden. However, the man was there, stopping them from going anywhere. If they were to try, they would reveal themselves.

They backed up together, preparing to return to deeper in the hall and plan what to do next. As they moved, the leaves under their feet rustled and cracked. The man stopped moving and turned around, immediately spotting them.

Chapter Twenty Four

The man's stare caused the two to stop. All they could seem to do was stare back at him. Fay had not anticipated an outcome like this. She had no plan for what to do. All she could think was that this meant failure for her plans.

She felt Bernard place his hand on her back and grab hold of her overdress, preparing to pull her out of harm's way as he had done many times before. She guessed that he had not planned for such an outcome before either, but he was prepared to protect her.

The man slowly stood, still staring at them. It seemed like he did not blink as he kept his eyes on them. He was clad in expensive looking clothes that did not show his previous work in the dirt. He was short and his skin had a yellow tinge. His overall appearance reminded Fay of a toad. Despite his pathetic appearance, at that moment he was the most terrifying person she had seen.

"You should explain yourselves, before I call my guards to apprehend and kill you."

He was apparently someone who was important in the castle, or at least he believed that he was. They still hesitated, unsure of the situation.

"Step forward and speak. Now. I will not be patient much longer."

Fay moved first, slowly putting her left foot past the threshold, into the garden proper. In her stressed state, her mind took a moment to wonder at how new her boots

looked, despite being worn constantly for the last seven days. She then returned to the task at hand, revealing herself to the well dressed, demanding toad.

The sun felt too bright after the darkness of the tunnel and the half-light of the hall. It felt like she was being accused of breaking in, which she had. Once she was fully in the garden, she moved to the side so that Bernard could stand beside her. He would be able to protect her better from there and it was comforting knowing that he was right at her side, with her in this moment of trouble that she had gotten herself into.

Fay abandoned her original plan, and decided to go with a half version of the truth.

“We came to the castle looking for information. I decided that it would be best to not bother anyone here, so we came in through the back door.”

She tried to make her voice strong and sure, but she could not help that everything came out in a rush.

After she finished speaking and took a big breath to calm herself, she noticed that he had changed his focus. He was looking specifically at her, about at the level of her chest. She reflexively looked down. She saw that her necklace, and the ring on it, had slipped from behind her overdress. It shone in the light very distractingly. The carnelian stone stood out against the dust that covered her clothes.

He quickly strode towards her, intently staring at the ring. His face showed a mix of anger and confusion, leaning towards confusion.

“Where did you get that? It is not yours to have.”

As he got close, Bernard stepped in front of Fay. He had his sword half drawn. And his face, though she could not see it, was stern and serious. Everything about him was ready to protect her from the incoming threat of the toady man.

“I assume that you speak of the ring sir? I can assure you that it is most definitely mine.”

She had to lean to the side or stand on her tiptoes to see around Bernard. Every time she exposed too much of herself, he gently knocked her back so that she was standing securely behind him.

The man stopped walking when Bernard drew his sword.

“Explain yourself, now.”

Fay took a moment to think about what she wanted to tell the man. Did she want to let him know the personal details of her life, or did she want to stay vague?

“I inherited the ring from my mother. She was given the ring by my father as a token of his promise to return.”

She had decided to go with a simple version of the truth, nothing more.

As she watched over Bernard’s shoulder, she could see the man thinking over what she had said. At first, he seemed unsure, but then he accepted her statement. He relaxed, and his features returned to the look of one who is calm and self-assured.

“I know the man that owned that ring. Come forward and sit near me. I wish to speak to you more.”

As he was speaking, he turned and walked back to where he had been sitting. Fay pushed Bernard to follow the man. She sat across from the man, with Bernard at her side.

“I am not sure how your mother might have met him, but the ring belongs to Harold, the captain of my guards. He was a young man the last time I saw him with the ring. Harold is a good man, and I am sure that he would like to know that you are here with his ring. Why don't you tell me about yourself?”

“My name is Fay; I am from Arcady. I came here because I wanted to find information about something that happened there 45 years ago. Would you be able to help me sir?”

The man looked at her a moment, considering what she had said and thinking about what more he wanted to know.

“What is it that you want to know?”

Fay could tell that he barely restrained himself from calling her girl. It seemed like he was trying to make a good impression, and not insult her for some reason.

“From what I have been able to tell, the king's soldiers were involved in something that happened in Arcady 45 years ago. I learned in Andefera that the castle records in Emnet might hold the information I seek, sir. I also thought I might be able to look for my father while I was traveling in Armag Denu. I did not hope to ever find him, let alone someone who knows him.”

Fay added the last part about her father because it seemed like that was the information the man was most interested in. Personally, she did not care if she found the man or anything about him.

“I am Sagara, the king of Armag Denu. My father was the king at the time. I do not know anything about our soldiers going to Arcady. Your father is here, training men

for me right now. I would like you to stay as my guest, so that you can meet him and get to know him.”

Fay was not sure what he wanted from her staying, but it would allow her to the opportunity to find out what she needed. She had a feeling that he was lying when he said he did not know anything about what happened to Arcady.

“I would be very honored to be your guest, your highness. I hope that you did not find me rude earlier, but I did not know who you were, nor am I accustomed to speaking with my equals.”

The king seemed a bit surprised at the last part of Fay’s statement. Of course, it would be difficult to believe that she was a queen after she had been on the road for seven days and crawled through an extremely dusty tunnel.

“I would like to introduce my companion, Bernard. He is my personal guard and the captain of my guards. He accompanied me on my journey to insure my safety.”

The king gave Bernard a shallow nod, finally re-acknowledging his presence beside her. He slowly rose, attempting to look graceful and powerful.

“If you would follow me, I will show you to your accommodations and someone will help you clean up.”

Fay and Bernard rose and followed the man as he exited the garden.

Chapter Twenty Five

Sagara told Fay that after she washed up, she was free to look around the castle until dinner that night. He handed her over to a servant who showed her to her room, which in actuality was a suite of rooms. It included a room for Bernard and a bathing room. Bernard informed the servant of where they had left their supplies before dismissing him.

Fay was eager to find the records room, so she decided to go light on washing up. She made use of the large bathing room to do this. When she walked into the main room, Bernard gave her a look. She was not surprised. She had only washed her face and hands and wiped the dust from her hair and clothes.

“Shall we go, Bernard? I’m ready to start looking.”

“Are you sure that you want to go looking like that Fay?”

“Unlike you, I cannot just make the dust fall away by disappearing for a moment. It takes more time than I am willing to spend to clean up.”

Bernard could tell that she was not going to give in, so he walked to the door and opened it for her.

Fay felt like she had never known the meaning of luxury until she came to the castle in Emnet. She thought that she had known what luxury was supposed to be whenever she visited the castle in Arcady. In the castle back home, there were silken fabrics, gemstones, and many things made of precious metals. This was all placed tastefully about the rooms. There were few objects that did not have a purpose in the

rooms. The colors were faded, but had once been bright, brighter than anything the villagers had.

The castle in Emnet was an extreme version of this. The walls were covered in tapestries and panels of fabrics that were made with rich bright colors. There were thick, soft rugs carpeting the halls and Fay's room. The rugs in her room covered nearly all of the open floor space, something that she had never seen before. Everything was heavily ornamented with jewels, gold, and silver. There were gaudy decorations in every corner of her room and stuck in every alcove in the halls that she saw.

From the books that she had read, this manner of decoration showed that the owner was very wealthy. The king was certainly not afraid of showing his wealth around the castle. When she had gotten closer to the king in the garden, she saw that he was similarly decorated. He had had many heavy rings on and his clothes had gemstones and circles of gold and silver sewn onto it.

Fay worried with every turn she made, that she would never find the records room or be able to find her room again. It took her hours of wandering and trying to ask the people she encountered for help, before she found the room she was looking for. It was only through luck and some vague directions from what appeared to be a servant, that she was able to finally find it.

The room was filled with tall dark wooden bookshelves that were stuffed with scrolls and books and piles of loose paper. The majority of the light came from short windows along the top of the back wall. The windows were covered in dust, muting any light that was able to seep in. Even in the gloomy light, Fay could tell that the room did

not have many visitors. It appeared that it was one of the few places that was not touched by the gaudy hand of luxury and opulence.

“Hello? Is there a record keeper here?”

Fay’s voice was hesitant and hushed when she called out. She had intended to be more sure of herself and speak in a louder voice, but the gloomy and oppressive feeling of the room made her pull back and be unsure of herself at the last moment.

When she looked at Bernard, he nodded his head for her to move forward. She suddenly felt shy and wanted Bernard to go forward and take control of the situation. He must have seen the desperation in her eyes, because he nodded and walked further into the room.

“I do not think that there is anyone here, Fay. You can either wait for the keeper, or begin looking on your own.”

She hesitated before replying, “Let’s just start looking. I wouldn’t want to involve anyone who works for the king anyway.”

Fay walked to the shelf in front of her and took down the nearest book.

It was nearing dark before Fay decided it would be a good idea to stop. She remembered that the king had invited her to dinner, and felt that it would not be a good idea to show up late and dusty.

“We should go now, Bernard. I haven’t found anything, and we will have to find our way back to the rooms so I can clean up before dinner.”

“I am sorry that you have not been able to find anything yet Fay. I think it would be a good idea that you try to not talk during the meal. I do not find Sagara trustful; there is something about him that seems wrong.”

They had just reached the doors. Bernard opened one, to find the servant from that morning waiting outside. He was standing still, as if he had been waiting for them. It was a good thing Bernard had just finished speaking poorly about the king. It would not have been good for one of his servants to overhear them.

The man led them quickly through the maze of hallways. When Fay glanced at Bernard, she could see him taking note of the details in the halls they passed, most likely to memorize the route from the records room to their suite of rooms.

The servant walked quickly without looking at any of the sights around him. The man was mostly nondescript in his appearance, a bland face with brown hair and clothes. The only notable thing about his appearance was his thinness; it was that of someone who did not get enough to eat on a regular basis.

As he opened the door to the rooms he said, “You will have an hour. I will return for you then and take you to the diner.”

Bernard walked past him without looking, and Fay followed. She did not like the emotionless way the man spoke, it unnerved her and caused her to feel like there was something he was not saying.

When they were in the main room, Fay spotted their things on a golden table in the middle of the room. The dust-covered saddlebags were extremely out of place in the colorful gilded space. The severe contrast brought her own appearance to mind. It was no

wonder that no one wanted to speak with her when she was looking for the records room earlier. She obviously did not belong, with her dirty dull colored clothes.

“You should bathe Fay; you are covered in dust and grime. You have not experienced one, but a king’s dinner is a very formal thing. You absolutely cannot go as you are.”

Fay started walking away as he was taking. It was clear that he was in the mood to lecture her. It had been a few years since he had given her a lesson over anything. Frankly, she thought he missed it.

“You also should dress appropriately. One does not wear their traveling clothes to dinner with a king, unless they are both traveling. Then the clothes are a nicer version of travel clothes and they are clean, just put on for that meal. Not worn all day, or longer.”

Fay went through her saddlebag looking for her mother’s court dress. She had packed it just in case she needed it. After all, she had not known what she would encounter during her travels. As she was looking, she found her mother’s jewelry. She took that out to wear; it could not hurt, especially in a place as bejeweled as the castle.

“One should also wear the appropriate jewelry for the outfit and situation. Oh, I see that you brought your mother’s. Good. That will do nicely for this dinner. Now there are certain things you can and cannot do when you are at a formal dinner.”

Fay finally had the dress with its layered skirt pulled out of the bag. She went to the bathing room, shutting the door on Bernard mid-sentence. She could still hear the occasional phrase or sentence through the door.

“And absolutely, under no circumstances, can you pick up something that has fallen on the table or floor and eat it. To do so would be uncouth and rude.”

The last comment made her frown. How wasteful, to not be able to eat anything that has fallen. It was not as if such things would hurt her.

“... always use the silverware provided. If it is on the table, you will be using it.”

It was a good thing that Bernard had taught her proper “fancy” manners. She should be able to get by in such formal and restricted atmosphere.

Once Fay had cleaned up, she approached her mother’s dress. She was not too sure how the dress would fit; she had never tried it on. The evening gown was one of the many spring/summer gowns. Its bodice was fitted, more than she was accustomed to, with a strip of cloth acting as the sleeve. She had never worn anything so revealing, her usual dress was more about function than fashion.

The skirt was full, with many light airy layers of fabric. Each layer was so thin, she could see through it when she held it up. The entire dress was a pale icy blue, similar to the blue tone of the moonstones in the jewelry. The color was very delicate, and easy to stain.

Once Fay had struggled her way into the dress, she looked at herself in the mirror. It was as if the dress was made to be hers, and not her mothers. Her arms were cold, and she felt unsure of herself, but the dress looked like it belonged on her, if the portraits from the castle in Arcady were anything to go by.

Once she calmed her nerves, she left the bathing room to join Bernard.

“So, now that I have gone over all of the protocol, I think that you should be able to behave in a manner that does not embarrass us too much. Just remember everything that I have taught you, and you will be fine.”

Thank you, Bernard. Could you help me put on the necklace? I can't seem to get it."

Fay did not feel like telling him that she had missed most of what he had said. If she did, he would just start over at the beginning.

She could not hear Bernard moving, and he was not speaking. When she looked up, she saw that he was staring at her. It was as if he was staring at a memory, a ghost as the books would describe it. Which was funny, seeing as he was the ghost and the memory of the past.

"What's wrong Bernard? I only asked for your help. I don't think that that breaks any of your rules of decorum, even though we are alone and that wouldn't matter."

He stood for a moment more before taking a big breath in and closing his eyes. When he opened them, his face was composed and it was like his moment of shock and remembering had never happened.

"It is just that you look very much like your mother in that dress. The last time Loah wore it was the night your father came to the valley. She looked very similar to you right now."

This was the first time that she had any real idea about what her mother looked like. Until now, she had only had vague descriptions from Martha, who had never been that close to her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a solid knock on the door. It then opened, admitting the servant from before. He did not seem bothered by his rudeness at just barging into the room without being invited.

"Ma'am, I have come to take you to dinner."

Chapter Twenty Six

Fay thought that the dining room was too big. That was her first impression of the space that the servant brought her to. There was a long table placed exactly in the middle. There was enough space between the table and the wall on either side to place ten horses side by side. There were twenty people scattered in groups around the room.

Her second thought was that the people must have very bad eyes because all of their clothes were ridiculously bright. In some cases, the fabric was bright enough to hurt her eyes; this was especially true with the oranges and yellows. Every woman's dress and every man's suit had gemstones and pieces of gold and silver sewn on in decoration. There was ornate embroidery to fill in almost all of the empty space on their torsos.

The servant abandoned Fay in the room, leaving her in the doorway without a word. She felt out of place among the people there. The style of her dress made her feel like she did not belong. The women in the room were dressed in gowns that had short puffed sleeves and long straight skirts. It was obvious that she did not belong.

She moved to the side of the door, getting out of the way of anyone that might be coming in the door. She desperately looked for the king. She might not like the toady man, but he was the only person she had spoken with while at the castle besides Bernard. None of the faces she saw looked friendly or inviting. They were made up with powders and creams which made them utterly unfamiliar.

As she tried to unobtrusively sidle out of the way, she accidentally kicked the door. The dull thud of her heel of her riding boot, the only shoe she had thought to bring,

was loud enough to draw the attention of the other occupants of the room. Every single face was turned towards her. Each conversation had paused, and Fay had become the focus of the room.

She reminded herself to stay calm and breathe as she looked back at the many eyes. She decided that it would be a good idea to be closer to the table, so she slowly closed the distance. It seemed like she had crossed half of the empty space before anyone blinked.

She was a queen. If she were a normal queen, she would have had to deal with a court of people every day. She needed to act her rank, make Bernard proud, and not embarrass herself. That was very difficult to do considering she nearly tripped over her skirt every other step she took.

She heard someone enter the room behind her. Finally, the eyes moved their focus from her. The people suddenly bowed and curtsied to the mysterious person. Fay was unsure about what to do.

When she turned around, she saw a young man. He looked like he was a few years older than she was. He was dressed in rich clothing, but the coloring differed from the rest of the court; he was in a suit of deep blue. Everything about him seemed much simpler than what surrounded him. Despite that, he was still more decorative than Fay.

The young man looked her in the eye, raised a dark blond brow, and tilted his head to the side. Fay was unsure what to do. Once he was in front of her, he stopped and looked her directly in the eyes.

“Well, who might you be?”

She was not sure how to answer him. Bernard had not prepared her for such a situation. She was sure of this, even though she had not heard everything he had said.

“That would depend on who you are. Why don’t you introduce yourself first, then I will give you my name?”

Fay knew that she had not said quite the right thing the moment she was done, because the young man looked shocked. She became less sure about that assessment when he suddenly gave her a wide smile.

“Alright, I am Freyr, son of Sagara, crown prince of Armag Denu. Now, who might you be?”

She was not too sure of the protocol for talking to royalty, but she assumed she would be safe by speaking as normal because she was also royalty. She decided to use a similar format to Freyr’s to give her name.

She spoke slowly due to nerves, “I am Fay, queen of Arcady.”

Freyr was surprised, and she guessed that the other occupants of the room were too when they gasped at hearing her statement.

“Ah, my beloved son, I see that you have met my guest. Let us all sit and enjoy our meal.”

Sagara had entered while they were not looking. He was accompanied by a man dressed in armor with a similar gait to Bernard’s. As they neared the table, Sagara motioned for everyone to sit, pointing out where each person should go. He placed Fay to his immediate right, surprising the armed man.

“Harold, you know that a royal guest should sit at the right hand of the king.”

“Especially if that guest is a queen father.”

Sagara seemed interested in the information, but Fay was not paying attention to him. She was looking at the man sitting next to her. The armored man, Harold, her father. She had not thought about how she would feel when she first saw her father, but she did not think that she would be so disinterested. She studied the man's appearance, his rough face, tanned skin, nicked armor. Everything made her think of Bernard, a halfhearted living version of Bernard.

“Your highness?”

She wondered what her mother thought about the man. She had never seen Bernard like Fay, so she would not be able to see the comparisons. Her mother also would have known him when he was younger, maybe there was something about him then. Something that was interesting instead of the boring man she saw now.

“Your highness?”

Fay looked at the king. She was so unused to having someone call her by such a title. It was difficult to remember to respond to it.

“I would like to introduce you to your father, Harold.” He was gesturing grandly as he spoke. “Harold, I would like to introduce you to your daughter, Fay, the queen of Arcady. The place where you apparently left your ring, instead of losing it.”

Fay looked at her father to see his reaction. He looked stunned. He then looked at her like it was the first time he was seeing her. After a moment, something in his eyes showed that he recognized her.

“I, you look like your mother. Loah. How is she?”

He spoke softly, as if he was not sure that he wanted anyone at the table to know what he was saying.

“My mother is dead.”

Fay did not tell him that she died giving birth to her, because she did not want to explain about who raised her. He saw the valley after all; he saw that there was no one but her mother.

Harold looked almost devastated after she spoke. She could see how it would be upsetting to find out that a person you once loved has died. Maybe he had thought that he could be with her mother again.

The king took all of this in with gleaming and greedy eyes. He looked like he was eager to know what was being said between the two. He seemed to enjoy the fact that the man was suffering, just like he enjoyed the man’s shock at learning Fay was his daughter.

Fay was thankful that the rest of the people at the table, with the exception of Freyr, were occupied in their own conversations. It was not nice to intrude in a person’s life so much. Fay felt uncomfortable that she had to see as much as she did.

“What, uh-hum, what,” her father paused, rethinking what he was going to say. “What brought you out of the valley, Fay.” He said her name hesitatingly, unsure of his right to say it.

Fay looked at Sagara before answering Harold. “I want to find out about something that happened in the valley 45 years ago, 27 years before I was born. The only place I can find them is here in Emnet.”

Food was finally brought to the table. It was placed before them on golden plates with extra heaped on silver trays. There was more food than any of them could eat. Fay occupied herself with her meal, making it so that conversation was impossible. She wanted to avoid any more awkward moments with her father and Sagara.

Before she knew it, another course was brought. There ended up being seven courses before it was clear the meal was over. Each course had been overdone, each plate overfilled. The people acted as if it was nothing unusual to have a meal like that. Only two people did not attempt to gorge themselves on everything that was put in front of them, Freyr and Harold. They ate moderately compared to the others, normally for anyone else.

The king stood, signaling that the meal was over. Everyone else followed, even if they were in the middle of taking a bite. Everyone stepped away from the tables and returned to their conversational groups, as they had been before the meal began.

Sagara gathered Freyr, Harold, and herself around him. He looked like he enjoyed being in the middle of them.

Freyr was the first to speak.

“I hope that you enjoyed the meal, your highness. It was nothing special, but the normal fare is usually quite extravagant.”

“Please, call me Fay. I enjoyed the meal very much.” Fay looked to her father to address the next part of her speech, “It was very nice to meet you, and I would like to speak with you again tomorrow.”

She finally looked to the king, “Thank you for inviting me to dinner. If you would excuse me, I have had a long journey and I am very tired. I will leave to go to bed if you do not mind.”

Fay did not give Sagara a chance to respond before she turned and left, she was ready to be out of the presence of so many strangers. She had not lied when she told him that she was tired, she had had a long day and had traveled very far. She had not slept in a

nice bed since she left home, even the bed at the inn was rough and lumpy compared to what she slept on at home. It would be nice to sleep in a bed as soft and comfortable as the one in her room looked.

She could not wait to renew her search in the morning. With a whole day to look, there was a good chance that she would be able to find information from around the same time as when the villagers died.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Once Fay dressed, she and Bernard set out for the records room. As they were navigating the halls, Fay took the lead. Bernard turned her in the right direction every time she hesitated or tried to make a wrong turn. They made it to the records room quickly, without encountering anyone. It appeared that the people of the castle were not early risers.

Once in the room, they returned to their places from the evening before. Fay felt like she was just beginning to make progress when she heard someone walk into the room. As she listened, she could hear that there was more than one person. They were talking together in low tones, hushed but not quite whispering.

Fay was curious about who had come in; she and Bernard had been the first to go there in many years. She did not think that they were there to look at the records. She silently crept to the edge of one of the bookshelves to get a look at the people.

Sagara was speaking to one of the members of the court that had been at the dinner the night before. The way they were leaned together and the fact that they had chosen to come to the records room seemed to indicate that they did not want anyone to overhear what they were saying.

Their attempts at secrecy made Fay want to know what was being said. She slipped closer and peered around the corner so that she could not be seen.

She saw the two men talking near the entrance. They did not seem to notice the room around them nor the little noise Fay made. Fay could see Bernard looking at the

men from behind a bookcase across from her. She motioned for him to stay hidden and be quiet. He nodded, understanding her meaning.

“My lord, my people will not be able to pay as much as you ask. I wish that I could give you that much, but I just am not able to.”

The nobleman had a pleading whining tone as he spoke.

“You will gather the money. After all, you will benefit from what is taken too. I need the money for my newest shipment of gems. There will be enough left over for you to have your share. Your people can afford to pay; it is not as if they will starve yet.”

“Yes, your highness. And you are very generous to me.”

“When I receive the taxes, I will send you your portion and your extra food. Remember, your people can always earn more.”

The two men left after the king finished speaking. When Bernard started towards her, Fay shook her head no, just leave her alone. She wanted to think about what she had heard. It would be easier if she could so alone.

As she resumed looking through the records, she thought about how the king spoke about collecting taxes. The way he planned to use the money was solely on himself, nothing that would help his people. It was terrible. As Fay had come to realize, a ruler was a person that was meant to take care of their people. What he did not use for himself, he was going to pass on to the nobleman. As a sort of obtaining fee, the man’s cut of what was collected.

The farmers and other people conducting business in Andefera had complained of the amount of taxes that was being collected from them. She wondered how they would

react if they knew that the money was being used to buy gemstones and decorate the palace. She did not think that any of them would approve; she certainly did not.

She was certain that Sagara would not be able to stay king if they knew what he did with their money and food. The people of Arcady would depose the royalty if they had done anything like that while they were alive. She could not stand to let something like that happen to people who needed help.

Just as she was deciding to do something about Sagara, she found a book that was written during the time of the Great Death. As she looked for any mention of what happened, she kept coming across the name Aeacus, a man in the military. Finally, after reading about many trips for war and gathering gold, she turned a page and saw the name Arcady.

The passage read: *The great king, Anhur, in this year sent a small portion of his army, led by his commander Aeacus, to the small kingdom of Arcady for the purpose of finding and obtaining the legendary fortunes there. Arcady is in possession of great riches like gold, silver, and gems.*

The army returned with a small amount of money and jewelry. Aeacus reported that the citizens of Arcady resisted their presence, resulting in the deaths of all but the royal family. The commander also reported that the reports of riches in Arcady were nothing more than stories. Despite this lack of legendary treasure, the army obtained the royal treasure.

Fay scanned the rest of the book to see if anything else was mentioned. The small passage was the only time Arcady was in record. There was nothing else about the Great Death either. That meant Bernard, Martha, and the rest of the villagers died because of

the king's greedy desire for more treasure. It was difficult information to face. Fay did not want to have to tell Bernard that he died because a king wanted imaginary gems.

She put the book up, and then slowly looked for Bernard. She decided to take the chance and tell him what she had discovered. Hopefully he really needed to know who killed him. It would take more investigation to find that out, and she had a feeling that her father would be able to provide the answer.

She found Bernard sitting with his back to a shelf, a pile of books next to him. He had a book open in his lap, his head bent down, and his eyes closed. She would have thought he was sleeping if she had not known that he was a spirit. Despite that, she did not want to disturb him.

“Bernard, Bernard,” she spoke softly so that she did not startle him too badly. “Bernard, I found a book that had something about the Great Death.” Fay stopped and waited for him to respond.

Bernard had jumped slightly when he heard his name called. He then gave her a blank stare as she spoke, not showing if he really understood what she was saying, or if he was just looking at her listening. Once she finished, he sat blinking, then turned and started to put up the books he had next to him.

Fay just stood and watched as he cleaned up around him. She did not try to help because she did not know where the books went, which meant she would not really be of any use.

“Would you like to hear what it said, Bernard?”

He nodded his head, still putting up the books.

Fay told him her best summary of what she had read. She watched his face as she spoke; waiting to see if that was the information he needed to pass on or not. She had a feeling by the time she finished, that he needed more information.

“There wasn’t anything else. That was the only book I found that had any information. I don’t think that the records here will have any more information.”

“What do you plan on doing next then?”

“I will need to speak to my father. I think he might know something.”

He looked surprised that she suggested they speak to her father. Fay knew though, that she would be able to find out more from him because of his job. As the head of the king’s army, he should know more about its history, what happened when they were in Arcadia.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Fay and Bernard went to look for her father after leaving the library. They looked for someone that would be able to show them where to find him. Bernard led Fay on the route that led to their rooms. Somehow, they managed to not run into anyone. Fay needed to find someone that would be able to show her the way.

“Well, Bernard, I suggest we just wander around until we find someone. We encountered plenty of people the last time we wandered around. It might work again.”

“If you think that is the best course of action, then you should lead the way.”

Fay started down the hall. She decided that she would only go down halls she had not gone down before; there was less chance of her ending back up at the records room. As they walked, Fay looked for people to ask. She kept walking higher up in the castle.

She saw a person at the end of a hall. As she got closer, she recognized the blond hair as belonging to Freyr. He was the perfect person to speak to. He was likely to know where to find her father, and he was the perfect person to talk to about what she had learned about his father.

“Freyr, I would like to speak to you about something.”

She surprised him when she called out. He jumped and turned to look at her. She was not surprised at that; she was easily startled herself.

“What is it you wish to speak to me about? I was just going to observe my father and the court.”

“I would like to speak to you about a private matter. And I would like to ask you where my father is, because I need to speak to him.”

“If you follow me, I will show you to my sitting room. We can talk there.”

Freyr looked confused about why she wanted to speak to him, but he led her towards a door at the end of the hall. He walked quickly, not looking back to see if she followed him.

Once in his room, he showed her to a seat. He waited to sit after her. Bernard moved to stand behind her, guarding her.

“What did you want to speak to me about?”

She was not sure how to start telling him what she had read. She did feel that he needed to know. From what she could tell, he seemed different from his father. She did not think that he would support what his father was doing.

“I overheard your father speaking earlier. He was speaking to one of the courtiers from last night. They were discussing collecting taxes.”

She paused to collect her thoughts and decide how she wanted to say the next part.

She did not look at him as she spoke. “He told the man that he wanted the money for gemstones. Then he told the man that he would get his share of the money and he would be sent food as well. Such actions are a direct sign of neglect of his people.”

“The people that I saw conducting trades suffered because of the taxes. The lower the social station, the worse off the person was. Many looked half-starved because they could not afford food.”

Freyr looked unsurprised when she described what his father had done. When she spoke about how the people suffered, he did begin to look surprised. He took a long moment before speaking.

“I knew that he spent extravagantly, but I did not know just how badly it affected the people.”

“I have not done much to be a queen, but I know that what he is doing is wrong. He needs to change how he governs.”

“That will never happen. The only thing that would be of use would be to have him deposed. If he were no longer the ruler, then I would be made king. I would be able to change things. I have never tried to do anything about it because I do not want the responsibility of ruling. But, if things have become so bad, then it must be done.”

Fay thought about what Freyr said. As bad as it would be to depose a king, sometimes it had to be done.

“I’m sorry, you’re right that it needs to be done though. He cannot continue to hurt the people that depend on him.”

They sat in silence before Fay remembered what her original purpose of finding him was.

“Could you please tell me how to find my father? I would like to speak with him, but I don’t know where he is.”

“Sure, I can take you to him. While you speak to your father, I will figure out how to get rid of my father. Sorry, I did not mean to be sarcastic. It is just that I am a little overwhelmed at what needs to be done.”

He got up and led Fay and Bernard out of the room. He did not say anything as he led them. They were outside when Fay started to wonder just where Freyr was taking them. She did not need to wonder for long after she saw soldiers training in a field.

“He should be out there, drilling the castle guard.”

He turned and walked away, then stopped and looked back. “Thank you for telling me about what you heard.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for bringing me all of the way out.”

Freyr left while she surveyed the field, looking for her father. It was difficult to tell the men apart when she was so far away. She began walking towards them again.

“They are very disciplined, Fay. That is the level of discipline I aim to achieve with my men.”

“It might be easier if I speak to my father alone, Bernard.”

She was worried that if he answered her questions, and Bernard heard, he would pass on. She was not ready for him to go yet. She also felt that her father was more likely to open up if Bernard was not around.

Bernard nodded his head in assent while staying where he was. She continued on, walking to her father. When her father saw her, he came over.

“Good afternoon, Fay. Is there something that you need?”

While he had been sure of himself on the field with his men, he was very unsure of himself when speaking to her.

“Yes, I think you can tell me something I want to know. It’s about the attack on Arcady. I want to know who was leading the attack.”

“Oh, well... your grandfather was the man who was in charge of the king’s army at the time.”

“My grandfather was Aeacus?”

He interrupted her, stopping her from asking any more. “He was also in charge of the attack on the valley. When I came back home after I delivered the letter, I asked my father about Arcady. Mainly it was because I wanted to find my way back. I also wanted to know more about where Loah was from. That was when he told me about what he did. He told me about how he led the men into the valley and killed all but the royal family because they had made a deal to save their lives.

“After I learned that my father had ordered the slaughter of the people in Arcady, I couldn’t go back. I could not go back to your mother as the son of the man who ruined her home. So, I just stayed away and worked for the king.

“If I had known that Loah was pregnant, I would have returned. I would never abandon a child. Even though we don’t know each other, you are my child, Fay.”

She did not say anything to her father because she was too upset. Not only had her grandfather led the people that killed the villagers, he was the man who directly killed Bernard. She did not know what to say. The only good thing was that she now understood why he never returned.

“Was there anything else you need to know, Fay?”

“No, no. Thank you. You told me what I needed to know.”

Because she was unsure of what to do, she turned around and walked away, leaving without saying anything more.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Fay wanted to leave right away, but Freyr asked her to stay in case he needed her to assist him while he ousted his father. He was sure that he would be able to convince some of the courtiers to stand behind him. Apparently, Freyr was not the only conservative person among the upper classes in Armag Denu.

The last few days had been interesting. Sagara had not been aware that Freyr was working to remove him from power, so he continued acting normally. That made it easier for Freyr to show what was happening and just what the king was doing wrong. As the day progressed, there were whispers and an undercurrent of something happening.

The next morning, Fay could tell that things were changing. All of the people she saw were on edge, whispering amongst themselves. By the morning of the third day, Freyr had Sagara under arrest. He was in the process of preparing his coronation. He was excited about the changes he was going to make for the people.

“Freyr, I am glad that you have been able to begin to remedy the damage that your father has done.”

“Yes, I would not have been able to do anything without your help.”

“Yes, well, I think it would be a good time for me to go home. I can’t do anything else here. It is time that I return home.”

Freyr nodded his head in understanding. He accepted that she had to go. Thankfully, he was willing to understand that she needed and wanted to go home. She found out everything she needed the previous few days.

“If you do not mind, I would like to send Harold with you, at least as far as Andefera. I need to inform some of our surrounding countries what happened, and your father would be the best to carry this type of message.”

Having her father along, would give her the opportunity to say goodbye in a more private setting. She would also have the opportunity to get to know him better as a person instead of an agent of the king.

“Thank you, it will be good to have my father with me for part of the journey.”

Bernard was not exactly happy when she told him that her father would be accompanying them to Andefera.

“There is no need for your father to accompany us. The man is not reliable.”

“Freyr wants him to go with us, Bernard. It’s not like I suggested that he come along. All I said was that we need to leave. Besides, this will give me time to get to know him a bit more and to say goodbye.”

“I still do not believe that he is responsible. His traveling with us could put you at risk.”

“Bernard, if the man were not reliable, he would not have the position that he does. He is the captain of the guard; I do not think that he will cause any unnecessary risks. Also, I’m his daughter. He will not put me in danger, not that there is a chance for any between here and Andefera.”

She was not sure why Bernard was being so stubborn about her father traveling with them, but she was not going to give in.

They were a day away from Andefera. Somehow, she had managed to not speak to neither Bernard nor her father. They had traveled in an awkward silence that she was ready to have broken. She did not care what they spoke about, as long as someone spoke.

She could tell that starting a conversation was going to fall to her. This was not something that she looked forward to. She was not as practiced at conversing, so it was not fair that this task fell to her.

She could not think of what to say to start the conversation. She wanted the two of them to at least get to the point where they were companionable. The real problem was Bernard. He did not want anything to do with Harold. He refused to ride near him or let him too near Fay. She knew that Bernard was just trying to protect her, but he was not being very communicative. He was acting as more of a barrier or wall than a protector.

“You know, Bernard thought that your soldiers were very disciplined when he saw them training the other day.”

She decided that it would be best if she went with a topic that they were both familiar with.

Harold looked slightly confused and unsure when he spoke, “Thank you...Bernard. As you know it takes a lot of time and effort to achieve that level of discipline.”

“I used to train my men to such a level, but because Fay does not seek out conflict, which is a good policy by the way, I no longer see the need for it. However, I do

have my men maintain physical readiness and I make sure that they are prepared to defend so that another massacre can be avoided.”

Fay was shocked by the blatant lie. Bernard had admitted to her that he had never been able to achieve such discipline with his men. And, she had never seen the soldiers train for defense, they only did basic exercises to keep their minds and bodies prepared.

Both men had a resolute look on their face that indicated that they would not be continuing the conversation on their own. Fay decided that it would be best to leave the men to their silence, especially after Bernard decided to lie.

The red walls of Andefera were in sight. Bernard had told Harold that he would be leaving with Fay when the road split. Because he did not leave any room for him to do so, Harold did not protest the decision. He only added that he would say his goodbyes before he continued on to the town.

Harold took charge as they neared the walls, and led the group to the side of the road where they could speak.

“I want you to know Fay, that I am very glad that I was able to meet you. I will try to return to Arcady soon so that I can see you again...I know that I have not known you long, but I will miss you, my daughter.”

Fay saw that he had tears in his eyes. She could feel that he truly meant what he had said.

“Thank you. I am glad that I know why you never returned.” She was not sure if she should say more, so she settled with, “good bye” before turning her horse back to the road towards home.

She heard Bernard follow behind her, but she did not hear Harold's horse. She had not been sure about what to say to her father. She would not miss him, and she did not care if she ever saw him again; but Martha taught her enough about acknowledging other people's emotions, that she knew better than saying how she felt.

She glanced back over her shoulder to check on her father. He had not moved from where they had left him. She could see the beginning of tears in his eyes, and pitied him because of his unreciprocated sadness at their parting.

Chapter Thirty

When Fay and Bernard were on the mountain, it finally felt like they were on their way home. Fay could only hear the sounds of the forest, the horses moving along the path, and her own breathing. Until that moment, she did not realize just how much noise a living person made. The quiet that was left after days spent among the living was glorious. She had missed the silence that allowed her to hear the rest of the world.

Now that she could finally hear the world as it was meant to be, she was able to think about how she would go about telling the villagers their story. She would ask that they hold a celebration, and at the end she would tell them a story, just like at any other celebration. The only difference would be the effect of the story.

She did not want to say good bye to Bernard that way, she wanted him all to herself. Besides, his story was more complicated than the others. Such a personal thing should not be aired to the whole valley, he deserved better.

“Bernard, I think I want to tell everyone what I learned during the story telling after a celebration, do you think that would be a good idea?”

He thought a moment before he said, “I think that would be the gentler way of telling them Fay. They will be happy and more open to what you have to say.”

“Good, good. I...I did learn a bit more about what happened from Harold. I want to tell you so that we can be on the same page when I tell the villagers.”

She glanced at Bernard as she lied about her motivations. She knew that he would never let her tell him his story before she was home safe and done with her mission. If he

knew that she was letting him pass on, he would feel like he was abandoning her, and she did not want him to be upset at the end.

“I think that is a good idea Fay. This way you will be prepared for when you speak to the villagers.”

She took a deep calming breath as she prepared to tell Bernard about his death.

“So, 45 years ago the king of Armag Denu heard rumors about what created the wealth of the valley kingdom of Arcady. He sent the commander of his army, Aeacus, to lead a small section of his soldiers and obtain the small kingdom’s treasure.”

When she said her grandfather’s name, Bernard’s form flickered, momentarily disappearing. He did not react like he noticed the discrepancy in his visibility.

“Aeacus was not only the leader for commands, he was leading when the army attacked the people of the valley. He was the one who gave the command to kill the villagers, and he led his men into the valley killing many.”

When she glanced at Bernard again, she noticed that he was not completely solid. She was able to see shadows of the trees that they passed through him. He was starting to fade. She thought about stopping because she was not ready to let him go, but she could not because it would not be fair to him.

“There was one distinguishing feature about Aeacus, the silver and carnelian signet ring that he wore, even during battle. He... he did not take pleasure from killing the people of Arcady, but he did not mourn them either. He simply viewed it as his duty.”

Fay was speaking in a whisper by the time she finished. She did not look at Bernard again, because she could feel him looking at her. She had felt his eyes on her the

moment she mentioned the ring, the same ring that was still around her neck and once again resting outside of her overdress, visible to all.

She felt small and guilty as she looked at Bernard, more than she had ever felt in her life.

“I am so sorry that my grandfather was the one who killed you Bernard. I had hoped that it could have been someone who was completely unconnected to me. But instead, I found out that you, and the rest of the villagers, died because of my family. My mother’s parents, my father’s parents, they are the cause of your death. I wish that you did not have to know, but it was necessary for you to pass on.”

She was pleading with him, and when she tried to look him in the eyes so that he could see that she meant what she said, she could barely see him. He was only as present as the misty haze that hung over the waterfall on bright sunny mornings.

“I do not blame you for what your forbearers have done, Fay. You have never been anything like your mother’s parents, why would you be like your grandfather? You are not their child; you are the valley’s child. We kept you and raised you and made you into something, someone who is connected only to the land. Your people are not part of you, they are not what makes you who you are.

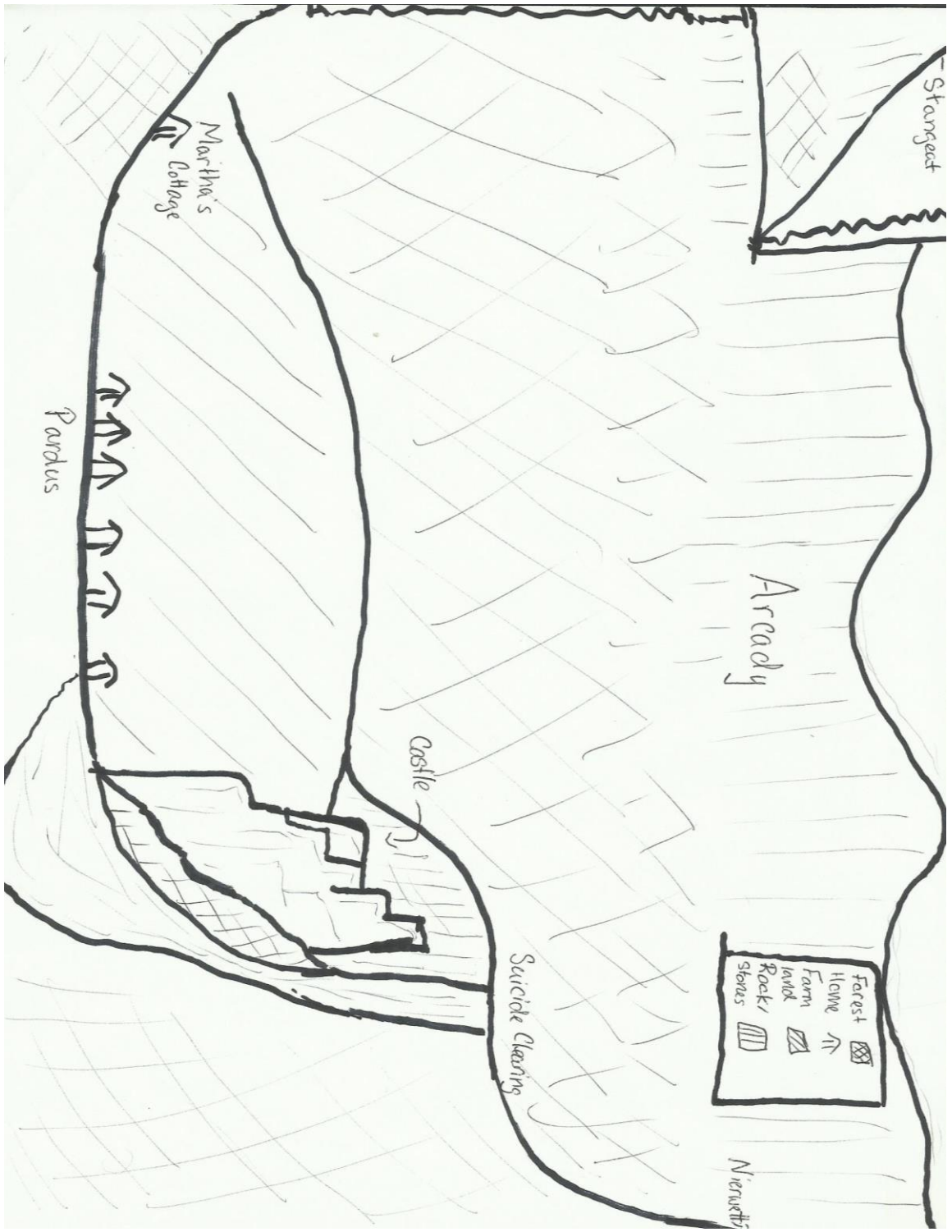
“I did need to know, Fay. My only regret is that you told me now instead of waiting for us to have returned to the valley. I have protected you from the moment you were born, and now I will not be here to see you home.”

The horses were still moving, following the trail they had made on their way down. Fay reached her hand out to touch Bernard one last time, but as her hand reached the place where his was, he disappeared.

She rode with her arm outstretched hoping that he would have one last resurgence of strength. But when it was clear that he was gone, Fay let her arm fall.

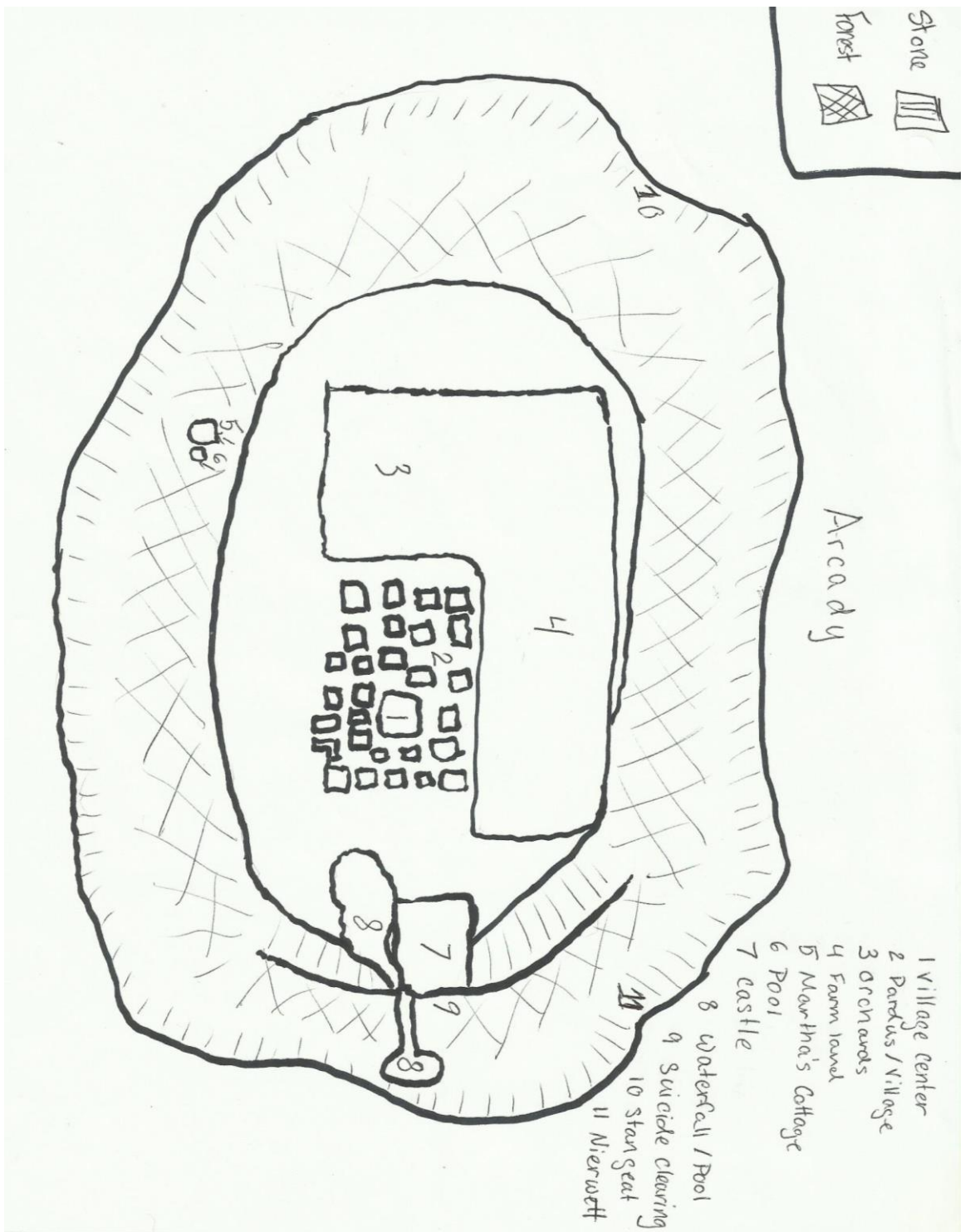
She continued riding up the mountain next to the empty horse, thinking about her plan to tell the villagers about their deaths to help them pass on.

Appendix A.
Arcady Elevations Map

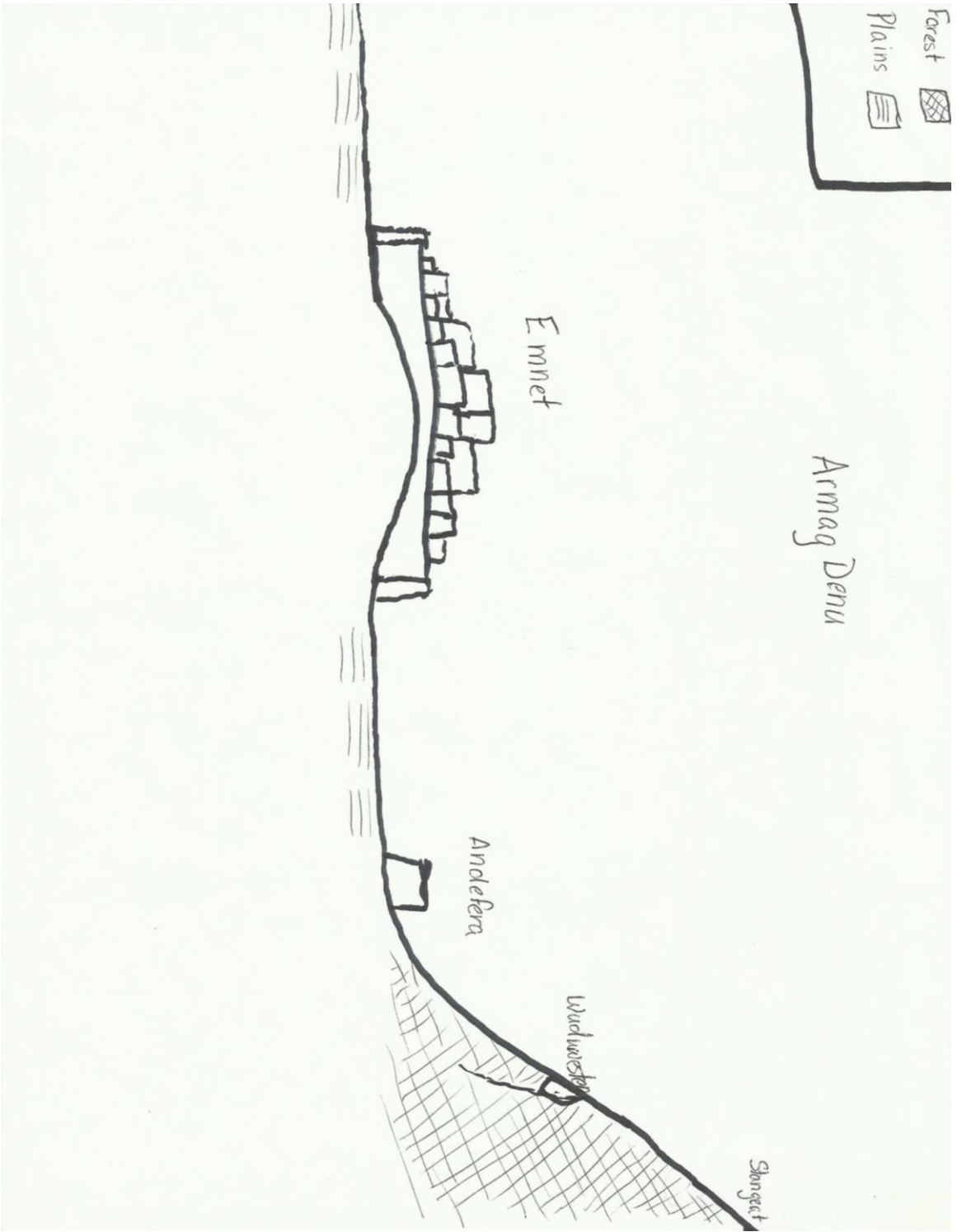


Appendix B.

Arcady Map



Appendix C.
Armag Denu Elevation Map



Appendix D.
Armag Denu Map

