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As Poetry Recycles Neurons

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The Oppressed Talk Back:

Writing as Goethean Science

*Abstract: How does my novel How to Survive Being Blessed recycle neurons? The first stage is taking ideas from culture to recycle into my own characters. The second stage is by using my own experiences. The third and last stage is by creating a story that is new and different from culture that will allow young adults to read about people who are like them, rather than the people that culture sees as beautiful or powerful.*

Summary of How to Survive Being Blessed.

Mauri grew up in Temple Town, an area where the Greek gods settled down before British armies halted their progress, highly regulating the god goods they produced. She serves as a Farmer of Demeter, helping women bring babies into the world. She dreams of being able to trade and sell dream dust across the

country, but merchant schools are reserved for boys. After losing both her mother and her father, the Sisters of Morpheus recruit her to buy and sell dream dust all over Britain. Her hired man and trusted friend rapes her and she ends up pregnant. She keeps the baby, not wanting to lose any more of her family and she ends up keeping the baby. She has to give up her dreams of travel, but she plans a rebellion and throws off the government control from the temple.

### 1. Sensing Boundaries

When it comes to the impact that my writing will have on my readers, Dehaene has discovered that our knowledge is physically imprinted on our brains. There are neurons associated with individual people as well as fictional characters. When people read, what they read is physically stored in their neurons. This means that there are actual physical connections to the world around you. I aim to claim some of those neurons with my story, to carve out a place for myself in people's brains where they can have positive stories of survival, of queer role models, and an underlying idea that people are good.

The first boundary of my writing itself is the boundary of ability. I can imagine so many stories that I would not be able to tell because of my own lack of experience and knowledge. It

was with some trepidation that I undertook Mauri's story, the tale of her rape and subsequent pregnancy. I am also a man, no matter how odd, without the ability to fathom how a woman would feel in that position. In the end I kept the story line, realizing that as long as I strove to portray everything with a careful eye and the utmost respect, I would do her story justice.

The second boundary for my writing is the boundary between what is mine and the old work I take apart to create new things. This is a boundary that Perloff explores very heavily in Unoriginal Genius. In the end, I draw the same conclusion that she does; everything that is old needs to be broken into parts in order to create something new. The boundary between my work and the work that came before is thinner than I would often like to admit.

The setting of my story is 14<sup>th</sup> century England, if the Greek and Roman Pantheon were still around. This means that I have a very rich and diverse history to use as material for my story. It is a thin line between what I need for my story and what mythology provides. Particularly around Ares, god of war, I wanted to show maturation and development over time. I wanted him to grow and learn that war should only ever be for a just

cause. I wanted to use Ares especially because he is male, to show that male anger can be a force for good ideas, justice, and change. The original Ares is not so noble, not so able to see that war is more than a game and that there are consequences far worse than pain for battles. I mold him to what I need, because as blasphemous as it is, two thousand years of history are less important to me than the tale of four voices that have been silenced.

The last and perhaps saddest boundary is what I want to be able to write and what I have the time to write. As I started writing Mauri's story it grew, and grew, and grew. I was expecting her tale to be about twenty pages, no more, and it ended up being about eighty. I was hoping that I would have time to develop the story of Clara, of Tom, and to rewrite the story of Colin to fit in with the broader world. Eighty pages took five weeks to write, built on two weeks of previous draft work and world building. Digitizing took much longer than I expected, between my terrible handwriting and perfectionist nature to build something that is perfect instead of the rough draft I promised in my contract. Because of this time constraint, I have only managed to complete Mauri's portion of the tale in full. When I discuss the characters, these are my plans for furthering

the novel after the course is finished and the outlines that I have drawn up.

## 2. Writing as a Conversation - Dissection as Recycling

I write because when I listen to culture I do not hear the stories that need to be told. When I listen to culture, I hear tales about rape that are untrue. Rape is not shown as strangers leaping out of back alleyways in my story, in contrast to popular culture. One billion women on Earth will be sexually assaulted in their life time, and this is too great a number. In a world where Todd Akin can call something a "legitimate rape" and the twist at the end is the woman was the abuser all along, there are stories that are not being told. I write because there are so few strong female characters in the fantasy genre and because there are even fewer well written queer characters. I listen to culture, and this is my retort.

### **Write What You Know**

Fantasy lives inside my blood.

It has defined my childhood since I could read.

I got Harry Potter for my fifth birthday, wrapped

With shiny unicorns. (I still have that

paper somewhere). When I was nine I read

Tamora Pierce for the first time.

And this was fire in my veins because  
I wanted to be Kel, Protector of the Small.  
Here was a woman in writing that I  
Not only could, but wanted  
To look up to.

Stories like these I've wanted to write  
My whole life. So why now but  
Not back then? It is still  
Rough.

Still easy to tell that I love Tamora Pierce,  
My own style immature. But maybe  
Telling my own story means that now  
I can tell other stories. Or at least..  
That's what the novel taking over my life says.

The cornerstone of my writing is the characters. It is  
stories of personal that change hearts, and my characters are  
what make it personal. I only had time to finish Mauri's story  
and a piece of Colin's story, so some of the characters are as  
yet unwritten, but I have plans that recycle neurons and  
continue the work of my writing. It is out of these characters  
that I build my story and my retort to this culture in two  
genders, male and female. For the women, I build strong female  
characters that are defined by what they do and not what they

look like. Just as important, I build male characters that learn how to manage their power in society. They grow, develop, and change into people who stand up for those who cannot always stand up for themselves. Aside from the genders, I draw characteristics and plots out of well-crafted fantasy novels, using them to jump start the creation of my characters. I pull from life, from my experience, my identity, and the stories that have come before me, creating fiction because I want to get the exactly correct combinations that mean what I want to say.

For the female characters and Colin, I drew from the works of Tamora Pierce and Sharon Shinn. Colin in particular came from Tamora Pierce, the idea of a trans\* boy who is passing as a girl but sneaks out to be himself comes from her Saga of the Lioness. It is a play on Alanna, a girl who wants to be a knight so she lives as a boy. The idea that Colin is a boy, pretending to be a girl, who was actually designated female at birth, is a really complicated idea I wanted to explore. I wanted to be able to show the misery that being seen as female produced but I also wanted to show that he was compassionate and caring. I wanted to play with the typical ideas of masculinity in a way that showed that men can be caring and compassionate, can want to be caretakers.

*"They could teach me to become a heart healer, someone who can look into the souls of people and teach them how to make their dreams come true."* - Morpheus Blessed, page 2

There is this common misperception that trans\* men are typically masculine, that they want to be men so they can be stereotypical sexist people who like NASCAR. In my encounters with many people, they are surprised that I actually like feminine things, as if I am not really a man because I like shoe shopping. The reality is that there are all kinds of trans\* men, just like there are all kinds of cisgender men, and I wanted a chance to show that. Colin is a soft and sensitive boy who is hardened because of the taunts that he gets, much like many of the trans\* people I know, something that is very rarely shown by the media.

From Sharon Shinn, I get Mauri, particularly from Troubled Waters. It is a story of recovery, and from this I want to give Mauri strength of spirit and the ability to endure. In particular, I try to borrow the way that Zoe gradually recovers from grief and is able to participate in society once again. The way that her grief was handled in troubled waters was particularly skillful. Throughout the beginning, she is fogged because of the death of her father and as she learns that she can live apart from her father, the clouding lifts. I wanted to



take this incredibly masterful handling and try to replicate it in some ways with Mauri. I wanted to show how she lost her rock, her anchor, and her world and recovered anyway.

*"My life was crumbling around me, but somehow the earth was still turning. How unfair that life would go on without my parents, that they wouldn't get to see Aylah grow up. I sank down to the floor of the hospital and wept but still the world kept turning."* How to Survive Being Blessed, page 21

Zoe learns to love life through loving the people around her, but Mauri learns to love life through the passion and the power that she commands. She is given a dream to accomplish and a cause to follow that invigorates her. I wanted her grief to be different, because she cannot continue on her own. Zoe continues because she learns to continue with time, but Mauri has a little sister to look after, a household to run, and a business to build in order to continue providing for her family. She does not get the same amount of time to be frozen by her grief and I wanted to show what it is like to have to keep going even when all you want to do is give up.

In Mauri's sexual assault, I draw heavily from Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson. It was one of the first stories I read that dealt with sexual assault in a respectful way. The book is

all about the main character finding her voice and learning how to stand up to people, whether her mother or her fake friend. The book also explores one of the areas of rape that doesn't often see the light and that is the awful area of alcohol and sexual assault. I wanted to approach the issue of perpetrators being people we know and trust in much the same way. In Speak the young girl goes on to successfully prosecute her rapist as mentioned in later books, and that was something I didn't want for Mauri. I wanted Mauri to have a reason to trust the gods more than the government. I wanted to show the appalling reality of most rape victims who have the courage and the aplomb to stand up and tell their stories. I want to use this story as a way to change minds not only about abortion and the regulation of women's bodies but also a society that tells women it is their own fault when they get raped. I want the reader to feel just as shocked as Mauri is when she realizes what the magistrate says and that no one will be able to help her.

Clara, in contrast to Mauri who is made of so many different pieces of fantasy and other literature, is someone almost entirely new. She is based on a goal, although pieces of her character are from Sandry from Will of the Empress by Tamora Pierce. I wanted to have a strong, utterly feminine woman working within the system of noble rights, parentage, and money,

to create a better world. In this way she is based on many of the historical figures that contributed to the feminist movement, women who were wealthy and needed a cause to take up. Wealthy women have a history of activism, from abolitionist quilts to the feminist movement. I wanted to show that women are capable of great activism, even if it doesn't always look like what we are expecting. I also wanted to show that there are more subtle ways to help within systems of oppression and those are all equally valid. She is also the contrast to the religious zeal that Mauri develops. I wanted her to be purely human, doing what she does because she genuinely wants to improve life for people without the aid of the gods. She sees the gods as forces that magnify the flaws as humans. She is my critical look at the religious structure in my world, a way of humanizing atheists and also a faith in the human spirit that is a contrast to Mauri's utter lack of faith after her assault. Throughout the whole novel, one of my goals was to try and show as many contrasting views as possible. I wanted to be able to explore and really tackle complicated ideas, and she is one character that certainly allows me to do that.

As for the men, I draw from Rick Riordan. He creates heroes who see women for who they are and are comfortable with them having power over men. He was also the inspiration for my use of

the Greek gods. He is where I create Tom, a character who learns to fight and accept his duties. He does not always understand why or why he has this anger, but he learns and grows and utterly respects women. I want him to take after Percy, the lead of the Riordan books, who respects his single mother and helps her get out of an abusive relationship. Tom is also the kind of man that I believe he could be if women had more of a say over what was added in to culture. He is the kind of boy that I want to be able to raise when I get older and the kind of boy I believe that we can raise when there are role models, when survivors speak out and talk about the importance of consent. He is born out of the idea that consent can be taught in schools, as well as the idea that boys who are raised by parents who teach them about what their anger can do and healthy boundaries are likely to advocate for women because it is the right thing to do.

With Mauri's father, I wanted him to be good at something stereotypically feminine, something that would require a lot of *craftsmanship and skill with color and a needle and thread.*

*"I nodded meekly as my mother turned to accept the patch and sash, before she remembered something and handed it back.*

*"Maybe your father should do it," she said with a wry grin.*

*"The last time I tried to sew something it ended up covered in*

*blood." My father laughed his deep booming laugh, already threading a tiny needle. Everything looked tiny in his hands and I was constantly amazed at how such a large man could be famous for embroidering the finest slippers in the city."* How to Survive Being Blessed, page 5.

I wanted him to protect his family in unconventional ways, with clothing and other items. I wanted him to be the one they would run to when they needed a chat instead of their mother. At the same time, I wanted him to be the kind of man who would not put up with any injustice. He has a rebel side and helps Mauri sneak into gendered libraries to do research while her mother would disapprove because he believes that she should be able to get the same opportunities as Saffron, Mauri's brother. I wanted him to be one of the main inspirations for how Mauri raises Tom and later Colin, someone who she saw as a rock, someone who was a good father and a breadwinner, who provides, is a nice contrast and a good man, much like Ambrose from Will of the Empress, by Tamora Pierce. He differs in a few crucial areas, in particular his awareness of the sexism in society and in his resolve for a better life. He is also a far simpler creature in the end, not having a large head for business and preferring to keep his mind on his craft.

Religion has started to attempt to regulate the government in America in a lot of ways. Many churches participate in politics, paying for campaigns against gay marriage, against the legislation of marijuana and other activities best left to non-religious segments. There are also churches for profit and churches that only want people's money. Many churches are also more worried about paying for nice buildings or paying more staff instead of funding charity projects or actually helping the poor. In the world for How to Survive Being Blessed, I wanted religion to be the ideal version of what religion would be in this world. I want the gods to be fallible, much like humans, but also to value humans. I want the gods to be better at seeing what is best for the largest number of humans than the government, because gods get their power from having the most number of humans in a position to worship and give to them. This means that they tend to be a lot more egalitarian than the government. Part of why Mauri agrees to trade and sell dream dust is because she believes that the gods can help spread equality and change the sexism imbedded in the government.

In contrast, the government is a reflection of our current government. It is more than a little corrupt, with the politicians working to keep the rich wealthy and the poor downtrodden, more side effect than intent. The government also

reflects the current government's idea of rape and women's rights. Many of the public schools do not teach girls beyond a certain age. They also strictly regulate religion and the production of the god goods sold in order to keep tourist business up, which provides money for many of the wealthy individuals in town. The government is eventually persuaded to let up on those laws but only through an absolutely massive battle, even though they are elected and the people want the god goods to be less regulated. The government came to power over the temples through war because I wanted the temples to have a reason to need to wait in order to try to deregulate the god goods. The gods are also more patient because they outlive many humans and they were willing to see if the government would become more lenient after time and when it didn't they took further action. The government lost power in large part due to riots and strikes. This is a reflection of much of the civil rights struggle in the 60s and also a commentary on our current political process, full as it is of online petitions and demands.

One of the most harmful things that I want this story to combat is many of the lies that society tells women and other survivors about rape. When you watch crime shows, usually women blame themselves for what happened and the police officers

rarely argue with this idea. Even in a show that is supposed to be positive around the experiences of survivors, like Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, often have a surprise twist. The woman falsely accused the man of assaulting her. This is very, very far from the truth. There are very few falsely reported rape cases. Very little in popular culture tells survivors this. It seems like as a culture, we are more worried about imaginary boogey men jumping from out of bushes to attack us than we are about the people close to us. It is a hard thing to know that those close to us would take advantage if given the chance, or that many men will actually admit to sexually assaulting a woman if the word rape isn't used. My story is an antidote to this, a tale where the harm of men who think they deserve sex from women for being friendly is shown. The "friend zone" is an incredibly toxic idea in our culture and I wanted to show the harm that can result, and often does result, from that sense of entitlement.

### 3. Contributing to this Conversation

How to Survive Being Blessed is a story born out of anger and injustice. It is what I say when I listen to what pop culture and fantasy at large have to say about rape, as well as a commentary on a government that doesn't work and a tale for queer people who are tired of niche fiction. There is much more to the plot than just a character's queerness or sexual assault.



These characters will grow and change all throughout the novel, learning about themselves and how to be the best people they can be. It is a tale that I tell because there are no other stories like it, a rebuttal to all of the garbage that I see getting spewed by culture.

I read a blog article once about how there is a parallel between monsters who don't have reflections and people who are different in popular culture. It is easy to turn people into monsters when they don't see people who are like them. It is incredibly difficult to grow up transgender, or queer, or as a woman, or a person of color, because you don't see people like you. This story is a remedy; it is turning the monstrous into the familiar in order to create a better world for the people who are different. I tell this story not only because it is important but because no one else has told it, even though it is made up of so much that has come before it.

See Appendix One for a copy of my story.

#### 4. Exact Sensorial Imaging and Understanding

Writing always takes several tries. The first draft is usually a basic plot outline, words thrown onto the page until I can get my thoughts less tangled. This draft is always, always written by hand, sprawled across any paper that I can get.

Inspiration strikes fast and frequently, building up into a tangled knot in my head. As I write, the knot starts to unravel. The first draft is usually very bare, the events happening often confused and in the wrong order. It is a draft that doesn't work, something that stops and starts, "first draft" usually referring to several attempts on the same material, grouped together because of the level of roughness that goes on. Any mistakes that get made usually require me to start over, the stack of first draft work often growing quite large. It is very dry, nothing more than a string of events without any descriptions. It is always the fastest draft because I am such a hurry to get all of my work on to the page, the inspiration that tangles it giving it urgency. This is the skeleton upon which I will build the body of my work.

The second draft is always better. Here I begin to flesh out the events that I wrote about in the first draft. This is where my writing starts to look like writing and less like a drunken idea on the back of napkins. It has flow, even if there are plot holes and pieces missing. This draft will still not be all that great, written in a hurry even as I mull over the right way to describe what is going on. I get stuck much more frequently here, knowing where I want to go with the plot but often having a difficult time figuring out how to get there.

Driving is oddly the cure for this, long drives where I can sit and mull out my thoughts without the pressure of pen and paper. The anxious part of my brain that might dampen my writing is busy keeping me safe on the road, so I plot and word and day dream about what I need to do in order to get myself out of the whole I stuck myself in. It is still handwritten, not up to facing the harsh reality of words on a keyboard and the inability to touch the language.

Second draft finally finished and coming in at a whopping 80 pages just for Mauri's story, it is time to get to the tedious work of digitizing what I have written. My handwriting is terrible, so it takes a while, unable to simply glance at the page and transfer it on to the computer. Here I will fix many of the plot holes, flesh out parts that need fleshing out, and give it a final polish as it moves from the realm of the touchable to the realm of the infinitely fixable. I no longer have to start over if I want to change the order of my story or rearrange something, I can simply copy and paste. This ability comes with a price because it is much more difficult to become inspired when I am staring down a keyboard than when I hold a pen in my hand. Paper is patient, technology demanding. It is difficult to develop the focus that I get when I am writing on paper.

**Ink**

I can't read my own handwriting when I write quickly.

Which is a problem when I can only write by hand.

Eighty pages of chicken scratch to somehow  
Turn into a story. The paper responds better

Than any keyboard, my mark left in the world.

My hands write better when they move, get rubbed

In ink and marked.

I can touch the language here

It isn't filtered by a screen or the perfection that is typing.

Here is where my drafts are born, because drafts are  
Messy, imperfect and full of flaws.

On the computer, they will be edited and processed

Turned into something clean and pure.

This is necessary evil, because in its raw state of ink  
And flaws, my story is not what it should be to others.

It is a raw idea I mold much like a potter, working clay  
Until there is something beautiful and functional.

Except I can't read my own writing.

Always an exciting adventure.

Editing is even more tedious than digitizing. Here I will  
carefully look over every comma, period, and word choice. I  
polish up the appearance of the story, making sure the grammar  
falls in line and the language used shows the true intent of the  
story. At this point, I am thoroughly sick of my own writing. It  
is better than reading my own handwriting in that it doesn't

strain my eyes nearly as much, but my story is written on my heard and my brain and I often write even in my dreams. Mauri's story fills every moment of my waking life and I long to be done, to have something that I can call finished. Here I will also have friends look it over, throwing their hats into the ring as far as grammar and editing. It is surprisingly easy to not get defensive about my writing, accepting any and all commentary that will make it better. What matters in the long run is not my pride but the quality of the story. After all, I am not writing for myself but to recycle neurons to help young people develop positive identities and anything that makes that construction more effective is appreciated. After all that, I finally have a piece that I can call finished. Or as finished as it is possible to get with writing.

##### 5. A portrayal

Writing is many things to me. It is an imp on my shoulder, goading me to write more and more until I am utterly fed up with pens and ink and computer keys. It is a craft, an art that I practiced. Perhaps most puzzling of all, it is hard. It is something that requires immense amounts of time, effort, and patience and yet it flows so well for me.

Writing is a calling because I cannot imagine doing anything else. I write because it is necessary. For me, I write because I breathe. I breathe in stories, hoarding bits of good writing, quotes, and characterization. I take all of these pieces and hide them like a squirrel with acorns, hoping that one of them will someday grow into a mighty oak tree of an idea. Ideas will fester in my head if I do not give them sunlight, much like Shakespeare's Sister, withering away from lack of expression. Writing is what I do when I cannot leave my room. It transports me away from a world of pain and my tiny dorm shoe box into a world where I can sneak of windows to go into town, passing as a boy. I can travel across the country building a spice trading network and smuggle dream dust. I can start rebellions, change the world, and make it better. I can do it all without leaving my room.

Writing is also a craft. It is something I practice. I learn how to form my words, my sentences, paragraphs, plots and how to form them better still. It is hard, because anything that engages my need for perfection is hard. This is the technical piece that is so difficult for me because I am so transported. I learn by editing, by rote, and through practice. I also learn from observation, reading other authors who form plots, character developments, and love interests, all within the same

story. This is the part of the writing that is considerably less fun for me, the piece I know I need but don't want to have. It comes out in the editing, in the repeated rewriting, and the drafts and writing without craft is not writing at all.

## 6. The Whole in the Part

My story is made up of four pieces, the lives of four characters who live together and learn how to work. All of these stories and lives are separate, but they work together to form something that is whole and coherent. The corset that Mauri gives Colin to bind was made by her father so that she could sneak in to the gendered libraries reserved for only men. Clara meets Saffron through Mauri and them trying to start a school that will allow women to work in more diverse ways. Together, they paint a picture of a complete and whole world. There are so many events that tie each of the pieces together to have it form a coherent whole.

It is the same way with my story. All the pieces combine together to show my views and opinions as a person. All of the time that I spend on the story is separated into chunks, broken down over a quarter. In the end, all of that time comes together to form something whole and complete that tells a story. Even as what I take in changes over time, it is a whole piece because I

tie it together. I take all of these separate pieces and build a whole, another Frankenstein's monster birthed from our culture.

## 7. The Unity of the Organism

One of the goals of story is to create a new unity in culture. Culture as it stands has divides between those who are allowed to be included and those who are not. Whenever I pick up my pen, I am starting to seal that divide between those who are included and those who are not. This story is designed as a bridge, a way for people to see the stories in culture as they actually are. It is unified by the parts that make it, both in culture and from the four different characters, and through these parts it unifies culture and those who are so often kept outside of it. It offers understand to those who do not know what they do or what it is like for the people outside of culture. Here are my ideas, presented in a story form. I fight this way because it is what I know how to do more than anything else. I hope that it unifies the experience of individuals in culture as much as I hope it will.

## 8. Doing Goethean Science: A Summary

Writing is indeed a magnificent obsession. Ideas grow far faster than any weed, turning into bramble thorns and tangles that are absolutely impossible to ignore. The idea for Colin's



story started off as a 4,000 word story that has blossomed into a novel, if not a series of novels, all fantasy centered around queer characters. I have realized my dream of being able to write excellent fantasy stories and somehow created a way to tell queer stories. It is a wonderful combination that creates a way for queer youth and survivors to see pieces of themselves in culture.

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Pierce, Tamora. *The will of the empress*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2005. Print.

Riordan, Rick. *The last Olympian*. New York: Disney Hyperion Books, 2009. Print. Definitely one of the reasons I wanted to explore Greek mythology. Influences a lot of the way

that I see the greek gods, how humans view the gods, and a lot of what it means to be driven by the gods. Also a great tale of growing up and what it means to grow up in a place where you are constantly a target.

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Print. The ability of the main character to come back from grief is part of what I wanted to do with Mauri. I love the way this book explores grief and power and how those two things can work together. Also shows a journey, a woman growing into her power and what it means to find yourself.

*Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Wolf, Dick. NBC. 1999.

Television.

## Appendix 1 - How to Survive Being Blessed

## Chapter One Auntie

It's dark as I head home from my last birth. I lost track of time, what with the screaming mother and frantic rush to make certain that the babies were born whole, or as whole as one ever can. I'm stumbling a little bit, tired from the past sixteen hours of careful watching. Even so, I try to be as quiet as possible when I open the door, not wanting to wake up the entire household with my arrival. Someday I'm also hoping to sneak past my mother so she can sleep, but somehow she sees my comings and goings. Every time I have a late night birth, she's in the kitchen making tea when I come home. I've told her so many times that she doesn't need to get up for me, even though I secretly adore her fussing. When I enter the kitchen my mom looks me up and down. She can tell by now how the births have gone by the way I look.

"Long one?" I nod. It was exhausting for everyone involved, including the poor woman who had the birthing shift before I did. "But looks like the mother and baby are safe and sound." I nod again.

"Babies, this time. Part of what made it so long. I am honestly amazed the husband is still in one piece." She had been yelling at him the entire night. My mother laughed at that.

"When I had you, your father had the good sense to stay out of the way. I was hollering the whole night." My mom has a fond smile on her face as she remembers. I have heard this many times before, my job giving her the opportunity to bring it up.

"I forget, had the farmers been very well established by then?" It was so long ago and I wasn't certain when the temples had been walled off.

"Oh yes." She looked at me strangely. "The temples came first, and then the city. The city tried to lay siege to the temples. It didn't work very well, and eventually the gods decided they could better serve the people of the city and the city conceded that they couldn't actually enslave the temple workers to make god goods. But don't the people at the temple teach you any of this? Didn't your school teach you any of this?" She was looking at me sternly, clearly amazed that I didn't know some of the more basic details of the history of my work or my city. I blushed.

"I always found the history bits rather boring, slept through them with the farmers. It was never on any of the exams." My mom rolled her eyes at me as I finished.

"No, it wouldn't be necessary to know those things in order to help women give birth but if you ever want to advance in the temple it helps to know the political climate, why the city is so controlling over the goods that the temples produce. The halting of progress here is also why there aren't very many temples elsewhere. People are too greedy, too controlling of the goods. The gods decided to bide their time, see if humanity could learn something." She was still eying me sharply. "There's more to life than tests and marks you know." I nodded meekly and her eyes softened. "Oh, but youth makes many stupid mistakes and I shouldn't hold yours against you." She stood up and stretched, her joints creaking softly as they resettled. Her eyes were twinkling merrily as she looked at me and I smiled broadly in response. "Now run along to bed, we both have sleep to get. I've a big breakfast to make in the morning for your brother and you know how you get when you don't sleep well after a birth." My mom padded up the stairs, and I washed up the tea mugs and banked the fire before heading up after her. My father would be up early to start the fire and do the morning chores. We had a small chicken coop and two goats in the backyard of our house,

enough for eggs to sell, cheese, and milk. I always thought my parents were the epitome of domestic bliss because of the easy way they handled the chores and this was no different. My father the morning person makes the morning tea and my mother the evening person gets everyone settled for the night. It was a nice rhythm, but I wanted more, adventure, excitement, something. Something more than just the possibility of getting to be a live-in midwife in the Demeter ward of the Apollo temple. Maybe one day I'll get to travel the country, see the people and fix this itch in my feet. I shake my head at myself as I head up the stairs, even though I fall asleep thinking about all of the places I would love to visit.

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I woke up to the smell of eggs cooking and I grinned. Mom had been saving the eggs for about a week to make certain my brother would get a proper send-off breakfast. It smelled like the wait would be worth it. I stretched, reaching my arms as high as they would go. I pouted, as I always did, that I couldn't reach the foot of my bed. I was a little bit short, about five foot four. I longed to be a little bit taller to be just a little bit more



intimidating. I figured more men would leave me alone, but I learned other ways to drive them off. It was why I wasn't a sister of Venus instead, even though they pay is better and they get more freedom. I couldn't ever picture myself lying with a man. I sighed and rolled out of bed. Neither the first nor the last time my nature would work against my plans. I banished such thoughts as my little sister tackled me on my way out of the door. I laughed and hugged her back. She was already so big. I smiled down at her and we cuddled all the way down the stairs, sitting down at the table in the kitchen. My father had traded a pair of his best shoes so he could give it to my mother as a congratulations gift for my birth and my brother had carved stories on all of the legs, tales of our lives and achievements. My favorite carving was one of Aylah, bandaging a wound. I grinned at my brother who already had a plate with two pastries and what looked like a mountain of eggs.

"Good morning, Sailor." Saffron puffed up when I used his new title. He had been studying on land for two years to learn all of the finer points of diplomacy and accounting that were used in building a trade network at sea. Today he actually got to serve on his first trade mission. I was immensely jealous. I wanted to go to the similar school to learn how to run trade

caravans over land, but because they were privately run schools, instead of temple programs, they didn't take girls.

"It will be nice to get away from you lot," he said around a mouthful of eggs. My mom sailed in at that exact moment to take her seat with the pot of tea.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." She ignores what he is saying, just like I do. He will miss us all just as much as we will miss him. Aylah runs over to hug him, not quite understanding teasing or his shyness.

"But you'll miss me, right?" She looks up at him with pleading eyes. His gaze softens.

"Of course I will. I will miss you every day that I'm gone." He pulls her up into his lap to cuddle her close. Ever the opportunist, Aylah eats off of his plate. No one really minds, because we can never say no to her and there is plenty of food. My father came in from the kitchen and padded over to the chair across from my mother before taking a seat. The chair groaned a bit under his bulk, but it settled, used to accommodating his large frame. He was tall, even sitting down and he smiled broadly at my mother. His smile changed and softened when he saw Aylah and Saffron cuddled up together, proud of his little

family. My mom was smiling too, even offering me one. It might chafe, my dull and rooted life, but it was full of love.

"So it looks like your teachers gave you the day off to volunteer again Aylah, and you can come to work with me after we walk Sailor Saffron to his new ship." My mother always loved to get business out of the way over breakfast. She got a squeal out of Aylah with this particular bit and she wriggled down from being in Saffron's lap to go over and hug my mother.

"Thank you!" She was practically screaming now, and my mother smiled down at her. Saffron was giggling through bits of his delicious pastry and my father's grin was splitting his face.

"You earned it. You've been working really hard to make sure you're getting all of your schoolwork done. And all of the nurses will be happy to see you."

Children whose parents could afford it usually stayed in one of the schools the temples kept until they were fourteen, but Aylah at twelve had her heart set on serving Apollo as a healer. My parents supported her, but they wanted her to finish her school just in case. Her response was to cram schoolwork in every spare moment so that she could have more time to volunteer.

"I get to start learning how to treat burns. I earned my badge for treating lacerations." I smile at the long word coming out of my sister's mouth.

"Go ahead and bring your sash here so I can sew it on before you go, alright?" My mother gives Aylah a quick squeeze before she runs off to get her sash.

"Wonderful pastries, mom." She pats my cheek as I talk around a delicious bite.

"Even if you are being complimentary you shouldn't talk with your mouth full." I nodded meekly as my mother turned to accept the patch and sash, before she remembered something and handed it back. "Maybe your father should do it," she said with a wry grin. "The last time I tried to sew something it ended up covered in blood." My father laughed his deep booming laugh, already threading a tiny needle. Everything looked tiny in his hands and I was constantly amazed at how such a large man could be famous for embroidering the finest slippers in the city. With a few deft twists of his hand, Aylah's new badge showed that she was trained enough to help bandage and clean cuts. She had two other badges on the sash used to track the training and usefulness of volunteers. Aylah could triage patients, treat most cuts short of those that needed stitches, and competently

care for someone who needed help with feeding, bathing, or anything else that was basic. Most volunteers stopped at basic nursing, wanting to help and interact with people without going through much more training, but she planned on getting all of her merit badges. It was the way the Healers of Apollo picked who would be most able to help, through their service of people and the sick. I was so proud of her, we all were. Aylah put her sash on and went back to cuddling with Saffron as if she was trying to absorb him before he went away for about two months, peddling spices on the high seas. When he was done with breakfast, I gathered the dishes to wash. My father had already done a fair amount of washing, taking care of most of the dishes my mom used to cook. In a moment, I shoved the leftover pastries in one of the cupboards and washed all of our plates, leaving them to dry. Everyone else bustled about, getting ready to head into work after we dropped Saffron off at his ship. Because I was up late with a birth, the farmers would allow me to have a day to recoup and let the live in midwives take care of my patients. I would still stay within hearing distance of the temple bells in case my special call came up, but for the most part I was free and it was a delicious feeling. I smiled as I went upstairs to put on a dress more suited to going out of the house.

My family bustled below, my father grabbing his bag full of needles and thread, my mom putting on her nurse's coat and sash. Apollo called to my mother as well, although she was a nurse and volunteer coordinator. She could easily train to become a healer but she loved working with volunteers and teaching them new things. As I padded down the stairs my mother was coaxing Aylah into a coat that would protect her against the mild chill in the air. Aylah didn't want to wear it because she wanted to show off the new badge on her sash. I rolled my eyes, wishing I had something I was so proud of at twelve years old. I came up behind her, lifted off her sash, let Mom slip on her coat, and then put her sash over her jacket. It worked for Aylah, even though she'd have to juggle her sash when she took off her coat at work. But most twelve year olds didn't have three Apollo badges and she deserved to show them off. She didn't need prompting to put on her best pair of shoes, a pair my father lovingly made for her when she started volunteering. They were designed to be easy to clean and take a lot of abuse. They shone with good care, precious to both Aylah and my father for what they did for her. My father smiled as she adjusted the laces. My brother came down the stairs as she straightened, wearing his sailor uniform, canvas duffel loaded with the personal affects he was allowed slung over his back. Mom whistled, and as he came

down the steps she moved to meet him. She proudly straightened his tie.

"Your father did some excellent work when he made you this." He beamed and wrapped my mother in a hug that wouldn't wrinkle his uniform. My father loved making shoes, but his children would wear clothing he made on special occasions because he wanted the absolute best and nothing else would do for any of his babies. We were all set and headed out the door, making the rather short and pleasant walk to the docks. The sun was shining and a few people called out hellos. Whenever we bumped into someone else in a sailor uniform, they would salute my brother, knowing he was headed out on his first trade mission. We made it to the ship and a tear slid down my father's face as he gave my brother a crushing hug. Knowing my father, he had probably slipped him some extra money. I hugged him while Aylah hung on to one of his legs. I strung a small charm around his neck.

"From the farmers. They'll take you in if you show them that." He nodded sagely and tucked it under his shirt.

"You do good, boy." Father said this as he slapped my brother across the back, a few more tears streaming down his face.

"And here." Mom smiled at him, more proud than sad. "You take this and you use it, no wiping your nose on your sleeve." She

handed him a handkerchief, and a small packet of them to put in his bag. "Those will help cuts heal faster. Don't be afraid to use them and try not to need them." Mom gave him one last hug before he gently peeled Aylah off his leg, kissing her forehead before he boarded his ship. Dad and I saluted back as he disappeared into the ship. My turn to wipe up tears.

"Now. Aylah and I better get going. You two have a good day." She pulled my father down to give him a long kiss goodbye as Aylah and I exchanged disgusted looks. Mom finished with him and grabbed Aylah's hand. They skipped off to the Apollo temple and my father smiled fondly at them.

"I have to go to work. You planning on going to the library?" My father had a mischievous grin, and I nodded back with my own grin.

"Excellent. I'll cover for you with your mother if she asks, which she won't because we both know she doesn't want to know. But have fun and be safe." He kissed me on the forehead and headed off to his little shop. Well, he just worked there, but he was famous for his work so it was sort of his. I headed back home, wanting to get dressed for a trip to the library.

I had to dress up especially for the library because the one I wanted to go to, the one with books about merchant caravans,



trade records, and tales of other lands was a city library that didn't allow women to get in. My father wanted me to be able to learn, and while he didn't think I could pass as a boy safely enough to go to school, he figured I should be able to learn on my own. I was so excited to get going that I ran up the stairs. In the bottom of my dresser were my boy clothes. I pulled out and shook my ever practical trousers. They were made out of slightly itchy but sturdy wool and I pulled them on, having already shucked off my dress. I wanted to wear trousers all of the time, but I would get funny looks when I wasn't working. After the pants, I pulled out a corset that my father made me. It took him about a month because he had never made a corset before and he wanted everything just so. I fingered the fine stitching, enjoying the just slightly rough feel of the sturdy silk. I slipped it on and laced it up, admiring the flat look I achieved. Don't get me wrong, I love being a woman, but it is thrilling for me to be able to pass as a man, to prove everyone wrong about what women can and can't do, even if I'm the only one who knows. I pulled on a rough cotton shirt, something that was sturdy but cheap. I looked like any old student, and I had a pass my father had a friend of a friend forge. It went into my pocket and I sighed happily at that small luxury. Women's clothing didn't have pockets. Terribly impractical, but I

suppose most women weren't expected to have their own money. I snorted at that thought and left the house, whistling away. My stride was longer, not hampered by skirts. Oh, I love trousers. My favorite invention. Sometimes, I'll give a cheeky wink to a girl as I walk down to the library. Sometimes they will giggle and blush. One woman even looks me up and down, sees a flash of recognition, and gives me a wink back. She knows, somehow, and is interested anyway. I am suddenly flushed with heat. Maybe she is like me, a woman who loves other women. I try to pass by her casually, but my heart is pounding in my chest. She halts.

"Hello." She smiles warmly at me, and my heart beats even faster. "You look familiar." Her voice is just slightly teasing. She sees what she is doing to me and she is amused.

"I - I don't know." I curse my stammer. "But I am bad with faces." It isn't quite a lie. Her face I would remember, especially with that teasing smile.

"Well." Her smile gets just a little bit larger. "You look like you have things to do. But why don't you take me out for tea at the little shop over here at about seven tonight?" I nodded mutely, swallowing. I had never had a woman express interest in me before. Part of me wondered if there were other women like me, it wasn't something that was discussed. But here she was.

"I will see you then." This time I managed not to stutter. I froze as she leaned forward to whisper in my ear.

"You look good this way, but if you wanted to dress as a woman, I wouldn't mind that either." My heart was thundering, my palms covered in dew. She saw this and smirked before heading on her way. I took a moment to calm down before I continued on to the library. There might not be too much point because I was so distracted now I don't know that I could focus. I will try anyway because my days off are so few and far between that wasting one because of a pretty girl is foolish. Someday, I will prove everyone wrong and have my own trade network. That won't happen if I can't focus. I flash my pass at the guard and ascend the steps, headed into quite possibly my favorite place in the world. Libraries have an almost sacred silence. A hush of knowledge and hungry minds, all listening to the books whisper. I sighed happily and headed for my usual alcove. I bought a notebook from the little stand. My last one was full of details about how to evaluate goods, specifically spices. Spices are humble, everyone uses them. And even though they might not make the most money, it is what I want to trade. Women buy spices, women tend to cook, and there is just something about them that calls to me. I still live with my parents partially so that I can save some of my income to buy the supplies I need to start

trading. I'll have to found my own company, but it will be worth it to travel and see the world. So here I am, making the wonder of travel about the quality of spice yields, dry facts and figures having to do more with money than with people. The people I would have to learn about through trial and error, but first I had to figure out how to get the money. My dream in a pile of books. It is dull, amazingly so, but I smile while I work because it is my dream. My gender won't stop me from achieving it.

I work until the bells toll four. I sigh, reluctant to put away my book. It deals with the fascinating subject of caravan safety on the roads. It is full of details about which carriage features work best on which roads, important but dull. I had to hurry, Mom would have my hide if I wasn't in time for dinner at five and I needed to change before she saw me. She thought sneaking into libraries was more than a bit risky, dream or no dream. I was home in fifteen minutes, dressed in trousers still but with a more feminine shirt. Some might still mistake me for a boy, but not anyone who looked for more than a moment. I couldn't bear the thought of wearing a skirt right now. I was more than happy to risk glares. My mother wouldn't care, and that was what mattered to me, just getting through dinner, and then my tea date. I was antsy and jittery just thinking about

it, all of the feelings I put off while I was studying coming back with a vengeance. Dinner was going to be long. I looked myself in the eye in the mirror, white blouse with black trousers. I took a deep breath, putting the woman out of my mind as I heard my mother and Aylah come home. I went downstairs to go get my obligatory hug from Aylah. I went to go cut up the vegetables for tonight's dinner. We were having soup and my father would be in soon to help with the cooking and some meat he would pick up on the way home. Chopping vegetables wasn't my favorite work, but it kept my hands busy as Aylah started telling me about her day and her training. Apparently if she volunteered twice more she could earn her burn badge. Then she would have enough training under her belt to start working under one of the more experienced volunteers. She was chattering away and all I could do was smile. She was doing so well. We exchanged disgusted looks as we heard Mom and Dad exchanging greeting kisses in the hallway. I dropped the vegetables in the pot as my father came in with the meat. He would sear it a little bit before it went in and it would all be ready in about half an hour. My sister and I set the table while my mom and dad caught up. He had sold three pairs of slippers today, the fancy kind with all of the embroidery. That was more than a little unusual, even for him. He was beaming with pride and my mom

smiled at his happiness. There was a slight pang as I set out four bowls for soup instead of five and I hoped my brother was doing well. He was off on adventures I longed to be having. Someday, I promised as I stirred the soup. Someday I could wander. My jitters were soothed by all of the motions of making dinner, but they got worse all through dinner. My knee was bouncing up and down through the entire meal. When my mother asked me about what was going on, I told her about my new friend. She looked knowingly at me with a mischievous glint in her eye. Did she know? Pondering didn't help my jitters, so I listened to my father tell funny stories about all of his customers. The rich and wealthy are certainly particular about their shoes. Dinner was finally over. As always, I cleared the table. My father would give the leftover soup to one of the neighbors who was raising pigs before he and my mother would help with the dishes. It was six when everything was clean and put away. I felt my father's heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Come sit with me for a while." I nodded. After dinner, he would sit on the stairs and embroider while the weather was nice. I would usually sit with him. I guess the jitters made him wonder if I would tonight. I settled myself on the porch steps, enjoying being barefoot in the sun. The weather was absolutely wonderful. The soft tread of my father came up behind me and he

settled his bulk on the porch steps with surprising grace. On his lap was the most beautiful pair of boots I had ever seen. They were black boots with laces, made out of gorgeous high quality leather.

"I made you these," he said as he handed them over. "Good boots for a wanderer. They should fit and I embossed them to have the symbol of Hermes on the side." I swallowed hard and hugged him tight around the neck, the boots tumbling to the ground. I picked them up and dusted them off, my eyes shining.

"They're beautiful." They were. He ducked his head and smiled at me, glad I enjoyed his gift.

"I know it's probably a little bit soon, but I know you will wander and you'll need good boots. They're a little early for your birthday, but I was so excited to have them done." I nodded, tears leaking down my cheeks. Sometimes my dream seemed so far away, but right now, I could touch it, taste it. He had faith in me, to make me such beautiful boots. I gave him a more careful hug, not wanting to dump my new boots on the ground. He cleared his throat, also moved. "Now, you've got a friend to meet tonight, right?" His eyes twinkled merrily, the word friend accompanied by a wink. So they did know. I flushed. He smiled softly and pulled out his wallet to give me some money. "You

give her a good time tonight, okay? Hard to do on a farmer salary." I beamed and hugged him again. "Now get going, you don't want to be late." I nodded and ran upstairs to get a fresh pair of socks. I didn't want to get my new boots smelly. They fit like a glove, just like I knew they would. He always knew exactly what to do to make everything right.

I tread as lightly as I could down the stairs, knowing mom hated the stomp of boots in the house. I shut the door behind me and placed a kiss on my father's head before I walked briskly towards the tea house. It was bothering me that my parents knew exactly what this was. I thought I had done a better job of hiding, but then maybe people assume you might like women after not showing an interest in men which would mean that this was relatively common. Not that anyone thought to tell me that. I sighed and reserved a table, putting all of the angry thoughts until later. I played with the salt shaker nervously, wondering if I walked here too fast and ended up being early. The bell above the shop door rang and my head jerked up. She caught my eye and laughed, having noticed my attention. She hadn't dressed up, nor had I really, but she looked much more elegant, wearing the same plain red dress from earlier. She was carrying a small parasol, probably to protect her from the sun. Her skin was pale, much paler than the olive color I got from my father. I



was a pale to medium brown, whereas her freckles stood out against her skin. Her teasing eyes were a deep brown, her light brown hair a bun on the back of her neck.

"Been here long?" Her voice had a pleasant lilt to it beyond just her knowing tone.

"No, not long." I stood to greet her and went to get her chair, wanting to treat her like the lady she is. "You look nice." She smiled demurely, glancing at the floor as she arranged her skirts. I pushed her chair in for her, going back to my own across the table. Somehow it seemed so much smaller with her here. "I didn't order." I took a deep breath and forced myself not to babble. "Wasn't sure what you would want." She gave me a genuine smile, one without any teasing.

"That's very kind of you. I'm Amber by the way." She held out her hand and I shook it, not wanting to presume with a kiss.

"A fitting name because of your eyes," I blurted out. She burst out laughing. "I'm Mauri." Hopefully that was enough of a recovery and she wouldn't think to poorly of me.

"Quite the charmer you are Mauri, getting to the flattery before I even knew your name. You can relax by the way. I don't bite."

Her eyes glinted, a teasing smile to match. "Unless you want me to." That was confusing.

"Why would I want you to bite me? That sounds kind of uncomfortable." She searched my eyes for a moment, trying to tell if I was giving her a hard time. She seemed a little surprised.

"Oh, have you never...?" The pause hung in the air, almost visible.

"Never what?" I was a little bit cross at this point, not wanting to seem naïve to her.

"You've never been with a woman," Amber said that and I flushed, head to toe.

"No. Until recently, until you, and my parents earlier this evening, I didn't know it was a possibility." She laughed again.

"I had you meet me at this tea house because it's for people like us, women who love other women and men who love other men." I was blown away.

"Nobody ever talked to me about this, even though my parents apparently assumed I like women. They guessed that's why I was meeting you. That makes sense, considering the tea house." Amber nodded, apparently not shocked that I was obvious. "So I didn't

realize there were other women like me. I thought I was a backwards freak." She gave me a soft and sad smile, patting me on the back of my hand.

"I guess they assumed you would figure out on your own or that someone else would talk to you. It's pretty common, unfortunately." Suddenly I heard my bell call coming from the temple of Apollo. I groaned.

"I'm a farmer, and that was me. Do you think it would be possible to continue this another time?" She nodded and I stood up, placing some coins on the table. "Order what you want. I live in the house on Pear Street with the blue paint and white trim. I have to run, that was a super urgent call." I sighed for the fate of my new boots. They were both not broken in and not designed for running. Normally, I had a pair of sturdy nurse shoes that could shuck off blood and other fluids. Guess we would see about the boots. I flew down the paths and raced for the temple, entering the wings mildly out of breath. I threw on my coat and was washing my hands while shouting for one of the nurses to come update me. A very somber looking nurse in dark navy scrubs came over to me. Her sash was covered in major care badges. Time froze, all the breath whooshing from my lungs. She wouldn't be here unless something was horribly wrong.

"I'm so sorry to call you like this, but we didn't know how else to reach you." There was a roaring in my ears. Don't panic, don't panic.

"What's wrong?" I resisted the urge to shake her until all of the information I wanted popped out but it was a close thing. She must have seen the look in my eyes, so she steered me over to a chair. My coat crinkled as I sat down. Someone must have wished it for me after my last birth. I startled back into the real world as the nurse sat across from me.

"Your father was stabbed." I leapt up and started tugging on my hair and pacing. She moved to come get me to sit down before deciding it was a lost cause.

"Let me see him. Why didn't you take me to him right away?" She stands up and starts walking briskly. I follow.

"We wanted you to be calm when you saw him. He's conscious but barely. He's lost too much blood and he is belly cut. There is a priest with him." She heard my steps falter. If he needed a full priest this was going to be bad. "He is bad, and he probably won't make it. But because he was wounded protecting a little girl, Hades wanted to give him a chance to say goodbye." Nobody worshiped Hades, not really. He was in everything, included in the prayers and dreams to other gods that we need not meet him

soon. His position was not an enviable one but sometimes he was merciful, as with my father. I paused for a moment and she heard me wait, turning around to face me. "It's a lot to take in."

"How?" I croaked out the word, tears falling down my face. MY father, who had just made me these beautiful boots, was being kept alive by a god in order to say goodbye.

"There was a man hitting a small girl and your father went to intervene. The man pulled a knife, about to go for the little girl. Your father got in the way." Stupid foolish man with a big heart. "We're taking the little girl in, so she won't have to deal with that in the future." I nodded. She anticipated my next question. "They have the man who stabbed your father. The Ares temple will put him on trial. I don't know why we didn't catch the man who was abusing his daughter before. He never brought her into the temples for healing. She didn't go to a temple school." She was angry, almost shaking. I was shocked. She gave me a tight smile, noticing my shock. "I would much rather deal with unhappy, screaming, miserable children and angry parents than the corpses of those that show up when we don't find these guys in time." I nodded. This made sense, though I hadn't realized how prevalent abuse was. Something I took for granted in my happy family. I stood up straight, wiping away my tears and blowing my nose. All of the stress, the worry, the sadness,

that could wait. Right now, I wanted to say goodbye to my father, to let him see my smiling face as he headed off to the afterlife. Once more I felt a pang for my brother, who would miss out on this opportunity. I prayed to Hermes, god of messages that something might be done, and walked in to see my father.

The room wasn't what I was expecting. It was well lit, decorated with cheerful flowers. There was no bed, just a few leather chairs that looked incredibly comfortable. My father was writing a letter, no doubt for my brother. He wasn't wearing a shirt. There was a massive bandage across his abdomen instead that was stained red with blood. The cut didn't seem to be bleeding any more. There was a priest who kept his hands on my father's shoulders. He was probably helping to tether my father to this world. He didn't look as drained as I have seen priests look, so either Hades really loved my father, or he was excellent at his job. Possibly both. I padded over to my father and he looked up from his letter. He smiled at me, even though there were tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Oh, Mauriana." I winced slightly at my full name, and his smile grew just a bit bigger. "I wanted to see you grow into the trader that you are." I promised myself that I wouldn't cry but there were already a few tears dripping down my face. "And I

know you love women now. I'm sorry we never showed you that it was okay. You must have felt so alone." More tears. I wanted to be brave for him. He pulled me on to his lap and held me for a little while. "I haven't got very long, so there are some things I want to tell you. I love you more than anything in the world. You are stronger than you could possibly imagine." My mother and Aylah burst through the door at that moment, Aylah sobbing. I scooted over on his lap and she climbed up too. He didn't seem to be in any pain. For that I promised to donate some of my earnings to the priest who was helping my father and those that served Hades to bury the dead. I owed Hades a lot for this. My mom came over and my father held her hand. He pulled her down to kiss her soundly. She was crying, rare for her.

"I knew that big heart of yours would do you in one day." She was aiming for a light and teasing tone but her voice was shaking. I got off of my father's lap so my mother could sit down instead. We switched, and my father smiled.

"Teasing me to the very end, eh?" She smiled up at him in response, even though it was watery. "I am very blessed to get to say goodbye to my family. I just wish that I could grow old with you." He was crying harder now. "I wrote you all letters with what I think you might need later in life. You'll get by, I promise." I went in and hugged the lump that was most of my

family. "I have to go now. I love you so, so much." He was sobbing, tears dripping down his cheeks. The priest lifted his hands. Suddenly my father was gone. My mother wailed, an unearthly noise. She wasn't one to show emotion usually. It broke my heart to see. Mostly I felt numb. I knew that later it would hit me, but for right now I had to be the strong one. I gave my mother and Aylah both a hug before I went to talk to my mom's supervisor to get her bereavement leave. It was only half pay, but it would be better than her losing her job or killing someone because she was distracted. As for me? I don't know if I would stay numb long enough to keep earning money while mom couldn't work or if that would even be healthy. Probably not healthy, but necessary. Thankfully, we owned our home. My father inherited it from his parents, who got it from their parents, on down to when the first temple was built. The house has been added to by many, fixed up, rebuilt, so it looks quite new but it is ours and a piece of our family. Even so, Aylah's school fees still need to be paid and we need to eat. I rubbed my eyes. There was a mountain of things to get done. There was no space for my grief, not yet. Oh, I didn't want to have to tell my brother when he got back. I rubbed my face again, suddenly noticing the tears. I didn't want to go back to that room with my mother, but I did it anyway. Gently, I peeled her off of my



father. The wailing had stopped at least. She was quietly whimpering. Part of me was wondering why I had to be the strong one, just as she wiped away her tears. She saw Aylah still in my father's lap and gently picked her up, staggering under the weight a little bit.

"We've got to go home now." Aylah nodded, tears falling down her face. She was old enough to understand and because of her volunteer work she knew people died, but right now she didn't want to. I was right there with her. Life doesn't stop for grief, no matter how much I wished that it would. The walk home was long and cold, warmer because of the coat I forgot to put back. Aylah had to walk after a while, although she continued to hold mom's hand until we were home and she was in bed. I could tell her teachers tomorrow when I went to work. We need the money and I would go mad trying to stay here. I put Aylah to bed for Mom. She was sitting outside their bedroom door, not willing to face the reality of it all yet. I squeezed her shoulder.

"Why don't you sleep in Saffron's room for now?" It wasn't a permanent solution, but it would get her in bed for tonight. We all needed a good sleep.

"Can you get me a nightgown?" I nodded, going in to grab her some things for the morning. I wasn't expecting very much to

happen, but I wanted to go to work as early as I could and I am nothing if not an optimist.

"Here." I pushed the clothes into her hands, helped her up, and walked her to Saffron's room. She shut the door and I headed to my own room in the rickety attic, far enough away that no one could hear me. I untied my boots and threw one against the wall, burying my head in my hands. What good were the stupid boots if my father wasn't here to cheer me on? I screamed, angry. Angry at my father, angry at the man who stabbed him, angry at my mother for not being the strong one, for not trying to do more to help our family get through this. But that wasn't fair. She was trying. Even if I wasn't here, Aylah would still be taken care of, the goat and chickens would get fed, life would go on. I just felt like a cliff that was crumbling away into the sea. My rock was gone. I sighed. I would manage, I always managed. I got up and got my boot, glad to see that it wasn't damaged. My father knew about my temper and habit of throwing things. Perhaps he designed them to survive such flights. That just brought tears to my eyes. Crazy, foolish man to get between the man with the knife and that little girl. He would probably be proud to know that I would have done the same thing.

I finished changing and crawled in to bed. It wouldn't take very long for me to fall asleep, considering the day. Oh, it hurt and

I was angry but it would get better, life would go on as always. I just wish I could skip to the part where it hurt less, where the loss wasn't a hole in my chest. Or a hole in my life. My dreams were full of him and more than once I woke up crying. The final time I woke up, it was to a scream. I bolted out of bed and threw myself down the stairs, almost falling on my face. It was Aylah, and she was still screaming, yelling mommy mommy over and over again. She was in Saffron's room, shaking my mother, yelling. Mom was pale and cold. No pulse, no life in her. Frantic, I grabbed Aylah, running for the temple. Neither of us was wearing shoes and she could barely keep up, but still we ran. I went around to the section that took in emergencies. As fast as I could, I told her what happened. People would go to get her, rush her here, try to bring her back. I knew death, Aylah and I both did. Our mother wasn't coming back. My family was shattered, left without its leaders. I lost my parents, my unconditional support. They weren't supposed to die until I had children of my own and I was old and wrinkled, until I knew how to handle loss. My life was crumbling around me, but somehow the earth was still turning. How unfair that life would go on without my parents, that they wouldn't get to see Aylah grow up. I sank down to the floor of the hospital and wept but still the world kept turning.

## Chapter 2

I felt hollow. There was no room for my grief or Aylah's grief, life had to go on. It had to go on, even though it didn't seem like it could because there was no room for anything but grief. I didn't know what to do, how to move on, so here I was on a bench in the Morpheus temple, thinking about everything that I wanted. And what I needed. I wish those two things weren't separate. What I had was a house full of memories, a somewhat decent job, two dead parents, and one twelve year old girl depending on me to keep her safe, love her, and help her grow up. She was in the Apollo temple right now, being fussed over by some of the grief volunteers that Aphrodite trained. They wanted to give me some space to collect my thoughts and plan without Aylah's crying. No one would judge me if I gave her to the Aphrodite temple to be raised by another family, if I didn't take responsibility. Well... That's not quite true. I would judge me, feeling myself a coward and a slacker for not trying. She already lost her mother and father; I wasn't going to break her last tie to family currently in town. Some of it was also probably selfish. I didn't want to lose her either, despite the siren song of Hermes singing in my feet, telling me that I could be free, I could travel. I would be praying in his temple, but he doesn't really have a temple so much as shrines along the

side of the road, places for travelers to make offerings. Many of his followers also run inns, places for travelers to gravitate towards. He's not really the temple sort of god. Which was why I was in the Morpheus temple, wondering what in Hades to do with my life. This wasn't actually helping, because I already knew I wouldn't give Aylah up, no matter what. I stood, sighed, resettling into my sore exhausted body. It had been a punishing twenty four hours.

On my way back into the temple to collect Aylah, one of the farmers stopped me. She was wearing the sash of one of the live-ins, an older woman with a lot of experience if her 500 births badge was anything to go by, too senior to work with me.

"One of the live-in farmers just got engaged, so she'll be moving out soon. You're next up for the job, so I wanted to offer it to you. I know you'll have to think about it with Aylah to look after." I smiled, even though it was small, grateful that at least someone knew I wouldn't, couldn't give her up.

"But I talked to the Apollo temple and they are willing to treat her as a boarding volunteer. So she could live with you still, go to school." I nodded, and then a smile cracked my face. I started laughing and couldn't stop, going into absolute hysterics. The farmer looked a little alarmed but she just waited for me to calm down.

"I wanted to be a live-in farmer so I could get away from my parents, but now I don't have any parents to get away from." She cracked a small smile at that, wrapping me in a hug when my laughter turned to crying. Both of us expected the tears to hit. I hadn't let myself cry for my mother yet, whose heart had given out. Surprising that such a tough woman would lose her heart to a man as gentle as my father, that her heart would be unable to continue without him. I missed them both already. Not the deep longing that I knew would hit later, when they had already been gone for a while, but fierce and sharp, a habit and routine gone missing. I sobbed once more, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe my nose. "Thank you for the position." I was all business, despite my red and puffy eyes and the tears on my face. "I will have to think about it before I accept." She nodded, eying me carefully as if I was a baby who was just born, trying to figure out if I needed medical help or a feeding. I smiled at her. She continued to eye me up and down.

"I know you need the money, but you should take some bereavement leave. Spend a few days with Aylah, keep each other close. You should have enough food to last for that long and I'll take care of her school fees myself if I have to." She could see the indecision on my face. We both knew I would do better busy so I wasn't certain why she was suggesting this. "Right now, Aylah

needs you. She's such a loving and physical girl, to lose both of her parents right now has got to be pretty devastating. For a few days, be her rock. Because if you take the position, you're not going to be able to be there for her as much as either of you want. It will be stable, and don't get me wrong, you'll be able to be there for her, but for right now she needs more." I nod. Part of me was a little bit relieved. I wanted to keep busy but dealing with people seemed to be too much to handle. These people didn't know that my mother and father were gone and that made me resent them. My parents deserved more than to be so easily forgotten and I was mad at anyone who helped with that. Maybe she could sense it too, even though there is always paperwork I could be doing. I wasn't just me any more though. Now I had to be a mother. Most women had nine months. Most women got babies. I had no time, nothing, and here I was with a twelve year old. I was only nineteen, what did I know about being a mother to a twelve year old girl? The experienced farmer eyed me up and down. "It's a lot to get used to, but we will all help." I nodded. "Even if it's just to listen or watch Aylah for a while, we all want to be here for you." I nodded again. I felt bad for not getting to know my coworkers better, for not appreciating how sensible being tied to the earth as a Farmer made them. They didn't know me, but here they were already

willing to help. "Good." She squeezed my shoulder. "Now go get Aylah and take her home." I nodded, feeling rather numb. I picked up Aylah from the Aphrodite grief counselors who offered me sad smiles. I wanted to carry her, to be close, but she was too big for that now. I slung her over my back instead, carrying her home that way. I felt less numb, more connected, more able to go on knowing I still had her, this physical connection. I carried her all the way upstairs to my little attic bedroom, laying her in my bed. We were both still in our pajamas, still barefoot, so we slept. Tried to sleep away the hell that was the last twenty four hours.

I dreamt of my mother and father, had nightmares of their death. I did not get even a few blissful seconds to forget that they were not alive anymore. They were dead, leaving me with an awful mess to clean up and a sister I was somehow supposed to mother. Thankfully Aylah wasn't awake yet. I snuck downstairs to get some tea and have a think. Tea in hand and cooling, Aylah started screaming. I sighed, setting my tea down in order to dash up all of those flights of stairs to the little attic. Aylah calmed down when she saw me, although she was still panting. I kicked myself. Of course she would be frightened to wake up alone, of course she would. Mothers would know this sort



of thing. I sighed and went to hug her, cradling her as tears started pouring down her cheeks.

"I thought I lost you too." She sniffed, trying to get her sobs under control.

"I know. It's okay, it was really stupid of me to leave you. I just went downstairs to get some tea. Would you like a cup?" She nodded and I held her hand all the way down the stairs. "We won't always be able to sleep in the same bed." She nodded, though she looked sad and part of me felt like a monster. I need privacy, my own space, no matter what she needs from me. I would have to figure out where I fit, how to meet her needs while still meeting mine. I sighed. Where did my grief end and hers begin and how could we possibly move on?

The tea helped to put some color back in her cheeks. She watched attentively as I got us both some bread to eat, lightly toasting it over the embers of our tea fire. Neither of us was hungry, but I ate anyway, eying her until she did too.

"So we're going to have to talk about where we go from here," I said as Aylah finished her bread. She nodded. "I'm just your big sister and I'm not going to be able to replace Mom, but if you want to stay with me I am going to have to be your parent. Would that be okay with you?" I worried I was talking down to her. It

was hard to know how much she understood, how much she would be able to be an adult and how much a child. She was crying again, tears pouring down her face.

"I don't want you to be a parent, I want Mom and Dad back." As the tears kept falling down her face, I wondered if it was too soon to have this talk. But it had to happen, had to be done.

"I know you do. I want them back too. But we can't have them back. And you don't have to stay with me, you can go live with another family. You're almost old enough to graduate school. Apollo would also be willing to have you board with them as a full time volunteer." Tears start dripping down my face. She never would've volunteered as a boarder when my parents were alive. It was one more sign that life was going to be different.

"I want to stay with you, in this house." I nodded. I wanted that too. This house was a piece of us. It built us, held and sheltered our family for so many years, decades, centuries. It would feel wrong somehow to lose this house, my room in the attic.

"Okay. I might have to take a job as a live in farmer, because we need the money for your school fees. I'll have to think about it, and we both have a few weeks off, so you can think more

about what you want too. And you might change your mind about wanting to live with me and that's okay." She hugged me tight.

"I won't. I need you now, you're the only family that I've got."

I hugged her back, finding a little bit of comfort. Family matters, blood ties of love that let you know who you are. Tea and bread done, we went back to bed to sleep some more, grief making us tired.

And this was how the next two weeks passed, filled with pain dulled mildly by sleep. We ate, we slept, we walked through town. Aylah was even more clingy than usual, holding my hand, frequently hugging me. She still woke up screaming if I timed my tea run wrong and wasn't there when she woke up. It was starting to become a little bit suffocating, even as I didn't really want to begrudge her. I couldn't figure out what to do, what choices to make, when all I could think about was getting time to be by myself, to sit and think and take some space for my own grief. I was in way over my head, no idea how to be a mother. I sighed, the end of the second week approaching. I let Aylah sleep in my bed, would wake her up for tea, but in the morning we would go to the Apollo temple so the Farmers could watch Aylah while I took some time for myself. I would probably go back to the Morpheus temple to pray, that he would help illuminate my desires.

The sun came up. I woke up Aylah, wanting to go downstairs to get tea and not wanting to have to run back upstairs because she started screaming. I don't know why she wouldn't just come downstairs to find me; maybe she was just afraid that she would find me dead. I made tea, a powerful morning brew that would wake the dead for me and a fruity blend for Aylah. Bread as usual for breakfast and away we went to the temple. Aylah was good enough to let the farmers look after her, the Aphrodite grief helpers no doubt be meeting with her while I started to have time for myself.

It was a short walk to the Morpheus temple, a warm and dim place that smelled of poppies and other sleepy flowers. I left a few coins on the tithe box, lighting a stick of incense. It was quiet, most Morpheus followers preferring to worship at night. I liked the quiet and the smell. After two weeks of almost never leaving Aylah's side I felt a bit odd without her. Odd, but relieved. Freer somehow. There were cushions in front of the altar at the center of the temple. I picked a cushion and sat, contemplating what I needed to do. It would be easy to rent out my family's home. A sensible solution if I were to take the job with the farmers. Without the pay raise, I would be just short of being able to pay the last of Aylah's school fees. She would have to drop out, potentially losing her ability to become a

healer if she couldn't pass an exam. I sighed. She could pass the exam, and pass it handily, but if she wanted to get a job outside of the Apollo temple it would be better for her if she could complete school. Neither of us wanted to leave the house, to separate at least a little bit, but it looked like that was what was going to happen. My heart was heavy as I stood up, ready to head out. Three Sisters approached me, all speaking at once.

"The Lord has heard your dreams and he answers. He has need of you, should you serve him. He is tired of the way this government regulates his dreams. He is tired of the poor, whose dreams are most powerful, being unable to taste the dust of his power, to dream his dreams." I was freaking out, shaking a little bit as they talked. It was intense to try to listen to three voices at once.

"What would the Lord have me do?" My heart was pounding, excitement starting to take over as I thought it through. I had a guess what Morpheus wanted of me.

"He would have you trade. You will release his dreams from the market designed for tourists and allowed only for the wealthy. You will bring his dreams across this nation. On the backs of camels, horses, people, you will spread his dreams. Free him

from the stale petty dreams of the wealthy." I smiled. They wanted me to not only be a trader but a smuggler. An element of danger. I would need men, a trading cover, some startup capital, and reliable guards. There was a list in my head, more in my notebooks at home. Then life came back.

"I can't. I have to look after my sister." There was a haunting noise as they all hummed at once. Three voices in a different and still odd harmony.

"We know of the one who is your sister. We have seen her dreams. It will take time to build an empire and if we wait she may wish to serve us as well. She will be fourteen in two years. You will have two years to build a trade network, to remain close and to love her. And then you may travel. She will mature and one day she might choose to travel with you, offering medical services to those in need. Your partnership with the Apollo temple could work out very well for us. Their healing caravans are never harmed and if you went with them you could reach many more people." I nodded, my mouth dry.

"I will need..." They cut me off, a high noise indicating their displeasure.

"We know that you will need." The head sister raised the hood of her violet robe, making the light blue eye on her head stand

out. It was glowing faintly as she continued with her other sisters. "This is a note of credit. Take it to the market and all will serve you. But before you hire any men, allow Morpheus to search their dreams." She paused to hand me a pouch. "Place a mark on their hands and the god will visit them. If the mark turns blue, they are fit to serve." It was an interesting way to find reliable staff. I would still use my own methods because I don't know that Morpheus cared about things like number sense.

"Do you already have an established presence for where you want to sell your goods?" Either way it would be wonderful, to have either a head start or the ability to build from the ground up.

"No. That will be your job. This is why there is a need to have Morpheus check the dreams of those who would serve you We need to know that these people can be trusted as we start to build our fragile network. Should they betray you, the mark will always allow them to be found. Dream dust can be corrupted and Morpheus loathes those that commit that particular sin. He would have need to find them again. If we know they will not pass the Lord's test, the mark will simply turn black and fall off. He is not so mighty that he could track so many." I nodded. It would be more complicated to start a new trading company from scratch but it was my dream. I didn't have my family, but now I had the opportunity to do what I had been dreaming of my entire life. No

life full of love or stability, just a dream and a sister. I laughed, and the sisters knew why I was laughing. It felt so hollow knowing how much I had to lose to get here. "Will you do it?"

"I can use this credit to pay for Aylah's school fees? And I wouldn't have to leave until after she's graduated?" The sisters paused a moment and then nodded, seeming to relax as I was coming to my decision.

"It is all you want. And in return you will serve Morpheus. Odd for one so touched by Hermes to have such strong dreams, such strong attachments to those you have here." They paused, considering. The head sister pulled out an amulet. "You must wear this. It will protect you from the corrupted dream dust of those who wish to taint the gift of the Lord." There was another slight pause. "And remember Maurianne that the world is better for you having been in it." I flinched at my full name before tears started falling down my face. It was good to be reminded that I mattered in a world where I had no one to remind me. How similar to what I had heard so often from my father. They walked out and I cried, able to see some of the beauty in life. Here I would have a new start, a new dream, and a new life. I would have a purpose and something to keep me afloat while I worked through my grief. I was starting to gently miss my father,



instead of feeling a giant, gaping hole of his absence. Now there was space for me, space for my grief and for my worries. I started laughing as I imagined telling the Farmers about my decision. They were all so down to earth and practical that they would see this as a silly gamble. They did not think too highly of Lord Morpheus, seeing desires as something that should be left behind for something far more practical. Who needs dreams and desires when there are mouths to feed, babies to birth, children to clothe. I don't know, maybe the best time to dream was when you had already lost everything and needed help to have anything at all. Easier to take risks if you didn't have to worry about losing a family, a life built on love and trust. Now there was nothing tying me here but Aylah and I had all the money that I needed in order to be able to start my own business. It felt good, somehow, to have a purpose. My life was starting to shift, slowly, as I found new ways of dealing with my grief. There will still be grief, but I no longer need to wallow in it with Aylah. I might not be able to travel right now, but two years is much more concrete than whenever I can save up the money.

### Chapter Three

Every day at four, the bells of the temple toll. I close my ledger, running to Aylah's school to pick her up. She will come

back to the office, where I will spend an hour or two doing more of the endless paperwork that was involved in building my spice company. The Pond Spice Company, after my surname. Aylah will work on her homework or study to pass badge tests at the Apollo temple. At six or seven, depending on how much work I have to do, we go home for dinner. I will ask Aylah about her day, prying short answers out of her, trying to guide my cheerful little sister through a haze of grief. In the morning, I run a small stand in the Common Market, plainer cousin of the Blessed Market, where the rich can buy god's goods without being sullied by the presence of the poor. The Blessed Market is the reason Morpheus wants me to smuggle for him, and I do my best. Slowly, through word of mouth, I spread the word that I have dream dust. It is salt that has been blessed, so none of the guards investigate too closely. But so many people come to buy it. They long to sleep well, to have dreams of a better life, help sorting out what they want. Many have heard of the powers of dream dust, the gift of a god who wants his people to achieve greatness, but many who want it cannot get the passes to the Blessed Market, too common. The office that sells the passes, theoretically to make certain that no unsavory type can handle the goods of the gods, has been bribed to keep the riffraff out. The wealthy like the tourists and want them to have a clean and

uncrowded market when they come to shop. The innkeepers line their pockets. The taverns make excellent money, and the people who make those god goods possible are forbidden to actually use them. So much for government protecting the people. But the people are eager, so I sell the dust. I learn about them, their lives. I get to experience these people, touch so many fates. This is what I have dreamed of, even if my feet still itch.

Amber would visit me at the market fairly often. I was amazed that she would want to be around someone who was so grief stricken all the time. When I told her so, she said she worried about me. Worried that I wouldn't be able to cope past my parent's death. More than just that, she wanted to keep an eye on me because I am a woman who loves other women.

"It can be dangerous here," she said to me as I covertly slipped a small pouch of dream dust into the woman's bag of salt and pepper. She was one of my regular customers. Her daughter went to school with Aylah, and they played together before my parents died. Now none of the children know what to say to Aylah and she plays more with the people at the Apollo temple, many of them also orphans. It was painful to see all of her old friends pull away from her as if grief was something contagious that could spread and invade your life. For a while she was too numb to notice. In the flux and blend of days going by, I tracked time

by her slow unfreezing. There were more smiles, more time spent in the yard with the other Apollo children, more time begging me for just a few more minutes. Days turned into weeks and my Aylah started to come back. Started to recover from the grief.

"How is it dangerous?" I was curious now. And afraid. There was enough danger in my life without added complications. Amber leaned back under the parasol she was holding to keep her skin from getting burned by the sun and sighed.

"People are afraid of those of us who love people of the same gender." I quirked my eyebrow, waiting to hear more. "Many people find it crude or gross. No one argues that the gods condemn it, because Aphrodite, Venus, and Morpheus have deemed that it is fine, love who you love. But they still scream and rave, calling it unnatural. They look for a cure, even though Apollo himself came down to say there isn't one and there would never be one. They just don't like that and they... show it in dangerous ways." The longer she went on the higher my eyebrows went. It wasn't exactly good news.

"I am amazed that I didn't hear about people who love people of the same sex with all that fuss going on," I smiled at a woman who I recognized as one of my regulars. When she came over, Amber paused, obviously not wanting to risk scaring away one of

my customers. She browsed my wares before asking for her usual. She enjoyed testing my memory, and I enjoyed rising to the occasion. In this case it meant that she wanted pepper, a pinch of cinnamon, salt, and dream dust. She handed over the money, and I handed her a bag full of paper packets of spices. I smiled, wished her a good day, and she wandered off.

"It happened a long time ago, before my parents were born." I nodded, managing to wince only slightly at the mention of her parents. I was too big a person to be jealous, surely. Thankfully she didn't notice. "It's better than it used to be at least." She sighed. "Mostly no one is really all that bothered, but a few people are quite outspoken." I nodded. It was the same way everywhere, a few people ruining what we had.

"Have you ever been hurt?" She shook her head. "It's pretty rare. I'm also noble, so that helps. Family is always there and if your family is noble, people are less interested in hurting you." I started a little. I hadn't realized she was noble.

"Should I call you m'lady?" I had no idea. Most nobles didn't want to hire farmers for births, or when they did they hired much more experienced ones. No noble children ever went to the schools designated for tradesmen, even if they were run by nobles. She just laughed.

"If I wanted you to, I would have said something by now." I nodded. She looked faintly disappointed. "I assumed you knew and just didn't want to treat me differently."

"You have the habit of assuming I know many, many things. I appreciate the compliment, but please just assume that if you're not talking about spices or births I know nothing. Because I can almost guarantee that it will be a fine assumption." I wasn't trying to be flippant but Amber laughed anyway. It spread a rather pleasant warmth through my body. Now was not really the time to be starting flings, not when I had Aylah to take care of, a business to manage, and my brother's impending return. It had been nearly two months and he would be back any day now. So much had changed since he left. I sighed and shook my head. I would worry about that when his ship arrived and not one minute more. I shook my head again, wiping away a stray tear. I ignored the sympathetic look Amber gave me. She gave a lot of them. I tried not to feel like someone she pitied, but it was never very successful.

"But don't worry too much. Like I said, most people don't care if you love people of the same sex." I nodded. I wasn't overly worried about it, having no interest in romance. Even if being around Amber warmed me in a variety of pleasant ways. It hit noon and the market started closing down. I picked up my wares,

loading them onto a small handcart. Amber would walk me to the temple of Morpheus to drop off the earnings and goods. I would usually buy us lunch after. Then she would go off to whatever noble women do and I would go to the office for the oh-so-exciting work of keeping up with inventory and researching new potential markets. Right now, the whole business was just buying and selling spices. I wanted to be confident in whoever I hired before I trusted them with any of our rather meager profits. Maybe I was being overprotective of my business, but I wanted to travel and risking the health of my business would impede that. Dreamer I might be, but sometimes I knew when not to take risks. I sighed as I walked to my office at the docks. Another exciting few hours of charting the tiny amount of money I made selling spices and the larger amount from dream dust. It made my feet itch more to see the slow going, but better to wait. Hard to remember as my knee is banging up and down as I do sums in the back. The dock bell started ringing for an incoming ship. I ignored it as usual until I realized it was for my brother's merchant company. He was a few days early. I barely capped my ink before tearing out the door. I debated going to get Aylah but figured I'd rather tell him the bad news in private. I ran over to the dock where I thought his ship would land, cursing as I lost a shoe. It was a simple wooden clog. I couldn't bring

myself to wear the boots he made me yet. As the ship docked, the wealthy people paraded off first, not needing to help secure the ship. There was a small crowd of people that started to gather around me, claiming people. My heart wobbled as so many young sailors were claimed by their parents, taken in with hugs and kisses, headed to happy homes with celebration dinners. My gut twisted as I saw Saffron's crooked smile. I ran over to hug him, canvas duffel and all. He squeezed me tight, even as I knocked him off balance.

"So you beat Mom and Dad here, did you?" His grin was wide as he looked down at me from the hug. I swallowed and my face fell. Alarmed, he pulled back to look at me. "What is it, what's happened?" I was crying softly but I was determined to continue. "Dad got stabbed while he was defending a little girl. Hades let him say goodbye." There were more tears but I took a deep breath to avoid sobbing. "Mom's heart gave out the same night. I'm so sorry." I was full on sobbing now. He pulled me into a hug, holding me tight. As he rocked back and forth, I could feel his tears splashing down on my air. He cried for a long time. The bell tolled for four and I swore softly. "I have to go get Aylah." She knew to wait for me, so at least I didn't have to worry about her getting lost between here and her school. Saffron nodded, tears still streaming down his face. I held his



hand the whole way to the school as he composed himself. Happy homecoming, I thought to myself. Sometimes life had an awful sense of humor.

Aylah wasn't surprised to see her brother. She heard the bell like the rest of the town, announcing the return of the training ship.

"Saffron!" She came running to hug him. I was glad that grief, even though it stole many things, hadn't changed this. Saffron hugged her tight, crying tears of gratitude now. At least he had us. We all went home, to a house that would ring hollow the feel of too many rooms. When we got to the house, Saffron walked inside. He clearly didn't want to go in, not at all. Tears were streaming down his face.

"Hey Aylah." She was still holding Saffron's hand. "Why don't you go start the tea fire, all right?" She ran in, excited. It was something I let her do only rarely. When she was fourteen, I kept telling her. For right now, Saffron needed a minute. I squeezed his hands, about to head in.

"It's so hard to realize they won't be there when I walk in." His voice was breaking as he talked, more tears falling. I nodded. His shock was starting to wear off.

"I know. Take your time, I'm going to go make sure Aylah doesn't burn the house down" I pat his shoulder on the way in. Aylah had even put the kettle on and laid out mugs.

"What's for dinner tonight?" She asked as she got ready to pull the kettle off the fire. "Well. I can probably still go to the butcher and get some steaks." They were a little expensive, but I could use the letter of credit from the Morpheus temple. It was what I got in return for building their business after all. Aylah crowed in victory. I smiled softly and ruffled her hair. "I'm off to go do that. You stay here, little rascal." She smiled at me, blowing on her tea. The butcher's was only a short ways away. I would be back before my tea cooled.

"I'm going to go buy some steaks from the butcher to try and make a nice welcome home diner." I clumped my way past Saffron and he nodded, still locked in a battle of wits with the front door. He was still there when I got back, Aylah poking her head out and looking slightly confused.

"It's real when I walk in the door," Saffron moved a few steps closer and I kept pace with him.

"I know. It's real now, too." I winced as soon as the words left my mouth. Stupid thing to say.

"I know. It's just a matter of when I have to believe it." He wiped his eyes, striding into the house. He went to his room in the basement to unpack. Knowing him, he would unpack his entire suitcase and start in on his laundry. Every time that he got upset when we were kids, the whole house would sparkle. I left him to it and started cooking the steaks. He would come up for dinner and in the morning we could talk about life and how it would look for a while, without Aylah to overhear. For what had to be the hundredth time I was grateful our parents owned the house. It made life so much simpler.

In the morning, I padded downstairs to make tea a little bit earlier than usual. Saffron was already up, a slightly cold mug of tea in front of him. Sure enough, the kitchen had been thoroughly cleaned.

"Couldn't sleep." He had dark circles under his eyes. "Missed the rocking of the ship, missed Mom and Dad." I nodded. "How have you guys been getting by? Aylah is still in school, and you're not going hungry. Did the farmers step in?" I shook my head.

"Quit, actually." He looked slightly pole axed. "The Sisters of Morpheus offered me a job as a merchant. They wanted someone to

build a trade network for the dream dust." A slow grin spread across his face.

"Now that is an offer too good for you to refuse." He knew of my ambitions to become a merchant, knew how jealous I was of his travel. "I don't suppose you need some contacts with the ocean trade..." He trailed off, looking at me expectantly. I grinned back.

"As a matter of fact..." He pulled out a notebook and I ran upstairs to get a few of my trade journals. I didn't like to keep work at home but these were mostly travel guides to other places I wrote in my researching how to be a merchant. With these, we could plan a larger map of where to trade what, create a true land and sea trading company. He could manage the boats and I the land. Oh, how I'd missed my brother.

Our plots made the years fly by. Days bled into weeks, weeks bled into months. Time ticked by in cycles and growth, in the presence and absence of my brother, the slow backwards and forwards of learning to cope with grief. Aylah grew; more badges were attached to her sash. I cried and bled as I sewed them on, remembering the last badge my father attached. After a year, Aylah needed an entirely new sash. She was no longer a volunteer; she was a qualified nurse at thirteen. She was so

proud and I was so proud for her. All of that work that she put in with me at the office was paying off. She was keeping busy through her grief and here she was at thirteen, a nurse. That didn't slow her down and soon her new sash was full of badges. Another test and she was qualified to become a monk, a priest in training. She graduated from school as my business was ready to start traveling. Saffron sent small amounts of dream dust across the sea, and I, too reluctant to trust, was not ready to do the same for our trade over land. I just kept selling in the marketplace and the sisters never minded. But now, my sister's schooling done, I was ready to take my first journey. I had been saving up profits for months to buy inventory, saving up money of my own to buy clothing that was suited to travel instead of aiding births. Sturdy pants meant for dust, sturdy shirts, everything could be washed and worn for days and day and a canvas duffel, like my brother's to hold it all. I sighed over the clothes, knowing my father would have made them if he were here. A few days before I was set out to leave, having bought a wagon and a team of two mules to pull me along, stocked it with water and travel food, a bow for hunting, found a hired man to help me out with driving the team, I was nervously unpacking and repacking my duffel. Aylah knocked on my door rather timidly.

"I want to come with you." I stared, not sure I heard right. "I want to come with you. I don't want to say with the Apollo temple. I know it's short notice, I just wanted to be certified as a monk when I asked. Now don't say anything yet." She saw that I was about to speak and wanted to get her argument out of the way, terrified that I would say no. "I hear Apollo sing sometimes when I work. I figure he likes music, being the god of poetry and all. He's usually less direct than Morpheus but I figure he's just as tired of the cities. I think... Well. I want to give medical services out while you trade. They don't have much out there except for expensive private healers. I've talked to the Apollo temple and they made me a medical kit I can use to help." So Morpheus was right and my sister would travel with me after all. A slow smile spread across my face. She had grown up a lot in two years, becoming a rather amazing young woman.

"You can come with me." My smile became rather teasing for a moment. Did you remember to buy travel clothes and food to go with your medical supplies?" She laughed, squeezing me tight before she pulled away.

"I have food, and clothes. I was going to give them to you if you said I couldn't go with you, as well as the medical supplies. You had some training as a farmer, you can do at least a little bit." I nodded, although Aylah was only partially

right. I could provide first aid to babies and help give birth, but not too much beyond that.

"You're growing up really well and I am so, so proud of you." We were both crying now, as we always did when I was her mother and not her sister and we could feel the absence of our parents. We dried our tears. "But you're also terribly sneaky to plot all of this without my noticing." She rolled her eyes at me in response.

"Yeah, well. You've been so absorbed in planning it wasn't too difficult. There's also apparently something of a tradition of medical pilgrimage. They have little kits and tour guides." I laughed at the idea of priests and monks traveling together in caravans.

"Well, at least you'll be in good company with all of those fancy people."

"And most merchants and bandits will leave Apollo monks alone. Or the priests. We heal everyone and even stupid bandits know that we're poor and not worth robbing. Even so, they weren't willing to let me go unless I could go with you. I guess they didn't want a barely legal monk wandering the country alone." I laughed again. She just made a face at me. I remembered being

fourteen and wanting to run the world. More than that, I remembered being fourteen and wanting to run the world.

"Well. You know, when we leave, I guess you would've been living in the Apollo temple anyway so we don't need to do anything extra for the house. It'll be good to have you along." I was selfishly smug that she would be coming with me. After two years of only having each other and occasionally Saffron, I was glad to not have to give her up just yet. I would still be there to protect her, even as we were on the road. Someday, we would part as all siblings do, but until the day I started traveling. I didn't have to be it. Family means everything, so here I would cling as closely as I could to the people tied to my blood.

#### Chapter 4

The day we are set to leave, I wake up an hour early out of pure excitement. When Aylah comes downstairs, tea and all of the food that would spoil is prepared on the table. Our bags are by the door, next to my traveling boots. I've been up for two hours now, somewhat impatiently waiting for her to wake up.

"Well then," is all Aylah says as she sits at the table. She is usually slow to rise and somewhat cranky before she has her tea.



I sit after she does and we stuff ourselves, selling the leftovers to the neighbor who now has full grown pigs. We wash all the dishes and close off the house. Our neighbors will make sure that no one messes with the house but there is no sense inviting trouble. I stare down my boots, crying as I start to put them on. It is the first time that I have worn them since my father died. I want my father here to send me off. I hope he would be proud of me for chasing my dream. Aylah came up behind me and squeezed my shoulder reassuringly. My boots are here and he is not but somehow it is still comforting to have them on my journey.

We grab our luggage and head off to the city to meet my hired man and the cart. Amber is waiting just outside our door, and I blush as soon as I see her. I told her about when we expected to be leaving, but I didn't expect her to show up. She smiles at me in my travel gear, coming up close to me. My heart is racing and Aylah smirks at me knowingly.

"I'll just meet you at the warehouse, yeah?" I nodded, tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth as it suddenly went dry. Amber didn't usually stand quite so close to me.

"You look really handsome today." Her voice is warm and mushy and it loosens my spine suddenly. I grin.

"Well thanks m'lady." I know it will irritate her, and sure enough, she pulls a face.

"I just wanted to make sure you had a proper send off." She kisses me softly on the mouth and I am a little bit stunned.

"Oh." My heart is racing. My first kiss.

"That is so you will come back to me, alright?" My heart patters softly and I nod. "I will miss you. Stay safe and have a good trip."

"I... I will. Thank you." Amber gently strolls off and I head in the opposite direction to the warehouse. I bump into Aylah a few streets away and she just smirks at me knowingly. She doesn't say anything after I give her a hard glare, but I get the feeling she will tease me about it later.

When we get to the warehouse, I put all of the dream dust in the special container that will hide its magic. It is salt blessed by Morpheus, so it is not an unusual thing for a spice trader to have. It will go unnoticed, provided the jars work and cancel out any magic detecting the guards have. Morpheus also mentioned about hiding it from them if they decide to try to test the salt. I have faith in him and his protections, but my heart still beats a little faster as we are leaving the city. We make

it through just fine and I breathe a sigh of relief before hopping on the bench next to Jake, who is in charge of driving. Aylah hops in the back of the wagon, settling down with books and study materials. I brought only my own head and eyes. There are few bandits, but they exist, even if many would not think it worth it to rob a spice merchant and fewer would want to bother a caravan that lit up with the mark of Morpheus as soon as we left the city. I would rather be safe than sorry and even with Jake, I felt better keeping an eye on things. I was comforted by the blue dot on the back of his hand and also by his easy going nature as he started telling funny tales of his previous travels. I laughed often. The sun was shining, not quite to the burning heat it would be in the afternoon and I was finally traveling. I was happy, even if I would be tasting dust for the next two months.

Let no one ever tell you that travel is glamorous. By the end of the first week, I am an entirely different color due to dirt. There are splinters in my bum, there are mysterious stains on my shirt, and the image of the bums of my mules is burned in to my brain. Were Jake any less easy going or if I loved my sister less I would want to kill them both. But I loved every bit of it. Even as the miles drag on, I love the feel of new ground beneath my feet, new sights and potential. Even if we are on a

seldom trod path with almost no other humans, it is beautiful. For the first time in my life, my feet don't itch. Every night when I fall asleep, I dream of markets, common people selling items. Morpheus was pleased, I think, with my dream and the potential of inspiring others.

The town Rhone was visible at ten in the morning at the beginning of our eighth day on the road. Aylah cheered, wanting to interact with more people. She was used to the bustle of school, the business of the temple, not two faces day after day. Especially when those faces were attached to bodies that are rather smelly and covered in dirt. We made it to the town just in time for lunch. It wasn't very big, but that was the goal. Morpheus wanted to harvest dreams from the places that would build them the most. This place certainly fit. It was big enough to have a store and inn, if just barely. The only other things were the houses for the miners of the silver in the area. Jake drove the cart down the road, the mules slightly skittish at the closeness of the houses after a week of being on the open road, but we made it to the inn. Jake unhitched them and led them to the barn. Aylah took some money from me and went to go inside to buy us some rooms while I locked down the wagon so nothing in it grew legs. It was a system we had worked out on the road, one of the many ways we tried to alleviate the absolute monotony of

mule backsides and trees. Later, we'll take the wagon around to the little market stand typically used for people to purchase silver when they get a load of ore in. If tradition held here, according to my books, the stand could be held by visiting merchants for a day or so to sell goods, provided there were no buyers in town. I had carefully checked the dates that were set to have buyers and we had avoided them by about a month, so the stand should be easy enough to rent. Wagon settled, I went inside to see Aylah arguing heatedly with the innkeeper. She was attempting to bargain with him, or at least that was my best guess. Aylah heard me come in, whirling with eyes full of fire.

"He won't rent to women." I laughed at her indignation and I was somehow glad that she didn't expect treatment like this. It was a nice reminder that in the temples, women were equal to men, that when you were bleeding it did not matter who stitched you up. Aylah didn't know why I had taken so long to become a merchant and I was glad. I reached in to my pocket to pull out a gold coin, thick and round. It was probably about what he made in a year. I spun it through my fingers, flipping it over and under, palming it up and down.

"My money will be the same whether it comes from me or my hired man. Can you really afford to turn away custom?" The coin darted into my pocket as I stared him down hard. He was sweating now,

not realizing that the rumpled fourteen year old girl would have access to such funds. I glanced over at Aylah. She wasn't wearing her sash or her coat. I motioned across my chest. Light dawned in her eyes and she went to go don her gear.

"I don't rent to women," he said firmly. "I will not be accused of hosting prostitutes or the townspeople will stop buying my food." Part of me laughed at the idea of sex work being shamed. The Sisters of Venus were well respected, visited without shame. You needed a health certificate to get into the temple at all and burly men would kick you out permanently if you ever tried to get rough with one of the Sisters. I raised my eyebrow at him.

"I'm a spice merchant. I am running a caravan through to Leony up in the East." It was the eastern most city on our trade route, one that hooked back up to the sea so we could take a boat home. It as a fairly common route, if not always the most profitable one. He simply scoffed at me.

"They would all say that. I do not lease to omen and that is final." He was white now, no longer the red and angry man who was yelling at a fourteen year old girl. I shrugged and walked out. I suppose we would have to sleep in the wagon again. Maybe the locals would be willing to sell us a bath. Jake, incredibly

grumpy, got the mules back out of the barn and re-hitched them to the wagon. He could get a room if he wanted, but there was no way I was going to try to put the three of us in the same hotel room and I don't think he would be all that pleased either. I knew what most hired men liked to do when they reached towns. I sighed. What an impractical policy, knowing what a small town Rhone is. As Jake finished attaching the mules, a woman approached us.

"I would have come to you sooner and told you that Ivan won't rent rooms to you but my father decided to try to cook." The woman looked old and haggard, hair gray from both stress and age. "My house is fine, thankfully, but it will smell bad for a day or two. I've got the best bath stove aside from Ivan, and I can sell you all a bath but I'm not certain you will want to rent rooms from me if it will mean sharing with my father." I nodded and Aylah deftly lept out of the wagon in her gear. She had just changed fully, wearing a pair of medical clothes under her white coat. Her sash was under her coat, gleaming with a large number of badges.

"I'm Aylah," she said as she stuck out her hand.

"I'm Tian. And even if you don't want to rent with me, I think my friend Ruth would be willing to get you some rooms..." She

trailed off as she seemed to notice what Aylah was wearing. I could tell that Aylah was eager to talk about her father.

"Oh, bless you, that would be wonderful." Tian started eying Aylah's sash as she talked, noting all of the badges.

"Are you really a monk?" Tian was amazed that someone so young and female would already be a monk as would many people along the road. Aylah just rolled her eyes and nodded. Tian immediately felt bad. "Oh, I'm sorry, you must get that all of the time. I'll go put the water on for the first bath." Aylah nodded.

"I heard you mention your father?" Tian nodded and they wandered over to the house. Tian would probably know who would be interested in and safe to buy my dream dust. Though really, now that we were away from the city, I didn't need to worry about guards. If I sold it in small enough amounts, I wouldn't need to be too worried about people trying to corrupt it either. I smiled, content that I would be able to start making real profit with my business and thoroughly brightened by the idea of a bath.

After the baths, Aylah having seen to Tian's father while I had mine, we went back to the inn, wondering if he would at least feed us. Tian had her hands too full with her father and Jake



wanted a drink. Women's money was apparently good enough for buy food if not a room. As he was sucking ale down, Jake turned to me.

"Does that happen often?" I ignored him for a moment, not wanting to test him on this particular issue. He continued to stare, awaiting his answer. I sighed.

"I don't know. This is my first trip. It might be one of the reasons the merchant schools don't take women." He nodded. We had discussed my lack of credentials when I hired him. I wanted to make sure that any man who traveled with me wasn't expecting someone who had been fully trained by a merchant school.

"Alright. At least we got a bath." He was still dark, brooding into his ale. I hoped wouldn't get too put out by it. After a moment, he turned to me and smiled. "Damned fool to turn down your money though, especially since the women here are so eager to take you in." He had a bit of a dirty smirk on his face. I rolled my eyes. This was my one issue with him, that he found my tumultuous relationship with Amber to be something lecherous, something that turned him on. We were not even in the midst of a romance, not really, minus the one kiss. Not that he believed me, of course. He smiled and went back to his drinking. Aylah looked somewhat confused. It took her a moment and then she

realized what he had said. She shot him a glare. I would have to talk to him later, lest the two of them start fighting. She was fiercely defensive of me and my love of women, allowing no one to give me a hard time about it. She was determined that I would get to live a normal life. As far as I knew, she liked boys, though when she first started her monthly bleedings and I explained about sex, she was told that it is possible for people of the same sex to fall in love. She gave me a knowing look when I mentioned that, and the looks only got more knowing as she saw me with Amber. I gave her a look that told her that I would take care of Jake myself later and she backed off, still seething a little bit. Jake was making things complicated. It was the first time I wished I could travel with just Aylah, but we would not deter bandits on our own.

Women's spices were also apparently good enough. Ivan bought a massive amount of our inventory. I did not tell him about the dream dust like I told many of the women. He would probably want a whole batch to sell his guests and I would only be willing to sell in small amounts. The women got a small sample if they bought very many of my spices. There were also many young girls who came buy, counting their pennies to see if they would be able to afford a few grains of dream dust. They wanted to participate in something usually intended for rich people, but

more than that, they wanted to give the dreams they couldn't dream being women in a mining town wings. Just for a night, they could be whoever they wanted and maybe find inspiration to become more than just wives to miners. Jake just looked at me funny whenever I got truly excited, but I could see his eyes soften as young people, especially young girls, came over to buy our dust. Not that there was anything wrong with being a miner's wife, I just wish that they had more choices. Maybe the temples could help to change that, could help little girls to dream and grow up in a world where they could be just as good as boys.

It was on my mind as I sold my spices and occasionally my dream dust. We did a lot of business, most people knowing that we would only be in town for one day. Even so, my stand was not nearly as swamped as Aylah's as she was offering free medical treatment. When the miners were done with their shifts, they came in with bodies that were worn down from hard physical labor. They could not afford to see the expensive private healer in the next closest town and the temples were a week away. Aylah did the best she could, helping to heal sore joints, treat nicks and bruises, and to teach them about how to be healthy in general. I even got to help her for a bit when a pregnant woman came waddling in to town to buy spices and see if she could get some help with her pregnancy. It was familiar to examine her and

ask questions about her pregnancy, to look after her and give her advice about what to do and what to expect when labor hit her. We packed up at the end of the day, exhausted and knowing that we would be moving on in the morning. The town was so small that anyone who wanted to had already gotten medical care or spices and it would be a waste of time and money to stay longer. Before we headed back to Tian's to sleep, I pulled Jake aside.

"Hey, I don't mind too much when you tease me about Amber or liking women when we're alone but please don't do it in front of my sister. She is used to defending me from people who aren't as nice and it is upsetting to her." As I talked he looked concerned. "I haven't had to deal with too much but she is terribly determined that I live my life as normally as I possibly can." He looked a little stricken.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize that it was something that people ever considered abnormal." He looked genuinely concerned. Maybe he wasn't so bad after all. "I won't do it again. I imagine that's pretty hard." He patted me on the shoulder and I breathed a sigh of relief. I don't know why I was so nervous talking to him, as easy going as he is. I finished with my spice stand before Aylah finished breaking down her medical tent, so I hung around until she finished. I wanted to walk her back to Tian's house. We couldn't find room anywhere else and after Aylah

figured out that Tian's father needed memory charms, it wasn't a bad place to stay. His future wasn't great, but Aylah could help to make his last few months or years happier and lucid. Tian cried when she found out, relieved to know that he would be able to be himself until he died. She was so strong to be able to handle caring for him as long as she did.

The whole walk back to Tian's, Aylah was bouncing excitedly. She babbled about all of the people she got to help, how exciting it was to meet new people and to work on her own. She paused suddenly and grabbed my hand.

"Thank you for coming with me. I really enjoy being able to practice on my own." She beamed up at me. I squeezed her hand, smiling in return. Amazing how she could be so professional with her patients and still seem so young when she was finished. Jake was already asleep in his room when we got back. Aylah and I weren't far behind him, eager to set out in the morning.

Rhone set the tone for much of the trip. We would rent rooms from more or less enlightened innkeepers. Sometimes we rented rooms from the local women if we were ever outright refused service. We figured out pretty quickly that if we sent Aylah in in her full monk gear she would be much more likely to get us rooms, although some innkeepers even turned her down. It didn't

usually matter very much, the local women almost always willing to take us in. Our coin was good enough for them and they were usually all too happy to house a monk.

We sold spices and dream dust, doing a brusque business. Our customers generally stayed the same, women and teenagers. Occasionally we would get men who wanted dream dust, but it was usually those men who were too disabled or old to work, people who needed dreams because they couldn't always find their purpose. It made me feel good to keep selling my dust and to talk with all of the women. The ability to talk to all of the different people was much more precious to me than any profit, especially as I saw so many people energized by Aylah and her work. She still got funny looks, but after she proved how much of a monk she was, people were more than happy to have her treat them.

The landscape throughout the journey stayed amazingly monotonous. It was mostly scrub plains, shrubs and trees dotting the rivers broken up by occasional farms. The farmhouses were always lovely, a chance for some real food and a bed. Dream dust got me in the door and kept a roof over my head in those circumstances. Jake kept his word about Amber and my love of women, never again making lewd comments where Aylah could hear him. I appreciated his courtesy, as well as all of the funny

stories he told to while away the long and monotonous miles. It eased my regret and my longing to travel only with Aylah, knowing that he could respect what I said.

The pattern got ready to end as we entered Leony, the last trade stop on our journey. After we sold the rest of our spices, we would sell our mules and wagons to catch a boat back home. It would be relaxing to do nothing for a week or two as we sailed home from our two month journey.

Even better, Leony was so bustling that we would have a few days to relax before we had to open up a market stall. There was always a waiting list and we could only keep the stall for a week. I wasn't too worried, because our wagon was only about a quarter full anymore and I was expecting to sell out of everything else within a few days.

We spent our few days off mostly sleeping, although Aylah worked with a couple of the local healers on their free clinic days. She was addicted to working and got plenty of time off in the wagon. She wanted to socialize more and was always great at finding people to take her in. I enjoyed my sleep, my time alone, and even a book or two from one of the local stores. It was a nice break before the absolute rush that was the time we spent selling our spices and dust. I was right, and we sold out

of inventory within two or three days. Saffron's spice connections had gotten us quite a bit that we saved especially for Leony, knowing that we could get competitive prices here. The gamble paid off and we were all the richer for it. After we closed up shop, I bumped into Jake on my way to drop Aylah off at yet another clinic she managed to find.

"So it looks like we have a night off." His voice was light but full of hope. "You want to get some food, maybe clean up and get fancy?" I smiled up at him. Jake was a wonderful friend, somehow always managing to guess just what I needed.

"I don't know if I brought any clothes that are too fancy, but I can order a bath at least." None of the innkeepers here would be so backwards as to refuse to rent to a woman. He smiled a young, charming, boyish smile, terribly eager. It was catching, my smile growing when I saw it.

"I will fancy up and join you then, shall I?" He wriggled off, practically bouncing up and down. I laughed, following behind him. We went to our separate rooms to dress for the baths. We passed each other on our way down, dressed in the robes provided by the inn for the guests to get to and from the bathing room downstairs. We shared giddy smiles, both of us eager for the treat that is a warm bath. It wasn't icy lake water and we



wouldn't have to wait for hours for the water to warm up. We went our separate ways as the baths were segregated by gender. I was so excited by a lot of the scented bath options they offered, as well as the gentle soap. I have a weakness for truly luxurious soaps. They are hard to find as you travel about and better left unpacked for more important things like food and rags for monthly bleedings. There was a whole basket of different scents to choose from. These soaps were not the lovingly crafted but still somehow harsh soaps made by women in towns who rarely saw trade caravans. I picked the one that smelled of roses.

I didn't bump into Jake again on the way up, which didn't really surprise me. I had managed to take an amazingly long soak. I took my time getting dressed as well, carefully unfolding one of the better pairs of trousers I had saved just to look nice at the market in Leony. I also had a cornflower blue button down blouse I hadn't worn yet on our journey. It was more feminine than a lot of what I usually wore, but I enjoyed it. As always, I was wearing my amulet over my breast band but under my shirt, enjoying the warmth still left in the metal from the bath water. My hair took care of itself, brown locks still chopped short in a practical travel cut. I wore my boots as always, though they got a polish first. I was just buckling on my dress knife and

belt as Jake knocked on the door. His sense of timing was perfect as always. Jake hooked my elbow playfully in his, bright brown eyes shining with good humor.

"You look nice tonight." He wasn't lying, which was interesting. Most men would have been bothered by my choice of trousers and a shirt, no matter how feminine the cut.

"Thank you, you're not so bad yourself." I wasn't lying either. He was wearing all black clothing, obviously traveling clothes repurposed. They were well fitted and clean though, showing off his wiry frame. He had even shaved his travel beard. He really was quite handsome if you were into that sort of thing. Hard to imagine this humorous man had yet to be caught. Perhaps he preferred men. That was a nice thought.

"I scouted out some dinner locations. There is a place not far down the street if m'lady doesn't mind the walk." He gave a somewhat courtly bow as he finished. I laughed at his gallant mannerism and felt a pang as I suddenly remembered Amber.

"Oh, not at all." He led on. I was glad I wore my boots, as we were going a little further than I originally thought. We ended up at a small, somewhat intimate looking place with a small sign that had the picture used by most taverns and eateries, many people not being able to read this far from the abundant temple

schools. Jake held open the door for me and I walked in, gasping slightly. They did something to the ceiling, showing whirling star patterns and constellations. A young man with a sort of wispy feel to him led us to a table, telling us about what was there. As he talked, the stars whirled, pausing when he did. If he remained silent for too long, they would time themselves to his breath. This boy had to be Zeus blessed, a rare trait. He noticed my flash of recognition, giving me a wink while Jake finished his order, then whirled off to get our food.

"This place is amazing. Thank you for taking me here!" I was practically bobbing up and down in my seat. Meeting someone Zeus blessed was supposed to be very good luck, they saw the way fates pulled together and watched. Zeus blessed were rare, the rarest of any of those blessed with gifts, because Zeus cares so rarely to get involved.

"I heard about it and I figured you would like the ceiling." Jake seemed blissfully unaware of the gift he had been given. I didn't feel the need to explain it.

"I love it, thank you." It was beautiful/ The Zeus boy came back with plates full of our food, his shock of black hair sweeping into his eyes as he twirled constellations, swirling in his electric blue eyes in time with the ones on the ceiling, then

gave me another wink and one long and hard stare before he smiled briefly. He slipped a note under my plate when he brought dessert, occasionally staring some more as Jake and I laughed through inner, talking about nothing and everything. I pulled up the note and it said "you were the reason I made this restaurant. Fate sits strong with you and you are strong enough to bear it." I smiled at the note, signed Julian. Jake insisted on paying, though I left an extra tip under the plate that held my pie. Jake walked me back to the hotel, the night air starting to cool down. When we got to my room, he pulled me into a hug. That was all right until he tried to kiss me. I pushed him back, stunned.

"Jake, I'm so sorry that you got the wrong impression. I like you as a friend. It's nothing to do with you at all, it's the fact that you're a man, really, and I just..." I trailed off. I hated hurting people, but Jake didn't seem hurt, he seemed angry.

"I put up with your talking, and your sister, you owe me." His eyes were hard with anger. I was stunned. Somehow my easy going friend turned into this snarling monster. He tried to grab my head and kiss me but my knife was at his throat, drawing blood in an instant.

"No man will ever lay a hand on me without my permission." My voice was hard and he looked stunned, hissing faintly as I pushed harder with my knife. The dot on his hand was no longer a reassuring shade of blue. It was starting to turn red. Leaving my knife at his throat, I unlocked my door behind my back. He reached into his pocket to throw something at me, expecting sand I pushed hard with my knife as I closed my eyes, blood starting to drip down the blade. It wasn't sand, it was dream dust, the fiery burn of my necklace telling me it was corrupted. (66) would have gotten corrupted dream dust with the eye of Morpheus on him? He was shoving me into my room, throwing me on the bed, and my thoughts started to go black, as my limbs stopped responding, heavy with the dust. My last feeling was of him inside me, foul and utterly painful.

Morpheus was in the blackness. I recognized the robes from that of the three sisters, a dreaming eye on the hood. He pulled back the hood, sorrow all over his face.

"I am so sorry that I could not protect you from him." I knew I knew nothing of corrupted dream dust (66) right now I knew I was supposed to be having a nightmare. "The amulet you wear can protect you from my corrupted gifts, but I cannot protect you from him and for this I am sorry. I will hunt him down for you, so that you know he will not harm another." I nodded.

Everything was so sudden, so new, that I had no idea how to react or feel. I was angry at Jake, angry for succumbing to the drug. Perhaps a little at Morpheus that he could not protect me. I waited there in the black space, naked, until I was roused by a scream. Aylah had found me. She tried to pull him off, but it was too late, he had already spent. Ever the monk, she was far more focused on making sure that I was okay than on catching Jake. "I didn't blame her. I was shaken and I wanted ???? 67 naked on the bed. There wasn't much physical damage, but I felt like there should be. I felt like I should be bleeding, that something should have been torn. Aylah finished checking me out, confirming that I was undamaged. While she inspected, she pulled off any bits of him that ???? 67 temple might be able to use to track a ???? 67 as evidence in trial. She had all the supplies for doing so, and I wondered how often she had to do that. Thinking about other people who had been violated in this way made me angry. The anger felt good. It was better than the fear, the sadness, the sheer violation I felt.

"Okay, I'm done." Aylah passed me a robe, unsure if I wanted it or clothes. I put it on, this was easier. She pulled out a small capsule, her voice quiet, gentle. "The capsule will help your body fight off anything he might give you. The herbs will

prevent a baby from latching on." I nodded, taking the capsule but leaving the herbs.

"Remind me to leave offerings to Apollo for his blessing of the capsule." She tentatively approached, looking as though she wanted to offer me physical comfort. I nodded and she squeezed me shoulder. 'There's time to think about whether or not you want the herbs later, take your time.'" I barked a harsh laugh.

This thing, if I do have it stick, will be be family. Even if I am an incubator to monster spawn, I don't want to risk losing more family." Aylah nodded and squeezed my shoulder again.

"I'll get them to bring you a bath." She pressed my knife into my hands, heading to the door. "After that, we'll get you dressed and talk to the local police." I nodded as the door shut, grateful to have my blade. I was suddenly angry again, that my sister was so well practiced at this. How often did she do this I looked through her med kit, noticing an entire pouch was devoted to these kits. About half of them looked to be gone, half her containers of medicine were empty. In the few months that we had been on the road, she had dealt with at least ten other women who had been recently assaulted. I was shaking with anger when Aylah got back.

"Bath will be here in a minute." She saw the way that I was looking at the kit and understood. "I have a log and samples from every kit that I also post at the Mars temple, as well as giving them to ???? 68 I do what I can, but..." She looked sad. There was a knock on the door, the bath arriving. She must have terrified them that it came so quickly.

It felt good to scrub all the traces of him off of me. My sister was experienced, because there was actually supplies for two baths. I was grateful, I did not want to soak in water contaminated with more of the seed spilling out of me, or the sweat he left behind. After I was clean, my sister helped me get dressed.

"It might not go well," she warned as she helped me get dressed. "I tried to report these assaults with the local magistrates while I was in some of the towns. They didn't do anything, acted like it was the woman's fault. It's just..." She got quiet for a moment and sighed. "There's just a reason I do the kit myself, and make sure the woman is fully clothed when I take her to report." I brushed it off, even as she continued to look sad. Surely ???? 69 would be more enlightened than that. I ignored Aylah's we headed to the magistrate, still clutching my knife.



I walked in the door of the office. It was dimly lit with a solitary candle. There was one man on duty, writing in a book as time wandered by around him. There was a ringing as the door shut. He looked up, a bored and dull expression on his face.

"Here to report a crime?" I hid behind Aylah, my breath catching as my eyes tried to explore all of the dark corners, wondering if there was someone lurking. She stepped forward, catching her stride. It was the stride of someone who knew what they were doing, whose authority could not be questioned.

"Yes. I have a kit that has been collected from a rape." Her voice was stern and she handed over some credentials. I startled a little bit. Credentials came with certain merit badges that went above and beyond. She would have had to test into a program, seek out this training to help rape victims. A warm burn of pride started in my stomach. The guard was less impressed. He looked over the credentials. "We can't do anything without a report from the woman." Aylah nodded, getting more and more pissed at us the guard sounded more and more bored.

"I am well aware of this fact. I brought her to make a statement." Aylah gestured back at me. Still glued to the wall, comforted by the idea that no one could sneak up behind me. I

half waved, remembering to do it with the hand that didn't have a knife. He sighed, gave me a bored look, and waved me over.

"When did the attack occur?" He flipped open a new book, the spine creaking in distress. There looked to be perhaps two other entries. My heart started to sink.

"About an hour ago." Aylah nodded as my voice came out in a squeak, still trying to skitter over to sit in a chair with my back to the door. I managed. She squeezed my shoulder, standing behind me facing the door. My heart calmed as I realized she could watch the door for me. She was still radiating anger. The guard nodded at my response, jotting it down in the book, making an aggravated noise as Aylah settled in behind me.

"And what happened?" His voice was utterly monotone.

"My business partner was walking me home from dinner. He wanted to kiss me goodnight but I didn't want to do that. He drugged me, pushed into my room, and forced himself on me." Before the guard could start up again, Aylah jumped in.

"I can confirm. There's a positive test for corrupted dream dust and I pulled the man off her myself. There is more detail in the report included with the kit." Her voice was quiet but hard

somehow, as if she wished she could force him to follow protocol, to follow the laws.

"Why was he walking you home?" I blanched, glaring at him.

"Does it matter?" The guard sighed.

"Yes. It's going to come up in trial, if we can ever find him."

"You'll have to tell him, he's unfortunately right." Aylah sighed as she said this, clearly getting frustrated and upset. My knee bouncing up and down in anxiety, the rickety chair shaking.

"He took me out to dinner. We needed something to do while Aylah was working." As the words left my mouth, the guard gave off a bored sigh.

"We can try to pursue it if you want, but if this ever goes to trial they're going to argue that you took dream dust, that he bought you dinner, that it was nice and you regret it now." Aylah was rigid behind me as the guard continued talking. I exploded out of my chair.

"Right, because I gave myself corrupted dream dust, because I roll over and sleep with anyone who buys me dinner!" The guard sighed at my outburst.

"I am not saying any of that, but it will come up at trial."

"I don't even like men!" I was yelling even louder now. It took forcing my anxieties to turn my back on him but I did, storming out of the office. The door slammed shut in Aylah's angry wake. Defiantly, I wiped tears from my face I had not known were there. Aylah squeezed my shoulder.

"We'll go back on the boat as planned," she said quietly as she squeezed my shoulder. "We'll go back to the temple city and they'll take care of it." I nodded, clenching my knife so hard my knuckles were turning white. I was utterly done with government and men who deemed that women were not worth respecting.

## Chapter Five

Morpheus visited me in my dreams again. His deep, soothing voice washed over me as he painted me a picture.

"I do not take kindly to those who hurt my chosen." His voice was slow and sleepy. Talking with him required a great deal of patience. "My sisters have tracked him down, the one who hurt you." Here he showed me, in the sped up fashion of dreams, the

long hunt they took, dream eyes on the hoods of their robes glowing bright. "He was long in coming, but we found him." Here the scene displayed his capture. They bound him in a powerful blue web, squeezing him until he no longer existed. "I have him now and he will pay." Morpheus was angry, then suddenly sad. "I am sorry I could not protect you. I cannot directly intervene." I nodded. Good. Humans must determine their own course. "But I have him now." He faded away slowly, his last comment coming like a whisper. "Though I cannot do anything in the physical realm, I will keep your dreams free of him."

"Thank you." But it was too late. I was awake with tears streaming down my face. He got justice for me when the government wouldn't. He took care of his own. Why couldn't men do as well? I threw my tankard of water. It bounced off the wall, clanking around before it stopped. It was thoroughly unsatisfying. I wanted to break things, tear them apart. Aylah heard all of the commotion and came running back from the clinic. She looked at me knowingly, seeing all off the now slightly dented tankard.

"Who are you angry at?" She was radiating calm sympathy, the same sort I'd seen her use on children who were afraid of doctors.

"The stupid government for not protecting me, for not doing what a government is supposed to do, for penning in the gods when they can do so much more." Tears were streaming down my cheeks. I crumpled into a ball, crying. Aylah came over, giving my shoulder a light squeeze. She rummaged through her pack, the light thump and rustle of her well organized kit comforting. I was expecting pills, drugs to numb me into oblivion. Instead, Aylah looked me in the eye, handing me a journal with a quill and ink.

"You have contacts and have been visited by the gods themselves. You can fix it." She walked away, shutting the door to our cabin on the way out. I was stunned. A fourteen year old was telling me that I should have known myself. How did she get so wise?

So I plotted. I thought of Saffron, all of the people he knew. He was charming, handsome, and much as I hated to admit it, male. People would listen to him, would follow him if asked. He had trade contacts, I had trade contacts, people in the temples, women in the market. People who wanted to see the god goods sold elsewhere. Women, the poor, the people the government took for granted. We would rise.

As I plotted, I counted. I counted the days until I was due for my next period. I questioned my decision to turn down the herbs

that meant I would not bear the spawn of a man who took my no. I counted as my breasts began to get tender, as I started to get hungrier and wake up sick. I held out hope and counted, counted down to zero, until the day my bleeding would come. I held out hope, counting again until I got to three and still my bleeding didn't come. I collapsed, crying. My body was not mine anymore, it belonged to this THING that was inside of me, left over from something I never wanted to remember but couldn't forget.

For two weeks, Aylah left me to my grief. She stayed in the cabin with me at night, not asking that I do anything else. We hit shore, finally home. It didn't feel like the victory it was, didn't feel like the triumphant return of heroes. Some of the sisters met us at the docks, helped us with our things. I made it through all the meetings with their reports of our profit and success. They noticed the surveys of who was buying dream dust, absorbed data that would be used by us and possibly others to build up the trade network. I made it through all of that before I went home and collapsed, hiding in my room. My book of plans lay forgotten in the bottom of my satchel, abandoned when I could no longer ignore the thing growing inside me. I could not plan for resolution when I could not plan what to do with my own body. It was a noble sentiment to turn down the herbs that would

have kept his spawn from growing inside of me. I never actually thought I would become pregnant.

It wasn't too late. I could rip the demon spawn out of me, have my sister or another monk relieve me of this THING eating my body. I could be relieved of this. But what if my choice had been the right one? I was drowning in what ifs. How could I bring a child into this world who was conceived in such a way? I laughed. Conceived. Babies. Thought of with love in the minds of their parents, made of dreams and ideas. Or even maybe just accidents, parents too drunk to remember that a baby could be born, still somehow happier than this. Could I really love this child?

On the third day of these thoughts, on the third day of not leaving my room, drowning in this idea that I had been possessed by a monster, Aylah came in with my food as usual. Instead of simply leaving, however, she sat on my bed. The covers rustled gently as she sat, blankets betraying her silence. There was something that hung between us, questions and ideas.

"Does the child still feel like family?" Aylah's question came out into the open. I blinked, time slowing as I pondered. She left.



In all of my thinking, I had forgotten the reason I resisted the herbs. Or maybe I did not want to think about a son who was born of a rapist, a son with those ideas imprinted on him. How could I tell him where he came from? Because he would want to know his father. Maybe I could teach him to be like his grandfather, a man who took care of his children and loved his family. Maybe he could be mine more than his father's, and when he asked where he came from I could say he came from honor and courage and duty. He could come from plots for a better world, from dreams, from the idea that women are worthy of respect and equal treatment. Maybe I could conceive him in my ideas for a better world.

I rolled over, still tired, still exhausted, still feeling like I had been possessed, but I held hope. Because my boy did not have to grow up to be like his father. Even though I was too much a coward to try to risk losing more family, I would not bear a monster. I pulled out my journal and began to plot more, more fired up to spread the gods even though the city might forbid it.

As my belly grew, so did my plans. Saffron agreed to be the figurehead, deciding not to lead any more expeditions in lieu of getting my plans off the ground. My first idea, before I got so big it would be uncomfortable, was a march. All the people, from the temples, from the poor districts, poured into the streets.

Saffron lead this mass of angry people, roaring as we went to the capitol. He presented a bill, written by many of the government officials who saw benefit from allowing the temples more freedom. It was signed by hordes and hordes of people who saw the dreams the temples offered and wanted them. The government saw this mob and broke it up, beating us back with guards and threats and time. They heard us but they would not listen.

Seeing all of those people beaten, seeing all of the people on their horses mowing down people who only wanted more opportunities for their children made me mad. I wanted them to pay, wanted their heads on poles as I read reports from Aylah about all of the injuries that occurred. We dared rise up so they beat us like a dog that bit. It was easy enough to do something about it, easy enough for the temples to let off the flow of god goods, the innkeepers refused to host any of the tourists, any of the workers in the god goods market left and they could not find more. There were no stables, no food, no inns, no workers to fix the stalls. We starved them. Aylah talked me down from my idea of building road blocks, causing tourists to go missing. I wanted blood, but Aylah kept me on the high ground. She made me not pay them back in kind. These people felt like my children, they were my wards and getting wounded

for my cause. But better to show them that they could not survive without us than to rise up in violence. They could not make us work for them, could not force us to obey laws that we were realizing were unjust. Before, we were afraid to rebel because we were afraid we would end up done, afraid no one would stand with us, that we would go hungry. But the temples fed us while we fought for them, and we were not alone. We stood firm, and as I started to give birth to my son, the laws changed. He was born into a world where the gods could spread, where they could come to protect more people. And I wanted to help them.

After the birth, it was impossible for me to travel very well at all. I grieved for that, even as my baby boy stole my heart. He was a reminder of when I had been powerless, but he was also a reminder that I was powerful. So I was home-bound as Saffron took over my business, revealed as the leader of a revolution, a mighty giant. He and I both laughed, even though it stung a little. Just a little, as he was the target of ire and congratulations both, but I could continue my work. I could go on, I could heal, and I could reshape my world from my little spice stand. I could lead, could motivate, could plot. I could have power, even though no one wanted to give it to me. I made my own power with the help of others, and with money and my voice, I could help other people find their own power.

## Appendix 2 - Morpheus Blessed

I have been at the convent for two years and the first thing I learned is that sneaking out gets easier with practice. When you're first starting out you don't know things like which guards will accept bribes and which ones won't, whether you need to bribe the guards with dream dust or with coin, which stairs squeak, the patrol routes for the guards who can't be bribed, and the general layout of the keep to avoid those sisters who have keen ears. Learning those things by rote is obviously not a possibility.

As eager as I am to get out, I want to keep my place as a Novice with the Sisters of Morpheus. Getting caught means getting expelled and they are the only people who will provide a girl with an education beyond basic reading and sums. The rest of the world suffers from the delusion that the ability to bear children means you don't have a brain. Even better, the Sisters have spent many centuries studying dreams and human minds. They could teach me to become a heart healer, someone who can look into the souls of people and teach them how to make their dreams come true.

At the same time, I have been staring at predominantly these same sixty faces for the better part of two years. I am

absolutely stir-crazy. What causes me to become more mad is the fact that every single one of these people believes me to be female. This, I suppose, is a somewhat reasonable assumption on their part. As far as I can tell, at least on the outside, I am female.

I have not felt female my entire life, least of all when I started to develop. I always assumed that when I started to change, I would not grow breasts like my Auntie told me I would. I assumed I would turn into a boy. That did not happen and one day my aunt came home to find me attempting to burn off my breasts.

She rushed me off to the temple of Apollo, hoping that the burns I had already inflicted weren't too severe and the priests would be able to heal them. With a prayer, a blessing, and a bandage wrapped over my chest, it was as if the burns had never happened. Regardless, my aunt was terrified. She sat me down on her lap when we got home, intending to talk. Instead I cried that she had interrupted me, cried that there was this intrusion into my long held belief that I was a boy and I could do nothing to rid myself of it. She rocked me, murmuring lullabies and prayers over my head until I was cried out.

With a shaky voice, I started explaining exactly why I was trying to burn off my chest. She softly stroked my head and told me she knew exactly what would fix me. She stood me up and placed a kiss on my forehead, settling me back in her chair. I almost immediately missed her warmth and I squeezed her hand. She told me that she would be back in just a moment and left the room. She came back with a few pieces of slightly tattered clothing.

"Your cousin was quite a bit bigger than you," she said as she held out a pair of faded brown pants and a soft blue shirt, "but these look like they should fit." I looked up at her with wide eyes. "Come over here and try them on." I blinked a few times, not quite believing what I was seeing. Slowly I stood up and slid out of my simple dress, carefully draping it over the chair even though I wanted to crumple it up and stomp on it. I climbed into the brown pants. Sure enough, they were a little too long, but I cuffed them. Before I put on the shirt, Auntie motioned me over. She had a corset, and I balked. "No, no, come here Se-." She smiled softly. "I suppose I shouldn't call you that anymore. Come here and let me show you what I can do with this." I was still suspicious, but she had brought me pants. I stepped over and she showed me how to lace the corset in a way that would hide my chest instead of enhance it. "I used to use

something like this when I wanted to smuggle dream dust. People are less likely to hassle a man, no?" I smiled. It was true. I slid on the shirt and my chest was wonderfully flat. "You are a handsome boy." She patted my back. "Now my handsome boy needs a name." I thought about it for a minute.

"Colin." To this day, I still celebrate my birthday on the day that Colin was born.

\*

When I sneak out of the abbey, I find it much easier to avoid the interior of the keep altogether. The inside guards are much less likely to accept bribes and the Sisters seem to have an intuitive sense for when Novices are trying to sneak out, regardless of how careful and stealthy we are. It's doable but it's much more difficult. I simply go out the window.

Simple is perhaps a bit of an overstatement. In order to be able to go out the window I had to get a rope and a grappling hook. The rope I stole off of a boat that was being watched by rather ribald and drunk sailors. Anyone looks like a cabin boy when you've had enough to drink. Hermes protects both thieves

and travelers so I felt reasonably confident stealing the rope. The grappling hook was trickier. Blacksmiths keep a much closer watch on their goods than drunken sailors. Possibly because a drunk blacksmith would burn the town down and possibly because metal is far more valuable than a section of rope. Either way, it was the thought of Hephaestus that stopped me. He was notoriously vengeful and I didn't want to anger him. Instead, I picked pockets for months, saving up change until I could afford a serviceable grappling hook.

Petty thievery is not really the best way to be a Novice of Morpheus, but then, most of the Novices aren't really boys. I was beginning to suspect that Morpheus had his hand on me anyway. Seems likely, seeing as I was a person with two powerful and opposing dreams working to make them both come true. The Sisters never seemed to have the same sense that I was up to no good. Whenever I was close to getting caught, it was always a guard willing to look the other way for coin or a sister who could be bluffed. It was a nice feeling, to know that my god supported me in being who I am and wanted to achieve my dreams. It's part of the reason why I serve Morpheus so willingly.

As for actually getting out via the window, first I have to retrieve my grappling hook. I hide it within the wind chimes just outside of our window. They mean I get woken up at the



slightest breeze, but they are the only place to hide a rather large chunk of metal. It takes all of my skill as a thief to not set them off and wake my roommate. As an extra precaution against waking up my roommate, I also pad the grappling hook with some velvet out of Auntie's scrap bag. Some of the Novices would cover for me but she's something of a snitch, willing to help the Sisters catch errant mischief makers. I am too stealthy for it to matter too much, although there have been occasional close calls.

My rope spends its days hiding as a decorative sculpture. I tell the other Novices that it was a gift from my father as a reminder of his business. I still have to prepare it before I can leave. I'm fond of sneaking out, considerably less so of dying. There is a way to tie a rope into a sort of harness so you can lower yourself down a smooth building. I got the basic idea listening to some of Auntie's tales of smuggling dream dust and I knew enough knots that it wasn't difficult to rig something up. Unsurprisingly, my nightgown was not designed to work well with a makeshift rope harness used for climbing up and down abbey walls. I have to wear it against the bare skin of my legs and it chafes something awful. It's not comfortable but it functions.

Snug and secure in my harness, I practically fly down the wall, well-practiced after nearly a year of sneaking out windows. I slip out of the harness, leaving it tied so I can get back up in a hurry later, and hide it under a nearby bush. Bushes are so useful for crooked folk. It is dark enough that no one will notice the slight difference in color between the rope and the keep wall, for which I can only be thankful. Paint to hide the color would flake off and need to be reapplied, making it a giant pain in my rump. Throwing the grappling hook, while possible in an emergency, is also more than a bit noisy and risky. I've only ever done it once and I would like to never, ever repeat the experience.

The guard at the gate gets his usual coin in order to let me out and I am relieved that pick pocketing has allowed me to bribe them in coin instead of in stolen dream dust. Coin is easier for one, because dream dust is difficult and tedious to steal. I also feel somewhat odd about leaving the guards dreaming on duty. It has been a century since anyone has dared to attack the Sisters, dream dust making for a very effective weapon, but I still feel off about leaving our protectors unable to actually protect. Dreaming guards are also much easier to notice and I don't need to be any more obvious. It is something of a miracle that I haven't been discovered. Thankfully, it is

apparently quite common for the guards to accept bribes to let girls out. Some people feel it is unfair to keep the girls locked away from the rest of the world, unable to have any adventures or mischief. It takes years to be initiated and that is a long time cut off from the outside world, especially when girls are supposed to be finding young love. The guard probably assumes I am seeing a gentleman suitor, although that thought makes me gag more than a bit. Outside the gate, I am free and it is amazing.

Like most of the good things in my life, I have Auntie to thank for my current freedom. When my father first suggested that I become a Novice to broaden his trade contacts, she was amazed that I considered accepting. She talked to me long and hard about what it would mean to give up the boyhood that we've kept hidden from my father. If he had known about my boyish inclinations, he might not have suggested that I become a Novice. Now that the suggestion has been made, now that I have a chance to seize my dream and become a heart healer, I am going to take it. Even if it means giving up something that quite possibly means even more.

"I'm worried about my Colin," she told me over the tea she made. "I don't want to lose you, and you know what being a girl does to you." I still don dresses when my father is in town and

without fail I am depressed and angry until several days after he leaves.

"If I am a heart healer I won't have to rely on anyone to get by in the world. I want make enough money when I am grown to insure that I can remain a boy my whole life and not need to marry anyone to avoid starving. Having a way to make money is the only sure fire way I can say who I am. And I'm afraid to go to a boy's school." My voice lowers to a whisper as I admit my fear. She thinks me so courageous and I don't want to ruin her image of me. "What if they found out?" My aunt's face immediately softens and she cannot resist getting up to hug me tight. She sits and pulls me down into her lap. Her acceptance feels too good to turn down, even if I am a bit large to fit now.

"I've made you a safe place here, but you're right to be afraid." Auntie was an imposing presence and no one wants to mess with a member of the Pond clan, not when she might hear about it. I was Colin Pond, one of her many nephews and no one ever doubted her. She looks down at me sadly as she rubs my back. "There are people in this world that would hurt you. But I know that you will hurt you if you can't be who you are." I bury my head in her neck to hide my shame. "Oh Mijo, there is no shame in needing to be who you are." Try as I might to persuade

her otherwise, Auntie would never tell me when she learned Spanish. Probably smuggling dream dust. Either way, every time she called me Mjio, my son, it made me feel warm inside. Auntie filled the void my mother left when she took off for parts unknown. I called her Tia, aunt, in response sometimes. I couldn't bring myself to call her Mama after the last person who held that title left.

"But I don't want to lose my handsome boy. So I tell you what. Every month, on the full moon... Yes, the full moon, let's be poetic about it. Why don't you sneak out," here I looked at her in shock. "Oh you know I'm not law abiding Mijo, don't look at me like that. Why don't you sneak out and I will leave some clothes for you under your castle." I knew exactly which of her carefully tended shrubs she was talking about. "That way, you'll have some time to play, no?" I nodded. Auntie had a solution for everything and my heart was less heavy about becoming a Novice.

It is Auntie and not my father who drops me off at the abbey with my small trunk. She takes the small tour offered to family and helps me unpack after the Sisters have searched my things thoroughly. When it is time for her to go, she hugs me tightly and whispers in my ear.

"Be brave Mijo." As she leaves she slips me a few coins that she smuggled in despite careful searching. Always full of surprises, my Tia.

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The path into town is one I know by heart and I fly down it, running as fast as I can. I resist the urge to laugh in delight at my freedom, outside and away from the watchful eye of the Sisters. I run out of breath before I make it to Auntie's house and end up walking the rest of the way, like always. Even though I have had plenty of time to cool down, my heart is hammering from excitement when I get there. There is the usual small pile of clothes hidden behind one of her bushes. There are a few coins as well, although I won't take those. There is a love note to her Mijo in the pocket of the pants that I will put with the rest of them in a box I burry under the hedge. These notes are the most precious thing I own.

I carefully unfold and shake dust off of Colin's clothes. In order to protect my modesty I change in the same hollow that made this bush a perfect castle for two young boys. It is a bit

tricky and cramped, but I manage and when I emerge from behind the bush I have my boyish swagger. It is a swagger I have had all my life, one that I have to consciously suppress while I am cloistered with the other Novices.

I head to the tavern, noting my good fortune when I come across a drunk with a full purse. I take a few coins, the unofficial penalty for being sloppy in public. Every morally flexible fellow who comes across him will take a coin or two, hoping to make the lesson of not drinking beyond what you are able stick. It is the sort of thievery I feel the least guilty about, aside from those so rich they won't notice.

Finally there, I walk into the tavern. As I am greeted warmly by many of the regulars, I am reminded of my reasons to steal. It is an utter relief to see new faces and familiar smiles both, faces different from the Sisters, Novices, and guards. I smile and stride over to the counter, pulling out a handkerchief to hide my placement of a small, tightly tied bag of dream dust on the counter. I have been carefully gathering the occasional grain left on the alter or blessing bowls for nearly two months in order to build up an amount that Jack the barman would be willing to buy. My effort is worth it as he shoves a pile of around thirty coins across the counter. Except for one, I hide them securely in places that will foil all but

the best pick pockets. I am far too poor to attract their notice, so my money will be safe.

The coin in my hand is payment to arm wrestle my friend and occasional enemy Julian. He told me one day that if a scrawny mouse of a thing like me ever beat him in a test of strength he would hand over his best dagger. It was a challenge I couldn't resist and I have spent many coins trying to win that blade. This time the joke will be on him. I watched the guards out of the library window while they were exercising one day and I have been copying many of the movements that strengthen arms. Though the abbey might not have much room to build wind or endurance, I have more than enough space in my room with the snitch to build up the muscles in my arms.

It doesn't take me long to slam his hand into the table and it is clear that all of the exercise paid off. I smile smugly at him. Julian grumbles but makes good on his word and hands over the dagger on his belt. I know for a fact it isn't the best that he owns, but it is a fine blade which makes it more than good enough for me. The goal wasn't even necessarily to win the blade but to beat a true lad in a contest of strength. Coins two and three go to buying a quality leather belt for my blade from the tannery next door to the tavern. Even though I will only be able to wear it a few days out of every month, I love the feel of the



supple leather and the way the dagger looks around my waist. It is something purely Colin and I have so few of those things that I cannot resist. I go back to show Julian, and when he has had enough of my strutting he asks me for a rematch, saying I can keep the dagger even if I lose. For that, I slam his hand to the table two more times. After the second time he tells me that I should go off and see my flower seller before the rest of his dignity disappears.

I am terribly excited to see my flower seller, a lovely girl by the name of Annabeth. She and I have a bit of a romance. We kiss, cuddle, go for walks, and stay up late watching the stars and talking. We never do anything more physical for somewhat obvious reasons. She thinks me Colin and fully male and I never want her to think of me as anything else. We talk for hours, standing by her wares. The smell is wonderful, a garden fit for the gods. She studies under the Farmers of Demeter and the results show in her flowers. We talk until I know that I have to go or I won't be able to sneak back into the abbey in time for a dream. My fourth coin of the evening goes to buying a lavish bouquet of her flowers, both thanks for the evening and because I wanted to share their beauty with my aunt.

I got so caught up with Annabeth that I have to run all the way back to my aunt's house. I change back into my nightgown in the cramped hollow of the bush, leaving the bouquet of flowers and a coin along with a note asking my aunt to please look after my new dagger. I know she will wonder, but she trusts me and I am not allowed weapons as a Novice. I run the whole way back to the abbey due to the time and it is a little painful, though the pain is well worth it for the evening I had. I am still panting as the guard accepts his bribe to open the gate and let me in. By the time I haul myself back up my rope my arms are tired and shaky. I have never longed to see my bed so much even though I will only get a few hours of sleep. As a reward for not sneaking in with the sun I allow myself the treat of a single grain of dream dust. I breathe it in and fall asleep instantly, with dreams that smell of gardens fit for gods. I am Colin, fully and truly, able to do more than just kiss. I am a spirit healer, someone who aids people in the quest to make their dreams come true. I dream of being Colin when I am grown, a man and a spirit healer both and I dream that someday I won't have to give up one of my loves in order to live the other.