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Tears of Glass

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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University of California, Riverside
To Catherine, my sister, my friend, your love and encouragement gave me the strength to follow my dream.
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Chapter 1

Out of all the duties I had at the temple, cleaning fish was the worst. They would look at me with lidless eyes while making silent pleas for mercy. Luna told me that fish were a gift from Oshira to allow us to fulfill our purpose. It was of little comfort to me now. I filleted the last fish, taking care to keep the bones and organs that I would use for hooks and bait, and threw what remained of the carcass into the river. Its lifeless tail bobbed a mournful goodbye in the tumbling waves. Tears sprung knowing that Luna wouldn’t be far behind. I shook the thought away, placed the basket of fish on my hip and sang as I walked the long stone stairway up the lower waterfall towards the temple.

Oshira my love oh Goddess divine
Make rivers run like fountains of wine
Like the blood of the earth
Sweet rivers flow
To the beckoning arms of the Goddess they go.

I had lived here my entire life, but every time I saw the temple, my breath would catch in wonder at its beauty. The temple stood on a peninsula between two waterfalls. The upper waterfall was called the Goddess’ veil for in the center of its narrow stream stood a crystal statue of the Goddess with her hands cupped at her chest. The water flowed into her hands to be blessed before entering the sacred pool below. The majority of the water from the pool flowed through the temple and out into the river. The peninsula had grown weaker with age and had allowed small streams to form directly from the pool into the lower waterfall.

Dragonflies of all colors whizzed and darted around me. Some even landed on my dress while I hung the fish on drying racks only to fly up again once my skirts shifted.
The birds sang in the dusk and the constant fall of the water gave meter to their melody.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of blue and purple. A gap opened from the border that protected the temple. It was a single lantern held by a steady hand. Marsha, the secondary priestess, appeared holding the lantern in front of her as if it would stave off the coming night. Her priestess robes were covered by a plain black cloak and a hood so that only the sharp angles of her face could be seen. Another lantern appeared behind her. Sister Eliana’s soft blonde ringlets poked out of her hood.

Luna had been ill for months, claiming the Goddess was calling her home. When one priestess dies, another girl must take her place so that the power of the Goddess can continue. The priestesses had been gone several weeks to look for candidates suitable for the choosing.

A girl stuck her head out behind Sister Eliana. Her hood had fallen back around her shoulders to reveal strawberry colored hair and blue eyes that rivaled the iridescence of the dragonflies. A hole grew in the pit of my stomach. They had found one.

Another girl walked behind the strawberry haired girl. This one had straight stringy blonde hair. Her eyes were wide, and her face pale. I wasn’t sure if it was the sight of the temple, or passing through the border that had drained the color from her cheeks. I had never gone through the border myself, but Luna told me terrible stories of what could happen to those who wander in the border on accident. She said there are creatures in the border that could devour a man whole. The stories alone deterred me from ever trying it on my own. A third girl walked through. She had brown hair a shade darker than my own and was near the height of Secondary Priestess Marsha. Her face was
fuller in the cheeks and she looked as if she wasn’t sure whether she wanted to look at the temple or her feet. Two more priestesses came behind them and the border closed.

My entire body prickled with nerves at their approach. I was torn between anger, fear, and curiosity of meeting an outsider. I couldn’t remember the last time an outsider visited the temple. I was still undecided when they came upon me my palms sweat and I wiped the sweat and fish guts on my dress. I could at least welcome the priestesses home, but Marsha met me with an icy gaze that meant I was not welcome to approach. So, I stood unmoving, the fish blood leaching into my dress. The girls gave me curious glances and shy smiles as they past. I barely managed a smile myself still not sure if I hated them or not. It wasn’t their fault after all. I told myself. It is the plan of Oshira. The other priestesses greeted me with their usual smiles of hesitance and pity.

The last glimmer of lantern light disappeared into the temple. “It is the will of Oshira,” I said, and nodded my accession. Now that I saw the girls for the choosing, the possibility of me leaving the temple was becoming more of a reality.

I was finishing hanging fish when Sacha walked across the peninsula with solemn grace. Her dark tresses flowed to the hem of the blue and white priestess robes that billowed around her slender frame. “Jayden,” she said. “You must come. The High Priestess has sent for you.”

My heart fell with the fish at my feet. I ran to the temple but stopped at the lower pool just long enough to splash water on my dress in a vain attempt to get the blood off. The constant rush of water echoed through the stone walls of the temple. The mist of the river made the floors shine and the water’s reflection rippled on the ceiling. My bare feet
slapped against wet stone, scolding faces of colored glass looked down on me from their noble perches.

Luna lay in her bed. Silver hair clung to her wrinkled face. The eyes that once shone with friendly guile were growing dim. The other priestesses were silent upon my approach but their eyes bore fierce disapproving gazes that I’d become all too familiar with. They undoubtedly noticed the fish guts that stained my plain brown dress. Secondary Priestess Marsha would have shot fire from her eyes at my insolence if she had the power.

“Leave us,” Luna said with a voice of rain and honey without seeming to notice the priestesses’ reaction to my presence. She rarely did. The priestesses nodded, and with a swish of their robes, they were gone.

“Three,” Luna said, playing with glass stone around her neck. “Has the bloodline been so thinned that only three…” Luna’s voice trailed off. “Come here, my child,” Luna said, and patted the bed. The necklace was a rare glass stone that only the priestesses of Oshira wore. Luna told me the Goddess wept twelve tears when the Gods left the earth. Her tears fell from the heavens but they became glass when they fell into the waters of her creation, they became glass. She gave the tears to the first of her twelve priestesses as a sign of her power.

I knelt beside her and pressed her hand to my lips. Tears streamed freely down my face only to be absorbed by her soft white blankets.

“Hush,” she said as she stroked my hair and dragged a gentle finger to catch the brown strands that gathered over my face. “Water moves with forceful determination,”
she said. “You can detour it, you can delay it, but you cannot stop it, for it will always reach its destination. Such is life.”

I nodded. Luna laughed at my efforts and brushed the stray tears from my cheeks. “Come, now,” she said. “I did not summon you here for this.” She paused for a moment examining my face. “How have your dreams been, my child?” she asked.

I avoided her eyes afraid that it would result in another bout of tears. “I see,” she said. “Pray the Goddess always grant you such a gift.”

“Today, the Goddess calls me home.” Her body suddenly shook her with a racking cough. I cringed as she heaved for air and prayed to the Goddess it would soon be over. Finally, Luna wiped her lip with a cloth, and lay back on her bed with a sigh. “At least let me finish,” she said to the ceiling and hacked again.

Tears streaked my cheeks once again. “No tears,” she said, and smiled though it did not reach her eyes. “Today is a good day.”

“No,” I said with a shaky voice. “It’s not.” The tears poured down my face. “Today I lose you,” I sobbed. Luna embraced me. I wrapped my arms around her bony shoulders, and buried my face in her neck. She squeezed back with what little strength she had left. “What am I going to do without you?” I cried.

“The Goddess will provide for you, my child,” she said. “Just as she always has.” Luna rocked me back and forth and sang softly like she used to when I was very young. The song that was meant to soothe me only brought on more tears. How I would miss that voice.
“Pay her no mind,” Luna said weakly and stared after Marsha. “She does not see
the hands of the Goddess as I do,” Luna sighed. “But she will.” Luna turned her attention
back to me. Her smiled warmed her countenance to where she was glowing. “My child,”
she said. “So, I’ve raised you as my child, but it is the Goddess who’s adopted you.”
Luna said, smiling. Tears burned and I turned away. She cupped her hand around my
cheek and held me still. “This is not the day you’ll remember for the rest of your life, but
not for my passing.” Luna brushed a tear away with her thumb.

My heart soared with a hope I dared not dream. “The Goddess has told you this?”
I asked.

Luna smiled. “You were a gift, Jayden,” she said. “It was not coincidence that
brought you to us all those years ago.”

The other priestesses entered the room, their heads were bent, and their hands
were held to their chests in a cup like the crystal statue of the Goddess.

Luna’s blue eyes sparkled. “It is time,” she said. “They have come to prepare me
for the Goddess.”

“So soon?” I asked.

She looked as if she didn’t quite hear me. Her eyes were focused on something in
the ceiling. “You must get ready yourself,” she said.

I looked down at my dress and was torn between my guilt of being dirty and the
guilt of leaving Luna’s side for vanity’s sake. After all, it would be her funeral I was
attending. I embraced her as hard as I dared as if trying to force all my love from my
body to hers. She held me tighter still. For a moment, we were all there was.
“May the Goddess guide and protect you,” Luna said quietly before letting go.

I let go with a reluctance that pulled at my heart. I bowed awkwardly to Luna and the other priestesses before I walked out of her chambers. When I looked back, the priestesses had surrounded her completely hiding her from view. I walked to my own chambers with an empty feeling where my heart should’ve been.

I returned to my little room to retrieve my other dress meant for special ceremonies. My room was bare for the most part, but a bed and chest that held my dress and a few trinkets I’d found exploring the waterfalls. Some stones with odd shapes of birds one looked like a frog. I had tiny fragments of polished glass. Nothing like the priestesses wore. These were dull when dry, but still beautiful in their own way. I had one particularly large piece that was an imperfect square. On more than one occasion, I had imagined that it was a Goddess tear like the priestesses wore. I’d keep the piece in my small satchel I wore on explorations. I’d pretend that somehow my piece was a Goddess tear and that she somehow flowed through it to give me strength even if it were just a little. Marsha caught me fawning over it and gave me one of her disapproving faces. Afraid that she’d take it away, I hid it in my room where it looks like part of my rock collection. Only the Goddess and I know what it truly is.

On top of the chest was a bundle of blue and white silk with a woven silver belt carefully laid on top. I felt the fabric with a ginger touch. The robes slipped over my head like liquid. I had to shift the robes a bit so they fit correctly. There were a lot more layers of fabric than I thought. I clasped the metal chain around my waist. A small bit of chain
hung loose from my waist. Whoever was chosen by Oshira would get a small green gem charm to attach to the belt as a sign of a novice.

When I left the room Sacha stood outside my door. Her dark hair shimmered with the reflection of running water. “It fits you well,” she said with approval.


“Come,” she said. “The moon is almost at its peak.”

I nodded and followed her through the temple. She guided me out to the sacred pool. The statue of Oshira glowed with the moonlight. The three young girls stood in the sacred pool. Sacha motioned for me to join them. I hesitated at the edge but Sacha nodded me forward and returned to the temple. As I grew up, I was told to never touch the sacred pool or the Goddess would strike me dead for disobedience. It was meant for only those chosen by her. I feared going in it now for punishment of the sisters looming over my head. That is to say that I had touched the sacred pool once before, but that was not my doing. Where the other priestesses found passing indifference if not forgiveness, Priestess Marsha would never forgive me for that transgression. The water felt no different than the other water at the temple, but the moon’s reflection made it glitter with liquid silver.

The three young girls stood holding hands with wide eyes taking it all in. I wondered what it would be like for an outsider to see the temple for the first time. Everything would be new and brilliant. Where to me, everything was a joy of familiarity. Jealousy scourged my stomach. What if one of the girls was chosen and I was sent away? With Luna gone, Marsha would not allow me to stay. I pushed the thought away as soon
as it came. Oshira would provide for me, and it is the will of the Goddess that one of the other girls is chosen, then that is how it will be. The Goddess will provide.

The girl with strawberry hair held her hand out to me and smiled. It was genuine and beautiful. The other two girls smiled and swung their clasped hands unable to contain their nerves. I clasped the redhead’s hand in my own and she gave it a squeeze.

Oshira’s statue glowed stronger with the rising moon. Though I had lived under her constant gaze, I had never been this close, from here, she seemed powerful and frightening. A sweet song rose from the temple. All twelve of the priestesses emerged from the temple door. Luna led them into the water, her hands cupped to mimic the statue’s pose. Long strands of silver hair melted into the water. The others followed close behind, their hands positioned in the same fashion. Their voices echoed like living bells.

I wanted to throw myself on Luna and stop her. Maybe the Goddess would trade my life for hers. I couldn’t stand the thought of going on without her. As the procession past, Luna didn’t look at me or the other girls. Her eyes were forward and focused, and I knew part of her was already gone.

They made a formation in front of the statue with Luna at its peak. Their singing continued and Luna raised her Goddess tear towards the statue. The tear burst into blue flame. I pulled my hand away from the red haired girl and ran toward Luna. Their song roared over the sound of the falls. The fire dribbled down her arm and consumed her body but she didn’t cry out and not a hair was singed. My robes pulled as I ran to her. “Luna!” I screamed. The priestesses kept on with their prayers. My feet sloshed through the water, and my robes caught underfoot and I fell. Luna turned to me with her body
wreathed in blue fire and I thought I could see her smile. A loud crack like thunder pierced the air, the sacred pool rippled, and Luna was gone.

I stayed half submerged, unblinking. The priestesses ceased their song, bowed their heads, and walked away. A gentle arm pulled me out of the water, but I didn’t spare them a look. My eyes were focused on where Luna had been. I was pulled towards the spot. Luna’s Goddess tear floated in spite of its weight and did not move with the current of the river.

The other three girls stood in a circle around it and the priestesses formed a circle around us and began singing once again. The Goddess ear pulsed like a heartbeat. I felt a tickle of recognition in the back of my mind like an inkling of a memory but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Great Goddess, Oshira,” cried Marsha. “You have accepted one of your children to your arms and for that we thank you.” The others murmured agreement. “We ask that you choose another to take on your mantle and be your representative to do as you would do, to act as you r body and your voice in the mortal world. May one of these young women honor you with their pure hearts so that they may be chosen as your conduit.”

Water rippled as the tear rose form its surface and hovered at eye level illuminating the faces of the girls. It had the slight hum of a bee. Blue light flickered across its surface pulling me in. The colors swirled and I was no longer aware of anything else. Loud gasps woke me from my trance. All eyes were on me. The Goddess tear was gone and a blue light leaked out from my closed fist. I uncurled my fingers and the Goddess’ tear glowed with a steady light and dimmed to cool glass once again.
High Priestess Marsha parted the crowds and strode to me with intent. No one made an effort to stop her, and my grip tightened around the tear. “Open your hand,” she said.

My hand tightened still.

“Open your hand,” she said again.

No one moved in my defense and I saw no other option but to obey. She took the tear from my hand and let it hang from its chain. “Jayden,” she said. “Do you swear to uphold the laws of Oshira, to protect all, heal all, and guide all, to do her will in this life and the next?”

“I swear.”

“Then I, Marsha, High Priestess of the Goddess Oshira, welcome you as one of the twelve priestesses.” Marsha placed the tear around my neck. “May you serve her with all that you are and be blessed.” She cupped her hands in the water and poured it over my head. “Welcome, Priestess Jayden.” Tears of joy mixed with the sacred water as it ran down my face. When I opened my eyes, pockets of the border opened behind the priestesses. Deer, rabbits and squirrels scampered in the valley. I had never seen so many at one time. A rabbit bounded down to the water. As soon as its feet touched the water, its soft grey coat melted and a black leathery beast with red eyes and fangs that hung over its jowls. The other animals followed all of their bodies melted into hideous leathery beasts.

They crossed the distance in seconds before anyone could even shout out in surprise, they were on us. Marsha and Sacha stood firm with several other priestesses. They held their hands towards the beasts and spoke low in an ancient tongue. Blue
flashes of light formed in their hands and together, they pulled a shield of water that rose up to form a protective globe as a barrier between us and the monsters. The beasts broke on it like waves against a rock, and they disappeared. We were frozen in silence. The leathery beasts were gone, but the others did not let the shield down. Not yet.

Something flashed in the water beneath Sacha and she was pulled under. Several priestesses disappeared under the water. Dozens of writhing snakes swam under the shield. One by one, the priestesses went down and the shield fell with them. A snake as thick as my arm wrapped itself around my ankle. I stepped on it and flicked my leg to get it off. The snake flopped in the water only a few feet away. It emerged, shedding its snake form and turned into a beast. Its red eyes burned like coals in a dying fire. Screams erupted around me as other snakes returned to their beast forms.

The red eyed beast lunged at me with its claws like fanned knives. I ran backward, tripped on my robes and fell. The beast was on me in a second. It picked me up by the throat and squeezed. The weight of my body pulled against my neck and it felt as if I’d split in two. I could only manage short little spurts of air that its grip would allow. Those red eyes were as big as my hand. I clawed at his grip on my throat and he carried me over to join the others on the bank.

The other beasts gathered on the bank with their quarry. Marsha’s limp form laid over the front of a horse and rider who wore a long black cape with red lining. The rider had no legs it was as if the rider sprouted right out of the horse’s back.

Every step the beast took jostled me and pulled my body further away from my head. I bit and kicked at its hands and arms. It stuck its face out and gnashed its teeth in a
sickly grin, its eyes so close I could see my reflection in them. Without thinking, I plunged my fingers into its eye. There was a pop that I felt more than heard. The beast had a horrible gut wrenching scream rivaled that of a dying rabbit and only added to the nausea of just popping an eye. I fell into the water, and didn’t give it time to recover.

Other beasts came at me now. I ran. Like a coward, I ran. Snakes tried to trip me while birds latched onto my hair. I flicked and kicked them all away before they turned into that horrible beast. I ran down the lower falls with beasts drooling at my heels. I slipped hard on a rock and fell on my back. The current pushed me down the falls. Rocks and roots ripped layers of my skin. The beasts traversed the cliffs of the waterfall with little effort. The current pushed me off a ledge that stood over thirty feet from the pool below. I managed to grab the root of a sturdy tree. The water rushed over my face, into my eyes and mouth. A bloody-eyed beast lunged at me. I rolled to get out of the way, but my hand slipped from the tree that held me. I scrambled to get another hold. The beast swung its claw down like a mace. I pushed off the root, off the rocks and I fell. There was a glorious four seconds of silence as I tumbled through the air before my back hit the water with numbing pin. The falls pounded on my and pushed me down further and further, twisting and contorting my body. From the depths of the water, I could see a small speck of the brilliant moon as it dimmed and turned black.
Chapter 2

I woke to the familiar rush of water that had woken me every morning for as long as I could remember. A pale fire light lit a cave set deep behind a waterfall. I had explored many such caves in my life, but I had never seen this one. It was tall and long as if the earth itself had split the roof above but it was so narrow that I could not lay flat at its width. A blanket was wrapped around me. I tried to untangle myself from it and sit up but my head pounded with the constant course of the water above and every muscle in my body ached. On the other side of the cave sat the dark silhouette of a man.

I stifled a cry as yesterday’s memories swirled through my head. I wiggled out of my woolen shackle. The movement caught the man’s attention. He stood and made his way towards me. I considered running deeper into the cave, but was uncertain where I would end up, if I’d come out at all. The man advanced and I grabbed for my fish knife that wasn’t in the unfamiliar silver belt at my waist.

As the man drew closer, I could see his features. His nose was a little crooked in an ugly way and his eyes were dark and shone like wet tar. He looked not too much older than I was, but I was no expert in measuring a man’s age.

“Stay back!” I said with a shaky voice that would not have even disturbed a thrush.

“Don’t be frightened, cherub” the man said with slickness in his voice. “I mean you no harm.”

“Who are you?” I demanded with more boldness this time. “What are you doing in the Sacred Realm?”
“My name, dear lady, is Finnius” he said, making a long elaborate bow so that his fingers brushed the tops of his boots, “And I am humbly at your service.”

I ducked around him, but he grabbed my shoulder in a surprising grip. “It would not be in your best interest to leave, my lady,” he said.

“What?” I asked pulling away from him, but he held me still.

“Those things that attacked you last night are still searching for you.” His face was stern but sympathetic in a way that made me angry.

“If you are at my service,” I said, “let me go.”

He put his hands up in surrender. “As you wish,” he said. “But I wouldn’t go out there just yet.”

I ignored him and walked towards the sound of the waterfall. At the end of the cave was a pool of water with a glimmer of sunlight on the bottom.

“Wait!” Finnius cried, but it was too late. I dove in and swam towards the light.

The cave was set deep in the cliff. I was almost out of air before I emerged behind the waterfall. Gallons of water beat against the rocks around me and I hid behind its veil in case of unfriendly eyes. The steps were only a couple feet away. I had climbed thousands of times. This time, the distance seemed further and my heart was heavier than any basket of fish. I took one last look around before I came out of hiding.

With each step, my stomach felt cold and sour as I smelled the familiar stench of smoke. Each step got me closer to the top, closer to the temple, closer to the reality that I feared to face but had to know. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw when I reached the top. The entire valley was filled with pyres of smoke from piles of
smoldering ashes. There were no flowers, no animals, or birds and the only sky that I could see was blocked by a black haze. The temple stones were stained black and all of the windows were shattered.

I stepped through the temple doors that were now broken and hanging from their hinges. The main hall was filled with thick smoke and covered in shards of broken glass. The curtains and other ornamentals of the Goddess were thrown into a pile in the center and still burned with a steady yellow flame.

I walked through the halls of the temple looking for my sisters; afraid that I wouldn’t find them, but terrified that I would. I checked the rooms but they were also destroyed with nothing but blackened remains of bedding and what little possessions the priestesses’ had. The floor was completely covered in different colored glass. I walked across with my bare feet crunching the glass with each timid step. The glass shifted under my weight and I was sure that I would slip and be mutilated on a bed of broken glass.

The sacred pool was empty but the smeared beast tracks in the mud. The great statue of the Goddess had a large crack going up her right leg and she looked like she was frowning. My own legs gave out. I collapsed to the ground and wept. Even from where I sat, I could see the path the beasts took through the border. Part of me wished that I had let the beasts take me. At least I wouldn’t be here alone, left wondering if the priestesses were still alive. I buried my face in my hands then chided myself for crying and wiped my face. Crying wasn’t going to help. If Luna were here, she’d know exactly what to do. She’d say I only had one choice really. I could stay here and cry, or I could do something about it. I was the only one who knew they had been taken; therefore, I was the only one
who could help them. “I will find them,” I said to the statue. “I will find them and bring
them back.” I walked back in the temple with new determination.

Finnius stood in the broken doorway. “I’m truly sorry for your loss,” he said. “It
is a sad day for all.” No man was ever allowed in the temple except for healing and I had
no strength to curse him for his disrespect. What harm could he do now that the temple
was an empty shell? “If there is anything that I can do for you, I will be glad to do it,” he
said.

I don’t know whether it was something in his voice, or his demeanor, but I
believed him. I had never left the temple, and I had no idea what to expect once I passed
into the border. This man must know something about the outside or at least the border.
He was odd, yes, but I trusted him after a fashion. After all, he did save my life. “I’m
going after them,” I said.

He nodded as if he expected nothing less.

“I don’t know the outside world,” I continued. “I could use a guide.”

He broke into a smile that practically split his face. “It would be my honor to
serve you, my lady,” he said, bowing.

We gathered what we could salvage. My knife survived, though it was discolored.
I was able to rescue a plain black cloak and some food that was edible. My satchel was
destroyed, but Finnius lent me a spare pack to carry my things.

Tall green blades of grass flicked against my calves and tangled themselves in my
robes as I walked. The glade had been my home, yes, but it had been so much more. It
was a living entity that the Goddess herself had breathed life into. The grass, the trees, the
water, the creatures, had all become part of me. Now, it was cut down and destroyed. The very heart of it had been ripped away and all that remained was the rotting twitching carcass of what once was precious and beautiful.

The border lined the edge of the Sacred Realm. It was flat but had the illusion of a forest of greens and purples and a haze like the white of clam shell. I was told that long ago, when the earth was new, the Goddess had created the border to protect her temple from unworthy outsiders.

The hoof prints of the beasts went straight into the border. Finnius unwrapped and lit a torch from his pack and thrust it into the wall. A hole appeared around his arm and I could see the torch on the other side. “Shall we?” Finnius said before walking in. The hole grew to the size of his body. As soon as he passed through, it closed behind him and he was gone. The wall looked solid once again. I brushed the border with my finger. It felt like mist, but when I pulled my hand back, it wasn’t wet.

Finnius’ head popped out of the wall. “Are you coming?”

I gasped and fell back.

Finnius chuckled and offered me a hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

I ignored his hand and pushed myself up. Next time he doesn’t mean to startle me, he shouldn’t look like a floating head, I thought. I brushed my backside with my hands.

I took one last look back at my beloved valley and followed him into the border. The air rushed past me and for a moment, I felt frozen, dead. Like all the warmth and life had been sucked out of me, and in the next moment, I was on the other side. The warmth
returned to my body. The hairs on my arms moved like the legs of a caterpillar as proof of what I had just experienced.

The air was stagnant and smelt like rotten earth. Finnius held the torch out in front of us and I could see the path through the border was a tunnel with the illusion of glazy woods on either side. I looked back over my shoulder towards the temple and could see nothing but ghostly branches. The sound of the river was muted by magic of the border. There was stillness, a quiet that unsettled me. I wondered if all the priestesses felt that way when they left the temple.

The border was about six feet wide and equally as tall. There was an unusually clear path with not even a rock or root to trip on. The torch made the wisps of magic look like angry shadows. It seemed as if the branches could reach out and pluck any unwitting traveler. I thought, that perhaps the protectors said to live in the border weren’t really creatures. Perhaps, they were the magic trees ready to choke the life out of any living thing that might show a hint of vulnerability. I imagined being wrapped in a branch until I shriveled from starvation. Maybe we would see dead or dying travelers hanging like decorations. The thought of it made me sick.

Finnius stopped short causing me to run into his back. “What is it?” I asked trying to peek around him to see what was ahead. I tried to regulate my breathing and hoped that the fear devouring creatures couldn’t sense the fear rising in me now.

He mumbled to himself as he stooped down to look at the path more closely and then looked out in front.
“What is it?” I squeaked with impatience. He gave me a crooked eyebrow. I snapped my mouth shut and tried to calm myself once again.

“Some of the horsemen’s tracks disappear,” he said, pressing a finger into the dirt of a hoof print.

“What do you mean?” I asked leaning over the tracks.

He rubbed the dirt between his fingers and stood upright again. “I don’t know,” he said. “Some of the tracks just disappear.”

“Maybe they’ve gone ahead?”

Finnius nodded, “Or behind.”

Finnius must have seen a glint of fear pass my eyes before it was squelched. He placed a hand on my shoulder and gave me a crooked smile. “Let us be free of this place before we think about it any further.” I nodded and Finnius continued to lead the way with me close behind.

I felt the pressure of someone’s gaze upon me, but when I turned, I saw nothing. “How long does it take to get through the border?” I asked.

“At the rate we’re going, we should reach the end by noon tomorrow if we only stop for a couple hours of rest.”

An unusually long branch waved at me like an accusing finger. “Tomorrow?” I moved to the other side of the path to avoid the branch and another one succeeded in brushing across my neck. “Can’t we pick up the pace a little?”

“Perhaps, if the kidnappers just left a horse lying around.” Finnius chuckled to himself but I was not amused.
I watched the silhouette of his head as the light of the torch reflected off of his greasy locks. I knew that I was not going to get any sleep tonight. The movement of the torch caused the shadows of the border to shift and sway. “Are there really monsters in here?”

“I have never seen them myself,” he said. “But I have heard terrible stories of people being disemb… people disappearing in the border.”

It was too late. I caught his slip. I clutched my already queasy stomach at the thought of it.

“You know what I like to do when I travel?” Finnius asked. “Sing a travelling song. It takes the edge off.”

An extremely ambitious branch brushed up against my left leg. “Really?”

“Yes,” he said. “Do you know Old Mr. Tamble?”

“No, I don’t think I’ve heard of that one.” Truthfully, I had not heard any secular song. Only the hymns of the Goddess were song in the sacred realm. Except, of course, the little songs that I would make up when no one else was around.

“Really?” he asked. “Oh, that’s a good one, a real good one. Would you like me to teach it to you?” I didn’t have time to answer. Finnius cleared his throat like a large lazy bullfrog and began to sing with a low guttural voice. I winced as soon as he started and silently hoped that it wasn’t a very long song.

There was an old man named Mr. Tamble.
   He loved to play the violin.
   Every day he’d sit on his stoop
   And played until the cows came in.
His grainy voice echoed off of the border and down the tunnel which created an incredible amplifier much to the displeasure of my pulsating ears.

Play, play oh Mr. Tamble
Play, play your violin
When the sun goes down, you can rest your fiddle
But play a song for us until then.

Finnius began to sway and move his feet to his own singing. I kept a keen eye out for anyone who might hear his droning and come after them.

Oh Mr. Tamble had a lovely daughter.
She loved to dance and sing with him.
Every day she’d twirl and sing
While Mr. Tamble played violin.

He turned and made a clumsy attempt to dance with me in the narrow path. I politely pushed his hands away and continued walking so that he would get the hint. Thankfully, he did and we fell back in line with him and the torch up front and I trailed behind.

“Sing the chorus with me,” he said with merry tone in his voice.

“No, I’d rather not.”

“You must sing with me it’s a traveling song,” he said. “Come. It will help you feel better.”

I mumbled along with him.

“I can’t hear you.”

I gritted my teeth and sang only slightly louder.

Play, play oh Mr. Tamble
Play, play your violin.
When the sun goes down, you can rest your fiddle
But play a song for us until then.

Oh Mr. Tamble once was a farmer.  
With fields as far as the eye could see.  
Now his crops are all brown and rotting  
But he’s as happy as he can be.

Play, play oh Mr. Tamble  
Play, play your violin  
When the sun goes down, you can rest your fiddle.  
But play a song for us until then.

The years went by for Mr. Tamble.  
His beard grew long and his hair turned gray  
The poor man died playing his fiddle  
But on a clear morning you can still hear him play.

Play, play oh Mr. Tamble.  
Play, play your violin.

“You’re not singing,” he called back.

When the sun goes down, you can rest your fiddle  
But play a song for us until then.

I restrained myself from bouncing along with the rhythm and tried to maintain the seriousness of the situation. But I noticed, even for a brief moment, that the dangers of the border seemed far away.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked over his shoulder.

I wasn’t sure if he meant the song or his voice. To evade any further discussion, I simply said. “I liked it.” Meaning the song, of course, and hoped that was the end of it.

“I’m glad,” he said, turning back to give me a smile. It’s nothing like a little music to lighten a dark day.”

I could only smile at the truth of his statement.
“Shall we have another song?” he asked.

“No thank you,” I said before he could begin another. “I wouldn’t want to attract any unwanted attention from those who may be listening,” I continued, trying not to hurt his feelings.

“No one will be listening, I assure you,” he said. “The kidnappers are going to be far away by now. They won’t be able to hear us.”

“Still, we can’t be too cautious.”

Finnius paused and I thought he would find another reason to disagree but he simply said, “Very well.”

I walked behind him playing the chorus in my head. I even found myself making up verses, but they weren’t very good and I soon gave up that endeavor.

“I told you that you’d like the song.” Finnius called back.

“What do you mean?” I asked fearing that Finnius had the ability to read my mind. In that case, I had some serious damage control for all of the things that I’d thought of him including his horrible voice.

“I could hear you humming,” he said. “It gets stuck in your head easily doesn’t it?”

I was sure I wasn’t humming, but it did make more sense than him having the ability to read minds. Still, I would be more careful from now on of what I thought of him. After all, you can never be too careful.

We continued in silence. That is, until Finnius opened his mouth again. “I think we should rest here for a few minutes before continuing.” Without waiting for a response
from me, he pulled off his pack and sat on the ground. I looked up and down the path. There was nothing moving, there were no sounds of anything. We seemed truly alone. I lowered myself across from where Finnius sat with an eager smile.

“So what is your plan after I take you through the border?” he asked.

“I’m going to find my sisters and bring them home.”

“How, may I ask, do you propose to do that?”

I thought about that for a moment tracing the dirt with my finger. “I will follow their trail,” I said.

“What will you do when you find them?” Finnius asked.

I shook my head. I hadn’t really thought about it. I knew I couldn’t handle them on my own, and I doubted Finnius would do much good. “I’ll go to the king to get reinforcements,” I said. “He has been sworn to protect and aid the four temples so he’ll have to help me. With his help, we will find the kidnappers, free my sisters and come home.” I emphasized the word home as if it was a done deal that involved no further discussion.

Finnius was eerily silent. I took a canteen from my pack a long with some bread and offered some to Finnius.

“No thank you my dear, you need it more than I.”

“There is plenty.”

“Still, I must say no, but thank you for thinking of your Finnius.”

I cringed inside at him calling him my Finnius, but I quickly changed my thoughts to something else just in case he was listening in. I nibbled on the bread and decided that
I wasn’t really hungry. Silence sat between us until I couldn’t help but ask, “Do you think the king will help?”

Finnius’ raised his eyebrows which looked unnaturally large in the torch light. He rubbed his chin as if he was calculating his next move. His silence and the intensity of his stare made me feel uneasy. The silence was so strained that I felt I could instantaneously scream out in anger at his reluctance or cry at the inevitable failure of my mission.

Finally, he spoke. “There are many things in the outside world that are changing,” he said. “People are forgetting the Gods, or at least ignoring them. You will find that the world does not revere your Goddess as you do because they have not experienced her as you have. The king may not be too eager to send his army on a religious endeavor.”

My hair bristled at the insinuation, but before I could speak, Finnius held up his hand and continued. “Do not misjudge me,” he continued. “I believe as you do and he may give you all the help that you desire. I just want you to know that the king may think of it very differently, so that you can be prepared if he should choose not to help you.”

I couldn’t believe it. Had the world truly turned its back on the Gods? Would have to go out there and ask for help from people who have forgotten Oshira, the one that me and the others lived and died for.

“Do not worry, my little chickadee,” Finnius said. “I swore to help you find your sisters, and I shall do it, even if I have to rough up the king a little in order for him to help you.”

I smiled and gave a small laugh that came out of my nose.
“Let us be off,” he said, and stood up without waiting for me to respond. He reached his free hand towards me and this time, I accepted, but discretely wiped my hand off on my skirt as soon as I was standing.

We walked for many hours in silence. There was the occasional chatter between us but I wasn’t in the mood for talking and I quickly disarmed Finnius’ attempts at conversation. The walk was tedious and my feet were already getting sore from walking.

“We are almost halfway through,” Finnius said. “We will rest there for a while before continuing.”

I nodded, even though he couldn’t see me.

After a few more hours of walking, the path doubled in size and opened out into a huge corridor. In the center stood a gate made of the same sheer look of the border. It reached across the entire length of the path and stretched up to the ceiling.

“What is this?” I asked.

“It is the center gate. We have reached the middle of the border,” he replied, but there was something in his tone that told me he hadn’t expected to see it.
Chapter 3

I inspected it closer. The branches on the gate swept and curved in a design similar to the doors on the temple itself. “How do we pass through?” I asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“What are we going to do?” I couldn’t breathe. It was getting to be too much the lack of light the lack of air the constant ghostly branches that grabbed at my clothes and hair when I wasn’t careful. The only thing that kept me going was the knowledge that we were going to the other side to find the light, the air, and most of all my sisters. Now we were stuck.

Finnius continued his inspection. “It’s alright. We’ll find our way out,” he said smoothly as if he were talking to a child.

I ignored his condescending tone and focus on regaining control of myself. It was difficult when each thought added to the next like an avalanche of suppressed fears that suddenly erupted and I had no way of controlling its charge of me. I imagined the creatures of the border pouncing out at any moment. What if the beasts that stole my sisters came back for me? There was a rush of air on both sides of the path. My head whipped to the side and I saw nothing.

“Finnius,” I whispered.

“Yes?” he said without looking up from the gate.

“Finnius?” I called a little louder.

I gasped and fell back when I saw a pair of green eyes standing inches from me. It was a horrible nasty creature covered with white hair from head to foot that moved with a
wind I couldn’t feel. It had the long ears of a bat, the fangs of a wolf but its snout was pushed in. It towered over me on two long legs.

Its eyes were fierce and the bright green of an emerald with an inner light that shone from behind them. It bared its nasty fangs and its mouth opened so far that I was sure it could swallow me whole. It let out an earth shattering roar before it lunged at me. I grasped for the knife at my belt. Finnius was much quicker than I was and caught the creature with a small dagger in the armpit. I clawed at the ground to regain my footing, but when I turned, I saw two hairy pairs of feet. I screamed and one of the creatures grabbed me by my pack and lifted me off the ground. It roared, splattering my face with spit. My knife fell with a thud in the soft dirt.

The first creature ignored Finnius and tried again to attack me, but Finnius stood his ground and stabbed the creature again in the chest. It didn’t seem to notice. It licked its lips and shoelaces of drool dribbled off of its lip as it pushed Finnius to the ground.

The creatures surrounded me and eagerly nipped at my arms and legs that dangled helplessly above the ground. I wiggled my way out of the straps of my pack and fell hard on the ground, but one of the creatures grabbed my leg with its massive hand and pulled me back. My fingers drew desperate lines in the dirt. They continued to let me go only to capture me again. I felt cornered, played with, like I was the mouse in a circle of sadistic cats. A creature grabbed each arm and the last creature grabbed my legs. I could smell its putrid breath and knew that I would be adding to the stench all too soon.

Finnius screamed and thrust a knife into one of the creature’s necks. Purple blood squirted on my face and I was dropped on the ground. The three creatures roared and
thrashed and stomped their feet. I crawled between the flailing legs. Once I was free of being trampled, I turned and saw poor Finnius being held by his limbs. The creatures clawed mercilessly at his flesh and wagged their terrible heads from side to side taunting him, torturing him, trying to get as much fear out of him as they could before they would devour him.

I noticed the torch laying a couple of yards away from the creatures. Something within me snapped. My blood curdled and warm sensation overtook my body. My limbs tingled and my eyes burned with ferocity. I picked up the torch and waved it at the creatures. “Let him go!” My voice was surprisingly stern and low with authority.

The creatures glared at me and smiled as if they had already won their prize.

“I said let him go!” I pushed the torch against one of the creatures expecting its fur to catch fire, but nothing happened. It whipped around and wailed me hard with the back of its hand and sent me sprawling. My face throbbed and my head was foggy. I heard Finnius cry out in pain. My eyes glazed and I searched the spinning path to find him. He was stretched between the creatures with blood flowing freely from where their claws held him. The torch glowed only a couple feet from where I landed. I crawled towards it. Beams of light penetrated the darkness. I looked around to see where the light was coming from and realized that my glass necklace had fallen out of my robes and reflected the torch light.

The creatures flinched and ducked as if they were being attacked and dropped Finnius in their confusion. He lay motionless. I held out my necklace towards the
creatures. They shied away from me and I was able to reach Finnius’ side. He was unconscious but breathing. His wounds were deep but not life threatening.

The creatures watched me from a safe distance and began to hiss. The hisses started to form words. “Who are you?” they asked in unison. Their voices were shallow and airy.

“I am Jay…Priestess Jayden,” I said. “And this is Finnius.”

The white creatures shifted back and forth for a moment before they came closer to examined me. I stayed rigid as the creatures sniffed my body, starting with my feet and ending at my hair, which moved with every inhale and exhale. I could hear my heart thumping in my ears and the painful lump on my cheek as each of the creatures stared at the necklace. When they were finished, their eyes seemed to glow with a new intensity.

The creatures stood away from me and hissed amongst themselves. “You are a priestess of Oshira,” they said together as one voice from three mouths. “Why have you come to the border?”

“My sisters were taken from the temple and I am going to bring them back.”

The creatures hissed to one another and looked back at me. “You cannot go through,” they said together. “You must go back.”

“We can’t go back!” I said.

“No one goes in, no one comes out.”

“I have to find my sisters.”

“No one goes in. No one goes out.”
“Why can no one pass?” I asked. “They got out. Those things that stole my sisters got through! Why not me?” I was on the verge of tears.

The creatures were silent and their tails thrashed back and forth. They hissed amongst themselves and nodded in unison. Within seconds, dozens of the creatures emerged from the bushes. One of them stepped forward. He was slightly taller than the others and was able maintain his ferocity even in his timid form.

“They should not have escaped,” he said in a uniform airy voice like the other three had used.

“They had magic,” said another.

“Terrible magic of the dark children,” said another.

“We could not stop them,” said another. Now, the creatures seemed to speak in turns. Like one consciousness using a different body for each thought.

“Then, why will you not let me pass? I can find them and bring them back.”

They looked at each other. The tallest one shook his head. “If we let you go, we have failed.”

“Failed what?” I asked.

“Failed to fulfill our oath.”

“We are servants of the Goddess.”

“Sworn to her.”

“We are bound to the daughters of Oshira.”

“To protect them.”

“To serve them.”
“If we fail them.”

“We will also perish.”

“You must stay.”

“We will protect you.”

I looked at their eager faces. All hoping that I would reconsider and return to the temple, all of them waiting for me to do the sensible thing and go home so that we all would be safe. It would be easy to turn back. It would be easy live in the sacred realm and rebuild my home, but I would do it alone. Never again would I hear my sisters’ song except in memory. In my dreams, I would rescue them and wake up to the reality that I never tried. I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I couldn’t live the rest of my life without even trying to find them. “I’m sorry, but I must go through to the other side to find my sisters. If you serve the Goddess, you will open the gate and let us pass.”

“We cannot do what you ask.”

“Our sons.”

“Our daughters.”

“Our lives will be lost when you fail.”

“I will not fail!” I said with conviction.

“You cannot promise this.”

“You do not know what awaits you.”

“No, I don’t know what awaits me out there. But I do know what awaits me in there.” I pointed back in the direction of the temple. “If I return, how long do you think you will have? How long do you think I will live? If you send me back, I will die
eventually and so will you. If you let me go, if you let me try, both of our people can survive, but if you send me back, you are sealing your own fate with me.”

The creatures were obviously displeased with my answer. They looked at one another with mournful uncertain eyes and finally, as one, they all looked to the slightly taller one and nodded in unison. The slightly taller one also nodded.

“It is with heavy hearts that we have decided that you may pass.”

I could have cried out in delight had it not been for the somber faces of the others that kept me silent. The creatures held their arms to the gate and howled in a horrid chant. The gate shimmered and opened.

The tall one spoke again, “It is done.”

“You may pass,” the others said in chorus.

“Thank you.” I smiled but they did not share my joy. “Do not fear. I will find my sisters and bring them home.”

Their lips pulled back in what I hoped were smiles. “That will be a happy day,” one said.

“A good day.”

“We will follow you to the edge of the border.”

“We are bound by the border.”

“We can go no further.”

“Or we would have followed them.”

“We would have enjoyed them,” the tall one said with a cruel growl.
“Thank you,” I said, hoping to change the subject from where it was headed. “We will greatly appreciate your protection.”

“It is our duty.”

“Our oath.”

“Our pleasure.”

I knelt beside Finnius. His body looked broken and he hardly seemed alive except for the shallow rise and fall of his chest. He had gashes on his arms and legs and swollen bruises on his face. I took a salve and strips of cloth from my pack and began to dress his wounds. When I was finished, I tried to wake him up gently at first with a nudge of the arm. When he didn’t respond, I slapped his face with the lightness of a bird. When that didn’t work, I took out my canteen and trickled water down his face. He still didn’t budge.

“I will carry him until he awakens,” said the tall one who was now hovering behind my shoulder. He picked up Finnius with ease.

“Thank you,” I said, admiring the sudden gentleness of the creature.

The border creature said nothing and waited for me to gather my things. The other people disappeared into the brush just as easily as they appeared. I lead the way through the opened gate with the torch in hand. The creature was close behind me with Finnius.

After a few hours of awkward silence, I found the courage to speak to it. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You may ask what you wish.” It answered with such coldness that I wasn’t sure if it was anger or indifference.
Hoping that it was just indifference, I continued. “Do you have a name?”

“My name is Jardock.”

I thought for a moment on an appropriate response. “What does it mean?”

“It means ruthless.” The last word came out in a rush that my hair was pushed forward by the gust.

I swallowed some extra spit before I continued. “What do you call your people?”

“We are called the Gaian.”

Gaian sounded familiar, but I was unable to place the origin of the memory. “Are there others like you in the borders of the other temples?”

“Of that, I cannot be certain.”

I was silent for a while trying to form the next question in the best way possible as to not offend Jardock. “How did you and your people become bound to the Goddess?”

Jardock sucked in air so hard that it pulled on my eardrums.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, I was just curious,” I said, and tried to focus on the path ahead.

“It is not your question that offends me; it is that you need to ask it. The priestesses have forgotten us.”

“No, not forgotten… just misrepresented.”

Jardock snorted. “It would be a waste to tell you. Soon, we will all die.”

He might as well have disemboweled me. I felt empty, broken. He didn’t believe they would come back, and I was starting to believe it myself. “I will bring them back,” I said mostly to myself.
“You said they had magic of the dark children?” I asked.

Jardock shook his head. “We are meant to protect against the dark children,” he said. “But they…” his voice trailed off. “They were powerful demons. As much as we tried, we could not stop them and for that we are ashamed.”

There was a loud thud behind me. When I turned around, I saw Finnius sprawled on the ground groaning.

“Why did you do that?”

Jardock looked at me with his lips pulled back in a mischievous toothy smile. “He woke.”

I scowled and kneeled next to Finnius. Are you alright? Finnius saw Jardock and his eyes bugged out of his head. He started blathering nonsense to me. I checked his bandages and examined his wounds before I tried to help him stand.

“Finnius, this is Jardock he is a Gaian a protector of the border. Jardock, this is Finnius.”

Jardock gave Finnius no notice and Finnius continued to spout out nonsense. I tried to hold him up with a shoulder but Finnius was a lot heavier than he looked and I was having trouble keeping him steady. “Jardock, could you please help me with him?” I asked. Jardock put his arm around Finnius and held him up.

For a long time, Finnius was silent. I wasn’t sure if it was the shock of seeing Jardock or if he was still recovering from the wounds that he sustained during the fight with the Gaians. I was glad that he was awake, but it was strangely unsettling that he would be speechless for once. We walked like this for a few hours until I couldn’t walk
any further. My head throbbed and my whole body ached. My feet were sore and swollen. Before, I was too frightened of the border to consider sleep. Now, that I knew the monsters were my sworn protectors, I longed to sleep in the comfort of it.

I instructed Jardock to help Finnius lay down. I laid down a little ways away from Finnius and watched as Jardock guarded them. I studied his long bristly hair, his terrifying and gentle hands, and his bat-wolf face. I wondered at the power of the Goddess who could make such a creature.

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The next thing I knew, I was awake. Finnius was already awake and chatting up a storm at Jardock, who, didn’t seemed too enthusiastic that Finnius was back to his normal self. Jardock growled low and pulled up his lip. Apparently, he had taken all he could of Finnius. After all, he had not sworn to protect him.

“I am glad you are well,” I said.

When Finnius turned and saw I awake, he beamed. “Oh I am so glad you are awake, my hero, my rescuer. I am only sorry that I couldn’t be that for you.”

“You were. If it weren’t for you, we’d both be dead.”

Finnius blushed. It was a flattering color on him. I pulled out some food from my pack and offered to share it with them. They both declined. Finnius claimed he had already eaten and Jardock didn’t give a reason.

I checked Finnius’ bandages before we packed up our things and continued our walk to the end of the border. Finnius was able to walk with little assistance. After a few hours, we could see the dead end of the wall. I felt exhilarated and frightened at the same
time. It meant one step closer to the end of our journey, and one step closer to the unknown.

Jardock handed Finnius over to me much to Finnius’ delight. “Thank you, Jardock.”

“You can still turn back if you wish,” said Jardock.

“I’m sorry, I cannot.”

Jardock nodded as if he had already known the answer but had hoped that I would change my mind.

“I will find them and I will bring them back.” I placed my hand on his furry shoulder.

“May it be so,” he said, and surprised me with a hug. His fur tickled my face and went into my nose, which threatened to sneeze. I ignored my discomfort and held him tight until he finally let go. He gave us one last look over before disappearing into the border.

“Shall we?” Finnius put his hand out through the end of the border. I held my breath before walking with him through the biting cold of the border wall and out into the open air.
Chapter 4

The sun was blinding, but it was wonderful. The air was fresh and clean and there was a little breeze that smelt like green leaves and lilac bushes. When my eyes finally adjusted to the light, I saw beautiful large trees next to the border, but past the trees, I saw fields as far as I could see. Never in my life had I ever seen something so big. In that moment, I felt very small and wondered how miniscule my problem must seem in the grand scheme of this wide world.

Then, I was hit with a sudden realization. How could I ever find my sisters in a world so big? It was hopeless. How could I think that I would waltz out of the border, find my sisters and return. It could take years to find them and then it would be too late.

Finnius knelt next to me. “What is it my turtle dove?” He asked.

“This is all too big for us.”

“Nonsense. Nothing is too big. If we can survive the creatures of the border, there is nothing that we can’t do.”

I laughed. “That’s different,” I said. “They swore on their lives that they would protect me. They didn’t have a choice.”

“True, True. Perhaps your charms will once again save the day. Your charms and my rugged fighting prowess.”

I laughed again. “We do make a good team, huh?”

“Indeed we do,” he said. “Don’t look now, but I think we are being watched.”

I turned back to the border and through the holes between the branches; I saw hundreds of sparkling green eyes watching us. I walked over to the wall.
“We await your return.” The Gaian said together.

“We will not fail you.” I replied.

Finnius and I said goodbye to the Gaian and began to follow the hoof prints of the kidnappers. Finnius told me that it was an easy trail to follow. They must not have expected to be followed because they didn’t even try to cover their tracks.

We followed the trail south east for a while before Finnius stopped suddenly and stared at the ground. He walked around in circles walked about ten paces to the left and stared at the ground again.

“What’s wrong?” I asked looking for what was upsetting Finnius, but had no clue what he was looking at.

“The main group is going south east and a small group is going south.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure.”

“The main group would have the priestesses,” I said. “The most logical conclusion would be that they are still taking the priestesses south west.”

Finnius nodded. “If you want to go ask the king for help, we must leave the trail and go south.”

My heart ached. I could follow them, but how could I fight the beasts? I barely survived the first encounter and even the Gaian could not stop them. “We must go to the city to ask the king for help.”
I checked Finnius’ bandages before we set out again. His wounds were healing, but they were still deep and would reopen if he wasn’t careful. “You can’t be running like this,” I said.

“Perhaps we should get some horses,” he said.

“It’s too bad those Gaian can’t go past the border,” I said. “Or we could have had one of them give us a ride.” I giggled at my own joke and Finnius roared with laughter, though I don’t think it deserved that much of a laugh. I sent a prayer along with my sisters before we turned to make our way south towards the city.

We picked up the pace, since time was clearly of the essence. My legs were tight, my lungs were burning and the fields seemed like they were going on forever. The sun sunk low in the horizon and it was soon dark. There were hardly any clouds, so they were able to travel for a few more hours by moonlight. I collapsed on a bed of long grasses. Finnies fell beside me. I could feel his warm breath on my neck. I scooched away to put more space between us.

“I don’t think that I’ve ever run that much in my life,” I said, looking up at the stars.

“I’m not sure if anyone has,” said Finnies.

Almost instantly after he finished speaking, I heard him snoring lightly. I let a gust of happy air out of my nose, closed my eyes, and fell asleep.

My dreams were swirls of color mixed with faces. None of them spoke to me but I could feel that they had nothing but evil intent. My sisters swirled in her head. The little
red-headed girl looked out from hollow eyes. I tried to call out to her but I found that I couldn’t speak. A shadow was cast over them and they vanished.

Luna floated before my eyes. Her smile was warm and charming as always. I couldn’t reach her no matter how hard I tried. Luna held out her hand towards me and I was given a new vision. A statue of a man holding a large white jewel the monster wreathed in black fire devoured the statue and the jewel. The jewel shines brightly from the beast’s belly. It glowed at first then all is dark. A flood of darkness pushed out from the beast and hit me hard.

I woke to a short fuzzy creature mouthing my face. I screamed and pushed it away, but it didn’t seem to care. It just wandered along eating grass as it went. I sat up and noticed that there were hundreds of the creatures surrounding us. I prodded Finnius with a finger. “Finnius? Finnius?”

He moaned and turned the other way.

“Finnius, wake up.” I poked even harder.

Finnius batted my hand away, and finally woke up. He looked confused at first, but then he saw me and it all seemed to come back to him. “Are you alright, plum flower?”

“What is that?” I pointed to the creature.

“That’s a sheep.” Finnius said, rubbing his face awake.

“Oh,” I said, stroking the soft matted fur. I had heard of sheep before but I’d never seen one. “They’re not dangerous are they?”

Finnius laughed at the thought. “Only if you are allergic to wool.”
I peeked up over the waist high grass to get a look around. There was only rolling hills of crops for miles. The horsemen were probably days ahead of us by now. Even if we ran the whole way, we would still be too late for whatever the kidnappers had in mind. I checked Finnius’ bandages. The wounds had reopened and the bandages were caked with old blood. “We can’t ride a sheep can we?” I asked.

Finnius seemed baffled for a moment before answering. “Small children perhaps but we can’t ride them.”

I stood up and brushed the rebellious strands of grass off my skirt. “We need to find something.” I noticed a large cluster of sheep around a small brown lump. I fell back in the grass and squinted. “Finnius, what is that?” I pointed towards the lump. The lump moved and I could see two suspicious eyes beneath a wide brown hat. “It’s a person.”

“It’s a shepherd.” Finnius waved his arms as he walked towards to the stranger. “Hello, friend. Don’t be alarmed. We have not come to harm your lovely sheep. We are only travelers. We were wondering if you know where we could get a horse.” He turned and motioned me to follow.

“I know what you are.” said the shepherd without moving. “You would be wise to be on your way now and bother me and my sheep no more.”

I saw Finnius stiffen and proceed with a slight edge to his voice that I hadn’t heard before. “I said we would cause no harm and we don’t intend to. Why so nervous, shepherd? Has someone been trimming your flocks?”
Now they were close enough to see that the shepherd was petting a large auburn
dog. It pink tongue stuck out of its perfect white teeth. It had the fierce look of death in
its eyes, waiting for its master to give it the command it desired.

“Take another step and it will be your last,” the shepherd warned.

They stopped for a moment. I tugged at Finnius’ arm. “Finnius, let’s go. I don’t
want any trouble.”

The shepherd tilted his head in a taunting smile revealing the dirt smeared face of
a woman. “Listen to the nymph and be happy that I was kind enough to warn you before
setting my dog on your heels.”

“Please, we must find horses to get us to the city.” I blurted.

The shepherdess unlocked her gaze from Finnius to me. Everything about her
exemplified the dirty life of a shepherd, but she carried herself like a warrior. “Not sure
should I help you strangers,” she said. “Can’t trust strangers anymore. I don’t want to
help if you’re going to cause trouble.”

“We’re not causing trouble,” I said. “Honest we’re not. We’re just making our
way to the city.”

The shepherdess tilted her head. “There is a town not too far off, but I doubt they
would give up a horse easily.” She stuck a piece of grass between her teeth and leaned
back. “Now get out of here before I decide I don’t like the look of you.”

“Thank you,” I said, and pulled Finnius along behind me.
All around us the flock of sheep grazed, and I had a feeling of unfriendly eyes upon me. A sheep cocked its head towards me, ripped grass by the roots and chewed. I wasn’t sure but I thought it winked at me.

The sun was high and the grass stuck and ripped between my toes as I ran. Sweat gathered on my forehead and in the crook of my lower back. I had abandoned prudence hours ago and held my robes up above my knees to keep it from wrapping around my legs. We didn’t stop moving, even when we rested, we walked, because we knew that if we sat down, it would be a chore to get back up.

There was a band of trees that grew beside a little stream that flowed through fields like a blue satin ribbon. There was a small ripple of a water fall with a pool of cool water at the bottom. I praised the Goddess and stepped out into the water without hesitation. I stood about thigh high in the cool water that seemed to soak right into my skin to revitalize me. I silently thanked the Goddess for her goodness and scooped some water in my face. It was a while before I noticed that Finnius had already crossed the stream and waited on the bank.

“Why don’t you come in?” I dipped my arms past the elbows and rubbed the sweat out of my joints. I hoped that Finnius would come in more for my own comfort rather than his.

Finnius viewed the watering hole and hesitated. “We should keep moving,” he said.

I was glad I didn’t have to share my hole with him, except now he’d smell like a sweaty sewer. I took my time filling our water skins. I reluctantly got out of the water and
joined Finnius on the bank. I had no idea how much I would miss the sight and feel of water.

We crested a small rise not too far from the stream. There was a cluster of buildings made of stone and wood about a mile away. Several buildings were scattered away from the cluster with speckles of black, white and browns mixed with the grasses.

“Here we are,” Finnius said, and sauntered towards the town.

There was a barn on our way to the town and the smell of hay and manure greeted us as we passed. There were half a dozen cows grazing with four horses inside a sturdy fence. A light brown horse trotted to the fence and snorted at me.

“Do you see what I see,” asked Finnius.

“I do.” I walked to the horse slowly and touched its silk snout. The horse shied a little. “Do you think they will let us borrow him?”

“If there is one thing I’ve learned, is people can always surprise you.”

The horse allowed me to scratch its forehead and stretched its neck for me to scratch under its chin. “I think he likes me.”

“Only a fool would not.” Finnius smiled.

I combed through the horse’s hair with my fingers and wished him a silent goodbye.

As we walked closer, the town seemed to grow in size. Dozens of buildings were laid out in between crooked streets. Some were much smaller than the temple, and others were close to the temple’ size if not larger. “If this is a town, what is a city,” I asked in awe.
Finnius chuckled and led the way.

Wind blew back my hair and whipped my skirts around my legs. I walked a little slower so that I could soak up every bit of it.

“We must find the farrier of the town. He will know who has horses that we could buy. You must look for a sign that has a square with a point on each end.”

“A square with a point on each end,” I said.

“Stay close to me,” Finnius said, and put my hood over my head. “Towns can be dangerous to outsiders and I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

I nodded, tucked my necklace in my robes, pulled my cloak tighter around me, and we stepped onto the streets of the town.

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There were more animals than I had ever seen being pulled, prodded, and shooed away. The constant traffic of people called out orders, greetings and insults to one another with no regard to anyone else. I have never seen such a sight. People were dressed in different shades of colors and in different types of fabrics varying in degrees of cleanliness and filth.

There were children, beautiful, healthy children, playing with a small ball of fur that wiggled and pranced when they moved a piece of cloth in front of it. They laughed as the little thing captured the cloth in its mouth. I had never seen a child play before. The only children who came to the temple were near death and usually all that can be done is to prepare them to meet the Goddess. Not these children. They played and laughed with
no cares. I couldn’t help but envy them. What must it be like to grow up with a playmate of your own?

I walked up to them and Finnius continued to go through the streets. I didn’t dare get too close to the children. The little creature they played with had long pointed ears and slanted eyes. Its fur was like a pile of fall leaves. A little girl in a pale pink dress noticed me watching. The others stopped what they were doing. There was no more laughing, no more playing, only terror.

A woman stood rushed between me and the children. Her eyes locked on my necklace. She was firm but her voice wavered when she spoke, “What do you want with the children?”

The question was absurd. “I don’t want anything with the children.”

“I know what you are,” she said. “We don’t want your kind here.” The children gathered up the creature and slowly moved away.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. I was just trying to…”

She pressed in on me. “I know what you want, and you won’t get it here. Move on.”

Finnius practically pushed me over. His breathing was ragged. “I beg your pardon, my dear lady,” he said. “I’m afraid there must be some misunderstanding. I am Finnius, this is Jayden. We meant no harm to you or the children. We were just wondering if you know where we might find a farrier.”

The woman wasn’t convinced. “His shop is on Market Street.” The woman pointed.
“Thank you so very much.” Finnius bowed slightly and pulled me towards him with his arm snug around my waist. “Remember, you must stay close to me. You don’t know what could happen to you here, and I could never live with myself if something did.”

I could see how the town could be unfriendly to strangers. However, the closeness of Finnius’ body to my own made me feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. I pulled his hand away from my waist. “Perhaps not too close,” I said with a laugh so he wouldn’t feel insulted.

“What ever you wish, my lady,” he said.

I ventured a glance over my shoulder and the woman was still watching us. I tucked my necklace in my robes and closed my cloak tight to me. Finnius yanked me back and I almost fell over. A carriage with a fidgety horse stomped through where I was walking. The driver bounced and flailed back and forth from the horse’s movements. His face was red and he looked as if he was going to be ill. Thank the Goddess Finnius had the sense to pull me back.

“Thank you,” I told him.

“My pleasure,” he said. “Now, stay close to me.”

We slowly made our way through the streets of the town. We arrived at a place with a dense amount of people. Small structures full of produce, meats, animals, trinkets of all sizes and colors lined the street. People shouted to one another. A large woman pushed me into Finnius so she could get to a man selling fish. She didn’t apologize. At least, I don’t think she did. I was too terrified to even question her rudeness.
People pressed in on us as we walked further and further into the swell of the market. Everywhere people bumping me, touching me. Their hot sweaty sticky bodies stuck to my arms. They were too close, too close. Dozens of faces inches from my own breathing their hot breath in my face and breathing in my air. Each time someone touched me it sent a prickle of nerves across my body. The whole place was threatening to crush me. Swallow me up into their sea of human flesh. My chest was tight, and it felt like a wriggling bird was trapped there. I couldn’t breathe. I wanted to run. I wanted to hide. I wanted to scream.

Finnius pulled me closer to him and I thought I was going wretch right there in the street. His stench was overbearing in the stagnant air and his slightest touch made me nauseous. I closed my eyes and let him lead me through the mass of bodies. I breathed slowly and deeply and imagined myself in the open of the sacred realm sitting near the paths of cool water alone where no one could touch me, but it did little good.

We entered a building that was scorching and sweat immediately excreted from my pores. I opened my eyes to see what he’d brought me to. A man stood over a large metal object. He hammered a glowing metal piece that bent to his will like a blade of grass bends to the wind. There was a younger man tending ferocious coals in the fire behind him. At least I was safe from the crowd outside.

The man looked up from his metal block. In the glow of the fire, his eyes were deep pools of black. When he looked at us, his judgment was piercing. This man was no fool and he would not be taken as such. The younger man kept to his duties, but would steal sidelong glances towards us. Whether it was curiosity or judgment, I couldn’t tell.
“Good afternoon, my dear sir. I am Finnius, and this is my friend, Jayden.” The man nodded to us. “We are in desperate need of a horse and since you are the fine farrier of this beautiful town, we thought that you might know of someone who would be willing to trade for one.”

The man stood silently and eyed Finnius. Not a shred of emotion crossed his face. He was as still as the stone he used to bend metal. The silence was so long that I feared he would not answer at all.

“Why do you need a horse?” he asked. The boom of his voice was startling. It must have startled Finnius as well because it took him a moment to answer.

“We are on a mission to get to the city.”

The man grumbled low in his throat. “Why?”

“We must ask the king for assistance in a most desperate manner.”

The man grunted with a mixture of amusement and disdain. “Why do you think the king would help you?”

Finnius’ lowered his voice and inched closer to the man. “Our mission is of a most holy and righteous nature. I’m sure the wise king will understand that it is to his best interest that he assists us as it will be to the best interest of all who reside in Adustru.”

The man stiffened and his eyes narrowed to small specks of night. “Perhaps it will be in your best interest if you leave.” He thrust his tongs back into the fire. The metal he was working began to glow in protest. The conversation was over.
I could hear Finnius’ gears turning. He was a gifted speaker, no doubt, but his flatteries and large speeches were lost on this man.

“Sir,” I said, and couldn’t believe the sound of my own voice.

The man looked up. His eyes were still narrowed and I could tell he loathed the idea of speaking to us further, but there was a glimmer of something soft in his demeanor, in his nature. It was there. All I had to do was find a way to get to it.

“Sir,” I said again, all the moisture in my mouth now drawn out from the heat or maybe my nerves or both. “Should we not ask the king for help?”

There was a shift in the man’s demeanor. It was a slight shift, but it was something. He looked me over once again before speaking. “If you can trust him, you can ask him.” He watched carefully to see my reaction.

I was walking on a wire with him. “I don’t know enough about him to make that judgment.”

“Why ask him for help?”

“Because he might be the only one who can help us.”

That got his attention. The kindness behind his harsh demeanor came forward. His face softened, his eyes brightened. He was looking at me differently too. Whether it was respect, pity, intrigue, I’m not sure, but it wasn’t unkind.

“Dartha has a few horses she might be willing to trade for. You can find her in the square.”

“What does she look like?” I asked.

He grunted. “You won’t be able to miss her.”
“Thank you,” I said. I couldn’t help but smile. My face radiated a joy that I couldn’t quite understand. Was it because I was able to open this man up or because I was grateful he was able to overcome his contempt for the king to help me? Perhaps the human race isn’t lost after all.

“Thank you, good farrier, your kindness will not be forgotten,” Finnius said.

The man’s eyes narrowed again, and I knew it was time to go. I pulled Finnius out of the shop while he bowed vehemently saying that we are in his debt and some other unnecessary flatteries.

The man yelled over Finnius’ blathering. “Be careful what you ask the king. He is not prone to giving his assistance without a price.”

I gave him one last smile, and mouthed thank you before we exited the shop and into the chaos of the streets.

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The last words of the blacksmith set off a series of warnings in my head, but I couldn’t bother with them now. The wave of people easily overtook us and forced us to move against the wall of the blacksmith’s shop. Their bodies pressed us against the wall. I imagined them crushing us slowly until we broke and were ultimately trampled beneath callous feet. My throat began to tighten. Claustrophobia threatened to overtake me again, but I wouldn’t let it. If I could brave the creatures of the border, I could do this.

“Which way to the square?” I yelled over the bustle of the crowd.

Finnius pointed. Down the street, I could see a statue of some kind. That must be the square. I grabbed Finnius’ filthy hand in my own, and dove into the crowd.
With a clear head, I could see a path that appeared between people as they moved. I pulled Finnius along with me. Together, we weaved in and out of the moving crowd towards the statue.

The crowd dissipated as we moved further away from the market. I could see the statue was a man in full armor on an enormous horse. He had hollow eyes and held a sword over his head. His mouth was open as if he were screaming. Around the statue was a garden of red and yellow flowers in stone flower beds. The entire square was paved with large flat stones in contrast to the dirt streets of the town. Tall poles with red and yellow flags and streamers were set up throughout the square. Long banners tied to them created a layer of fabric draping between the poles.

A pretty plump woman in a clean yellow dress directed a man on a ladder hanging a banner. “No, that is crooked. Can’t you see it’s crooked? The left side must be higher.”

“Excuse me, my dear lady,” Finnius said.

The woman smiled at Finnius but gave me a dirty look.

“How do you do, Madame? I am Finnius and this is my dear friend Jayden. We were wondering if you might know someone by the name of Dartha.”

“Pleasure, Mr. Finnius. My name is Dartha, but you may call me Dee.”

“The pleasure is mine, Ms. Dee.” Finnius bent over to kiss the woman’s hand. Dee giggled and blushed. I didn’t quite understand the exchange that was happening here, but it was starting to make me nauseous. “I bet a lovely woman like yourself wouldn’t know where we could get a horse or two would you?”
Dee swayed and fidgeted with her dress. “That depends on what you have to trade for them.” She stroked the hem of his tunic letting a finger linger on his chest.

This was all getting to be too much for me, though I wasn’t sure why I was so disgusted with the whole thing. “What is your price?” I asked flatly.

Dee puffed up and cocked her head like a jealous hen. “Well, if you’re going to speak to me like that, then perhaps I don’t have any horses.

“Oh don’t worry about her, dear lady. She is anxious to get back to her fiancé. You know how young hearts in love can be.” Finnius pressed close and gave her a brilliant smile. I started to protest but Finnius pushed me to the side. “We do have coins and other trinkets that might interest a lady like yourself.”

Dee got dangerously close and I could hardly place a hand between them. “I’m afraid that I’m too busy preparing for the festival to give you my proper attention. If you are free this evening, perhaps you could join me at the festival. Afterwards, we could settle the price on some horses.”

“Could someone else help with the festival?” I asked. “We are in a hurry,”

Dee looked down her nose at me and cocked her perfectly shaped eyebrows. I could see that the woman’s patience with me was wearing thin. “Of course no one else can. I am the head of festival decorating.”

“A woman with your taste cannot be out done. You are doing a fine job indeed,” Finnius said much to the delight of his new admirer.

“Thank you, the Commencement Festival is the most important festival to our town. Well, aside from the Day of Deliverance, of course.” Dee giggled at her own joke.
“Then, my dear Dee, I will not keep you from your artistic vision. I will see you at the festival tonight.” He bent low and kissed her hand, lingering his lips just a hint longer than before. “Until we meet again.” Dee giggled and batted her lashes like a suffocating fish flaps its gills.

Finnius gently cupped my elbow in his hand and pulled me away. We left the square but not without Finnius giving Dee one last blazing smile. When I was sure Dee couldn’t see us I ripped my elbow away from his fingers.

“What was that?” I asked.

“I was being friendly,” he said. He tried to reattach his hand to my elbow, but I yanked it back.

“Is that what you call it?”

“Why yes, my dear. You will find that more people are helpful when you are friendly.” He moved closer and I could feel his breath thick on my face. His eyes glimmered with mischief, as if he were holding back a joke. Just when I felt that my skin would crawl off my body, he looked away and the moment passed.

“So, now what?” I asked.

“Now we wait, my cherub.”

“Wait?”

“The farrier said she was our best bet to get horses. So, we will wait a few hours for the festival.”

“We cannot afford to wait. The priestesses are out there somewhere and they need my help.” My anger rose with the volume of my voice. It was horrible. How dare he so
carelessly say wait when my sisters could be dying as we spoke, all for this pawing woman to have a companion at the festival. It was infuriating.

“If we don’t get the horses, we won’t have a chance to get to them in time. Our best chance is to wait. It is only a few hours.”

He was right, of course, but I wouldn’t hear any of it. “You wait,” I said. “I am going to find a horse.” I started to walk away from him, the square, that woman. Finnius grabbed my hand.

“It isn’t safe for you to wander the town alone.” His voice was gentle as he caressed my fingers with his, but the fire from my anger started to boil to the point of no return. I pushed him hard. He sprawled back and landed on the ground. A crowd began to form around us. My entire body felt hot, and flames licked at my eyes. Never in my life had I been so angry. I felt indestructible and it was intoxicating. I stood over Finnius, the young man with his quick tongue and slippery personality. I could crush him into the dirt that always seems to stick to his clammy hands. Those same dirty stinky hands that had guided and protected me when I had no one else.

Just as quickly as it came, my rage cooled. Finnius stared up at me, his jaw open and for once, he was speechless. I didn’t understand what had happened. Something kept ringing in my head like a memory or a lesson I had forgotten. Did Luna mention this in our lessons? If she had, it wouldn’t have including throwing my only friend on the ground. I offered my hand to Finnius and he accepted it with caution.
“I’m sorry, Finnius. I don’t know what came over me.” When I tried to pull my hand away, he wouldn’t let go. His poor pleading eyes looked up at me like a beaten animal.

“My dear, Jayden, if I have offended you, I am truly sorry,” he said. “I would never wish to offend you. If you want to look for a horse, we can look for another horse. I will scour the town to find whatever steed your ladyship requires.”

“That is not necessary, but thank you.” I patted him on the shoulder. It felt forced and uncomfortable, but it was all I could think to do.

A smile erased his pitiful expression. “What now?”

The curious group of onlookers crooked their necks waiting for my reply. My face flushed and all I wanted to do was disappear. “I think we should go.”

“Come,” he said, and guided me away from curious eyes. The onlookers followed us for a while, but since we offered them nothing interesting to watch. They slowly broke off and left us to our own devices.

There were hardly any people on the side streets so we were free to look around without the threat of being trampled. The town was lovely without the people. There were flower boxes hanging out of windows. Birds rolled in the dusty street and small rodents scurried along the buildings. It must be hard to share their homes with that many people.

We came across a large stone building with the sign of Oshira carved in the door. It was not nearly as grand as the temple in the sacred realm, but it was like a second home. I bounded up the steps and pushed the door open. The inside was dark. The
windows barely let in light from the outside. No candles were lit. From the cobwebs and
dust that covered them, it was safe to say they hadn’t been lit for a long time.

The walls and the floor also had a thick layer of dust. At the far end of the hall, a
glass statue of the Goddess stood with her arms cupped at her chest. But there was no
water flowing into them to overflow into the pool below. There was only a pool of
muddy water that stained the Goddess’ feet.

I knelt on the floor, bowed over the water. What Finnius said was true. The people
of the outside world don’t care about the Goddess. They don’t care about my sisters.
They only care about themselves and festivals. What am I going to do? How on earth am
I to get the king’s help?

Tears fell into the pool and sent little ripples that lapped at the base of the statue. I
felt helpless and empty. Everything that I lived for was slipping through my fingers and I
could do nothing but pray. I closed my eyes and sang the song of the Goddess.

Oshira my love oh Goddess divine
Make rivers run like fountains of wine
Like the blood of the earth
Sweet rivers flow
To the beckoning arms of the Goddess they go.

My song echoed through the main hall and for a moment I felt the other sisters
were singing with me. Familiar harmonies rose from the walls, the floor and the ceiling. I
could hear each distinct voice of my sisters. For a brief moment, we were together. We
were joined by the prayer of the Goddess. It was not a trick of the ears or the heart. It was
a sign. They were alive.

“Thank you,” I whispered to the Goddess. “Thank you.”
When I opened my eyes, my heart stopped and a scream lodged in my throat. The water around the foot of the statue was clear with not a speck of dirt contaminating it. I had heard of miracles from the other priestesses, but never had I seen one for myself. I didn’t know how to feel. I was surprised, frightened, humbled, and ecstatic all at once. I couldn’t help but laugh at the wonders of the Goddess. “Thank you,” I yelled until the whole temple vibrated with the sound of my voice. “Praise to Oshira! Praise to the Goddess!”

I noticed Finnius standing at the door. He gave me a closed lipped smile. “Praise to Oshira,” he said not quite knowing why I had gone from miserable to happy in a matter of seconds.

“Come see,” I said, and beckoned him to the altar.

He walked up as if the Goddess herself would strike him down for trespassing.

“Look.” I pointed to the water. “It’s clean. It was dirty and now it’s clean. The Goddess has given us a sign. There is still hope.” I hugged him so tight that I forced the air out of him, but he didn’t seem to mind. “And they’re alive. My sisters are alive.”
Chapter 5

I laughed in spite of propriety. The Goddess had shown me a miracle of all things. Truly this meant that I was on the right path. She had not foreseen this land as it has so blatantly forsaken her. She in all her graciousness had turned a blind eye to their neglect and had chosen to show me there is hope in all of this. “Praise to the Goddess,” I said again.

I could tell Finnius still didn’t quite understand why I was so excited. Perhaps he didn’t see the miracle like I had. Perhaps his doubts blinded him to the wonders of the Goddess. Either way, it didn’t matter. I knew what the Goddess had done and I was ready to follow the path that she laid for me. All I had to do was follow it. She meant Dee to delay us so that I could find the temple. Therefore, Dee was also part of her plan. Oh what a blessed Goddess she is to test my patience only to reward my restraint with a miracle.

For hours I must have prayed at the foot of the statue, maybe minutes, I couldn’t tell. Finnius tapped my shoulder in the middle of my prayers. I hadn’t noticed how late it had become and I would have stayed all night if it weren’t for Finnius.

“Forgive me, dear priestess, the festival will be starting shortly,” he said.

I nodded and stood up much to the discomfort of my legs, which had fallen asleep from kneeling. Needles of nerves shot up the length of my leg and back down to settle into my feet. Every step was painfully slow, until the blood finally returned to my lower limbs and I was able to walk comfortably once again. Finnius kept trying to help me along but I repeatedly pushed him aside. In a strange way, I enjoyed the pain. Every step
was I reminder that I was alive, and while I was alive, there was still hope for the others. I reveled in each step because it meant that I was getting closer and closer to my destiny.

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I could tell from halfway down the street that the whole town must be congregating at the square for the festival. Hundreds of people in their flashy clothing shifted and moved amongst themselves like a pile of ants. The different shades of bright yellows and reds would have shamed the Goddess herself at their vanity. However, the true beauty was in the decorations that Dee had produced for the occasion. I had to admit, she did a fine job of decorating.

Finnius and I pushed through the square in search for Dee. There was a large crowd settling around the center of the square where a group of people were speaking loudly in the middle of a group of dancers.

“What are they doing?” I asked Finnius over the droning of people.

“They are actors putting on a play for the town,” he answered.

“A play?” The word sounded odd. Were they pretending to play something for the crowd?

“They are pretending to be characters in a story for your amusement, my priestess,” he said. I cringed a little at the word priestess and wondered if anyone had heard, but everyone’s attention seemed to be elsewhere.

I watched the dancers with their ribbons sway to the words of the players. Sometimes they used blue ribbons, which made it look like rolling waves. Other times they used orange and yellow ribbons and made it appear like a roaring fire. It was quite
beautiful. I could barely hear the words of the players over the crowd. Finnius said that we would be able to watch the play once we found Dee and settled the score of the horses. The dancers used green ribbons and moved and swayed like trees in a strong wind before a storm.

We saw Dee at the edge of the performers. She was dressed in a bright orange and yellow dress that accentuated her chest. She had a large orange and green fan that she fluttered in front of her face and looked out from the top of it like a gopher peeking out of its hole.

She saw us coming and flicked the fan away from her to bat her eyes at Finnius and then placed the fan in front of her face in mock embarrassment and modesty. There was nothing modest about this woman.

“Oh Finnius,” Dee crooned, “I’m so glad that you could attend my little party.”

“The pleasure, my dear, is entirely ours.” Finnius bent low to kiss the blushing woman’s hand. “You sure know how to throw a fine party, my dear lady.”

“Oh, thank you, Finnius.” Dee fluttered the fan in front of her face and blinked ferociously. “It was no trouble really. It seems I have quite the knack for it. Wouldn’t you say?”

“I would indeed say so, my lady.” Finnius bent again to kiss her hand. The fluttering of Dee’s fan and eyelashes picked up speed and I was quite certain she would blow herself away.

I jabbed Finnius with my elbow. He jolted forward into Dee a little much to her delight.
Finnius brushed himself off and quickly pulled himself upright and away from Dee. “My dear lady, forgive my forwardness. It is not like me to become enamored with a woman so quickly.” Finnius gave me a dirty look and placed Dee’s hand between his own. “Unfortunately, my fair, we will not be able to enjoy your joyous festival tonight. We must get to the city as soon as possible, and the only way that I can do that is with the help of horses.”

Dee pulled her hand out of Finnius grasp in mock disdain. “Is that all I’m good for? I should have known you were like every other man who comes in this town. You only want one thing and when you get it you’re off to find yourself another woman.” Dee glared at me and tucked her fan in a tight fist. “Perhaps you wish to find yourself a younger rose that is not so weathered.”

Finnius tried to grasp Dee’s hand once again, but she flicked it away and sighed. Finnius tried a second time to regain her hand and she allowed it although somewhat dejectedly. “My sweet flower, who would ever search for a sweeter rose than you? Such delicate soft curved petals cannot be outdone by a flower that hasn’t seen the sun long enough to bloom.”

Dee smiled up through her eyelashes. “So if I were to sell you horses, would you leave your flower here all alone to be picked by some other admirer?” Dee pressed herself up against Finnius. Her lips were inches away from his. The energy between them made me feel dirty and uncomfortable. I tried making myself watch the players, but I couldn’t help but see Dee and Finnius out of the corner of my eye.
“I will not make a promise that I cannot keep, my rose. There are many dangers in this world and I could never hurt you so as to lie to you and tell you that I will return. Only the gods know my fate, and I don’t dare tempt them.”

Dee hugged Finnius to her tight enough that her bosoms almost disappeared into Finnius. “Oh Finnius, I can’t bear the thought of it.” Dee nuzzled her face into the crook of Finnius’ neck so that she could put her lips close to his ear. “Perhaps I will not sell you horses at all if it would keep you safe.”

I shot Finnius an exasperated look. This had gone far enough. Finnius immediately got the message and pulled the woman away from him. “You cannot say such things. I have made an oath that I should escort the young lady to the city. If I should break that vow, the gods would strike me down as I stand here now.” Finnius brushed a stray hair out of Dee’s face. “If I had known what I know now, things might have been different, but as it stands, I have a duty to this young lady, and I must fulfill it.” Finnius pointed to me and Dee eyed me with a jealous but sympathetic look.

“I would not make you break your vow, Finnius,” Dee said. “Although, it pains me to do so, I have two horses that I can sell for a price.” Dee’s eyes were intense with hidden purpose. Whatever she wanted in return would be extravagant in one way or another. In any case, it wasn’t going to be as easy as we hoped.

“What is it that you require?” asked Finnius. “We do have coins, or some other things to trade that might interest you.”

“Oh no, Finnius.” Dee purred. “I want so much more than that.”
Finnius swallowed hard. He pretended to act intrigued, but I’ve seen the same spark of fear behind his eyes before and I knew he was terrified. “I’m sorry, my lady, but that is all we have to offer,” Finnius managed to stammer.

Dee looked around as if she were afraid of being overheard. “I have a favor to ask, but not here,” she whispered.

“Then where, my lady?” asked Finnius.

“You agreed to be my companion this evening did you not?” she asked.

Finnius hesitated. “I did, my lady.”

“Then I shall hold you that bargain,” she said, and tapped him playfully on the nose with her fan. “You shall be my companion this evening and when the festivities are over, we will talk business.”

Finnius glanced at me out of the corner of his eye asking what we should do. Dee noticed his distraction and pounced. “A bargain is a bargain,” Dee said with a sweetness dripping from her lips like venom. “If you do not wish to hold your bargain, I’m afraid that I will not give you horses.” The last few words were directed at me and she waited for my response.

“A bargain is a bargain,” I said.

Dee smiled with satisfaction.

“It seems I am yours, dear lady,” Finnius said.

“Indeed you are,” Dee said. “Come, you shall buy me a honey comb and we will sit and watch the players together.” Dee wrapped her arm around Finnius’ and she guided him through the square.
I tried to stay as close to them as possible. The square was thick with people who were drunk on fun and liquor. Dee gave me more than one dirty glance over her shoulder, but said nothing. She did seem to be in an awful hurry. Finnius pulled out a coin from a hidden jacket in his pocket to pay for a pastry for Dee. He bought me a blob of pink sugar. He told me that I was supposed to suck on it, but I couldn’t help but chew it. It broke into tiny shards and dissolved, but the aftertaste of sugar lingered on my tongue and in my teeth.

Dee led us to a small tent with chairs facing the players. There were only two open and Finnius insisted that I sit next to Dee and he would remain standing. I politely declined and stood at the edge of the tent to watch the players.

One of the players pretended to weep bitterly for his wife who was lying with a red stained dress at his feet. The man wept bitterly and the dancers used the streamers to form his tears. He stood up and shouted his revenge to the gods for allowing his wife to die. The gods were silent. The man gave one final scream to the heavens in his pain and agony. Then, a swirling of white ribbons ebbed through the crowd surrounding the players. They twirled and fell in frantic beautiful movements. One of the white ribbon dancers came close enough for me to touch, but before I could think to try, my opportunity had passed and the dancer was in the center with the other players. The white ribbons encircled the man and his dead wife. They moved around him like ripples on a pond. The white ribbons closed in on the couple until the audience could see nothing but white. Then, the dancers disbursed, revealing the once dead woman standing in white robes.
The woman clasped her husband tight. The white ribbons surrounded her and pulled her away from the man. The audience became suddenly quiet as the woman began to sing in a clear voice the likes of which I had never heard before. It was sweet, beautiful, and haunting. I let it take me. My heart soared and plummeted with every note. My eyes welled at how much the woman loved her husband and the pain she felt for leaving him. I was reminded of those final moments with Luna before the goddess took her.

The white ribbon dancers pulled the woman with them and disappeared into the crowd. When the song was finished, the crowd roared with approval. They were screaming, clapping and crying. I wiped the tears from my cheeks and clapped my hands vigorously. The players smiled and bowed. People in the crowd threw coins and flowers at them.

Dee wiped a tear from her eye and looked as if she would swoon. “Tidus and Laurel is my favorite love story. Is it yours too, Finnius?”

“I love all love stories,” he said, trying to hide the signs of his weeping.

My arms still tingled from the woman’s voice, and I tried hard to shake the emotion that her song had surfaced. “It is getting late,” I said. “Can we discuss our business now?”

Dee pouted and dabbed her eyes again, although I am certain there was nothing there to dab. She stood and smoothed the front of her dress, cleared her throat gently. “Follow me,” she cooed and gently pulled Finnius through the crowd. I had no intention of being left behind, so I followed them through the crowded square to a back alley.
Small flickers of residual fire from the square played along the windows of the alley. Other than that, there was nothing but moon and stars to light our way. Dee led us down another street with different buildings from the others. These were old, jagged buildings of an ancient sort, cruel and angry. She walked up to the door of one and knocked three times. There was no answer at first. Then, a sliding of a lock and the door swung open. Light escaped from the door out into the street. I could see a small shadow of a figure moving over to let us pass.

The door slammed behind us and a scrawny man flicked the lock into place. He was old. He was the oldest man I had ever seen. His hair was all stringy and lay in white ropes across his forehead. His face was wrinkled and puckered like an old leather shoe. His eyes were the only thing that seemed to show the vitality that still thrived within him.

“Strange thing to have so many guests come at night,” the man said with a smooth baritone voice. “I hope that you forgive what little hospitality that I can give. My cook has been excused for the night.” The man shuffled off leaving us in a large room with chairs and a small table in the middle.

Dee sat down in a large overstuffed chair that she seemed to sink into. Finnius took his place beside her. She pet his fingers and whispering to him softly. I noticed there were entire walls of books on either side of a fireplace. The books were probably as old as the man or older. Their covers were practically in shreds. The pages would crumble at the instant they were touched. There was one with an insignia on the binder that I had never seen before. I traced the outline with my fingers and pulled ever so gently to get it out. The two books it was lodged between groaned and sputtered little bits of paper.
“It is impolite to go through a man’s library without asking,” the man said as he walked into the room. A maid followed close behind with a tray of tea and some spice bread.

I jerked my hand back embarrassed and ashamed. Did I have no self-control?

“Come, my dear, and have some tea,” said the man kindly. “I’m afraid that it is not like the fancy food at the festival.”

“Whatever hospitality you give us,” Finnius said, “is taken with the highest regard of that which a king might bestow upon a humble servant. May your house be rich and plentiful in food and wealth as it is in good company,” Finnius raised his tea cup in a toast before sipping it loudly.

The man looked up from pouring his own tea. He stared at Finnius for a moment with his mouth tight and his eyebrows creased in the center. “Thank you,” he said, and continued pouring his tea. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. If only the old man had seen Finnius’ performance earlier. Then, he would have really seen the extent of Finnius’ flattering tongue.

“Well now, my daughter says that you have a need for some horses.” The old man sat back in his chair with his tea cup poised above a small plate.

“Indeed we do, sir,” Finnius replied.

“Enough of this sir business, you may call me Gregory,” he said, and sipped his tea quietly.
“Of course, where are my manners,” Finnius said, standing from his chair. “My lord Gregory, my name is Finnius and this is my companion Jayden.” Finnius made a sweeping bow before returning to his seat.

Gregory stared up through his eyebrows at Finnius for half a second. Then, he looked straight at me. “Jayden, such a lovely name you have.” A smile crept into his eyes but barely a turn of the lip.

I didn’t really know how to answer him, so I simply said, “Thank you,” sipped my tea and hoped that he would move on. Unfortunately, he did not.

“The jade stone is said to be a dream stone that connects the spirit realm to that of the living,” he said. “Your parents must have been quite spiritual indeed.” Gregory sipped his tea with only his eyes gleaming over the brim of his cup. My tongue felt thick in my mouth. The man knew or he guessed who and what I was. But was he going to condemn me for it? “You know,” he continued, “I haven’t looked at that book in years. Perhaps I will give it a gander now. Would you like to have a look at it?” Gregory gently put down his tea cup and walked to the book case.

Of course I wanted to see it, but I didn’t want to seem too eager. I cursed myself for being so curious and giving away more than I ought to have. Now, he was surely baiting me with some kind of trap, but what? Entice me with an unusual book so that I might reveal myself? Preposterous. “I would indeed like to look at it someday, but now I’m afraid we have some business that we must attend to.”

“Business can wait. You don’t intend to leave tonight do you?” he said, then pulled the book gently from its place without disturbing so much as a speck of dust.
I looked to Finnius for an answer. He smiled easily as if he had everything under control. If only he did. I felt that our meeting was turning into an interrogation and I wanted out. “Dee said that you have a favor to ask of us for payment. We do have coins and other things that are valuable. We are willing to pay for the use of your horses.”

Gregory carried the book to his seat and rearranged the table so that he could lay down the opened book. He flipped through a few pages completely ignoring my previous comment about the horses. He came to a page with a large cross in the center of a circle. In the center of the cross was an open circle. There were letters written on and around the picture, but I had never seen the language before.

“Do you know what that is?” he asked.

“No,” I answered.

He eyed me critically as if to detect any trace of a lie. He must have been satisfied because he continued. “These lines here,” he said, indicating the cross, “are called the four winds of the Gods. And this,” he pointed to the open circle in the center, “is the heart of the guardian.” He looked at me for recognition, but when I betrayed nothing, he continued. “You’ve never heard of this before?”

“No. I have not,” It was an honest answer, but something nagged at the back of my head as if I were lying. Part of me knew I had seen it before, but I just couldn’t remember where or what it meant.

“Father,” Dee said, “these poor people don’t want to hear about your fairy tales. They came here to do business. If I had known that you’d expect them to sit and hear
about myths, I would rather have the professional players do it.” Dee took a piece of spice bread, dunked it in her tea and popped it in her mouth with finality.

“Bah,” he said, “they know nothing but their fancy words and dances. The hearts of the stories have been replaced with spectacle.”

“Now, father,” Dee said, “they have come all the way from the city to put on their spectacle and they did not come cheap. Please put away your books. You are being rude to our guests,” Dee pouted at Finnius sympathetically.

“Of course, my dear, you are right.” He crooked his eyebrow at me as if to ask if she was right.

I didn’t know what to do, so I just sat there. He closed the book and I could feel the opportunity slipping away from me. I did want to know what was in that book, but how was I to ask without betraying myself?

“Tell me, why do you plan to go to the city?” he asked.

“Father,” Dee scolded and touched Finnius protectively on the arm.

“It is not such an unusual question is it? After all, I don’t want to sponsor an illegal operation.” There was a hint of amusement in his voice. I wasn’t sure if he liked to antagonize his daughter or he liked to watch us squirm under his sharp gaze. I stayed silent for a moment hoping that Finnius would step in. When he did not, I noticed he was whispering to Dee while petting her hands with his filthy fingers. Gregory did not seem to notice them. His eyes were locked on me in a steady expectant gaze.

I had to say something, anything to break the silence. “I’m afraid we are on a quest to ask for the king’s help.”
Gregory spat with disgust at my words. “Ask for the king’s help and you might as well ask the god of wind to cease his mighty gales. Why would you ask for the king’s help?”

I hesitated. What was I to say to him? I didn’t know him. How could I trust him with such precious information? He could just tell those bandits where I was and they would be after me as well. “I cannot say but I assure you that our venture is a righteous one.”

It wasn’t enough. Gregory huffed and placed his empty tea cup on the table and began to pour himself another cup. “To every man a venture can be both righteous and unrighteous.” He stirred a cube of sugar in his tea as he spoke. “It is his own moral compass that guides his path. Tell me, what is your moral compass?”

This was too much. What did he want from me? To admit it? For all I know this man could be in league with the men who stole my sisters and here I sit at tea with him. It was too much. It was all too much. I had to get out. I stood up and knocked the table with my knee spilling my full glass of tea on my little plate. “Forgive me, sir. I do not have time to debate morals with you. I must go to the city and if you cannot provide me with a horse, I will find someone else who can.”

Finnius abandoned Dee and stood beside me, slightly confused, but he stood by me none the less. “Indeed, dear sir, we have a matter of great importance that we must get to.” Finnius bowed but it was only a fraction of the bow he gave before. This one was stiff, reserved.

Dee stood from her cushiony perch. “Father, don’t be rude.”
Gregory’s easy temperament became suddenly hot. His whole body was tense and he shook slightly. He set his cup down gingerly as not to give away his discontent. “I was not rude. I asked a simple question,” he said. “These strangers come to town in nothing but what is on their backs. They have no horses but more than enough money to buy them. They must get to the city, but refuse to say why. I am your only hope for dealing for a horse in this town. Not too many people are keen on outsiders, especially ones with appearances such as yours. I simply asked why you need to go to the city and you are on your feet and ready to walk out the door. That only leads me to believe that your intentions are not honorable, and you intend to deceive me out of two horses and then go off to do the dark one’s work. Tell me, how am I to guess otherwise?”

Finnius wrapped his arm around my waist. “I assure you, sir, our actions are entirely honorable, but are dangerous in nature. We do not say to where we must go because we are not sure where the tides of the Gods will take us. Believe this, if you believe nothing else, we are honest people with a righteous cause. If you sell us your horses, we will not shame you or scam you. You have our word on that, sir.”

“Whose word do I have?” Gregory asked hotly. “I don’t even know you. What is your word worth to me?”

“To you, it may mean nothing,” Finnius said, “but to me my word is everything. When I say a vow I do not break it, and neither does my dear Jayden.”

Gregory eyed Finnius with suspicion. “A servant of the dark one can make seemingly innocent promises that become deadly.”
Oh what a fool I had been to think this would be easy. We shouldn’t have wasted time with this town, or with Dee. This man had no intentions of giving us horses. He only wanted to see what we were about, which was no one’s business but our own. “Forgive us for wasting your time, Gregory, Dee, but we must be going now.” My voice was tight. It took all my effort to push the words out. They came out flat and angry, though I tried to conceal it the best that I could.

“Good bye, my fair,” Finnius said, and brushed his lips against Dee’s fingers.

“Please don’t go,” she begged with teary eyes.

Gregory remained seated. His brows so close together that there was barely a space between them. His arms were thrown on the arms of the chair in a seemingly casual manner, but every part of him was tense, as if he would jump up at us in a second.

Dee walked us to the door much to her own displeasure. “Perhaps we could go back to the festival and enjoy what’s left of it before you go.” Dee’s broken heart bled through her words like a sieve. I did feel badly for her. The poor thing wanted so much for Finnius to be a gentleman. Perhaps one day, she will find such a gentleman.

“I’m afraid we must depart,” he said, and kissed her hand and held it in his own for a moment.

I unlocked the door, ready to be rid of the house and all of them who lived there. Loud bangs came from the room we had just left. I quickly fiddled with the handle and opened the door. The noise became louder and I realized they were footsteps. I grabbed Finnius’ coat and pulled him into the night air.
Chapter 6

“Wait!”

Finnius and I had just stepped out of the door when we heard Gregory yell from inside. His footsteps were far louder than his stature would allow, but they were indeed his and they demanded a presence that I would have not expected of this man. I halted in the doorway, my body poised to run at the slightest provocation. My heart was beating so hard I found it difficult to breathe. “I did not mean to offend.” His words were forced between clenched teeth. “Please, come back and sit with us and I will give you my price for horses.”

Finnius raised his eyebrows asking me for the answer. I didn’t know. Who was I after all? An orphaned priestess without a breath of authority in my body, and yet I am to make these decisions for us both. He trusted me with his life just as easily as I trusted mine with his. What a pair we made.

I could tell the old man was not actually sorry for his actions, but he was willing to swallow it to get us back to sitting on his chairs. Whatever he was asking for the horses must be a high price indeed. “We will sit with you to discuss the price of the horses,” I said with whatever authority I could muster. I closed the door but left it unlocked.

We settled back into our chairs. Dee was so overjoyed that she barely sat in hers. She kept popping up and down like a rabbit from its hole. Gregory looked tense and far from the gentle-hearted man he had been before. He somehow looked older, much older in fact. The luster that was in his eyes was dim now and his face was ashen.
“I do not want your gold or trinkets or prizes,” he said with great difficulty. “I want you to take me to the city.”

I froze and was acutely aware that my eyes and mouth were wide open but I could not bring myself to close them. “You want to go with us?” I asked. It sounded much harsher than I intended.

“Now you see why I wanted to know who you were.”

I did see.

“What fun it will be to have another along with us, will it not, my lily?” Finnius asked. His lily statement roused a flare of jealousy from Dee but was quickly hidden behind an over exuberant smile.

“Why would you want to go with us?” I asked. I tried to keep the frantic squeak out of my voice, but I’m sure there was a trace of it there.

“The city is a long way from our village, much too far for an old man to travel by himself, and there are more bandits and thieves on the roads than there has ever been.” Gregory gave Finnius a poignant look before continuing. “I dare not ask the others in the village to risk their lives for me. If you are already going, your lives have already been forfeit to what may befall you on the road.”

“I am not sure that you would want to go with us,” I said. “Trouble seems to follow us.”

“Then I will fit in just fine,” he said, and the previous luster seeped back into his eyes once again.

“Why do you wish to go to the city?” I asked.
Gregory smiled, showing his full mouth of teeth. “If you do not wish to share your business with me, it is only fair that I should not be required to share my business with you.” He sat back in his chair and took a sip of tea as if he had just won a great victory.

My temper was pricked. He was right. I should not ask of someone else what I am not willing to give of myself but still. “My moral compass is directed towards protecting the innocent. Where is your moral compass pointing?”

My question amused him. He took a long sip of his tea before smacking his lips and sighing in satisfaction. He lay the cup down on the table between us. “My moral compass points to the ultimate truth.”

“What is the ultimate truth?” I asked.

“That is what I want to find out,” he said, leaning over the table, his face only inches from my own. I could smell the bitterness of tea on his breath as well as some other unsavory smells. The strength of the stench was too much and I had to move back slightly to be safe from the fumes. “Is that good enough for you?” he asked.

I stiffened but willed myself to relax and not show my frustration towards him. It could be both harmful and beneficial to have this man with us on our way to the city. But the bottom line was, we needed a way to get there quickly and he offered the only solution. I looked at Finnius for confirmation. Finnius smiled back. “It is settled,” I said. “For the price of two horses, we will take you to the city with us.”

Gregory slapped his knee and smiled. “Done,” he said. “We will leave first light tomorrow morning. Tonight, you will stay here with me and my daughter.” Dee squealed
and hugged Finnius in her delight. “Dee will you please prepare rooms for our guests?” Dee smiled and set off down the hall. Her footsteps sounded unnaturally heavy down the hallway. “This house is one of the oldest houses in the town,” Gregory said, pouring another cup of tea for himself. “The floors shift and squeak at the slightest sound and it is drafty in the winter, because the walls are so thin, but its home.” He looked at me as he said this, but I had the distinct feeling that his words were meant for someone else’s ears.

“It is very kind of you to allow us refuge in your fine home, Sir Gregory. It is an honor to be welcomed in your company.” Finnius said, lifting his glass. “May we reach our journey’s end and live to tell the tale.” Finnius and Gregory toasted. I stared at my spilled cup of tea and decided it wasn’t worth it.

The rest of the evening was filled with Finnius toasting everything from the color of Dee’s eyes to the shadows the lights made on the wall. I had grown tired of listening to them talk of nonsense and I was ready to sleep on a real bed in the peace and quiet of a real bedroom. The truth was, I dreaded tomorrow. As much as I wanted to save my sisters, I feared it. I feared it with every fiber of my being. What would I do if I found them? While we sat there in the little den of the ancient house, I would be safe from the reality of what I must do. In a weird way, I was glad that Gregory said we wouldn’t leave until morning.

I was ready to announce my decision to go to bed when Gregory opened the book once again. This time, he placed it on his lap and leafed through it. He didn’t look at me but somehow I knew he was watching me. If he wanted to pique my interest, he had it. I
wanted to ask him about the book on his lap but reined in my curiosity a touch. “Where did you acquire all of these books?”

Gregory continued to leaf through the book. “I gathered them from all over the world.” he continued looking at his book without so much as looking at me. I couldn’t tell if he was intentionally ignoring me or if he was so engrossed in his book that he didn’t care to acknowledge me.

“A toast,” Finnius stood up. “To books. To books and all the knowledge that they possess. May they forever be on bookshelves and may they burn slowly.” Finnius sat back down and Dee applauded his eloquence.

I leaned over and sniffed my tea cup. It did not smell of spirits, but Finnius was certainly acting like he had drunk the evil brew that makes men foolish. Gregory leaned over me as I sniffed and whispered low to me. “If I was trying to drug him, I would have used something stronger so that he would be quiet.” He smirked and returned to his book.

After a few more failed attempts to speak with Gregory and a few more ridiculous toasts from Finnius, I excused myself. Dee was kind enough to have the maid make me a bath. I lay in the bath until the water was cooled and goose bumps covered my flesh. I could have slept there. After the bath I felt much better. Priestesses of Oshira were never meant to be dirty.

I went to the room that Dee had prepared for me. Small glass figurines carved holes in the layers of dust on top of dark wooden furniture. There was a small fire in the fireplace. I placed some more logs in the fire. It didn’t take long to take the chill from the
air. Above the mantle was a painting of a child picking flowers in front of a large stone building. I couldn’t see the child’s face, but I thought she must be happy and I envied her.

I lay on the massive bed of feathers and slipped under the covers. It felt warm and familiar. How I wished Luna was here to tell me stories and stroke my hair. Tears welled in my eyes and I tried to shut them off but they came stronger and spilled out onto the feathered pillow. “I miss you,” I cried into the dark. “I miss you so much.” Tears sprang from my eyes. I let them fall and I sucked in gasps of air. I buried my head into my pillow to stifle my cries.

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I woke to a small knock at the door. “Jayden, it’s your Finnius,” Finnius whispered at the door. “Jayden, are you awake?” I didn’t answer. All I wanted to do was return to the shallows of my dreamless sleep. “Jayden?” Finnius called again.

I stared at the ceiling. It wasn’t even light out but I could hear the birds waking. I slipped out from under the covers and put on my robes which were spotless and smelled of spring. Dee must have had the maid wash them during the night. I made a note that I should thank her for it. As odd as she was with Finnius, she was a kind woman.

“Jayden,” Finnius said a little louder and knocked on the door again.

“I’m coming,” I said, and tucked my necklace back into my robes, threw on my cloak. I opened the door to see Finnius. His face was red and beaming in a goofy grin. Unfortunately, he had not had the sense to take a bath. I checked his wounds, which were healing in spite of the dirt.
“Come, dear Jayden.” He took my arm in his and escorted me down the hall. “The cooks have breakfast already prepared.”

As we walked, the smells of breakfast drifted from the kitchen and I realized how hungry I truly was. Finnius guided me into a dining room with a long wooden table in the center. Gregory sat at the head of the table. He looked far more rested than I felt. His hair was tied back and he wore a smile of adventure. Dee sat to the right of her father. It appeared she could cry or laugh at any moment. Finnius sat me on the other side of Gregory next to Dee, much to her delight. Large plates of food set before us. There was a tall pile of eggs, strips of bacon, sausage and some fruit that I could hardly put a name to. A bowl of oats and sugar was set next to my plate and biscuits and other delicate pastries lay in the center of the table for all to have their pick.

I didn’t know where to begin. My stomach pushed for me to make a decision quickly and I did so by trying the variety of odd fruit on my plate. I found that the green soggy fruit was so sweet that it made my jaw cringe. I made a point to eat them first.

“Sleep well?” Gregory asked while delicately putting fork full of egg in his mouth.

“Yes,” I managed to say with a mouth full of fruit. I swallowed and dabbed my lips politely with a napkin. I kicked myself for my poor manners. “Yes, thank you. I slept very well.” Gregory nodded and returned to his meal. Dee giggled at something Finnius said, and some tea spurted from her mouth. She dabbed her face delicately and tried to laugh but the redness in her cheeks betrayed her embarrassment.

“Thank you, Dee, for cleaning my clothes,” I said.
Dee’s face became brighter still and tilted her chin up. “It would not have been prudent to have a clean woman with dirty clothes,” she said. “Though, I’m sure they will be dirty before the day is out. At least I can say that I was a good hostess.”

“You are the best hostess, my dear,” Finnius said.

“I have already told the stable boy to ready three horses,” said Gregory “We can leave as soon as our bellies and packs are full.”

I tried my best to eat as slowly as possible, dissecting every bit of food that passed through my lips.

“Well, I’d say it was time for us to leave,” Gregory said, pushing his plate away with a grunt.

Dee whimpered.

“I suppose you are right, Sir Gregory,” Finnius said with a pout on his face.

“You may fill your packs with whatever stores we have in the kitchen,” Gregory said. “The cooks have been instructed to help you with what you need.” Gregory left the table with a more than disapproving look at Finnius and Dee.

I went to the kitchen to get whatever the cooks would give me. There were two cooks in the kitchen. They were overly ambitious and had my pack so full of food that it was spilling out the top and bulging in odd places. They insisted that they could fit more, but I declined, fearing that my pack would explode. I thanked them profusely for their kindness before I left.

I lugged my bulging pack towards the door. I passed the den where we had tea last night. Gregory was rummaging through his books. I stopped to watch him. He gently
placed books in his pack. He removed one of them and traded it for a different book. He grunted and placed the other one in there as well. He noticed me standing in the doorway. “I see Dreager has made sure you won’t go hungry.”

“Oh yes,” I said, showing him my pack.

He nodded and went back to sorting through his books. I placed my pack next to the door and joined him. The books were sprawled out on the furniture and on the floor in various states of decay. The book from last night was not among them.

“What will you need all the books for?” I ventured to ask.

He held one book in each hand and tested their weight. “You never know when you’ll need a book.”

“If you don’t know what the ultimate truth is, how do you expect to find it?” I asked. Gregory forgot about his books for a moment.

“Just like we all know there is an ultimate truth,” he said. “It’s in here.” He pointed to his chest. “It’s part of us whether we know it or not.” He decided on one of the books and placed it in his pack. “I figure a priestess would know that more than anyone.”

There it was. It hit me like ice to the face. He knew. Who else in this little town knew what I was? What would that mean for my sisters?

“Don’t look so surprised,” he laughed. “I have seen plenty of you in my day, although I’ll admit it has been a few decades since I have seen your kind.” He continued to scrutinize his books.

My chest tightened and my stomach lurched, but at the same time I felt a twinge of relief. “You know what I am. It is only fair that you tell me who you are.”
Gregory smiled and closed his pack but not without a hesitant glance at the books around him. “What would be fair is for you to figure it out for yourself.” He laughed again and left the den chuckling to himself. I grabbed my pack which seemed heavier than before and I wondered if the cooks had shoved more food in there while I wasn’t looking.

Gregory, Finnius and Dee were already standing by the door. Finnius smiled at my approach. He had an equally abundant pack that threatened to break the seams.

“Well, my song, are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded. Dee hugged him profusely and Finnius kissed her hand. He whispered something to her that I couldn’t quite hear over the creak from the door. Then we were following Gregory out into the morning air when sun was just beginning to peek out from the horizon in a thin line of gold. The stable boy was ready with three horses. Gregory strapped his pack to the brown horse with a white blaze down its forehead. Finnius strapped his pack to a black one with a star on its forehead and one white ankle. I stared up at my horse. It was slightly smaller than the others and had black and white spots covering its body. I patted its neck and scratched its chin and forehead. The stable boy smiled.

“Can I help you with your pack, my lady?” he asked.

“Yes. Thank you,” I said, and handed him my pack. He tossed the bulging bag on the horse with little effort and tied it quickly to the saddle.

“Her name is Lightfoot,” he said. He put down his hands to give me a lift onto the horse.
Finnius came over blustering and breathy. “Oh, I am so sorry, my lady, my fawn. I should have hastened to help you sooner.” He put a hand down to help me into the saddle. I smiled at the stable boy and stepped up on Finnius’ hands. I flicked my leg over on the other side and struggled to find the stirrup. The stable boy handed me the reins and patted Lightfoot’s neck. I didn’t quite know what to do with the reins so I looked over at Gregory for reference, but he was fiddling with the horse’s equipment.

“My cherub, my gull, could you ever forgive your Finnius for his rudeness?” He held his hands to his chest, his eyes wide and penitent.

“I forgive you,” I said with a smile that I hoped didn’t look too fake.

“You are too gracious to your loving Finnius.” He pecked my hand with his lips before returning to his horse.

The saddle squeaked as Lightfoot shifted beneath me. My whole body swayed with her movement and I feared that I might just fall before the day was over. The stable boy checked the equipment on my horse and whispered to me.

“You’ve never ridden before have you?” He tightened one of the buckles around the horse’s waste.

I shook my head discreetly.

The stable boy laughed. It was like an exuberant puff of air through his nose.

“Pull to your left to go left. Pull to your right to go right. Pull back to stop and squeeze your legs to go faster.” He looked up at me and winked. “She’s a good horse. Just don’t let her eat too much when you give her a break.”
“Thank you.” I smiled feeling much better now that I at least knew the basics. People always made it look so easy, but I see now that I should have been preparing myself for it.

“You’re welcome,” he said, and patted Lightfoot’s neck. The stable boy moved on to the other two horses and checked the equipment once more.

“Thank you, Phillip,” Gregory said, tossing him a coin. Phillip caught it and bowed.

“My pleasure, sir,” Phillip said.

Gregory’s horse began to move with a bouncy run closely followed by Finnius’ horse. I gave the stable boy one last look. “Squeeze your legs,” he said. Lightfoot moved slowly at first and then moved quickly to catch up with the others. I could see Phillip wave and laugh as I bounced along down the road towards the others.

I could barely keep my rump in my seat. Every jolt from Lightfoot sent me into the air and back down painfully on my buttocks. The others stayed still in their saddles and didn’t seem to have the same problem. We avoided the thicker parts of town as much as possible by moving around the edges. It wasn’t long before we were on the open road towards the city. Gregory spurred his horse forward and Lightfoot followed without further instruction from me. I wasn’t sure if I should be happy or frightened that she did things without my permission, but at least one of us knew what we were doing.

The sun crested the hills with brilliance. I felt its warmth on my face and arms I let my hood fall back and my hair blew free in the wind. I was getting the hang of riding and what was awkward and uncomfortable became freedom and exhilaration. Never had I
known such a feeling. I wondered if this is was what a fish felt like when it jumped out of the water for one brief second. Lightfoot was certainly true to her name. The faster she went, the less I could feel her hoofs touch the ground. After a while it felt like nothing more than the gentle creek of a rocking chair. A rocking chair that flew.

We rode nearly all day stopping briefly at a small stream to rest and let the horses drink. Gregory stayed out front with Finnius and I could hear little wisps of conversation that caught in the breeze. I delighted in staying back. The country was larger and more beautiful that I could have possibly imagined. There were tall rolling hills of grass, crops and trees that ran for miles, with farms strewn about like freckles.

The sun began to dip closer to large black mounds jutting into the sky like an angry jaw of blackened teeth. We reached a small orchard and Gregory slowed his horse and waited for me to catch up. “We will make camp here tonight,” he said, and swung off his horse with little difficulty. I held onto the saddle and painfully lifted my leg up and over Lightfoot.

“Jayden, my sparrow, wait for me to help you,” Finnius said.

“No thank you,” I said, trying to pull my other leg out of the stirrup while still hanging onto the saddle.

Finnius came around to help me down. “Please, let me help you.”

“No,” I said, and shooed him away with my head. “Thank you, but no.” I managed to pull my foot out and let go of the saddle. The shock of my legs on the ground sent a shooting pain up my thighs. My muscles were so sore that I couldn’t keep control and fell backwards. I would have fallen flat on my back had it not been for Finnius.
“Easy there, you should let me help you. That is why I’m here,” he said, and gave me a small squeeze before lugging the pack off my horse. I made a note to myself that I would deal with my own pack tomorrow.

Finnius and I gathered fire wood while Gregory took out his bedroll. It was only fair that he did little of the work because he was the one financing our trip to the city. I wouldn’t have minded it so much if my legs weren’t burning from even the slightest movement. Finnius made the fire and I went through our packs to find a suitable meal. We decided to eat the meats first so they wouldn’t spoil. Finnius warmed up the quail on a spit made of sticks while I cut up some bread. Gregory laid on his bedroll looking through his books, and took no notice of us until the quail was warm.

Finnius cut off pieces of the quail and handed them to us. It was hot and the juice ran down my face. Finnius bit into his with relish. His face and hands were covered with the grease. Gregory took small bites and barely had any grease on him. We each took a swig of water from our water skins and watched the fire burn.

“What do you plan to do when you get to the city?” I asked Gregory.

“I told you,” he said. “Find the ultimate truth,” he said.

“Yes but where do you intend to look?”

Gregory hovered over the warmth of the fire. The shadows over his eyes made him look otherworldly. “I intend to look in the heart of the world.” With that, Gregory lay down away from Finnius and me. His breathing was deep and slow and there were small wheezy noises coming from his direction. I watched the fire, thinking of what he could possibly mean by the heart of the world. Then my thoughts turned to what the king might
bring? I was in way over my head and I knew it. But if I didn’t do something, who would? Finnius lay beside me watching the stars. Every once in a while I heard him humming a song that I didn’t recognize. He rolled over and stared at me with his dark beady eyes. “Why don’t you sleep, little lark, I will take the watch.”

“Thank you,” I said, my blanket tucked up over my nose. He was so kind to suggest it. I was tired. Who knew that riding would be as exhausting as running? The only advantage was that we were making good time. Soon we would be in the city and this would all be over. I snuggled down deep in my blankets. The pebbles in my back made me dream of the feather bed that I’d had only the night before. I could hear Finnius humming to himself. It was a soft song and perhaps it would have been sweet or even romantic had it been sung by a gentler man’s voice. His voice, however, was not made to be heard by people with keen ears. I tried to ignore his noises and watched the fire burn.

That night I had a dream that my sisters were in a room of fire and a monster with a head like a wolf blew fire which caught on their hair. They screamed and tried to put out the flames but there was nothing that would quench the lustful fire. It scorched their hair and scalp, but it didn’t stop there. It burned my screaming sisters until there was nothing left but dust and smoke.
Chapter 7

I woke up drenched. The hollow of my back had a pool of sweat. My neck and chest were damp and my clothes stuck to it miserably. The sun was just coming over the horizon. Finnius lay in his bed roll snoring softly. Gregory was sitting next to the fire nursing a hot cup of tea.

“Awake, are you?” he said, blowing on his tea. “I had no idea you were such a greedy sleeper,”

“He was supposed to wake me when it was my turn,” I said, peeling my bed roll off me to drink in the chill of the morning air.

“You should apologize when he wakes up,” Gregory said. “Poor man hardly got a wink of sleep.”

I ignored Gregory and started breakfast while he read his books. There was something odd about him, I could feel it. I had no idea why he wanted to go to the city but I knew that I wanted no part of it. This man would only get me into more trouble.

“Perhaps you should wake up the poor boy so that he can make your breakfast as well,” Gregory said, without looking up from his book.

This caught my attention. “What do you mean?” I asked. Gregory wrote something down in his journal with a small quill. “What do you mean when you said he should make my breakfast?” I asked again.

“What do you think I mean?” he said, and flipped the pages deeper into his book.
My skin seared with anger and guilt. Had I done something wrong in allowing him to help? Was it so terrible that Finnius wanted to help me? “I have never asked him to do anything for me. He has always helped me on his own accord.”

Gregory took a sip of his tea and watched me with his beady eyes hovering over his cup. “It is hard to find such blind loyalty these days,” he said. “I should hope that you will not take advantage of his kindness.” He took a sip of his tea and flipped the page of one of his opened books. “Or that he should take advantage of yours.”

“He hasn’t taken advantage of anything,” I said, all of my guilt changing to fury.

“Hasn’t he?” Gregory said, placing his tea cup on a rock by the fire. “He cozied up to my daughter and left her just as quickly. And now, here he is spouting off terms of endearment towards you. Which leaves me to wonder what kind of man he is and more importantly, why would a priestess put up with such nonsense?”

Finnius snorted in his sleep.

“Now,” Gregory said, “I don’t expect every vagabond trouncing around the countryside to keep his word when it comes to the hearts of women. But I am not a fool. He did not act that way for the sake of my daughter’s affections. His affections were geared towards a different goal. He needed to get his hands on some horses. Horses that you needed. If he was willing to manipulate an innocent girl for horses, what else would he be willing to manipulate for, I wonder?”

The pan smoked with burnt ham. I flipped it with my fingers, and I instantly regretted that. I sucked on the tips of my fingers to soothe them. Gregory did not look at his tea cup, his book, or his journal. He looked straight at me, waiting. It was true that I
didn’t know Finnius all that well. I had no idea why he was willing to help me, but I
couldn’t shake the fact that I could have never gotten this far without his help.

“He is my escort, and my friend,” I said. “He has sworn an oath to protect me. He
swore no oath to your daughter as I am certain she would have clung to any man who
walked on your doorstep without being manipulated.” I regretted it as soon as I said it.
What kind of person insults a father’s daughter right to their face? I should know better.
A priestess should know better.

Gregory picked an apple from his pack and took a big chomp of it. Pieces of apple
flesh exploded into the air. “I think I’ll skip breakfast this morning,” he said, “It looks a
little overdone. When something looks that bad, chances are it tastes just as bad.”

I pushed the burnt ham around in the pan. Truthfully, it didn’t look all that
appetizing, but I did try. Finnius snored peacefully in his sleep, which I’m sure was full
of fantastical dreams. I touched his shoulder with the tips of my fingers. “Finnius,” I
whispered. His lips smacked. “Finnius,” I said again. I shook his arm slightly. One eye
opened, and then the other.

“What is it, my sparrow?” he said, with the heaviness of sleep in his voice.

“Breakfast is ready,” I said. “We have to be going soon.”

Finnius pushed himself out of his bed roll with ease and smiled as if he was just
pretending to sleep. “You made breakfast for your Finnius?” He smiled.

“I made breakfast for all of us.” I corrected. This didn’t seem to detour him in the
slightest. He sat by the fire and scooped some of the burnt meat on a piece of fire toasted
bread and handed it to me. I took it without protest. Finnius handed Gregory a piece of my makeshift breakfast. Gregory waved it away.

We ate in silence because Finnius’ mouth was full of food. Gregory finished his apple quickly. He pulled a neatly folded napkin from his bag and dabbed the corner of his lips and wiped his hands. He dipped his quill in the ink and began to write in his journal once again.

“So, have you figured out who I am yet?” he asked, looking up from his pages.

“Excuse me?” I asked. Shocked, and embarrassed that he caught me staring. My face flushed. It took all I had not to shrink away.

“Have you figured out who I am?” he asked again. Gregory’s eyes were reaching for the very depths of me.

“No, I haven’t,” I told him. The words came out in a gush.

“Then, I will give you a clue,” he said. I leaned forward holding my breath afraid I might miss something. “Are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded.

“You won’t find out anything from watching me read books,” he said, and slammed his books closed. “Perhaps your time will be better spent elsewhere.” He lifted his pack and carried it towards his horse.

Why in all creation did I think he would come out and tell me? I started packing up. Finnius tried to help me pack my things but I pushed him away without saying a word. He hovered over me for a minute or two before leaving.
By the time I packed up my things, Finnius took it upon himself to put the tack on my horse. His smile practically made him glow. I should have been thankful but instead I was furious. I threw my bag on Lightfoot’s back. She skittered a little, but Finnius was there to calm her. I tied the bag to the saddle the best that I could. I put my foot in the stirrup and swung onto the horse before Finnius had time to react.

“My petunia, why did you not wait for your Finnius to help you?”

Gregory stared at me from his horse. Waiting.

“Because, my Finnius,” I said, “one day you may not be there to help me, and then where will I be?” My words cut worse than any weapon. His face went white and his shoulders slumped.

Finnius clutched my boot in his fingers like a calf clings to its mother. “Do not say that, my flower. Please do not say such things to your Finnius.”

My heart went out to him, and I could sense the error in my own words, but as I had learned the past few days, nothing is certain. “I’m sorry. I can’t rely on you to do everything, Finnius. I have to do things myself.” I might as well have smacked him across the cheek. At least it would have hurt less. His eyes swelled with tears and his Adam’s apple bobbed with desperate swallows.

“You will not send me away?” he asked with a quaking lip. “You will not send your poor Finnius away?”

I unwrapped his hands from my ankle and held it in my own. “No, I will not send you away, but I must be able to do things by myself.” His chin quivered. “But,” I said, “I could use a teacher.”
His eyes brightened and he kissed my hand profusely. “I will teach you, my Jayden, I will teach you everything that I know.” I nodded and tried to slip my hand away from him but his grip was too tight. He kissed my hand again before letting go. “I will not fail you,” he said, bowing before he attended to his own horse.

Gregory smirked from his perch on his high horse. “How kind of you to let him teach you,” he said. “It’s almost as if you have given him a reason to live.” Gregory chuckled to himself.

I gave him a cordial laugh for his joke, but it was more to steady my nerves than anything else. I had never seen Finnius so nervous, so desperate. Even when faced with death he had not shown so much fear.

Finnius mounted his horse and we were on our way towards the city.

We took a much slower pace today. Gregory said he was feeling a little stiff and needed to take it slowly. I didn’t want to argue with him anymore, so I held my tongue. The countryside was glorious and beautiful. Never in my life had I ever done something so grand as to fly across the fields and forests. A large black shape grew on the horizon.

“Ha ha,” Gregory exclaimed, “Do you see that? Do you see it?” He pushed his horse forward and cantered to the top of the small hill. Finnius and I spurred our horses forward to catch up. Gregory sat taller on his horse as he looked upon the great shape looming in the distance. “It is the called Ordon’s crown,” he said. “The tallest mountain in all of Adustru. And that,” he pointed to a small white speck in a sea of green, “is the city.”
I felt like I could vomit. That little speck of white could hold my sisters’ lives, but only if I could persuade the king to help me. But what could I do if the king refuses? I didn’t want to think about it and I pushed it from my mind. I couldn’t erase it completely and it threatened to absolve my breakfast.

“Come,” Gregory said. “Let’s not lolly gag here looking at it.” Gregory put his horse into a gallop and he was off.

Finnius turned to me and smiled. How could he be so calm? Didn’t he know what’s at stake? “Are you ready to go, my dove?” he asked. I sighed and moved Lightfoot into a gallop. Finnius followed close behind.

We stopped to rest at a grove of trees. Not far from where we sat was a thick forest of dark green trees much taller than any tree I had seen before. Gregory nibbled on bread while he gleefully pulled out his journal and scrawled letters with his quill. Finnius found a pear in his pack that he was chomping on as he surveyed the grove. I wasn’t hungry. I wondered the grove thinking of what lay ahead.

I found a small muddy stream that was barely a trickle. I walked through the water and wiggled my toes. I tried to imagine the roar of the river, the force behind all of that water, but it felt distant, detached. Even the most vivid memories of the temple were being stripped away from me. I feared that they would leave me entirely, and then what would I be? A lone priestess by name and nothing more?

Finnius came running up behind me all out of breath. “Why did you not tell me where you were going?” he asked. “I was worried that you had disappeared.”

“No, not entirely,” I said, and walked upstream.
“You should really be more careful,” he said. “There are serious dangers out here.”

“Is it really more dangerous to be alone?” I asked. “What are we anyway? A priestess, an old man, and…well, you.”

“Do you think I’m not capable of protecting you? Have I not protected you from dangers in the past? Why do you doubt your Finnius now?” he asked. His eyes twitched in Gregory’s direction. “Is it because of him?” he asked with his voice low and dangerous. “Did he tell you to doubt your Finnius?”

A lump formed in my throat. “He didn’t tell me to doubt you.” It was true. He didn’t come right out and say it.

Finnius didn’t look convinced. “I pledged an oath to protect you.”

“I know,” I said, and plunged my feet as far as they would go willing them to become water so that I might disappear from this all together. Finnius walked out into the water and put my hand in his own and held it to his chest.

“As long as I live, no harm will come to you. I promise,” he said.

My fingers tingled, my chest felt tight. “Why would you make such a promise to me?” I asked. Finnius’ face turned red and he tightened his lips.

“Because, my lady, I have made my oath to you and your Goddess…”

“No,” I said. “Why did you want to help me at all? Why did you agree to come with me?” Finnius tried to pull his hand away but I held it firm. Every time he pulled, I squeezed harder. “Why would you risk your life for someone you didn’t even know?”
“Just the same reason you would accept help from someone you did not know,” he said, with his goofy smile sprouting across his face. His slimy hand wiggled from my grasp and he scampered to the bank. When he was safely on the other side of the creek, he flashed me another smile.

I followed Finnius back to where we tethered the horses. Gregory was already in his saddle. He scowled at my approach. “Well, now, enjoy your stroll, did you? Your mission must not be that important if you are willing to waste half the day daydreaming.” I remained silent, but I could feel Gregory’s eyes on me as I mounted my horse. If he was looking for a reaction, I wasn’t going to give it to him.

We reached the edge of the forest and Lightfoot skittered beneath me. I had a hard time staying in the saddle. Gregory walked his horse up with ease and touched the bark one of the trees. “The forest of Heir,” he said. “It is the oldest forest in Adustru. In the center of the forest, is the city.”

Finnius moved his mount closer to mine and whispered to Lightfoot and stroked her forehead. “Do not be nervous, my cherub,” he said to Lightfoot. “You stay next to us you will cross the forest safely.” Lightfoot shook her head, which caused her mane to shift to the other side. The other horses seemed to agree with her. A slight breeze that tousled my hair had the distinct feeling of breath.

“How long will it take to get through the forest?” I asked.

Finnius opened his mouth to speak.

“We will reach the city by tomorrow afternoon,” Gregory grumbled. “That is if we don’t stop for walks and daydreams.”
Finnius became tense. “Dear Gregory, Priestess Jayden was just stretching her legs. She is not accustomed to riding horses.”

“Seems like she’s not accustomed to doing anything,” Gregory said, with a smirk.

“Now see here…” Finnius moved his horse slowly towards Gregory.

“No, Finnius,” I said. Finnius and Gregory both turned to look at me. “We are almost to the city where we will part company. There is no need to fight here.”

Finnius eyed Gregory one more time then smiled as if nothing had happened. “Of course, we will not fight, my kitten.”

Gregory grunted, “Kitten, indeed.” He pushed his horse into the forest. “Come along, house cat, we must get you to your master.”
Chapter 8

The forest was dark and the trees swayed back and forth in rhythm as if they were dancing. Finnius was humming beside me and Gregory stayed out in front of us. We couldn’t move for fear of our horses getting tripped up on the roots. Poor Lightfoot’s big eyes rolled in all directions. I wasn’t sure if I was nervous because of her or she was nervous because of me.

We travelled late into the afternoon. Once in a while Gregory would mumble to himself, but for the most part he remained silent. Finnius, on the other hand, decided to take this opportunity to teach me. He told me all about the trees of the forest that he called pine trees. Every time a new plant or animal crossed our path, he would give a long lecture on what it was or what its possible uses were. By the time we made camp, my head was ready to explode with information.

I collected fire wood while Finnius made preparations for dinner. He offered to go in my stead, but I didn’t want to be around Gregory any more than I had to. I gathered some twigs and larger sticks and brought them back to the camp. Gregory, of course, had his face in a book, and Finnius had started a small fire with pine needles. I handed him my bundle of wood and went out for more.

After we ate dinner, I rolled out my bed and watched the oncoming night. Stars began to peek from behind the velvet blue curtain and sparkled between the branches making it appear that the tops of the trees were glowing. Finnius rolled out his blankets beside mine and lay next to me and watched the stars. “What do you suppose is in those books?” he whispered.
I snuck a glance at Gregory. His turned his back towards the fire so he could read. “I don’t know,” I said. “Whatever it is, we won’t have to worry about it tomorrow.” I could feel Finnius twitching next to me.

“Then it is a big day in more than one way, wouldn’t you say?” Finnius laughed at his own cleverness.

I had to laugh as well. “It is indeed,” I said, and then a thought struck me. “Do you suppose there is a place where I can make myself more presentable?”

“I am sure the inns will open their doors and beg to wash your clothes.” Finnius laughed again.

“Perhaps, they will wish to wash yours as well. You are the escort of a priestess after all,” I said.

Finnius laughed but said nothing. I was beginning to fear that this man would never bathe unless I demanded it, which I was considering. “I will take first watch,” I said.

“But, my flower, you need your rest,” answered Finnius. “You have a big day ahead of you.”

Yes, it was true that I had a big day ahead of me, but I knew I would get no sleep tonight. “No, thank you. I will take the first watch,” I said again. He watched me for a moment and I could see his insistence burrowing beneath the surface. I stood up from my bed and tended the fire, leaving no room for argument. He lay in his bed, but I did not hear him slip into snores for quite some time.
I watched the coals dim until they were nothing short of ash and a few
glimmering orange chips of darkened wood. Finnius was snoring again. Gregory’s face
was turned away from us. His books were all placed neatly in his pack except for his
journal, which he kept tucked under his head. What was written in those books that he
treasured so dearly? What was the ultimate truth?

A wicked thought occurred to me. I could look in his books while he slept. Luna
would never approve of sifting through someone else’s belongings. The Goddess would
not approve either, I’m sure. I pushed the thought away and tended to the embers. The
forest was quiet and cool. There were noises in the distance like the scuffling of a rodent.
My mind was brought back to that night when my sisters were taken. They had arrived as
gentle creatures only to attack and destroy the temple. I pushed the thought away. If they
had found me, they would have attacked by now. I pushed the thought away and tended
the embers.

The glow of the reawakened fire spread across Gregory’s pack. I could see a book
that had fallen half out of the bag. Its dusty cover pulsated in the fire light. It would not
be invading his privacy if the book had already fallen out of his pack. Surely the Goddess
would forgive the innocence of looking at a book that had fallen onto the ground.

I crept closer to Gregory’s pack. I could hear his heavy breathing. I held my
breath as I slid the book from his pack. I tiptoed away to open the book.

The page was filled with long strokes of ink like squashed spiders. Whatever this
was, it was not in the common language. Gregory stirred in his sleep. I froze. Poised.
Waiting. His deep breathing returned and he settled back into sleep. I sighed relief and
returned to the book before me. I traced my fingers across the unfamiliar language, willing myself to understand them. I tried to remember the ancient language of the Goddess, but whatever this was. It wasn’t the holy language of the Gods.

Frustrated, I placed the book back in Gregory’s pack. In the wavering fire light, I saw his journal exposed. His stirring must have freed it from his protective arm. It would be so easy to pick it up and read his frantic writings. Perhaps it held the secrets of the mysterious language. If it did, was it worth the guilt of putting my nose where it didn’t belong? My whole body tingled. The bigger question would be could I live out my life not knowing?

I touched the edge of the journal. It felt damp. I stuck my fingers underneath. I could feel the dirt go up into my fingernails. So deep, I was certain I would never get it out. With a quick tug, I pulled it out of the ground, leaving a small rectangular imprint where it had been. I clutched the journal to my chest and moved to where I could see it better. I opened up the first page. There were diagrams and glyphs that looked identical to the other book. I sifted through the pages, trying to find anything that I recognized. Then I saw a picture of a door with five seals around the entrance. Each seal had the symbol of a different element. Water, fire, earth, wind, and another symbol that I did not recognize. Gregory shifted in his sleep and I froze. Hardly daring to breathe, I waited. When he did not move again, I continued to read the pages. Three words were scribbled beneath the door. Enorum Acion Leanatu. I repeated the words in my head. I felt like I did know them, that I should know them, but I couldn’t remember. I flipped through the pages of his journal. There were more symbols and scripts that I did not understand. The only
thing that I did recognize was the ancient names of the gods, and the door of five symbols.

The dawn began to break across the horizon. The glow of the morning began to filter through the trees and I could see Gregory’s face without aid of fire light. I tiptoed back to where he lay and placed the journal as close to him as I dared. Gregory stirred. I tried to look busy throwing wood on the fire and preparing breakfast.

I could feel his eyes upon me and I knew that he was awake. He grunted and I could hear fabric shifting. I couldn’t look at him for fear that he would read the guilt on my face. I heard him wander into the woods to relieve himself. As I placed the pots on the coals.

Gregory returned from his journey through the woods and sat on his bedroll. “I see that you found it in your heart to allow the young man to sleep last night?”

I pushed around some warm oats in the pan and tried to hide the redness of my face in the fire. “I thought it only fair.”

“Indeed.” Gregory bobbed his head. “Is there any chance that you have made tea this morning?”

I hadn’t. With all my nerves, I had forgotten to make tea. “I’m sorry, but I forgot.”

“No hurry, of course,” said Gregory. “I’m sure your wits aren’t about you today staying up all night. In that state of mind, it is easy to forget even the most common staple in a meal.” Gregory began to sift through his books once again and showed no sign
of getting up to make tea. I poured water into the kettle and set it on the coals beside the other pot.

When the tea was finished, I handed him a cup of the steaming brew. “Thank you, I know how hard that must have been to make,” he said.

I stirred the oats. His words were kind enough, but the way he said them made my blood boil. I had never met such a contemptuous human being and I was glad to be rid of him. Today could not get over fast enough.

“So,” Gregory said. “Is there something that you wish to tell me?”

I could feel my face burn. He knew that I looked through his books. He had to know. I let the silence hang for a second longer before responding. “No. I do not wish to tell you anything.” It was honest.

“Nothing?” he asked, crooking an eyebrow.

I shook my head in response and scraped the burning oats off the side of the pan.

“Pity,” he said, and produced a small pastry from his pack. “I had hoped that you would be clever enough to discover who I am before our journey together was over.” He began to dunk the pastry into his tea.

I could barely disguise my sigh of relief. Perhaps he didn’t know. Then, a thought occurred to me. Would I have to live with this guilt my whole life if I never told Gregory what I did? The thought brought a nervous wave of feeling up through my stomach to my throat. How on earth was there ever any crime if ones conscience made them so nauseous?
“Have you any guesses, at least?” he asked, dunking his smug little cookie back into his tea. How fortunate for the pastry that it would soon be rid of him as well.

“I believe you are a scholar,” I said. Gregory laughed so hard he could barely hold himself upright. My face was becoming hot once again and I knew that it wasn’t from the fire.

Gregory tried to right himself as tears streamed down his face and drool dribbled on his lower lip. He wiped the moisture away and wheezed through his jubilation. “Is that all that you could come up with?” He choked on his own words for a moment before continuing. “Is that the best you could do? Why, even an imbecile would know that.” His laughter began to recede and his words came out smoothly once again. “I thought you were a priestess. Have they taught you nothing at your temple? Even the lowliest of priests in the cities could have figured it out by now, but you, an actual high priestess from the temple of Oshira herself, could not even make a guess worthy of a dimwitted house fly.” His laughter abounded once again.

Finnius woke and surveyed Gregory’s display of unusual laughter. “Whatever is so funny, Sir Gregory?” he asked, pulling back his blankets.

Gregory looked at me with a keen smile. “It is nothing, Finnius. Nothing at all.” “Come now,” Finnius asked looking from me to Gregory to find some light on our private joke. “Something was funny, and I would like to know too. It is not right that you two should know and I should not.”
Gregory allowed the last of his chuckles to recede into his tea cup. “It is nothing,” he said. “Just a case of the morning giggles. From the smell of it, Jayden has made some crunchy oats for breakfast, if you like.”

Finnius’ smile returned. “I would very much. If you would excuse me for just one moment.” Finnius went off into the woods to relieve himself.

When he was out of earshot, Gregory leaned over the fire. “Tell me truthfully. Are you a priestess of Oshira or have you stolen the identity of a true priestess?”

I could barely breathe for the fury building inside me. I didn’t know how much more of this man I could take. If he truly knew the Gods, then he should fear a priestess and her wrath.

“If you do not believe that I am a priestess, then that is your business, not mine. It doesn’t matter to me what you think of me. Soon this will be over and it will not matter what I think of you.” I poured warm oats into two bowls. The burnt pieces swam in a sea of soft beige.

“Spoken like a true thief,” he said.

“I am no thief,” I said. I tried to think of the cool waters, the gentle breeze.

“Then what are you?” Gregory stood and all books and food fell unnoticed. “If you can look through my books and not know who and what I am, you are no priestess. What are you?”

I took a step back. The anger in his eyes was enough to scare a stubborn boar. “I am a priestess,” I said, calmly, coolly.

“What did you say?” he asked, and made his way around the fire towards me.
“I am a priestess,” I said louder.

“I still didn’t hear you,” he said.

“I am a priestess of Oshira!” I screamed.

“Prove it!” He jumped at me.

I closed my eyes and held my arms up for protection against his first blow. The coolness of my body was replaced with a searing energy. He grabbed my wrist and without a moment of hesitation, I grabbed his wrist and twisted it slowly so he was wriggling on the ground. I saw him screaming in agony, but I heard nothing. I knew only the energy that flowed through my chest, my limbs and my eyes. I felt I could tear him apart with just the power of my gaze. Then, it was gone.

Gregory lay on the ground gasping for air, but he never took his eyes off me. I let his wrist go and it fell limply to the ground. Finnius came running out of the bushes, his eyes as wide as a deer’s.

“What is it? Are you all right, my turtledove? Did this man harm you?”

“No,” I said without looking. “He hasn’t, but we have come to an understanding. Haven’t we?”

Gregory stared up at me with shimmering eyes and said, “Indeed we have.”

He held his arm out for me to help him up, but by the goddess Oshira, I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Instead, Finnius graciously took his hand to help him to his feet.

I cut fruit into the oats. Finnius waited patiently to be offered a bowl. He stared at my failed attempt at oats and smiled. “You are a lovely cook, my dearest Jayden. Perhaps you should give the chefs some lessons.” I couldn’t tell if he was serious or not, but it
was Finnius and I didn’t think him capable of making a joke of someone’s feelings, even if it was well deserved.

I didn’t bother to offer a bowl to Gregory. He wouldn’t have eaten it, I’m sure, and I wasn’t at all willing to put up with any more of his abuse. We packed up camp once again. Finnius rambled on about the greatness of the city, and I tried to pay attention to his words, but I just couldn’t concentrate. My thoughts kept returning to my recent encounter with Gregory. He knew that I had looked in his books, which meant he had let me look at them. I had wasted a good night’s sleep for nothing. Now, I was exhausted, unfocused, and furious at myself.

Gregory kept his distance from me but his eyes were ever watchful. He seemed happier, and smugger since our entanglement. I had felt elated watching him wiggle under the power of the Goddess because only she could have granted me such strength. Now my victory felt cold and unworthy of celebration. Somehow, I knew that he had won. Somehow, I had given him exactly what he wanted.

We had traveled through the forest for quite some time. I was having trouble staying awake. My eyes were heavy and I could feel myself drifting to the side just before snapping awake. Thank Oshira for Lightfoot’s gentle gait or I would have fallen several times.

Gregory insisted that we stop at a clearing with a small creek to refill our canteens even though the city was only a few hours away and we had more than enough water. “You can never be too careful,” he said, filling his own water skin. “There are many things that are uncertain,” he smiled at me.
Oh yes, I thought, I knew that well enough.

“Come fill your water while we are here,” he called. “It will only take a moment and the water is refreshing.”

It did look refreshing and I could stretch my legs. I hoisted my leg above Lightfoot’s rump and slid down. My legs felt like stones. I stretched them further than their normal gait. I chose a spot above Gregory as to not get his muddied water. I was doing the cleansing ritual of Oshira and felt a prickling on my back. It was like goose bumps only more intense. I scanned the edge of the clearing but saw nothing but Finnius bent over looking at a spot on the ground.

I finished the ritual and filled my canteen with the cool water from the spring. Indeed, I felt refreshed. My muscles loosened and my head had cleared. Before exiting the stream, I splashed water on my face and scrubbed the day from my face. A hand grabbed my arm, I pulled away but the grip was tight, but not unkind. I wiped the water from my eyes with my free hand, and saw it was Finnius. He put a finger to his lips. I complied.

Together, we listened. There was nothing but the distant trill of a boisterous bird probably cussing out another bird or a chipmunk perhaps. Nothing of concern. I began to pull myself up out of the bank but Finnius held me still, and that’s when I noticed that Gregory was gone.

I felt a cold stab in my chest and the prickles formed along my spine and on my neck. “What is it?” I whispered. “Where’s Gregory?”
Finnius held his finger to his lips and shook his head. We waited another moment. The bird stopped chirping. I felt several eyes upon me but there was no movement around the clearing. Finnius put his face close to my ear. I could smell the putrescence of his breath, but I tried to ignore it. “No matter what happens, my little chickadee,” Finnius whispered. “You must ride to the city. Do you understand?”

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“Shh. We are going to run to the horses on the count of three,” he whispered.

“Whatever you do, do not stop until you get to the city.”

I nodded and prepared myself.

“One.”

I looked around the clearing and dug my feet into a firm place in the creek.

“Two.”

My skin crawled with the pressure of the eyes upon me. I bent my knees and flexed my muscles in preparation for the sprint.

“Three.”

Just as I leaped up out of the water, I saw eyes peering from the leaves of a plant. I didn’t stop, I didn’t think, I just sprinted as fast as I could to Lightfoot, and with all my strength threw myself up on her back. I kicked my legs and we flew as fast as ever a horse had flown. Finnius was only a couple horse lengths away, and Gregory’s rider-less horse followed close behind us.

The ride was a blur of branches and dirt. Green plants flew by my face like banners of indiscriminate sizes and shapes. I held tightly to Lightfoot’s neck, my face
buried in her mane. The memory of the plant latched onto my mind and I could not shake it free.

I spurred Lightfoot forward. Faster and faster we went. The road became nothing but a dizzying dream. Shapes moved alongside of us. Dark shapes with evil posture and malevolent eyes passed in the frenzy. Things scratched at my arms, my legs, but what it was, I couldn’t tell. I burrowed my face further in her Lightfoot’s neck, willing her my strength and the strength of the Goddess.

The shapes closed in. Demon eyes in a sea of hatred. One of the creatures caught Lightfoot on the side and she whinnied and bucked before bolting once again. I didn’t dare look back. I didn’t dare look forward. I held on and prayed.

Finnius cried out. I turned enough to see him being pulled from the back of his horse by hideous plants with eyes. I yanked Lightfoot’s reins to turn us around she skidded and almost threw me off her side.

“Run!” Finnius cried. “Run!” The things pulled him deeper into the forest.

They pounced on us like leeches grabbing at my arms, and legs. Lightfoot whinnied and kicked wildly. “Finnius!” I screamed just before I saw his foot being dragged into the shadows. I kicked and punched at the branched things. “Come on!” I said, and squeezed my legs around Lightfoot’s middle and aimed her for the road. “Come on!” It was no use. The creatures were like a wall. Then I felt a click. The fire returned. I snapped the branches that bound us as if they were straw. I heard distant yelps coming from the branches that I broke. One by one, I snapped them. One by one they backed off.
Finally, we reached the road and I felt normal once again. I searched for Finnius amongst the sea of beasts, but saw no sign of him or his horse.

The beasts began to move after us more furiously than before, stepping on the limbs of their fallen comrades. I squeezed Lightfoot’s middle and made a promise to myself that I would go back for him. How, I had no idea.

Lightfoot stopped with a jolt that almost threw me over her head. I could hear the plant beasts’ twigs snapping and crunching. I squeezed and kicked Lightfoot’s sides but she stood her ground. I kicked and squeezed my legs and screamed at her but she wouldn’t budge. My chest began to tighten and the forest whirled around me. Now what? Just keep going. I patted Lightfoot’s neck and cooed in her ear. Her ear twitched but her legs were locked and unmoving.

“Fine!” I said. “Be stubborn, you silly thing.” I practically fell off her back. The road felt soft like melting butter. I took her reigns and pulled. She whinnied and tossed her head. I pulled on her reins. The force of her protest caused me to lose my footing and I fell. Soft mud soaked through my robes and squished through the space between my fingers. “Ugh! You cursed thing!” I screamed. I stood to pull her again, but I wasn’t any more successful and fell again.

The horse twitched her ears in response. I could see the wave of beasts surge towards us. Time after time, she would not budge. Finally, I threw the reigns at her and said, “Fine. Stand there.” She didn’t respond. I started to walk away. “I’m going to leave you here all alone.” Lightfoot blinked her large brown eyes. Frustrated, I began running up the path without her.
I heard a chimes of some kind. I thought of Finnius, but he was nowhere to be seen. I continued to walk forward slowly. My foot sunk deep into the mud and water sprung up from the ground. I stepped back and it followed the tracks that my feet left. Each footprint got swallowed up in the water. Up ahead, water was making its way down the path towards us. It started small, but began to grow and then came in a rush, almost knocking my feet out from underneath me.

Lightfoot bucked and whinnied. I was able to grab onto the saddle and pull myself. I steered her back towards the beasts. She stuttered for a few moments before breaking into a run. The whole forest began to flood around us. No matter how fast she ran, the water was getting higher and higher. Soon, Lightfoot would be over taken. I saw an incline not far away and steered Lightfoot towards it. The water was up to my feet and I could feel Lightfoot failing beneath me. Waves crashed against the trees. Trees shifted and limbs fell to get swept away with the current. The beasts’ garbled cries rose up with the cracking of limbs.

“Come on, you can do it. Just a little further,” I said. I could feel Lightfoot’s breathing in harsh bubbling gasps. “You can do it. We’re almost there. A tree fell in front of us and Lightfoot reared and lost her footing. Half my body was in the water but hung on to Lightfoot’s saddle. She corrected herself in time before we both were swept away. Lightfoot climbed up the incline dragging my soggy body with her. I let go of her saddle and fell in a heap.

We climbed up to the top of the hill together. The water coursed around us, felling trees and washing away all life that could have existed there. I gave Lightfoot an apple
from my saturated pack. As I hugged her neck, I could hear the apple being crushed, her neck vibrated with every movement of her jaw. “I’m sorry for what I said back there. You are a blessed horse. May Oshira protect you from fools like me.”
Chapter 9

The water showed no sign of receding. I sat and wondered what had become of poor Finnius. Night came on and I made a small attempt to set up camp. I was able to make a small fire with a few branches. I took the saddle off Lightfoot, unrolled my bed and took everything out of my pack. I pulled out each piece of soggy food. The breads crumbled in a mushy paste but a bit of cake had somehow survived the deluge. I reached further and further into my pack, I pulled out more disappointing contents. In the midst of ruined food, my hand hit something solid. It was a small wooden box. Around the edges, delicate carvings of ivy intertwined to form a perfect circle.

My fingers studied the carvings and somewhere deep down, my soul was pricked. A single latch fastened the lid. I flipped it open. The inside of the box was lined with red velvet that had been miraculously untouched by the water. In the center was a golden bracelet with carvings identical to those on the box. Without thinking, I placed the bracelet on my wrist. For a moment, it seemed to glow with an iridescence that rivaled any candle light. I flicked it from my wrist as if swatting off a bug. The bracelet landed on the ground with a hollow thunk. The glow that once held the gold in a fiery light diminished into cold metal once again.

A small piece of paper lay on the bottom of the box. I opened its delicate folds to reveal its contents.

Property of Varamis.
That was it? I flipped the paper over, but that was all. I poked around the edges of the box in hopes that a hidden compartment would explain more of this unusual trinket. There was nothing else. Who could have placed it in my pack, and why? I lay next to the meager fire that wouldn’t last the night. The stars shone brilliantly. For the briefest of seconds, my soul lifted to the sky. I was far away from everything in this world and nothing existed. The hardness of the earth drew me back, and I was soaked, lying next to an equally wet but less pleasant smelling horse. Now what, I thought to myself. Above all things, I must get to the city. That was the only way to save my sisters.

Everything that I was working towards fell apart before my eyes and the only man who believed in me was gone. What on earth will I do now, I thought. The stars stared back at me, unblinking. “Oshira, what am I to do?” Her only answer was the sound of flowing water and the breaking of limbs caught in its wake.

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I woke up to Lightfoot ripping grass from the ground next to my ear. I could feel the dimples left in my back from the roots I must have slept on. The fire had gone out long ago. My damp clothes hung on me like lead drapes. The sun was barely coming over the horizon, but I could still see the silhouette of the massacre of the night before. As far as the eye could see, bits of trees poked from the mud like the dead left from an ancient battle. Nothing could have survived that. Not even the thick trees that have stood for centuries could take such a blow. There was no way Finnius could have survived. The combination of cold and nerves made me shiver. I wiped the tears that gathered at my
eyes. “I survived,” I said. Lightfoot was happily munching. “We survived. If we could, there may still be hope.”

The sun rose higher and I its rays warmed my skin. Today was a new day. Today, I would speak to the king and rescue my sisters. But then a sudden guilty thought hit me. He had gotten me this far. Finnius, the one with the horrible voice, greasy hair, and dirty fingers, the one who never bathed and smelled like swamp, the one who risked everything for me and I didn’t even know him. “Thank you,” I said to the buried twisted trees. “Thank you for getting me this far.”

I imagined what would have happened if Lightfoot and I weren’t able to get out of the deluge and were crushed, drowned, or buried alive. Goosebumps ran up my arms. What must it have been like for Finnius when the water came with no warning and washed him away? Or perhaps he was killed before it even reached him. “But we survived,” a voice said. Lightfoot’s nose flared, she sniffed the ground around her. Then I realized that I was the one who said it.

I nibbled on a piece of dried meat while I placed my remaining rations in my pack. I shoved the little wooden box in with everything else. I led Lightfoot down the hill that had been our salvation. The water that overtook the forest last night was now only a small creek about a quarter of what the river is at the temple. I stepped into the surrounding mud, which instantly gave way to the pressure of my foot. I pulled it back quickly so I wouldn’t get sucked in. “Now what?” I tried another section that looked slightly drier. I sunk slightly, but was able to walk. “This isn’t going to be easy,” I said to Lightfoot. She rolled her eye in my direction as if to say no kidding.
We walked up what was once the road. It took a while to make any headway. Each step had to be carefully placed and I had to find a path that Lightfoot could take with the least difficulty. She plodded along beside me with her head hung low. She waved it side to side every once in a while looking for stray bits of grass or leaves that stuck out of the muck.

A nagging feeling drew blood away from my stomach. Could Finnius have survived? The wasteland that lay before and behind would suggest otherwise. The next step I took made me sick. If I had fought back harder or had done something more, he would have been safe with us. But what could I have done? Something. If I had gone back, we both might have died. We both might have lived. If we survived, there may be a chance that he did too.

Lightfoot pulled at her reins and I realized I had stopped moving. She rolled her large brown eye at me as if she knew exactly what I was thinking and didn’t like it one bit. We couldn’t have run that far after the attack, but it was hard to tell. If I was trapped in the rubble somewhere, I’m sure Finnius wouldn’t stop until he found me. With a deep breath, I turned back and my stomach relaxed. Lightfoot sighed and slowly moved her body around. I patted her neck. “I’m sorry,” I said. “This wasn’t part of the deal, was it?”

We walked for some time without a sign of any living thing. The ground gave way in some places where water had seeped in. I had to yank myself out more than once and each time, my robes became a darker color of brown. “Oh, if the Secondary Priestess Marsha could see me now,” I laughed. “She’d have a conniption. When I rescue them, I will have the Secondary Priestess kiss my dirty hem.”
I saw nothing of where I thought Finnius might have taken shelter. That Lightfoot and I survived at all seemed nothing short of a miracle. She nickered and stomped her feet and tugged on the reigns to turn around.

“Not yet.” I said.

She pulled again and gave a wary eye off in the distance. I peered in the direction and saw a small green island. My heart would have been lightened if Lightfoot had not been so hesitant.

“Well, now,” I said, and stroked her cheek. “It looks like that’s the only place Finnius might be. That means we at least have to try. Doesn’t it?” She shook her head and for a moment, I thought she understood, but noticed the flies were gathering around her eyes while we stood. “Come on,” I said, and began trudging through once again. She resisted only for a moment before following.

By the time we reached the green island, the sun was halfway in the sky. Its heat intensified without shade and my skin scorched and thirsted for relief from the sun. I would have welcomed the cool boughs that promised mercy, but Lightfoot’s tension piqued and mine with it. The island was about a quarter mile long and equally wide. The island of green was not like the hill that we found. It was flat and almost level with the devastated ground around it, but everything seemed utterly untouched.

Lightfoot shifted and bucked. I tried to bring her under control. Her foot slid and caught a log. Her front legs thrashed out in every direction. She squealed and huffed trying to get her leg free. I heard a sickening snap. She screamed and limped a few paces
away with a long gash above her back hoof. She shook her head and pranced away on all four feet. The log she had been caught on had been broken.

“Oh you had me scared half to death. Now, come here so I can clean it up so it won’t fester.” When I got too close, she stumbled away and wouldn’t let me touch her. She flicked her tail and looked absolutely indifferent.

With a frustrated groan, I tried once again to get her. I smiled and coaxed her. “I’m just going to clean it for you,” I purred. “That’s all. I just want to make sure it’s alright.” She twitched and stomped her feet. I grabbed her reigns. She pulled but I pulled harder and brought her back. “It’s alright,” I said, patting her nose. “Everything will be alright.”

She allowed me to get a closer look at the cut. It wasn’t too deep but it was dirty. I trickled some water from my skin, which made her kick and scurry away. Eventually, I was able to treat and bandage the wound. By the time I was finished, I was covered in sweat, sticky with mud, and I could feel the sun roasting me alive.

“There,” I said, and placed my hand on her bridle. “Now, listen here. I am going to see if Finnius is here or not. You can either stay here to fry in the sun, or you can come with me and find some shade and food. It’s up to you.” I let the reigns fall freely on her back. She stood without moving except for the gentle swish of her tail. I continued towards the island and heard heavy footsteps follow close behind.

The shade from the enormous trees was a delightful change from the heat. The leaves of the trees came to a point on either side and forked at the end. The island was
filled with lush grasses that had blades as wide as my arm. Lightfoot sniffed at them but refused to eat any.

I checked the rest of the island but there was no sign of Finnius or anything else for that matter. I stumbled upon a large hole in the center about as big as a small house. Creeping ivy fell in like a waterfall.

“Finnius,” I called. There was no answer. I leaned as far as I could go. For a moment, I thought I could hear a chittering sound. A small green glow illuminated the bottom. It could be Finnius or something much worse. If he was down there, I was going to find him. But how was I going to get down there?

I took whatever vines I could find and wrapped them together to strengthen their hold. I tied the makeshift rope around the nearest tree and wrapped the other end loosely around my bottom. With a final breath, I lowered myself down. The green light below grew with intensity. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride at my courage, and guilt at my stupidity.

It was a lot more difficult to lower myself down than I thought. The vine was uneven and several splinters found their way under my skin in a matter of minutes. A loud boom erupted from below and I almost lost my grip. The chittering stopped and all was silent. There were three loud cracks like the breaking of limbs. The chittering began again. This time it was low and rhythmic.

As I got closer, I realized that the green light was a fire. Shadows dipped and twirled around it. My vine ended a few feet away from the bottom. I was able to slip out and fall to the ground with barely a sound. I crept back against the wall of the cave. The
dance continued without any notice of my intrusion. I felt my way around the wall of the cave. The chittering stopped suddenly and I froze, barely able to breathe.

A very large creature set itself before the fire. Its beastly face glowed in the light, the face of a plant monster. It thrust its hand up, or what should have been a hand but instead it looked more like a gnarled stub. Its voice became deeper and I could feel it pressing on me as if it sought me out.

The gnarled stub pointed to the other side of the cave. He raised it over his head and indicated the fire with the other. When he was finished speaking, the others chittered with pleasure. I had no idea what it said, but one thing was clear. Something was going into the fire, and that made the others very happy.

I crawled along the floor in the direction of the hallway that the plant monster had pointed to. If the plant monsters took Finnius, he would most certainly be here. They began to dance again and the fire blazed with a new light. As far as I could tell, nothing was added to the fire that would cause it. I scrambled to the edge of the tunnel. They were so caught up in their dance that they didn’t notice. I crept down the hall to see just what or who they intended to throw on the fire.

The green fire was the only light source in the cave. The light formed jagged shadows that looked like giant teeth. The corridor became narrower the further I walked. There was a wall directly in front of me and for a moment, I feared it was a dead end. I felt a sliver of a crack I could place my arm through. I gave one last glance to make sure I wasn’t being followed before I forced the rest of my body in.
The space was black. Not even the glow of the fire reached this far back. Rapid breathing came like hisses from every direction. My heart raced and my mind clouded with fear. What had I gotten myself into?

“Go back, demon,” said a weak manly voice. “You cannot have me today.”

“Finnius?” I asked barely able to contain myself.

“No,” he said. “I am not Finnius.”

My heart sunk with disappointment. “Who are you?” I whispered.

“Who am I?” he said. “What angel’s voice has come so far into hell to rescue me?”

“I am no angel,” I said. “This isn’t hell. I came looking for my friend but if you would like to get out of here, you will tell me your name, or I just might leave without you.”

Laughter filled the room like obnoxious wind chimes.

“Gregory?” I gasped. “You’re alive?”

“Barely,” he grumbled.

My fear subsided, and I could follow the sound of his voice. “Do you know what became of Finnius?”

“Oh, I am fine thank you,” he said. “Just a little bruised, and my clothes are torn.”

“Do you know what happened to Finnius?” I felt around until I found his arm and wrist, which were held to the wall with a thick wooden rope. Actually, it was a vine.

“No, I don’t know what has happened to him. I haven’t seen him since those things took me.”
“What are they?”

“They are called Nadark,” he said. “The Dark One’s blood. But let us get out of here before I give you your long overdue history lesson.”

I tugged on the vines but the vines seemed to tighten. “It won’t budge,” I said.

“Do you have a knife?” he asked. “Or anything else that might cut them?”

“No,” I said.

“Of course you don’t,” he said. “Useless. How did you expect to rescue anyone?”

I strongly considered leaving him there. What good would it do to free this man if I would be miserable? I shook the negative thoughts away, and pulled as hard as I could. Suddenly, a blinding light filled the room and I could see Gregory’s ragged face.

The roof opened up above us and I could see slits of the sky. Vines twisted together like knots of slithering snakes. The walls and floor churned and coiled like a rolling river of thorns. The vines pushed me up and I lost my balance and fell. The floor tossed me in its waves and I couldn’t regain my footing. The crack where I entered opened up to reveal hundreds of thorn bush monsters. Their faces mangled and contorted in odd directions. Their bodies were wrapped in thorns, uneven and bulging in awkward places. The large one stood in front. Its stub of a hand was the size of a mallet. It spoke with a garbled move of its twiggy lips. I couldn’t make out a word, but it was angry. It pointed its mallet hand towards me and its words burned with fire.

The floor threw me closer to the plant monsters that surrounded me while walking on the tide of vines. The large one screamed and hurled his arm at me. I jumped to the
side just in time. The thorn monster screamed and the floor writhed. He pulled a six inch thorn from the tangle of the vines. *Where did that come from?*

“Don’t let it touch you, Jayden!” Gregory called. “The prick from one of one their thorns is death.” The vines pulled Gregory pulled further into the wall.

It screamed again and lunged itself towards me, I tripped on a branch from the floor. I rolled across the floor as it continually stabbed at me. Each time it became more and more angry. Each time, it became more violent. The vines on the floor started tangling themselves around my arms and legs. I kicked and wiggled to keep them away.

One overly ambitious vine wrapped itself twice around my knee. The large monster came barreling at me not even affected by the movement in the floor. I yanked on the vine but it only squeezed tighter. The thorn monster screamed in fury and the vine came after me with new vigor. It squeezed my leg so hard I feared it might explode. The vines took hold of my whole body and squeezed without mercy. The thorn monster stuck his spike to my chest. His obtuse face stood inches from mine and for a moment, it seemed to be smiling. He dragged the spike across my chest and my skin rippled with fear.

The thorn touched my necklace with a gentle tink of glass. When he pulled it from my robes, he hissed and crackled and the vines tightened as they crawled up to hold my throat and squeezed. It put the spike up to my eye and spoke in its hideous language. His breath smelled like dirt and decay. My head began to ring. It wouldn’t be long now. The ringing grew louder and louder and with it, I began to understand some of the creature’s language. What was once garbled mash of syllables became a rhythm of language. “Will
rip your body to shreds and cast its putrescence in the darkness of the master so he may feed on your flesh and suck the marrow from your bones.”

My face and body felt hot, and I couldn’t see straight. Words flowed through my mouth that felt foreign, not my own. “You dare threaten me, scum of the dark. You will suffer greatly for your impertinence.” The large one stepped back mouth gaping then his expression turned angry. With a growl, the thing sauntered over to the wall where Gregory was fastened. It looked at me and without a word, stabbed Gregory in the heart. Gregory hung from his wooden shackles. I tried to scream, but the vine wrapped itself tighter and I could barely breathe. The thorn monster walked over with a booming noise, which I assumed was laughter.

“Your blood will pave the way to our master’s rightful throne.” With a quick lurch, the leader broke the chain around my neck and held the Goddess tear in his thorny fingers. He held it above his head to show the others who erupted in cheers. “Our trophy!” The tear spun and twisted on its chain. Streams of light bounced off its surface. As it turned, I saw the multitude of thorn faces, then a brief glimpse of my own. Turn after turn, thorn faces and my own, thorn faces then my own. Then a face I did not know appeared in place of my own. She was strong, she was powerful, and she could not be defeated.

Power surged through my body. Every limb tense, every inch tingled with sensations. I pushed on the vines that held me. I pushed with my arms, my legs, my neck even pressed against its confines. The leader thrust the spike towards my heart. I broke my bonds, grabbed his wrist in mid swing and broke it with a shuttering crack. With his
own mangled paw attached to the spike I drove it into his eye. He screamed and grabbed his face. He writhed on the floor, flopped like an earthbound fish. His face shriveled to dried crumbling bark and the rest of his body followed until he was frozen like a decaying stump.

The thorn creatures stared at what was left of their commander. With one loud voice, they came at me with thorns in every hand. The floor erupted with grasping vines threatening to pull me in. I dodged and slashed at the onslaught. One by one, I tore them apart, but they kept coming like waves upon a rock. The vines clawed at my legs and arms. I shoved the spike through it with bitter satisfaction. The vines wilted at its prick and quickly petrified. The walls and floor suddenly stopped moving as if all life had been sucked away. I snatched my chain from the leader’s dead branches and placed it back around my neck.

I broke off the deadened vines that held Gregory’s body. Dust swirled around him as he fell in a heap on the floor. His face was pale and he wasn’t breathing. I pressed my hand upon the wound in his chest. “Let the poison that has consumed you be passed to the vermin from whence it came.”

The room started to crumble. Soon, we would be buried in ruins. I pulled Gregory across my back and pulled us up the side of the wall. With each step, I felt myself get weaker. The sky was getting dark. Vines fell apart in my hands, but I kept on climbing. At last, I pushed Gregory above ground and pulled myself the rest of the way. I pulled him off the island just as it collapsed.

************
I awoke staring at a blue sky with barely a wisp of cloud. Birds sang in the
distance and a loud munching noise was close by. Lightfoot blew a long snort through her
nose at me before continuing to graze. My head spun when I sat up and even my
fingernails ached. We were not on the island anymore. In fact, I had no clue where we
were. There was no sign of the flood damage either. “Where are we?”

“About seven leagues from the city,” said Gregory. “You’ve been asleep for two
days. Now that you’ve awakened, perhaps I will get to ride on the horse.”

“You, you’re alive?” I said.

“Of course I’m alive. Drink this,” he said, and pushed a bowl in my face. The
smell made me nauseous. “You must drink it if you are to recover. It tastes much better
than it smells.”

I took three quick agonizing breaths before touching it to my lips, certain that I
would vomit. The drink had a surprising combination of sweet and tangy. When I was
certain I had taken an adequate gulp, I put the bowl on the ground beside me. Gregory
looked as healthy as the day I met him. “I saw you die,” I said.

“I was dead. Or partly dead.” He smiled and drank from his own cup of tea. “By
the grace of Oshira, I was healed,”

“It was real?” I asked. “It was all real?”

“Yes,” he said, and handed me a piece of bread. “You have just tasted the
bitterness of your reality.” He took a long gulp of tea.

“What…happened down there?” I asked. “What are the Nadark?”
Gregory clicked his tongue. “The temples must be failing if a priestess cannot recognize an agent of evil. During the great battle, the Dark One was cut by the Great One’s blade. The cut drew blood that sprinkled across the land. Like an evil seed, the Nadark grew into the creatures that you saw.”

“What did they want with us?” I asked.

“What any other agent of evil desires,” he said. “To destroy anything that is not of their master.”

“Oh.” I dug my heels into the ground. “It’s not the temple’s fault,” I confessed. “It’s mine. I wasn’t a true priestess until just before my sisters were taken.”

“Hmm….” His eyebrows met in the middle. “That’s the big secret? The priestesses were taken from the temple, and you had only been a priestess for a day? Interesting.” Steam rose up from Gregory’s cup and covered his face in a shroud. “You didn’t happen to save my books did you?”

“No,” I said sadly.

“Pity.” He flicked his wrist to empty out the last remnants from his cup. “Time is of the essence. Now that you’re awake, we will be able to move faster.”

“Will you help me find the king?” I asked.

Gregory practically spat. “Good heavens, no. I will no sooner show you the king than I would steal his crown jewels.” He threw himself on Lightfoot’s back and held a hand out for me to follow. It felt claustrophobic and cramped with us squished together on her back. Not the freedom I had enjoyed when we first started out. Gregory kicked Lightfoot’s sides and we were off. I didn’t appreciate him kicking her. A gentle squeeze
on her middle was enough to move her with great speed. I silently apologized for his rudeness.

We travelled all day without stopping. I begged Gregory to stop. My head was getting light and my legs numb, not to mention I had to go to the bathroom like you wouldn’t believe. He heard none of it. After so many of his nos, I grabbed the reigns and pulled her in myself. She reared at the sudden change of direction and Gregory nearly fell off.

“What are you doing?” he yelled angrily clinging to her saddle.

“We’re taking a break.” I said, and made a painful hop to the ground.

“Are you crazy?” he screamed. “You could have killed me!”

“I’d just have to bring you back to life again then wouldn’t I?” I laughed. When I returned from the trees, Gregory was leaning against Lightfoot with his arms across his chest.

“Now that you have almost killed us both,” he said. “I believe it is only fair that you should walk the rest of the way by yourself.” He made no attempt to, and showed no sign that he was joking.

“Are you serious,” I asked.

“Indeed I am,” he said, and mounted Lightfoot.

“I just saved your life,”

“And you almost killed me,” he retorted. “I think we’re even.”
“Wait!” I said, and grabbed the reigns. “You can’t go without me. We had an agreement. We get to use the horses until you reach the city. You can’t just go back on your word.”

“I am a man of my word,” he said, and pointed. “Just over that hill, you will find the city and with it your precious king.” I started to protest but he continued. “We did not agree to how close we had to be.”

“But I don’t know the city,” I said, barely keeping my panic in check. “How am I supposed to find the king?”

Gregory reached in his pocket and placed a coin in my hand. “I suggest you find a quiet inn,” he said. “The Lone Goose or The Half Step Inn would be suitable. Wash yourself and your clothes. Then, request an audience with the king.”

“Gregory,” I pleaded. My hand desperately held his. “Please, I don’t know anybody else. I can’t do this alone.”

His demeanor softened and he leaned over and plucked my chin with his fist. “My dear,” he said. “If you are only a pinch of what I think you are, you don’t need anyone else.” He smiled and gave me a nod before kicking Lightfoot’s sides and disappearing over the hill. I couldn’t be sure, but I think Lightfoot looked over her shoulder in farewell. “Thank you,” I whispered, and began the last couple miles to the city alone.
Chapter 10

There was nothing that could have prepared me for what I saw when I stood on the peak of the hill. The white city was a thousand times bigger than Gregory’s town. Every building was white except for a few small dots of color that I couldn’t make out. The city was surrounded by a great white wall. In the direct center, a castle jutted to the sky with spires of immeasurable height. Each spire glittered with a giant jewel at its peak. People shuffled through the city gates like a line of discombobulated ants.

I couldn’t believe I had made it this far from the temple. Never had I dreamed that I would be setting foot in the capital of the world let alone demanding an audience with the king. It all seemed too unreal, too big for me. The sounds of the city reached my ears and there was an aroma of food coming from all directions. My stomach rumbled with envy and delight. I pulled my cowl around my face and tightened my cloak. What would they say if they saw a single priestess walking through the streets alone? They would see trouble, and I didn’t want any part of it.

There was no sign of Gregory. Not that I could have seen him in the flood of people. There were small buildings on the outside of the city walls. The buildings were just as dynamic as the people who inhabited them. Some tall, some crooked, some pristine and some barely able to stand on their foundations. The streets were dirt.

A large man with a bird nest of a beard pushed me aside so that I ran into a merchant with dried fish strung up around his cart. His face had orange grime and his beady eyes were sunk deep into his face while his jagged nose hovered over his wares. “The finest fish west of the Hullard River,” he said. He held out a small piece. “Just one
taste of my fish will make you want no other.” He licked his lips with emphasis, smearing the orange grime on his upper lip.

“No, thank you,” I said, and walked away. He called after me bragging about his fish, but I didn’t listen. Hundreds of carts like his lined the street outside the castle with jewelry, with fruits, and vegetables that I had never seen. My stomach grumbled louder, but I didn’t give in. I only had one coin and that was already spent on the inn. Merchants called to the crowd about whatever trinkets they were selling. Most of the crowd ignored them.

The streets didn’t seem as congested as the other town, but one look at the city gates made me cringe. People pressed against each other going in both directions. They moved slowly one behind the other. Every step I took brought me closer to the conglomerate, and with each step, my throat tightened and my skin crawled. I bit the inside of my lip. I didn’t go through all that to be deterred by the city gate. I sucked in my last breath of freedom and joined the flow of people.

It was worse than I thought it would be. People pressed against me from every direction. A woman with a crying child in her arms stood at my left shoulder. Her baby wailed and streams of tears streaked its dirty face. She bounced the bundle up and down, and looked ahead, always ahead. In front, a cart full of crates was being pulled by two slow moving horses. I tried to push my way forward. The people were as immovable as stumps. They would sooner shove your face into the ground than let you pass.

To the left, I saw a young girl with dark ringlet curls draped around her shoulders. In an instant, her head disappeared in the crowd. I panicked thinking that she had gotten
trampled. I was about to cry out when I saw her head pop up again to in front of the cart. Again, and again, her head popped up in a different place. If only I could move as well as she did, this would be over already.

“Thief! Thief!” A man cried behind me and held a young boy to the level of his eyes. The guards came immediately, and the crowd opened up to them and then resumed their previously cramped state. I wondered how they could have made any room at all. The guards intercepted the man and the boy he had by the collar. I tried to watch but the crowd pushed me forward.

The gate was three times as tall as the temple and twice as wide. The wall itself was close to fifteen feet deep. Each stone was the size of a large man. As we reached the other side, the people dispersed into various directions. I walked straight ahead and looked in wonder at the glorious white buildings of the city. The signs that hung from the door were the only thing that distinguished one from the next.

The streets were paved with white stone, tarnished and weathered. As I emerged from the crowd, I gazed upon the great city from within. From the corner of my eye, I saw a black tuft of hair atop a tall gangly looking man. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew it could only be one man. “Finnius,” I whispered to myself. “Finnius!” I cried and pushed my way through the crowd. Angry shouts followed me but I didn’t care. “Finnius!” I called again as he turned the corner and out of sight. I sprinted around the corner to follow him, but he wasn’t there.

A group of children threw a stick for a furry thing that pranced and retrieved it proudly. The mother watched through the window while making dinner. She poked her
head out to shout at a boy who had gone too far down the street. The boy pouted and walked back towards the house. People passed with bundles of food, wares and children, but none of them looked like Finnius. The mother stared at me with a venomous look. I noticed my cowl had come loose and the Goddess tear around my neck was exposed. I pulled my cowl back up and quickly turned back the way I came. When I thought I was safely out of sight, I watched the people in the street for a glimpse of him. *Was it really Finnius, I thought. Was my mind playing tricks on me?* I watched for a moment longer before turning back to the main street. I stared down the endless row of shop signs.

“Stop!” a man’s voice cried out, and then a commotion rose up from the gate. People were scrambling, and shouting at nothing in particular. Then, the little girl that I had watched earlier popped out from underneath a wagon and dragged the young boy behind her. “Stop! Thief! Stop them!” The children ran down the main street, ducked through the crowds, then disappeared. A handful of guard chased after them.

Some of the townsfolk grumbled to themselves and carried on with their day.

“Damn thieves sprouting up like rabbits,” said a man with a twisting mustache that threatened to poke out his eyes.

“It’s a pity they don’t put the little buggers to work,” said a skinny woman hauling water on her shoulders like a mule.

A woman in her mid-thirties stood outside her door with her arms crossed neatly on her chest. “It is a pity that they have to resort to such things to survive. Don’t you think?” she asked. To my surprise, she was actually talking to me.

I stammered. “Is there no other way to survive here?”
The woman cocked her head and smiled. “Sharlee,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Jayden,” I said, and held out mine. Sharlee gave me a queer look, took my hand and shook it.

“Where will you be staying tonight, Miss Jayden?” she asked, her smile never leaving her crooked lips.

“I’m going to go to The Lone Goose or The Half Step Inn,” I said. “You wouldn’t happen to know where they are, would you?”

Sharlee puckered her face. “They’re on the other side of town,” she said. “It’s almost nightfall. You don’t want to be caught in the dark out here, do you? I’ll tell you what. You stay with me tonight. I’ll make sure you’re fed and cleaned, because let’s face it, my dear, you’re filthy. Give those little beggar children a run for their money I’ll bet.”

She was right. I was filthy and tired and hungry. Plus, the promise of a bed close by was almost too hard to pass up. But something chimed in the back of my head. A warning. “Your offer is greatly appreciated, but I’m afraid I must decline. If you could please point me in the right direction…”

Sharlee held my shoulder in her spindly fingers. “No need to go find another inn, you will stay here and have lots to eat at half the price of one of those inns. Come on. I’ll show you one of our rooms. I’m sure the thought of The Lone Goose will flit away from memory once you see our fine feathered beds.

“No, thank you,” I said, and pulled my shoulder from her grasp.
She looked hurt, but her smile quickly returned. “Well then, since you are so persistent. The Lone Goose is twelve blocks to the left.” Sharlee pointed her finger. “The Half Step Inn is about thirteen blocks towards the palace, there. Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

“I’m sure, thank you,” I said. “Just one more question, what are blocks?”

Sharlee giggled a piercing note that hurt my ears. She wiped her eyes from amusement and tried subdue her laughter long enough to speak to me. “Oh dear, child. You really aren’t from around here are you?”

I walked away clenching my jaw as tightly as I could. The sun was sitting on the top of the wall now. It would be dark soon. The Lone Goose took me away from the castle and The Half Step Inn took me towards it. To The Half Step Inn it is, I thought, and shifted my pack to a more comfortable position. Now, what on earth is a block?

People dwindled as the sun fell behind the wall and shadows stretched across the city. Children were called into their houses illuminated with a kiss of lantern light. To sit with a family around the fire seemed so warm and inviting. I imagined what it would be like to live here, with all the people, all the sights, sounds, smells. Not the quiet sacred realm, not the coldness of the temple, but life and warmth. I felt ashamed for thinking such things. The temple was home, and there was something there that these happy people would never even dream about.

I pulled the cowl tighter around my face to ward off the chill. It was completely dark. The streets were silent except for faint rustlings in the alleys. I kept my eyes and
ears open for anything that would portray an inn. But I had never been in an inn, so I wasn’t sure what I should expect to find.

“Are you lost, my flower?” asked a man in the dark.

“Finnius?” I called excitedly, but it wasn’t Finnius. It was an enormous man whose head was level with the window he was leaning against. I swallowed hard, and kept moving. “What are you doing out so late?” he asked. I didn’t stick around to answer.

He grabbed at me. I swerved down the street to avoid him and crashed into a cart full of what I can only assume was garbage. Slimy unmentionable things clung to my arms and hair, but I kept running. In the distance, I could hear music, music and laughing. I ran in the direction. “Hey! Wait!” he called, his voice sounding pleasant, soothing. He was getting closer.

Ahead, I could see a warm glorious light. The source of the singing, the source of people. His long strides were gaining on me. One of his large paws reached for me but I ducked to the side and it missed by inches, only managing to pull the cowl away from my face. He reached again, this time more successful. He whirled me around to face him. He saw the Goddess tear around my neck, and looked at me with new curiosity. Without thinking, I brought my knee up to his groin. He made a small whimpering sound and his grip on my shoulders loosened. I pulled myself away and flew to the door, pulled on the door and let it slam behind me.

I leaned against the inside of the door, my lungs heaving in ragged breaths. The music had stopped and a room filled with people stared at me with open mouths. Some nasty thing from the garbage heap fell off my cheek onto the floor. I flipped my cowl
over my face and tightened my cloak as I hurried through the room. The music resumed, and within minutes, the crowd of people seemed to have forgotten all about me.

A large man rubbed his apron nervously. “Excuse me miss, how can I help you this evening?”

“I’m looking for The Half Step Inn,” I said.

He laughed with little merriment. “Well, you’ve found it. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I would like a room,” I said, and pulled the coin from my pack.

His eyes became wide and he covered the coin with his hand. He surveyed the room to see if anyone noticed before he spoke. “No need to bring more attention to yourself, miss.” He pulled me to the side. “What are you trying to do?”

“I need to rent a room,” I said.

“Well, you have a funny way of showing it. Those people out there see what you’re carrying; they’ll rob you blind soon as look at you. How do you come by that kind…” He held his hands up. “Never mind, I don’t want to know.” He sighed deeply.

“How long do you plan on staying here?”

“Only one night but I’ll need a bath and clean clothes.”

He rubbed his beardless chin and shook his head. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“You won’t have any from me,” I told him. “I promise.”

The door slammed open on its hinges and all faces in the commons looked up to see the new intruder. He was a tall man with sandy blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. He looked out of breath and his face was slightly pale. His body took up the entire door
frame and his hair brushed the top. He wore a guard’s uniform.

“Anyone see a young lady come in here?” he boomed.

All patrons pointed to the side of the room where I stood. The innkeeper practically pushed me into my attacker’s arms. The man towered over me. My face was directly in line with his chest and my neck hurt from trying to look him in the eye.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the Innkeeper said. “I was just about to put her back on the street where she came from.”

I gave the Innkeeper a dirty look.

“That’s unnecessary. I’ll take it from here.” The large man pointed to an unoccupied table. “Won’t you have a seat?”

I contemplated running out of the inn, but it was a fleeting thought. Where would I go this late at night? I sat down at one of the chairs. The large man placed two drinks on the table and sat down across from me.

“Have a drink,” he said.

“No thank you,” I said.

“Suit yourself,” he said, and took a swig. “My name is William.”

“Jayden.”

“Jayden,” he said. “Are you hungry, Jayden?”

My stomach rumbled as if on cue.

He laughed. “Innkeeper, bring us some food.”

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In a moment the innkeeper came and placed heaping plates of hot food in front of both of us. My stomach gurgled. I practically wretched at the thought of food entering my stomach. I’d forgotten how hungry I was.

He shoveled food into his mouth. Little dribbles of gravy fell down the corners. Potatoes mashed between his perfect teeth and his long wet tongue sucked them into the back of his throat. I pricked the meat with my fork and juices ran along it. I placed it in my mouth, which cried out with agony and pleasure. I ate slowly, so as not to seem too eager.

He took a swig of his drink. Long foamy bubbles trickled down his smooth face. He slammed the drink on the table and sucked his upper lip with a smack. “Now do you want to explain to me why you were out this late at night?”

I looked around and there was commotion going on, laughing, smacking, and drinking. No one paid attention to us, and most importantly, no one was looking at me.

“I don’t see how it is any of your business what I do.”

He lifted his eyebrow, took another swig of his drink and slammed an empty cup on the table. “I’m sure you don’t but I assure you it is very much my business,” he said. He threw a coin beside his cup. “More ale,” he said. The innkeeper came and replaced his cup with a fresh full one while mine stayed untouched in front of me. “You see,” he said. “There are rules about people wandering around after dark. That leaves me with only two options. Either you are out causing trouble, which would be a serious problem with me. Or you are unaware of the laws, which would leave you vulnerable to those who would
take advantage of a young woman alone at night. That doesn’t sit right with me either.”

He shoved a fork full of potatoes in his mouth. “So, which one is it?” he asked.

“Well,” I said. “I think you know the answer to that question or you would be turning me in by now.”

William laughed and took a swig of his ale. “Very true,” he said. “Or I could be deciding whether or not I want to arrest you.”

I swallowed down a bite of meat but it was difficult with the lump in my throat. “I’m sorry about that,” I said. “If I had known, I never would have…”

William waved his hand in dismissal and smiled. “No harm done,” he said. “I hope,”

Something inside me stirred and I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. I stood up quickly and bumped the table with my knee. I tried to ignore what I knew would be a bruise in the morning. “Thank you for your courtesy,” I said, “but I think that I should turn in.”

“Oh?” he said, and stood. There was a long silence between us. He reached across the table and pulled a slimy piece of cabbage from my hair. “Be careful and don’t be wandering around at night anymore.”

“I won’t. Thank you, goodnight.” I shouldered my pack and walked towards the innkeeper. To my satisfaction, William did not try to follow. The innkeeper showed me to a small room at the top of his inn.
One of the maids gave me an extra pair of clothes. She poured me a bath right there in the room. When she was certain that there was nothing else to be done, she took my dirty robes down to be washed. I dipped my toe in the basin. The heat burned and prickled. I forced my foot in with the rest of me. I prayed to the goddess and blessed the water, pouring it above my head and down my body.

Oshira my love oh goddess divine
Make rivers run like fountains of wine
Like the blood of the earth
Sweet rivers flow
To the beckoning arms of the goddess they go.

I soaked until my skin was wrinkled and the water chilled. I put on the extra pair of clothes and slipped between the sheets. I didn’t have the energy to think about meeting with the king tomorrow. For tonight, I would sleep.

A knock at the door woke me.

“Miss Jayden?” A woman’s voice called from the other side of the door.

“Yes, come in,” I said.

“Your garments have been cleaned, miss.”

“Thank you.”

My robes were indeed spotless, and softer than I’d ever felt them “Did you clean these yourself?”

“I did, miss.”

“You are truly a miracle worker.”

The blue and white hues were flawless. It was once again a garment fit for a priestess.
“Thank you, you have been most helpful.”

Something about her expression stuck with me but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. I was moments away from getting an army to rescue my sisters. I put my pristine robes on and I could feel that today was going to be a good day.

The common room had a few patrons eating around the tables. The innkeeper busied himself bringing food and slamming dirty dishes away in the kitchen, all the while smiling, but with a constant worry line on his forehead.

“Good morning, miss. Did you rest well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good, good.” He hardly looked at me as he placed fresh plates of food and bustled dirty ones away. Will you have some breakfast before you’re off this morning?”

“Yes thank you, please. I would like some breakfast before I go.”

“Right away.” He tornadoed through the kitchen and returned with a plate full of food and set it down on the table in front of me. They had eggs covered in cheese and colorful peppers. Sausage and a pile of spiced potatoes. I picked at the eggs but they turned into mush in my mouth. My nerves were getting the better of me. I took a deep breath and ate them. My stomach threatened to expel them but I held them down. It wouldn’t do to have my stomach gurgling when I met the king. As I made my way out the door, I wondered at my own logic.

I followed the maid’s directions and at the end of the road, I saw the palace standing three times the size of the tallest building in the city. The spires were buried behind the puffy woolen blankets of clouds. My nerves turned into a ball of knots deep
beneath my rib cage. Breathe, I told myself and with each agonizing step I took, I became closer to my goal, closer to my sisters’ rescue, closer to the king.

The city streets were a lot busier in the morning than they’d been the evening before. It was quite a chore squeezing through the ranks of endless people to get anywhere. People cried out from their merchant stands. Carriages flew by without a second thought to the pedestrians that crossed their path. It was a toss-up between getting too close to the yammering merchants or getting trampled by horses. I took my chances with the horses.

As I made my way through the crowd a little boy tripped and fell in front of an oncoming carriage. The horses reared, nearly clipping him with their hooves. A very fat sweaty man yelled from his seat, telling the boy to get out of the way. The little boy started to wail. The crowd moved along as if nothing had happened. I helped the little boy up and get him out of the way. He lifted up his arms to give me a hug. I hesitated, not wanting to get my new robes dirty, but I couldn’t resist his little face. I kneeled next to him and held him, gently feeling all of his tiny little bones enveloped in my arms. When we let go, I couldn’t help but smile.

“Thank you,” he said in a sweet little voice.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

A blur of black hair rushed over my face and I felt a snap as my necklace was ripped from my neck. The mat of curly hair disappeared into the crowd, dragging the little boy behind it.

“Stop!” I cried. “Thief! Thief!” No one seemed to notice.
I scrambled after the two scoundrels. The crowd wouldn’t budge. I pushed with all I had. “Thieves!” I cried. “Thieves! Thieves!” But there were no guards coming to the rescue me. No one seemed to care that the priceless Tear of the Goddess was in the hands of thieves. I couldn’t breathe. Tears streamed down my face as I scanned the crowd for a sign of the vermin, but they were gone. A man was unloading a cart full of barrels into one of the buildings. I climbed up into the seat to get a better look. There was no sign of the children.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing up there?” The man unloading barrels dropped his barrel on the steps and started coming towards me. He was mostly bald but had wisps of red hair still clinging to his scalp.

My heart raced. The man was closing in. I had only a few more seconds before he would throw me off of his cart and I would lose the tear forever. Help me, Oshira. Please help. The man was only a few feet away. I was about to jump down when I saw a flash of dark hair cut down behind a merchant’s tent.

I jumped off after them, but was thrown back by a man holding my cloak. “Oh, no you don’t,” he said, and spun me around to face him. “You’re not going to take my cart, you little weasel,” he said. “I’m turning you in.”

“No, sir, you don’t understand,” I pleaded.

“Save it,” he said.

The hair vanished down an alley that disappeared from view. “No,” I cried. I kicked the man’s knee cap. He yowled in pain and dropped me on my stomach.
“Why, you little,” he muttered and grabbed my feet. I punched him square in the nose. The man stumbled back a bit. His face was blazed in anger and blood drizzled over his lip. “I’ll teach you,” He pinned my arms down I tried to kick him free but he was too heavy. He bear hugged me and brought me to my feet. I noticed a whip dangling precariously over the cart horse. I dug the heel of my foot into his toe and tried to reach the whip with the other foot but he only squeezed harder and pulled me away. I bit down on his arm I felt a pop when my teeth pierced his skin. He yowled and wrenched his arm free. I flicked the end of the whip with my toe and it fell with a smack on the horse’s buttocks. The cart reeled forward. I fell back into the seat and the man flipped off the cart in a cloud of dust.

The horse went wild. People screamed and threw themselves out of the way. I grabbed the reins and steered towards the alley. I heard the man with the barrels crying “Thief!” I was almost to the alley when guards emerged from the crowd. They grabbed at the cart, but they were too slow and fell harmlessly off the sides. The crowd parted for a mounted guard in full armor. He pushed his steed in front of the cart. The cart horse veered and came to a stop just short of the alley. I flew from cart and fell into the road just in time to see the children disappear under a crate at the end.

The mounted guard pointed his sword down at my face. “You are under arrest,” he said. The other guard started to circle me and the owner of the cart huffed up behind with the rage of murder in his eyes.

“Sir, I must get…”

“Arrest her!” he yelled to the other guards.
I whispered a prayer of forgiveness to the Goddess and rolled under the guard’s horse into the alley. As soon as I was clear, I jumped up and ran. Shouts erupted behind me. It was only seconds before I heard hooves thundering against the stone. “Halt!” he yelled but I kept on running. I could hear the guard closing in on me, but I focused on the crate where my whole world was clutched in tiny dirty fingers. The guard was pressing in behind me with the crate still ten yards away. I wasn’t going to make it. The guard was just over my right shoulder. My whole body tensed for the blow that would surely come.

For me, Oshira. I have failed.

The horse flew past me and stopped at the end of the alley. The guard dismounted with his sword drawn. The crate sat between us. The other guards fell in behind me with their swords drawn as well. I took a step towards the crate.

“Your next step will be your last,” said the guard. “Arrest her.” The guards grabbed me. I tried to fight back but there were too many of them. Cold shackles tighten around my wrists.

“Please,” I begged, “There are children underneath that crate. They stole something very important to me. I must have it back.”

The guard hesitated. “Under this crate?” he asked.

I nodded.

He took two large steps towards the crate and kicked it up on its side. The children were gone.
Chapter 11

I was thrown in a cell that was dank and wet from what I could only assume was urine. The guards pushed me up against the wall where they clasped my wrists and ankles in iron rings fastened to the wall. They bolted the door shut and I was left in total darkness. I would have sunk to my knees and cried if the chains on my wrists allowed me to reach the ground. Instead, I stood with my back against the cold wall and waited for the worst to come.

I did not sleep that night. There were no mystic dreams from the goddess to show the way. The world was dark and once again, I felt utterly alone. All I could do was pray.

Through the night  
I see your face  
Through the darkness  
I see your grace  
Please protect me  
from this place  
Oh sweet goddess  
Hear my prayer.

My soul and its sweet yet clumsy song rose up to the goddess. In the horrid conditions of the prison and the impending punishment, I felt at peace. So, I kept on singing the lines over and over, letting the notes rattle the roof while my tears chimed against the stone floor. I sang until no words could pass my lips. I felt warm and calm and I knew I wasn’t alone.

I was awakened from my trance by the tinkle of keys outside of my door. The door swung open revealing an impressive looking guard in full uniform. His dark hair bobbed when he ducked to get into the door. He was followed by another guard of a very
similar stature, but this one had hair like the burning bushes in the fall. Both had cold
dead eyes.

They escorted me through the dungeon and up several flights of stairs. By the
time I had reached the top my legs felt as floppy as worms and the guards practically
dragged me the rest of the way. We reached an enormous double door twice the size of
my escorts. It was mostly supported by large bits of spiked steel. A guard in full armor
slapped his chest with his right arm and opened the door.

The room was dimly lit by a single candle on a desk covered with papers that a
man was hastily flipping through. His face was scarred and he had a slight milky tint to
one eye. His hair was dark with a hint of grey at the tips. “I see you’ve gotten yourself in
a bit of trouble, eh?” The man sat back in his chair and folded his fingers on the desk. I
opened my mouth to speak but he quickly waved his hand at me. “No need,” he said.
“We have several witnesses to you crimes. It will be a swift trial I’m sure.”

“Sir,” I pleaded. “I didn’t mean to take the horse.”

The man laughed and rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. “Well,” he
said. “I’m afraid that is not the point.”

was trying to get it back.”

“Children?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Two little children stole my necklace.”

“You should have never taken the matter into your own hands, dear lady,” he
said. “That only leads to more trouble.”
My anger was starting to brim. “I did call for the guards, but by the time they came, it would have been too late.”

The man stood from his chair. “Are you insinuating that the castle guard is not doing its job?”

I could feel the eyes of my escorts burrowing into the back of my head. “I did not say that they didn’t do their job,” I said. “I only said that the children were so quick that even a mounted guard would have had trouble.”

The man dragged his fingers across his desk. “Do you think I don’t know what you’re doing?” he asked. “I have seen your kind come through here before. You come here saying that you are the real victim. Your kind is always the victim. Yet, you cause more problems that could be avoided if we got rid of the lot of you all together!” The man’s face was inches away from mine. His milky eye was swirling with hate. I felt a cold pit in my stomach. “You are going to spend the rest of your life in that cell,” he said. “But, if you can help us find the others. The king might be more lenient.”

“The king?” I asked. “And what do you mean by others?”

“Don’t play with me.” The man scowled at me and continued. “Where are the others?”

“I don’t know where they are.”

“Liar!” he growled low in his throat.

“It’s true,” I said. “I don’t know where they are any more than you do.”

The man smacked me hard across the cheek. “How dare you mock me, you little troll!” My cheek stung and I could feel the throbbing imprint on my face “I’ll make sure
you rot in your cell!” He flicked his arm at the guards. “Get this filthy mongrel out of my sight!”

“I’d like to ask a question,” said a smooth voice behind me.

The man scowled. “What do you want?”

“I’d just like to ask a question.”

The man rolled his eyes. “You are a fool if you believe a word she says.”

“Then I am a fool.” William walked in front of the desk and smiled. The man grunted and returned to his papers.

“Well,” William said. “I thought you weren’t going to cause any trouble.”

“I didn’t mean to,” I wasn’t sure if I should be pleased to see him or not.

“Of course you didn’t,” he said. “Nobody means to get into these things.”

The man grunted with disgust.

“You say your necklace was stolen,” William said “What did it look like?”

I hesitated. “It’s a glass necklace,” I replied. “It’s a family heirloom.” It wasn’t a lie.

William’s eyes grew hard for a moment and then relaxed just as quickly.

“Do you know who those children were?”

“No.”

“Can you describe them for me?”

I described them the best that I could.

“Now,” he said. “Since you have caused trouble in my city, I believe I have every right to ask what your business is here.”
He was right, of course. I had nothing left. I was at the mercy of these brutes of men and no one seemed to be on my side. A knot was wrapping itself around my stomach. “I came here to plead for the king’s help.”

The man grunted from his desk.

“Are you getting sick, sir?” asked William.

The man just scowled and continued rustling his papers.

“What help do you require of the king?” William asked.

I froze.

“I would like to help you,” he said. “But I can’t if you won’t tell me the truth.”

I remembered Finnius, with his awkward gawky face. I had no reason to trust him, yet he had saved my life on more than one occasion.

“She could always wait for the trial and ask for his help then,” the man chuckled.

“I will speak with the king?” I said.

“Yes,” William said. “You will be presented to the king where he will give you your sentencing.” His voice became quiet. “You are far better off telling me.”

“Why?” the man asked. “We already have all the evidence we need. No use wasting your effort on this one.”

William leaned over the desk “If you cannot hold your tongue,” he said. “It will be my pleasure to do it for you.” William stood to his full height. “Sir.” William turned back to face me. His face softened but his eyes were on fire. “Now,” he said, with a forced calm in his voice. “Why have you come to see the king?”

“I will tell him during my trial,” I said.
William let out a tense sigh. “Very well,” he said. “Return her to her cell.”

My escorts dragged me out of the room, but not before I saw William turn on the man at the desk. I heard raised voices but they became muffled when the closed door.

I bounded back to my cell with the thought of speaking to the king. Soon, it would all be over.

***************

I did sleep that night. It was a fitful dreamless sleep. Every time that I dozed off, the tug of the chains snapped me awake. By the time the guards came to get me in the morning, my wrists had become raw and bloody. I was taken back up the stairs but this time it seemed as if they would never end. My stomach was all tied in nervous giddy knots.

At the top of the stairs was a glorious golden door with gems encrusted throughout a menagerie of carved figures. In the center was a shining figure surrounded by four bowing figures, each with a different jewel over their heads. The guard outside the door knocked his spear twice on the floor.

A slight man peeked his hooked-nose through the doors. “Who requests an audience with the king?” he asked.

One of my escorts firmly placed his hand across his chest before handing the hook-nosed man a paper. “A prisoner to see the king for sentencing,” he said.

The hooked-nosed man looked me over before reading the paper, waited half a second and gave the guard a nod. “You may enter,” he said. The guards opened the doors. The room was breathtaking. The ceiling was arched and twice as high as the temple. It
was braced with delicately carved stone. Windows lined the walls to let light in that reflected off the brilliant white floor.

In the center was an embroidered carpet that led to a marble throne that stood on a slightly raised dais. A slouched figure sat with a gold crown slightly cocked to one side and sleek hair dark held it in place. He had a face framed with a perfectly trimmed beard. His eyes were hostile.

A slender woman stood to his right. She stood tall and unmoving as if she had been hewn from the marble. A thin sword hung from a silver belt around her waist. A delicate golden crown sat on her equally golden hair.

William stood at the bottom of the dais. He was in full armor that shone brightly from the sunlight. It hurt my eyes just to look at it.

The guards shoved me to the floor. I bowed without protest. The king’s head lulled to the side as if just acknowledging our presence.

The hook-nosed man stood on the bottom step next to the throne. “Your Majesty,” he said, reading off the paper. “This woman was caught attempting to steal a cart,” The hook-nosed man fidgeted with delight. “She assaulted an honest business man in the process and attempted to flee the scene of the crime. She is also charged with consorting with thieves and disturbing the peace.”

The king grunted and plucked at his chin hairs. “I see,” he said. “How do you respond to these accusations?”
I sat there dumbfounded. The guard kicked me hard in the leg and I doubled over in pain. My leg throbbed where his steel boot had bit me. “Answer the king,” the guard ordered.

“Your Highness,” I began, “I don’t know anything about the thieves except they stole something very important to me.”

“In order to justify your crime,” the hook-nosed man sneered. “You are claiming to be a victim. How original.”

“Silence,” said the king. “Let her speak.”

The hook-nosed man shrank and peered at me with beady rodent eyes.

“What is it that they stole?” the king asked.

“It is a necklace,” I said. “It has a glass ornament in the shape of a tear.”

The king cocked his eyebrow and a slight of recognition crossed his face, but then it was gone.

“How did you come by such an item?” the queen asked.

“It was given to me by Luna the High Priestess of Oshira.”

The hook-nosed man gasped, the guards shifted uncomfortably beside me, and the queen met my eyes with a bit of satisfaction and something else that I couldn’t put my finger on. William didn’t flinch, but the news had broken the king out of his stupor.

“What do we owe the pleasure of your visit to our fine city?” the king asked.

“My sisters were stolen from our temple by dark children,” I said. “I’ve come to ask for your assistance.”
The king’s eyes grew wide and I thought I saw a bit of a smile. “What assistance do you require of me?” the king asked.

“I ask that you send a group of guards to save my sisters,” I said.

“I would gladly assist you in finding your sister,” the king said. “However, due to the solidarity of your order, we have not had the pleasure of your presence in quite some time. It stands to reason that you would ask for help if such a thing did occur.”

“It did occur, your highness,” I said. “That is why I’m here. You’re the only one who can help.

“As you can see, we are having quite a bit of trouble with thieves and liars trying to take advantage of the good people of our city,” he said. “Sending our guards away could leave the city vulnerable to attack.” The king shifted back and tapped the arm with his ringed fingers.

“My duty is to protect my subjects but I will not do it at the risk of others.”

“Please, your highness,” I begged. “You must help me. I can’t fight them on my own, and fear if I don’t help them, my sisters will die.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I cannot help you.”

“Your Highness, please!”

The king held his hand up to silence me.

I started to shake.

“How do you plead to the accusations?” he asked.

I barely heard him. “I’m…innocent.”
“We have a witness,” he said, pointing to William. “He saw you controlling the cart and when the guards had you surrounded, you tried to escape.”

“I suppose that is how it appeared, yes,” I replied.

“Very well,” he said, and waved to the hook-nosed man.

“Wait,” the queen purred. “Tell me what you know about this.” The queen pulled out the golden bracelet that I found in my pack after the flood. The curves of the queen’s lips were turned in a satisfied smirk. The king took one look at the bracelet and his demeanor became fierce. His once dull eyes gleamed.

“Where did you get that?” the king growled.

“I don’t know anything about it,” I said.

“Lies!” The queen walked towards me with a smooth prowling gait. “They found it in your belongings,” she spat. “How did it get there?”

“I don’t know,” I said, cowering on the floor.

The queen unsheathed her sword. “You are a liar and a thief.” She placed the tip of her sword in the hollow between my neck and skull, forcing me to stare at the floor. She twisted the blade into my skin and I felt its prick.

“I tell you the truth. I swear.” The blood trickled down my throat.

Her blade burrowed deeper into my neck. “What do you know of the bracelet,” she asked.

“I know nothing.” Tears streamed down my face and mingled with the drops of blood on the floor. “I swear on the Goddess, I do not know.”
She pushed the sword into my spine. “I suppose it does not matter now,” the queen said, and placed her sword back in its sheath. “The bracelet has been recovered once again.” The queen stood next to the throne again. “And you will pay dearly for your crimes.” The king nodded to the hook-nosed man.

The hook-nosed man bowed and read from the paper with regal elegance. “Since you have failed to plead your case, you are guilty of assault.”

I could see the life lines of my sisters disappearing.

“Theft.”

His words echoed in my head.

“Resisting arrest.”

They seemed distant and foggy.

“Consorting with thieves and disturbing the peace,”

I could hear singing voices in the distance. My sisters were calling. I felt consumed as if fire itself was pulsating from my eyes. Against all reason that screamed inside me, I stood.

“You are hereby sentenced…” he stopped with his mouth open. He squealed in disgusted rage. “You will kneel before his majesty the king!”

“I will not,” I said. My body trembled from anger.

“How dare you,” the queen hissed.

“How dare you,” I said.

“Guards,” the king ordered. “Control the prisoner.”
The guards hesitated before placing their enormous arms on my shoulders to push me down. I braced my legs to the floor. One kicked the back of my knee but with the power coursing through me, I felt nothing.

“You asked what proof I had that I am a priestess,” I said.

“You will be silent,” the king spat.

“If you cannot answer the call when you are bidden, then you do not deserve the honor bestowed upon you by gods who you’ve forgotten.”

“Silence her immediately!” the king ordered. One of the guards tried to hold me down. I tucked my hand under his chin and pushed him to the floor. The other one tried to grab me around my middle but I pushed his arms out and elbowed him in the face with a loud crunch.

The hook-nosed man ran screaming out the door, but there was no time to get him. William came at me in his gleaming armor with his sword balanced patiently.

“Surrender!” he yelled. He thrust his sword and I dodged it easily. He did it again and again. Each time, I dodged it with little effort.

Hundreds of guards filed in through the door. All of them in full armor. They came at me all at once, but William got there first. He grabbed one of my wrists. “Stop this,” he whispered. “You’re only making it harder on yourself.”

I wrapped my fingers around the wrist that held mine and twisted.

The guards pounced and held me down to the floor. My strength was failing and I couldn’t push them off. They wrapped an iron bar around my mouth like a bit. The king
stepped off his dais and smiled in my face. “I am the king, witch. Your gods have no hold on me.”

The queen traced his finger along the edge of the bracelet in her hand.

“Because of your insolence,” the king said. “You shall be executed immediately.”

He unsheathed his sword and rested the point on my throat.

The queen stepped forward and rested her hand on his shoulder. “Wait, my lord. She would be a lot more useful alive.”

“Have you become soft, my queen,” he asked. “Take her to the block.”

***************

The block was a stone set on a platform of the palace facing towards the city. I was thrown to the ground. The bit in my mouth pressed hard against the corner of my lips and I could feel them splitting from the stress. I pulled against the chains on my wrists, willed myself to become powerful again. Pain shot up my arms, but I pulled harder. I pulled until I felt my wrists would snap.

The king gave a signal and one of the guards blew a large metal horn three times. The city below became silent and hundreds of bodies stared up at us. The guard blew the horn three more times, and the crowd gathered around the bottom. The horn blew three final times. The crowd was gathered tightly and I could hardly see a separation between the bodies.

“Prop her on her knees,” said the king to the guards. A guard grabbed my wrists and pulled me into a kneeling position. I had no strength to fight him. The king spread his arms wide and faced the crowd. “People of Adestru, I present to you a traitor and a thief.”
He pointed at me. The crowd was silent for a moment and then a murmur of disapproval rose up to meet the king’s approving ears. “She has stolen from honest working people like you.” The crowd booed louder. “Do not worry, my people. She will receive a just punishment for her actions.”

The guards pounded their swords against their chests in a monstrous warlike rhythm. The crowd began to clap and pound with the rhythm of the guards. The king drew his sword in a long dramatic movement.

Dear, Goddess, I prayed. If ever I needed you, it is now. If it is my time, I only pray that my sisters will be spared.

The rhythm of the guards continued. The king held the sword up to my throat. The queen nodded at me in solemn approval.

The king put his hand up for silence and the rhythm stopped.

All was quiet.

The king drew his arm back ready to swing. I stared out into the crowd of people who did not know me, but who loathed me and cheered for my death. All of them looked on me and waited. A figure stood at the edge of the crowd in the shadow of a building. I could only see a long black cloak with the blood red lining just like the ones the kidnappers had worn. The king’s sword came towards me, his face held an ecstatic grimace. I ducked beneath the cut of his sword. The inertia threw him forward. I pulled myself up and raced to the edge of the block. It was a steep drop into the courtyard below. There were small bushes, trees and bushes that would do nothing to break my fall. There was a little pond, but with my hands tied, I would easily drown.
“Don’t just stand there, kill her,” the king yelled. The entire guard was racing towards me. One of the guards lunged ahead of the pack.

I jumped.

My stomach went up into my throat. I tried to roll upon impact, but my knees hit the ground hard and I was having difficulty standing. A large clatter fell behind me and I knew that it was a guard before I saw the mound of armor. I struggled to get to my feet. The pounding of the armor got closer. A strong hand picked me up and placed me on my feet. William’s brilliant blue eyes shone beneath the shadow of his helmet.

“How dare you insult the king,” he screamed inches from my face. Then he whispered, “Run.”

I didn’t wait to question him. He stayed close behind screaming profanities. I reached the edge of the courtyard. I was trapped.

“Left,” he whispered loud enough for me to hear.

I went left and found a small door leading out of the garden.

“Stop,” he yelled.

Through the door was small channel between two walls.

“Right,” he whispered upon entering the door.

I went right.

On we went. William whispered directions through the labyrinth of the palace, while pretending to chase me.
As we turned a corner, half a dozen guards in uniform cut us off. I tried to turn around, but William blocked my path. He grabbed me by the shoulders. “Well done, men,” William said.

One of the guards spoke up. “We will help escort the prisoner.”

“Thank you,” William said. “I think I can handle it from here.”

They all looked at one another. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like our assistance,” the guard asked.

“Are insinuating that I don’t know how to handle a prisoner on my own?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Good,” William said. “I should hate to think my own men didn’t trust my judgment.”

“Not at all, sir,” the guards replied in unison.

“Report to the queen that I found the prisoner,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir.” The guards disappeared around the corner.

William unlocked the chains around my wrists and took that metal bit from my mouth. “At the end of this corridor, there is a door,” he said. “It will lead you out into the street on the north side of the city. Keep going until you’re at the north gate. I’ll meet you there.”

My mouth was dry and hurt from being stretched. I shook my head. “I saw one of the men who kidnapped my sisters,” I said.
“If you don’t take your chances now, you will never leave this city alive and no one will be there to save your sisters.” The soldier began to stir. William kicked him in the head and he was still again. William gently took my hand. “Please, go now and I promise I will help reunite you with your sisters.” He placed the tear of the goddess in my palm.

I threw my arms around him and without thinking, kissed him on the cheek. “I will meet you at the north gate,” I said, and ran down the corridor.
Chapter 12

The door was stuck. I rocked it back and forth and it gave way only a little at a time. The cuts on my wrists broke open with the effort and blood streamed down my arms, staining my robes. I thrust my hip into the door again and again. The door squeaked and finally flew open. I fell out onto the city street.

The entire city had returned to its usual bustle. I could hear bits and pieces of gossip from the uproar I had just caused. My clumsy ordeal with the door went unnoticed. I closed the door as quietly as I could, wrapped my tattered cloak around me praying that I would remain invisible until I reached the gate.

I walked close to the edge, with my cowl tucked close around my face. A large buxom woman yelled insults at a merchant who sold speckled eggs. The woman turned quickly in a huff and I didn’t have time to get out of her way. She tripped over me. Her recent findings at the market flew out of her arms and rained spatters of red and green on the street. Her nasty glare met my eyes.

“Watch where you’re—“

I ran, holding my dress up around my knees. She called after me but I didn’t look back. I weaved in and out of the crowd. Pushing and jostling and shoving. Luckily none of them seemed to notice who I was only, that I was in their way. A shine of armor hovered above the horizon. I ducked behind a large man walking in the same direction. As we got closer, I could see half a dozen guards on horseback shouting orders. Several other guards were on foot. They covered the entire street from end to end, checking
everyone. Angry shouts among the frustrated citizens quickly were squelched by threats from the guards.

There was an abandoned merchant’s stand just inside the alley. It was more tattered than most and the fabric that draped to the ground was now a faded yellow. I kept an eye on the guards and rolled underneath the yellow fabric. I hit something hard, there was a click and then I was airborne for a few seconds before hitting solid ground below. There was a soft clunk above me like the closing of a door. I struggled to catch the breath that I lost on impact. Dirt filled my mouth and the cracks of my lips. I hacked and spit the filth out. It was completely dark and I could hear voices far above me. I tried my best to hold back the coughs that threatened to give me away.

“Yeah, I saw a girl like that,” said a woman’s voice. “She threw my food all over the streets.”

I tucked myself against the wall and found a small opening.

“Which way did she go?” a man asked.

“The little scamp just bolted this way,” she answered.

“Thank you,” the man said.

“Who’s going to pay for my food?” asked the woman.

There was no response from the guard, but I could feel their footsteps on the ground not far above. I heard the shriek of torn fabric and the snap of broken wood. I pulled back further into the tunnel. My pulse pounded in my ears and along my temples. My chest
burned from trying not to cough. The guards mumbled angrily and faded away. Then there was silence.

It was only moments before the sound of the city returned to its normal bluster.

I let out a long awaited cough and leaned back on the tunnel wall and tried to steady my racing heart. The tunnel had four flat sides just like the ones Finnius and I had used through the farmlands. They must connect all the way to the city. If they were like the others, they must have a ladder around here somewhere. I felt along the wall, and there was indeed a thin wooden ladder pressed into the side of the cave. I climbed up the smooth rungs. When I reached the top, I could feel a solid wooden hatch on the roof of the hole. I pushed up on the hatch, but it wouldn’t budge. It was weighed down by the debris of the ruined merchant stand.

I climbed back down the ladder. My legs gave way beneath me and I collapsed against the wall. My whole body ached. My wrists and ankles stung from the dirt that had ground itself into my open wounds. My lips burned where the bit had torn them. In a matter of minutes, my life had gone from hopeful to desolate. There was nothing I could do now. I was trapped in a dark hole and had no way of getting out. The king had been my only hope and now he was the worst of my enemies. I had no plan. Even if I did find the men who kidnapped my sisters, what then? Now, my sisters had only me, and what could I possibly do to save them?

Time passed, and I could feel the cool of night entering the darkness around me. William would be waiting for me at the gate. How long would he wait there? How long until he gives up on me like I had given up on myself? I played with the cool pendant that
once again hung from my neck. Even in total darkness, I could see the gentle blue glow from within. The light swirled like the gentle wave of a pool. It captured me. I could feel part of myself being pulled away. I resisted at first, but an overwhelming peace washed over me, and finally, I let go.

I stood in a pool of water that did not wet my feet. The pool seemed to spring out of the ground and fall off a circular platform in all directions. The walls and sky were a dazzling bright as if the sun was reflecting off crystal.

“Welcome, my child,” said a woman with a voice as gentle as trickling rain.

Before me stood a woman with long silver hair that was so long it flowed past her ankles and into the water behind her. Her face was pale and luminous. Her eyes were a swirling mix of blue and green. She wore a long white dress that melted in the water around her feet.

“I am Oshira. Be at peace, my beloved, for you are in a sacred place.” She opened her arms out to me. Soft delicate fingers curled in my direction as if to welcome me to them. I wept and fell into her arms. She pulled me into her and hugged me as if she knew every pain. In her arms, I felt the most unconditional overwhelming love that I had ever felt. The warmth of her touch lingered long after our embrace was broken.

She stroked my face and rubbed a tear from my cheek. Ever so gently, she held my chin in her lovely fingers. “Why do you despair, my child?”

I stared into her intense saddened eyes. “I have failed.”

“You have never failed me, dear one,” she said.

“But I have,” I said. “I can never save my sisters now.”
She smiled, “You have more to you than you know or I would not have chosen you as my own.”

I breathed in the sound of rushing water, and drank in her beauty. Thousands of questions flooded my mind, but they fell away like the gentle break of a wave. Only one stuck. “How do I save them?”

She smiled and took my hand in hers. Light flowed from her finger in beams and my hand burned with a holy fire. “Be who you are,” she said. “And all who oppose you shall not stand.” The Goddess began to fade into light. Only her brilliant eyes remained clear.

“Don’t go,” I said. “I have so many questions.”

“You must go now. Time is running out.”

“Please, don’t leave me!” I cried and clung to the vision.

“I am part of you. Our souls can never be torn asunder.”

The world of the Goddess disappeared in a flash of light.

I was back in the hole once again. The Goddess’ tear was now dim. I touched my hand where the Goddess had touched me.

My body was no longer tired and sore. The deep gashes that had been in my wrists and arms had miraculously healed. Even the corners of my mouth were without a hint of a scar. I would have given it all back if I could have stayed with her only a few moments longer. The Goddess reminded me so much of Luna. It felt good to know that Luna was with the Goddess for eternity. Someday, I would be with them forever and finally be at peace. Today was not that day.
I followed the cave with my fingers tracing edge of the wall. I had no idea where I was going, but I tried to keep going where I thought was north. The tunnels seemed endless, winding and twisting in all directions until finally I was quite convinced that I was going in circles.

I sat on the ground utterly miserable. My belly burned from hunger. I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten. My mouth was dry and dusty as if I had licked the walls with my tongue.

A flicker of light appeared at the end of the tunnel. I blinked to make sure I wasn’t seeing things. It was a warm yellow light, not the pure white light of the Goddess. The light began to grow, and with it, I could see the tunnel around me. I ducked into a small alcove only a few feet away from where I sat. The light grew brighter and I could hear the hush of soft shoes in the dirt. The light came closer and I pressed myself as far as I could go, holding my breath and waiting for the stranger to appear. The stranger stopped. The live light flickered just out of view.

“You can come out,” said a woman’s voice. “I know you’re there.”

I waited a moment wondering if I should show myself to this woman or bolt. I felt a warm tense feeling in my left palm where the Goddess had touched me. I rubbed it absently with the tip of my finger. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves and stood to confront the stranger. I turned out of the alcove and saw a dirty woman wearing rags, a torch in one hand and a dagger in the other. She squinted at me and a familiar smile came across her face. It was Sharlee.
“Well, if it isn’t Miss Jayden herself,” she said. “How on earth did a green girl like you get yourself down here?”

“I was…”

“My goodness what a ruckus you’ve made around here,” she said with amusement. She put her dagger back in the leather sheath at her waist “It was you, wasn’t it? The girl who was to be beheaded?”

I nodded.

“I…”

“No matter,” she said. “You young things bounce back quick, don’t you?”

I nodded.

“Where are you heading?” she asked.

“I need to get to the north gate,” I said.

Sharlee cocked her head at me. “Why are you gonna do that?” she asked. “Those guards are swarming the city. You’ll never get out of those gates alive.”

“I need to meet someone there that promised safe passage,” I said.

“Who?” she asked.

“His name is William,” I answered.

“And how can this William provide you safe passage out of the city?”

I hesitated. “I’m not sure exactly.”

Sharlee snickered. “Take it from me, you can’t trust what a man says unless you’ve got him strapped down and threatening to cut off his danglers. Even then, you can’t be sure”
“I beg your pardon?”

Sharlee smiled. “Never mind,” she said, waving her free hand. “I’ll take you towards the north gate, it’s on my way anyway. Besides, there might be someone interested in seeing you,” she winked. Then started off in the opposite direction that I was going. My heart fluttered. Who would be interested in seeing me? For a brief moment, I let myself hope that it was Finnius.

It didn’t take long to see that even with the light, I would’ve been lost. There were far more tunnels beneath the city than there were in the country. Every couple of feet there was tunnel winding off in a different direction.

“How did you get down here anyway?” Sharlee asked.

I explained to her about the guards blocking the streets. I didn’t bother telling her about the woman and her vegetables. Even though, I felt guilty for ruining them.

“You were lucky to find an open door,” she said. “Most of the time we keep them closed. The guards have been getting snoopy, and I’m afraid that it won’t be long before they find our little underground society.”

“How is the society?” I asked.

Sharlee gave me a crooked smile. “Well, it’s a city of those opposed to the current king,” she explained. Though, we cannot outright rebel or be killed as you nearly were. Instead, we must work within it, beneath it, and redistribute the wealth as we see fit.”

“You’re a city of thieves?” I gasped.
Sharlee chuckled but her face was stoic. “We prefer to call ourselves The Order,” she said. I could hear muffled voices ahead. The torch hissed and flickered with Sharlee’s quickened pace.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“To the council,” she said. “They will be wild to meet the one who directly opposed the king.”

The shouts grew louder. All garbled into a loud mess. There were banging noises and boisterous laughter. We came upon a large square room with tunnels exiting in all directions. Benches lined the edges speckled with an astonishing array of people. Some were dressed in rags, while others wore more respectable clothing. All were giddy and red faced. Yelling over one another and shoving each other aside playfully resulting in the upset of another member. The tawdry acted far different from their given name.

Sharlee grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me through the crowd. In the center of the room was a small wooden platform. There were a few benches up close, and she sat me down on a bench beside a large man with a black beard to match his rotting teeth. “Wait here,” she whispered and disappeared on the other side of the room.

The black haired man was busy talking to a red haired girl on the other side of him. She was dressed in a gentile fabric that reminded me much of Dee’s attire. Across the room, I saw Sharlee bend down and whisper something to a woman with dark shining hair wrapped tightly around her head. The woman looked at me and nodded. She exchanged words with Sharlee, though I couldn’t hear them over the roar of conversations around me.
Sharlee returned and sat beside me positively beaming, though I couldn’t guess why. The woman made her way to the platform and the crowd hushed. She wore a simple black dress, but the way she stood, I’d swear she was wearing robes even the queen would envy. “Welcome,” she said in a voice low and smooth like thunder. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I understand that there has been an episode on the surface that needs some addressing.”

The crowd murmured and nodded in agreement.

“It seems as though the young woman who was to be executed has escaped,” she said, scanning the crowd like a curious crow.

The crowd yelled, though I wasn’t sure if it was anger or approval.

“The young woman brought out the guard into the open,” she said. “Now, no stone will be left unturned, since the hornet’s nest has been kicked. We have suffered a great loss today. Unless the find the girl soon, they will continue to monitor the city carefully especially since she has been believed to be in association with us.”

I could feel my face getting hot. I pulled my cowl close around my face while I scanned the room for the nearest exit.

“Luckily,” she said. Her eyes burrowed into my own. “I am told that girl sits among us this evening.” A slew of whispers filled the room like a giant pit of snakes.

“Would that girl please step forward and address The Order?” A hush fell over the crowd. Most bobbed their heads to see who might approach the pedestal. A few slyly looked out of the corner of their eyes.
My heart raced. It would surely be a mistake to run now. I clenched and unclenched my fists trying to steady my nerves. I held the image of the Goddess in my mind. I was the daughter of the Goddess.

I stood with my head level and pulled the cowl off. Gasps rose through the crowd, but I ignored the gawking faces. I met the gaze of the woman and moved towards the platform. The woman showed no emotion as I stood on the dais. The room was absolutely silent. “I am Jayden, Priestess of Oshira.”

“What crime did you commit that you would succumb to execution?” she asked.

“I renounced the king,” I said.

A buzz hummed from the crowd but the woman held her hand up to silence them. “Your actions caused us many grievances,” she said. “Because of you, we will lose much of what we gained just to maintain our livelihood. Were you aware that such reckless actions would impact so many lives?” she asked.

“I was not aware of your actions.”

“Do you take responsibility for it?” she asked angrily.

“I do not.” I answered.

The crowd rose to their feet pounding their fists with angry shouts, all but Sharlee and a figure who was wearing grimy clothes. I couldn’t see the person’s face, but the eyes glimmered beneath the dark cloak. Among the onslaught of curses, I felt cool, calm, stone. It was as if I was separate from myself. None of the insults reached my once gentle heart. I felt both powerful and frightened by the disconnection.
I put my hand out to quiet the crowd, and to my own surprise, they obeyed. “I do not take responsibility for the impact it has on your families,” I repeated. “It is not my fault that you have turned to this life to support yourselves. You call yourselves The Order, though it seems all you bring to this city is chaos and distrust amongst its honest citizens.” I turned to the woman. “Tell me, do you accept responsibility for your actions?”

The woman stood with her arms across her chest unblinking. I heard nothing but her quick angry breaths. “It is the price we pay for peace and freedom,” she said at last.

“Is it?” I asked. “Or is it the price that they pay?” I said, pointing to the city above us.

“We suffer more than you can imagine,” she said, with her lips taunt over her teeth. “While we pay for our efforts with sweat and blood, they will reap the benefits of our labor by paying with coins and food.” She turned on me like a viper. Her face inches from my own. “Tell me, priestess, which sacrifice would you prefer?”

“I would suffer any price as long as I didn’t sacrifice my soul,” I said calmly.

We stared at one another without budging an inch.

“Since you are responsible for the increase in security throughout the city, you are considered a liability,” she said. Her voice low and cool once again. “However, since you openly renounced the king’s authority, by our laws you are also our ally.” She held out her hand as a symbol of peace. I grasped it with my own in acknowledgment of our alliance.
The crowd responded with a mix of emotions. Some seemed pleased, some confused, while others were still ruddy with anger. I noticed small bobbing heads playing in the back. One of them had dark black curls.

“I am Vida,” she said. “The voice of The Order.” She turned to where my attention had shifted and saw I was watching the children. She clasped my hand hard and pulled me towards her so only I could hear. “If you so much as touch our children, you will beg for the king’s manner of execution.”

“That is not why I’m here,” I said.

She crooked her eyebrow cynically. “You may step down,” she said.

I waited half a moment before acknowledging her request and returned to my seat next to Sharlee. She slapped me on the back and nodded in silent approval. My whole body began to convulse. All of the insults that had been thrown at me came rushing back. The worst was that Vida believed I would harm the children. “May I go to the north gate now?” I asked Sharlee trying to hide the quiver in my voice. She shook her head and nodded towards Vida.

Vida continued with the meeting accounting for all that was lost during the hoopla that I had caused. Apparently, they were preparing to make a raid on a merchant shipment that was due that afternoon. The increased guards at the gate insured that the shipment went unmolested. Several members of The Order were arrested, and some were imprisoned. The room took each point in silence, though I heard some whimpers when the arrested members were mentioned. Time dragged on. It was well into the middle of the night by the time Vida had finished with the tally.
“Sharlee,” I whispered. “I must get to the north gate tonight or I will lose my chance.”

It looked as though she hadn’t heard me. Vida droned on and on to a point where I could feel my skin crawling with agitation. I scanned the tunnels going out of the room. It would certainly be a risk to go out into the city. I was tempted to take it. The room seemed to have forgotten all about me. I could slip out easily enough. I decided to go for the large tunnel at the far end. It was the closest to the direction we had been going when we reached this room. With a final decision, I started to stand.

Sharlee placed a gentle had on my lap. “Wait,” she said out of the corner of her mouth.

I took a long look at the tunnel before returning to my seat.

Vida continued with precautions that they must take with the higher risk of guards. She explained the new rations that they must take in order to wait out the meager months ahead. My leg started to shake uncontrollably and I held my face in my hand, which wiggled with the movement of my leg. Sharlee slapped my leg with the back of her hand. After what seemed like ages, Vida finally finished. The assembly began to bustle with conversation in light of the new information.

“I cannot stay here longer.” I told Sharlee. “Will you take me to the north gate or must I find my own way?”

“I told you someone would want to see you,” she said, smiling.

“I thought…” A figure appeared in my peripheral vision. I realized it was the person who had refused to join in the taunts of the crowd. This close, I could see
intelligent blue eyes and familiar white wisps of hair beneath the shadows of his cape. I gasped and unconsciously brought my hand to cover my mouth. “Gregory?”

“Indeed,” he said without smiling. “I leave you alone for two days and look what you’ve gotten yourself into.” He shook his head and grunted. “I suppose it’s my own fault for letting you out of my sight.”

“I suppose it is,” I said, and smiled.

He scowled.

“It wasn’t my fault. These children,” I nodded to the ones playing in the corner.

“Stole my…”

Gregory put up a hand. “I don’t want to hear it.”

“But…”

“You have finally come to your senses about the king,” he said. “That is all I need to know.”

I felt hurt by his willingness to rub off what I had just experienced. Then, a pleasant thought popped into my head. “I know what you are,” I said smiling.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“When we met,” I explained. “You said I had to figure out what you were,”

He raised his eyebrows and squinted. “And?”

“You’re a thief,” I said simply.

He pointed a long bony finger in my face. “Wrong,” he said, and gave me a genuine smile. “It is good to see you well, Miss Jayden.”

“It is good to see you too,” I said, and I really meant it.
You look half starved," he said. "The Order might be averse to sharing considering the circumstances, but I think we could find you something." Gregory and Sharlee shared a look then started following the other members down a tunnel.

"Thank you for your offer," I said. "But Sharlee promised to take me to the north gate. Someone is meeting me there."

Gregory turned on me quickly. "Who?"


Gregory scowled and continued down the hall. "Another suitor, perhaps?"

"No," I said vehemently.

"This city is full of scum and sinners," Gregory said.

"I can trust him," I said. "He returned my necklace and he helped me escape the castle."

Gregory turned to face me and placed a hand on my shoulder. His eyes were warm and sympathetic. "I don’t know William," he said. "But I can bet that he has more of a motivation than just being friendly. You’re better off staying with us until we can sort out a plan."

I followed silently. It was true that I needed a plan. Surely, they would have seen or heard about the kidnappers. I felt every second tick by. Time was running out. I would be gone before dawn with or without Gregory’s help.
Chapter 13

I explained to Vida what happened with the king. Leaving out, of course, the sensation of power I get on occasion. When I got to the part of the bracelet, Vida practically bore holes into the chair with her fingernails. Her jaw became tense and her eyes brimmed with fury. I continued to tell how the queen interrogated me and Vida jumped up and slammed her hands on the table causing everyone to jump.

“You claim that the bracelet just appeared in your bag?” she asked.

“Yes,” I nodded. “I found it in my belongings after I was caught up in a flood.”

Vida’s eyes darted towards Gregory, but he raised his eyebrows slightly as if to say it was new to him as well.

“Truthfully,” I said. “I don’t know what it is.”

“Vida hovered over the table. She squinted at me and I was certain she didn’t believe a word I said. “You just found it?” she said. “Crammed in your bag?”

“Yes,” I said. “Well, no,” I corrected. “It was in a wooden box carved with leaves” Vida pursed her lips. “And it had a note that said property of Varamis.” Vida straightened. The other council members gasped and murmured amongst themselves.

“Varamis was my father,” she said, with some difficulty.

“I am sorry,” I said.

She waved her hand to brush the moment aside. “What’s done is done,” she said, though she clearly still held onto the burden of her father.
I let a moment pass out of for her father before I continued. “Could someone please tell me what the bracelet is so that I can understand why I am being judged so harshly?”

Vida scowled.

“It is a valid question,” Gregory said. “Though, it is painful to hear that someone from the temple doesn’t already know.”

“But she knows what it is!” Vida spat. “Can’t you see she’s lying?”

“I am not a liar,” I said. “It is against the laws of the Goddess to be dishonest.”

“So you say,” she whispered with no less tension in her voice. “Is it also against the laws of your goddess to stand by while good people suffer?”

The council remained quiet. Gregory tapped his finger on the table without taking his eyes off Vida. “How old are you, Jayden?” he asked.

“I am nearly seventeen,” I said.

“Sixteen,” he said. “The breaking of our government happened four years before she was even born.”

“And?” asked Vida.

“And,” Gregory said. “She should not be held responsible for something that happened before she was even born?”

“If she is the last of her kind,” Vida said. “The responsibility falls on her.”

“I am not the last of my kind,” I said. “As far as I’m concerned, they still live.” I thought Vida would lunge over the table at me but she stood her ground. “You talk of this bracelet and the breaking of the government. Don’t you understand what I’m up against?”
The only family I have is gone and you’re arguing over something that happened twenty years ago. How does any of it fall on me now?”

“The bracelet that you lost,” Vida said, “was one of four. There is evidence that the bracelets have the ability to overthrow the king if the king is found unworthy. We were planning to use the bracelets to dethrone the king before one of them was stolen.”

“It went missing,” Gregory corrected. “No one was sure what happened to it.”

“I am quite certain what happened to it,” Vida retorted.

“That’s enough,” Sharlee interrupted and rolled her eyes towards Vida. “The explanation of its disappearance was never confirmed. Greenie over here has given no cause for the offense. Therefore, she will be treated as an ally.”

Vida sat down but kept her hands stuck to the able and her eyes locked onto mine.

“The Order,” Gregory continued, “was having trouble deciphering how to use the ancient magic of the bracelets, so we sought out the temples for help. The group that went to the water temple for guidance was attacked. The bracelet went missing along with all who escorted it.”

“How did it end up in my pack?” I asked more to myself than anyone.

“That’s what we’re asking you,” Vida said, barely holding herself in her seat.

The only people who even touched my pack were…Finnius. It had to be. Gregory showed no love for the king and wouldn’t trust me enough with something so precious to his cause. And what would the cook want me to do with a magic bracelet? No, it had to be Finnius.

“Well?” Vida asked.
“The girl says she doesn’t know,” Gregory cut in. “There are probably many people who have had access to her pack since she left the temple. And as you’ve seen she is quite careless, so it could have been anyone.”

I started to protest but Gregory gave me a look that demanded silence. My mouth snapped shut.

“It doesn’t matter how it got in there,” Gregory said. “What matters is what we do now.” He looked down the line of the council for objection. The council remained quiet. Vida was livid. “Now that we have that settled, please continue your account of the events concerning your encounter with the king.”

I nodded and told the story of how I escaped the wrath of the king and William’s promise to help me find my sisters.

“You will not meet that guard at the gate,” Vida said. “It is out of the question.”

“I agree with Lady Vida,” said Gregory. “It is far too risky.”

“It is my only chance to get out of here,” I said. “I have to take it.”

“No you don’t,” Vida said. “If you are captured…”

“I swear on the Goddess, I will not speak a word about you.”

“If you are captured,” she sneered. The tone in her voice made my skin prickle.

“They will break you down to the last thread of sanity until you are nothing but a whimpering mass of flesh. They will get what they want from you whether you swear it or not.”
I felt my own ignorance of the world come at me like a cold switch. I did not know this world where thieves were good and the honest citizens were wrong for living within a corrupt system. In my secluded little temple, I couldn’t have imagined the lengths others would go. It was no wonder that I blundered about and destroyed everything I touched. I did not belong in this world.

A young man of the council member cleared his throat. “We will discuss the matter thoroughly before any decision is made.” The council nodded in agreement except for Vida, of course, who took a second longer to agree. “Please wait in the hall while we discuss it.”

I bowed slightly. Gregory gave me a wink before I left the room. There were a couple of nosey spectators waiting outside the door. I’m certain they were trying to listen into the council meeting, though I’m not sure they could have heard considering how thick the door was. Most of them stared at me curiously and continued their conversations. Perhaps they were there to bring their own issues before the council. The women took special interest in giving me dirty looks. For so many years, I thought I would finally be accepted once I became a priestess. Now it seemed that being a priestess had brought the same distaste from outsiders.

There was a large man with dark curly hair stationed at the door. I assumed he was a guard, but with so many people around, I couldn’t be sure.

“Excuse me,” I asked.

He acknowledged me with a raised eyebrow, which was more comical than threatening.
“Please, “I said. “I haven’t eaten for I don’t know how long. “By the grace of the Goddess, would you please tell me where I can find something to eat?”

The man stared at me as if he did not comprehend. He pointed down the hall with a flick of his thumb. “Go down to the last door,” he said, in a voice much high than I expected. “If you hit the bend, you’ve gone too far.”

I nodded and thanked him before moving off in the direction of food.

“Don’t be too long,” he called. “And no funny business.”

I smiled and tried to keep a slow pace. When I reached the last door, I saw a woman scribbling something on a parchment while four pillars of men stood as statues to guard a hoard of food. The spectators continued their conversations outside the council room, occasionally glancing my way. I opened the door wide and entered the pantry.

“All rations have been dispersed for today,” the woman said without looking up.

“You will have to wait until tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m new here, and I haven’t received any rations.”

She looked up. “Oh. It’s you,” she said. “Name?”

“Jayden.”

“Give me a moment.” She flipped through mountains of papers and stopped on a page, shook her head and clicked her tongue. “It seems we’ve lost a couple bodies today. You may have one of their rations.” She wrote something down and crossed over to the stack of crates and opened one. She pulled out a small bag and handed it to me. The large men towered over me. The one closed to me grunted softly.

“Will you be staying long with us,” she asked.
“I am not certain.”

“Come to me as soon as you know and I’ll get you set up with a rations schedule.”

She returned to her papers and I had the distinct feeling I had been dismissed.

When I entered the hallway again, the guard’s ear was pressed tightly to the council door. The spectators outside were focused on their own conversations. I stood straight, took a couple of deep breaths. This was my chance. I started out slowly. I hadn’t gone far when I heard a loud creak at the council door. I glanced back in time to see the guard stumble and regain himself. Vida’s angled head poked through the door. Her copper eyes locked onto mine. She knew what I was about to do. I knew she had no intention of letting me do it.

I bolted down the hall and around the corner. Vida yelled from behind. I was reaching the end of the main corridor where the light of the torches ended. I took a chance and grabbed at a torch but it was bolted to the wall and shot sparks on my hand and arm. I stifled a cry of pain. Thundering footsteps came from behind, so I gave up on the torch and ran further down the hall. My toes gripped the dirt. The torch light dwindled in the distance making it harder to see what was ahead. One thing I did know, if I stopped, it would be over. William would move on and I’d be trapped underground with a bunch of thieves.

A glint of my pursuers’ torches followed me. I dug deeper and smacked face first into a wall. As stupid as I felt, I didn’t have time to be embarrassed. They were closing in. I picked myself up. This time I kept my hand in front in case of another incident while
my other hand felt along the wall. I needed to find another hatch. It would be the only way out. They wouldn’t be too eager to chase me above ground.

A pair of footsteps became louder than the others. There was a mass of people chasing me under the glow of torches. A single silhouette was almost on top of me. I didn’t have to see her face to know who it was.

My chest burned, and I prayed that I’d find an exit. I prayed that the inhuman strength would return to me so that I could defend myself against her. I prayed for help.

Vida tackled me from behind. Her dagger sang as it was freed from its sheath. I flung my elbow back in hopes that it would connect with her face. I missed. Vida forced my chest down so my arms were level with my chin, her dagger on my throat. The rest of the group thundered behind. It wouldn’t be long now.

I pushed on the wrist that held the dagger to the floor. I put all of my body weight into rolling on her arm and flattened her right shoulder to the ground. Her other arm squeezed around my throat. I dug my elbow into the soft flesh of her inner arm. She cried out in pain and frustration and tightened her grip around my neck. I pulled against the arm around my neck with one hand, and pushed as hard as I could into her inner elbow with my own. I was losing air, and my head throbbed with the constant foot falls of reinforcements. With a last effort, I let her choke me and used my free hand to force my elbow between the tendons of her arm.

Her hand twitched, she cried out, and the dagger fell from her hand. I picked up the dagger and elbowed her in the face. Twice. Blood poured from her nose and her other arm loosened from my neck. I climbed over her broken body and ran.
I suspect Vida got up, but I didn’t take the time to look back. I continued on my left hand up front and dagger tracing the wall on my right. I could feel my pursuers getting closer. I desperately wanted to stop and catch my breath, but there was no time.

There was a gap in the wall and I turned right. Two steps down there was another gap in the wall. It became wider as I walked in just like the room where I fell. I felt along the wall for a ladder. Torch light spilled against the wall outside the room and illuminated a ladder. I immediately started climbing. The torches cast shadows on the wall as I climbed. I reached the hatch and pushed. Thank the Goddess it opened. I saw piles of garbage through the opening. Shouts came from behind. I slipped as quietly as I could into the open air and closed the hatch.

My lungs would have welcomed the fresh night air if it hadn’t been filled with the foul stench of a trash heap. I pushed a crate full of something putrid over the hatch. It might not stop them, but it might give me some time.

There was a silhouette of someone standing at the end of the alley. From the reflection of the moon, I knew it was a guard. I pulled the cowl around my face and hung tight to the wall as I made my way towards him. He shifted his feet from one to the other. I backed myself up to a small tower of trash and could see his head was facing away from me. A loud thump came from where I had just been. The Order must have been tried to open the hatch. The guard whipped his head around. I ducked down behind the tower as he walked past me to investigate.

When he was far enough away, I slid around the tower of garbage and out into the main street. The moon lit the main street in a dull gray glow. Dark shadows leaned
against walls. Masses of waste were pushed to the edge. Guards glittered in the mouths of darkened streets. There was a crash behind me. Someone muttered curses and there was another crash. Then, there was nothing. My pursuers must have given up for now. And the sounds I heard were that of a frustrated guard. I could see glimmers of the castle in the distance. I had travelled further underground than I thought. In the opposite direction, a dark line opposed the velvet blue sky. It could only be the outer wall.

The guard moved towards me, so I crouched low and crept towards the outer wall. It was hard staying in the shadow with the moon so high and trash strewn everywhere. It was difficult to remain quiet. The trash squished between my fingers and up my arms. My face was buried so deep in the stench that my nose burned.

As I reached the next intersection, I could see the guard on the opposite side of the street turn his head from side to side. I couldn’t see, but I was certain a guard just like him was on my side of the street as well.

I had no idea how I was going to pass these men without getting killed, so I waited, and thought. As I thought, I saw movement at the end of the street. I didn’t see a reflection of armor like I did with the guards. This shape was blacker than the shadows. As it glided across the end of the street, it moved suddenly and I saw a glint of blood red. The same red I had seen in the eyes of the beast that attacked the temple.

My chest turned cold and I pressed myself further into the ground. My heart raced and it was hard to breathe. I stuffed my face in my arms so the guards wouldn’t hear my gasps. My body trembled. It wouldn’t do me any good to panic. When I finally got the
courage to look up from my arms, the figure was gone. There was no doubt in my mind
that the kidnapper knew I was here. The whole city knew.

If only I could muster whatever power I had in that throne room. If only I could
capture it. I couldn’t recreate the strength that I had, but I had Vida’s dagger and the gate
was only a hundred feet away. I continued to crawl in the dirt, through the garbage all the
time, I watched the guard across the street. Every time I moved, I heard a swish as my
clothes dragged against the ground. The guard across the street stopped moving his head
and focused his attention in my direction. Even my breathing seemed loud.

There was a flare of light behind me. The guard across the street lost interest in
my direction for the moment and focused on the light behind me. A guard held a torch at
the entrance of the street I just came from. He waved at the guard near me.

“What is it?” asked the guard across the street.

“I think I found something,” called the guard with the torch.

The guard across the street nodded to the one next to me and they both emerged
from their posts and onto the main road. The one nearest to me was inches away from
stepping on my fingers. I waited until the three of them disappeared into the alley before I
made my move. I crawled to the intersection and looked both ways. Unfortunately, there
was a guard at the end of the street in both directions. It seemed they were looking out in
the opposite directions but I couldn’t be sure.

I crouched low and crawled across the opening on my belly like a snake. When I
finally reached the other side, I walked as fast as I dared in the direction of the gate. I
heard voices from behind.
“See,” said one of the guards. “There are tracks in the dirt.”

“That could be from anything,” said another. “You’re probably jumping at a stray cat with a bum leg.”

“But look here,” said the first guard. “These aren’t from a cat.”

“It walked right past you,” said the third one.

The torch light leaked back into the street and I dropped to the ground. My heart pounded like a cage of captured birds. I made it about half way to the wall. I could make out twenty or so mounted guards lining a closed gate. There were a couple guards on top of the wall as well. I could feel the three guards’ footsteps vibrating the stone. The torchlight grew brighter as they came closer.

“Look,” said the first one. “There are tracks along here.”

Everything within me told me to run, but I knew if I ran, I would be as good as dead or worse. My only choice was to go as quickly as I could and stay out of the lantern light. It was too late for me to go anywhere but forward. I kept my head down and prayed for a miracle.

It was difficult to keep ahead of the torch. The guards were quick and I was losing ground. The torch light was only a couple feet from my feet, and the gate seemed such a long way away. I wasn’t going to make it. Goddess, help me! I prayed with all of my might. The guards were almost on me. I grabbed the hilt of my dagger and prepared to turn.
“Hey, you!” yelled a mounted soldier at the gate. “What are you doing away from your posts? The gate guard brought his horse up so it was level with my head. It was the biggest horse I’d ever seen. It made poor Lightfoot look like a pony.

“I saw something that looked suspicious, sir,” said the first guard.

The gate soldier leaned over his horse’s neck. “That required all three of you to leave your posts?” he said in a gruff familiar voice.

I couldn’t see them, but there silence said a lot.

“Well?” asked the gate guard.

“Sir,” said the second one. “If there was a threat, we wanted to have back up considering the circumstance.”

“What circumstances?”

“Well, sir,” he continued. “We heard she took out several men at once.”

“Some say she can take other shapes and even fly,” said the first.

“They say she’s a demon, sir,” said the third.

“Do not believe everything you hear,” the gate guard said. “She is a thief and nothing more.”

There was a long pause. “Yes, sir,” they said in unison.

“Extinguish your torch immediately, unless you want us to lose our night eyes,” the gate guard said. “And return to your posts. If the vixen is down this way, we’ll find her.”

“Yes, sir,” they said again. Then, there was nothing but the scruff of their retreating feet.
The gate guard dismounted and walked over to where the three guards last stood. The gate guard closed into my position. Step by step, every crunch of stones echoed in my ears. My palm was sweaty from the dagger pressed in my hand. I wasn’t sure if I’d even be able to hold onto it if it came down to a fight. He followed the edge and kicked away the trash. I clutched the dagger until it hurt. The second he touched me, I’d have to stab him and run for my life. A piece of garbage landed on my foot. I braced my arms to spring, and prayed the Goddess would protect me if not for my life, then for the lives of my sisters.

“Don’t move,” whispered the guard. The sword shrieked against its sheath as he drew it.

My body turned cold and even the sweat on my palms felt like ice. He hovered over my legs. Just a little closer and I could strike before he did. He was at my waist now. I turned with my dagger, before I could strike, he pierced his sword through my sleeve and pinned my arm to the ground and fusses with the garbage in front of my face as if to scan it. I could have burst into tears. It was William.

He rustled the garbage so it crackled. “I am going to create a distraction,” he whispered. “There is a grove of trees to the right. When the gate is open, take my horse and ride as fast as you can to those trees.”

The pressure of his knee eased. He sliced a piece from my sleeve as he retrieved his sword. He scanned the ground in front of me before walking towards the wall. My hand ached from how tight I’d held the dagger. Thank the Goddess.
William’s stooped figure followed an imaginary trail to end of the street and crossed to the outer wall. The other guards watched his performance the entire time he traced the ground and spread his hands across the outer wall. “Anything unusual?” he asked one of the guards on the top of the wall.

“No, sir,” called the guard.

William bent down to the ground and shook his head. I have to admit, William was quite the actor. If I didn’t know any better, I would have believed him myself. He entered the doors at the base of the gate. Moments later, he appeared on the wall next to the guard. He continued to scan both sides.

William pointed to the top of the wall and held something above his head. “She’s escaped!” William cried. “She’s escaped! Open the gate!” The gate creaked open and became a bustle of confusion. The guards scurried in all directions. “Don’t just stand there like a bunch of fools! She went that way!” He pointed to the left of the outer wall.

The guards funneled out of the gate. William disappeared into the wall. The guard on the wall rang the bell calling all to the North gate. I sprang from my hiding place towards William’s giant horse. Sounds of shock and alarm came from all directions. I tried to pull myself up into the saddle but it was too big. The horse side stepped and I couldn’t get a grip. I fell flat on my back. Hundreds of upside down men scurried towards the gate. I jumped up and grabbed the horse’s reins. I got one foot into a stirrup and kicked it’s rump with my other foot. “Ya!” I yelled. The horse leaped forward. I steered him to the gate with one hand. I pulled myself onto the saddle as the horse plunged through the open gate and into the outlying town. Once I cleared the gate, I steered
towards the trees. The horse reacted to the slightest shift in the reins. Where Lightfoot was graceful, William’s horse was nothing but power.

There was a clamor of steel. Lights flared from houses as the guards slammed down doors. Shouts came in all directions. Women screamed, babies wailed, and Men yelled. The horse thundered beneath me as we maneuvered through the town. It leaped over crates, ducked under low hanging signs. A clothesline almost took my head off. When I looked back at the thing that almost killed me, I saw a pursuer in a black cloak was not far behind. I stuffed my heels into the belly of the beast and steered it into a side street. People were out early with all the confusion. My horse reared and swatted its hooves in the air. The pursuer turned the corner. I thought I saw jagged features hidden beneath the cowl, which could only mean Vida. As soon as my horse’s four feet touched the ground, I squished him with my heels. He tossed his mighty head and we were off. People threw themselves out of the way. Yells from the villagers followed me through the town. We took a right to get back on track towards the forest.

Shouts of “that way” signaled that my pursuer was not far behind. We cut down another street and another, all the while, making a jagged line towards the trees. Still, the black hooded rider stayed right with me. I’d just turn a corner as I saw her come around the last. The villagers were most helpful to her.

I turned into a dead end. My horse almost threw me off when it stopped to avoid the wall. The large horse could barely turn around in the alley. We just got turned around in time to see a streak of black go by. I wasted no time and flew out of the alley in the opposite direction and cut up another street before my pursuer had a chance to react.
The city and outlying town were all awake now. Sounds of confusion rose into the early morning. There were smashed boards, the clash of steel and the pounding of thousands of running feet of both men and beasts. Raised shouts came from behind. Dozens of foot soldiers rushed with weapons ready. A mounted guard in full armor led the way. I yelled encouragement to the horse and his ears flicked as he ran. My legs pressed harder and he gave me all he had. We burst out of the town into the open field. The footmen were slowing, but the mounted guard pushed his horse forward. The shadowed rider burst from the town only a few strides behind me. My horse snorted and frothed at his bit, but never slowed. The hooded rider closed in, and I feared I could ask nothing more of the horse beneath me. The guard steadily gained. Soon, we would all meet. I’d have to do something drastic. I’d have to do something stupid.

We raced across the open plains. Dirt kicked up from the horses made a dull haze. The moon gave way to the first signs of dawn and the horses sped on. Through he grasses, to the trees. The hooded rider was getting too close. I heard a muffled cry from that direction. I clung to the neck of my horse as it leaped over the outlying brush and into the forest. Branches whizzed by my face, tree trunks were a blur. I held on to my horse’s neck fearing I might get knocked off by a low branch. The hooded figure plunged into the forest behind me. A voice rose from that direction, but I couldn’t understand what they said. My horse leapt over a ditch almost bounced me from the saddle. I couldn’t see where we were going. I had to trust that my horse did.

The guard was gaining on the hooded rider. His sword was ready in his hand and I felt sick. The guard was going to kill Vida. I couldn’t live with myself if someone died
because of me even if it was Vida. I pulled on the reins. My horse skidded to a stop. The 
hooded rider’s horse stopped to avoid mine and threw its rider. The guard leaped from his 
horse with ease and lunged at the sprawled figure on the ground. I screamed and jumped 
from my horse onto her body. The guard stopped short. I could see William’s curious 
eyes through the slits of his helmet.

“You remembered your Finnius after all,” said the voice beneath me. Deep within 
the cowl I saw a familiar goony smile and crooked nose.