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The Storyteller

Susan Renee Page
Northern Michigan University

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THE STORYTELLER

By

Susan Renee Page

THESIS

Submitted to
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MASTER OF ART

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2008

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Susan Renee Page is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Rebecca Johns Date

Reader: Diane Sautter Date

Interim Department Head: Ray Ventre Date

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NAME: Page, Susan Renee

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ABSTRACT

THE STORYTELLER

By

Susan Renee Page

When her childhood friend Wren fails to return from his rite of passage, Telyn leaves her home to journey to the Citadel, the mountainous fortress of the magic-wielding Morganites. “The Storyteller” is the tale of Telyn, a sheltered young woman of Leyton village, who journeys out into the world and learns that her place in society does not dictate who she is; rather, she has it within herself to dictate the role she chooses. On the way she will meet new people and have new experiences that will change her. At its core, “The Storyteller” is about self-realization and overcoming others’—and your own—perceptions, using identity as a central theme.

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2008

DEDICATION

A long time ago, I promised my first dedication to my best friend Kendra Litz for her birthday. Thank you for every day since we built the paddle boat. It was a marvelous boat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my parents, David and Sun Page, and my sister, Stephanie, for their love and support; my thesis director, Rebecca Johns, for her advice and guidance; BJ Bosco (President of the Blaith fan club), Gina Chartier, Melody Edwards, Kim Hoyum, Megan Keller, and Jamie Reed for their help and friendship; Lindsey Rizzi for convincing me to visit Colorado; Mike Biery for investing in my future; and Tim McVannel for the encouragement to pursue writing in the first place. Without the help of these people, this story would've never been told.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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Chapter One

The women of Leyton scrubbed the long hall clean as they did for every village boy's coming-of-age feast, but Telyn could see the subtle differences between today's preparation and those of the recent past. The men joked as they butchered a sheep and a couple of pigs for supper. The women chatted as they cooked with an enthusiasm that had been lost due to a harsh winter and meager harvest a year ago.

Today's celebration was to commemorate the departure of Wren, the blacksmith's boy and the town's favored son. He had turned seventeen less than a sennight ago, and it was now time for his parents to send him out to prove he'd reached manhood by venturing into the world and return with some boon for the village. The last boy who was sent out brought back with him new ideas about farm irrigation from Glen, the town just past the Gold Wood to the north.

When Wren returned there would be another feast. His find, no matter its nature, would be shown and praised. Afterward, he would ask his intended to marry him. He would most likely select one of the pretty girls who flitted about in colorful kirtles and embroidered aprons while doing their chores, such as the baker's girl, a pretty little brunette with large doe eyes and ample curves. Wren would be smart to choose a respectable young girl like her. They could be married within a fortnight of his return.

Telyn would watch it all happen, just as she'd done since she came into her mentor's care. As storyteller and apprentice, she and Caethes lived on the fringes of Leyton society. They were neither shunned nor accepted. They simply existed, and at nineteen, Telyn had no illusions about her station and lack of prospects. Even now she could not justify why she was running her callused fingers through her long blond hair, or why she'd taken care with her appearance at all. It would shame Caethes, the woman who'd raised her since she was twelve. She turned to regard her mentor lying asleep on the cot behind her. Her mentor was sleeping more and more of late. Soon Telyn would be the master storyteller, and alone. Her shoulders sagged at the thought. She turned back to the smudged looking-glass that was tacked to the wall above the wash basin. Everything had a gloomy pallor in the mirror. It made her usually cream-colored skin match her dull, dove-gray eyes.

"Telyn?" The old woman's head barely rose off the meager pillow.

"Yes, Caethes, I am here," she answered, turning her face to her mentor.

"Is it time?"

Telyn rose from the stool and peeked out the door. Several of the village women were stoking the great pyre until the flames leapt into the dusk sky. Other villagers were gathering, greeting each other. A crisp wind nibbled at Telyn's fingers as she closed the door.

"They are beginning to gather around the fire." Telyn approached the woman, who had pushed her frail body up into a sitting position. Her breath was heavy, labored.

"Shall I help you ready yourself?"

Caethes held up a hand with thin fingers and large knobby knuckles that resisted movement. “No,” she replied. “You are still young, girl. Go. Enjoy the feast. I can manage myself for one night.”

Telyn began to move closer. “But—”

“When I am gone, you will be the mistress, and not as readily accepted. You should enjoy it while there is time,” she said.

“I’m not accepted now, Caethes.” She paused for a moment, letting her fingers skim the surface of the cold water in the wash basin. “I may even be less welcome than you or any other storyteller in the province. Perhaps even the whole kingdom.”

Caethes clucked her tongue. “And here I’d forgotten how young you were, still prone to flights of the dramatic.”

“I would think that being a bit dramatic would be an advantage in our station.”

The woman’s skin wrinkled as her lips curved upwards at the corners. “Only with restraint, like all other gifts and talents.”

With a small gesture, Caethes signaled for the girl to take her leave. Telyn made a light bow and left, walking toward the fire. People gave her looks, a mixture of sneering dislike and indifference, but no words of greeting. She clutched part of her skirt in her hands as she waited for heat to soak through her threadbare clothing. A ring of logs circled the pyre, and she sat on the far side of the flames with her back to the town’s hall.

Telyn extended her hands, palms out, toward the heat as every seat was filled save for the ones that flanked her. Her former childhood friends, most married now, gossiped about the blacksmith’s boy, wondering who he would select to be his wife.

Even though he was two years her junior, Wren and Telyn had been playmates and friends in their early life. They had been inseparable. The old gossips even used to say that the pair of them were destined to be joined together in marriage. The blacksmith's son and the chieftain's daughter—it would have been a strong match that benefitted both families. That was until Telyn was disowned by her father. The accident had seen to that.

As a child Telyn had been adventurous, more so than her twin brother, Owain. She was always dragging Owain and Wren from one place to another, getting into mischief. It was harmless fun. But then her brother died, and in only a short time, she'd gone from an honored and beloved child of Leyton to the lowest station in their society, the ward of an outsider. As tradition dictated, her name was stripped from her and replaced. When once she went by Telyn ap Gavin, she now bore the name of Telyn ap Storyteller. The shame of descent in status had brought her mother to an early grave, a fact Telyn hadn't forgotten, and neither had her father.

Telyn felt a small tug at her skirts. She looked down to see a tiny, chubby fist clutching at the worn beige ruffles of her best skirt. The toddler, sitting in the dirt with his other fist resting against his mouth, looked up at her with clear blue eyes. She smiled at the boy and patted the mop of brown curls that crowned his head. "Can I help you, little one?"

"Wanna story," he answered.

She smiled. "Do you have a favorite?"

"The Two Toads." It was a different voice that answered her question. It was deeper, stronger, and playful.

Telyn stiffened. If she were honest with herself, she would admit that it was his voice she heard in the recesses of her dreams. She could feel the warmth of his body now, directly behind her. “Wren,” she whispered.

A long, sinewy leg arched over the log, and soon he was sitting next to her. His warm, muscled thigh pressed against her own. She was always amazed at how the thin child she’d known had become the handsome, dark-haired youth with eyes the color of tanned leather.

“Telyn,” he said. “I see you have my little brother begging you for a story.”

She realized she was staring and cast her eyes down. “He wasn’t begging. He asked but once, and I was going to oblige him, but then you came and interrupted—”

He laughed, causing long strands of his hair to fall behind his shoulders. “I did not mean to force an explanation or an apology from you.” He lay his roughened hand atop hers. “I only meant to imply that you have enchanted him as you’ve enchanted the other children in the village. They love to hear you tell your stories, Telyn.”

“I…” she began, then jerked her hand away. “I am not trying to bewitch them, and I am sorry I misunderstood you, Wren.”

“I told you, I didn’t need an apology.” He tilted her head up to face him, his fingers lingering on her chin a bit too long. “You needn’t feel obligated to agree with me. Not on any matter.”

He smiled again, and she felt a knot settle low in her belly. She looked down at her feet and toed the dirt. His gaze was too intense. Too familiar. Telyn wasn’t used to this attention from anyone older than the child who sat at her feet now. Most of the villagers paid her no mind, and if they did, it was only out of pity. She did not feel pity

from Wren. She felt something else. Something that began in her stomach and shone in her eyes. She could never tire of watching him, all the smiles and small waves he'd given to her freely over the years. He was the only one who didn't make her feel like she didn't belong.

“Telyn?”

She shook her head. “Yes?”

“It must've been a happy thought. You were smiling.” He ran his fingers over the loose fabric at the hem of her sleeve, and she felt the barest touch of skin on her wrist. “I hope you were thinking of—”

“Stories,” she finished, noticing that the other children of the village had gathered. “I was thinking that I have kept these little ones waiting long enough.” Turning her full attention to the children, she clapped her hands and smiled wide. “Now I believe I had a request for a telling of ‘The Two Toads.’”

She felt his weight ease off the log. When he was gone, she took a deep breath. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see him talk with the other villagers. They were laughing at something she couldn't hear. It was better this way, being separated from Wren.

* * *

When the first rays of sunlight cut through the predawn haze, Telyn had been awake for more than an hour. She remained on the brink of sleep no matter what position she shifted to on her pallet, never able to plunge herself headlong into unconsciousness. Wren was leaving soon. It was a thought that tainted everything. Her presence at his farewell wasn't required, but she felt a need to go. She was already dressed and her hair styled

into an intricate braid that she looped into a bun. If anyone cared to ask why she had put the effort into her appearance, she would deny the truth.

The sun was cresting over the town's thatched huts as she made her way outside to wish Wren a safe journey. Telyn slipped out of the hut while her mentor slept. As she drew the door closed, a large, callused hand covered her mouth, and she felt a strong, bar-like pull at her midsection. His hot breath wisped over her ear. As his head descended closer to her face, she stilled.

"Relax, Telyn, it's me." His hand released her mouth, and his fingers trailed down the lines of her jaw and neck. "I was hoping you'd come out soon."

She struggled to control her breath. "Wren, what are you doing?"

"I had to see you before I left," he whispered. "Alone."

"Why?"

With gentle pressure, he turned her around and drew her head up until they were gazing at each other. "Because I wanted you to know of my intentions."

"I don't care whom you marry," she told him as she wrenched her face from his hand.

"I want to bring Leyton a new story, one it's never heard before."

"Why?" she asked, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. "You should bring back some new farming technique or something about animal husbandry, not a story. A story won't help Leyton survive. You can't feed on stories. They're useless, Wren."

“This story isn’t for the village.” He gripped her shoulders, holding her a scant few inches from him. “It’s for you, a betrothal gift. I hope that when I return you will accept my suit.”

“Your suit? Wren, it isn’t—”

“I want to marry you. I’ve always wanted this, Telyn.” He brushed a thumb over her cheek, and she couldn’t help but savor the feel of it. “I thought you knew.”

“And you know I can’t, not since Owain.”

He drew her shaking body into his arms and hugged her. “I don’t care.”

“I killed him, Wren.”

“No.” He stroked her hair.

“But I did. I wanted to go to the river. I…” Her throat closed. She felt the wetness of his shirt from her tears.

“You didn’t kill Owain. We were children.”

“It doesn’t matter. It was my fault.”

“Stop, Telyn. It was an accident.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

He pulled away and placed a kiss on her forehead.

“You have to go,” she whispered.

“I know.” He hesitated before taking a step back. He reached for her hand and held it firmly in his own. “I will come back with a story for you, Telyn, even if I have to go beyond the boundaries of the Gold Wood to the Citadel’s library.” With a final squeeze of her hand, he walked away. Telyn remained hidden in the shadows.

She watched him as he hugged his mother and shook his father's hand. As he picked up his gear, she leaned against the hut. Other people had begun to gather. They wished him a good journey, but just before he left, he looked back and nodded in her direction. She couldn't move. She could only watch as he turned around and walked out of her view. She knew that he'd return in only a few days, but she still wanted to remember the sight of him in the dawn light, an image to last her until he returned.

Chapter Two

The days after Wren's departure passed one into the other in a haze of chores and monotony. They had rarely interacted, so Telyn shouldn't feel his absence day after day, but she did. Doing her errands was keeping her busy, but she still felt alone.

For many nights since Wren had been gone the memory of her brother's accident had replayed in her dreams. The nightmare always started the same: She was clutching her brother's hand, dragging him toward the river. One of the men in the village said a tree had fallen and now bridged the river. Telyn wanted to see it, but she never went anywhere without Owain and Wren. They ran to the ashy-brown tree and watched the river rush under it. Telyn thought it would be fun to cross the river, and despite the boys' protests, she hauled herself on the tree trunk. Her arms out for balance, she tiptoed her way over the bridge. She dared the others to join her. Wren and Owain climbed onto the tree. All three children crossed the bridge and laughed when they jumped down onto opposite shore, kicking up the brightly colored fall foliage.

Soon dusk began to fall. At sundown, the new storyteller, Caethes, was going to tell one of her tales, one the children were anxious to hear, so Telyn took the lead again with Owain close behind. They strutted back, more confident than before. Telyn was nearly to the end of the branch when her step faltered. Gaining her balance, she tried to move forward, but her skirt caught on a broken stub. She tugged and then tugged harder.

On her third pull she freed herself but lost her balance and fell, landing hard on the tree and crying out.

“Tel!” Owain yelled.

Telyn tried to push herself up, and Owain reached down to help her, but then he shifted and lost his balance, tumbling into the roiling water of the river. She saw his blond hair disappear into the waves. She went to fling herself toward her brother, but Wren held her back. She knew it was too late. He was gone.

Now Wren, too, was gone, off to look for a story for her. Telyn was tired of waking in the middle of the night and she missed Wren. After a month, he had still not returned to Leyton. The villagers had begun to look on the blacksmith’s family with sympathy. The loss of any child, especially a strapping lad like Wren, would take its toll.

On the one-month anniversary of Wren’s departure, Telyn was gathering water from the village well when she saw her father, the village chieftain, escort Wren’s family into the longhouse. The blacksmith’s pace was slow and careful. His wife followed with their youngest son. A few moments later, the piecing sob of a woman penetrated the wooden walls and thatched roof of the building. Her father had most likely told his friends that their son’s return was no longer expected. The heartache conveyed in that one wretched wail was nearly more than Telyn could bear.

The others didn’t know of her role in Wren’s disappearance. All this misery, the mournful gait of the blacksmith, and Wren’s little brother—how her heart ached to comfort . But she could do naught, even though she was the only one who knew what Wren had gone in search of. A story for his best friend’s sister, his intended—her.

Her twin had died when they'd been but twelve, his body swept away in the swollen river after she'd stumbled. It was Wren who'd kept her from following her brother after his golden curls disappeared under the surface. It was her last vision of Owain, twelve and drowning, wet hair plastered to his face. If only she hadn't thought it a lark to tiptoe over the fallen oak that spanned the river's breadth. If only her skirt hadn't caught on the nub of a branch. If only she hadn't cried out as the bark bit into the tender flesh of her palm. If only she'd died that day instead of Owain.

A warm hand squeezed her shoulder. "Telyn, did you not hear my call?" The hand shook her shoulder as her mistress asked again. "Telyn?"

She blinked twice before lowering her hand from her lips and regarding the master storyteller. "I'm sorry, Caethes. Did you have need of me?"

"No, I merely wanted some company while walking."

"I don't know if walking is a good idea," Telyn said, glancing up. Gray clouds were visible overhead, covering the afternoon sun, and they seemed to pulse in anticipation of a new downpour. "We may be in for a storm soon, and I have no wish to run about trying to fetch my mistress after the strong winds have seen fit to carry her off."

Caethes rolled her eyes and stabbed the dirt with her cane. "Gods, what have I ever done to deserve such a cheeky apprentice? I must have razed a village in my sleep."

"And I care for you too, Caethes, but in all honesty I feel that we should take shelter soon before the weather worsens." She added in a low voice, "It seems even Nature is upset at the thought of losing Wren."

Encircling her arm about Telyn's waist, the old woman led her back to their poor hut before the clouds unleashed their load. As Telyn stoked the small fire, her mistress

shed her heavy wool shawl and dress, replacing it with a loose linen shift. The cot creaked when Caethes lay down on it and pulled the worn brown blankets up to her chin. All the while Telyn sat back on her haunches and stared at the flames flickering in the hearth.

“What is on your mind, child?”

Telyn looked down as she poked the embers. “Nothing of consequence.”

“You’ve never been one to hide things from me. I wonder if this is the long-awaited petulant streak appearing.” Caethes paused. “I’d heard so much about it when you came into my care, but then you were always so meek.”

“Unruliness has its consequences,” she began. “I learned my lesson young.”

“Aye, you did.”

Telyn stood up and wiped her hands on her apron. Moving to her own cot, she pulled out her mending. The needle flew as she concentrated on sewing a patch onto her gray skirt. The brown patch clashed with the gray, but it would keep her warm for another winter. As she looked at her handiwork, the sound of snores drifted toward her. Her mistress was asleep. Telyn set aside the needlework, walked to the door, and eased it open. The rain had begun to let up, and with a last look at Caethes, Telyn slipped out of the hut. She walked toward the ring of logs and took a seat on the wet timber. From her vantage point she could see the smoke coming from the blacksmith’s hut. A family had lost its son, and it was her fault. Again. She threaded her fingers through her loose blond hair as she tilted her chin down. Her hair plastered to her face and neck, and her sodden wool dress weighed down her already burdened shoulders. She took in long, chilled breaths. The early autumn air had turned cold from the rain.

Wren was gone. There would be no more smiles from his mouth as she retrieved well water in the mornings, no nods of acknowledgement when they happened to pass each other. No more small bundles of supplies and food left on her doorstep. Though he'd never admitted to it, Telyn always knew they were a gift from him.

It had been a full month since he'd left to find her a story. He left to get her a present—her and no one else. First her brother had died, and now she'd bear the weight of Wren's death, too, even if the others had no inkling of his true intentions. No. She couldn't be responsible for another death. It had only been one month, and Wren had always been resourceful. The villagers were only assuming he was dead due to his long absence, but what if he'd been waylaid in some other village? What if he were still at the Citadel searching their tomes for her story? What if he needed help? Her help?

* * *

For the next couple of days, Telyn worked harder than ever. She stacked split logs near the hut and carried several inside. She washed clothes, filled water bags, and performed numerous other tasks that she would normally complete at a more sedate pace. She still had not told Caethes of her plans. It was a difficult subject to broach. How do you tell someone that you are leaving?

It was when she was hauling a water bucket from the well that Caethes approached her with a hand on her back and a cane to steady her. "You've been working hard," her mistress said.

"I just wanted to get things done."

Caethes nodded and then glanced up at the sky. She shadowed her eyes with one wrinkled hand. It was bright with barely a wisp of clouds. "It looks as if the skies will be clear tonight, clear enough for the stars to shine."

Telyn lifted the bucket to the well's ledge and filled her pail.

"It reminds me of the night Sir Colin and Lady Morgan began their quest."

Hefting the weight of the pail, the apprentice studied her mistress. "Is there a reason you are mentioning this?"

"Clear skies bode well for journeys, and tonight there shall be a clear sky."

Her mentor walked away as the water bucket drooped to Telyn's side. Lifting the pail up to her chest, Telyn hurried after her mistress as fast as she could without letting the water slosh onto her breasts. As soon as she slipped into the doorway of their hut, she placed the pail down and sat at Caethes' feet while her mentor settled on her cot.

"Caethes," she said, "are you...that is to say, are you suggesting that I might put particular stock into the condition of tonight's sky?"

A withered hand stroked the loose blond hair atop her apprentice's head. "I have known you since you were a child, and I've seen how you are since he left." The hand slipped under the young woman's chin and tilted her face up to meet her eyes. "You miss him, and there is something more that you don't wish to share."

Telyn opened her mouth to speak, but Caethes motioned her to stop.

"I didn't mean to extract a confession from you. Just know that I understand."

With a final soft stroke of Telyn's hair, her mentor yawned. "I believe I shall take a nap now."

Telyn nodded and helped her mentor to bed, bringing the cover up to the old woman's shoulders.

* * *

The stars did shine like fireflies that night, so brightly that Telyn couldn't help but think that the gods were smiling down upon their little world. After her mistress had fallen asleep and the noise of the village quieted into a noiseless slumber, Telyn eased the hut's door open and slipped into the night with her small, patched bag, one water-skin, and the woolen cloak that fell to her knees.

No lights burned along the paths of the town, and everyone was tucked into his or her warm bed. The wind blew around her too-short skirt, exposing her ankles, but she had serviceable leather walking boots that did fit. The weather was turning colder now that the harvest time was ending. At dawn the villagers would be readying their crops for harvesting. Caethes Storyteller would wake in an empty, ramshackle hut, and the people of Leyton would acknowledge Telyn's disappearance and call her a deserter. The added disgrace would shame her mistress, and that knowledge hurt Telyn more than if the barbs were thrown at her.

Clouds of dust and dried vegetation rose around each nervous step she took on the dirt path to the Gold Wood. The forest stretched across the land between Leyton and the Moors of Morgan that lay at the foothills of the mountains.

"Where are you going?" The voice halted Telyn in her tracks. It reverberated like grit and pebbles grinding against one another. Slowly she turned toward the village she'd just left and found a dark figure in the middle of the road. The man was tall and broad-shouldered with a strong stance.

“Chieftain, you startled me.”

“I expected more from you, Telyn ap Storyteller.” Her father’s leather shoes made soft thuds on the dirt as he moved closer. “You were chosen to become Leyton’s storyteller.”

Now that he was barely two paces from her, Telyn could see the lines in his face that marked his troubles since had become leader and the dark coloring of his hair that blended into the night. Her hand inched up to wipe her tears, but the chieftain’s hand was faster. His roughened fingers grasped her chin and jerked her head up. She tried in vain to look away from the steely gray gaze too similar to her own. His eyes searched her for something that she did not know. She thought it felt like genuine concern, a look from her childhood that she’d almost forgotten about. A moment passed and then another before he finally freed her.

“You know nothing save for your own foolish desires,” he said in a low voice.

Her fingers sweated despite the cold, and she wiped them anxiously on her cloak.

“I know my place, sir. I intend to reclaim it after I return.”

“Return from what?”

“I want to find Wren.” The air became heavy with things unsaid, and it weighed on Telyn’s shoulders like a sack of the miller’s coarse flour. “I promise I shall return, Father. You have my word.”

He crossed his thick arms over his chest and widened his stance. He studied her, making her shrink back into her thin brown cloak and let her flaxen-colored curls hide her face. “What good is your word against all that is beyond our fields?” he asked her.

She said nothing, and her body wavered. “Here,” he said as he bent to retrieve something from the ground. He tossed her a large, bulging rucksack, and the heavy weight smacked against her chest. Her hands juggled the bag before steadying the load. Telyn clutched it against her breasts. She looked up at her father, her eyes wide. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He nodded. “Journey well.”

He turned and walked toward the village. In her gut, Telyn felt words bubbling up. They rose over the barriers of tradition and stricture. Telyn tried to hold them back, but the chieftain’s kindness had seemed to stunt her common sense. “I promise,” she called after him, “I will return with Wren.”

She watched him as he disappeared into the night. When she could stare at the darkness no longer, she hefted the rucksack from the ground and fitted the straps over her shoulders. The pack and the small rolled pallet weighed as much as a large stone or more, causing her body to sag from the burden. Telyn covered the sack with her cloak and began to walk.

Hours passed. Her feet ached from her heel to the tips of her blistered toes. The rucksack felt as if it weighed twenty stone. As she saw the edge of a shadowy line of trees, her knees buckled from exertion, and she fell. Dust rose from the road, and she coughed as it floated into her throat. With the back of her hand, she wiped dust and dried spittle from her lips. Telyn looked up and saw the forest lay no more than thirty yards away from where she’d fallen. As she pulled herself up, she kept her eyes trained on the edge of the forest. The branches still appeared to be full of foliage despite it being mid-autumn. As she moved closer and closer, she could see several leaves the color of raw

gold and copper drifting toward the ground. The leaves floated on chilled currents of air that beckoned her to enter the dark depths of the woods. She could find shelter from the wind in the trees. She could rest under the gold leaves.

When she reached the first tree, she leaned heavily on it despite the rough bark that clawed against her clothes and the pale skin of her hands as she caught her breath.

Telyn walked further into the wood, and the wind's pressure weakened. She found a small clearing that was large enough for her bedroll and a small fire. Dropping her bag, she leaned against the cool bark of a tree that stood a little ways from the others. The air smelled damp and earthy like the fields after the rain. Her eyes closed. The leaves rustled overhead, creating a musical shuffle that lulled her into a quiet contentment she never quite achieved in the little hut she shared with her mistress. A wolf howled in the distance, the haunting sound piercing the frail stillness.

Her eyes snapped open, and a dull ache slid its way into her muscles and bones. Sleep was calling, but she pushed herself from the tree to stave off idleness and began searching for stones to build a circle. When she had set the circle for the fire, she gathered dried bits of wood and leaves. With a flint and a piece of steel from her sack, she sparked a flame, nurturing it into heat that would survive during her rest. She rolled out the pallet and sat staring at the small fire she'd made with her blanket and cloak wrapped around her. Another wolf howled in the darkness, and Telyn wondered if it was answering the call of the first wolf. A yawn came from her exhaustion as faint beams of morning light filtered through the canopy of leaves. She too said farewell to the night. Then she bunched her cloak into a makeshift pillow and slept, clutching her rucksack tightly against her chest.

Chapter Three

Heated tree sap crackled in the fire, splitting the small log with a sharp *crack*. Telyn was stretching on her back, working the sleep out of her body, when a snuffling sound in the nearby bushes snapped her eyes open. She sat up, clutching the brown wool blanket to her chest, to see a large, dappled gray wolf sitting at the foot of her pallet. His long head was tilted to the side, his ears perked up in curiosity. With one green eye and one blue, he watched her take fast, shallow breaths, her chest rising and falling in rapid succession nearly as fast as her pulse. The wolf straightened his head, tracking the slow movement of her hand as she reached for her bag, and he stood up on muscular legs as her fingertips brushed the sack. Her hand froze when he began to walk toward her on steady paws.

The wolf's warm breath rolled across her face. Her journey would end before it had even begun.

Then the wolf's rough tongue stroked her face, leaving a wet trail. His nose nudged her cheek, and his fur tickled her ear. She giggled, and he nudged her again with his snout and large forepaws, pushing her onto her back. Her giggle became a laugh, and she pushed the animal off of her. He slinked away and sat at the end of her pallet.

She raised the blanket up, covering the loosened laces of her shirt. The wolf's gaze made her uncomfortable, though she did not know why. As if sensing her distress,

he stood and walked in a slow, small circle, then sat with his back to her. His head turned toward her. The directness of his stare said, "Trust me." Then he turned away again.

Telyn waited, but the wolf didn't look at her again. She dropped the blanket, and her fingers quickly did up the laces, then straightened her bodice. When she finished, she stood and tried to smooth the wrinkles from her skirt. With her dress set to rights, she called to the wolf, "You may turn around now."

He looked over his shoulder before turning to face her, and again, the directness of his stare caused her to fidget. Her hands sought her too-wide-sleeves, and she clutched the abundant material. The blue-and-green gaze pierced her unease. The wolf's silence beckoned her own voice to fill the void. "How do I look?" she asked.

The wolf raised his paw and stroked his head. Telyn raised her own hand to her hair and felt a leaf tangled in the strands. Her skirt billowed out as she spun around. She dragged her fingers through the long tresses of her blond hair, picking out bits of twigs, leaves, and dirt. She continued to comb her hair with her fingers, and when satisfied, she took care to braid her hair in the style her mother had taught her. It was the same thing she'd done on the dawn of Wren's departure. She rarely took so much care with her appearance, but here she was preening for the wolf as she'd groomed herself for Wren. Her blush deepened. She finished the braid and tied it off with a thin strip of leather that she kept in a pocket.

Telyn's stomach grumbled. She laid her hands over it, fingers entwining, and slowly turned toward her new companion. "I believe it is time to break my fast."

She sat down again and opened the flap of her bag. After a few moments, she pulled out a round, crusty loaf of bread and a small wrapped bundle. The crust crackled

as she ripped a piece off and swallowed without tasting it. She tore off a larger chunk. Stretching her arm out, she presented it to the wolf.

With his snout, he nudged the offering back toward Telyn. She ate the hunk of bread and packed the rest away. Her attention shifted to the cloth bundle. The wrapping hid a small brick of fresh cheese. The aroma wafted under her nose, causing her mouth to water. She took a small bite and savored the creamy, sharp taste. She enfolded the leftovers back into the cloth, a treat saved for later, then took a swig of water. She gathered her gear back into the satchel and tied the rolled pallet to her bag. Hefting the pack onto her shoulders, she regarded the wolf, which was still sitting and staring at her.

She placed her hands on her hips and stared back at the wolf. “You know, it is very rude to stare, Mr. Wolf.”

His tongue lolled out, and he smiled a canine grin with ears perked.

“It makes me uncomfortable, and you should stop,” she said, but he didn’t stop. “Well, I am leaving now. You can follow if you want, but I won’t be good company, and I don’t know how much companionship a wolf can give me. But I suppose the legendary Lady Morgan was assisted by a red wolf, and she went on to save the kingdom.”

* * *

He followed her for three days. The wolf proved to be a better travelling companion than Telyn could’ve hoped for. He was a vigilant guard, keeping her safe from wild animals and other hazards she hadn’t the forethought to consider before starting her journey. At night, he would curl his furred body next to hers to help fend off the autumn chill. During the day he loped after her or scouted several paces ahead, depending on his disposition.

But Telyn most enjoyed the times when they walked side-by-side, as they were doing now.

They'd been on the worn, dirt path since morning. They'd paused for noon meal, but that felt like hours ago. She suspected that they were more than three-quarters through the woods. Soon they would find themselves passing onto the Moors of Morgan that filled the space from the woods to the mountains.

The leaves had begun to fall in earnest the day before. As she and the wolf strolled in silence, Telyn marveled at their surroundings. The leaves shimmered in the light, their burnished gold hue glinting like metal in the sun. She looked down to the right at her travelling companion, ambling at her side. They'd been walking uphill for the last hour, and the side of the path now receded into a deep ditch on the left.

Lacing her fingers in front of her, she smiled. "Have you ever heard the story of how the Gold Wood received its name?" The wolf made no reply, so she continued, "It begins with a young blacksmith of unusual talent. It was said that he was so skilled that he could spin gold and silver into the most delicate of designs." Her face tilted up to meet the few rays of sun that filtered through the treetop canopy. "One day he wandered into the woods that bordered his village. While searching for firewood and kindling, he met a beautiful tree spirit dressed in a gossamer gown of green silk and fell instantly in love with her. The blacksmith fell to his knees in front of the sprite and confessed his undying affection, but was rebuffed. 'How can a mortal love a magical being when my very presence inspires your awe? How can I know you truly love me?' she'd asked him.

"Heartbroken, the man returned to his forge. The season changed, and he still thought of his beautiful tree sprite. His work suffered, and his patrons began to complain,

but he paid them no heed. Only one thought filled his mind: How could he prove himself to his magical sprite?"

The wolf made a questioning grumble, causing Telyn to look down. His head was tilted at a quizzical angle. She'd seen the same expression on the faces of the children to whom she told stories, and that made her glad. It was comforting to see a familiar expression in such an unfamiliar place. She reached a hand down and scratched the wolf behind his ear.

"It was on a sunny day in mid-spring when the sunlight fell upon the pile of metal scraps the blacksmith kept in his workshop. Seeing the light reflect on the bits of gold amidst the iron and copper, he began to form a plan in his head, a way to show his love that his feelings were true.

"For many days and nights, the blacksmith worked, toiling away in his forge. He refused all orders from the other villagers, and they began to worry. They could see the glow of his hearth and hear the clinking sound of his hammer on metal. Sacks of metals were delivered steadily to his door even though he still did not take any new commissions.

"It was more than a full season later, toward the end of autumn, when the blacksmith left his forge one morning. He had borrowed a farmer's mule and wagon and piled it high with bags upon bags. Without a word to his neighbors, he headed into the woods to the very spot he'd met his fair wood sprite. When he reached a barren oak tree, he stopped the mule and unloaded his bags and an old ladder. He opened the first bag and pulled out a small satchel that held his tools, a set of pliers and several spools of silver wire he'd crafted. He tied the satchel around his waist. Kneeling, he reached into the bag

again and pulled out a handful of delicate gold leaves. He put them in the empty pocket of the bag. When it was full, he climbed up the ladder and began to thread the leaves on to the branches with silver.

“He worked all through the night, and in the morning, the dawn light twinkled off the tree’s new golden foliage. Seeing his work glimmer, he sat at the foot of the tree with his back leaning against the trunk and waited. At noon the wood sprite appeared before him in an ethereal dress of burnt orange and russet. So awed was she of his demonstration that she wept at its beauty. When she asked why he did this, he answered, ‘Because my love is like a tree forever in full bloom and a wonder all its own.’

“The young blacksmith married his wood sprite, and for every moment of happiness they shared, he made another golden tree until the entire wood was covered in golden leaves.”

Telyn smiled after she’d finished her story. The “Blacksmith and the Tree Sprite” had always been one of her favorite tales, because it was the first one she’d learned. Looking down at the wolf, he didn’t seem too impressed with her tale. Of course, she did tell the story more for herself than her audience. The wolf would probably have enjoyed something with more action and drama like many of the young boys of Leyton. She began tapping her chin with her forefinger as she thought of a suitable tale for her companion. Her lips turned up in a smile as she snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it.” Quickly, she strode out in front of the wolf and turned, her skirts and cloak billowing behind her. “This is a tale that should whet your appetite.” Telyn began to gesture in excitement as she started to lay the groundwork of her story. “A tale of adventure, danger, and a vicious dragon that—”

A stone turned her ankle, and she stumbled. Falling in the dirt, she reached out and tried to stop from tumbling. The shallow ditch was now a steep ravine. Her fingers clawed the dirt. It lodged in under her fingernails. The ground dropped from beneath her. There was nothing to hold onto. She was falling.

Chapter Four

No root. No rocky outcropping. There was nothing, nothing to latch onto as Telyn slid over the edge of the path. Clouds of dust obscured her sight, everything save for the murky brown of dirt. Her fingers grasped at the ground. It slowed her down, but only a little. Then she stopped. Her breath held. She opened one eye and then the other, but she wasn't falling. She was suspended against the side of the ravine.

“Hold on,” ordered a deep, roughened voice.

Looking up, Telyn saw that her right wrist was clutched by a large masculine hand. A brown mop of shaggy hair shadowed her savior's face, and all she could see of it was the line of his long nose.

“Grab. Now.”

Easing her other hand from the dirt, Telyn clutched at the man's wrist. Her feet toed the wall of dirt, attempting to find a foothold, but the earth was packed and unyielding. Inch by inch, her bodice dragged across the dirt and pebbles, and the fingers of his remaining hand wrapped around her other wrist. Her ascent doubled in pace until the top of her head was level with the path's edge. He grunted and with a swift jerk hauled Telyn back onto the path.

She landed hard, her cheek bouncing on a warm, solid surface. Eyes still firmly shut, Telyn tried to steady herself. The burning sensation in her lungs began to ease as

gasps became slow breaths. There was only the chirp of the birds, the weight of the bag on her back, and the rhythmic motion of the surface beneath her body.

Telyn's eyes shot open; she saw firm flesh beneath her. Throwing herself to the side, she scuttled away from the body, never letting it out of her sight. The stranger sat up and shook himself, sending puffs of dust everywhere until it haloed his form. He stood, causing Telyn to gasp. Not three yards away from her stood a man virile, brawny, and naked as the day his mother birthed him. Speech froze in her throat when he turned his fierce gaze upon her. His eyes raked her from head to shaking toes. He stalked toward her with intent, and she could do nothing but breathe. All thoughts of escape fled without her.

"S-stop!" she cried out. When he didn't slow his pace, she rolled over and tried to stand, but her legs felt like boiled leeks. Instead, she crawled on her hands and knees as fast as her fear would allow. In the space of a few breaths, he was upon her. His weight pressed her body to the ground, and his hot breath mingled in her hair. She whimpered as his nose nudged her ear while the pack was pressed between their bodies.

"I'd never tire of your scent," he murmured. His tongue flicked out and tasted the soft flesh behind her ear. "Or your taste, Telyn."

She shivered as his hands roamed her arms, but revulsion no longer tainted the sensation. "Please," she whispered, "let me go."

His fingers tightened around her biceps, not enough to hurt but enough to show his power over her. Telyn could hear his ragged breaths over the singing songbirds and the rush of the breeze. The pebbled path under her belly jabbed against her body, creating several small fissures of pain. The weight above her eased and then vanished completely.

She pulled herself up and stood with her back to the man on shaky legs. She ran her hands over her bodice.

“Sorry,” the stranger growled. “I am not used to your kind.”

Your kind. His tone stopped her. It was the same tone she’d use if she were talking of Morganites, dragons, or nobility, a pitch that made it clear that they were formed from different molds. She looked over her shoulder at him. His body was tense and controlled, as if he might have to pounce.

She turned on her heels to face him. Her first observations had been correct. He had a broad chest, strong shoulders, and was a good foot taller than she. The man’s face was angled and his chin was set at a stubborn slant. His jaw was covered in several days’ growth of dark stubble, giving his face a rawboned quality. The nose was large and thin, bisecting his face like a straight blade, and his eyes, half-hidden by an unruly mop of brown hair, were intense. One was blue like the sky, and the other matched the green of the plains. She’d seen the eyes before, only in another face.

Telyn’s lips parted until her mouth formed a wordless “oh.” She couldn’t look away from his face if she tried.

“Do you know me, then?” he asked.

She said nothing. Her eyes never wavered from his.

He strode to her, crossing the distance between them in a couple of paces. His large hands grabbed her shoulders and pulled her toward him as he leaned closer to her face. “Do you know me, Telyn of Leyton?”

“Wolf,” she answered, barely hearing the words herself.

“Yes.”

She felt his breath across her nose and cheeks. He was so close. Too close. A scant inch separated their noses. “Wolf, I—”

“Blaith,” he said, his voice low and deep.

“Blaith.”

His eyes flicked downward but returned to her. A low growl emanated deep in his chest; she could feel it rumble in her own. “Telyn.”

“I..”

Blaith’s face began to descend to hers.

“I—no!” she said.

He stopped, his lips so close to hers that she could feel the bristles of his beard. She pushed at his hard chest; it felt immovable to her, but he let her go all the same. He turned his back to her and walked away, giving her some room to steady the rapid rhythm of her heart. Now that he was a fair distance from her, she could see his bunched muscles, the curve at the small of his back, his unabashed nudity. She swallowed. Her cheeks warmed, growing hot, but she couldn’t tear her gaze from the masculine form showered in golden light.

“Sorry,” he said.

Telyn’s eyes snapped up to stare at the back of his head. She wondered if he had felt her eyes on him. Finally, she turned her back to him to prevent further temptation. She’d never seen a fully naked man before, and she’d never before seen a changeling. It was the latter rather than the former that had fascinated her so. She’d believed that the Were-race was as extinct as dragons. Did it not say in the Histories from the House of Winnan that changelings had died out during the time of the old kingdom?

“Can you really,” she began, gesturing awkwardly in the air, “change? Between a wolf and a man, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“Can I see it?”

“No,” he answered.

“Oh.”

He sighed. “It wouldn’t be right. The change, it isn’t pleasant to watch.”

“Is it painful?”

“No.”

“That’s good.”

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t like it if you had to suffer just because of what you are.”

Still with their backs to each other, they fell into silence. Telyn laced her fingers over her stomach and tapped a rhythm with her thumbs. The wind had died down enough so that she could hear his feet scrape against the ground.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

“You make me uncomfortable,” she answered over her shoulder.

“Because I’m a Were?” he said, half-snarling at her.

“Of course not. I like to think we are friends, but,” she took a deep breath, “it’s because you are...or rather, that you lack... Well, you’re naked.”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She separated her hands and squeezed them into fists. "It's not normal."

She waited for him to say something. When he did, it was a bark. She peered over her shoulder and saw the wolf.

"Blaith?" she asked, unclenching her hands.

The wolf nodded, then trotted forward. He rubbed his head against her skirt and she tapped his head with her fingertips.

"We are almost to the town of Glen. I would prefer it if you were to remain human, and we can find clothes for you in town," she said as she picked up her fallen water-skins.

Blaith started down the path toward the moorland and Glen with Telyn following closely behind.

Chapter Five

They reached the town at nightfall. Glen was several times larger than Leyton and far grander in its structures, shingled roofs, and decorative touches. The shops were closed for the night, and only a few townsfolk lingered about outside. Most were heading to the lighted entrance of the local inn and alehouse, The Thistle and Thorn, which stood no more than fifteen paces from where Telyn and Blaith were situated.

“It would be nice to sleep indoors,” Telyn said, more to herself than her companion. “I have some coin. A few nates, and a handful of pennies, actually, but perhaps I should conserve, especially if I am going to buy you some clothing.”

As the door to the inn opened, the aroma of boiled meat floated toward them. Her mouth watered. As she stared in open envy of the jolly patrons she’d briefly glimpsed through the doorway, Blaith nudged her toward the portal with his head.

She looked down at the wolf. “I don’t think this is wise. It looks rowdy, does it not?”

He pushed her again, harder this time.

“Stop it, Blaith,” she said. He yawned, then loped past her, flicking her skirt with his tail as he passed. “Blaith? Blaith! Oh, for Morgan’s sake.”

She followed into the inn. It was loud, much louder than she’d imagined. Men were laughing, drinking, and gaming at several tables in the main room. A couple of

tavern girls went from table to table, replacing the empty glasses with fresh brews and showing too much bosom. A portly man with thinning hair stood behind the bar, serving up mugs of amber-colored ale topped with white froth.

Taking a deep breath, Telyn followed the wolf, who was already halfway to the bar. The din seemed to quiet down as she passed by a few of the tables. She could feel their eyes on her. Whispers preceded her arrival to the bar, but she took a seat on one of the hard wooden stools. The barkeep ambled to her end of the bar.

“What can I get you?” he asked.

“A private room,” Telyn blurted out. “If you have one, that is.”

“Aye, I do, lass.” He eyed her from head to her middle, lingering a moment on her breasts. “Traveling by yourself?”

“Of course not. I have my—” she said, looking down at Blaith, who sat glaring at the other Thistle and Thorn patrons, “—my pet.”

“A pet? A wee doggie or kitty?” He leaned closer to her. The yellowish-brown rot of the barkeeper’s teeth clearly visible in his mouth, and his sour breath made Telyn want to gag.

“No, Blaith is a wolf, but well-behaved.” On cue, two large gray paws appeared on the counter, followed by a head. She patted his head while the wolf narrowed his eyes at the barkeep.

The rotund man tore his gaze away and Blaith lowered himself to the floor. “I have a room for ye. It’ll cost ye a nate and a half a night.”

Telyn pulled out a silver coin stamped with the image of King Nathaniel the First and five smaller copper coins. “Would it be possible to have a supper for two delivered to the room?” she asked.

“Aye, but it’ll cost ye another nate.”

She handed over another silver coin.

“Yer room’s up the stairs, second door on the left,” he said as he pocketed the money. “The food’ll be up in wee bit.”

Telyn stood and smiled politely. “Thank you, sir.”

Blaith followed her through the tavern and up the stairs. The room was simple, with a roughly hewn bed and a nightstand, a small, lop-sided table with two chairs, and a screen that most likely hid a chamber pot and washbasin.

Telyn shut the door and set her gear down on the floor, lighting the tallow candles on the nightstand before flopping down on the bed. She reveled in the feel of the warm quilt, softened by wear. The straw mattress felt as if it needed more stuffing but was still firm—the ropes must’ve been tightened recently.

A knock sounded, and she forced herself out of the bed to answer the door. A buxom brunette walked into the room bearing a large, tarnished silver tray laden with several steaming dishes. The maid set the tray down on the table and faced Telyn.

“Anything else I can do for you, mum?” she asked, looking between Telyn and the large wolf reclining near the end of the bed.

Telyn took a quick glance at the empty fireplace. It would get cold tonight, and a fire would certainly warm the room, but if the maid’s tone was any clue as to her level of hospitality, she wouldn’t want to make a decent fire.

“No, I think that will be all for the night,” Telyn said. “Goodnight.”

The maid bobbed a small curtsy and exited the room. With a soft click, Telyn closed the door and locked it.

“Are you cold?”

She spun and slammed her back against the door. The heels of her hands bit into the heavy wood while her heart thumped a swift tattoo.

Blaith lowered his dark head. “Sorry.”

Telyn eased herself from the door and brushed past him. “It isn’t your fault. I wasn’t expecting to hear another voice.” She breathed deeply. “And anyway, I can make a small blaze. It isn’t like I’ve never done it before. You should start eating before it cools much more.”

The tinder was already gathered into a neat pile in the hearth. She reached for a log with her right hand, her fingers firmly gripping the wood. Pain stabbed her wrist when she tried to lift the log. She whimpered, bringing Blaith to her side. He held her forearm with gentle pressure while his other hand began to push her sleeve toward her elbow. Even in the dim light of the lamp on the far side of the room, she could see the purple bruise that had begun to mar the delicate flesh around her wrist. It encircled the entire circumference of her wrist and stretched down several inches below the joint, about the width of his palm. He ran a finger over the injury, his rough calluses scraping against the sensitive flesh.

“I need to see how badly I hurt you.”

She nodded, as he placed his thumb over the tendon of her wrist and pressed down. The pain flared and sizzled up her arm. She cried out, the ache causing her to lean

forward until her forehead rested upon Blaith's muscled shoulder. Her rapid breaths caressed his neck. His scent filled her nostrils: dirt, bark, and sweat. He smelled comforting, like the woods.

His thumb traced her jawline until he cradled her neck in his warm hand. "Forgive me." With his other hand he lifted the injured wrist to his lip and placed a light kiss on the purpled skin.

She lifted her head until she could see his face. His blue-and-green eyes searched her features, looking for a flicker of emotion she herself couldn't begin to fathom.

"Blaith, I—"

A loud rapping at the door jarred her from the haze of the intimate moment. She freed herself from his grasp and stood. The knocking persisted.

Telyn looked down at the man kneeling at her feet and whispered, "Change."

Trusting him to listen, she walked to the door and opened it. An older woman waited for her in the dim light of the hallway. She had round apple cheeks flush with color, gray hair curling out from under a cap, and plump hands resting on her ample hips. She looked about the same age as the man who'd let the room to Telyn.

"I heard a noise and came to check on ye." The woman eyed her from head to toe. "Ye well, lass?"

Telyn bit her lower lip and looked down. "No, I just...I mean, I tried to make a fire, Miss—"

"Mrs. Tibbets, dear."

She gestured toward her right wrist. "Well, Mrs. Tibbits, I was picking up wood, but I didn't realize that it was—"

The woman reached for Telyn's hand and pulled up her sleeve. She clucked her tongue as she examined the bruise. "I have just the thing for this. I'll return with a poultice in a tick, dear." She looked at the empty hearth. "And I'll send a girl up to build ye a nice fire."

"Thank you, but—"

The woman walked off. Telyn stood in the doorway, watching until she descended the stairs, then she shook her head and closed the door. She rubbed her bruised wrist and winced. An injury such as this was only minimal if she were still at home, where there was help. Even the evil Firblog king was felled by a nettle scratch—and her wrist felt worse than a simple nick.

She sat on the bed when a soft tapping came from the door.

"Enter," she said.

The impatient maid walked in and curtsied. With swishing steps, the maid began to work the hearth until a fire sparked into life. Then the maid performed another perfunctory curtsy before sweeping out of the room. Telyn's shoulders sagged as she blew out a breath through partially pursed lips.

The door burst open and a large, skirt-covered bottom entered first, followed by the rest of the old woman. She carried a tray laden with four small bowls, a large mortar and pestle, and a folded strip of yellow linen.

"I've got just the cure for ye, dear. An old remedy me mum taught me," Mrs. Tibbits said. "You just stay right there."

She set the tray on the bed and dumped the contents of one bowl into the mortar. She whisked the pestle with vigor before adding another ingredient, then raised the pestle

and let the thick brown liquid drizzle back into the mortar. Telyn didn't think it looked like a healing mixture—quite the opposite, if the murky color was any indication.

“Could I ask what it is you're mixing, mum?”

Mrs. Tibbits emptied the last bowl into the concoction and stirred. “A bit of this and that. Dandelions, yarrow blossoms, black barony root, and a touch of honey to sweeten your humors.” She checked the consistency again. The mixture fell in wet clumps off the pestle. “Just right.”

She lowered herself onto a chair and held out her hand, into which Telyn placed her injured wrist. Mrs. Tibbits proceeded to poke and prod it just as Blaith had, but the woman's gentle touches made the pain more bearable than Blaith's rough examination. Dipping her plump fingers into the mortar, the woman scooped up the mixture and slathered in on the bruise. Soon the purpled flesh was hidden by the poultice. Wiping her hands on her apron, the plump woman grabbed the yellowed linen and began to wrap Telyn's wrist tightly. The yellow of the linen was swirled and uneven as if it were haphazardly dyed. The woman patted Telyn on the shoulder when she tied off the bandage.

“A bit of yellow to brighten your mood 'til ye feel better, lass.”

Telyn flexed her wrist, amazed at the warming sensation that encased her injury. “Thank you, Mrs. Tibbits. How can I repay you?”

Waving a hand in the air, the older woman said, “Ye don't owe me a thing, dear. Just like to feel useful.” She smiled and touched Telyn's cheek the same way Caethes used to when Telyn was a child. “You must change the dressing once a day.”

Getting up, Mrs. Tibbits scooped the extra balm into a crude leather pouch. She pulled the drawstring and placed the bag on top of the folded cloths. Telyn thanked her again. The old woman cautioned Telyn to be gentle on her wrist and then left with the tray, closing the door behind her.

Telyn locked the door and unclasped her cloak while staring at the rough and splintered wood. She held the cloak out behind her back.

“Take it, Blaith, so we can eat.”

She waited until she felt his warm hand drift down to take the cloak. The rustle of wool told her that he was wrapping it around himself, but she still studied the gouges and nicks covering the door. The mere memory of seeing Blaith’s nudity again heated her cheeks. Blaith may be the first man she’d seen naked, but once, when she was seventeen, she’d spied Wren bathing in the river while she was gathering kindling. He was waist-deep in the water, which sluiced down his back. Telyn’s breath had hitched in her throat. But when Blaith pressed his body against hers, his heat mingling with hers, Telyn felt something different. He seemed so much larger, more muscular than Wren. When Blaith was near her, she felt small and weak, like a rabbit in a hunter’s sights.

A chair scraped across the floor, then creaked as he sat. Telyn peeked over her shoulder and saw Blaith devouring the food with his hands and teeth while the flatware lay beside the plate, unused. She sat in the empty chair. Picking up a fork and knife, she served herself dinner. Almost methodically, Telyn sliced her meat into manageable bite-sized morsels. Blaith paused in his eating to stare at her, head tilted to the side. She ignored him as she ate, taking time to chew every piece. After three more pieces of boiled beef, Telyn look across the table and met his gaze.

He raised a thick slice of browned beef, greasy juice dripping down his hand and between his fingers. "Eat more." As if to emphasize his command, he tore the meat with his teeth, chewing a few times and swallowing it.

Barbaric was her first thought. The second was how ridiculous her manners might seem to him. Unlike other villagers, Telyn's mother had been from the southern city of Dinnieau. She had raised her daughter to be more refined than the other children of Leyton, both in manners and speech. Even seven years after her mother's death, Telyn could not shake her mother's lessons.

"Eat," he said again.

Reaching for a hunk of bread, she tore a hearty piece from the loaf and took a large bite. Satisfied at her compliance, Blaith returned his attention to the remaining food. She swallowed the dry bread and took a drink of water.

"I have never met a Were before. I had thought your kind were just stories."

He grunted.

"Are there many of you?" Telyn asked.

"No."

"I see. Do all Weres become wolves?"

"No."

Her eyes widened in excitement. "Really? What else is there? Are some birds? I'd very much like to know what it feels like to fly. See the treetops as I float on the breeze. I bet it would feel wondrous."

He grunted again as he helped himself to more meat, bread, and root vegetables. Telyn frowned. He wasn't very talkative. It was most unsettling.

“Do you have family?” she asked. When it was apparent to her that he was not going to answer, she continued. “My father is chieftain of our village. They say there has never been a finer leader than Gavin. I live with my mentor, Caethes. She is the master storyteller, and I’ve learned many tales under her care.”

Between mouthfuls, Blaith asked, “Did she teach you to play with your food as well?”

Realizing that he was talking about her manners, she paused a moment before answering. “No, I learned that from my mother. She passed on when I was young, just after my brother died.”

“How?”

“I think I’ve talked enough about myself.” She pasted a smile onto her lips. “Please tell me of yourself. I want to know everything about your kind.”

“Why?”

“Curiosity. I never imagined that I’d meet a magical creature. “

“What of wizards?”

“They are still human. But I never believed that Weres existed, or if they did, they were long dead.”

She reached out her hand, her fingers seeking confirmation that he was sitting before her in the flesh. Her touch was a mere hairsbreadth away from his whiskered cheek before he jerked away from her. Telyn placed her hand firmly in her lap.

“I’m sorry. I’ve offended you.” She lowered her head. “I did not mean to suggest that you were lesser because of your animal nature. Please, Blaith, accept my apologies.”

When he didn't say anything, she raised her head and looked at him across the table. He was still eating but lacked the vigor he'd previously had when he attacked the meal.

"Eat," he told her. "It will be two days of hard travel before we reach the Citadel."

Telyn nodded and picked up her forgotten fork. Blaith sliced a large portion of beef, then laid it on her plate. "Thank you."

He nodded quickly before returning to his own plate. They both finished the meal in silence.

Chapter Six

Telyn was up with the sun. She blinked as the first rays of light entered the room through the partially curtained window. Sitting up, she stretched.

“You’re up.”

Telyn lowered her arms and looked across the dim room. Blaith loomed at the foot of the bed. He was dressed in a lawn-colored, roughly woven tunic and brown leather trews. The clothes looked worn, freshly laundered.

“Where did you get those?” she asked as she pulled the bedcovers off herself.

He didn’t reply. She could even smell scented soap. The clothes were not new. She walked up to him and prodded his shoulder.

“Where did you get these clothes, Blaith?” She jabbed him again. “Blaith, answer me.”

He shrugged her off. “They were on a line.”

“You stole them.” Telyn began to rifle through her bag.

“Let’s go.”

“No, not until I fix this.” The clink of coins could be heard as she shifted the bag. “I was going to buy you clothes this morning. Why did you have to steal? Now I have to compensate.”

She palmed what few coins she had left. When she withdrew the money, her hands shook and the metal pieces scraped against one another. He covered her hands with his steady ones as he knelt before her. “Let’s go.”

“But—”

He rose from the floor. Her hands still held the money. “I’ve already paid them,” he told her.

Telyn opened her hands, but all she could see were pennies, not a single silver nate in sight. The bronze coins felt flimsy in her hands. The Citadel was still a couple of days away, and there was the return journey to consider. Her food supply would run out before she and Blaith reached the crossroads. The pennies in her hands couldn’t buy a day’s ration for herself, let alone her companion, who seemed able to eat a whole pig by himself in one sitting. She clutched the money in her hands until her knuckles whitened and the coins dug into her flesh.

“What am I going to do?” she asked.

“We must leave now. Light doesn’t last forever,” he answered.

She glared at him. “Neither does food or supplies! It isn’t like we have a magical ever-full stewpot, like Sir Colin. We have nothing.”

He lifted a bulging sack, a darker brown than her own. “I bought some rations while you slept.” He slid the straps over his shoulders. “I’ll hunt for meat if needed. Now let’s go.”

* * *

The light had just begun to fade when the old wooden signpost appeared on the horizon. When they had first started out that morning, Telyn was awed by the gently rolling hills

of lavender and flowering heather. The wind caused ripples to run across the moors like the stories she read about the frothy sea. As the day wore on, she and Blaith followed a well-travelled road. He set the pace, often leaving Telyn struggling to keep up, and only allowing her a few brief respites. But the strenuous tempo of their journey was rewarded when they reached the crossroads at dusk.

The old signpost pointed travelers in four directions: Dinnieau City to the south, the Capital City in the west, the neighboring kingdom, Menosi, beyond the eastern mountains, and Ventir—the gateway to the Citadel—in the north. A boulder rested near the signpost. Blaith left to scout the path ahead, and with her sack lying on the ground near the post, Telyn leaned against the smooth rock and lay her head back after changing her poultice. The position afforded her a unique view of the sign. The weather had worn the hard edges into smooth curves. It was comforting to imagine that Wren too had rested on the crossroads boulder. Telyn had to believe that she was following her friend's footsteps. If he wasn't at the Citadel, Wren would be lost to her, and he would most likely never return to Leyton.

“Let's go.”

She pushed herself up before Blaith reached her. “Back?”

“Obviously.”

“Grumpy, I see.” She bent down to retrieve her bag. “Maybe I should use this honey poultice on you to improve your mood.”

When she didn't continue, Blaith turned toward her. She was on her knees in front of the post, touching it as if it were a gift from the gods. He walked to her and clasped her shoulder.

“Tel.”

“He was here.” Her fingers slowly scraped across a single carved word. She turned toward Blaith and gave him a bright smile. “He was here.” She jumped up and hugged him. Blaith staggered backward at the force of her body colliding with his. Her arms encircled his waist while his hands hovered above her shoulders as if he feared touching her. Slowly, he rested his hands on her upper arms.

“Who?” he asked.

She loosened her hold and look up at him, still beaming. “Wren.” She jerked away from him and pointed out Wren’s name, carved into the wood of the signpost. “He signed the post right here. He used to do this on trees when we were younger.” She rubbed the name with her fingers again. Tracing the grooves with a light touch, Telyn smiled to herself.

“Time to go.”

She turned to him. “It’s dark, Blaith. We should settle for the night.”

“No. Too open.”

“I like the open. The stars are beautiful tonight.”

Snatching her bag from the ground, Blaith muttered, “I can’t protect you here.”

“I never asked for you to help me.”

He stalked over to her until he could look down at her. “You’d not be breathing if I hadn’t saved you.”

“I was trying to entertain you when I fell,” she said, emphasizing her point with a hard poke to his chest. “So it’s your fault I slipped in the first place.”

Growling low in his throat, he gripped her arm.

A new voice said, “You’d better hope he’ll still protect you after mouthing off, girl.” A stranger held them at sword point. His attire was shabby and dust-covered, and a cloth covered his lower face.

Blaith pulled Telyn behind him as he turned toward the speaker. Telyn only got a brief glimpse of the man before he shoved her. Peeking around the Were, she watched as the robber began to circle around them. Telyn groped at Blaith’s back and clutched his shirt in her fists as she shuffled her feet, keeping the Were between herself and the thief.

“Go home, boy,” Blaith snarled at the man.

“Boy?” The man waved the sword in small, almost playful circles. “I haven’t been called that in a long time. Now if you’re worried about having no money, then I’ll gladly take the lady off your hands and let you go.”

Muscles tensed in Blaith’s back. “Go now.”

“I think not.”

Blaith hunched over, his form beginning to change, accompanied by the soft sound of flesh molding itself into a different form. It was like the sloshing, sucking sound of butter churning. Telyn let go of his shirt and watched as the transformation occurred, giving him wide berth. The robber’s sword wavered as a seam of Blaith’s shirt popped. Flashing his fangs, the wolf growled and his fur bristled. If not for his shaking, the robber might have turned to stone.

The thief jabbed his sword toward the wolf. “Stay back, beast.” The sword point dipped as Blaith crouched, his ears erect and his lips curling to reveal his sharp incisors. “Stay back.”

Blaith pounced at the man. His leap covered nearly the entire distance between the two of them, but as he landed, the clothing he still wore tangled in his paws. He rolled as he fell, tangling himself further, until he rested at the robber's feet. The man laughed as Blaith struggled to get his footing, the shirtsleeves twisted on his forepaws. Gripping his sword hilt tighter, the thief raised his weapon and swung down. Blaith let out a strangled yelp. Telyn propelled herself toward him as the man raised his sword again.

Chapter Seven

Blaith tried to scramble away as the sword swung downward. Shrugging off her bag, Telyn looped the straps around her hands and wrists and ran. Pain raced up her arm as the strap tightened around her bruise. She swung the bag at the man with her full weight behind it. The sack connected with the robber's sword arm, causing the man to spin and fall to the ground. Telyn skidded to a stop, her bag falling from her limp hands. She was breathing heavily, her knees about to buckle. At the sound growling and flesh impacting flesh, Telyn glanced over her shoulder, where a human Blaith was raining heavy-fisted blows on the unmoving robber.

“Blaith.”

His blows seemed to grow fiercer.

“Blaith!” she shouted, walking toward him.

When she was close enough, she grabbed his arm and held tight. “Stop it, Blaith. Stop it.”

The last bits of light clung to the sky as Telyn continued to clutch him. His fist seemed frozen in midair. She tugged and then tugged harder, to no avail. They both knew that she had neither the strength nor fortitude to stop him, but still she clung to him.

“Please.”

“No one threatens you.”

If Telyn hadn't been clutching Blaith's arm, she would've collapsed. His voice was thick with malice. "I'm unhurt." She loosened her grip and sidestepped so that she stood in front of him. "Look at me, Blaith."

When he finally dipped his head, Telyn could see the steely sheen in his eyes. It was as if the man had left and only the beast was looking at her. Swallowing, she grabbed a handful of the shirt hanging off his shoulder while keeping one hand holding his clenched fist.

"I'm all right. Truly I am." She glanced quickly at the ground. "But I'd feel much better if we went somewhere, somewhere safe, where we can rest. Please, Blaith."

He growled. She nudged him. His arm lowered and came around her shoulders, and his breath was on her neck as he lowered his head, nuzzling her. She shivered and closed her eyes as his body loomed over her. She'd suspected that Blaith was capable of violence, but having it demonstrated shocked her. Scared her. It cracked the image of all she knew of people. Not once had she ever seen anyone from Leyton become so aggressive that they'd been reduced to brutality. They were peaceful men, but of course, Blaith wasn't human. He was a Were, and, it seemed, more beast than man.

"Let's go," she whispered, pulling him away from the unconscious man lying in the dirt.

A short while later they found a relatively secluded spot some distance from the road. Blaith built a fire and left to get food. Telyn was still jabbing the flame-licked logs and kindling when he returned with a handful of berries. He poured them into her cupped hands, then sat on the opposite side of the fire. One by one she ate the berries in silence, sneaking the occasional glance in his direction.

“You should let me look at your arm,” she said as she wiped her hands clean of juice and seeds.

“It’s fine, Tel.”

She got up with her bag and sat next to him. “Let me see for myself.”

She brought his arm closer to the light and exhaled. The gash wasn’t deep or life-threatening, merely a long slash that crossed his forearm. Digging in her bag, Telyn pulled out the leather pouch containing her poultice and one of her water-skins. She washed the wound, then smeared the paste on. “The honey should keep out infection.”

Blaith looked on as she tugged at the yellow scrap of cloth that covered her wrist. The strip unwound until her own balm-slathered skin was visible. “What are you doing?”

She carefully wrapped his arm in the yellow cloth. “If I bandage this tight, I might be able to lessen your chances of a scar.” She smiled. “Mrs. Tibbets said the dandelion color would improve humors, and my temperament has been improved enough.”

“But your wrist.”

She tied him off, then let him flex his arm, testing the binding. With her fingers she peeled the crusted poultice off her wrist, then used her skirt and water to remove what was left behind. She only grimaced a handful of times, though she wanted to clench her teeth at the lingering pain. “It feels better and looks far better, does it not?” As if to punctuate her statement, she rotated her wrist. Indeed the bruises that marred the skin had begun to fade from eggplant purple to the sickly green of old meat. He made no indication of agreement, and Telyn didn’t ask for one. Later, she lay down as the fire burned low and slept with her injured wrist cradled against her chest.

* * *

Another day of hard travel and the pair reached the final town on the road to the Citadel. Before the Morganites had settled in the mountain, Ventir had been just another poor village in a harsh climate. Now it was a thriving town that produced some of the most exquisite metalwork in the kingdom. Several of the queen of Raidian's jewels had been fashioned into settings by the smiths of Ventir.

Telyn marveled at the cleanliness of the cobblestone roads that all met in the town's center. Unlike the citizens of Glen, the people of Ventir greeted her as she waited outside of the supplies shop. Blaith had entered the store a half hour earlier to learn about the condition of the path to the Citadel.

“Hi.”

Telyn, who'd been leaning against the store's wall, looked down at a chubby-faced girl with straight auburn hair. The child looked to be around six, her baby curls long gone. Telyn pushed herself off the wall and crouched until she was nose-to-nose with the girl.

“Hello, little one. How are you today?”

“Fine,” the girl answered while toying with her dress's long sleeves. “You're new.”

Telyn smiled. “Yes, I'm just visiting. My name is Telyn ap Storyteller. What is yours?”

The girl's eyes widened until they resembled ripe figs before she ran off down the lane. Telyn frowned at the child's reaction. When adults learned of her position they usually ignored her or made some excuse to leave as children asked for stories. Never had

Telyn had someone run from her, especially a child. They were her only friends and only audience in Leyton.

Sighing, she stood and hesitated before wiping her hands on her kirtle. She looked down at her dusty skirt and resigned herself to clammy hands rather than dirtying them. The door opened behind her, and Blaith's heavy footsteps resonated on the wooden planks.

"We'll stay here tonight," he told her.

It was the first full phrase he'd uttered in her presence that wasn't accompanied by growls and grumbles since their near-skewering. He hadn't left her side as they walked, but neither had he acknowledge her. The only peace Telyn had felt were the few moments of respite while he was in the shop. Even the little girl fleeing her could not upset her more than Blaith's leaden silence.

"Where?" She trotted after him. "We don't have enough coin to stay anywhere, remember?"

"Still mad about that?"

"Concerned. I still have to worry about getting Wren and me home."

He grimaced. "I'll return you safely."

She wanted to say something more, but she didn't. Blaith's violence was still fresh in her mind. Somehow, Telyn believed that he wouldn't hurt her. She felt safe with the man, but the wolf was still frightening. She shuddered thinking of the man's bloodied face pounded raw from Blaith's fists though the wind was still warm from the smithies.

"—for shelter tonight."

She realized that she'd completely missed what Blaith was talking about. "Excuse me?"

"We will find a barn for shelter."

"A barn?" she asked.

He arched a bushy eyebrow. "You slept in the dirt last night."

"Yes, but the ground didn't smell and wasn't covered in who-knows-what sort of animal matter. If you hadn't taken my money we could've slept on the floor of some villager's house, where at least it would be warm."

Blaith turned. Grabbing Telyn about the shoulders, he pulled her close. His embrace didn't resemble the parting hug Wren had given her when they'd last been together. Blaith's fingers dug into the soft flesh of her arms as he growled in frustration. For a brief moment Telyn could see the glimmer of something behind his eyes, a faint echo of the aggression he'd unleashed on the bandit. She wanted to shiver in fear, but she kept her gaze locked with his. Too often she had backed down when others had caused her hurt, waving them off and telling them it was okay.

"I am not some scared rabbit you can intimidate, Blaith."

"I know," he said. "You're more."

She pushed him away. "We should figure out where we're going to stay. It looks like rain."

"Telyn? Telyn of Leyton?"

Again, Telyn felt Blaith pull her behind him.

"That's her! That's her!" cried the little girl from earlier. She was pulling on the sleeve of a middle-aged woman who bore her likeness.

“Are you the storyteller from Leyton?” the woman asked again.

Taking a deep breath, Telyn stepped out from behind her human shield. “Yes, but how do you know that?”

The woman smiled. “I’m Mira. I have an empty room in my home if you need a place to sleep.”

“Why?” Blaith barked.

“We were hoping to meet you after the boy didn’t return,” Mira answered.

“Wren?” Telyn asked, stepping forward. “You know him?”

“Yes,” Mira answered, “but please come home with me. It looks like rain.”

* * *

The group entered the modest crofter’s cottage a few minutes later and settled themselves in front of the fire in the main room. Mira offered them bread and cheese before sinking into a warm chair, dragging her young daughter onto her lap. Gratefully, Telyn ate the fresh bread and cheese while her companion refused, standing away from them and watching Mira intently.

“Thank you very much,” Telyn said. “The bread was—”

“Tell us what you know,” Blaith demanded.

“You’re mean,” the little girl said.

He growled, showing teeth, which caused the girl to shriek.

“Blaith! Go outside until you behave,” Telyn commanded.

He stalked out of the house, his heavy footfalls echoing in the silence of his banishment.

“I’m sorry. Blaith is just unused to all of this.” A wolf howled outside. “He’s different, a loner.”

“I understand. My husband was the same, rest his soul.”

Telyn shifted in her seat, relocating to its edge. “No, you misunderstand. Blaith and I aren’t together in that way. We merely met by chance, and he agreed to escort me to the Citadel.”

“To find Wren?” the girl asked.

“Yes, but how do you know him?”

Mira stroked her daughter’s hair. “Sweeting, why don’t you get ready for bed?”

The little girl gave her mother a wet, smacking kiss on her nose and ran off.

“Her father was a Morganite. He advised us when to plant and when to harvest.”

She smiled, a slight upturn of the lips as if she were sharing a pleasant secret.

“Morganites are a clandestine lot. They usually arrange marriages and affairs to produce children who will inherit magic. They take the child and keep it in their fortress. It is rare that a Morganite ever leaves the Citadel in his whole life. It’s more of a prison than a haven.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Mira looked directly into Telyn’s eyes. “Wren left for the Citadel a month ago and hasn’t returned. When he stayed here, all he could talk about was you. He wouldn’t have stayed there this long by choice.”

“What are you saying?” Telyn asked.

The older woman laid a hand on her shoulder and said, “You might already be too late.”

Telyn sat, stunned, as Mira went to go tuck her daughter into bed. “Gods,” she whispered. She got up and stumbled toward the door, grabbing the jamb and pushing it open. The darkness was only held at bay by the flickering glow of the oil lamp that lit the cottage door. “Blaith?” she called out. “Blaith?”

A flash of yellow caught her eye at the edge of the light. It was the bandage, the one she’d wrapped around Blaith’s arm. Next to it, blending in with the dirt, were his clothes. Telyn fell onto the ground, landing hard on her knees, clutching the dandelion bandage in her hands.

Chapter Eight

Telyn heard Blaith return the next morning, though he tried to close the door quietly. He was wearing the discarded clothes she'd folded for him, and she was lying on the spare bed in Mira's guest room, still clutching the dandelion-yellow cloth.

"Why do you follow me?" she asked.

"I must protect my mate."

"I'm not your mate, Blaith," she whispered.

"It's not something you can choose."

She sat up. "What does that mean?"

"Wolves mate once, for life, and we know our mates when we meet them."

"And I get no say?"

"I don't know," he said. "You're human. Different."

"Come here," she said, patting the spot beside her.

He hesitated but sat on the bed. She stroked the cut on his arm. The healing balm was gone, but the wound was clean. She scooped out the last of the poultice, slathered it on his skin and wrapped the cloth tightly around his arm, giving it a light pat. "There," she said. "Are you ready to leave? I want to leave now."

He nodded. "We'll leave when you're ready."

With slow, silent deliberateness, Telyn prepared her belongings for travel. Blaith watched her from his perch on the bed.

“You aren’t talking,” he said.

“So?”

“You always talk.” He paused for a moment, giving Telyn a chance to slide her gaze to him. When he had her attention, he asked, “Why are you angry?”

“I’m not. I just want to leave, all right?”

“You are, Tel. I can smell it on you.”

She dropped her bag on the bed. “Do not do that! It’s not normal. It’s not—”

“Human?”

“That’s not what I was going to say, Blaith,” she answered, rubbing her forehead as if to expel a headache. “Okay, I admit that I am angry.”

“Can I send you outside like a dog until you behave?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

He picked up her bags and shouldered them. “Let’s go.”

“If I am so terrible, why do you still stay?”

“You ask as if it’s a choice.”

“Isn’t it?”

“No.”

“Blaith—”

“Let’s go save your Wren,” he said. “It’s what you want.”

She bent her head. “It might already be too late.”

“We won’t know until we go to the Citadel,” he answered. “Until then, there is hope.”

“Is there anything crueler than hope?” Telyn asked, more to herself than the Were.

“Yes,” he said. “Confirmation.”

* * *

The footpath was narrow and steep, unlike the cart road, but it was also much shorter in distance. Blaith and Telyn had been walking the path for two hours. Telyn tried to start a conversation—to return to that camaraderie they once shared—only to fail.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He grunted but didn’t reply.

“I did not mean to insult you, Blaith. I was just embarrassed by your behavior.

Mira was so pleasant. Being there, being treated like a guest, was so nice.”

“You’re not used to it?”

“No, I am not.”

“Why?”

“There was an accident,” she said. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Blaith stopped. He turned to face her, but her eyes were firmly fixed to the ground.

He reached out to her. “Tel—”

“No.” She walked past him with determined strides. “We’re almost there.”

Lowering his hand, Blaith followed her in silence to the gates of the Citadel.

* * *

The legend said that after Lady Morgan's death, Sir Colin had built the stronghold of the Citadel. The massive structure stood like a guardian looking out over the Raidian's mountainous border. It was a sanctuary and a fortress, a protector safeguarding the kingdom's magic adapts while making sure the rest of the citizens remained shielded from danger.

Telyn thought that a fortress carved into the side of a mountain would look dark and oppressive, but in its way, the Citadel shone in the afternoon sun. The granite gray of the stone seemed as polished as fine marble. Its luster almost masked its age, but centuries of nicks and scratches marked the stone like fine wrinkles. Two thick pillars loomed, serving as sentries before the door. Nothing moved in the courtyard, not even the air. The entire scene seemed to remain perfectly preserved as if it were waiting for something or someone to set it all in motion.

Blaith paused before the threshold of the pillars. His eyes roved the surfaces of the courtyard, waiting. Telyn felt no compulsion to wait. She walked through the doorway of the pillars and across the courtyard until she reached the large oaken portal trimmed in iron. The door swung open easily. Lit by tallow candles, the hallway glowed amber, the entrance hall old and worn but richly appointed with dark wood furniture and crimson tapestries.

"Hello?" she called as she took a few tentative steps into the building. "Anyone here?"

She waited, her breath a visible mist in the cold dampness. As in the courtyard, there was no motion inside. Everything was static and intense. The colors seemed brighter, more distinct. Sharper.

“Tel.”

A hand wrapped itself around her arm and pulled her back until she felt pressed against Blaith’s warm body. Her breath came in staccato gasps and her hands clutched the rough linen material. Gentle pressure ran along her spine from the nape of her neck to the small of her back in a soothing massage of comfort.

“It’s all right, I’m here,” Blaith whispered into her ear.

The strong, steady beat of his heart echoed against her erratic one, which slowed until they matched. Gradually, he eased her around, taking her face in his hands. Her gray eyes were still wide, though the worst of her fear had passed.

“May I help you?”

Telyn turned until she faced the new speaker, a short, pudgy man with thinning salt-and-pepper hair and dark circles under his eyes. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Faris of the Citadel,” he announced with a slight bow. “And who might you be, my lady?”

“Telyn of Leyton,” she answered with a mockery of a curtsy. “And this is my companion, Blaith of the Gold Wood.”

The small man looked at them quizzically, his gaze lingering on Blaith just a bit too long for Telyn’s comfort. She thought she saw the Morganite’s eyebrow arch, but it was gone as quickly as it came. “Very well, and to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“I’m looking for someone,” Telyn began. “His name is Wren of Leyton, and he would have arrived a little over a month ago.”

“I see,” Faris answered with a nod. “I believe he has been confined to a room below stairs until his punishment is decided upon.”

“What did he do?” she asked.

“We caught him pilfering a book from our library. Removing any Morganite text from the Citadel is considered an offense,” Faris said. “If you are here to petition for his release, then you must appeal to the council.”

“Gladly.”

Faris nodded, then looked past her to Blaith. He gave him a small bow before leaving them in the hall. Telyn turned around to see Blaith, arms folded over his chest, looking down at his boot-clad feet.

“What was that about?” she asked, her voice sharp with suspicion and tempered with mild accusation.

“Come,” he told her.

He walked quickly down the corridor, too confident in his direction. Telyn trailed behind him like a nervous pup. Everything was dark: tapestries, wood furniture, and metal torch holders. The wavering fire of the torches did nothing to lift the impending sense of trouble Telyn felt deep within the marrow of her being. When they reached the upper floors, it grew warmer and lighter. More people were about, huddled together in careless groups or wandering down the hallway alone. All were dressed in flowing robes in a multitude of colors, from jewel-tones to fresh pastels. Never had she seen such extraordinary depth of color in dyed wool, velvet, and silks. The vibrancy of it could only match the exaggerations storytellers lent their tales. But for all the flash and marvel presented to her in so little time, Telyn didn't fail to notice that several of the Morganites

and servants nodded their heads in their direction, two or three even calling out Blaith's name, though he made no effort toward noticing them.

He escorted her to a new corridor devoid of people, though it still possessed the richness of the other passages on this floor. Turning to a heavy wooden door, Blaith led her into a comfortably, if frugally, appointed bedchamber—only marginally better quality than the inn room in Glen.

“You are to remain here until sent for,” Blaith announced.

Telyn stepped into the room and turned to face him. “Am I to be a prisoner too?”

“No.”

“I feel like one,” she said as she laced her fingers behind her back just under her bag. “Though I feel more slighted than criminal.”

“I have never lied to you, Tel.”

“No, you didn't, did you? But then you also never told me anything true.” She paused as if trying to gather her fleeing thoughts. “Who are you?”

He bowed stiffly, as though he'd not had reason to perform such an act for a long while. “Blaith Were, emissary of the Citadel.”

“It is unfortunate that we have only now met, Mr. Were. Now please leave me in peace,” she said, turning her back to him and to the door.

Blaith's shoes scuffed across the stone floor, then the door clicked softly. It was only when she heard the metal scrap of a lock sliding close that Telyn realized that she had never asked to see Wren.

Chapter Nine

After an hour, young Morganites brought Telyn a lunch cart filled with boiled meats and an assortment of vegetables. The meal was fit for an entire troupe of storytellers. An hour after that she received a book from the great library, a collection of fairy tales from western Raidian. She flipped through it—any storyteller worth her words would attempt to memorize it—but it held not a single minute of her interest. Her mind was flittering through too many thoughts to focus on a single tale. So Telyn resorted to pacing. It was almost comforting, the walking. After all, she'd spent that last week doing nothing but walking, sleeping, and eating.

A knock startled her to a sudden stop. The other visits weren't preceded with that level of courtesy—the young wizards had barged into her room without rapping on the door and announcing themselves.

“Enter,” she called as she positioned herself in the center of the room, looking calm. She hoped.

The door opened and a man clad in black came in, then shut it quickly behind him. He moved too swiftly for Telyn to see clearly, but when he turned to face her, she crossed her arms over her chest and abandoned all pretense of composure.

“Telyn,” he said, his voice flat.

Gone were the rough, borrowed clothes. In their stead, Blaith wore a long-sleeved jerkin and fitted black trews, both made of material too fine for Telyn to recognize. He looked darker and far more civilized than she'd thought possible.

"Tel," he said again.

She dragged her eyes from his well-crafted leather boots, looking instead at the face that still held its rawboned quality, despite his finery.

"Blaith."

"Are you well?"

"My prison is very comfortable, thank you."

He sighed. "You aren't a prisoner. You're a guest."

"Then why am I not allowed out of this room?" she asked. "A cage is a cage no matter its trappings."

"The Citadel is a dangerous place for those who aren't versed in Morganite ways, but if you wish, I will take you to our library."

Telyn straightened herself, tilting her head slightly upward in the way her mother used to do when she wanted something from her father. "I want to see Wren."

Blaith's jaw clenched. "Fine."

"Good."

"Follow me."

Blaith walked out the door, Telyn following close behind, almost running to catch up to him. They passed more corridors and stairs. Children dressed in Morganite robes scampered around, carrying scrolls from lesson to lesson. Apprentices, Blaith explained.

They crossed the entrance hall and walked down the stairs into the servants' quarters. It was colder but homier, with colorful frayed rugs and fragrant dried flowers. As they continued down the hallways, the homey feeling lessened until the surroundings were drab and threadbare to the point of ragged. The lower levels were a maze of corridors through which Telyn would never find her way. The only thing that still retained a sturdy appearance was the heavy wooden door that Blaith now stood before.

Without preamble, he opened the doorway and announced, "Visitor."

"Go away," said a voice, gravelly from disuse. It sounded like Wren, but there was a note in the tone that seemed sour. No one would ever describe Wren as sharing the characteristics of vinegar or unripe berries. The Wren Telyn knew could never become acerbic, for he always possessed the best of humors no matter the situation.

"This is an important visitor," Blaith said.

"I don't care if it's the paunchy old goat himself."

The door was now wide open, and Blaith had given her enough space to maneuver herself into the room. The room was dim and far gloomier than the chamber she was assigned. Wren was huddled on the bed, his back to them. His form was completely clear to her, but Telyn thought that she could see folded arms that were a bit too thin.

"The last time I looked in the mirror, I had neither horns nor hooves," she announced, trying to alleviate the apprehension that suddenly began to itch in her clammy palms.

Wren's head turned toward her. She waited, her dress still covered in traveling dust with wisps of blond hair escaping her once-tight braid. He blinked as if he couldn't believe she was standing in the doorway.

"Telyn?" Wren asked. "Are you truly there?"

"I am, Wren."

He leapt from the bed, shedding the image of his helplessness in an instant. Wren embraced Telyn so quickly and fiercely that it stole the breath from her lungs. After the shock, Telyn slowly began to run her hand across his shoulder and upper back. His grip tightened, and breath truly left her body. Her soothing strokes became feeble attempts to push him back or loosen his hold on her.

"Wren," she sputtered as she tried in vain to free herself. "Wren, please."

He was off of her and sprawled on the floor as she sucked the air back into her lungs. When the dizziness began to subside, Telyn found herself clutching Blaith's forearm. He must have pulled Wren off of her.

"Are you well?" Blaith asked.

She nodded, not trusting her power of speech just then. Wren stared at them for a moment before picking himself up from the floor. Telyn could now see him clearly in the light spilling in from the hallway. He was gaunt, not so much that he was loose skin stretched across bones, but he looked as if he could use a filling meal or three.

"What did you do to her?" Wren asked, his tone returning to the terseness of earlier.

He lunged for her, but Blaith kept him at bay with one arm. "I saved her from being suffocated by a fool," he answered.

Wren clenched his teeth. “How dare you touch my betrothed? Let her go.”

“Wren,” Telyn said weakly.

“I will when she asks it of me, not by your order.”

“Blaith,” Telyn tried again.

Wren stepped closer. Telyn felt trapped and small between the two men.

“Unhand her, wolf, or I’ll force you.”

“Unlikely,” Blaith replied.

Telyn felt the Were’s body tense, readying for a fight. Pushing herself away from Blaith, she stood between the two men and held hands up to keep them apart. “Stop it. Both of you,” she said, glaring at both. “I’ll not have you fight like a couple of crows over a plump worm.”

They didn’t toss her aside, nor did they back down. And neither would she. She looked up at Blaith, who tore his eyes from Wren’s to stare down at her face.

“I would like to talk to him alone, please,” she said, remembering the hurt Blaith had shown over his dismissal at Mira’s home. “That doesn’t mean I think any less of you. It would just be easier.”

He nodded. “I will be outside if you have need of me.”

Blaith closed the door but didn’t shut it completely. It remained cracked only a hairsbreadth, plunging the room into further darkness. Telyn was finally alone with Wren after a month of missing him. When she’d begun her journey, and even during, she wondered what this moment would be like. Would she cry? Would they touch? Would everything suddenly make sense like in her stories?

No, she realized. There were no tears and no understanding. There was just silence and two people staring at one another. She had nothing to tell him.

“What are you doing here, Telyn? And what are you doing with that?” He gestured toward the door behind her.

“I came here to bring you home. Blaith and I met on the road.”

He sighed. “The wolf’s one of them, you know.”

“I know that now,” she answered. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I owe him my life.”

“Probably put you in danger in the first place,” Wren said.

Remembering her first meeting with Blaith the man, she bit her lower lip. “No, I was being foolish. If he wasn’t there... suffice it to say that I would’ve never been heard from again.”

Telyn felt rather than saw Wren’s fingers brush her cheek, then trace her jaw. His thumb ran lightly over her lips. It was nearly the most intimate moment in her life, and would have been had it not been for Blaith’s rescue from the ravine. Her body stilled, but her mind spun like a weaver’s wheel, soaking up the sensations.

“I’m glad you are here. I’ve missed you, Telyn,” he said, just loud enough for her to hear. His other hand began to stroke the base of her neck and her eyes closed. “Have you missed me?”

“Yes.”

“Terribly?” he asked with a poor imitation of his once-playful tone.

No, she thought, and she knew it was true. She had missed him, but not in the consuming way he wanted her to miss him. She opened her eyes. He was looking at her,

waiting for her answer. His eyes searched hers as if he could divine her thoughts. Telyn hoped that he couldn't, because she'd never seen him look so lost or hungry for an answer that wasn't truth.

“Telyn, have you missed me greatly?”

“Yes, I have.”

He cradled her against him. “I will marry you when we return.”

“I know.”

He lowered his head, his lips brushing hers. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” she said with a smile. Glad to discover that it wasn't a lie.

Chapter Ten

After she and Wren finished talking, Blaith returned Telyn to her room. When he opened the door and stepped aside to let her enter, she saw a large copper tub filled with water and heard the door click shut behind her. The bathwater was hot, and the soap smelled overwhelmingly of lilacs. Telyn soaked and washed off the dust, going over the story Wren had confessed.

When he arrived, the Morganites had treated him as a welcome guest. The wolf, as Wren called Blaith, was assigned to escort him around the Citadel and keep him safe during his visit. For five days, Wren had scoured manuscripts and scrolls for a story for her, his betrothed. On the sixth day he found what he was looking for. Excited over his success, he'd tucked the story of "The Water-Lily Princess" into his loose jerkin, thinking he could just walk out of the fortress and return to Leyton with his wedding gift secure near his heart. But Blaith—he said the name as if spitting out a foul taste—had been no fool, and he apprehended Wren in the courtyard with the stolen scroll. Brought before the ruling council, Wren had explained that he was just borrowing the scroll until Telyn could copy the story, and he begged to be returned to Leyton, but to no avail. He'd been in the barren room ever since.

Upon hearing the story, Telyn stood quite dumbfounded. All of this because of one story written on a scrap of scroll. And still, after an hour of soaking in the fragrant

water, she was no closer to figuring out a way to contest for Wren's release. He had admitted to breaking their laws. The whole thing was enough to make Telyn's head ache with frustration.

She dried off with a rough towel, donning a loaned shift, and burrowing into the warm comfort of the bed linens. Her wet hair slicked behind her head and pooled at the base of her neck as her head came to rest on a soft pillow. Telyn curled her body and gathered the blanket around her. She was so very weary.

Telyn was awakened some time later by a gentle shake of her shoulders. Her fatigue had lessened until it no longer felt as keen as a sharpened blade. Still, she would rather bask in the cocooned warmth of the bed and sleep until her bones felt stiffer than clotted cream.

"Time to wake up, Tel."

She whimpered at the thought of leaving the bed's cossetting comfort, but the voice—a wonderfully soothing voice—was relentless.

"The council is waiting."

The council... Wren! Telyn bolted out of bed, nearly colliding heads with Blaith. He steadied her, large hands encompassing her shoulders. It was a moment before she realized that he was staring at her barely clothed body. She covered herself and turned her back to him.

"You didn't knock," she said over her shoulder.

"I did, but you didn't answer."

She thought he was coming closer, a shuffling of feet. But when she looked behind her, he was still where she'd left him. His gaze was forceful but hooded to deflect the intensity.

"I'll be ready in a moment," she told him and looked away.

"I'll be outside."

He closed the door behind him, and she rushed to ready herself for her meeting. A dress lay over a chair. It wasn't new, but neither was it worn. It was made of sturdy, bluebell-colored lawn. Telyn admired it and contemplated wearing it instead of her own gown but decided against it until she discovered her own dusty, dun-colored kirtle was nowhere to be found. Donning the blue dress and her boots, Telyn met Blaith in the corridor. He looked at her a moment from head to toe, then dipped into a bow and requested that she follow him to the council's meeting chamber. Telyn agreed and followed his easy stride, so unlike his long, hurried gait when travelling.

After a seemingly endless walk, Blaith gestured for her to enter through the large double doors made of solid oak. The chamber was circular, large, and brightly lit by oil-globe sconces that dotted the wall. Everything shimmered with the firelight. Tapestries hung on the wall depicting the four natural elements in their various states and their amalgamations. Telyn looked up and saw that the ceiling disappeared into shadow, the light not strong enough to penetrate the upper darkness.

The doors closed, and Blaith stood guard. He nodded, motioning her to turn around. When she did, Telyn saw five old men seated at a massive, half-moon stone table. Each man was a sage, the highest ranked of the Morganites, and dressed in robes of different colors to represent their mastery of elements: blue for water, red for fire, green

for earth, gray for air. The final mage was dressed in black to show he was a master in all elements. He was seated in the center in a chair raised higher than the rest.

“Telyn ap Storyteller of Leyton?” he asked in a deep baritone voice. The mage’s hair was thinning, but his beard was bushy and full.

“Yes,” she replied. She clenched her fists and tried to force the apprehension from her body. “Yes, I am Telyn.”

He smiled in a way that reminded her of her mistress, Caethes. It did much to soothe her nerves. She walked closer to the table and stood before the men with her back straight and her gaze steady.

“We have heard much about you,” said the man in blue. “The boy...” He looked over her shoulder.

Blaith answered, “Wren, sir.”

“Wren has informed us that you are a storyteller.”

“An apprentice, sir, of master storyteller Caethes.”

“Are you familiar with our history?” She wasn’t sure, but Telyn thought it was the sage of air who asked.

“If you speak of the legend of Lady Morgan and Sir Colin, then yes, I know it well. It is one of the first histories I learned,” Telyn answered.

The black-clad mage leaned forward, an elbow now resting on the table. “And how is the ending told in Leyton?”

“The, um, dragon...” She swallowed. She was unused to recalling an ending without building to it and found it difficult to recall one specific part without recounting the whole story. “The dragon was weakened by the young mage Morgan enough so that

Sir Colin could cut...no, slash the beast's belly from throat to tail. It died, but not before killing Morgan. Bereft, her lover, Colin, carried her up the nearest mountain and built a great fortress to protect other magic adapts like her."

"Accurate," the mage said. "Knowing that tale, you should understand what virtues we hold high within these walls."

Telyn nodded but made no effort to answer.

"Wren has said that we must release him because he needed to take care of you. What have you to say to this?"

Telyn no longer cared who spoke, her gaze firmly locked upon the etched designs carved into the table's edge. "He is a good friend," she answered. "We've known each other since childhood."

"Do you love him?" the mage asked.

"I think so."

"Our man, Were, reported that you were not as helpless as the boy made you sound." The earth sage picked up a piece of parchments and scanned it. "In fact, he said you were quite capable and a remarkably talented storyteller. How do you find his assessment?"

"I am honored by it," Telyn answered, "but he doesn't know me, and his generous appraisal is proof of that."

"He is not a man prone to exaggeration," the water sage said.

Telyn swallowed. "No, he isn't," she said, then turned to looked over her shoulder at Blaith, still standing in the shadows near the door. He was rigid and unyielding, but his

eyes seemed to soften when they met hers. “But he is prone to letting himself believe what he wishes were true. He’s human after all. We all are.”

The fire sage, who’d been silent the entire time, smiled. “Prettily stated, young storyteller, but I wouldn’t expect anything less from someone in your trade.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“But as you know, your Wren was accused of theft, a most serious crime in our walls. We do not take kindly to those who attempt to abuse our generosity,” the red sage continued. “I expect you are acquainted with the gravity of the situation.”

“Yes, Wren’s action was reprehensible, but he’s learned his lesson,” Telyn said. “Please release him, and I will return him home, and you will never have cause to hear our names again.”

The mage began to tap a soundless beat on the table. “We shall release him to your custody, but only if you provide us a boon,” he said. “A story told for a story stolen. The Wind Sage has agreed to inscribe your best tale down to be saved in our library. Pray you make it a worthy trade for Wren’s freedom.”

Chapter Eleven

Her best story in lieu of Wren's imprisonment. Telyn tried to let their pronouncement sink in, but all she could hear was silence. The voice of a mere apprentice storyteller would decide her friend's fate.

"What will you tell us?" the mage asked.

"The Two Toads," Telyn answered. She hadn't meant to say that, but it slipped out. It was the story she told most, the one she knew best.

The Wind Sage scribbled the title on the top of his parchment, then waited, his quill held ready. Telyn wiped her hands on her skirt and took a deep breath. Nervousness hadn't been a problem since she'd begun telling stories to the children of Leyton. She looked at her audience, five elderly men who had powers she'd only heard of in stories. She took a step back so that she'd have room to ply her trade. If they wanted her best, she'd give them all she had. Taking another cleansing breath, she closed her eyes and banished her fear.

The mage, annoyance coloring his voice, said, "We are waiting, storyteller."

Telyn opened her eyes and smiled just enough to be confident but not broad enough to be bold. She would let her gestures and words be daring for her.

"Once there lived two toads in the Kingdom of Raidian. One made her home in a clear brook near the village of Dinnieau. The other toad lived in the shadows of the great

mountains in the town of Ventir. Despite the great distance that separated them, the toads were very much alike, so much so that they both decided, on the same day—nearly the same moment—that they were missing something in their lives, and that they must go out into the world to find it.

“The toad in Ventir was called Benno. He decided he must travel south toward the woods of Dinnieau, thus avoiding the heavy lanes of traffic near the kingdom’s capital, for he would not like to fall prey to a cart’s heavy wheel.

“The Dinnieau toad, named Febe, chose to travel north to the mountains of Ventir to see if the great Citadel had her missing piece. It was well known, even to the forest creatures, that the Morganites held treasures deep in their hallowed halls. And what is more precious, the toad thought, than a piece of yourself?

“The roads they both traveled were long and perilous. With great hops they avoided ditches and the wheels of tinker carts. Halfway through their journeys, they reached the moorland, which looked quite vast and endless to them. Heather and grasses and wildflowers dotted the landscape, and the tiny beasts were overcome at the thought of hopping their way through the unknown terrain.

“But these toads were both of hearty stock. Febe had the longest jump of any frog or toad in the province. Benno was the highest jumper in his province. They hopped and hopped until even they could not hop any farther. When Febe took a breath, she looked across the clearing and saw another toad.” Telyn looked at the council of men, gauging their interest. Their eyes were focused on her.

“Benno too was surprised to meet another toad in such an unfriendly place. They regarded each other, neither uttering a croak. But after only a moment, they began to fall

into friendly conversation. Both were delighted to meet a new friend who was also searching for something.

“After sharing a hearty meal of moorland flies, the toads decided to part ways. They needed to continue their search, and with slow hops they left on their quests. But the farther they got from the moors, the sharper they felt the empty pain. When once it was a hollow emptiness, they now felt a vast weight—like a tinker’s wheel, squeezing the very breath from their lungs.

“Even when they reached their destinations, they could not find their missing pieces. Febe searched and searched the Citadel’s library and its maze of corridors but found nothing. Benno reached a cool stream that was so clear, he could see the stones that lay in the creek’s bed. Though it was much cleaner than his own home and smelled of honeysuckle, it brought him no peace.

“Benno raced home while Febe continued her search. Hopping so fast he nearly tripped over his legs, he reached Ventir in half the time it had taken him to reach Dinnieau. Though he was home, the hole that belonged to his missing piece seemed to grow larger and larger still.

“He was sitting on a rock at the edge of the murky river of Ventir when a noise sounded behind him. Benno scuttled around, and when he saw a sad Febe behind him, he bounded toward her.

“Benno showed Febe his favorite dining spot, and they feasted on the plump flies that lived along the riverbank until their hunger was sated. Febe spoke of her time in the Citadel, while Benno spoke of the clear creek. As they talked, the hollow place within their chests no longer pained them. It was as if a balm was smoothed over that empty

place with each word spoken and each laugh shared. But as the sun passed its peak, Febe told her friend that she must leave, though she was loath to do it. They waved goodbye, and she began to hop away.

“Hop, hop, hop, down the dusty road she went. The hole where her missing piece should be ached more fiercely with each jump. Febe stopped and looked back at the little town of Ventir and wondered why the emptiness would hurt when she had found nothing in her travels.”

Telyn smiled as she took a brief break during her narrative. This moment was the hardest part for her. The rapid change of voices in such a small span of time could overtax her voice if she wasn't careful and ruin the entire effect.

“‘Febe! Febe!’ Benno called out. He hopped closer until he stood beside her.

“‘Benno?’ she asked. ‘What’s wrong?’

“‘I found it,’ he said. ‘I found my missing piece.’

“Though she was happy for him, Febe couldn't help but be jealous.

“He lay a webbed foot on her back. ‘The missing piece was a friend.’

“It was then Febe realized that what Benno said was true. The missing piece was not a thing, but another soul that fit with hers, her missing half, and forevermore they were whole.” Telyn finished with a flourished bow. This gesture was normally accompanied by applause—and time to catch her breath—from the children. The story had always been a favorite. She waited, still bent low, balancing herself on the balls of her feet. Still the councilmen said nothing, and she heard only the scratching of the Wind Sage's quill. Had she failed?

No. She couldn't believe it. If she was skilled at anything, it was telling a story. Telyn had told dozens of tales over the years. They had asked for her best, and that was what she'd given them. Whatever their verdict, the outcome would not be her burden. She knew she had done her best, and she could not be faulted for trying.

When the scrape of the quill stopped, Telyn lifted her head and looked the black-clad mage in the eye. The Morganites bent their heads together and began conversing. Telyn straightened her spine and held herself with as much fake self-assurance as she could muster. As she waited, Telyn strained to eavesdrop on the murmured words of the old men, but all she could hear were the soft thuds of boot steps behind her. Blaith didn't touch her, and she didn't want him to. He stood slightly behind Telyn and waited with her.

The whispers died down, and the mage smiled. "Well told, young storyteller. You are all our emissary's report said you were. You and your betrothed may leave with the first light of morning."

Telyn bowed again and let her breath out in a near-silent gust. "Thank you, sirs," she said. "Thank you."

"Thank you, Telyn of Leyton, for adding to our library," the Wind Sage said as he and the rest of the council stood. "Were, escort our guest to her room, please."

Having been dismissed, Telyn felt Blaith gently grip her elbow and steer her out of the chamber. She shook off his hold when the doors closed behind them, but he didn't stop walking. She quickened her pace to keep up. He seemed to be in a hurry to return her to her room.

After ascending another floor in silence, Telyn was sick of the quiet, the lack of camaraderie she and Blaith once shared. They were almost to her bedchamber. Blaith had never been a man of words, but once in awhile he'd speak to her, though usually in a grumpy tone. She really hadn't been the best of travel companions, she supposed.

"Thank you," she said.

"You are welcome," he replied.

Telyn sighed. "Aren't you even the least bit interested in why I am thanking you?"

"No."

"Well, I wanted to thank you for this dress. I assume the theft of my kirtle and the appearance of this frock was your doing." She smiled up at him, a bit too honeyed to be completely sincere. "The deed was most likely done before waking me, correct?"

He looked down at her, his pace slowing. "It is not my fault," he said, with a slight upturn at the corner of his mouth, "you sleep like a dragon. Snore like one, too."

She gasped and then hit him, though she doubted very much that he even noticed such a weak blow. "I do not."

"If I recant, then I'd be lying."

"Then lie, for me."

"Always," he whispered.

The solemnity of that one word bothered her, and Telyn wished to needle him about it, but she was loath to lose this small bit of amity. He was showing her his playful side, the one she hadn't seen since she found out he was a Were.

"Then say it," she demanded, returning to their previous playfulness.

“You do not snore like a dragon.”

Her smile turned smug and self-indulgent. “Thank you.”

He opened the door to her room and stepped back to allow her entry. They faced each other over the threshold.

Telyn swallowed, and all semblance of their former lighthearted banter departed. “Thank you, Blaith, truly,” she told him. “Whatever you told them about me...just thank you for everything.”

He bowed, a slight dip. “Goodbye, Telyn of Leyton. Journey well.”

The door closed and Telyn sat on the bed, staring at the place he had stood.

“Goodbye, Blaith.”

Chapter Twelve

The day dawned cool with the cock's crow. Telyn had already been up for hours. She had packed her things, and Wren had packed what little he had. All she was waiting for was her escort. It was a relief when the knock sounded on her door. Blaith's swift departure still plagued her.

She reached the door, her mouth open, ready to greet her friend, but he wasn't there. A young boy of about eleven years stood before her. His red hair clashed with his bright-green training robes, and next to him stood another, a bit younger, with ruffled brown hair.

"Hello," Telyn said. "May I help you?"

They both bowed, and the ginger-haired boy said, "We are here to help you." He looked at the other boy. "Aiden, her bag."

The younger boy snatched her bag and began walking down the corridor before Telyn could stop him. The other boy, introducing himself as Zev, held out his arm and waited for her to take it. The formal gesture seemed odd from such a young boy.

"Thank you," she said as she took his arm. She looked around, trying to spot Blaith among the Morganites and the adepts, but she didn't see his black-clad form anywhere.

"If you are looking for Blaith, he isn't here," Zev said.

Startled, Telyn asked, “Why do you say that? I was just trying to get my last glimpse of this place before I go. Perhaps I can fashion a story featuring the Citadel. The interiors are really quite wonderful, and not many people have seen it.”

She knew that the boy didn’t believe her little half-truth. She had been looking for Blaith, quite brazenly, it seemed. Things had not gone well the last couple days in their travels together. Stilted conversations, strained silences, and clandestine looks had all been markers of an underlying something. But his ease when they were last together, Blaith’s candor, had given her cause to hope. Hope that they would be friends despite her constant denial of their depth of connection. Surely, Blaith realized that she was already bound—though that thought also distressed her—to Wren.

“Blaith has prepared everything for your departure,” Zev said. “He even got you a carriage because your betrothed is sick and all.”

Telyn nodded. “He is very kind and considerate, a good friend.”

“Blaith is my cousin, you ken?” Zev whispered. “I’m not supposed to let anyone know. Weres aren’t supposed to learn magic.”

Surely, the Morganites weren’t prejudiced. The boy seemed a bit frightened after his pronouncement: shoulders hunched, head lowered, his elbow shaking. “Why not?”

“The Morganites believe in a balance, and Weres are magical creatures. The Council fears that with too much magic, magical creatures may grow too powerful. They also fear the bestial nature of Weres. The longer they stay in beast form, the more of their humanity is overtaken by the beast inside, and they become unpredictable when they finally become human again,” Zev said. “Even if you are only part creature, you are not

allowed in for training. I've only a drop of Were-blood, and unlike my cousin, I can't change form, but I am adept at earth-lore."

"Your secret is safe with me, Zev," Telyn said as she patted his arm. "It is unfair to keep a being from fulfilling his potential."

The boy nodded. "When they sent Blaith to take me from my family, he told my mother that he'd make sure the wizards never found out about my heritage. In a few years I'll complete my training. I think Blaith will be happy then. I don't think he wants to stay here any longer."

The last was said more to himself than to Telyn, but the comment rattled her. "Why would he want to leave?"

"I think he spends too much time with humans," Zev said. "I think he enjoyed his time as a wolf when he was with you. Ever since he's been back he just seems different, I guess."

They were almost upon the entrance hall now. Telyn could hear the servants preparing things for her journey home. But just before they crossed the threshold to the entrance hall, Zev stopped her. "I didn't mean to trouble you with my concerns, Telyn, but you said you were his friend, and I thought maybe you could help by talking to him."

"Zev," she said, placing her hand over his, "I don't think Blaith will heed anything I say. I consider him a friend, but things are strained between us at best. And if he chooses to leave here, it should be his choice alone."

The boy nodded and silently escorted her out to the courtyard. Aiden had already loaded her things into the black coach. It was nice but far from extravagant, the wheels worn from use. As they got closer, Telyn could see the dark outline of Wren's form

already inside the carriage with a blanket wrapped around his legs. The coachman introduced himself, and then Zev assisted her up into the carriage.

“Food and anything else you may need is packed into the storage compartment under the seats,” Zev said. He took a step away from the carriage and bent low at the hip in a formal bow. “Journey well, Telyn.”

“Thank you, Zev. I hope your training goes well.” She inclined her head. “Morgan be with you.”

He smiled at her. “And with you, storyteller.”

He closed the door, and she was left alone with Wren. His head lolled to the side on the headrest of the coach’s gray wool-covered squab. Pulling the blanket next to her, Telyn settled down for the ride back to Leyton.

* * *

The journey was swift and easy. Wren rested most of the time, while Telyn look out the window at the passing landscape. They were already halfway through the Gold Wood.

“Are you happy to be going home?”

Telyn turned her head away from the window and looked at her friend. It was the first real question he’d asked her. They had used small talk to pass some of the time, but Telyn had found that she’d rather feign sleep than talk.

“Yes,” she replied. “It will be nice to see Caethes again.” A smile played on her lips. “And the children. I didn’t expect I’d miss them so much.”

He shifted in his seat. “I’m sure they missed you as well.” He smiled, the timbre of his voice dropping. “I know I did.”

Her eyes lowered, breaking contact with his.

“Did you miss me?” he asked in that same husky tone.

She looked out the window again. “Yes.”

The seat squeaked as Wren leaned forward, and his finger caressed her cheek.

“Are you well, love?”

Telyn could see—now that the light from the window was shining on his face—that his color had returned and his body had filled out a bit from the hearty meals and provisions of the past few days. He was beginning to look like the boy she knew, the Wren who’d kept her from jumping in after her brother, the Wren who’d watched over her from afar. She waited for that same heavy knot to form in her belly. It didn’t come. The feeling she had associated with him all their lives was gone, replaced by some emotion that didn’t weigh her down.

“Telyn?”

She smiled at him, soft and sweet. “Yes, Wren, I am fine. A lot has happened, and I am still trying to sort it out in my mind.”

He toyed with a strand of her blond hair. “Don’t worry so. I’ll take care of you. I promise, Tel.”

She couldn’t reply. Lying back, Wren let the gentle rocking motion of the coach lull him to sleep. Her eyes hurt. They hurt from watching, from blinking so much, from holding back tears. Telyn rubbed them hard with the heels of her hands. She looked at the sleeping man who wanted her for his wife. He wanted to take care of her, protect her, love her. If this was a tale she was telling, it would end with some flowery words expounding on how the hero and heroine lived wonderfully full and content lives. But her words failed her.

“Don’t call me Tel,” she said, but he was asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

It was late afternoon when Telyn and Wren finally made it back to Leyton. Peeking out the window, Telyn could see villagers gathering to watch the coach pull to a slow halt near the town's long hall. When the carriage came to a full stop, Telyn hopped out of it and held her hand out. Wren may have strengthened, but Telyn didn't trust that he could hold himself steady after sitting so long. The townsfolk gasped when Wren emerged from the darkened interior of the conveyance. His step wobbled a bit, and he clutched her arm tightly, almost painfully. Telyn was glad he was holding her forearms and leaving her still-bruised wrist alone.

Moving to one of the log benches that circled the empty fire pit, Telyn seated Wren and took a place next to him, murmuring reassurances at how well he was doing. She cupped his face, not caring that others were staring, and smiled. "You're home, Wren."

Instead of replying, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead, then hugged her tight, his fingers running through her loose hair.

"Wren!"

The desperate cry broke them apart. Wren's mother was hurtling toward them, arms outstretched. Mother and son embraced, and the crowd broke out of its stupor. Their cheers and claps overwhelmed Telyn. The noise was nearly too much. She scooted away

as more of Wren's family joined him. She supposed she moved because their station was above hers and she had returned to a place where being a storyteller mattered. At the Citadel, Telyn had felt accepted despite her trade. She'd even felt a bit of respect from the council of Morganites after she'd told her tale, and respect was a feeling she thought she'd long forgotten. And though they treated her with the same deference as they did other non-magic users, they still held their own set of social castes, according to young Zev.

“Telyn Storyteller?”

She looked up at her father—no, her chieftain—and inclined her head in greeting and deference. “Chieftain Gavin, I have held my word. I've brought Wren home, as I promised you I would.”

“Yes, you have and for that you are entitled to a reward. What do you wish?”

Everyone except Wren and his family was watching her. Telyn thought for a minute, her eyes downcast. “I don't know what I want anymore. I've seen much this past fortnight, and I feel that I know less than I did, if possible.”

“Then I shall await your answer. Please rest. Your hut has been prepared for you, Storyteller,” Gavin said.

Telyn froze, the name finally sinking in. “You called me Storyteller.” She looked around. No one would quite look her in the eye. “Where is my mistress? Where is Caethes?”

“She succumbed three days past,” Gavin explained, laying a firm hand on her shoulder. “Her last words were of you.”

Shrugging away his touch, Telyn pushed passed the gawkers and stumbled toward her home. She shoved open the door. The familiar scent of a sickroom was gone, the house having been aired out in the intervening days. Telyn staggered to the pallet and fell into it. She felt boneless and tired. Caethes was gone, but she'd brought Wren back. Telyn felt she should be feeling some speck of pride if not happiness at completing the task she'd set for herself. Most of all, she wished to hear Caethes's advice. She would know what to say or tale to spin to dispel this melancholy.

Telyn heard a knock at the door but made no motion to respond. The door creaked open, and Wren stepped in. He set her bag near the door. Telyn saw that he was much stronger than she'd thought. His form didn't wobble as it had when they'd left the Citadel. When he reached her, he wrapped one of the cot's blankets around her.

"It's cold," he said.

She shrugged it off. "I'm used to it."

"You shouldn't be."

"But I am."

Wren's fingers caressed her jaw until his hand wrapped around the back of her neck. With a gentle tug he pulled her head close and kissed her forehead, his lips lingering. "I'm sorry, Telyn. I'm sorry you weren't here for her."

"I as well," she said, leaning her head against his shoulder. "But she understood I had to find you and bring you home.

"Why?" he asked, his thumb stroking her cheek. "Why you?"

"You left for me, and no one else knew. I had the best chance to find you."

He lowered his forehead to her and whispered, “You could have told someone. If something were to happen to you, I’d hate myself.”

“Nothing happened,” she said.

His hand grazed from her neck and down her arm until his fingers tenderly encircled her wrist. The bruise was barely noticeable now and the pain was manageable. He raised it up as and brushed his lips against the wrist. “And here? What happened?”

“I slipped. I would have fallen down a ravine, but Blaith saved me,” Telyn explained.

“The Were hurt you?” Wren asked. “He’s a beast.”

She pulled her arm away. “He saved my life. I would have died if he weren’t there. You should be grateful to Blaith.”

“I don’t want to fight, Telyn.” He leaned over and kissed her lightly. His hands smoothed over her blond locks. “The children have missed you and are waiting for you outside. I think they want one of your stories.”

Turning her head away, she licked her lips and closed her eyes. “Tell them I’ll be out in a moment.”

She felt his weight ease off the cot and heard his footfalls move out the door. When he was gone, Telyn retrieved her bag and began to rifle through it for her leather strip. She was tired and it was windy out, and she didn’t want her hair in her face. One story—she’d tell the children one tale and then barricade herself in her hut and sleep for days, because she doubted she had the energy and heart for more.

Her hand caught the pointed edge of something. Clutching it, Telyn pulled the object. It wasn’t overlarge, but she could feel its weight. The faded brown leather cover

was the first thing she saw as she slipped the book out of her bag. It wasn't hers—she was too poor to own such a luxury. She ran her fingers over the cover, feeling the burned letters of the tome's title. It was a book of tales from the Dinnian Province, her province. She ran fingertip over the edges of the book and flicked the pages. About halfway through the book, the pages fell open. Telyn flipped quickly through the pages until she found the bookmark. The cloth slipped down the page and into her lap. She recognized it easily: it was the yellow scrap of cloth that once wound around her wrist and then bound the cut on Blaith's forearm. It had been cleaned, but a thin line of faded red still bisected the bandage. She slipped the cloth under her hair and used it to tie her hair into a bun.

The book still lay on her lap, opened to the bookmarked page. The title of the tale was written in flourished script with a small illumination decorating the large first letter of the story: "The Blacksmith and the Gold Wood Sprite," Telyn read.

She scanned the pages and noticed the subtle differences between her version and the written text. When she reached the last page, Telyn closed the book and stuffed it back into her bag. Rising, she wiped her hands on her skirt and opened the door. The children were gathered around Wren as he answered their questions about his journey and the Citadel. As if sensing her, Wren looked up and smiled. The kids saw her and cheered. A few even ran up to her and hugged her around the legs. Grabbing her hands, they pulled her toward Wren until she took a seat next to him. They called to her, asking for a story.

"In honor of Caethes," Telyn began, "I shall tell the very first story she taught me. To the north of the village lay the Gold Wood, a magical place of burnished leaves and perfumed breezes."

She wove the tale around the children, describing the intricacies of the blacksmith's metalwork and the forest sprite's beauty. The girls seemed to be hanging on her every word, but the older boys looked a bit bored, some even whispering to each other as she talked. Her most attentive audience was Wren, who touched her occasionally, using it as a sign of possession to others and affection to her.

Telyn's tale wound itself down, and she finished it with a small bow. The children applauded. All save one.

"Miss Telyn?" the girl asked. She was older than the others, about twelve, with dark, almost black hair, muddy brown eyes and a nose that would seem large until she grew into it in a few years.

"Yes, Adara?" Telyn responded as she gestured for the children to quiet down. "Do you have a question?"

"You met a magical creature like the sprite, right?" Adara asked.

Telyn smiled. "Not quite like the sprite. Blaith Were was a shape-shifter. He could change from man to wolf, and he was a very good traveling companion and friend."

"So was the sprite correct? Are they awe-inspiring, since they have magic?" the girl asked.

Taking a deep breath, Telyn touched the yellow bow in her hair. "We shouldn't think of them as creatures. They are beings much like ourselves, I think. It was startling to see Blaith change, but I..." She looked down for a moment. "He was a friend, and I didn't think of him as anything other than that. I shall miss his companionship."

The other children began to clamor for her attention, asking questions about her trip, her stories, and anything else they could think of. Telyn smiled and attempted to answer every query she could. Telyn was able to slip away from them a few hours later. She built a fire in her hut and warmed her hands over the banked coals. Her gaze drifted from the glowing fire over to the bag still sitting by the door. The Citadel's book was still inside the satchel, along with her five copper coins and the other things she'd carried on her journey. Telyn suspected who'd snuck the book into her bag and who persuaded the poor boy to break one of the Morganite laws. The book didn't belong to her, and even though she was not the one to steal it, Telyn keeping it would right no wrongs. She smiled to herself.

Stepping out of her hut, Telyn saw that dusk had settled and the stars had begun dotting the sky with their pinpoint glow. There was not a cloud to be seen. Leaning against the rough wood door, she gazed up, watching the pinks turn purple and finally blue.

Clear skies were an omen of good journeying, Caethes had said.

Telyn smiled as she watched the other villagers retire into their homes. She knew they wouldn't understand. Wren wouldn't understand. It was something that she knew she must do. Telyn wanted to see more than the spit of land she'd traversed on the way to save her friend. She could go in any direction she chose. "But I have a book to return," she said to herself, and she knew that north was the one direction she wanted to go.