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BETWEEN WORLDS
& A CONVERSATION ON FANTASY, PORTALS, AND ESCAPE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Sarah Watkins
May 2020

Accepted by:
Nic Brown, Committee Chair
Dr. Erin Goss
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ABSTRACT

The primary content of this creative thesis is a portion of a manuscript—the first four chapters of a novel to be called, *Between Worlds*. This could be considered a work of fantasy and science fiction. Additionally, this thesis contains a critical essay entitled, “A Conversation on Fantasy, Portals, and Escape,” which explores the idea of multiple genres within fantasy and the question of escape versus escapism in fiction. This essay elucidates on the creative work herein, as *Between Worlds* ventures into both multiple genres and the argument surrounding escapism.

DEDICATION

For my parents who always believed regardless of me going into English,
Reb who kept me mostly sane,
and my Grand Council who agreed to read this even after knowing it was from me.

Cheers to you all!

And though I am compelled to end this (mostly because it's due in a few hours) I would be remiss if I didn't thank everyone else who helped. So thanks All! You know who you are. I

raise a mug of tea in your honor.

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A CONVERSATION ON FANTASY, PORTALS, AND ESCAPE

“I propose to speak about fairy-stories, though I am aware that this is a rash adventure. Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold.”--Tolkien

In the past fantasy has been seen as a genre with less to offer than other genres. That narrative has been changing as fantasy grows in popularity. There’s an interesting portrayal of fantasy though—that its main purpose is one of escape. Or more specifically, escapism. It’s great for a jaunt away from life’s burdens but doesn’t offer much more than a pleasant diversion. These thoughts are beginning to shift with readers and writers seeing value in the genre other than a momentary pleasant excursion. I want to talk about this value in regards to portal fantasy.

Portal fantasy seems to be more connected with escapism due to the literal “escape” that often happens. But as academic historian and writer, Farah Mendleson points out in her article “Toward a Taxonomy of Fantasy” portal fantasies are not intrinsically an escape, but about the start of a new thought process or the beginning of a quest. “...the portal fantasy is about entry, transition, and negotiation” (Mendleson, 174). The portal in a fantasy world takes the reader to another time and place. However, it’s not only an entry— it functions as both an opening of the world and a bringing together of ideas. The portal takes the reader from where they’re comfortable and drops them into a place of confusion and uncertainty where they must discover how to “negotiate” their new present. Portals are a challenge to the status quo. They exist to upset the order of the norm and toss both reader and character into a new situation and thought process.

Portal fantasy allows a reader to move between the known into a place of fantastic unknown. They are as lost as the characters and can place themselves more easily into a character who, like them, is a stranger to this new world system. The classic portal fantasy, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* takes children from an Earth embroiled in World War 2 and removes them to a place of lore. But even though the portal takes them to a new world, it doesn't take them away forever or even let them forget that war is going on. When a character is thrust into a new world, we get to "start over." We begin with no preconceived notions about the way that we can interact with the world and the way that it works. When the Pevensie children enter Narnia they, and we, have no idea what to expect. There could have been a fairy that met Lucy just as easily as there was a faun. Every entry through a portal opens new processes in our minds. We begin again. And that beginning isn't escaping problems, it's rethinking them and our ability to cope with them.

The Pevensie children are tossed from one world war into another. If the story was meant to function as escapism, then it would have placed the children in a safe space where they could hide. Narnia showed the children their strength and that even though they were "only" children, they could make a difference in the world they found themselves dropped into. They learned the control that they did have, and how they could rely on each other. This gave them the courage to face the war that they were returned to on Earth. They didn't leave and come back when the war was over. They were returned to the exact time and spot as when they left. Though now more resilient and trusting of each other. They weren't allowed to escape their own world, but they were given the tools to see their problems and themselves in a different, more courageous light.

Fantasy may be an escape sometimes as with any other story, but it is not inherently escapist. But escape that encourages, escape that refreshes the mind and body for continuing the difficult life ahead—that’s an escape that’s worth something. “Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic...[critics] confound the escape of the prisoner with the flight of the deserter” (Tolkien, 148). Portal Fantasy can seem to fall beneath this deserter/escapist mentality more so than other genres as it usually includes one person from Earth finding themselves in another place or world. But the goal is not escape, but to see problems and solutions from a different angle or perspective. Portals don’t take you away from problems. Usually, they land you in even bigger problems that force you to realize you have the ability to confront the problems in your present just as you do in the fantastical world. Confronting doesn’t mean perfect victory or some nonsense about how you can do anything—it just means that you’re refreshed with a new realization that you can attack the problem from other angles instead of running from it.

More often than not, characters who try to escape into permanent diversion are actually brought to a place where they are forced to deal with their troubles. Neil Gaiman’s critically acclaimed novel, *Coraline* is an example of this concept. Coraline finds that her parents don’t understand her and have no time for her. Her neighbors are strange creatures obsessed with themselves and what they did in their pasts. She finds a door in her new house that is a portal to another dimension where her Other Mother cares for her and her Other Father only wants to do things that please her. It seems like she’s escaped from the world of dull anonymity and entered the ideal life. The problem is that this new world is a trap and to live here permanently she must eventually give up her soul. The world is only a place created by the Other Mother to trap

children. The dimension exists, but not in the way that she can see it. It's a front that appears to be a better house and father and neighborhood, but in reality, it's all just webs that have been shaped to look like a better life. Coraline must destroy her "escapism" before it takes over her life and even the "real" world.

The fantasy is not the reality and Gaiman shows us that it doesn't work when we try to make the fantasy our reality. Coraline's reality is that her parents don't treat her badly. She's not being abused, she just feels little overlooked. Gaiman shows his readers that attempting to escape forever and live in denial of our real-life situations, is not only dangerous, but it can cost us everything. However, he's not saying that we should abandon all joy in story and live away from fantasy. He's warning us to take care how we interact with fantasy and how that interaction affects our relationship to the real world.

My story, *Between Worlds* has moments where this idea is shown in a different way. Maeren did fall through a portal into a fantastic world, Heorth, but that world has far more physical and mental danger than the life she would've grown up in. There's constant war instead of safety and peace, learning to fight instead of learning geometry, and making friends with wizards and snarky faeries instead of going to the movie with fellow teenagers (well that last one might be better). That fantastical world becomes her real world; when she gets back to Earth, she has to make the decision whether to go back to the war torn world to save her friends, or to stay on Earth and live the more carefree life with an Earth family that loves and cares about her. In essence she "escaped" the difficult life, got to refresh herself by seeing her Earth family again, but then chooses to go back to the trauma of her "reality" because she cares about the lives she would be hurting if she stayed.

The portal fantasy in *Between Worlds* functions as a way to take the main character out of her comfort—which is now the fantastical world she’s lived in for a decade—and place her not only in new worlds but also place her back into her younger body. This body is not the one she’s familiar with now. It is the discomfort of something that should be familiar but has become foreign due to the distance of time and experience. She’s a twenty-four-year-old in her body of thirteen years. This use of the portal to change not only Maeren’s surroundings, but the body that she finds herself in, makes the portal less an escape, and more of challenge to overcome. She doesn’t have the warrior’s body that she worked hard to form, the scars that held her memories from Heorth are erased making it feel as if her own body is a betrayal, and people around her treat her as a child whose thoughts are considered to be only rampant imaginings.

As Maeren journeys through the different portals she finds herself constantly challenged and forced to reevaluate what she values—will she save her sister or the book that is her link to her homeworld? Is her Earth family or her Heorth family the most important to her life? Leaving the comfort of the familiar forces Maeren to make uncomfortable choices. What portal fantasy does so well is taking away the apron strings and making a character struggle and stand on their own two feet, not only in physical challenges, but moral as well. In Maeren’s case it brings up the question of why a character with a seemingly fine life would want to leave that?

As I wrote Maeren’s story I found that I was exploring the use of portals just as much as Maeren was. As Mendelson said, “...portal fantasies require that we learn from a point of entry...the portal fantasy must be navigated” (Mendelson, 173). Maeren’s story necessitated the navigating of worlds that became themselves an exploration of genre. Originally, *Between Worlds* began with tentative ties to an exploration of the stages of grief. Those ties still remain

lightly fastened to the characters and story; if you look hard enough you can pull on them a bit. Along the way, however, it also became an adventure through different fantasy type genres. This genre adventure came about as I was trying to differentiate the words and the story that was happening through each one. Organically each world began to take on aspects of genres that I appreciate and enjoy. These worlds gave the story the opportunity to take advantage of the best parts of the different genres.

The first world after Earth, leans toward Science Fiction with spaceships and alien creatures and a sentient planet. The world is focused on the instability of emotions, but also draws a contrast to those who try too hard to bottle up their emotions. Grief and uncertainty build up and make it difficult to process not only these emotions, but logical thought as well. Maeren has to realize the balance of not letting herself be controlled by her emotions—either by the world encouraging emotion to the extent of chaos or the beings on the planet withholding emotion to the extent of pointless existence. Sci-fi allows the reader to examine a world that might happen. It's a possible fantasy based on an unknown potential. But this is not constrained to futuristic devices or worlds, Sci-fi often deals with emotions and moral dilemmas as well. Maeren has to deal with a planet that feeds on emotions and thus she struggles with how and what she can feel in these circumstances. To be denied emotions is to be denied a basic form of humanity, and Maeren must decide how much she can worry over her sister, Bri, and when that worry becomes a hindrance in actually rescuing Bri. Sci-fi gives a great outlet for this type of struggle as the focus on emotions and humanity can be magnified by the way that the planet heightens those emotions to the point of insanity.

The planet Maeren finds herself on next has a steampunk feel. It's focus is on a kind of steampunk with an alchemy type magic that requires “sacrifice” to work. The world has a system of “replacement.” They replace what they’ve lost or sacrificed with created parts that might work even better than the original. Thus sacrifices mean less and the alchemy becomes stagnate. This created a strange dichotomy within a society that based itself around sacrifice and magic.

Steampunk is a great choice to showcase creative replacement and sacrifice because that genre is defined by the way that it replaces aspects of history with futuristic contraptions and sacrifices a complete futuristic shift with nods toward Victorian history. It’s a place where characters both wear corsets and have robot geared arms. In *Between Worlds*, Maeren meets a man who has a cyber eye and a geared robotic leg. The leg he lost in battle, but the eye he sacrificed to use alchemy to create a medicine that saved his deathly ill nephew. The theme of replacement and sacrifice is overarching through the chapters in that world.

In addition, steampunk explores how we see the past and what elements we cling to and bring into the future, as well as giving readers a dynamic ability to make us see our present in light of the future and past. For example, the corset plays a major part in the fashion that is iconic to Steampunk. This corset is an object that signifies a certain time period where women were oppressed and had few choices. The badass female that wears a corset and high heels on an airship could be implying a feminist twist: I have brought this into the future by my own choice and I’m owning this thing that once owned me. Or it could be an indictment on the fact that even in the future we cling to outdated and constricting modes of patriarchy. The articles in Steampunk have a duality that force readers to acknowledge the ways in which our past dictates

and is incorporated into our present. I'm intrigued by this aspect of steampunk and as I keep writing on this world I'm excited to see how it's brought into Maeren's story.

Heorth, Maeren's "home world" is a typical sword-and-sorcery, high fantasy. There's the familiar medieval veneer over the world where wizards battle sorcerers and magical creatures such as faeries and trolls, are part of the everyday. As of now, this world is seen mostly through flashbacks during the journey of the story. Its effect is more to show the reader the change that Maeren already went through, lessons that correlate to the struggles at hand, and reason why she wants to return and save her "family." The world of the flashbacks show that Maeren didn't escape anything when she was brought to Heorth. In fact, she was thrown from a peaceful, idyllic existence into the troubles of war and the confusion of an unknown world. She must find her way in this strange place. Her confusion and fear at the way that this new world works, mirrors the uncertainty of real life, when an event happens and a person finds themselves suddenly faced with a new world. They might eventually figure out how to navigate and even thrive in that existence, but then, as life happens, they're thrown again into a new uncertainty, and life goes on.

Maeren's story has this feel to it. Each time she gets comfortable, something happens to force her to re-evaluate what's important in her life and where her energies should go. Far from making Maeren comfortable or offering her an escape, the portals in *Between Worlds* compel our main character to confront her choices and the consequences that come from each choice she has to make.

Fantasy genres create unique ways that readers are forced to evaluate their own decisions. It's not so much an escapism as it is a way to evaluate yourself without being fully aware that you're doing it. Fantasy both engages the mind, and alters our perceptions. Every engagement with it grows until you have something that's worth more than the sum of its parts.

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CHAPTER 1

WORLDS UNSEEN

Maeren's hands trembled as she read the spell from the book. She crouched behind a boulder, but glanced around it to see Jarl still distracting the tyrant ruler, Theron. Maeren was only human, but part of Jarl's power had been temporarily transferred to her so that she could read the spell. Theron wouldn't know until it was too late who was tolling his death note.

Her voice grew stronger as the words' power built. The warlock seemed to know something was wrong. His spells appeared to weaken as Meaven's spell began to expand. She faltered when Jarl was pinned down by a spell. He was shouting, but she couldn't understand him over the wind and the words. They echoed in the vacuum where the clashing sounds of battle should have been. She saw their army of Outliers—resistance men and women wounded and dying, but no sounds of screaming pain entered her void. She prayed that her friends, Alena and Reg, were still alive. Theron was crushing Jarl beneath the weight of the wizard's own magic, but Maeren knew she could only keep reading. The only way to save any of them was to finish the spell.

From the side she saw one of Theron's grey wraiths coming close. Reg's battle cry rang out and the creature fell beneath the half-troll's axe. He gave her a wink and turned his back, cutting down any of the wraiths who got near.

Why was the spell so long? She tried to speed up, but the words came slowly from her throat as if the spell itself was reluctant. Finally the last word whispered from her lips. There a moment. An inhale. Then the sounds of battle came rushing in. Theron's terrified expression

froze as, stripped of his power, he had no defence against Jarl's blade. His head fell to the field, and as his power vanished, his wraiths scattered.

Maeren slid down the boulder face, clutching the spellbook, her grey eyes staring out across the field of battle. They had won? A few of the Outlier's fighters continued to chase after the wraiths and cut them down and the sharp metallic smell of blood and gore hung in the air, but it was over. They had defeated Theron. The goal of eleven years was accomplished. And with his death, the curse over the land of Heorth shattered—the coolness of night at long last began to fall. Jarl, the brother she'd never had on Earth, slumped next to her and her head dropped to his shoulder.

“Look,” he said, his weary voice edged with awe. “The first star. The first star in fifty years.”

Her eyes followed his finger to the bright pinpoint in the sky. “I see it,” she said with a tired smile.

“Are you actually crying, old chap?” Reg said.

Jarl rolled his eyes, then narrowed them at the small group of Outlier leaders gathered nearby. He gently shifted Maeren off his shoulder. “Hold on a second,” he said and walked over to the group.

Jarl returned a few moments later, but his smile was strained.

“What is it?” Maeren said.

The young wizard ran an agitated hand through his matted silver hair before he replied, “We did break Theron and his spell, but his general, Sansere escaped. Her sorcery has the potential to be powerful as his. We have to find her and destroy her before she threatens our new

world.” He turned to Maeren. “I can take the spell book back. I’m going to need it to figure out how to beat Theron’s general.”

Maeren reached the book out, but just as Jarl’s fingers brushed the spine, the world flashed with bright colors. Her friends’ faces began to fade and their voices seemed to come from a great void. The colors swirled around her and it felt like she was being sucked through to somewhere else. The familiarity of it terrified her, and she tried to claw and grasp at anything. No! Jarl! Reg, Help!

~&~

“No!” Maeren shouted as she jerked awake, her body trembling, sheets soaked in sweat. A moment later her door burst open and her mother rushed in.

“Are you ok, Sweetie?” her mom asked. “Was it another nightmare?”

Maeren took a shaky breath. “Yeah,” she said and looked out her window at the bright stars. “A nightmare.”

Her mom sat on the bed, gently rubbing Maeren’s hand. Maeren turned her hand over and squeezed her mom’s. She’d missed her mom’s comfort and tenderness when she grew up in Heorth. Moms were the best medicine for nightmares and heartbreak. Even if they didn’t understand what was going on.

“This has been going on for three months now, honey,” her mom said. “Do you want to tell me what happened that day in the woods?”

Maeren just stared. Her mom sighed. “I mean, did something happen other than the Narnia story that you keep telling of living in another world for a decade? This isn’t healthy, Ren. Just tell me so that I can get my sweet little girl back.”

Maeren pulled her hand away, rubbing its unfamiliarly smooth palm. She didn’t answer her mother. She’d answered so many times—that thirteen-year-old was gone. Maybe the body was back, but Maeren was twenty-four in her head. She knew that she had lived eleven years in the world of Heorth. She had grown up learning to sword fight from a wizard, cook from a faery, and hunt from a half-troll. She had grown up in fear for her friends’ and her own life, but no one back on earth believed her. According to them she had walked into the woods one day, been gone for a few hours, and came back troll-mad insane.

Her mom got up and hovered by the door. “You really need to see someone about these imaginings, Ren. This isn’t healthy,” she said and gave Maeren one last worried look, before heading back to bed.

Maybe it wasn’t healthy, but these thoughts, these memories, were all she had left of that life. The moon scattered bright light across her pale, unmarred skin. She had thought about marking it herself. Creating deep scars in memory of the ones she was sure had been erased from her body. She hadn’t yet, but the possibility lingered. She needed something substantial to remind her of the way life used to be. Like she was determined it would be again. She clenched her fist and looked at her disappointing biceps. She had been trying to tone this body, but it was nowhere near the toned athletic build that eleven years of living by what you can hunt, and fighting battles to survive, made it. Maybe it wasn’t healthy, but Maeren wasn’t about to give up.

Her life in Heorth couldn't be gone forever. She refused to believe that the magic had just abandoned her. What would be the point?

She reached for the book beside her bed. The soft leather and raised engraving of a spray of silver stars, was comforting. When she'd first been jerked back, she'd tried to use the book to open a portal, but the magic hadn't worked, or maybe she'd had none left from the power that Jarl had given her. She needed to get back. Jarl had to have this book if they stood a chance against the general. The spell book was ancient and had been passed down from wizard to wizard. Spells could be memorized, but the powerful ones were long and intricate. She would get the book and herself back to Heorth. She just had to figure out how.

Laying back, Maeren pulled the covers up and drifted back into her favorite thought—that being here on earth was all a dream. She had been knocked out on the battlefield and would wake up soon to find Jarl telling her to stop lazing around, and Alena fluttering about punching Jarl for his insensitivity and asking her if she was ok, and Reg bursting in with an armful of unhelpful objects he had grabbed in a panic. Eventually sleep claimed her. Maybe it would wake her up from this nightmare.

A week later, Maeren's parents caved to her begging to go to the desert. Since Heorth had been a desert because of the curse that it was under, Maeren held to the belief that maybe she could find a portal to that world in a similar place. Or at the very least, get a tiny taste of her past life. Her mom seemingly had decided that it might help Maeren move past the delusions if she were able to see that the desert was just a desert and not a way to another world.

The car ride was long, made even longer by the complaining of her younger sister, Bri. Bri was two years younger than Maeren, but now it felt like she was thirteen years younger.

“Are we there yet?” Bri asked for the tenth time. “Why can’t we be there already?”

Maeren shook her head and turned up her music. It was odd listening to music again through headphones. She was cringing at some of her old favorites, yet there was still a satisfying feeling of nostalgia. Maybe she could bring her ipod through the portal and see if Jarl could find a magical way to charge it. A hard poke to her shoulder had her turning to look at Bri.

“Aren’t you tired?” Bri said, when Maeren moved her headphones back.

“Yeah, but complaining isn’t really going to help us get there any faster. Do you want to listen to my music?” she said, holding out her ipod.

Maeren caught her mom’s astonished look in the rearview mirror. Bri appeared skeptical, but eventually snatched the ipod and waited as if Maeren would explode and yell for it back. Maeren settled back and closed her eyes. “Number 4 is my favorite.”

A few hours later, Bri had gotten tired of the music, dropped the ipod in Maeren’s lap, and began complaining again.

“Hey,” Maeren said, interrupting another series of “are we there yet.” “at least the twins aren’t here. Remember when we went to see Grammy and they spit up all over us?”

Bri’s scowl cleared a little. “And Drew wiped his nose all over your new purple shirt,” Bri said with a laugh. “They travel terribly. That’s why mom and dad left them home this time.”

“I’d forgotten that. Where is that shirt? Did I ever get his snot out?”

Bri gave her an odd look. “Grammy washed it out right after we got there. That was only like, two weeks ago.”

Maeren shook her head. “Oh right. Well I’m going to conk out for a bit.” She turned away from the family that worried about her sanity, and pressed her cheek against the window. The car soon began to speed by desert. A warmth that had nothing to do with the temperature, welled up in her chest. She caught a glimpse of her mom in the window reflection and tightness fought with the warmth. Her hand dipped in her bag and gripped the spine of the spellbook. She didn’t have a choice.

They reached their hotel near the Mojave desert late in the evening. And Maeren’s dad went to check them into the room. She waited impatiently for the next day to come. This was her best shot yet and she couldn’t forget that Heorth counted on her. Despite reconnecting with her Earth family, she had to get back to Heorth. She went to bed early and pretended to be asleep when Bri climbed in the hotel bed. An unexpected tear slid down her cheek. She had missed her family here.

The next morning, Maeren’s family finally headed out to the desert. As she stepped out of the car, the heat hit her face, and for the first time in three months, Maeren felt for a moment as if she were home. Her shoes sunk into the yellow sand and her eyes ached from the glare of the sun, but she was happy. She was twenty-four again, not the barely thirteen that her family here on earth still saw. In that moment she was herself. She gazed at the haze in the distance, a recent, yet long ago memory tugged at the corner of her mind.

&

Fifteen-year-old Maeren frowned as she grabbed a young Jarl’s helping hand to pull her up from the gritty sand. “What did I do wrong? I got my block up in time. What trick did you pull?”

“It wasn’t a trick,” her friend replied with a good natured grin. “Your guard was vertical so you didn’t catch my blade and I was able to attack over your defences. Now let’s try it again.”

Maeren groaned, but raised her sword. Jarl may have only been a year older than her, but he had lived in this world his whole life and had been studying fighting for most of that time. She might have been a mistake that he accidentally had brought through to the world of Heorth, but she wasn’t going to stay a mistake. She had already progressed quite fast in the two years she had been in this other world. And though the world was much different than Earth, and she missed her Earth family, there she’d always been different. She loved her parents and sisters, and the thought of never seeing them again had been a difficult one to come to terms with, but she had found a place here and a love for this family. They needed her more than her family back on Earth did. She wanted to fight with the ragtag group of resistors she had found herself in the midst of. Their battle had become hers. Their— “Youch! Jarl!” Maeren said rubbing her hip where Jarl had smacked her with the cloth-wrapped blade.

“Pay attention,” he said with a smirk, lifting his sword in a defensive stance.

&

Maeren jumped as her mom’s call and hand on her shoulder jerked her out of the memory.

“We’ve been calling you for five minutes, honey; are you ok?” her mom said, forehead wrinkled with the worry that Maeren was getting used to seeing.

She forced a smile. “I’m ok, Mom. Just drifted off in the beauty of the desert for a bit.”

Her mom’s face said that Maeren had been drifting for more than “a bit,” but her mom let it go and steered her over to some rock formation that her sister wanted to take a family picture

in front of. She smiled dutifully at the camera, but her eyes strayed to a glint on the side of her vision. Could it be...? Ignoring her family's confused cries, Maeren darted away over the sand and rocks toward a wind-carved rock archway.

Hope bubbled even as a sickening despair made it seem that the portal was too far away. She may have lost a shoe; the back of her mind registered sharp pain stabbing into her left foot, but that mattered so little. She clutched the book till her hand ached. This might be her one chance back. Scrambling through the shifting sand, she clawed her way to the rock arch. With a gasping breath she hurled herself through the archway glinting in the sun. For a moment she swore she felt the warmth, grasped the tendril of light, but then she found herself skidding on aching knees, still on Earth. She didn't even have the comfort of tears. She felt cold. An empty numbness. Her mother gathered her up tutting over the scrapes and cuts that Maeren barely felt the sting of.

“Come on, dear,” her mother said. “Let's get you inside. I think this heat has been a little too much for you.”

She caught the worried glances between her parents. They didn't understand. They couldn't know. They thought her a complete loon. And maybe she was...in this world. She closed her eyes.

That night she woke to her parents' agitated whispers. They were sitting in the little kitchenette of the hotel room. She peeked at her sister, Bri still slept beside her, the whispers not enough to disturb her dreams.

“We've got to get her help, Jared,” her mom said, tears evident in her voice. “She could have really hurt herself today. I think this is more than just delusions for attention. I think

something happened that day in those woods that she's too hurt to talk about. What if she's suppressed it with this thought of being a hardened warrior from another planet?"

Her father shrugged. "It makes sense, I guess. If she tries to have confidence as a grown adult who can defend herself from 'evil magic' then she could believe that she can defend herself from whatever happened."

"Exactly. I'm making an appointment for her to go see a psychologist." Her mom got up from the table and moved resolutely toward her purse, no doubt to retrieve her cell phone.

"Umm honey? It's midnight, not sure the office is open now."

Her mom froze, then collapsed back on the chair, her head in her hands.

"I just want her to be better."

Her dad put a comforting arm around her mom's shoulders, and Maeren turned over. She knew she was worrying her parents and that she suddenly seemed crazy. She didn't blame them, and actually had missed their caring. But Heorth was so real, and the memories that she had. She glanced at the spellbook on the bedside table. Her mom had brushed it off as a gift she must have gotten for her recent birthday, but Maeren knew it was more than that. She knew it was from Jarl and that it needed to get back to him.

She burrowed further under the covers. Maybe she'd try to be "normal" to calm her parents down, but how long could one hide one's true self? She wasn't thirteen anymore, and to go back to acting like that—she shuddered. But if she could keep suspicion off of her, then she could continue to look for portals without the constant worried questions from her parents. It was bittersweet to be back and see them again, but she had to return to Heorth. The book was just too important to the survival of the world they had only just redeemed.

When her parents told Maeren that they had made an appointment for her to see a psychologist, she bit her lip and didn't complain. If she had gone to another world, then there was a chance that others had also been. And if they had also been jerked back to Earth, they might have been sent to mind doctors as well. If she told the doctor her story maybe he'd let something slip and she'd be able to find someone else like herself. It wasn't a very realistic chance, but Maeren was willing to try anything.

So she told the man her story. After listening and nodding profusely, he asked some leading questions, then told her mom that she should see a psychiatrist to prescribe her some medication that might help. Like the mature adult that she was, Maeren proceeded to curse him out in the faery tongue and then stride out the door.

"I don't know what that was back there, but you need to get your act together, young lady," her mother said as they drove away. "And talking in gibberish won't help your cause. This has cemented the idea that you need serious help."

Maeren shook her head in frustration. "Try to understand this from my point of view, Mom. I'm twenty-four, have fought for my life in multiple battles, had to survive magic and warlocks and learning a whole new world, and now I'm being treated like a delusional child. I know you don't see it, but that's how I feel."

Her mom looked away and they didn't speak for the rest of the trip. After that day, Maeren held back and only spoke of "normal" things to the doctors. The only saving grace was that it was summer. She was determined to figure out a way back to Heorth before school started. The longer she was gone, the more chance of losing the spellbook, and she had to return it.

Heorth was counting on it. Not to mention the much less pressing, but still frustrating dilemma that to go back to school would be unbearable now, and she had completely forgotten things like algebra and geography. They hadn't really been useful in learning to survive on a different world.

Every once in a while, she wondered if she'd had a stroke and dreamed the whole thing, but that thought rarely lasted. Earth seemed oddly foreign and familiar at the same time, but this prepubescent body she was in, felt alien—like an uncomfortable memory. Surely hitting her head wouldn't have resulted in the clarity that she had now. And she also had the book to prove it. Just holding it, there was a warmth and power that she could feel pulsing in it. Her parents might say that it was her imagination, but she had weathered more difficult storms than unbelief.

Odds were that Jarl was trying to bring her back, she just had to bide her time and make sure she was ready whenever the portal opened. Though she admitted that after her first desperate attempts to get back had failed, and, despite the tension that her “mental illness” caused in the family, it had been really good to see her parents and sisters again. But she couldn't stay on Earth. They needed her and the book back on Heorth. She was going to miss this family again when she left. But she had to leave. She didn't belong here anymore.

Three psychologists later, Maeren didn't have much hope for this fourth one. Walking into the new psychologist's waiting room, she noticed immediately that it was different. This place was not slathered in the dull, “calming” colors of taupe the others had favored, instead, tones of dove grey, blue, and rich purples brightened the walls and chairs. Prints and paintings of distant, snow-covered mountains, and quiet sun-speckled glens drew the mind into

contemplations of the otherworldly, of nature-ruled fantasy lands where swords and sorcery still reigned. Maeren felt comfortable here. She felt safe.

“Maeren Doyle?” a smiling assistant in a bright sweater called from the doorway. At Maeren’s nod, he continued, “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to the back office and Dr. Susan will be with you shortly.”

Maeren had talked her mom into waiting outside, and she had filled out the paperwork for new clients online last night, so there was nothing left but to follow the assistant. The man opened a door to a comfortable looking office and motioned Maeren inside. He repeated his line about Dr. Susan arriving shortly, and asked if he could get her anything. After agreeing to bring her some water, he left her alone.

The inside of the office was a cheery pale yellow and sage green and continued the painting motif of nature devoid of human presence. A particular painting next to the door caught her attention. A huge tree wreathed in mist. The trunk was twisted and split wide enough that a person could slip through. And though the tree was clearly in the midst of a deep forest, the summit of a mountain barely seen behind it, through the split in the trunk one could see the ocean. Before Maeren could examine the painting closer, the door opened and an elderly woman slightly hunched and dressed in a bright blue skirt and top, entered the room.

“Hi Maeren, I’m Dr. Susan,” the elderly lady said holding out her hand, and after Maeren remembered she needed to shake it, Dr. Susan continued, “Let’s sit down if you like, and just have a conversation.” She motioned to a comfy oversized chair on a sage green rug, and took a seat in the one opposite it, pushing her long black and silver braid over one shoulder. Maeren

shrugged, with a last glance at the picture, she plopped down in the chair and curled her legs under her.

“So Maeren, what brings you here today?” the doctor said with a gentle smile. There was a depth to her dark brown eyes that seemed familiar somehow.

“To be honest, my mother is worried about me.”

Susan nodded in understanding. “And why is your mom worried?”

Maeren took a deep breath. There was something about this Dr. Susan that inspired confidences, maybe she would at least sympathize instead of just thinking her crazy right off the bat.

“I’ve been to another world,” she said. “In fact, I lived there for eleven years, became a warrior--though not a great one compared to my friends--and helped to defeat an evil that had enslaved the planet for fifty years. I was pulled back to earth without warning--still not sure I’m actually here or if *this* is all a nightmare--and now I’m in my thirteen-year-old body again. My parents think I endured some trauma in the woods that I’m suppressing, which if you count growing up in a world where I often feared for my life, then I guess that would be trauma.” She ended with a half-hearted smile.

Dr. Susan didn’t immediately grunt out “hmms” or “ahhs” with a superior look. Instead, she sat back and tapped her pen thoughtfully.

“I do deal with many cases of repressed trauma that come out in forms of fantasies. Believing in monsters and other worlds have helped people through times of great horror or pain.” She looked directly at Maeren. “Do *you* think you’re suppressing something?”

No one had actually asked that. They had all asked, “What do you think you’re suppressing?” No one had given a minutia of credence to Maeren’s opinion on the reality or illusion of her situation. She didn’t know how to answer. She knew in her heart that she wasn’t suppressing anything, but did she take the easy way out, agree that she was and get out of the office? She looked back at the open, wrinkled face of the doctor. “No,” she said. “If I’m repressing anything, it’s memories of battles where I saw friends fall, skewered on the swords of the wraiths.” She shrugged ruthfully. “Actually, I guess I’m not repressing much.”

Dr. Susan smiled. “No it doesn’t sound like you are.”

After that visit, Maeren, much to her mother’s joy, consented to continue meeting with Dr. Susan. There was just something about the woman that made Maeren feel like she was being heard, not just listened to, but actually heard. Susan might not believe her, but she heard Maeren, and that was more than anyone had done so far.

It was on their third meeting that Maeren asked about the tree painting.

Susan smiled fondly. “My little sister painted that.”

“She’s very good, and the subject is intriguing. It reminds me of...”Maeren trailed off, unsure if she should say what she had in mind.

“A portal?” Susan said and grinned at Maeren’s sudden attention. “My sister was also very interested in other worlds. She saw portals in lots of places--twisted oaks, old paintings, arched branches in the forests; she was a dreamer for sure.”

“Could I meet her?” Maeren wasn’t doing a good job of hiding her excitement, maybe this other person would understand, maybe they had been to another place too?

The doctor shook her head and pain filled her eyes. “She died many years ago in a train accident. That was one of the first and last things she painted.”

“Oh. “Maeren wasn’t sure what to say. It was never easy to address someone else’s loss. “I’m so sorry.”

Susan stared at the tree painting. “It’s never alright after you lose someone you love,” she said, “but memories are comforting.” The doctor glanced back at Maeren. “My sister used to say that portals are there if you become aware of them--a flash at the corner of your sight, an odd gnarled branch twisted in an arch, a whimsical ring of domed mushrooms--if you know where to look for portals, they are there. The trick is figuring out when they’re open.”

Maeren’s breath caught. That saying, that saying about portals had been something the fairy, Alena, used to say. Jarl and Alena often had fights about the nature of magic and portals.

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“...the trick is figuring out when they’re open,” Alena said, glaring up at Jarl.

The sixteen-year-old wizard just rolled his eyes. “That’s the old ways. Now we know that you don’t have to just wait around for a portal to open, they can be opened by people who wield magic, such as myself.” He ended with a comical sweeping bow and smirk in Maeren’s direction. “After all, we have the perfect example of such a scenario sitting amongst us.”

Maeren grinned back, happily swinging her legs beside the tree stump she was sitting on. She’d only been in Heorth for a year, but she’d heard this argument on the nature of magic many times since she’d arrived. So she knew that Alena was just about to come back with the argument that the way that Jarl used magic was unnatural and would eventually cause a problem.

“Yes, yes, you summoned a portal, but you couldn’t do it again. And thus poor Maeren got stuck here. You didn’t know what you did and furthermore, you didn’t know who or what might come through. And you lucked out that it was Maeren. Using powerful magic like that is unnatural. Small magics are ok, but we faeries know that messing with magic for your own purposes has a cost. Portals really should be left to the magic’s choice.”

“Magic’s choice?” Jarl scoffed. “Magic is a tool, not an entity that chooses things.”

Alena fluttered up and looked down at Jarl disdainfully. “Shows what you know. You’re smart in the ways of wizard tricks, but you’re ignorant about real magic,” she said then turned to Maeren. “Come on, let’s leave this degenerate and go catch some fish for dinner. I saw a stream a few miles west.”

“Degenerate? Degenerate?” Jarl faked outrage. “Just for that I’m not going to start the fire tonight with magic, someone will have to do it the hard way.”

“Then I guess you’re eating raw fish!” Alena called back.

Maeren hopped down from the stump and gave the wizard a conspiratorial eye roll. She caught his smile as she followed the faery out of the glen.

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Maeren had never known enough about magic to make her own theory, though with it bringing her back to earth unexpectedly she was inclined to lean on Alena’s judgement, but she clearly remembered that line. Could Susan’s sister have been to Heorth? Or were there other worlds with the same philosophy on magic? Did Dr. Susan know? What was going on?

CHAPTER 2

MAKING PROGRESS?

Maeren's last visit with Dr. Susan ended before Maeren could ask her more about the portal line. She was quiet on the way back to the house, answering her mom's questions with distracted shrugs.

When Maeren got home, she immediately shot upstairs to her room and tried to look up Dr. Susan's sister on the computer. She didn't have a name, but looking at the people that were presumed dead from the train crash, she decided that the girl had to be either fifteen-year-old Katherine Martin or nineteen-year-old Claire Henderson. She realized she didn't know Dr. Susan's last name, and that would probably clear this up quickly.

Maeren's mom interrupted her searches with the call to dinner, and she reluctantly left her computer. Something she had been appreciating having again. Eating with the family was still awkward. Her parents tried to ignore her "mind problems" and talk about everyday things, her friends that she had just seen last week, but whom Maeren only remembered with the fondness of nostalgia, and what college she was thinking about—none at all. The one-year-old twins were a good distraction, but then ten-year-old Bri would ask about Heorth and Maeren's parents would ultimately end the evening being upset with her for continuing to fill Bri's head with stories, though they didn't outright say as much. Instead they would look at each in panic and try to change the subject. Maeren just stopped talking about it altogether. It was easier that way. The only person that might believe her, seemed to be the doctor, so she waited impatiently for the next appointment.

A week finally passed and Maeren was sitting in the overstuffed sage green chair with brass buttons, waiting for Dr. Susan to come into the room. Maeren noticed the brass plate on the door said Susan Martin, so that cleared up which girl was the one she was looking for. The doctor came in well dressed as usual, her long silver streaked hair plaited in a neat braid.

“Hello, Maeren. How have you been this last week?” Dr. Susan said.

“Pretty good,” Maeren said, impatient to dive into her thoughts on Dr. Susan’s younger sister, “but I’ve been thinking, that line about portals that you said—the one where they are all around but we just have to find them when they’re open—my faery friend, Alena used to say that. She added something about wind, because faeries are obsessed with wind, but basically that was the line.” She leaned forward earnestly hoping that the doctor would consider her next thoughts. “I think your sister went to Heorth. I think she was in my home.”

The little doctor turned and pattered over with two cups of steaming tea and set them on the table. Her eyes had an odd sparkle behind the blue rimmed glasses.

“Tea?” she asked.

Maeren nodded and held in her impatience. The doctor smiled and perched on the edge of a yellow lounge chair.

“My sister never spoke of a world where there was always light and scorching heat. Her world was far colder. She always wanted to go back to see her friends and relive the magical lands. But let me ask you,” Dr. Susan said, leaning forward. “Why do you want to go back to Heorth, Maeren? Are you running from something here on Earth?”

Maeren shook her head and stared out the window that overlooked a dried out pond. The cracked dirt pockmarked with dead patches of marsh grass reminded her of the many dry

watering holes that the group came across as they traveled Heorth. “The easy answer is that my wizard friend needs a spellbook that I have because I was holding it when I was suddenly brought back to Earth, to defeat the general of the guy we just beat and save Heorth from being again enslaved. So I really need to get back for that.”

The doctor didn’t raise her brows or make “hmm” noises and write in a notebook. She merely took a sip of her tea and waited for Maeren to continue.

Maeren shrugged and looked back out the window. “The harder answer has to do with belonging, I guess.”

The doctor nodded, her forehead wrinkling in concern. “Your mother seems like a loving, caring woman who just wants the best for you,” she said. “Is that just a front?”

“No, no.” Maeren said. “She’s loving and cares about me, as does the rest of my family. I do love them, but...” she trailed off scrubbing a hand over her face in frustration. “It’s less that I’m running away from something and more that I’m running to something. I love my family here, but they’re not the family that I grew up with.”

The doctor’s voice was gentle when she said, “But you did grow up with them for thirteen years. That has to count for something.”

“But those years were just the good ones. It’s like when someone says they wish they could go back to being five when all they worried about was coloring inside the lines. But that time has passed. It doesn’t exist anymore. And if you went back it wouldn’t be the same because you’re not the same. I’m not the same. I can’t connect with this family anymore. Jarl, Alena, Reg—they’re the family that raised me through the hard times. They’re the family that doesn’t

look at me with pity and concern like someone they don't know anymore. I can't pretend to be the Maeren that my parents knew. I can't leave my Heorth family when they need me most."

As she walked out of the office Maeren felt that the doctor knew more than she let on. Her sister had gone through a portal, and Maeren wasn't convinced that Dr. Susan didn't believe that. She would just have to find some way of getting the doctor to tell her what actually happened to her sister. She had mentioned a train crash on the tracks by the beach that was a few miles from Maeren's house, but Maeren wondered if the girl had disappeared that day not from the crash, but going through another portal. She needed to find out exactly where the crash happened. There was always a cost to magic, but as Maeren's mother drove her to the house and chatted about the upcoming school year, she knew she was willing to pay that cost. She and the spellbook needed to get home.

Later that day, Maeren walked through the woods behind her house. The day was misting and wisps of fog settled in the dark places between trees. The eeriness didn't bother Maeren. It reflected her somber, frustrated mood and made her want to push on. A few minutes walk brought her to the arch of twisted branches by the creek. The branches mocked her with their stillness. She continued to come back to this place where the portal spirited her away to Heorth, but no matter how many times she walked, ran, or jumped through the branches, she remained on earth. As a thirteen-year-old...

Dr. Susan's questions had jarred Maeren. She'd only been obsessed with getting back to Heorth; she'd been behaving like the troll-headed teenager from so long ago. She needed to get back, not just for herself, but for the book, but what would that mean? Would she be a teenager again there? A half-adult wouldn't be the type of help that the group would need to defeat

Theron's general and rebuild the land. She plopped down with a sigh and pulled out her recently made fishing rod. She sat for a while just watching the creek drift by. Reg had been the one to teach Maeren how to catch and clean a fish. She'd been so bad at survival in those days and Jarl didn't have the patience, so it fell to the endearing half-troll to take up the slack.

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"Knock it off, Maeren. You're driving me crazy," Jarl said, shooting a half-glare in her direction.

"I'm driving you crazy?" Maeren said, jumping down from the rock she'd been laying on, tapping out bits of random Disney songs. "You're driving me crazy by not letting me do anything."

"That's because you don't know how to do anything. I really wonder about this world you're from. You don't know how to trap, hunt, or start a fire. How does anyone survive?"

"I've told you, we don't have to survive by hunting and building fires. We have electricity and stores to do that for us."

Alena landed between the bickering pair, folding up her shimmering wings behind her. "Honestly," she said, "you two are worse than my cousin's little faelings. Jarl, stop picking on Maeren for not growing up the same way you did—also you use magic to start fires so I'm not really sure you can complain about Maeren not knowing how to start them without magic." The faery raised her hand to cut off Jarl's sputtering defence, and continued, "And Maeren, stop bothering Jarl."

“Well what am I supposed to do? After the last time I tried to help in camp set-up Jarl says I’m not allowed to do anything but sit and wiggle my toes. I’m trying to be useful, not just sit around like a—a—well whatever your version of a bump on a log, is.”

“A bump on a log?” Alena said.

“Yeah, a thing that sits around with no purpose.”

“Oh, like a wizard without magic?”

Jarl glared at Alena; he had been going through a hard time with some of his spells since he’d accidentally opened the portal that pulled Maeren through to Heorth, and Alena was convinced that he was just afraid of his own power. “Even without magic,” he chimed in, “we’re of more use than some faeries I know.”

Just then Reg came into the clearing. Maeren was always amazed at how fast and quiet he was for such a large creature. His skin was a pale sage green with mottled darker spots that acted as a type of camouflage. Maeren had been terrified the first time she saw the half-troll. But she soon found that Reg was a fun-loving goofy sort, and despite his size and appearance, he was always comforting to be around.

The half-troll was carrying a rod in his stubby three fingered grip, but he stopped when he seemed to notice the bickering tension. “Oh no,” he said, turning back toward the trees. “I’m not gett’n involved in yer arguments.”

Sensing an opportunity, Maeren jumped up and ran after him. “Reg, wait!”

“Not getting involved,” he said.

Maeren caught up with his long strides and grabbed his arm. “I’m not asking you to,” she said, gulping in air and trying to get her breathing under control. “I wanted you to teach me how to fish.”

Reg’s overly large green eyes stared at her. “To fish?”

“Yeah. If I’m going to be in this world, then I don’t want to be useless. I want to help with the group.”

“Okay, but the kind of help you gave us last time…” he trailed off, scratching one of his short horns nervously.

Maeren crossed her skinny arms. “Will no one forget about that? Look, how will I ever be more than decoration for the group if you guys never let me do anything? How will I know you won’t just leave me somewhere if I can’t contribute anything?” she added under her breath. “And anyway,” she continued with a cheeky grin, “fishing can’t be that hard.”

Reg smiled back and gave a good natured shrug that Maeren interpreted as an invitation. By the time they got to the nearby creek, Reg taught her what type of branches would make a pliable, yet strong rod and helped her pick one out. Then he showed her how to make it and what parts of the stream to look for the most fish. They added some bait to their thorn-hooks and sat down to wait.

“I’m still not used to this always day thing,” Maeren said when she couldn’t stand the silence any longer.

Reg grunted.

“I mean, can you really get good sleep?” Maeren continued, trying to draw the half-troll into conversation. The concept of fishing was fairly easy, but she wasn’t a girl given to much silence. “I haven’t been able to sleep through the ‘nights’ yet, and I’ve been here over a month.”

Reg finally replied, “It’s all we’ve ever known; so I guess we get as much sleep as we should. Jarl believes that one day we’ll overthrow Theron and break the curse of perpetual day-heat, and we’ll feel the coolness of night again.”

Maeren flopped down on her stomach and peered into the water. “I don’t know. I mean, all the stories I read say that the scrappy group eventually wins, but being in the story? It doesn’t feel like we’re getting any closer to beating that crazed warlock. We’re still hiding in the forest, for wind’s sake.”

The half-troll grinned. “You’re picking up Alena’s slang.” A distant look entered his eye as he gazed over the river. “Jarl may be young, but he’s the most powerful wizard that’s been born in the time of the curse, and that Theron wasn’t able to kill off as a child. We have a chance to rally the people behind him, and that means we have a chance to succeed.”

Maeren opened her mouth to reply, when a jerk on her rod pulled her right into the murky water. She lost her rod and whatever grabbed it, and sat up sputtering and pulling weeds out of her clothes. “Gaverk!” she cursed with a word she’d often heard Alena use when frustrated, and wiped a hand across her eyes to clear the muddy water. Reg’s laughter filled the air, and Maeren couldn’t help but grin through the mud dripping down her face.

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Maeren shook her head at the fond memory. She’d gone on to catch a small fish that day, though Reg had to clean it because she refused to touch the slimy thing. But she’d eventually

learned not just how to clean a fish, but all the things that were required for survival in the harsh lands of Heorth. Not just building fires and hunting with Reg, but weapons training with Jarl, and plant recognition and how to read the stunted forests and deserts with Alena. Through the years she'd become as adept as her friends and even surpassing some of them in certain skills—

“Ren!” Bri called from somewhere nearby.

Before Maeren could decide whether she wanted peace or to answer, her little sister came around the bend and spotted her.

“There you are,” Bri said. “What are you doing out here? Are you trying to find that otherworld doorway thing?” She plopped down next to Maeren and gave her sister’s handmade rod a suspicious glance. “Mom says you need doctors cuz you’re crazy.”

Maeren rolled her eyes and turned back to the creek. “Mom doesn’t think I’m crazy,” she said. “She just doesn’t believe my story because, well, it’s a hard story to believe.”

Maeren had been able to admit to herself that if she’d had a daughter who’d come to her with this same story, she probably would have thought something else was wrong as well. But even that knowledge didn’t make the looks of worry and the constant inquires for truth much easier to endure.

“Maybe,” Bri said with a shrug. “You do act different. But sometimes you act like a thirteen-year-old too.”

“Getting treated like a child is bringing back my inner angsty teenager, I guess,” Maeren said.

“You really think you lived another life? Like those fantasy stories of kids who go to other worlds?”

“I don’t think it. I know it. I didn’t just imagine eleven years of history for myself. I know that it happened.”

Bri lapsed into silence for a minute then poked Maeren in the shoulder.

“Are you actually fishing?” she said.

“Yeah, why?”

Before Bri could reply, a hard tug on the line grabbed Maeren’s attention and she fought to pull up the fish without losing it. When she finally landed it, it wasn’t the largest trout, but it might make a decent lunch. Working quickly she plopped the fish on a nearby flat stone and stunned the fish with a blow to the skull and then cut its artery. After it bled out, she split open at the base of the gills with a sharp knife she’d pilfered from the kitchen and then washed the whole thing in the stream. Holding the fish she turned around to see where she might try to start a fire to roast it, though she hadn’t considered the wet wood, when she saw her sister’s stunned expression.

“You just—you just—” Bri said.

“I just killed a fish. I thought we could have it for lunch since we’re already out here,” Maeren replied. She glanced around trying to find a place where the wood might have dried out. Then she spotted a small circle of light a little ways off. The sun might have dried that area. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go over to that sunlit area; we could probably cook this over there.”

Bri was still staring at her like she’d just sprouted wings.

“What is it? I thought you liked fish,” Maeren said.

“You really did grow up in another world, didn’t you?” Bri said, her blue eyes wide.

Maeren’s head jerked around to look at her sister. “You believe me? Why? How?”

“Just a few weeks ago, you were running away from Donnie when he teased you with that head-on fish he’d gotten from the grocery store. You hated fish and you’d never go try to catch them. Now you’re fishing and gutting them? I don’t think you’d change or learn that so fast.”

“Jarl used to make fun that I couldn’t clean and prep the animals for dinner and didn’t even like touching or looking at them,” Maeren said with a rueful smile. “Finally I just got mad enough and had Reg teach me how to gut them. That was an interesting couple of days.” She chuckled.

Bri shook her head. “I can’t believe...this is so crazy,” she said.

“I can’t believe that you believe,” Maeren said. It was hard to understand that her little sister had seen what the adults had refused to. Perhaps she should clean a fish in front of her mom. Maybe that would convince her. Doubtful though. Bri was a child, and children are more able to see clearer into mysteries because they don’t automatically ignore the “impossible.”

“You should show Mom and Dad,” Bri said, bouncing around as Maeren tried to pick through and find some dry or mostly dry sticks. “They’d have to believe you then.”

Maeren shook her head at that. “They’d just say that it was a trick I’d learned just to try to make them believe my crazy delusions. They’d end up worrying more about me getting desperate for their acceptance of my delusions.”

“I don’t know. You gutted and filleted that fish faster and better than some of those Food Network people I watch all the time.” Bri paused as Maeren began working on starting a fire. As a trail of smoke began to rise from the kindling and Maeren expertly stacked wood so that it would catch the flame, Bri continued, “Annd you just started a fire like a Boy Scout, but you

weren't ever a Boy Scout. And you're scared of fire. You don't even get close enough to make s'mores."

Maeren glanced up. "I was, wasn't I? I'd forgotten that," she said with a smile. "Survival in another world makes you realize the things you should fear, and those things you no longer have the luxury to fear."

"What did you fear in Harth?"

"Heorth," Maeren absently corrected. She looked down at the fish she was stuffing with herbs. She placed it onto the hot coals at the fire's edge and stared into the crackling flames. "I was afraid of losing those I loved. Every day was a risk. I feared losing to the warlock tyrant. I feared being hungry and trusting the wrong people. There were lots of things I'd never feared here on earth, that I learned to dread there."

"So why do you want to go back?" Bri said.

"I have to return a spellbook. Jarl needs it to defeat General Sansere. She got away and she's almost as powerful as the warlock who held Heorth in his power before. Also," Maeren said after a pause and giving her sister a teasing push. "I can't stay here and relive being a teenager."

"But why do you have the book?"

"Well, I guess that's a good story to tell while the fish is cooking," Maeren said and settled back against a tree. She told of the plan for that final battle. How Jarl had weakened himself so that they could surprise Theron with a spellcaster he'd never see coming. And she told how they had won, yet realized that a powerful enemy had escaped, and how at the last moment a portal had opened and jerked Maeren back to Earth.

“But, that doesn’t make sense,” Bri said. “You’ve said that portals don’t just open up in the middle of air, they’re anchored to trees or rocks or some natural thing. So how could you have walked into a portal without knowing it?”

That question had bothered Maeren as well. She hadn’t heard or seen anything until the portal had seemed to just collapse on her.

Bri’s eyes widened. “Maybe someone was trying to get you away? You said Jarl opened the portal that brought you here, maybe another wizard wanted you gone.”

Clarity zinged through Maeren’s head. Of course! But it wasn’t her they were trying to send it away, it was the book. She’d lay odds on the idea that Theron’s general had seen her with the book and put two and two together. General Sansere was a powerful sorcerer, even more powerful than they had originally known if she could open a portal. She must have been trying to separate Jarl and book to give herself a better chance. And she had succeeded. Maeren slumped against the tree. It was even more imperative that she get back.

A few days later, with school fast approaching and everyone but Bri still treating her as if she were a tragedy victim or insane, Maeren felt more than ever that she needed to get back home. Since her portal seemed to have no intention of working, she began to look elsewhere. Stepping in puddles and through magical-looking doorways always searching for the portal that would be open, but only getting wet feet and scolded in the process.

One evening, she made up her mind that she had to find an open portal. She stuffed the spellbook in an across-the-shoulder bag, and as she was about to sneak out to hike to the beach

where Dr. Susan's sister had disappeared, Bri came out of the bathroom and saw her. Both girls froze.

"You're going to find a portal," Bri said almost as a challenge.

"Yes. I have to."

"Why can't you just stay? Didn't you miss us? Did you not want to come back to ever see me again?"

"It wasn't like that, Bri. I did miss you, I wanted mom so much when I was running for my life, and I'd replay all the annoying things you used to do to me, like steal my hairbrush and upload kid music on my ipod. But when there's no chance of going back, no way to change the past, you have to adapt. Eventually Heorth became my home and my companions became family." She slumped against the wall. "And now it's happened again, only this time I'm longing for a vampiric fairy, a wizard, and a half-troll." Maeren smiled ruefully.

"But why would you want to leave again? You could stay here. No one knows you left. It would be like nothing had happened."

"Bri...I can't stay even if I wanted to. You know I have to get the spellbook back. And I'm not that Maeren anymore. I can't just pretend. Maybe if I had come back in a month or even a year, but now?" She shook her head. "I just can't. You guys aren't going to die if I leave." Without my help, my family there could die. Someday, you'll understand."

Bri's face crumpled. "That's stupid and you're stupid and you just don't care. Well you can just go back to your stupid world. See if I care." Bri kicked the door frame and raced into her room slamming the door.

“Bir!” Maeren moved to follow, but then thought better. Her sister wouldn’t want her right now. And maybe this was better anyway. “It’s not like that,” she whispered, then tightened her back and headed out into the night.

The moon was shining brightly and she easily found her way down to the beach and began to walk along the sand at the bottom of the cliffs. She had been out for a few hours and had almost given up when she noticed an odd glow coming from a small cleft in rock above her. A faint, barely-there idea of a glow that she could only see on the edge of her vision. If she looked at it straight on, it wasn’t there. Excitement stirred her blood and her heart began to pound. With sweaty palms she clutched the rock and tried to pull herself up to the cleft.

“Why didn’t I work out when I was younger?” she grumbled a few minutes later and cursed as she slipped again. Her arms ached by the time she had made it the short way up to the cleft in the stone. But the faint glow was still there. She didn’t hesitate to pull herself up and squeeze in. There was a small passageway and the blue glow was coming from the end of it.

“Maeren!” Bri’s voice shouted from the beach. What was her little sister doing following her? And why hadn’t Maeren noticed earlier?

“Maeren! Wait for me!”

Maeren’s teeth bit hard into her lip. She didn’t want to leave Bri, but this might be her only chance. She glanced at the glow and then back toward her sister’s voice in agony. How could she leave her sister here on the beach in the middle of the night? But how could she leave a world to suffer without trying to help them? The spellbook pulsed gently against her back. It was picking up on the magic of the portal.

“I know you’re here, Maeren. What are you doing?” Bri said from somewhere near the base of the cliff.

The light began to grow dim, and Maeren knew she was out of time. “Go home, Bri! I have to leave.” she said and with one last agonizing glance toward the beach, she turned and rushed through the fissure, Bri’s last call echoing in her ears.

“Maeren wait!”

The same bright glow engulfed her as it had eleven years ago, then she was falling. Her scream echoed as she found herself plunging from an unfamiliar cliff into a purple ocean below. She hit the water with bone-jarring force. Water immediately clogged her nose and mouth. By some miracle she was able to claw her way to the surface sputtering and gasping for breath. Just as she broke the surface, a huge wave smacked her in the face and sent her tumbling beneath the angry sea.

Her younger body couldn’t take this beating and she knew, in the corner of her mind that wasn’t panicking about air, that she needed to get to shore or she was going to end up dead. With the determination of her older self, she pushed off from the bottom and propelled toward the surface. Taking a quick gulp of air she ducked back just as another wave crashed over her. Taking another quick gasping breath, Maeren used her body surfing techniques—seemingly the only useful thing living in California had taught her—and rode the next wave into shore. She pulled herself just up enough to keep from being pulled back by another wave, and collapsed in the sand.

Grey sand. Not pale yellow. Grey. Purple ocean, not blue. Heorth's water reflected a blue sky, similar to earth's. She raised her chin slightly and looked at the light lavender sky. A horrified shudder shook her quickly cooling body. Where was she?

CHAPTER 3

THE HIGHWAYMAN PLANET

Gradually Maeren became aware of another sound above the crashing waves, the pounding of heavy feet and the terrifyingly familiar sharp ring of steel on steel. Lifting her chin, she came face to face with a bloody maimed head partially buried in red-streaked sand and guts. It bobbed against the sand, blue tentacles floated from its head. Sightless black eyes frozen in the moment of confused terror. Maeren reared back clamping her hands over her mouth to stifle the screech. She scrambled to get her footing and tripped over another body, falling down, her hand landed on the face of the decapitated being. Its eye squished gently against her pinky. She jerked away in disgusted horror crawling backwards into the shallows. Her head snapped around. Bodies lay across the beach, twisted and mangled. Some bobbed in the shallows turning the violet-hued water a deep grape-wine.

The stench of rotting corpses, the screams and groans of the dying, she had somehow fallen into a war! And not a war on Heorth. “What the depths!?” she used Jarl’s favorite curse and jerked to her feet, grabbing a broken sword that had half sunk in the shallows from some unlucky soldier, or clan warrior, or whoever the heck was fighting. A quick glance showed her that the fighting was a bit further down the beach to her right. The fighters were so armored, that it looked more like a mass of silver and bronze flowing and screaming, than actual people. Left is was.

Maeren ducked low and stumbled across the beach, looking behind her every few seconds to make sure no one followed. She’d get out of range of the battle and then figure out

what in the universe was going on, where the depths she was, and why the portal had decided to be so cruel.

She scaled a steep path that led to a high cliff overlooking the ocean. Following the path, Maeren finally got far enough away that she felt relatively safe from being accidentally embroiled in the battle. Her whole body ached and the shallow cuts from scaling the cliff on Earth stung. She furiously tried to rub away the feeling of the being's eye rupturing around her pinky. And yet, she was so angry at the portal that she continued to pace by a small outcropping of rock. Over the cliff she could see the deep purple ocean disappear in the distance. But she didn't want to sightsee. She didn't want to acknowledge that the lavender sky was probably the reason for the purple ocean and that the red clay dirt and jagged rock formations sprouting from the ground could have been similar to the Badlands of America, she felt further than she had ever been from home.

"How could the portal send me here?" she muttered. "There was one place I wanted to go. Why would it send me to another random world? I can't believe this is happening. How am I going to get back? Even if I could somehow climb that cliff again, portals often don't open the same way twice for a person, and it's true that I could never get the original portal back home to work. I have to find another bloody portal. And how long will that take?!" She viciously kicked a stone at her feet and stubbed her toe in the reddish clay. A string of furious sounds erupted from her as she hopped around clutching her foot. A strange pressure welled up inside her. "Bloody portal! Bloody magic! Bloody world! Bloody--" She stopped her rant when she noticed the two shoulder height boulders near the cliff that she had just scaled. The rocks were covered in white moss streaked with pink and set slightly apart from each other. Could it be...?

She gingerly set her foot down and hobbled as fast as she could toward the opening. She slipped through, but when the familiar sparks of magic didn't spread across her body and she found herself merely closer to the cliff's edge, Maeren sunk down and sobbed in frustration. How could Heorth do this to her? "I helped to save you!" she shouted as if Heorth could actually hear and respond from whichever galaxy it existed in.

In the back of her mind, Maeren knew that she was irrationally angry, but who cared? No one cared. Not back on Earth, and certainly not in this world. Had the magic even left Jarl and her friends with any memory of her, or had it wiped her away from Heorth as easily as it had erased any physical signs she had left Earth? Maeren slashed at the ground with the broken sword. She decapitated the scrub vegetation that dotted the landscape, and then whirled and punched the rock. Pain radiated through her arm. She stared down at the blood smeared across two of her knuckles. "And now I'm acting like a thirteen-year-old..." she muttered. But even with the acknowledgment, anger and fear clogged her throat.

"Having a bad day?" A slightly raspy voice with an English accent startled Maeren from her fury. She looked around and found a young girl sitting on the cliff edge looking back at her. The girl seemed to be around fifteen or sixteen. Her hair was pixie cut with dark blue tips and she wore fingerless gloves and a leather jerkin that was decorated with random bits of shiny materials.

"Who are you?" Maeren said.

"I'm Kit," the girl said with a grin, her brown eyes lit with mischief. "Welcome to planet Eorre. That's what the locals call it, anyway. I call it

you-better-keep-your-temper-in-check-or-you'll-find-you're-part-of-a-war, planet. I know it's a bit more of a mouthful, but I kinda like it.”

Maeren stared.

“Don't worry about it,” Kit said, turning back to swing her legs over the cliff. “It's really this place. Something about the planet feeds on negative emotions, or maybe just strong emotions, and so when you have them, it enhances those emotions. Don't ask me how, I just stumbled into the only sane village on this side of the planet and they told me. What's your name, by the way? Or should I just call you Angry Traveler Number 537?”

“Maeren. You're not from here?” was the only thing Maeren could think to say. Planets affecting emotion? What did a “sane” village look like? And who was this girl anyway?

“From here? Nah, I'm from a little place called Earth. A planet I'm guessing you're familiar with from that Old Navy shirt you're wearing.”

“You came from Earth? How did you get here? When did you get here?”

“Whoa,” Kit said holding up her hands. “Breathe. I got here a year ago in this planet's timeline. I don't know how many times you've Traveled before, you're not freaking out and you have that ‘look’ of a Traveler, but different planets seem to have different timelines that don't intersect very well.”

“I have Traveled, but I wasn't headed here,” Maeren said.

“I've never yet met anyone who was. Come on, I'll take you to the village.” Kit hopped up. “You might be here a while.”

Maeren still felt the anger at the unfairness boiling in her, she tried to swallow it down, but her chest began to feel heated and her vision tinted red.

“Whoa, hey, hey look at me,” Kit said. “Aww, darn it.”

Maeren could barely hear Kit through rushing in her head. She half-raised the sword. Something needed to die. Then a sweet sound pierced through the heated confusion of her mind. The sword dropped down until the jagged end scraped the red dirt. Maeren breathed deeply, the tightness in her chest loosening until breathing felt normal again. She looked up to see Kit playing a small instrument that resembled a two-pronged, bronze penny-whistle. Kit played for a few moments more, something that sounded like a mythical lullaby. Then she lowered the instrument and warily eyed Maeren’s broken blade.

“Feeling better?”

Maeren swallowed. “What happened?”

“You almost gave into the planet. I’ve found, quite accidentally, that if I can play the music for those just as they’re beginning to give in, then I can sometimes stop them from going insane. It’s not foolproof, but it seems to work on those with strong wills.” Kit seemed to be confident that Maeren wouldn’t attack her, and tucked the flute-thing into her belt. Ok, so maybe not super confident. “Let’s go,” Kit continued. “It’s a two-hour walk to the village.”

Maeren still wasn’t comfortable with what happened to her, or who Kit was. “I’m not sure I should follow you.”

Kit shrugged. “What’s your alternative?” She spread her arms. “You want to just wander around and stumble into another battle? Besides, how bad can I be? I’m like fifteen years old.”

Maeren had to acknowledge Kit’s point. She didn’t really have any other options. Still... “You may look like a teenager, but you don’t act like one.”

“You don’t really act the age you appear either,” Kit said with a grin. “My guess is that we have a similar story. Brought back to your planet of origin and your younger body after living somewhere else for many years?”

“I’m actually twenty-three,” Maeren said after a pause.

“Twenty-two for me,” Kit said. “So you coming?”

Maeren let out a breath. “I guess.” She tightened her hold on the sword, though. It might not help much, but it felt better to have it than to leave it behind. “Do many people come here accidentally?” she said as she followed the girl along the cliff.

“I’m willing to bet that everyone who ended up here had no intention of doing so. Who would actually want to come here?” Kit said, spreading her arms at the dry, red land around them. “If you want to know my theory, I think this is some kind of highwayman planet.”

Maeren shot her a confused look.

“Yeah, it’s like a thief. It sends its tendrils out and when it feels a portal being used nearby it can latch onto it and redirect you, and voila! You’re here and you’re mad and you’re feeding it.”

Maeren made a noise of agreement, but she had no idea if what Kit said was true. She’d never heard of “highwaymen planets.” Heorth didn’t get a lot of outside traffic, and none of her group had ever Traveled before. It seemed possible, she supposed. Anything was possible at this point. A sudden scream echoed across the water. Both girls whirled to see a splash where Maeren had fallen from the cliff. A moment later a blonde head popped up from the water and another scream spiked terror in Maeren’s mind.

“Maeren!!”

It took half a second for Maeren to realize that Bri had followed her and was struggling in the water. She took off. The only thing that filled her mind was how to get to Bri before she washed up on the war beach or was taken out to sea. She could see Bri struggling in the choppy surf. Arms flailing, her sister slipped under a wave. Maeren's lungs burned. She held her breath until Bri reappeared. Her sister's splashes were weaker and she disappeared again behind another swell.

"Wait a minute," Kit said breathlessly and grabbed at her arm. They skidded to a stop. "Look."

Maeren looked above her sister where Kit was pointing. An odd, leaf shaped craft hovered over the water where Bri had fallen. A moment later her sister rose out of the water and then disappeared up into the ship. And it flew off across the water. Maeren's anger and fear kicked up a notch.

"Who was that? Where are they taking Bri?"

Kit let go of Maeren's arm and stuffed her hands in her coat pockets. "Those were the Vald. They're the main power on this world. They learn to control anger and fear and use it when they need to put down rebellions or the Crazy—those who have succumbed to the planet and have no control over their fear and fury."

"We've got to get her back! Where are they taking her?" Maeren said. "She's only ten. She's going to be terrified." Maeren felt her chest tightening again and saw Kit reach for the flute-thing.

"Easy there, Maeren. You can't let the emotions begin to control you."

Maeren's hand fisted and she jerked away breathing deeply. "So tell me what to do. Where do I find these Vald?"

"First," Kit said, "we'll need to get you to the Rátha. They're the village people I live with. They can help us figure out what to do about your sister."

Maeren bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. She didn't want to spend time talking to these Rátha people. But Kit was her only contact here and the only one who knew about the people who'd taken Bri. If her time in Heorth had taught her anything, it was that rushing in without enough information was a quick way to get killed. So she reluctantly followed Kit along the cliff path.

Small orange scrub bushes grew around them. Their branches were prickly with thorns. Heorth had been similar to an Earth desert so she'd never felt the planet was too alien, but this world felt completely removed from anything familiar. The purple ocean and lilac sky didn't feel real and made the whole thing seem like a dream. There didn't appear to be a sun in the sky, just a glow that lit up the planet. Of course, maybe all the lilac color was just clouds and the sun was behind that, or maybe this planet was warmed by a giant glowworm. She had no idea. And she didn't care. She just needed to get Bri back.

The cliff path slanted down and became quite steep. The girls had to pick their way around jagged rocks and continue single file. The bottom of Maeren's jeans and her hiking boots were rusty red from the dirt. She glared down at the dirt as she tried not to trip. Bri had better be ok. And if these Rátha couldn't help then she'd just have to figure it out on her own. Maeren understood how strange it was to suddenly end up on another world. And this world was much more hostile than where she had fallen in Heorth.

The sounds of the battle had completely faded by the time the two girls arrived at the village. As far as Maeren could tell, the village was a series of caves dug out of the red stone next to the sea. The purple waves crashed up against the cliffside, but the villagers had carved a few paths along the cliff about thirty feet above the sea. The spray kept the area damp, and there were strange little orange tented succulents all along the path. Kit pointed out that the little plants actually glowed at night which was very useful to keep people from falling off the edge.

The villagers glanced at Maeren, but didn't seem too interested in another person joining them. They wore goggles like the ones that Kit had around her neck, and their faces and clothes were red from the dirt. Some were planting, some were cleaning, and some looked to be making little machines, but there was very little conversation happening.

"Is it always this dead around here?" she whispered to Kit. "And why don't they seem to care that a new person is here?"

Kit shrugged and kept climbing toward a larger cave. "We get one or two Travelers every few months; it's not really a new thing. And strong emotions enhanced by the planet can cause murders or insanity, so not much talking or interacting occurs because you don't want to accidentally set someone off or get annoyed yourself. Though you also have to be careful about being afraid, so really they just try not to have any emotions at all."

Before Maeren could ask about Kit's friendly personality, they had made it to the large cave. Two goggled beings with what looked like leather capes and large staffs stood guard and Maeren could see nothing but an orange glow coming from deeper in the cave.

“Hey Rennoc,” Kit said, stopping in front of one of the guards. “I’ve got a newbie who just landed. We need to talk to the Rátha about her and something else.”

Rennoc nodded at the other guard and he disappeared into the cave. A few moments later the guard returned and motioned them inside. The cave opened up into a large room with two other branches disappearing to the right. There were four people sitting on rock shelves carved out of the stalagmites and lit by a few torches throwing twisted shadows about the room. They looked to have been eating a meal of some kind of seafood as the plates had yellow tentacles on them.

One of the members who was about four feet tall, stood and greeted them.

“Lah Sew, Kit,” he said, his voice was a smooth whisper with odd clicks on the ‘t, as if his language didn’t have that sound and that was the closest Maeren’s magic language spell could make. “I am glad that you found the new Traveler before the Vald did.” None of the Rátha wore goggles, and Maeren saw that the being who spoke had glowing yellow eyes, much like a cat’s in the dark. They turned toward Maeren and said, “Fortunate you are that Kit spotted you before our enemies the Vald. You would be wise to stay here and not track after foolish hopes.”

“Wait, what do you mean ‘foolish hopes?’ How do you know what I want to do?”
Maeren said.

Kit whispered loudly, “TreiVath is from a world where they read facial expressions and are so in tuned with emotions that it almost seems like they read minds. It’s pretty creepy, but you get used to it.”

TreiVath sighed. “This one,” he said, pointing at Kit, “does not hide her emotions nor keep them under the best control. You would be wise to do better than her if you wish to live on this planet.”

“That’s just it,” Maeren said, glancing at the other three silent members of the Rátha elders or council or whatever they called themselves. “I don’t want to live here. I don’t want to stay. The Vald captured my sister. I need to find her and return her home.” Panic began to claw at Maeren’s insides, she clutched her messenger bag closer and squeezed till she felt the book. A wave of calm flowed over her and she took a deep breath in, and let it out slowly. TreiVath watched her with narrowed eyes.

“You’ll never make it to the Vald with so little control of your emotions,” he said. “Though whatever spell you possess in your bag does seem a powerful one.” He ended with a calculating glance at Maeren’s bag, that had her clenching it tighter. Kit casually sidled in front of the bag, her hand clasping Maeren’s forearm in solidarity.

“There really isn’t a choice,” Maeren said. Her confidence growing with Kit’s support. “My sister is counting on me. And I don’t have a magical spell, it’s just a reminder to focus. Are you going to tell me where to find these Vald people?”

TreiVath eyed his companions and then turned back to the girls. “Anyone could point you in their direction,” he said. “But your sister is most probably lost to you. If the Vald picked her up they will have placed her in their fight rings. They use the emotions of the contestants to feed the planet and the planet keeps from feeding on the Vald. It is a symbiotic relationship that keeps the Vald alive, but kills their prisoners with fear. We’re not sure how long they hold the prisoners, but there is little hope that you’ll be able to reach your sister, let alone save her. None

have returned from the Vald. However,” he continued, sitting down, “you are welcome to stay here as long as pleases you. We are safe in our caves since—”

He was cut off by screams of, “Vald!! Vald! To the caves!”

The leaders all stood, their body language seeming almost annoyed rather than worried, and calmly moved back while people poured into the cave through the front entrance and also from the side paths.

“These caves,” Kit whispered, “go all through this cliffside. They connect different housecaves to this central one.”

“Why are they all coming in here if they’re being attacked?”

“They need to be calmed and accounted for. These attacks by the Vald cause emotions to scramble and then if the planet enhances those people’s emotions they could be in danger of—”

A man near the center of the crowd began violently shoving his way toward the entrance. “I’ve got to get out of here. Get out of my way! They’re going to kill us all. Can’t you see we’re trapped like rats?” the man screamed.

“--panic syndrome,” Kit finished with a grimace toward the man quickly escalating into hysteria. She reached for her flute, but then dropped her hand.

“Aren’t you going to try to knock him out of it?” Maeren said.

Kit shook her head. “He’s too far gone at this point. I’d probably only agitate him further. No one likes to be told to calm down when they’re in a full-blown panic.”

An uneasy murmur ran through the crowd as they shifted away from the crazed man. Two guards flew in on leathery wings, grabbed the man and brought him high up to the cave’s

ceiling. They disappeared through what seemed to be a smaller opening at the top of a waterfall, but the torches didn't throw much light up to the recess of the ceiling.

“What are they going to do with him?” she asked Kit.

Kit shrugged. “I don't know. I can't find out. I've tried pestering, I've tried sneaking, I can't seem to find the entrance and none of the Crazed has ever returned. The leaders say it's for the safety of the group, but...” she trailed off.

Everyone sat in the flickering dark until the Rátha leaders gave a signal and the people filed silently back to their dwellings. Evening had settled across the land when Maeren and Kit made it outside. Evening, meant whatever light source had kept a purple-hued bright light about the land, had dimmed. And the world around them was tinted a deep indigo-lavender.

Kit led Maeren back through the village and up to a higher cave. “Well, this is home. You're welcome to bunk here for as long as you need,” she said eyeing Maeren.

Maeren nodded in thanks and then looked back toward the mountain range where Bri had been taken. How could she have let this happen? She had filled Bri's head full of adventure and thrill, and her little sister had followed her to this place of horror. What could be happening to her? Maeren felt her blood begin to spike as fear clawed at her throat, but then Kit clapped a hand on her shoulder, startling her out of her fear.

“Whoa there. Don't go getting all panicky on me,” the girl said. “That's not going to help your sister.” Kit gave her shoulder a squeeze and moved past her to sit on a large rock covered in yellow moss. She stared out at the dark sea and tapped her heel against the rock. “You know, I'm not sure that the Rátha aren't similarly bad as the Vald. The other extreme perhaps. One encourages too much emotion, while the other stifles any.”

“Why are you here then? And how come you seem to be fine with emotion?” Maeren said, settling on a smaller rock beside the other girl.

“Well do you see much choice in this place?” Kit said. “And It’s not that difficult if you’re cheery. Strong, negative emotions seem to be what the planet craves. I haven’t been able to talk TreiVath into that, though.”

“This is the only village on the planet?”

“The only one around here. It’s difficult to travel far in this terrain. There’s not much water except for the sea, which is drinkable, but once you go inland too far...” Kit shrugged.

They sat in silence for a while as the sky darkened completely and the orange plants began to glow along the cliff edge. Seaspray misted Maeren’s hair and she shivered hoping Bri wasn’t cold or hungry. Her own hunger began to make itself known, and after a particularly loud stomach complaint, Kit jumped up apologizing and offered a meal.

Maeren had eaten a lot of unusual food in Heorth. She’d been a picky eater as a child, but surrounded by strangeness, the type of food seemed the least of her worries in Heorth. Now she tucked into the three tentacled sea-creature with barely a glance. It actually didn’t taste too bad. It was oddly spicy without Kit having put anything on it and a deep indigo color that, judging from Kit’s blue-tinged lips, was turning her own lips and probably teeth too, dark blue.

Kit smirked. “Sorry about the blue, this is just an easy meal. These are called cruuj. They come up to feed off of something on the cliffs I guess, they’re usually stuck out there in the morning when the tide goes out. We lower people over the edge and they send them back up in baskets enough for everyone to have dinner that day.”

“Thanks for sharing yours with me,” Maeren said around a mouthful of tentacle.

Kit waved a dismissive hand and pushed back the remnants of her meal. “No worries, I don’t usually eat it all anyway. They’re pretty big. And while not terrible, they do get boring after a while.”

Maeren finished her meal and they moved to a rug that was near the mouth of the cave. The fire had to be close to the mouth as there weren't any air tunnels to send the smoke out. Kit added some wood and they sat in silence for a bit.

“I have to get my sister back,” Maeren finally said. “I’m not staying here and I’m not leaving Bri to whatever fate the Vald have for her.”

“Of course you do,” Kist said. “There’s no question about that. TraiVath should know better, but I’m not sure he’s ever had family.”

Maeren blinked. She hadn’t been expecting that answer. Though she was finding that with Kit, it was difficult to figure out what to expect. “So then, I guess if you just point me in the right direction I’ll be on my way.”

“First off, you don’t want to travel around here at night. There are some nasty beasties that could make it so you never get the chance to save Bri. Secondly, you might want some help getting into the Vald homeship. They kinda crashed it in the mountains awhile before I got here.”

Maeren’s eyes narrowed. “Look, I appreciate what you’ve done so far, but I don’t understand your reason for helping me further. We just met.”

Kit rolled her shoulders. “I’d probably be suspicious too, but honestly? I’ve been here for two years. I want to get out. The Rátha have no intentions of storming the Vald or trying to leave, that I can tell. You’re actually my best shot at getting off this planet. Two people have

more options for plans than one. Trust me, I've already tried the single person escape. It doesn't end well. So, you in?"

CHAPTER 4

AT THE END OF THE ROPE

The morning found Maeren already up and pacing as the dark lilac sky lightened to lavender. She wanted to get on the road to get to Bri as fast as possible and also to avoid any confrontation with the Rátha. Unfortunately, Kit slept like the dead and any attempt to be loud enough to wake her was just met with even louder snoring. Finally, after what seemed like hours, but was probably less than half-an-hour, Kit gave a loud snort and woke herself up.

She scrubbed her eyes and wiped at the drool on her chin. “You’re already ready, aren’t you? How long have you been up?” She said, as she slowly pulled herself to her feet and ambled over to the food making area.

“Not too long,” Maeren said, not wanting to make Kit feel bad, but also wishing they could hurry things up and get going.

Kit raised a brow and then turned back to cutting some sort of normal-looking bread.

“You’re lying,” she said. “I know you want to get out of here, but I was thinking as I was falling asleep, that it might be easier to sneak out in the afternoon. That’s usually when I go wandering for foodstuffs or searching for people who’ve been dropped here. So they’ll be less suspicious if we leave at my usual time.”

She finished cutting the bread and spread it with something that looked like light-colored grape jelly. Kit motioned for Maeren to sit down and handed her a cloth with the bread on it.

“This is made from some kind of wheat grain that’s harvested from fields where the ocean floods,” Kit said. “I’m not kidding, this stuff tastes almost like the loaf you get back on

Earth at your local grocery store. And the jelly is close to blackcurrant flavor. It's really the most familiar thing on this planet."

Maeren eyed the food, but then tucked in. She'd never really tasted blackcurrant, she'd have to trust Kit's opinion on that flavour—but the jam did taste like an upscale grape. And the bread was a bit drier and denser than normal sandwich bread—much like the consistency of Heorth bread actually—and had a more earthy flavour that wasn't unpleasant.

"So Kit," Maeren said between bites and as a way to stem her anxiety. "What's your story? Were you headed to someplace particular when this planet grabbed you or had you just stumbled through a portal?"

"I did have a particular planet I was trying to get to, but I walked through a wardrobe and here I am."

Maeren stopped eating. She stared at Kit. then the other girl laughed. "I'm just kidding, it was a closet." She grinned. "Actually, you'd be surprised at how many portals tend to open up in closets. I wonder why that is?" Kit said and tapped her chin, her brow wrinkled in concentration.

Maeren shrugged. She'd never had any experience with portals in closets. Though to be fair, she'd only experienced three portals and so far all of them of an outside nature. But she was curious. "How many times have you Traveled?" she asked.

"Seven times, counting all the portals back to Earth."

"That's incredible! You've been to a lot of planets then?"

Kit shook her head. "I've been to a few different ones and Earth before here," she said. "I was hoping to go back to a planet I have friends on when this one hijacked my Travel."

Maeren settled back against the cave wall where she could look out to the purple ocean. If they had to stay here for a few hours, then she'd really like to know more about this other Traveler. "So did you go back and forth on purpose? How do you know where the portal will take you?" Maeren said.

Kit came over and sat on the other side of the cave entrance. "Not entirely on purpose. But sometimes I was needed in one place or the other, or it just wasn't my time to be there. As for the portals, you can't know for certain, but I had powerful people that were sending me back and opening portals on Earth where I needed them. How did you get to your planet?"

Maeren glanced toward her bag, reminded of the spellbook. She jumped up to grab it and noticed that it wasn't snapped closed and was a few feet from where she'd left it last night. She looked over at Kit. The other girl looked almost innocent but there was something about the stiffness of her posture...

"Kit did you go through my bag?"

Kit grimaced for a moment. She let out a deep breath. "Yeah, sorry. What can I say?" Her face scrunched sheepishly. "I wanted to see if you had any Earth food. I know I should have just asked but..." she trailed off with a shrug.

Maeren shook her head with a laugh and clutched the bag closer. She sat back down near the cave entrance. "Sorry, no Poptarts or candy." She didn't mention the book but told Kit of the portal that had taken her unexpectedly to Heorth and how it had also taken her away from the world she had fought for.

Kit scrubbed a hand through her blue-tipped hair. “That’s rough,” she said. “I’m sorry for that. It sounds like this world meant a lot to you.” She paused and then nodded toward the messenger bag Maeren kept close. “That book something from Heorth?”

Maeren wasn’t sure how much to trust Kit. It was one thing to follow her when Kit wanted to leave as well, but it was another to trust her with the one thing that Maeren had to do. She wasn’t sure how or if magic worked on this world or on other worlds and she didn’t want to attract attention to it.

“It’s just a book that’s special to me because a friend from Heorth gave it to me,” Maeren finally said, pulling the bag that the book was in a little closer.

Kit put her hands up. “Hey I’m just curious. If you don’t want to talk about it, I get it.”

Their light was blocked and both women's heads whipped toward the entrance. The guards, whose “leather capes” were actually large bat wings, landed in front of the women. Maeren and Kit leaped up. Maeren shoved the messenger bag around so it lay against her back. Kit stood with the same type of feigned nonchalance that Jarl used to show when they were about to head into a fight.

“Why are you bats here? Aren’t you supposed to be sleeping during the day?” Kit said, staring down the one in front.

“They’re here for the new Traveler,” a voice from behind the aliens spoke up. Maeren recognized the guard from the door yesterday, as he moved into the women’s sight.

Kit crossed her arms and angled slightly more toward the newcomer. “And why is that, Rennoc?” she said. “Maeren was introduced to the council yesterday and they had no problem with her.”

“Look Kit, I don’t ask questions. I just do what I’m told. They want to talk with her again and she’s to bring the contents of the bag.”

Maeren narrowed her eyes and Kit moved between her and the guards. “Why?”

The guard scrubbed a hand across his forehead and sighed. “I just said I don’t ask questions. But if you’re going to be difficult about it, I can get the two Gargoths to help you along.”

Maeren glanced at Kit’s taut face and the girl gave her an almost imperceptible nod. There didn’t seem much else that she could do. The cave entrance was blocked, and Kit had said the back tunnels just lead back to the council room anyway. If they took the book, Maeren would just have to get it back. She prayed they wouldn’t find any use in it and would simply hand it back once they’d examined the book.

She glared at the guard, Rennoc, and walked past him. “Well, show me the way then. I’d really like to be back in time for the midday meal.”

Maeren was led back into the large cave room. Kit had tried to follow, but was stopped by the guards and threatened with being knocked out. Though Maeren wasn’t sure a simple threat would keep the vivacious girl away from a place she wanted to be. There were only two of the four leaders in the room. TraiVath was there and a second leader who looked fairly humanoid except for her pale shimmery skin that reflected the torchlight.

“It seems obvious that you’re interested in my book,” Maeren said crossing her arms and widening her stance. “But it isn’t going to help you.”

TraiVath arched a brow. “A technology or magic that calms the emotions on a planet where emotions will kill you? Forgive me if I don’t take your word on its lack of aid,” he said.

Maeren shook her head. “That’s not how it works,” she said. “It calmed me down because it reminded me of my goals and what I needed to stay calm for. It wasn’t a magic spell or anything.”

The female leader spoke, her voice whispery and thin, “This planet is powerful. Once it locks onto your emotions, very few can break free. Your dedication to your goals must be of great strength.” Her eyebrowless eyes narrowed. “Or you lie to us.”

Maeren rolled her eyes. “Or not. Look,” she said motioning to TraiVath, “can’t he like, read minds or something? So read my mind. It’s just a book, nothing that’s going to help you.”

TraiVath stared at her. “I don’t read minds. Emotions, however, are easy for me to read. Right now you’re nervous and that doesn’t support your version of the truth. Show us what’s in the bag or we will take it from you.”

“Fine,” Maeren said, removing the book and waving it in the air for a moment, “See. Just a book. It’s not some kind of technology or anything to give me an emotionless edge.”

TraiVath motioned for her to give the book to him. Maeren’s hand dug into the spine and she glanced about the room. The only ways out were blocked by leather winged aliens and the Rennoc guy. Slowly she extended the book towards the leader. TraiVath snatched the book and brought it over to the pale leader. They closed in over it and began to whisper while turning pages. Maeren assumed they wouldn’t be able to read it, but then again, who knew what type of alien the pale one was. Maybe her people were amazing at reading languages or something.

Maeren shifted her weight. How long were they going to take? She needed the book back and—she glanced out at the brightening light—more importantly, she needed to go rescue Bri.

“Are you done yet? I’d really like my book back, not that it’s going to help you,” she hastened to add, “but it really helps me feel more at home.”

TraiVath motioned the guards without looking at her. The two leather winged ones quickly converged and grabbed Maeren right as she realized what was happening. She ducked under their arms, but they had the upper hand and knocked her down with a sweep of a large wing.

“What’s going on?” Maeren said. “Where are they taking me? What’s happening? I told you, that’s not going to help you,” she yelled as the two aliens lifted her up and flew toward the high cave entrance she’d seen the hysterical man get dragged through.

She bit down hard on her lip, trying to quell the beginnings of panic. They swooped into a narrow tunnel, but a minute of flying saw them exit the tunnel into a large chamber. She had stopped shouting as that seemed to only agitate herself more, but a horrified yelp escaped her when she was dropped. She landed hard on her side and when she looked around she found herself in a cage. In fact, half the room was cages and the other half seemed to be a large river rushing from an opening up high and crashing in a loud waterfall down to the cave floor and rushing away out of her vision. The waterfall probably kept anyone from hearing the screams of the crazed people trapped in the cages. There were only three at the moment: the man she saw taken away yesterday, a woman who appeared to be beating her own head against the bars, and Maeren.

Maeren clutched a bar and pulled at it, but quickly found that the bars were some kind of metal or material that wouldn't bend and seemed unlikely to break. The cage was open on top, so if she was somehow able to climb up, she could escape in that way. The bars were about as tall as two of Reg and tilted inward. She looked around, but the only thing in the cage was...well nothing. Apparently these Rátha didn't have prisoner comfort in mind. Climbing the bars were out of the question even if she'd been in her older, warrior body, so there definitely wasn't a chance now. She bit down hard on her knuckle, the pain distracting her from growing panic.

She'd never been alone. Never in the sense that, even when she'd been captured or lost before, she'd always had the knowledge that her adopted family were coming for her. Kit might have been friendly, but Maeren was under no illusion that the other woman would put herself at risk for Maeren in the same way that Alena, Reg, and Jarl had done multiple times. She took a calming breath as she remembered the time, soon after she'd Traveled to Heorth, when she'd fallen into the unsavory clutches of one of Theron's scout teams. She'd been gathering plants for kindling when she'd walked right into a group of soldiers.

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Maeren hummed the snatch of tune she could remember from Alena's song the night before as she gathered sticks. It really was catchy. She'd have to ask the faery what the translation of it was. The language spell that she'd been given translated common tongues of the world, but Alena had been singing in some form of ancient Fae. The most she'd gotten was that there were stars and wind.

Maeren looked down at her meager pile of plants-that-would-burn. The land was hard since the light remained and kept away the cool. Most trees had perished, except for some sturdy

scrub trees that thrived in deserts, but the group had ventured out of one of those clusters two days ago. Since then they'd been traveling across rugged hills covered in rocks and brown brittle plants.

She rounded another hill and hit a wall. A wall who turned out to be a surprised soldier, by the look of his brown uniform with the yellow stripe down the side. They both stared at each other for a moment, then the soldier reacted, reaching out. Maeren ducked under his arm and charged away from the man. Holding her plants, she sprinted around another hill away from her group. She'd read enough books to know that you can't lead the enemy back to your allies. But what she didn't remember to do was look. She had outpaced the soldier, apparently a scout or patroller, only to find herself smack in the middle of a group of soldiers before she realized it.

"Tie her up. We'll wait for the captain's return to say what he wants done with her," one of the soldiers said as the other ones grabbed her.

"Hey, you can't just tie me up! I have to get back to my father. He's expecting me," Maeren bluffed, pulling at the rough ropes as they tried to tie her. "He has a really bad temper and if he finds out you've kept me from bringing him the kindling to start his dinner..." she trailed off when she realized they weren't really paying attention. She grit her teeth against the panic seeping into her blood. These people could kill her.

"She's probably not alone," the same soldier who'd spoken before, said. "Send out Fenrad and Tallers, each with a group, to search for her companions. These Outliers are like rats, they never nest alone."

"Hey! I'm not a member of any resistance, I'm—"

“Then why are you this far out of a city? All loyal people were asked to move into the cities. Only resistors have stayed outside,” the soldier scoffed then nodded to his companions. “Find them.”

Maeren shivered. Alena had been nearby trying to find herbs and Maeren could only hope that the faery had better awareness than she’d had. Half an hour later, the soldiers came back with nothing. They reported they’d seen the remains of a campsite, but couldn’t find any other Outliers. “We’ll keep a watch for them,” the captain said. “They’ll come for her. Gag the girl and set up a perimeter. They’ll be lured in and then won’t see the trap.”

“You are so right,” Jarl’s voice rang across the clearing. “I would not see that coming.”

The captain looked at two of his men and jerked his head toward the hill where Jarl’s voice seemed to be coming from. The men ran to the top, then turned back in confusion.

“He’s nowhere to be seen,” they said.

“Well of course not,” Jarl said, his voice coming from a hill further away. “That’s because I’m over here. You really have bad hearing if you thought I was that way.”

Two different soldiers rushed toward the new place the voice was. As Jarl’s voice danced around the campsite and the soldiers continued to be distracted, Maeren suddenly felt the rope go slack and heard Alena’s soft voice behind, “Come on, let’s get out of here before they catch on to Jarl’s spell. That boy is having entirely too much fun with this,” she added as Jarl’s voice continued to taunt the soldiers.

“No you idiots, go where his voice isn’t,” the captain growled and turned around just as Maeren stood up. The captain yelled at his men and ran toward the two girls. Alena grabbed

Maeren's arm and they took off. They ran past Reg, who was waiting to slow down any pursuers with his huge, double-headed axe.

"You ok?" Jarl said catching up and running alongside them.

Maeren nodded, breathing hard as they continued to run. "Just outta breath." Not for the first time since coming to this world three months ago, did Maeren wish she'd been more active in sports or running or cardio on Earth. Soon Jarl pointed to a cave and they raced inside. They waited there for a few moments with Jarl muttering under his breath, "Come on, Reg, I can't wait much longer." After another minute, the wizard shook his head and began to make hand movements and say words that wouldn't translate and a thin film built itself across the entrance.

"What about Reg?" Maeren said in alarm. She moved to stop the progression of the spell, but Alena grabbed her arm. "Reg knows how to take care of himself," the faery said. "Not a lot of people are going to want to try to capture a half-troll." She tried to laugh, but Maeren could tell the faery was worried too. The film was slowly building toward the center of the cave opening when the troll agilely leapt in. Jarl had obviously been slowing down his spell, because once Reg was through, the wizard spoke more quickly and the film closed with gentle "pop."

Maeren held her breath as the soldiers ran by a few minutes later. Their shouts sounded muffled and their forms were blurry, like looking at people through a plastic screen in the rain. The group gave the soldiers half an hour, and then moved. Jarl said that they needed to give them enough time to leave, but not too much time to bring more soldiers out. The whole countryside would be crawling with soldiers in a few hours, he'd said. Outlier groups, no matter how small, were hunted ferociously. Theron didn't make a habit of underestimating his enemies.

That evening, they didn't start a fire in case the soldiers were near. The raw nuts and berries were good, but not as filling as the cooked fish or ground-rodent that they usually hunted. Their little group had found a new cave miles away, so at least they were out of the wind. Maeren had soon found that the heat never let up on Heorth. The sun continued to beat down day and night, due to the curse that Theron had placed across the land. Even the night winds were uncomfortable hot air blowing sand and grit in her face. So she was glad to be out of it, even if they could only eat dnomla nuts for dinner.

Thinking back to the terror of the day, Maeren was amazed that this group had put their lives and their resistance work on the line for her. She'd only been with them a few months and they were ready to drop everything to save her? It wasn't even like they were worried about her giving any information to the enemy—she had none to give.

She shifted a little. "I just wanted to thank you guys for coming for me. That was really dangerous and I realize you didn't have to do that. So thanks for saving me."

Reg smiled. A troll smile full of sharp teeth and half-hidden beneath a crooked nose, but despite the slightly terrifying nature of such a smile, Maeren saw the warmth in it. "We're all family here, little Traveler. You're one of us. We wouldn't leave you behind."

"Exactly!" Jarl added with a jarring thump on her back.

The faery also grinned. Her sharp incisors giving her cheeriness and unsettling, dangerous edge. "I echo Reg. You're one of us, and we'd never think of leaving you behind."

Maeren smiled shyly at the group. She'd had friends at home, but this kind of deep friendship that was built through trials, was something foreign to her. There really weren't a lot of words that one could say to that. "Thanks. It's inadequate, but, thanks."

They sat in silence for a little while, until Jarl broke it.

“So how’d you like my voice throwing spell, today?” he said, looking proudly around the room, but lingering with a challenging glint in his eye on Alena.

Reg glanced up from the handful of nuts that he was eyeing sadly. He looked at Alena, but when she seemed to be pointedly ignoring the question, he shrugged. “It worked,” he grunted and dropped his head again with a long-suffering sigh. There was a long moment of silence. Maeren squirmed, she wanted to say something, but wasn’t sure how to break into the tension. Finally, Alena said, “It did work, but I can’t help but think that there might have been a better way where we didn’t need to manipulate magic.”

Jarl shook his head. “Sometimes manipulating magic is good, ok? We had to think of a plan fast, and mine worked. I didn’t hurt the magic or anything.” He ended with an exaggerated roll of his eyes.

“It’s not about ‘hurting’ the magic. It’s about respect. You need to respect the magic. Magic is a natural part of our world and you just use it whenever you don’t want to work a little harder. I’m not saying that it didn’t work or even that it wasn’t a good idea, I’m just saying that you always run to magic first when something gets difficult and you don’t respect it. The more you manipulate magic, the more you risk consequences,” Alena said. “I mean, the last time you messed around, you stole Maeren here. Uprooted her from her planet and can’t even get her back,” the faery said.

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Maeren chewed on the inside of her lip. There wasn’t a rebel family to help her now, but she was Bri’s family and her little sister was counting on Maeren to get her out. Maeren walked

around the cage again trying to find any weaknesses. Her best bet was probably getting someone to open the cage and then take them by surprise. But the odd thing was, there didn't seem to be a door. Why did they have open tops and no doors? She glanced over at the two other inmates. The woman was still banging her head on the bars and the man had taken to continuously trying to climb the rock side of his cage.

"Hey," Maeren hissed, trying to catch the attention of one of them. Neither of them looked at her. "Hey! Calm down," she said again. Frustration welled up as the two continued their destructive pursuits. In desperation, she grabbed a rock and slammed it against the bar. The woman stopped banging her head and looked at Maeren with such despair that Maeren took a step back. Then the woman went back to banging her head. The man was just thrown into more of a frenzy, slamming his fists into the stone and shouting about how "they" were after him, and darkness was coming. No Rátha came either. They probably couldn't hear the noise over the waterfall, or they didn't care.

Maeren squeezed the bars. How could they not see this was their only shot? They had to escape. Her hands began to cramp and the rough metal bit into her palms. "You've got to calm down!" she shouted, shaking the bars. "We have to work together somehow!"

"Whoa," Kit's voice startled Maeren. "Girl, I thought we were mates," she said, climbing out of the river. "And here I find you trying to go off with a new crowd."

"Kit!" Maeren grinned. "I'd have waited, but I didn't think you were coming."

The other woman hurried over carrying a dripping rope. "Nah, I just had to wait till the leaders had left the main cave, and let me tell you they took forever over their lunch. And then I

had no other way, but to climb up to the waterfall and get in via that way.” Kit glanced around. “I was hoping to find a different exit up here.”

“I haven’t seen anyone come in, except the winged guys that dropped me off and they flew through the waterfall opening,” Maeren said.

Kit wrinkled her nose. “I guess there’s nothing for it then,” she said. “Let’s get you out and then we’ll search around.”

“There’s no door,” Maeren said.

Kit glanced up at the top of the bars. “Alright then, I brought this rope cuz I thought we might need it to get up or back down the wall. It should work here. If I throw it over do you think you can use it to climb up? I can help pull too.”

Maeren looked down at her skinny arms. “That’s the only option we have, so I’ll pull myself up.”

Kit walked away a few paces. “Stand back so I don’t hit you,” she said and began to swing the rope like a propeller above her.

Maeren backed against the wall. She was fairly doubtful of the accuracy of Kit’s rope throwing ability. The rope flew up and hit the bars short of the top. After a few more failures to get the rope over. Maeren suggested that Kit tie a rock to the end of the rope to give her more momentum. That finally worked after the fourth try. Kit then fed the rest of the rope over until Maeren could reach it. Kit turned and strained forward. She pulled on the rope while Maeren set her feet against the bars and used the tension to help her walk up the bars. The bars were angled out toward the room, so by the time she got to the top she was precariously tilted toward the floor. Climbing overtook a few tries, but she finally got one leg swung over.

“Ummm, we didn’t really think this part through,” Maeren said, looking at the distance between her and the stone floor.

Kit shifted. “You could tie the rope at the top and shimmy down.”

“But don’t we need the rope to get back out of the cave?”

“I guess I could catch you instead,” Kit said with a shrug.

Maeren glared at her. “Sure, and I’ll break your back while also breaking my legs.”

“Well I don’t know what you want to do.” Kit threw her hands up. “You can’t just stay up there.”

Maeren looked around the room trying to find anything that might help. Nothing. No rusted bar that might reach up. No half-broken ladder that would have just enough rungs left to climb down but then break on the last rung making her think she’d fall to her death but really just finding herself basically already on the ground. And definitely no extra rope tucked away in a corner somewhere; forgotten by a fellow Traveler years before. There was nothing for it then, she’d have to try to climb down on her own. The only good thing about that was she’d be going down, not up. Something her skinny, thirteen-year-old body’s arms could maybe do. With another curse at her younger self for not working out, she swung her other leg over the bar, gripped the top and tried to find a foothold.

Her foot slipped and she hung precariously over the side.

“You know,” Kit yelled from below, “if you’d wanted to kill yourself you could have told me earlier so I didn’t waste my time coming up here.”

“Not helpful right now.” Maeren pulled her feet up trying to get them under her and in a position where she could walk down the bar, rather than slide. Sliding seemed easier, easier to

get down, and also easier to die. She could lose her grip and basically plummet down the bar without a way to stop herself. Finally, she managed to get her feet flat against the bar, pushing her body out and using the rough texture of the bar to keep a solid foothold. Of course, that texture wasn't friendly on her hands, but she'd worry about that later. Preferably after she got down alive and unbroken.

About halfway down, Maeren heard a grinding noise over the waterfall. She hazard a glance at Kit. "What is that?"

Kit shook her head. "I don't know. It seems to be coming from that end of the cave. I could go check it out, but..."

Maeren struggled to catch her balance after a near slip. She breathed in relief when she was "secure" again. "Maybe just stay here. I'll need someone to drag me away if I fall."

"Roger that, mate."

Maeren inched down the bars. Her arms and legs shook and bits of rough metal dug into her fingers and palms. The trickling blood made the bar that much more slippery. She tried to ignore the strange grinding noise that had just stopped as her excruciating slow descent finally came to an end. Maeren collapsed on the ground. That couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes, but her aching teenage body had no strength to continue. Kit half-dragged, half-carried her over to a dark corner of the room, then left to see what the noise had been. She came back a few minutes later.

"We may be in luck. That noise appears to have been a door opening in a nearby cave that's attached to this one. It's just a little room and no other way out, but I saw the light. Maybe we can use the rope to climb down."

Maeren's whole body slumped. "Climb down? I don't know if I can even stand at the moment."

"Come on. Don't be dramatic," Kit said, pulling her to her feet. "I'll lower you down if I have to and then follow. I suppose you shouldn't have to do all the climbing."

Maeren wobbled and grabbed a rock to lean on. "But why did it open? Shouldn't we wait and see that first?"

Kit raised a brow. "Is this just a way to rest a bit?"

"Kit."

"Fine, fine, I'm just asking. I guess that's wise, though it may be better just to charge through. If we wait, whoever's coming through may get into the cave and find that you're gone. Then what're we gonna do?"

"I guess let's see where the opening goes and decide from there," Maeren said.

Maeren slowly followed Kit to where the other woman had found the side cave. They paused at the cave entrance to make sure no one had come in through the hole yet. There weren't any sounds except a wind periodically blowing through the cave. There were some large chunks of rock in the room, but nothing else. The women looked at each other and shrugged. They crept into the cave, sideling along the wall until they reached the hole. It was wide enough for a food truck to drive through. Maeren grimaced as she glanced down. Just a solid cliff wall for thirty feet at least.

"How long is your rope?" Maeren said.

Kit glanced over the edge. "Not that long."