

DEADLANDS GIRL: A MODERN FAIRY TALE

by

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Abstract

Deadlands Girl is a short young adult, fantasy fiction novel set in a post-apocalyptic Canada. The protagonist, Tabitha, is kidnapped and brought to Faerie and the novel follows her quest to come back home. Written as a response to the notion that there are few non-historical Young Adult (YA) novels that are set in Canada, my creative thesis demonstrates that a novel can explore themes of identity, belonging and power while using the Canadian landscape as a backdrop and an inspiration. Mythological creatures assist Tabitha on her hero-quest but, ultimately, it is a coming-of-age story about a young woman growing up and discovering her own power. The novel is introduced with a critical analysis of young adult fiction in Canada, a discussion of identity and what it means to be a Canadian writer creating dark, but hopeful, stories for youth.

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Dedication

For Liam and Emily.

Introduction

My thesis is a work of creative fantasy young adult fiction set in northern Saskatchewan. I have chosen this location, at least in part, because a little known part of my family history is from this region; so for me, the vast, flat wilderness of the Canadian prairies has always retained a bit of mystery. My maternal grandfather's family has a farm that has been in their family for over 100 years yet my connection to the farm is tenuous. I draw inspiration from family stories and the idea that there is a farm that has been owned by my family for over 100 years, yet is unknown to me, is compelling. For much of my life, this unknown side of my life history, my life story, has influenced my identity, particularly when I was a teen. My maternal grandfather died when my mother was three months old so it has always felt like there was a piece of our story that was missing. Identity is a theme in Canadian literature across all genres, whether adult or children's literature and it is from this broad theme, that I explore my story.

The importance of fiction and stories for modern youth is as important today, as it ever has been in this digital and frenetic world. For youth, reading can provide an escape into far-away worlds that are seemingly apart from the stresses of modern life. Reading fiction of any genre is an exercise in narcissism; looking for a version of yourself with a book is to make yourself the hero of your own story. What better way to reach people, to reach youth, than to write stories for them.

My intention with this thesis is to add to the body of youth literature written in English that is both written, and set in, Canada. My research suggests that there is a lack of Canadian youth fiction that is set in Canada not classified as historical fiction. I find this troubling for a number of reasons, primarily that this implies that Canada is not worthy of setting fiction. I hope to question, in a small way, the assumption that anything Canadian is

less important than its American version. There, however, is a growing critical awareness of a more subtle version of Canada within Canadian texts and I explore how Canadian history and a Canadian sensibility can make its way into modern texts. As a voracious teenage reader, I always looked for stories that I could see myself in and I intend to write a version of a story that I would have liked to read.

Young adult (YA), or teen fiction, is a sub-genre of children's literature, and in its simplest definition, YA can be defined as a genre of books written for 12-18 year olds from the perspective of the 12-18 year olds (Belbin 142). As with adult fiction, YA has many subgenres and cross-over genres that can change according to trends within the publishing industry but at its core, YA fiction acts as a "bridge" ushering readers from childhood into adulthood (Belbin 143). Writers of YA fiction, Belbin states, are painfully aware of their dual roles as both storytellers and educators. He argues that YA writers are fulfilling a vital function for young readers by promoting the joy of reading throughout the tumultuous teen years (143). The appeal of books dealing with "real subjects" in a frank way is equal to the appeal of reading a story that is far racier than *Anne of Green Gables* or *Little House on the Prairie*. That being said, the appeal of reading YA fiction lies more with the quality of the storytelling and the conciseness of the narrative rather than "bridging" childhood pleasure reading to the adult realm of fiction. Writers of fiction for young adults have a responsibility to tell stories that are relevant to readers and speak to their intelligence as readers.

Canadian YA authors have shown themselves to be successful and popular in the global publishing and reading world. Interestingly, most successful novels written by Canadian authors are indistinguishable from American novels (Mathers 4). Canadian YA authors, on average, do not set their books in Canada or have Canadian protagonists. "[This] also reveals something about Canadian teen fiction culture - that we're comfortable hiding in

the shadows, downplaying our homegrown talent, and that American teen fiction bestsellers tend to eclipse the books we offer” (Mathers 5). Why is this? Amy Mathers proposes that “[s]ince we’re foreign but not exotic, Canadian-themed literature holds little interest.... This, in part, explains why, when it comes to teen books, Canadian authors are known for writing amazing stories about other countries” (4).

Before starting my story, I questioned if Canadian writers had an internalized Canadian inferiority complex or if the authors removed the “Canadian” out of their books to sell more copies in the American publishing market. Through the act of writing, I found it was physically uncomfortable for me to use my own Canadian landscape and I found it far easier to escape to the fantasy world I created rather than to have the characters exist in the land where I live. I believe that this uncomfortableness speaks to a lack of familiarity. Although I live with my family in the north, I am unaccustomed to see my hometown reflected back within literature. To combat this, I found myself re-drawing parts of the Canadian landscape and “re-branding” it, as it were, as fantastic.

Fantasy, as a genre, has been a particular force within the publishing industry and filmmaking worlds. The success of trilogies such as *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent* and *The Uglies* has fuelled a resurgence into the fantasy and science-fiction genres. The appeal of post-apocalyptic fiction has been studied at length about the appeal of this genre for young people: “Regardless of what makes a particular story fantastic, that story will be important in the measure that it engages in its fantastic ways concerns of the real world” (Rabkin 5). The freedom that a writer has within the fantasy genre allows the characters to address real life concerns in an indirect way. The fantasy elements in stories can prevent unnecessary didacticism or prescriptiveness which is vitally important when writing for youth in a realistic way. “The elements of speculative science fiction allow for a consideration of how

the adolescent fits into a perfect society; the utopian setting becomes almost an exaggerated way for the young adult to find his or her voice, and this voice is seen having a deep effect on a wider society” (Hintz 255). A writer can build a character dealing with alienation and the anxiety about growing up by transporting that character through a portal where she or he has been thrust into a situation that is unfamiliar and strange (i.e adulthood). On the surface, there will be fantastic worlds and creatures but at its core, fantasy is myth building; telling the stories of a nation, a generation or a person to be able to confront social inequalities and address our assumptions.

So how then will my proposed thesis fit within this barren frontier of Canadian YA literature set in Canada? I will bridge the gap in historical young adult novels set in Canada by using the 1930s immigration history of northern Saskatchewan, and their mythologies, as inspiration for a fantasy young adult novel. Tabitha Sorenson, a young girl of Scandinavian heritage, lives in Prince George, BC and, for as long as she can remember, she spends her summers in northern Saskatchewan. When she stumbles upon mythological creatures, she will embark on an adventure in a parallel world. By referring to the work that Propp, Campbell and Leeming have done on the mythological hero, I have presented a modified quest/seeker journey using the mythological stories and heroes of traditional Scandinavia, primarily Sweden and Iceland. Largely, I am choosing the quest myth in part because I agree with Leeming’s statement that the “quest myth in one sense is the only myth – that is, all other myths are a part of the quest myth” (152). The Scandinavian region is ripe with helper characters, villains and heroic deeds to help propel the story forward.

There are a number of fascinating creatures with origins in the Scandinavian tradition that are underused within the fantasy genre. Many fantasy readers are familiar with the more famous creatures from faery like elves and trolls, however there are a number of region-

specific creatures that will be refreshingly “new” to those familiar with the genre. For example, the *Nattmarra* (Nightmare) are a race of female werewolves with the ability to turn into sand and slip through cracks and floorboards in order to cause nightmares in sleepers. A *Fossegrimen* is a neutral aligned water spirit who lives in waterfalls and fiddles all day and night. There are a few different versions of the classic witch, from the *Trollkonor*, a magic-wielding Troll wife, to the more classic old women in the woods and finally fully evil versions of shapeshifting witches who live to trick humans. The fantasy genre, as a whole, tends to reuse mythological tropes as a shortcut for the audience and although there may be slight variations on the representations of a mythological creature the overall characterization will remain the same. A vampire drinks blood and is “undead,” werewolves, silver and full moons go hand in hand, and trolls usually live under a bridge. By using unfamiliar mythological base material, so to speak, my story has an added element of surprise and anticipation associated with it. In addition to some unusual creatures within the text, the location of the Canadian setting will also aid in establishing a new element to the story. The imported mythological creatures are specific to the immigration history of the region that is explored in my thesis.

The immigration/colonization of northern Saskatchewan is unique and happened within a relatively short period: “Almost half of all prairie residents at the start of the First World War had been born in another country, and the proportion was still one in three as late as 1931” (Friesen 244). The relatively quick influx of settlers will provide a useful stepping-stone to discuss a larger story about identity. In *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction*, Dick Harrison explores the alienation of self within the context of the physical landscape. By exploring the prairie and the “physical and psychic dislocation” (1) that early settlers had regarding their landscape, Harrison explores the immigrants’

“problem of seeing the prairie” for what it is, different from the where they were from (1). By exploring this sense of isolation and alienation that early settlers must have felt at being transported into a strange new world, I set the tone of my story. I expand on the premise that Neil Gaiman put forth in his successful novel, *American Gods*, that gods from the old world travel with immigrants to the new country (La Jeunesse 47). Although Tabitha is a modern Canadian teen, her family’s roots in the early settlement of the prairies influence her experience of the new world. Tabitha is stolen from her grandmother’s farm and is thrust into an unfamiliar world where she does not know the rules nor does she have anyone to explain them to her. Her choice to journey back home, a poisoned land with little prospects, or to stay in Faerie, a land of magic and mystery, becomes a choice between the past (childhood) and her future (adulthood). She navigates both environments and, as the hero, needs to defeat, or come to terms with, her new agency.

Margaret Atwood’s seminal work, *Survival*, argues a relevant point: that the identity of Canadian fiction is rooted in the landscape, vast and varied, and our relationship to the place that we live in is intrinsically tied to our fiction (31). Placing my proposed thesis within the context of the living skies of Saskatchewan will provide the narrator’s story with a brilliant backdrop for her coming of age story arc. Atwood proposes that Canadian literature is “not equivalent to ‘Canadian Content’” (Atwood 237). She argues that a lack of maple leaves does not necessarily mean that a novel is not Canadian but the Canadian “signature” of a novel is less about the content of a text and more about an attitude (237). I explore the connections between the open skies of the prairies with the openness of childhood; how the act of growing up closes you off to the world around you. Marzec argues that colonizing works such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* have “narratives [that] foreground land at the edge of empire as empty, the common representation of territories sought after by the

great Western empires of modernity” (421). Given the settlement history of northern Saskatchewan and the colonization of the land, the effect of the landscape on the characters has been interesting to explore further.

The connection between ecocriticism and young adult fiction is worth exploring in further detail, particularly within the context of the work being done in transatlantic studies. Because I have used the cultural history of the Scandinavian diaspora in the Canadian prairies as a jumping off point for the setting in my story, it is useful to examine the work being done in the ecocriticism field and relate it to the relatively new work being done on Canadian young adult fiction. Laurence Buell has completed ground-breaking work in the field of ecocriticism and children’s literature; however, his focus has been more on classical texts of the nineteenth century. In addition to Buell, Kevin Hutchings, Ursula Heise and Greg Garrard are all formative critics using ecocriticism to explore the representations (or the absences) of the environment within literature (Gaard). Primarily, the work being done in this field is on environmentally-focused children’s books (such as Suess’ *The Lorax* and Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*) rather than within young adult fiction. This opens a door for a more in depth study of environmental concerns as they relate to the young adult demographic. The relationship between fantasy and the environment is intrinsically linked, in particular with “portal stories” where the hero travels to a new world. In these fantasy texts, often the portal world will have some catastrophic event befalling it, and the hero has to save the world from the villain who is intent on destroying it in some way. In my text, Tabitha’s world, Earth, has been (mostly) destroyed and she has been taken from her broken world to a land that is still lush with possibility – except the poison from Tabitha’s land is affecting the Faery world. There can, and should be, parallels drawn between environmental concerns and youth culture and as such, I have explored this connection in my story.

In consideration to the existing First Nations cultures and stories from northern Saskatchewan and British Columbia in the regions my story is based, I believe it is important to address the existing cultural heritage of the area but I remain hesitant about blithely integrating First Nations stories and myths into the narrative fabric of my story. Cultural appropriation is a current “hot button issue” creating a scenario wherein an author will be censured for either ignoring the issue of colonization or appropriating stories that are “not theirs to tell.” There is some interesting work being done by critics such as Adam Lifshey on the aboriginal absence in transatlantic literature. Lifshey proposes that the absences of the aboriginal experience or narratives in the early exploratory texts are “hauntings” that exist in texts such as Columbus’ journals and Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* whether conscious or not. This is a compelling idea and approaching the narrative of my thesis as a liminal space where hauntings of former civilizations and mythologies occur may help me to negotiate some of the political issues associated with storytelling from a non-aboriginal perspective. Ultimately, due to thesis length limitations and the direction of the narrative, I have not been able to fully explore the colonial implications within the novel.

My thesis adds to the growing diversity of young adult fiction that is being written in Canada, by Canadians. By using the tropes of historical fantasy genre, the story is not limited to “pure history” and thus, appeal to a broader audience of young readers. The field of ecocriticism and young adult fiction is in its infancy and the work that I have started established some of the groundwork for a further investigation around young adults, environmental activism and representations within literature. My choice of setting my story in northern Saskatchewan was two-fold: 1) the Canadian prairies has been underused landscape in teen fiction and 2) the use of Scandinavian mythology in fantasy fiction, (other

than Norse mythology), has also been overlooked as narrative tools. It is for these reasons, that my thesis is a valuable addition to Canadian fiction.

My research methodology for the creative portion of my thesis involved a thorough reading of classic Swedish and Icelandic mythology to draw inspiration from the folklore of the prairie region. In 2018, I was fortunate enough to present a paper in Akureyri, Iceland and while there, I was able to explore the breath-taking landscape that influenced so many historical sagas. Although the landscape of Iceland and Canada is vastly different, Iceland felt familiar. To some extent, to an unfamiliar traveler such as myself, Iceland felt like Canada on a volcano. It was beautiful, the people were friendly but, unlike Canada, there was a history embedded in the bones of the earth. The Icelandic people have over 1200 years of written history on one small island; the sagas mention landmarks that are recognizable today and myths and legend are imbued in the ground. It was overwhelming to be a visitor in a land that was so present in itself. While I was there, I also learned about the strong connection that Iceland has with Canada, in particular Manitoba. This connection further worked its way into my story.

While I was writing, I focused on myths and stories that involve young women in situations outside of their control, such as the tale about the “outlaws who kidnapped the girl” as it recalled through John Lindow’s paper “Kidnapping, Infanticide, Cannibalism: A legend from Swedish Finland.” I have sampled different folkloric examples of young women, both with and without agency, in order to create an adventure for my heroine that has mythological roots.

My completed project should be read on multiple levels. As a novel for young adults, the story is exciting, empowering and funny. More mature readers will be able to read the mythological creatures and adventures as parables for the “dangers of the modern world.”

My story will enrich the research being done on Canadian young adult fiction and will add to the corpus of literature by demonstrating that literature can and should be set in Canada and by doing so, it can enhance the Canadian identity.

There is a current lack of fiction aimed at youth that is set in a modern Canada. By examining the themes and subject matter in current young adult fiction, I build on Margaret Atwood's premise that Canadian literature is Canadian regardless of setting (237). There is a Canadian attitude present in our fiction that is intrinsically linked to our identity. The historical and fantastic elements in my work will set it apart from merely historical or strictly fantasy and is thus a blend of many different cultures, histories and stories. The re-examination of the immigration experience with the fantastic elements will bring depth to the narrative of Canada's colonization.

In a study of new student teachers, researchers examined how Canadian literature is taught to children. In the study, a number of interesting observations were made but ultimately concluded the following:

By engaging with literary texts that 'represent' Canada's changing landscape, preservice teachers come face to face with their own understandings of what it means to be a Canadian in the 21st century. The texts, through words and images, evoke responses from these readers that help them to articulate how they view themselves and those who have been positioned as 'other' in Canadian society and the extent to which they are prepared to share these literary representations with the students they will teach. (Johnston et al, 81).

I am not 'other' in Canadian society. I am an educated, white, female from a middle-class background and although I am not 'other,' I am a Canadian author that is consciously trying to address issues affecting young Canadians through fiction.

The act of writing this novel has changed me and my perspective of what it means to be a Canadian author. Kelley Armstrong, a popular Canadian fiction writer, discusses her own choice to use a pseudonym in her latest novel as an act of managing reader expectations (Armstrong “Name Game” 36). The bulk of her work has supernatural elements in it and she (and her Canadian publishers) felt that her latest novel, *Wherever She Goes*, a straight crime thriller, needed a pen name because it was “a departure in both content and tone,” it was “more mainstream than most of [her] work” (36). It is not a top-secret pen name, (K.L. Armstrong vs Kelley Armstrong), rather she is using the pseudonym as a signal to her readers that the content of the book will be vastly different than what they may be used to – a re-branding of the author rather than subterfuge. In addition, Armstrong debates using a pseudonym every time she switches narrative gears and is actively concerned that her younger readers would explore her more adult work and be introduced to subjects too mature for their age (36). Ultimately, she decides there is no right answer only choices that an author can make: “We’re all trying to put books into readers’ hands, and the use of pseudonyms is just one of the choices we make in our efforts to convince as many people as possible to give our stories a try” (36). There is an interesting parallel with her deliberate use, or avoidance, of Canadiana in her young adult novels, perhaps building on the ease of mass appeal.

Armstrong’s *Darkest Powers* trilogy and the follow-up trilogy, *Darkness Rising*, follow a group of supernatural teenagers as they fight an evil cabal that has been genetically engineering supernatural children with the goal of using their “powers” for global domination. The protagonists in the first trilogy are Americans living in Buffalo while the second trilogy follows Canadian supernatural teenagers living in a remote village on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. In the interest of appealing to the maximum number of readers, it is in Armstrong’s best, financial interest to appeal to the American market and

in most of her novels, the setting is a “generic” middle-America. Canada is always present in her novels as a place to travel to, not live in. In *The Gathering*, the first novel in the *Darkness Rising* trilogy, odd explanations of Canadian landscape and culture are sprinkled awkwardly through the texts:

When I tell online friends that I live on Vancouver Island, they start asking questions about the city of Vancouver. I guess it makes sense that it would be on the island with the same name. It’s not. It’s across the strait, and while it’s barely thirty-five kilometers away, the water flowing in between means we only cross for special occasions. (Armstrong, *The Gathering*, 31)

Other “Canadian” references include Nanaimo Bar-flavored ice cream (45), an explanation of British Columbia’s graduated licensing laws (169) and the liberal use of kilometers.

Armstrong is a prolific and accomplished author from whom I can learn a lot about great storytelling, but I wanted to avoid overt Canadian references or explanations within my own novel. Tabitha is from Prince George, my own hometown, because it made me uncomfortable using the city as a base for a story. I did not explain Prince George as a city, the population, the industries or a regional flavours of ice cream because it was not relevant to the story and I wanted to avoid any sense that I was “apologizing” for my use of a Canadian city.

However, it was hard *not* to apologize. As I was writing, I found myself drawn to the fantasy world and avoiding Canada as a setting. When I found the story drifting away from “home,” I made a conscious effort to bring it back to solid ground but I thought it was a losing battle and I would have to throw out the idea of setting the story in Canada altogether. I questioned why it was that I was resistant to my own country; why did I feel like my hometown was any less worthy of setting a story than in Buffalo or Detroit? It was the Bone

Forest in my novel that brought the story back to Canada; I pictured what I thought that a post-apocalyptic, environmentally-devastated forest would look like and all I could see were the trees in my backyard: spruce, pine, poplar, birch and, in between, a scrub-filled woods that is impossible to walk through gracefully. The trees and branches were bare but the Bone Forest was still the bush of my childhood and Tabitha tripped on every branch and stump, just as I did (and still do).

There is evidence to suggest that today's youth are more politically engaged than has been previously thought (Ames 4). Youth today are willing to examine the dirty underbelly of our society in real life and this is reflected in our fiction. Tabitha's story is a part of this movement and by solidly establishing her story within Canada, and within a coded, fantasy version of the Canadian wilderness, readers will be able to enjoy Tabitha's journey of self-discovery.

The act of reading should not be overlooked as a form of protest and resistance to cultural influences:

One never just (generically) reads. Readers always read something... All texts represent cultural positions, ideologies, and discourses. All readers construct readings from particular epistemological standpoints. Both writers' and readers' resources are cultural resources; they are not about representing and accessing neutral information structures. (Luke and Freebody qtd in Johnston)

The rise of dark-themed literature for young adults and its subsequent popularity indicates that there is a desire for youth to read stories that are grittier and more complex than simple boy-meets-girl fiction. This desire for darker stories affirms that today's youth are looking for stories that reflect their changing world and, perhaps, for a way to find themselves

reflected within the texts. If the hero in the texts makes a difference in the fictional world, maybe that will be enough to incite small changes in the world at large.

Joyce Bainbridge argues that “Literature is a powerful vehicle for the transmission of national culture and national identity” (Bainbridge). The act of writing in Canada, writing a Canadian story, becomes a political act: a message to youth, for the future. It is impossible to write from an unfamiliar place, even if, on the surface, my story takes place in Faerie. My story is Canadian, because I am Canadian. Even if the story took place on Mars, it would still be a Canadian story. I am a descendant of European immigrants on both sides of my family. My mother was born in Prince George, as was I, and also my children; three generations of Canadians born and raised in northern BC. Where else would home be if it were not here? Yet, we are destroying the world and precipitating a mass extinction event. We live in troubling times and the rage of young adults and children is palpable with young people gathering en masse to protest climate change, staging global walkouts and taking part in pro-democracy rallies around the world. By writing a story that takes place after an environmental disaster, I am predicting a grim future for our world, and for our children. The most powerful thing about fantasy and speculative fiction is that writers and readers are able to experiment with possibility. Yes, the world, as we know it, might end in a nuclear disaster but what’s next? Where can we go from here? Writing literature allows us to create our own stories and to experiment with how life could be. My children will grow up only knowing summers with forest fires and smoky skies and perhaps, they will always feel nervous about an extended heat wave. I used to be able to enjoy the sun, without guilt or worry; they will not be able to. But, they might live in a world that has solved the plastics problem or maybe discover a way to eliminate the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, or microplastics in the ocean,

the air and in our bodies. Literature opens up our minds to an infinite amount of possibilities and through that, hope.

Ultimately, this experience has changed me as a person and as a writer. Being able to follow Tabitha, (because she was leading the way), was a blessing. We write from who we are but that does not limit us in who we can be. Tabitha's journey of discovery, of growing up, is more than a *bildungsroman* for new millennials or pure escapist fiction; Tabitha's quest is to believe in magic, believe in herself, and to keep moving forward. And if you end up trapped in a liminal space between worlds with no obvious escape route, all you need to do is make your own Door and walk through.

Chapter One – A Reasonably Poor Start to the Day

But the girl did not believe in faeries and was not able to escape when they whisked her away. She stayed in the hidden lands because she could not remember the way home.

Excerpt from *Faery: Collected Tales of the Hidden World*

It was a troll. And it was very dead.

Tabitha Sorensen had woken up this ordinary morning, like she had woken up every morning hoping that the summer would be over and she could go back home. The sun was outrageously bright and made it impossible for her to sleep in. After moping around the farmhouse for a half an hour, her mother and her grandma made it clear that she was no longer welcome in the house until lunch. Summers in the prairies were the worst of the worst but hopefully this was the last time she would have to come here.

She and her mom had driven across a province and a half from the northern reaches of British Columbia to the middle of the Saskatchewan to bring her looney tunes grandmother back to Prince George. She did not want to be here in this baked and dry little town in the middle of windy nowhere. She wanted to be back at home, where, if not cool, she at least could hang out with her friends – some of whom had access to vehicles and older brothers who would boot beer for them. There was always a case of Lucky and a bush party to look forward to back home rather than this endless dead sky and dust.

Tabitha hated being away during the summer because anytime someone from school wasn't at a party or a get-together, then that person ended up ostracized and gossiped about and a delightful variety of horrible rumours would appear about them. The last time Tabitha

went away, Brian, Mark and Terry, ended up starting up some bullshit story about how she couldn't keep her hands off them at a party during the school year and then she came home to a half a year of people whispering "slut" to her in the hallways.

It ended, eventually. The next victim drank too much at a party and passed out in the bathroom. Now Pisspants Penny could bear the brunt of the high school vitriol while Tabitha escaped to Saskatchewan. Not that it was much of an escape. Hope Valley, Saskatchewan – population: not enough. Main industry: farming. At least, it was. Before the droughts of the last decade and the tornados and the floods and the winters that never quite had enough snow to fill the village reservoirs. Most of the residents worked at massive farm conglomerations that were owned by American shell corporations that may, or may not, have been money laundering operations. Twenty or thirty years ago, those workers maybe owned some of the farms, mortgaged to the hilt, in order to finance massive combines that could do the work of forty men. Twenty or thirty years before that, the farms were smaller and the Canadian Wheat Board actually made sense and helped the farmers sell their product to the rest of the world in a fair and equitable manner. Tabitha learned about it in History class and she didn't raise her hand even once to tell anyone that she knew people who still lived in Saskatchewan.

When the crops failed and the top soil blew away, the Canadian government stepped in and invested billions to "help" the prairie people relocate to urban centers. Over ninety percent of the world's population lived in cities; sea cans stacked on top of one another if the apartments were filled. Dollar signs flashed in government officials' eyes and when a company stepped in to help the poor people of Saskatchewan, the government said "Thank you very much and here are the keys to the province."

They wanted to use Saskatchewan as a testing ground for NNE – New Nuclear Energy – *Energy you can count on, Energy you can trust*. Except when you can't. Nuclear

energy plants popped up around the province like grain silos and, for a while, everyone was working. Money flowed like the oil booms in Alberta and everyone felt great about this new clean energy. When radioactive waste contaminated the soil and the groundwater, the small number of farms left in the province, failed. People died, lawsuits ensued and hush money payouts broke the backs of the power plants. Northern Saskatchewan became even more of a wasteland, with genuine nuclear waste, poisoning the heart of Canada's breadbox.

Like the idiots who won't leave their houses when the neighbourhood is burning down around them, a few small farm owners refused to quit and wouldn't leave. Tiny government pensions and FreshFood Drone Deliveries keep some stubborn residents fed and the country forgets about them until some old person dies and rots in their broken-down farm shack. The drone deliveries keep piling up until a distant family member thinks to call in to the RCMP to check on their absent relatives. Occasionally, Saskatchewan still makes the clickable local news section of the online papers and human interest stories about the old, dead people who appear in editorials designed to make people feel badly about abandoning their kin. Until something else horrible happens and we all move on to the next link.

There has been some chatter in the news recently about having the drones report on activity in the prairies but even for a country that has given up most of their privacy for convenience, drone reporting seems to go a bit too far.

A few months ago, Ellen, Tabitha's mom, started receiving increasingly bonkers emails and video calls from her grandma Ellinor. Raving about faeries and goblins in the fields, it was clear that granny had gone round the bend and it was time to do something about it. She had never been, what you would call a normal grandma. For one, she had a sliding relationship with reality at the best of times and two, her fondness for whiskey (heavy on the rye, light on the water) made sustained conversations about day-to-day things

challenging. The booze softened the hard edges of her personality. Ellinor would konk out early in the evenings so Tabitha and Ellen would stay awake playing crib or hearts to pass the time.

When Tabitha was little she loved coming to farm. Even though the drive took at least three days, she enjoyed spending time with her mom, just the two of them, listening to audio books, the CBC or some CDs that still worked with only a minimal amount of skipping. They started a tradition of stopping at the little white church up the road to stretch their legs before heading to the farmhouse. They would walk between the headstones that were still legible and make up stories about the people who had passed away. As if to steel herself against the impending onslaught of silliness that comes at the farmhouse, Ellen would sigh loudly and ask Tabitha if she was ready to go. This time, Ellen drove right on by the little white church.

Tabitha loved to listen to her Gramma's stories about growing up in Sweden and the stories that she brought with her to the new world. She immigrated from Sweden when the prairies were still hopeful, seduced by a Canadian farm lad that she met in Amsterdam. Ellinor "practiced her English" on the continent with any number of young men, as she would tell Tabitha, but as soon as she met Henry, she was a goner and she followed him back to Canada as soon as she could afford the airfare. They married, they farmed, had babies, the crops failed and the kids grew up and moved away, leaving Ellinor and Henry in a dilapidated farm house overlooking a stunted forest with the shadow of an environmental holocaust hanging over them. Fun times in the Canadian prairies.

Tabitha's summers were the prairies; bumming around the overgrown fields and playing hide-and-seek with shadows in the windbreak masquerading as a forest. The longer she stayed at the farm, the stranger Tabitha would begin to feel. It was as if the prairie dust

was pixie dust and she could feel like she could fly. Sometimes she would spend a whole day out in fields and forest and not speak to anyone. She liked to stay closer to the forest than walk too far out in the field because the endless sky made her chest feel tight. Even the stars were overwhelming.

Tabitha IRL: sixteen, reasonably pretty with a tendency to freckle, hair – cut wheat, eyes – algae-filled swamp, teeth – mostly straight, could be whiter, clothes – boring, style – fake edgy.

Tabitha In Dreams: fifteen, a little pretty when she made an effort but was largely unconcerned about her appearance. She had frizzy brown hair, the colour of a mushroom gill, and pale blue eyes that were often looking at something in the distance giving the impression that she did not really care who she was talking to. She liked the rustling, hungry sound of tall prairie grasses blowing in the wind and disliked the metallic taste of blueberries and unripe, filmy bananas. She was too old to be climbing trees but had a lazy approach to hunting for danger.

Dream number 1: Climbing limberly up the branches of a partially rotted apple tree. The apple tree, many seasons past giving apples, was located on the north-side of a small stream that Tabitha was sure to give way and crack and fall majestically into the rolling water. The stream was not much of a stream. More of a brook than a raging river, this stream had a few rounded stones perfect to break an ankle or a delicate wrist and approximately four generous inches of murky brown water. Perched on the edge of a limb, on the edge of an apple tree, on the edge of a mediocre stream Tabitha waited, for two hours for something to happen. Nothing did.

The tree did not fall. She was not injured. The stream did not become a torrent of raging, white water rapids to carry her and her decrepit, rotted tree to another town in another place where she would be rescued by a handsome, dark-eyed and mysterious stranger.

Sighing, Tabitha climbed down, ripping her serviceable, brown flannel dress in only two places. She did not fall out of the tree and break her leg, crying out for help until she was found by her mother who would bring her to town wherein she would be given a cast by a visiting doctor.

She was always aware that she was dreaming and that someone else was watching her. She could feel a figure lurking just outside of the dream, watching Tabitha's oddly-detailed, old-timey dream but she could never see the figure and was not able to call out to them.

Sometimes Tabitha would meet a Mysterious Man in Dreamland who would wait until nightfall, behind the rhododendron bush under Tabitha's window. After nightfall, the Mysterious Man would creep up to the second floor window of Tabitha's room which overlooks the apple tree and the inadequate stream. After stopping for a moment to admire the fresh beauty of the sleeping Tabitha lit by the silvery glow of the harvest moon, the Mysterious Man would scoop up the innocent Tabitha and whisk her away to his beautiful mansion in a far-away land. The Mysterious Man would explain to Tabitha that her whole life has been a lie. Her parents are not her parents. Her house is not her house. She is actually a princess from a far-away land and he kidnapped her to take her back to her little known, but wealthy, kingdom. Tabitha does not believe so she bargains with the Mysterious Man for her freedom. Once she is free, she learns that the Mysterious Man is actually a creature from Faery and accepts a drink of wine from a silver chalice and spends the rest of her evenings dancing in the moonlight, laughing and carefree.

As far as fantasies go, a Mysterious Man and a Little House on the Prairie-esque vibe seem a little lame. Last month, Tabitha, went to bed with her hair wet and the window open, hoping to get sick and go home early. She instead woke up with a damp pillow and hair, frizzier than usual.

After sixteen years of hot, dry summers, Tabitha was sick to death of the goddamn prairies.

She was thinking of the various ways she could run away while she walked through the sad, excuse of a forest before deciding she was hungry. She escaped early this morning from the shrieking of her mother and gramma, fighting about selling the farm, accompanied by the buzz-drone of the crickets in the field. She was pretty sure her gramma was winning, yelling Slavic curses at her daughter who was taking out her anger on the dishwasher. Tabitha slipped out the back door, wrapped in a knitted, green afghan that smelled of memories, dust and dreams.

Tabitha walked until the sky shook off the last of the clinging darkness and started on her way back home to the farmhouse. Were it not for the sharp twinge of a newly-formed blister on the back of her heel making its presence known, Tabitha would not have stopped and leaned on the rotted stump to remove her shoe. If not for the blister, she would not have noticed the smudge of oily black on the leaf beside her. If not for the blister, she would not have leaned in for a closer look and reached out to touch the oily black substance. Getting a whiff of the sickly-sweet smell of gone-off milk, Tabitha might not have noticed the figure lying partially obscured by twigs and forest detritus.

But she did.

Tabitha reeled back in shock and tumbled backwards off the stump, landing firmly on her bottom. Crawling forward for a better look, Tabitha examined the figure. *Jesus Christ on a cracker. What in the hell is this?*

When Tabitha was little, she stole the worn editions of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Bullfinches Mythology* that lived in the study, gathering dust on the shelves and hid them under her pillow. When gramma learned that Tabitha had an interest in Fairy Tales, she was pleased. Tabitha had spent a great many hours lost in her imagination in her bed after gramma Ellinor would come and tell her granddaughter tales of her homeland in her stilted, broken-English. She would stroke the paper-soft skin on her gramma's arms while she listened, rapt:

"Ven I vas a girl, I saw the Nighögger take dis girl who lived down the road. You not know Nighögger? Let me tell us the story. The Nighögger is the great demon, evil spirt, who eats our beloved dead and gnaws at the roots of Yggdrasil. You not know Yggdrasil. It is the life and death tree, connects all tings, alive and dead. Odin hang on dis tree, big ash tree. Ash tree? Tis the big tree by the barn – looks like king of trees. Good for climbing. Now Odin - you not know Odin? Let me tell us the story of great Odin and Frigg his wife and his eight-legged horse Slepnir. Odin, he has a very fine hat and cloak...."

Tabitha loved the way Ellinor would trip through the re-telling of the gods and demons of her childhood and would tell the beginning of each myth and story. *Tell me the story of the trolls, the dark things that live underneath and between our world and the next. Vallhalla and the warrior women, fighting and dying. Tell me more.*

It was her moderately robust reading habits that made Tabitha quite certain of her diagnosis.

It was a troll. Lying face-up with a large and burley nose, his head was too large for his body, eyes dead-open and staring into the tree tops, one leg askew and at an odd angle. Where the emerging summer sun dappled on his corpse, his skin turned to stone. A patchwork statue of death. Crawling closer, Tabitha reached up to touch his shoulder and his large head tipped back as if he were yawning and promptly rolled off his pale shoulders with a thud and a rustle in the brush.

Chapter Two – Between a Rock and a Dead Face

Tabitha sat down beside the headless corpse feeling light-headed and bewildered. Breathing slowly and swallowing bile, Tabitha fought to keep her insides where they were.

Now what?

Crouched as she was beside the cooling remains of a mythical creature, Tabitha decided the first thing she needed to do was stand up. Rolling over to her knees, she carefully placed her hands between the cooling, and rapidly-hardening, puddles of blood. The decapitated head had thankfully stopped rocking to and fro and it was lying down on its cheek, glassy-eyed and staring. She carefully stepped around the troll's torso and began to carefully back away from the gruesome mess. Feeling the overly-large dead eyes staring at her, judging, Tabitha turned away and started to head back to the house.

"This is insane," she said quietly to herself. Stepping around the head lying a good three feet from the rest of his body, Tabitha felt strangely guilty about the current resting spot of the head. Reluctantly, she turned back. Not knowing what to do in a situation wherein you discover that a) fairy tales are real and b) fairy tale creatures can be viciously murdered in your grandma's backyard, Tabitha was hesitant at what to do. Deciding that someone (or thing) would probably be around to look for him at some point, Tabitha thought that maybe she could at least try to tidy him up a bit.

Grunting with the surprising weight, Tabitha picked up the sundered head. Staggering slightly, Tabitha had taken two steps towards the body when a flash of light appeared before her and two figures stepped out of nothing and into the clearing between her and her heavy package and the headless corpse. Tall and slim, the two figures looked at her with mild surprise saying nothing. The man on the left had a long knife strapped to his thigh and had hair the colour of a raven's wing. The man on the right carried a bow and had a

quiver of arrows strapped to his back and a tightness around his mouth. He narrowed his eyes and glanced down to the disembodied head in her aching arms, flicked his eyes over her body covered in stone-blood muck and finally, to the prone body before her. One slow heartbeat later, Tabitha met his stare and dropped her bundle, yelling, “This isn’t what it looks like,” before running towards the farmhouse, the tall dry grasses whipping her thighs, papery-dry rustling accompanying her as she ran.

Tabitha did not run very fast. She had just enough time to think, *I think I am starting to lose them*, before there was a sharp pain on the back of her head and then there was nothing.

Chapter Three – Cup of Tea

Ellinor Sorenson did not sleep much anymore. Her daughter Ellen read something that dementia worsens when the “elderly” didn’t get enough sleep. Or maybe that the lack of sleep causes the dementia. She doesn’t remember. It doesn’t really matter. She isn’t bothered much by it, the forgetting. What is there to be bothered by since she can’t stop it and it becomes less important with each slow day. Ellinor is really only troubled by the feeling of panic and perpetual fret that jars her out of a restless sleep. It is a bit like feeling like you are always late for something but you can’t remember what it is.

Her faded nightgown has twisted itself around her waist, feeling like a large snake or maybe a clingy child. She is lying on her stomach, the small, white buttons pressed into her chest that she knows will leave marks. Not that you could tell. The skin on her chest was the first to age - too many sunburns and a lifetime of farming. It’s been so long but she thinks that maybe she never had the creamy, white skin that her mother wanted for her. She tanned too easily and every summer, freckles would erupt over her nose and cheeks. She should have been a redhead. Maybe she should dye her hair? What colour is it now? She lifts her head from her pillow to see fine, snowy-white hair hanging down in front of her face. Right. Old now. Forgot. That’s why everything hurts. She wondered what she did to her knee?

Whenever she thinks that she made the wrong choice, she, what was it now? Did she make the right choice? What was the choice? She’s cold and dresses quickly, struggling with the drawers in her dresser. The only thing she recognizes is a long, cloak that is the colour of sick roses. She hates pink. She goes outside to see if she can catch them.

“Mom!” the woman is shouting at her. “What are you doing out here?”

Ellinor was standing in the middle of the overgrown yard in her nightgown. She was holding a shovel and her arms were tired.

“Hello dear,” she said, hoping to distract her daughter with conversation. “Are you having trouble sleeping, too?”

Ellen pulled at her hair and let out a guttural noise. She closed her eyes and sighed, centering herself. *Self-care is important for the caregiver*, the pamphlet said. Her mom’s doctor had given her the pamphlet after an infuriating and depressing appointment about “next steps.” Next steps include midnight gardening and daughterly-rage, apparently. Ellen spoke in a soft voice, as recommended by the pamphlet. “Yes, mom. I’m having trouble sleeping. Why don’t we come inside and have a cup of tea?”

“Oh I could go for a cup of tea. Do you have any thistledown and dandelion fluff tea left? Maybe with some fairy nectar or angelhair moss on the side.”

“Sure, mom. How about chamomile, instead?” She steadied Ellinor up the stairs. “You like chamomile, don’t you? Maybe there’s a spot of sugar left from your rations.” *I’ve already used up all of mine*, she thought, trying not to be bitter.

“Chamomile is fine, dear,” Ellinor replied. “Just as long as there is a sparkling apple for cake.”

“Okay, mom,” Ellen sighed. “We’ll have some cake, too.”

Chapter Four – Welcome to Faerie

Tabitha woke to whispering in a language she almost recognized but could not understand – like French spoken backwards at high speed, punctuated by angry, hard consonants as the men argued back and forth. Her cheek felt sore and the back of her head ached. Maybe if she kept her eyes closed, this would all go away.

“I know you are awake, now,” Tabitha’s eyes flew open when the raven-haired man spoke English. He has a slight accent, as if he was fluent a decade ago but had not spoken it in some time. “Are you well?” he asked.

“My head hurts,” she answered. “Who are you people?”

“Not people at all,” he said, pulling his hair back behind his ear revealing a pointed tip. “Huldufólk. Hidden people. More commonly known as elves, I think, in your land. I am Kolli and this is my sword-brother Atli.” He squatted down in front of her and smiled a sharp smile that did not reach his eyes. “And you are in big trouble, no?”

“I think there has been some misunderstanding is all,” she tried to get to her feet. “I will just be leaving now.”

“You are coming with us,” Kolli said, while shouting something at Atli who began gathering the remains of the partially-petrified troll and placed them in a large, white cloth bag. Who travels with a large cloth bag? With stone hands and fleshy feet sticking out of the top of the bag, Atli resembled a deranged Santa Claus carrying presents no one wanted underneath the tree. The stone remains squished into the flesh bits, squelching unpleasantly. Dark fluid pooled, staining the bottom of the bag becoming a macabre Rorschach test – the stain patterning itself into a moth’s wings, a death shroud.

Kolli picked up a struggling Tabitha and held her firmly in his arms. Her head ached and she felt nauseous. He reached into a small pouch attached to his waist and pulled out a

handful of dust that shone silver in rising moonlight and threw it in front of him while chanting softly. The dust swirled, whirlpool forming in the center and with a small *whoomp* the dust circle expanded, forming an oval portal, about the size of a door. Through the portal, Tabitha could see a stone hallway, torches lining the walls, flickering eerily.

I really don't think that this is a dream, Tabitha thought as she struggled against Kolli. Atli had finished collecting fleshy and stone pieces of the dead troll and nodded to his partner before stepping through the glowing portal. Kolli leaned in, closer than was comfortable.

“Will you walk through or shall I hit you again?” he asked. “I do not mind the latter.”

“I’ll walk, thanks.”

“See that you don’t try to run away. It will not go well for you,” he said, dryly.

“Noted.” *Sure. Not only do you want to kidnap me, you want me to go willingly?*

“Lead on, Mr. Elf. I’ll be right behind you.”

He did not take the hint. Instead, he pulled and pushed Tabitha through the portal before following himself. Stepping through the portal felt like being ripped open from the inside. Like swallowing the sun, her skin crackled and stretched and she felt like she was being burned alive. Tabitha would have screamed if she could have but she couldn’t remember how to open her mouth, draw a breath or fight back. She felt hands on her shoulders give a hard shove and she tumbled out of the portal, unburned, unharmed and in a stone hallway, knees buckling with the memory of being burned alive still echoing across her skin. Kolli picked her up before she fell, half dragging her down the hallway, nerve endings tingling with the echo of pain.

The hallway was cold and damp. Torchlight flickering made shadows that danced along the walls. Tabitha shivered, a knot of unease unfurled in her belly.

“Wait here,” Kolli deposited Tabitha beside a potted plant on the floor that looked like it could have come straight out of her Gramma’s living room. Atli waited for Kolli at the end of the hallway and then the two elves walked away, leaving her behind without looking back or restraining her in any way.

This is my chance, she thought, as she turned to tiptoe back from where they came. *I can find the doorway back home or wake up and this nightmare will be over.* As she moved away, she heard a rustle behind her and felt something touch her wrist. The potted plant beside had doubled in size, vines extended out towards her, grabbing hold of her wrist and snaking up her arm. She shrugged and tried to pull the vine off her wrist but she could not move the leafy ropes. She whimpered, heart in her throat, struggling and pulling, trying to escape the dozens of vines creeping slowly across her body.

“Stop,” she whispered. “Please!” She pleaded with the plant. The vines had wrapped themselves around both wrists, her feet and they were slowly working their way to the center of her body, crackling and popping as they grew and stretched. Once she was cocooned inside the vines, the plant picked her up as if she weighed nothing and deposited her right back to where she had been standing. Gently lowering her to the floor, the vines continued to hold her immobile.

Thinking that perhaps she was not going to be eaten by a vine monster, Tabitha thought that maybe it would listen to reason. “Look, I’m sorry for not listening. I’m sure you are a very nice plant and are not terrifying in the slightest.” She spoke softly, trying to project a confident voice. “I am here by mistake and I would really like to go home.” The vines did not move. “I promise I won’t try to run away.” The ropy vines tightened around Tabitha, taking her breath away, as if in warning. “I promise,” she reassured them. Like a cord retracting into an old-fashioned pod vacuum, the vines retracted halfway back into the leafy

plant. When Tabitha did not move, they retreated completely, disappearing into the lush greenery.

Red welts covered her wrists and arms. Wincing as she traced the marks, Tabitha wondered how she was going to get out of this wonderland, sane or alive.

Chapter Five – If the Wizard had Wings

Kolli came back into the hallway to find Tabitha rooted to the spot, casting suspicious glances at the potted plant. Tabitha felt an absurd urge to giggle but she knew that if she started that she would not be able to stop. She wondered if she was ever going to know what was going, on thinking this day could not possibly get any worse.

“She will see you now,” he said.

“Who will?”

“Queen Carina of the Frozen Water.”

“Is she a singer?”

Kolli raised one eyebrow. “No,” he said, mildly. “She is the Queen, Ruler of the Frozen Water People and Summoner of Storms.”

“Bully for her then.” She inched away from the plant. “That’s a stupid name.”

“Be sure to tell her that,” Kolli frog-marched her down the hallway to meet the Queen.

The throne room was cold and drafty. Tabitha shivered as goosebumps erupted over her arms as the trio walked from the hallway into the great room beyond. The walls were smooth stone, glittering with a dull shimmer, pyrite and quartz flecks danced and sparked as they caught the light. The roof fell away and opened up into an impossible cave, filled with brightly-colored people dancing and talking together in small groups. The room was filled with a soft, flickering light, pulling shadows across the tapestry panels draped along the walls. Tabitha, mouth open and aghast, looked around in amazement at the people and the room. No one looked human and everyone looked like they came straight out of a fairy tale.

Goblins, dressed richly in furs and leather stood in stark contrast at the sprites surrounding the water fountain in the middle of the room, whispering and giggling, floating as if they were being caressed by an imagined breeze. Monstrous creatures, beautiful horrors and the hint of every nightmare that stood in the shadows of your dreams were just standing around, sipping wine from goblets and nibbling on canapes of undeterminable origin. At the north end of the room stood a dais, empty save for a child-sized figure sitting on a simple wooden chair. She looked like any ordinary human child, save for the giant gossamer wings pulsing behind her back. She ignored the room in favour of examining her blood-red, clawed nails, nodding disinterestedly as her handmaidens and courtiers vied for her attention. The queen cleared her throat softly and the room silenced so abruptly that Tabitha thought she spontaneously lost her hearing. All eyes in the room turned towards the queen.

“Now we begin,” she said as a portly, round creature with the general appearance of a mole wearing the suit of an English dandy appeared at her side and whispered in her ear. He held a worn-looking book and stood at the ready, quill in hand, behind a small wooden podium, eagerly awaiting the day’s proceedings. He began to speak to the assembly, presumably discussing the agenda, it was hard to tell, since she couldn’t understand anything he was saying, but he had the same sort of officiousness that a bureaucrat has, or a teacher, or her mother. The utter belief that what you are saying or doing is right and nothing will ever change your mind. The mole man rocked back and forth on his heels so aggressively that Tabitha was sure he was going to tip backwards and she let out a little snort as she thought of it. The Elven Duo shot her a dirty look and Tabitha went back to watching the mole man address the room.

He spoke in a different language than Atli and Kolli spoke. Like German, spoken by a mole. Maybe it was German. Tabitha tried to remember if she had ever actually heard

German spoke out loud before. Maybe in a movie. There was one about a man in a room who had a toy horse and had never seen the sky. It was both beautiful and boring.

“Pay attention,” Atli whispered in her ear. “Your life depends on this.”

“I can’t understand what he is saying!” she whisper-shrieked. She could swear she saw him roll his eyes before muttering under his breath and reaching into his pouch before throwing the sparkly pixie dust on her. “Get it off me!” she cried, not wanting to be turned into a portal.

He snapped his fingers and Tabitha’s ears popped. “That should do it.”

The mole man’s German-esque shout-talking morphed into accented English. He was still clearly speaking whatever language it was but Tabitha heard English, the overall effect resembling a badly-dubbed movie. She started to giggle.

“Are all humans this hysterical?” Kolli asked Atli.

“I think it is just her,” he replied.

Chapter Six – Tried and Prejudice

The queen appeared bored as the mole man conferred with her from his little book. She nodded and sat back in her low-backed chair, grey-blue wings fluttering, with irritation. She looked young, like fourteen years old, and if you slapped a pair of jeans and a ratty t-shirt on her, she would not have looked out of place in Tabitha's high school. Except for the wings. And the overall demeanor of an apocalyptic war lord. The cold, dead eyes though, math class for sure.

“Welcome to the 841st session of the Hrafn Court. Proceedings of a criminal nature will be brought forward by the Terran Knights of the magnificent Queen Carina.... Judgements, as always, will be issued by the beautiful and just Queen Carina...., Seventh of her name, Supreme deity of the land, blessed among the people.” Mole man's whiskers quivered with increasing excitement as he gushed over the queen's titles. Tabitha snorted with amusement, anxiety fading to a general feeling of ridiculousness. Dour-faced Kolli gripped her arm tightly in warning. She pulled away and glared.

He straightened and stepped towards the queen.

“Greetings your majesty, Mistress of the Sun Burning the Land to Ash and the End of Days,” he announced, voice booming into the vast chamber. “My brother-in-arms and I stand before you after our voyage to the frozen dead land Earth on your quest to find Jotnar, the troll missing from your majesty's lands. He led us on long and treacherous chase but by the grace of your beautiful face, we eventually found the villain.” A susurrus whisper broke out across the room. The Queen raised her eyebrow and whispered to the mole man before responding.

“Well, my knight?” She asked, leaning forward. “Where is the vile miscreant? Did you find the man who stole from me?”

“Yes, we found him milady,” said Atli, gravely, swinging his grotesque sack from his shoulder and holding it out before him. “But not before he was murdered!” He dropped the sack on the stone floor in front of him, contents squelching out of the bag in a trail-mix of stone and gore. The creatures closest to the sack stepped back, avoiding any possible splash back.

Her face expressionless, she examined the remains from her throne, the only indication of her mood was a quick, irritated flutter of her wings.

“This vexes us,” she sighed. “You know that we requested the traitor to be brought back alive so that we may question him...personally.”

“Your Highness, accept our apologizes for our failures,” Kolli went on, smoothly. “We too were troubled by the discovery of the dead, thieving creature.”

The queen considered this, tilting her head

“We will kill you both for your incompetence.” They took the news rather well, all things considered.

“Of course, my Queen, my life is yours.” Kolli fell to his knees. “However, before you do, please allow me to present you with a gift: the body and soul of the vicious girl-child from the frozen, dead lands – murderer of the villainous troll.” He gestured towards Tabitha. “This maiden was found standing at the scene carrying the head of Jotnar when we came across her.”

That little elven liar! Tabitha shook with anger and struggled against Atli and she started to yell but was cut off when Atli’s hand covered her mouth.

“Tabitha of the Frozen Deadlands laughed when my partner and I confronted her. Then she attempted to run away,” he announced to the room, loudly.

“That was nervous laughter, I...”

“What choice did we have but to apprehend the murderess and collect the remains of our slain brethren?” He looked out into the crowd, beseeching. “What choice would any of you make?” He paused for dramatic effect. “I humbly await your wise consideration of the facts in this case and your supreme judgement.”

The queen flicked her wings, iridescent in the candlelight. “Facts bore us. What say you, dead lands girl, to this claim?” Her piercing stare chilled Tabitha and dried her mouth. Atli reluctantly removed his hand from her mouth.

“Your Majesty, I can’t even begin to tell you in how many ways that this man is a liar. I came across the body during a walk on my grandmother’s land and, quite frankly, thought that it was some sort of joke. I have never heard of your world before today and I thought that faeries and trolls and goblins were made up stories told to scare children.”

The crowd tittered and gasped.

“Such insolence,” tsked the queen. “Made up stories? We have ruled this land for almost 900 years. We can assure you that we are more “real” than you, girl.” She said, with a smile that did not reach her eyes. “For now, we think, deflecting blame for failure is in poor taste,” she said, gesturing lazily in Kolli’s direction. “Kill him for his incompetence.”

The ringing of the Atli’s sword being pulled from his scabbard echoed throughout the room, setting Tabitha’s teeth on edge.

“No, brother, please,” the Kolli pleaded. Atli knelt down and brought his hands to Kolli’s face. Clasp the back of his head, they leaned into one another, foreheads touching and eyes closed. Atli whispered to him and Kolli’s face relaxed, tension draining out of him.

“I am ready my queen,” Kolli closed his eyes and bowed his head. When Atli brought his sword above his head, Tabitha closed her eyes. The whistling of the sword came to an abrupt end in a soft *thwack* and the sound of a ripe peach hitting the stone floor. Tabitha, only

partially shielded by her captor's body, was sprayed with bright arterial blood, the coppery scent flooding the room.

The room was silent except for the slow sound of blood seeping across the floor. Tabitha heard a buzzing sound and she began to feel light-headed as she swayed where she stood.

Cawcaw. Cawcaw.

The sound of wings beating, like fabric ripping, preceded the largest raven that Tabitha had ever seen swooping into the room, making lazy circles around the room. It eventually flew low and perched on the back of queen's throne, shiny, black eye taking in the room.

The tension in the room rose and Tabitha felt sick. With a powerful flap of his wings, the raven leapt up and flew directly at the body. The bird hopped on the ground, pecking and cawing, coming to a stop before Kolli's bloody head. The elf's sightless eyes appeared to watch the raven as it stood in front of the head. It cawed softly as if saying a prayer before peeling a strip of skin flesh off Kolli's face with its beak and gobbling it down with a wet sound.

The debridging of the face took over an hour and Tabitha's legs ached with the strain of standing, nausea long since past in favour of plain, old anxious terror, Hop, peck, tug, rip, chew, repeat. The crowd barely shuffled its feet as they watched the raven finish his meal and fly off, leaving an elongated skull rocking on the throne room floor.

The only sound Tabitha could hear was her heart, beating slowly in the rhythm of the queen's wings. She thought that maybe she would be able to back slowly out of the room without anyone noticing, but before she took a step, the queen locked eyes with her.

“What shall we do with you, girl?” she asked.

“Let me go back home?”

The queen motioned for the little mole man and he scurried to her side, parchment and quill in hand. “Atli. Attend.”

“Yes, my queen.”

“She is guilty, yes?” she asked.

“Of murdering the troll? Yes.” Atli crossed to where Tabitha was standing in a few, long strides. “Undoubtedly.”

“Very well.” She sat back down and flicked her hand. “Tabitha of the Frozen, Dead Lands, you have been found guilty of murdering one of the queen’s subjects. You will be punished, by death, and then by torture. Have you anything to say for yourself?”

“Death and then torture?” Tabitha asked. “Isn’t it the other way around?”

The queen started to laugh, an infectious sound that flooded the room while the crowd muttered with unease. “You are brave and ignorant. First you die, and then our sorcerers will bind your soul and contain it in a jar where it will stay for a millennia or two. Die then torture.”

Her life was in her hands (if this was even real?) and that’s the question she chose to ask? What in the hell was wrong with her?

“I did not do this, your highness, of the....whatever... water, I swear I was just walking in the bush. Please let me go home!”

The queen’s azure wings unfurled and with a powerful swoop, she was out of the dais and in front of Tabitha. She leaned in and Tabitha could see the faint shine on her face, her beautiful, child-like face twisted into a cold rage. Tabitha stepped back, bumping up against Atli who stood silently, sword point down and dripping with the blood of his warrior-brother.

“I don’t know why this is happening?” Tabitha whispered to the queen. “I haven’t done anything – to the troll, whatshisname, or to him, or to you. Please just let me go home. I won’t tell anyone, I swear.” The queen appeared to consider Tabitha’s request before nodding slightly at Atli who grabbed her arms and held her immobile.

“You are human, yes?” Tabitha nodded. “That is enough!” the queen spit out. “You have poisoned your own world, leaving it barren and dead and now you seek to colonize ours. We will kill every human in our land who crosses the boundary. Your blood will feed our land and your flesh will feed the ravens. You will all pay for what was done here.” She flew back to her throne and crossed her legs.

Atli dragged Tabitha away and when she struggled, he hit her on the back of the head with the butt of his sword. An explosion of stars accompanied a piercing pain. Maybe her new hobby was getting knocked unconscious....

Chapter Seven – Gone

Ellen woke in her childhood bed, the musty smell of mothballs and mildew blankets greeting her for the day. Behind her eyes throbbed slightly, reminding her that using scotch as a sleeping aid is generally not recommended. When her husband Bruce was still alive and after they had stayed up late celebrating making it through the week or not murdering a colleague, she would wake to smell of coffee, the good instant kind, not the rationed garbage. He would balance a breakfast tray they had received as a wedding present, and carry an assortment of hangover cures: Tylenol, tall glass of water, dry toast and coffee. She missed him.

She rolled slowly out of bed and pulled on her mother's spare bathrobe, making her way to the kitchen to make breakfast. Her mother was on the porch, staring off into the wheat field. She called a good morning to her mom who waved back distractedly without turning. Maybe she could take Tabitha into town today. Break things up. It is hard for her, stuck here. Tabitha didn't want to come this summer. What teenager did want to spend a summer on the prairies in a run-down farmhouse watching her mother and grandmother fight about the latter's dementia and declining health? It might give her mother a break too, from the constant arguing. Although Ellen felt at home on the farm, she equally felt at home back in Prince George. It could be Ellinor's home too – if only she would stand to sell this rundown place.

"Tabbycat?" Ellen called down the hall. Tabitha was a bit of a night hawk and liked to stay up late, even when there was nothing to do. "Breakfast is ready" Ellen had made rehydrated eggs and toast and have even managed to scrounge up some canned mandarin slices that only tasted a little of tin. "Tabs?" called Ellen when there was no answer from

Tabitha's room. She walked down the hall feeling annoyed and opened the door to an empty room. She was gone.

Chapter Eight – When There are No Doors or Windows

Tabitha woke to a cold, pale light seeping into the edges of the unfamiliar room. Blinking, she glanced around trying to get a handle on her surroundings. She was on a bed, if you could call it that. More of a mattress, really. Scratchy and uncomfortable, like it was actually filled with straw. She grunted as she sat up, wincing as the room spun and her head throbbed. She was still in her faded jeans and green t-shirt but her jacket was nowhere to be seen.

The room was chilly and strange, just large enough for the horrible mattress and a small, rough-hewn table with a basin and a pitcher of water on top. There was no door and the ceiling was impossibly high, while the walls were perfectly round and made of stone. If there were bricks, she could not see the mortar. The smooth stone smelled faintly of pennies and rain.

The twilight appeared to ooze from the very stone, casting shadows in every direction. Heat leeches out of her body leaving her covered in goosebumps. Her jaw ached from clenching her teeth and there was a sore spot on her head.

“Are you quite finished spinning round in senseless circles like a virgin on the solstice or shall I give you another few moments?” The amused voice came from behind her and she jumped and spun around. He was on the formerly-empty mattress-that-was-not-a-bed, leaning back on his elbows looking comfortably bored and smugly satisfied at her startled yelp. His eyes were a mossy green and he winked as he sprang nimbly to his feet.

He stood about two hands taller than her wearing loose trousers and a crisp, white tunic under an embroidered vest, covered in beaded symbols and geometric patterns. His auburn hair shone with the colours of a fall day when the ambient light, coming from nowhere and everywhere, hit it. He looked completely normal – other than a nose that was

just this side of too long to be handsome, and the massive fox tail. Her gaze flicked back to the tail and she found herself staring, wondering if it was as soft as it looked.

“It’s as soft as it looks, Tabitha. Want to touch it?” He smirked.

“No, thank you.”

“Too bad.” He slid towards her, flicking his tail slowly behind him. “If you change your mind.... Now, are you quite ready to go?”

“Excuse me?”

“For what?” He was close enough to smell – a mix of sandalwood, prairie grass and faintly of soil. Her stomach flipped – not unpleasantly – as she found herself backing up slowly until she hit the wall.

“Wait. What?”

“Are you ready to come,” he paused. “With me.”

She frowned.

“Are you going to come with me or would you like to stay in this creepy little room with no door?”

Tabitha wondered about the wisdom of heading off somewhere in Fairyland with a man with a tail who she hardly knew. Even though none of the choices were good she still had to choose.

“Lead the way, Foxman,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “What should I call you?”

“Beautiful,” he replied.

“I meant, what’s your name?” She felt her cheeks grow warm and she turned away from his smiling face.

“You can call me...Al,” he said, his grin fading when she just stared at him. “Fine then, just call me Ishmael if you must call me something. We’ll have a *whale* of a good time together.” Tabitha blinked.

“So, are you Al or Ishmael? What’s your real name?” Tabitha was starting to feel like she was missing something.

“Neither are what I am called although they could be.”

“Seriously, though. What is your name? It seems only fair since you seem to know mine.”

He sighed, defeated. “Thrice asked and truth given,” he announced, formally. “My true name is Taelon. My friends call me Tae. You can call me Taelon.”

“Sure, whatever. Can we get out of here now? But since there are no windows and a door seems to be missing, I’m not sure how you are going to pull that off.” She paused, considering. “How in the hell did you get in here anyway?”

“Magic. Or maybe, I was always here and you didn’t notice.”

Tabitha doubted that she would miss noticing a six-foot tall man with a tail, but she was less and less sure about anything these days.

“There is always an escape route, if you can make your own fire exit.” Tae winked at Tabitha again before crouching down and drawing complex symbols in the dirt with his fingertips on the floor between them. His tail made a quiet, swooshing sound, flicking back and forth as he drew. “You just have to know where to look.” Tae appeared to finish his drawing, a swirling mass of circles and lines and hard angles that made Tabitha’s head swim if she tried to focus. He let out a slow, soft whistle. Placing his hand flat on the hard-packed earth, Tae began to chant softly under his breath while a small hole appeared in the ground. He put one finger in the hole, wiggling it back and forth in a way that seemed a little rude.

The small hole appeared to stretch and grow, until he could put two fingers inside, then three, then he squeezed in his hand. Wincing, he grabbed the edges of the hole with both hands and yanked it apart shouting, “Öppna!”

Startled, she stepped away from the inky black hole that appeared to defy physics, her heart pounding. “You are crazy if you think I am jumping into that!” She leaned forward, interested. “How deep is it and where does it go?”

Tae peered into the pit, “I knew I was forgetting something.” He snapped his fingers and nothing happened. Slowly, after a handful of heartbeats and shallow breaths, the loose sand covering the floor began to shimmer and flow towards the pit, dripping over the side like a mudslide. The sand firmed and hardened into stairs leading to the depths below.

“After you, milady,” Tae said as he bowed at the waist.

They descended into darkness.

Chapter Nine – Down the Sand Stairs

The stairs were endless and Tabitha's thighs burned as they made their way down into the clammy deep. Traces of dust hung in the air, sparkling as it caught the light that appeared as they walked down. Would it have killed him to add a platform and maybe a bench every few hundred stairs?

"Probably. Maybe I thought you needed the exercise?" Tae's voice travelled back towards Tabitha, who was trudging along behind him.

"Excuse me?" Tabitha frowned.

"The bench," he answered. "And platform. It likely would have killed me. It's one thing to take a stair and duplicate it but completely another if you want to start decorating. Where do you stop? First a platform, then a bench. Next, you'll be wanting a loveseat and maybe some curtains."

"I thought I said that in my head."

"You did. You are a loud thinker. If you don't want me listening in, try not to shout-think while you are complaining." He stopped and she ran into his back, getting a face full of fox tail for her trouble. "Look. We're already at the bottom. Now we go up." The stairs ended in nothingness and black dust.

Tabitha groaned, expecting to have to climb again, except there were no stairs to ascend. She looked around, searching for the next staircase. "Where are they?"

"Where are what?"

"The stairs?"

Tae pursed his lips and sighed, enunciating each word and speaking slowly as if Tabitha was simple-minded. "You are on the stairs. You need to get off the stairs if you want to go back up otherwise the sand stairs will collapse and we will die, suffocated and buried

under a thousand pounds of earth – no one to hear us scream and only the sandworms will find our bodies.”

“What?”

Exasperated, Tae grabbed Tabitha by the shoulders and brought her off the last step to stand beside him. As her feet left the final stair and touched the ground, the sand stairs collapsed with a slow rumble, dust erupting into the air. Coughing, Tae said, “See?” He brought his arm up and muttered an unintelligible incantation under his breath. Pillars of the pale sand rose, swirling and floating in the dusky darkness hardening into a rough ladder reaching upwards, disappearing above their heads. The top of the ladder was obscured, reaching into the night like a thief.

“Better get to it,” Tae said, beginning to climb nimbly up the sand-hewn ladder, tail erect as if pointing the way out.

Tabitha climbed slowly up the rough ladder, palms scratched and sore, wondering how it was that she was in the middle of the earth and how she could escape back home.

“Why did you make a ladder instead of stairs? The stairs were easier to climb.”

He answered without stopping. “Forgive me, Mistress Complains-a-lot. Stairs are harder. Ladders easier. I’m lazy. So what?”

“Complains-a-lot?” They climbed in silence, dust from their feet crumbling and echoing below.

“Tae?” she asked. “What’s a sandworm?”

He grinned at her in the darkness. “You really don’t want to find out.”

Chapter Ten – Quality Craftsmanship

They climbed for what seemed like forever – *hand, hand, foot, foot – don't slip – don't look down – keep going – hand, hand, foot, foot*, repeated in Tabitha's mind, an endless litany to keep her going. Not that she needed motivation. Her hands hurt and her feet were sore. Tabitha heard a shushing sound, like water escaping a faucet. She climbed slower, grateful for an excuse to slow down.

“Do you hear that?” she asked.

Tae listened, ear cocked below. “That sounds like,” he stopped and whipped his head back up the ladder. “Tabs, run! Run now.”

Tabitha climbed faster, racing up the ladder behind Tae, both out of breath and wheezing, coughing up dust as they hurried. Tabitha let out a short yelp as her foot slipped, banging through the rung of the ladder she was standing on. “What's going on? Is something breaking?” she called up to Tae. “The ladder feels a little soft all of a sudden.” Understanding dawned and she climbed faster. “Blighted shoddy sand ladders made by incompetent, fox tailed men.”

“I heard that.” Tae reached the top of the ladder which was jutting into hard packed dirt and soil. A few plant roots hung loose from the earth, pale and thin like tiny icicles on a cold winter day. The air in the ladder tunnel grew warmer as Tabitha caught up to Tae. Muttering to himself, Tae's hand motions looked increasingly frantic as he attempted another spell. Dust plumed beneath them and the waterfall sound grew louder and rumbled, rungs vibrating with the sound. “It's not working,” he said. “I'm not sure what –” he stopped as Tabitha raced past him up the ladder, stepping on his instep on the way up.

“Get out of my way,” she said, hooking her legs around both sides of the ladder, reaching into the earth ceiling and grabbing handfuls of dirt and flinging it below them.

“Oh,” Tae said, quietly and climbed up, both figures on either side of the ladder, digging wildly with their hands. At last, light appeared through a crack and the earth ceiling began to fall inward, first slowly and then large clumps of earth crumbled on their heads. Tabitha screwed her eyes shut and winced as the dirt fell. Once the hole above them was large enough to get through, Tae leapt up on to the ground, yelling at Tabitha to hurry. The ladder softened further beneath her hands and her feet gave out underneath her as the rung disintegrated into sand that floated slowly down to the bottom of the pit.

“Help!” she called, hanging her feet dangling into the void, ladder crumbling beneath her. Tae reached down and grabbed her forearm just as the rest of the ladder gave way.

“I’ve got you,” he called, grunting with the effort of swinging her up to the edge of the pit. “Now you’re safe.”

Panting, Tabitha lay on her back staring up into the trees above them. The pit between them slowly closed, grass growing over the site as they lay on their backs, immobile and shaking. Above them, the trees were thick branched and old, striated marks streaked the gray bark – bleached bones threading the limbs of the trees. Where in the hell are we?

“The Bone Forest,” Tae answered. “Welcome home.”

“Stop doing that,” she said. “If I want to talk to you, I will do it out loud.”

“Stop being so loud.”

Chapter Eleven – Bone Forest

The forest was quiet with a silence that was deafening. The trees, gnarled and twisted, swayed and creaked in the light breeze that came in from the Cold Mountains. The bones hung from the branches in loose configurations, knocking together with hollow echoes – a macabre wind chime clunking through the forest floor. The bones appeared to be a mix of human and other – dog, cat, and other smaller skeletons with strange, twisted shapes and horns in odd places. There was no flesh or sinew left on the bones – just bones, bare, hanging from skinny jute ropes swaying in the breeze. Tabitha shivered, suddenly cold.

Tae got off the ground, stretching his arms above his head. “It’s good to be home. It smells better here than underground, don’t you think? A little more charcoal and a little less dry-as-dust. It’s been a long time since I’ve been back.” Tae started to walk into the forest. “It will be dark soon. We need to get going.”

Tabitha stopped. “What in the name of all that is holy is going on!” she exploded, picking up and throwing a rock at Tae. It missed. “Why do you keep bringing me places and never telling me where we are going? I woke up this morning, bored. Now, I’ve been tried for murder, imprisoned, escaped into the ground by way of sand stairs that appear and disappear and reform into a crappy ladder that disintegrates....” She collapsed to the ground, out of breath and overwhelmed.

“Crappy?” Tae said. “Not crappy. I would say it was more like a time-sensitive ladder that does not like slow people.”

“Not funny.”

“A little funny,” Tae sat down on the ground beside her, leaning back against his tail giving the impression of a man lounging on a red, furry, oversized pillow. He rested his arms behind his head and stared at Tabitha seriously as he spoke.

“I imagine this must be hard for you. This is the Bone Forest. The forest sprites that live in this world have been given to the trees when they die so their bones rattle and chime, making music until the end of time or when their bones turn to dust. Before your world started to reek of poison and death, the forest was green.

“I am a hulderkall and this is my home and you are a guest of mine until we can find a way to get you home. You are mostly human and of very little humour which makes it exceedingly difficult to have fun. The sun will be down in an hour and all sorts of delightful creatures hunt here at night so I would rather continue this conversation in a safer location.” He stared down the length of his nose at Tabitha. “Okay?” Tabitha nodded.

Tae jumped to his feet and ran ahead, vaulting effortlessly over stumps, half-rotted logs and chalky-white bones that have fallen to the forest floor. Tabitha followed for a few yards, ducking her head under low-hanging branches and squiggling past the hanging bones.

“Wait, what?” she stopped. “Mostly, human?”

Chapter Twelve – Delusions of Grandeur

Tae and Tabitha picked their way through the forest of the dead, the cawing of ravens garbled caws cast an eerie soundtrack as they weaved their way through the forest detritus. The dust they disturbed smelled faintly of decay and held memories of greener days. The stillness in the forest felt suspended, like the inhaled breath of a crowd watching someone slowly fall down but no one moved to help.

When Tabitha was younger, she had vivid dreams that would wake her in the middle of night. The dreams left her feeling confused and she would wake up not knowing exactly where she was or who she was. In this dream, she was familiar but not herself. Her blond hair was brown, her green eyes were blue and she walked in the middle of a wheat field wearing some old-timey garb. She never hurried even though, in the dreams, Tabitha could tell there was something behind her. She was never able to turn her head or walk faster, or run away. She just walked, one loping, calm step, humming a tune that she did not know and would never remember in the morning. The Bone Forest felt like the wheat dream. The forest floor prevented her from following Tae quickly. After a few slips and tumbles, she bloodied her knees and scratched her palms and slowed down enough that when she slipped, she did not immediately fall down.

Assuming Tae was telling the truth, which was as likely as anything else in this place, she was not entirely human. She used to pretend that she was a fairy princess. She was not quite sure what a fairy princess did besides sitting in mossy, forest enclaves looking pretty. Tabitha was reasonably certain that fairy princesses did trip over logs in the forest and get bashed upside the head by the mostly-clean bones of strange creatures. Wasn't there a genetic fairy grace that would be passed down throughout the generations? Was she failing at being a fairy princess?

“You’re not a fairy princess,” Tae laughed, his tail flicking with amusement.

“Stop getting in my head. What am I, then, if I’m not fully human?”

“Annoying.”

Tabitha stuck her tongue out at him. “Ha, ha.” They walked together through the glade, surrounded by the soft chiming on the bones in the trees.

“We’re here.” The forest brightened as they stepped into a glade, dappled light casting strange shadows on the bones in the trees.

“Where is here exactly?” Tae did not answer. He stopped in the middle of the clearing, and snapped his fingers. Like flicking on a light, foxfire erupted around the clearing wrapping the forest in a light green glow. Out of the ghastly light, a large figure stepped forward, out of the trees. He was pale with a blue pallor but did not appear ill. He stood uncomfortably tall, wearing a long tunic the color of a bruise and dark trousers. His feet were bare and his eyes black. Tabitha took an involuntary step back as he strode towards them.

“Taelon of the Huldrakull,” he said. “You are trespassing and breaking the terms of your banishment. I am assuming there is good reason? Otherwise...” His voice trailed off and he gestured to the forest around him. A dozen men and women in leafy-looking armor holding bow and arrows, crossbows, spears and other assorted sharp weaponry stepped silently out of the glowing thick wall of forest surrounding them. None of them looked happy.

Taelon appeared unshaken by the welcome and he smiled at the leader.

“Is that anyway to greet me cousin? It is nice to see you too. I was just passing through and thought you might want to meet my friend Tabitha here. She’s from the Deadlands and is having a spot of trouble with the Queen. We need to lay low for a while and were hoping to call on the Robber King’s...” he coughed. “uhh, hospitality for a spell. If

not, we will just be on our way. Come now, my dear, we will be on our way.” Tae grabbed Tabitha’s elbow and began to lead her away.

“You will stop or you will die,” growled the pale leader, voice echoing across the clearing. “You are here now. Bringing a girl from the Deadlands was a mistake. Come.” The ring of warriors faded back into the bleached forest somehow avoiding the bones that hung in the trees, their passing a whisper through the trees. The leader examined Tabitha with a skeptical eye. “You are not too skinny. You will do well here. I am Drauger. Follow me.”

Tae winked at Tabitha. “After you?” Sighing, Tabitha followed Drauger into the woods.

Chapter Thirteen – A Terrible Hike

They walked for hours, the afternoon darkening into twilight, Tae pointing out edible plants and berries as they hiked and Drauger plodding solidly in front of them. Tabitha preferred the dusty purple berries that tasted like overripe huckleberries or saskatoons. She felt tears come to her eyes as a wave of homesickness rushed over her, threatening to bring her to her knees. *Buck up, girlie*, she heard her gramma say. *Keep your wits about you when the faeries are around.* She remembered her gramma warning her never to take food from faeries lest she be stuck with them forever but Tabitha figured that starving to death was not a decent alternative. The back of her heel was beginning to hurt with the beginnings of a blister that grew and split before she could take care of it. If only she paid more attention in the bushcraft course in grade nine that she took as an easy elective. Maybe she would have been better prepared for hiking through some scary-ass forest. But the mustached man in the cowichan sweater dying of hypothermia in the weird video she saw in survival class did not seem particularly relevant to this situation.

Draugur led the crew through the forest at a fast clip. Every so often, he would grunt at his second-in-command, a small-statured man with pointed ears and a red cap who would bark out a command in a language that Tabitha did not understand. The warrior who flanked the group would then fan out into the bush, flushing out animals and keeping watch for other people. Drauger strode evenly for such a large creature. He reminded Tabitha of a mechanical bull. Although they had fallen out of fashion some time ago, you could still see them in burned out cowboy bars and sometimes, Tabitha and her friends would jack the power from a nearby shelter and run a cord to the bull and would take turns riding it. Not that Tabitha wanted to ride on Dragur's back. As her thoughts spiraled, Taelon looked back at Tabitha and winked. She blushed remembering he could read her mind and hiked faster.

Eventually, Drauger and company began to slow down and Tabitha was pulled to a stop. The change of pace was sudden and after the endless trudging through the bush, Tabitha swayed with exhaustion. She rubbed her dry eyes before pulling the hair off the back of her sweaty neck. Their destination was indiscernible from the rest of the forest. Dry, cracked trees, bones in the wind. Dragur, who had been setting the pace through the forest, stopped in front of a mass of trees, bowed at nothing and then walked forward into the forest and abruptly disappeared.

I am never getting out of here alive, thought Tabitha.

“Well, you’re feeling cheery as always,” said, Taelon, flippantly.

“Just being realistic,” she answered, figuring that she had better learn how to stop projecting her thoughts so loudly. She frowned as she wondered why the telepathy seemed to only go one way.

Taelon stood at her shoulder watching Drauger’s armed companions disappear into the trees. Then it was Tabitha’s turn. He gestured toward the disappearing space with a courtly bow.

“After you milady.”

Tabitha straightened, pulling herself out of a slump and walked out into the unknown.

Chapter Fourteen – Remember

The Saskatchewan sky was the colour of Forget-me-nots. Ellinor snorted, laughing to herself. She spent most of her time lost in her memories, the present a fleeting pinwheel, spinning out of control, half familiar faces flicking in and out of her memory. It was not the worst thing in the world to lose yourself in your twilight years. Ellinor only really minded that she was forgetting when she felt overcome by the sensation that she has forgotten something important. It was hard on her daughter Ellen during these times, she knew. Ellinor would come out of the fog and her daughter would tell her that she was yelling nonsense again and fighting. Sometimes Ellen would have a mark or a scratch on her that she would shrug or change the subject if Ellinor asked about it.

My poor dear, thought Ellinor. She looks so tired. Daughter taken by the fairies and nary a word from them. Nothing at all like it was when she was a girl. There was an agreement made and promises kept. Ellinor shuffled to her feet. She supposed though that the humans were the ones who had broken faith first. The poisons in the earth bleed through to faeries and they were none too happy about it.

The covered porch in the front of the house was looking rather weathered. A few boards missing here and there that let the water in when it rained. An assortment of potted plants hardy enough to take the acidic rain were placed strategically on the deck to catch the rainwater. Ellinor stepped around them with a familiar ease, walking towards her daughter who had fallen asleep on the wooden swing. She had Tabitha's woolen blanket from when she was little pulled up over her. She was sleeping restlessly, clenching her jaw and frowning slightly. Ellen startled awake when Ellinor touched her shoulder.

"Any word?" Ellen mumbled as she sat up. "I was dreaming of Tabitha. She was lost and trying to find her way home."

“Nothing, yet.” Ellinor sat down beside her daughter on the swing, rocking it gently. She took her hand into her lap and squeezed it gently.

“I just wish there was something to do.” Ellen pulled at her hair and closed her eyes. “I feel like I am losing my mind.”

You probably are my dear, Ellinor thought as she held her weeping daughter in her arms. You probably are. Ellinor stroked Ellen’s hair until the rain stopped and she fell asleep. Outside the sky continued to pour.

Chapter Fifteen – Lost in the Woods

Atli cursed as the last of his firestones slipped out of his hand and shattered on the rocky ground. The rain had soaked the few available wood scraps he had managed to scavenge. He refused to shiver. The queen had sent him after the human and the traitorous Hudrakrall. He would not fail her or the death ravens would come for him too. He could not let this happen. Not now. Not after being so close to finding her again. Hervor. The Warrior Maiden. She who stole the Tyrfing sword from her father and then disappeared from Hrafn. She has been missing for a long time.

Not many elves remembered the sword, or why Atli became guard rather than prince. They only remember what they choose to, or what they can.

The Memory Keepers adjust time as they like in Hrafn leaving pockets of suspended time and space. There was a pocket of fast time Atli found when he was young. It was not large but the size of a beaver dam and you could watch brightly-colored flying insects cocoon, fly, mate and die in the space of a few minutes. There are other less-beautiful pockets: a rabbit being eaten slowly by a fox, pain contorts the rabbit's nearly frozen face. The bright blue of the creature's blood sprays and is held motionless in the air, the drops falling too slowly to see. Atli gives the time-lost a quiet prayer, wishing them happiness in their own times.

Tabitha is the key. Atli knows that she will be the one to lead him back to Tyrfing. If only he catches up to her and isn't caught in return.

Chapter Sixteen – Foxfire and Fairy Dreams

A few more portal leaps and Tabitha thought that she might be getting the hang of it soon. She only retched a, laughably, small amount of vomit. Hardly enough for anyone to notice. Tabitha was kneeling on the ground again, watching a small vole with dragonfly wings scuttle around.

Tabitha jumped when Taelon leaned down and blew in her ear. “Ahh! What are you doing?”

“Getting your attention,” he said. “And reminding you that you are projecting your thoughts. Everyone saw you puke. It was disgusting.”

Tabitha reluctantly raised her head and got to her feet. The portal had popped them out into a stone cavern lit by bioluminescence casting the gathered crowd with an eerie green glow. Drauger sat on a stone throne that was only partially carved out of the grey rock wall. His warriors flanked him on each side of the throne, weapons at their sides. Drauger’s laugh boomed into the silence of the cavern, startling a small colony of pale bats that flew further into the cavern, irritated squeaking following them, echoing through the chamber. Chamber reeked of ammonia, unwashed bodies and, Tabitha thought, sixty-seven armpits. Her stomach rolled and she hoped her humiliation was done for the day. She was wrong. Faeryland is the gift that keeps on giving.

“Welcome to cave, not-skinny girl from Deadlands,” Dragur boomed to her. Tabitha thought of a few responses that would suit. Taelon, picking up on her train of thought, shook his head, looking worried that she would commit some sort of fairy faux-pas. It’s not like there is a guidebook. “You want favour from me. No?”

Taelon stepped forward and bowed formally to Drauger. “The Tabitha girl from the Deadlands and I seek passage through the Dreamspace to go back home to her world.” His tail flicked back and forth absently, belying his steady voice.

Dragur grunted and rubbed his beard with his enormous hand. “This is a long way through Dreamspace to the Deadlands. Many things can go wrong.” He pondered, silently for a moment before leaping to his feet and thundering towards them. Tabitha took a step back. “I will take you. Payment?” he asked Taelon.

“Favour?”

“Agreed.” Drauger gathered them in his enormous arms and engulfed them in a sweaty bear-hug. Tabitha grimaced.

“Great,” she said. “What does this mean?”

“This means, my dear,” Taelon replied. “We will hitch a ride with Drauger into the Dreamspace and, hopefully, not die. I owe Drauger a favour and you owe me one for helping you.”

“Now why does that make me nervous?” She asked, not expecting an answer. An absence of certainty was how we rolled.

Chapter Seventeen – Lost and Dreaming

There aren't enough chairs here. Ellinor thought as she wandered through a stone tunnel lit by flickering scones that smelled of kerosene. *I'm tired of walking.* She hated this dream and was always exhausted when she woke up in the morning. Her nightgown was faded and the lace was coming apart on the collar. It itched.

She turned a corner and found herself at a dead end. Sighing, she turned around to find that the hallway she had just come through had disappeared and she was now trapped in a fifteen foot stone bubble. Ellinor frowned. Playing tricks again, are we? She took a deep, shaky breath and placed her hands on the wall and pushed. The wall glimmered and softened and with a firm shove, Ellinor flicked the rock back into the hallway like she was folding a stiff, sun-drying bedsheet. It wanted to be a hallway. Sometimes it just forgot.

She straightened her nightgown and resumed her wander through the hallway, humming softly under her breath. As she walked, Ellinor ran her fingers along the hard stone wall, reminding it of its purpose.

Chapter Eighteen – Stone Hell

The process of getting into the Dreamspace seemed to involve a lot of drinking. The day had turned to night since Tabitha leapt through the portal into this stone hell. At least, she assumed it was night based on how tired she was. She wished she knew what time it was, or day, or year? Did they have years in Hrafn? Or seasons? It so far had seemed to her that the weather was quite mild on this... planet? Interdimensional portal? Dream?

“Are you quite finished playing with descriptive words? I have something important to tell you.” Taelon had a serious look on his face and his tail was not its normal, bushy self. He held two clay mugs and offered one to her. It tasted of green things and sunshine and it warmed her belly on its way down. Giving her a burst of energy, the liquid made her feel more awake and less hungry.

“What is this? It’s delicious,” she asked, taking another sip.

“Mead. The pixies brew it. It’s potent though, be careful.” Taelon sat down beside her on the stone bench and they watched the revelry together. The faces of the warriors looked strange when smiling, as if they were out of practice. Old friends laughed and told jokes and even though Tabitha could not understand the language, she could hear their happiness. The food at the head table was peculiar; a scattering of oblong fruit in unbelievable shades of purple, teal and fushia. There were dry-looking flatbreads with a grey, lumpy spread that the children seemed to enjoy. The spread smelled of feet and the fruit was sticky sweet. Tabitha picked at her plate, finding it odd that for a crowd this size, no one’s dish was very full. The children sat quietly beside their mothers, wolfing down their food with the frantic zest of the nearly starved. Couples shared one wooden plate between them, feeding each other small bites and savouring each morsel. Taelon did not have a plate, just a handful of dried green berries that he popped in his mouth every few minutes.

“What is wrong here?” asked Tabitha, concerned.

Tae did not look at Tabitha but stared out into the massive bonfire in the center of the cave. The smoke trailed up into a hole in the ceiling, curling into the dark, starless sky.

“Famine,” he said, bluntly. “When the poison from the Deadlands began to seep through into our world, it decimated our farmlands and our forests. Thousands of us died. Draugur’s people were luckier than most. They had someplace to go and they escaped underground. Only Draugur and his warriors go up to the surface, now, to hunt and forage. The rest stay underground, growing mushrooms and cave lichens and trying to make the food stretch. This is a large feast for them, when food is so scarce.”

When Tabitha looked at the gathered crowd again, she could see the subtle signs that she had missed before. Sharp cheekbones and wide, tired eyes. A listless pallor in the children’s cheeks. Mothers nursed wee babes and rocked toddlers, tiredly. A small child with sunken cheeks sat near them staring out into the fire. Tabitha got up and walked over to the child, placing her plate in his lap. The child looked up, gratefully and ate the rest of Tabitha’s flatbread and shared the fruit with his mother. She walked back to the bench and sat down beside him without saying a word.

“That was kind of you.”

She shook her head. “Yeah, well. It’s not like it’s enough, is it.” The smoke drifted lazily out into the night. “What were you going to tell me?”

“Right. I know what Draugur’s favour is and I will pay it, gladly but I need something from you in order to do so.”

“Sure, I guess. What is it?” Tabitha said, curious.

“If you have a chance to go home, I want you to take it.” He turned his head and met her eyes, with an intensity that Tabitha could not quite understand.

Tabitha's belly flipped and she caught her breath. "Of course," she said. "That's the whole point, isn't it?" He smelled of the forest and rich, earthy things. She tucked her hair behind her ears and looked down, breaking eye contact. I must look like a fright, she thought. She hadn't bathed in what felt like days. She needed to brush her teeth, her hair and put on deodorant. She wouldn't say no to a clean shirt, either. The one she was wearing had splotches of dirt, and blood and had snagged through in a few places after their adventures in the Bone Forest.

Taelon touched her cheek with his fingertips, gently turning her face towards him. All along her side felt like it buzzed with electricity where it was pressed up against him and she let her face be turned.

"You are extraordinary," he said, pressing his lips against hers in a soft kiss, as light as butterfly wings. It ended before it began. Taelon dropped his hand from her face and walked away from her, his shadow cutting off the glow of the fire. Tabitha watched his silhouette disappear to the other side of the massive cave wondering what in the world was happening here.

Chapter Nineteen – When in a Cave Surrounded by Strangers, Fall Asleep

Morning dawned in the cave, the ashes of the previous night's bonfire still smoldered and a smoky haze hung in the air. Tabitha's throat hurt from the smoke and her hip hurt from lying on the stone floor. The crudely woven cots had aspirations of being a proper mattress but, alas, were far too uncomfortable and thin. She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hands, trying to wake herself up. She was never much of a morning person. She was more of a middle of the night person and don't talk to me unless I've had fake coffee kind of person if it was totally necessary to be up in the morning. But here she was. Awake, too early, surrounded by a small gang of snoring, troll children who had been up all night trying to teach Tabitha to say their names in their own language. She could not do it. At all. She could however make them laugh enough to nearly pee their little loincloths at her butchery of their language.

She was pretty sure that she kept accidentally swearing in their language because she couldn't hear the difference in the vowel sounds. It sounded like German mixed with Hungarian. Every word sounded angry, even when they were smiling. As she tried to purse her lips like they were showing her, like a round "O" except not quite and she had to do something with her bottom lip that seemed impossible, she caught side of Taelon on the other side of the cave, speaking to Draugur in low tones. He looked up and saw her looking like she was about to hoot like a demented owl and she blushed. He smiled, his eyes distant and turned back to his conversation. It was weird. He was acting weird.

She spent the rest of the morning smiling and nodding at questions that she didn't understand. At one point, in an embarrassing encounter with some of the mothers, she was able to mime that she needed to use the facilities and was shown where and how to manage when you are underground in a massive cave. After relieving her bladder, she felt much more

comfortable and allowed herself to be pulled along by the smiling women down a small hallway leading to a storage cave. Inside, the room was lit by the strange phosphorescent torches that lit up a dressing room of sorts. The women gaggled around her clucking and shushing her and Tabitha found herself being measured and examined. A woman with strong, sinewy hands and the darkest eyes she had ever seen, gave Tabitha a mound of clothing to wear and firmly pointed to a screen along the wall. Tabitha thought about protesting the garments and opened her mouth to do so but the woman's expression reminded her of her mother's when there was no use arguing. The woman wrinkled her nose and waved her hand under it.

"Go, girl," the woman said in the common tongue, a surprise to Tabitha, since she hadn't spoken it before. "You stink like skunk."

"Thanks," Tabitha muttered, grabbing her bundle of clothes and marching with little dignity, behind the screen.

Behind the privacy screen, Tabitha found a smooth bowl made of a bleached-white wood, from the Bone Forest, resting on a stone shelf jutting out from the cave wall. With relief, Tabitha found warm water in the bowl and a soft cloth for washing up. She wasted no time, washing her face and giving herself a quick sponge bath, removing most of the grime and muck that she had accumulated in her travels. The water smelled faintly of barley and thimbleberries, scents that conjured up images of both of her homes, the farm in Saskatchewan and her house in Prince George. Thinking of home felt unnatural, like the existence of her high school and mundane life wasn't real and this land here, was. The open and broken farmlands should not be allowed to exist in the same space in her head in front of a wooden bowl on a stone tablet like she was in the middle ages or something. Inexplicably, she felt like crying.

Instead, she got dressed. The clothes the women gave her were made from a soft, woven cloth, blended from natural fibers. It itched. The dress was more like a long green tunic, like what Taelon wore, except it was cinched at the waist with a leather belt. Loose leggings went underneath the dress, for which Tabitha was grateful remembering the bramble from the Bone Forest. It would provide a measure of protection from the environment. Not enough. For that, she would need full body armor.

She came out from behind the screen to the giggling women who oohed and awed at her. The flinty-eyed woman who said she stunk, pulled Tabitha by the hand and sat her down on a hard, wooden chair in the middle of the room. The woman, Glamr was her name, started to brush out her hair. Lulled by the repetitive motion, Tabitha found her eyes closing and she started to drift asleep. She swore that she could almost hear a familiar humming as she nodded off.

Chapter Twenty – When You Only Have a Hammer

Tabitha jolted awake to find herself alone in the room. Except for Taelon who stood in the door watching her, like a creep. His tail drooped.

“That was unkind,” he said. “And, I think, on purpose because you knew I was listening.”

She raised an eyebrow as she got to her feet. “Maybe. It is still a little creepy, watching me sleep. Next time, find someone else to gawk at.”

He shrugged. “It’s time.”

“For what?”

“To go into the Dreamspace.”

Tabitha stared at him, waiting for him to explain further. He didn’t. “So what does that mean?”

“What?”

“To go into the Dreamspace. What does that mean? Where are we going? What is the Dreamspace? How are we going to get there? Why do we need to get there?” The questions poured out of Tabitha, rolling faster and faster, until she began to feel light-headed.

“Woah, there, Tabbycat. Take a breath.” He smiled condescendingly, irritating her out of her panic attack.

“Only my mom calls me that. So you don’t get to.”

“Alright. Sorry. The Dreamspace is hard to explain.”

“Try,” she said, firmly. “Now.”

He cleared his throat. “The Dreamspace is the space between the worlds. Your world. Mine. Others.” Taelon put his hand up to preemptively shush Tabitha. “Yes, there are other worlds and, no, we are not going to them. You wouldn’t like the few that I’ve been to as they

are largely inhabited by large rodents. Although, they are quite delicious.” He chomped his teeth at her, theatrically. “The Dreamspace is only available to be opened by a few individuals, Drauger being one of them.”

“He seems a bit too...drunk, to be the Gatekeeper from *Ghostbusters*.”

“Good movie, I liked the remake.” Tabitha rolled her eyes at him as he continued.

“Drauger will open the Dreamspace, we will go in and hope that we can find our way back to your little prairie farmhouse in the Deadlands, or Earth, as you like to call it.”

“Why do you call it the Deadlands?”

Taelon shuffled his feet and looked pained. “Long ago, our worlds were more closely connected with travelers from both sides visiting, sometimes merriment, sometimes murder. It was exciting! You never knew what you were going to get. When the humans began to poison their world, it began to die. The parts of our world that were closely connected were not able to survive. Large parts of Hrafn are poisoned and the fair folks who lived there, dead and gone and swinging in the trees, food for the Ravens.”

“I am sorry, on behalf of my entire world.”

“Thanks. I am sorry too. Well then, we need to go and kill Drauger,” he said, mildly as he walked away.

“Wait, what?”

Chapter Twenty One – Why Does It Have to Be Blood?

Draugur sat in his stone throne laughing at something a buxom woman said to him when they walked into the main cavern. He leapt to feet when he caught sight of them.

“Friends! It is time,” he said, voice booming, filling the cavern.

“We are ready,” said Taelon, gracefully bowing.

“And so it begins,” whispered Tabitha, under her breath. “Whatever *it* is.” Taelon nudged her sharply in the ribs and she struggled to hide her smile.

Drauger stalked towards them, smiling viciously. He stopped in front of them, close enough that Tabitha could smell him. It was strangely comforting. Like a smelly uncle who always brought you sweets. He pulled a long sword out from his tattered tunic, blade shining in the dim morning light. He flipped the sword around, presenting the hilt to Taelon.

Draugur raised his arms and turned in a circle, addressing the room. “Friends, lovers, enemies,” he bellowed. The crowd tittered. “I leave you now but not forever. Our friend Taelon will bring food back and feed us all for a year and day. We will eat like kings! I will see you, anon.” He made an exaggerated bow to the cheers of his warriors, friends, and lovers, apparently. When the applause died down, a silver bowl was brought by the buxom woman and placed on the floor. Drauger grabbed Tabitha’s hand and sliced her palm with a small silver dagger, shocking her.

“Ow!” she tried to pull her hand back but Drauger held it firm. “What was that for?”

“Nothing is free, girl.” The bowl on the floor was being splashed by her blood which looked nearly black in the dim light. Draugur grunted and released her hand, satisfied with the amount. He handed Tabitha the dagger. “Now, you,” he said, nodding his head towards Taelon.

“Seriously?” They both stared at her, expressions dry. “Fine. Whatever. Stupid little suicide pact we have going on here. I don’t even want to go to the stupid Dreamlands. Maybe we just stay.” Continuing to mutter to herself, she grabbed Taelon’s hand and held the dagger over his palm, taking a deep breath in, she met his eyes. He smiled and winked. Flustered, Tabitha cut across his palm, not liking the feel of the blade piercing through his flesh. He winced. She shrugged and held his hand out to drip blood into the bowl.

The crowd watched the ceremony silently; Tabitha was uncomfortable being the focus of so many unfamiliar people’s attention. At what point, Tabitha wondered, did these creatures of Faery become people, rather than terrifyingly strange creatures? Anything can become normal, given time and exposure.

Taelon held his hand out for Tabitha to give him the dagger, which Tabitha did, grateful to get rid of the bloody thing. Draugur held both Tabitha and Taelon’s hands and bowed his head, saying a prayer. The whole rigmarole felt like an old-time revival meeting. Tabitha had been invited by a school friend a few years ago and she was curious. At the meeting, the priest stood at the altar and commanded the congregation to repent their sins while holding hands with their neighbour. But Tabitha, growing up in a non-religious household, unless you counted Fairy tales, could not remember what a sin was. Tabitha was remembering the church meeting and how uncomfortable she was when Taelon kissed the hilt of the dagger. Expecting more blood-letting, Tabitha was not paying Taelon and Draugur much attention so she was stunned when Taelon stabbed Draugur in the heart.

Chapter Twenty Two – Is Any Death Expected?

Draugur grunted as the blade slid into his chest and he fell to his knees, hard. The handle of Taelon's blade stuck out of Draugur's chest like a thumbtack, thought Tabitha, panic rising. Draugur reached with trembling hands to pick up the bowl and held it to his chest to catch the dripping blood. Tabitha stood frozen in shock. She glared at Taelon.

"What did you do? I thought you were joking!"

"I rarely joke." Taelon shrugged. "Besides, he prefers it if it's unexpected."

"Unexpected? How could you? He was your friend, I thought." Tabitha cried and launched herself at Taelon, punching him as hard as she could in the face. This was the second time that Tabitha had punched someone. The first time was in grade six and was a boy who snapped her bra strap as often as he could. He had a bruise the size of her fist on his side for a week. Punching boys felt good, thought Tabitha, and was totally worth the sore hand.

"That hurt." Taelon rubbed his cheek with his unbloodied hand. "But, you managed to not broadcast your intentions. Well done, Tabbycat, well done!"

The bowl clinked on the stone floor, the sound echoing throughout the cavern, quieting Tabitha and Taelon. Draugur coughed and motioned for Tabitha to come closer. She knelt beside him, the cooling blood making the stone floor sticky.

"You... girl," he croaked. "You will like this part." His head fell back to the floor with a thud and the smell of pennies and the smell of a far-off rain storm rose around the three of them. The hair on Tabitha's arms rose and the air felt charged, pulsing with electricity. Tiny green and blue glowing lights appeared around the trio, spinning faster and faster, surrounding them in a wall of teal light. With a thunderous crack that Tabitha felt in her whole body, the three of them disappeared from the cave.

Chapter Twenty Three – Awake and Dreaming

Queen Carina watched her subjects dance and drink from the comfort of her throne. As she watched them, she nibbled on pastries and cloudberryes that were brought to her by her loyal and insipid valet, Ernest. His stupid, little pointy face annoyed her but he was useful. She frowned as he weaseled his way towards her.

“Your magnificent highness,” he sniveled. “We have had word of the Deadlands girl.”

She straightened in her throne. “And?”

“She and the Huldrakall made it to the Stone Caves and to the Draugur,” he said. “They have made it to Dreamspace with the sword.”

She held up a delicate and manicured hand to stop Ernest’s prattle. “This has to be stopped.” The queen’s wings fluttered with irritation. “Any word from Atli?”

“No, your highness. Atli has not been seen since he entered the Bone Forest. He’s gone dark.”

She stood from her throne abruptly, putting a stop to the revelry before her, and stormed out of the throne room into her ready room, Ernest hard on her heels. The room always soothed her as was its design; the finest weavers in the land had woven a hammock made out of spider’s silk and the wall displayed her collection of weapons, taken from the cooling bodies of her enemies. There was a space above the stone fireplace that was empty.

“We are not going to allow her to continue, Ernest, are we?”

“No, your majesty. How may I serve you?”

“Bring me the dagger.”

“Yes, your majesty.” He returned with a small jeweled dagger.

“Now, hold still,” she said, handing him a silver bowl.

Atli ran into the Stone Caves, diving through the warriors surrounding Draugur, Tabitha and Taelon, sliding on his belly towards the glowing tower of blue green light. Ignoring the shouts and threats behind him, he leapt through the pulsing light, his skin buzzing as the tiny lights settled on his body. I am not too late, he thought, relieved that at least he was able to hitch a ride, even if he could not stop them. With a swirling flash of light, Atli was gone.

Ellinor blinked and found herself at home on the farm, washing dishes with her daughter beside her. They stood side-by-side at the sink, watching a storm build across the fields.

“How did I get here?” Ellinor asked, puzzled.

“What do you mean, mom?”

“I was walking in a hallway that forgot how to be a hallway. I helped it remember. Why can’t I remember?” Ellinor dropped the plate she had been washing back into the sink with a splash. Ellen gently took her mother by the shoulders and sat her down at the scarred, wooden table. Ellen moved a chair beside her mom so she could hold her hands.

“It’s okay, mom. It’s okay. We were washing dishes and now we are sitting. Do you want some tea?” she asked in a low voice.

“Tea? Yes,” she said, shakily. “Yes, tea might be just the ticket. If only I could remember where I dropped my handkerchief. Where’s Tabitha? I could hear her voice a minute ago? Has that girl come back from the fairies yet?”

Ellen sighed as she went to make tea. This is so hard, she thought. All I want is for my daughter and my mother to come back to me. “No, mom she’s still gone.”

Ellinor hummed to herself and let herself forget.

Chapter Twenty Four – The Dreamspace is Not a Nice Place

Tabitha's first impression of the Dreamspace was that it looked like some place the Childlike Empress would feel at home. Everything was white and blurry, like an old movie from the 1950s featuring some aging starlet who is only ever filmed with a soft-focused lens. Tabitha rubbed her eyes but everything remained fuzzy. She was kneeling beside Draugur and Taelon stood over both of them, eyes wary and scanning the blank surroundings.

Draugur groaned, breaking the muffled silence and sat up. Tabitha yelped and scrambled backwards. Draugur's wild hair was matted with blood and the dagger that Taelon had stabbed him with was still poking out of his chest making him look like a deranged, life-sized voodoo doll. He got to his feet, slowly, wincing with pain. He looked down at himself and pulled out the dagger like he was pulling out a particularly large splinter. His hands were covered in dried blood but they did not shake. The wound in his chest dribbled a little blood before sealing up. Tabitha gasped.

"I thought you were dead? How is it that you are not dead?"

Draugur grinned and slapped Taelon, hard, on the back. "Draugur. Means 'Again-Walker.' Hard to kill. Good man to have to get to Dreamspace. I die. Then not." He rubbed his chest, gingerly, then grinned at Tabitha. "Still hurts to die. Good not to be dead."

"I am glad you are not dead," Tabitha hugged him.

"Ah! The Ravens do not come for me yet. Stupid birds."

"I hate to break up this little happy lovefest, but we are running out of time." Taelon tapped his wrist as if he were wearing a watch. The gesture seemed out of place. "We need to leave." Draugur laughed as if Taelon had said something funny and started to walk away. Tabitha shook her head and followed them.

They walked through Dreamspace, making their way out of the ghostly caves. Eventually, Tabitha could make out small variations in the countryside. They walked around the ghosts of trees, and shrubs. Occasionally, a transparent figure would wander past them. Tabitha had a hard time getting used to the in-between people. It was creepy. Like being surrounded by ghosts or the walking dead. They had blank stares and talked to themselves, lost in their own dreaming. Taelon had explained that the Dreamspace was where the worlds collided but a few people could visit in their dreams. Tabitha and Taelon were being pulled along by Draugur's death-dream and once they found the portal back to the Deadlands, Draugur would "wake-up" and be dragged back into his world.

"But not yet!" Draugur boomed, laughing at his own joke.

Tabitha smiled. "I'm glad."

As they walked, the scenery gradually changed from dense forest to open fields. Ghostly forests gave way to the impressions of houses and buildings. Some of the buildings looked odd: suburban split-level homes overlaid with round straw homes with thatch roofs. Like the Dreamspace was where the two worlds co-existed but not cleanly; a photo taken over another. Double-exposure.

They made camp for the night in the dubious shade of a gnarled oak tree. They slept curled around the fire, as if the light of the fire could protect them from the crushing darkness. The evening passed quickly, dawn fading into night. As they slept, they did not notice the figure in the wilderness, watching them sleep.

The morning rose, pale and cold and Tabitha was finding it harder to breathe. The moderately fresh air in the forest thickened and the hazy atmosphere turned grey. The sky, such as it was, was a charcoal grey and Tabitha felt claustrophobic with the lack of sky. She had gotten used to the clear blue sky in Faery and found herself missing the open skies of

home. The air was smoky; a fine, white powder hung in the air, dust coating her body, making her eyes burn and her skin itch. What was this stuff? She asked herself.

“Broken dreams.”

“What?”

“Broken dreams. The white powder. It’s the stuff that dead dreams are made out of.”

“I would take it as a personal favour, if you would stop doing that.” Taelon shrugged and continued. “The universe and magic are made out of the same substance: possibility. The dust here is spent dreams. Dried-up, flavorless and empty. Eventually, all of the Dreamspace will be like this. As people give up on hope and dreams, as their hearts are broken, the possible futures narrow and dry up.” Taelon would not look at Tabitha. The sword that Draugur had given him in the cave was in a rough leather scabbard, tied to his waist. The red stone in the pommel seemed to shine with its own light.

“What’s with the sword?” asked Tabitha as she rummaged through their bags, looking for something for breakfast. “If it’s so special then why did you have to stab Drauger with the dagger? Why not the big sword?”

Taelon stretched out and built up the fire, ignoring Tabitha’s question. After a few minutes, he appeared to come to a decision and settled cross-legged in front of the fire.

“Grettir was a man that lived long ago who wanted to become king. He had a brother who he loved but he wanted to be king more than he loved his brother. One day their father, Asmunder, gave them each a quest, and Grettir knew that he would do anything to beat his brother. Grettir’s brother was gentle and kind. He wanted to be king so he could help his people defeat the poison from the Deadlands that was encroaching on their world. Grettir though, he wanted power. Asmunder loved his sons and believed that by setting them against

each other, it would ensure that the best man would become king. And he thought it would be funny.” Taelon deadpanned.

Tabitha rolled her eyes. “The sword, remember? Get to the sword.”

Taelon crossed his legs and stared into the fire. Soft snores came from Draugur’s side of the camp. A natural storyteller, Taelon conjured up images of ancient feuds and days gone by. A fairy tale told by a fairy with a fox tail.

“Asmunder had a sword made by the best metal worker in the kingdom,” he paused. “It was Jotnar the troll that you came across in your world. The sword was called Tyrfinn and had the ability to cut through the barriers between worlds. To gain the power to do so, the sword needed a blood sacrifice during the casting of the sword. Asmunder thought long and hard about the appropriate sacrifice and rather than pick someone that deserved to die... he chose my sister.” Tabitha gasped. Taelon ran his fingers through his hair and leaned backward on his tail.

“Her name was Anna and she loved to run. Asmunder’s men grabbed her and took her away to the castle where she was run through by Jotnar. She was held down by the king’s sons while the king’s daughter, Carina, watched and laughed as Anna was killed. After the sword was completed, Asmunder threw a festival and invited my parents who did not yet know that their daughter was dead. I was tasked with watching my younger sister at home which I greatly resented. At the festival, Asmunder unveiled his grand surprise and thanked my parents for their sacrifice and had them killed as well. It always is three times in Faery. Three deaths, three times, three promises to keep.”

Tabitha’s eyes welled with tears. “I am sorry that happened to you,” she said, softly.

“Thank you,” he replied, using the sword to poke at some wood in the fire.

“How did you end up with the sword?”

“I stole it,” he said with a boyish grin. “Grettir killed his father and Carina became Queen and stripped her brother, Atli, from all claims to the throne forcing him into servitude. During all the madness, I broke into her bedroom and took the sword.”

“That seems ridiculous.”

“That seems ridiculous?” He gestured to his tail and the snoring Draugur. “All this is okay, but breaking into a bedroom and stealing a sword is too much?”

“Yes,” Tabitha laughed. “A girl has to have some limits.”

Chapter Twenty Five – Convergence

The Robber King is a myth. The scary thing about myths is that sometimes they turn out to be based in truth. Most of the time, we wish we never pulled back the curtain and could go back not knowing anything.

- Excerpt from untitled memoir, author
unknown

“Can I hold the sword?” Tabitha asked.

“No,” replied Taelon, walking away. “Not yet.”

“Jerk.”

The morning passed quickly. Taelon woke Draugur with a light kick in the bum and he returned the favour by punching Taelon in arm. Then they laughed together like two idiot boys. The cloudy light made it hard to tell the time, that and the lack of a sun. It was a bizarre place, thought Tabitha. She was having a difficult time getting a destination out of the boys and wondered if there was any point to this ridiculous exercise. They walked for hours, the forest giving way to dry earth and tall grasses. The air smelled of sweetgrass and heather, and the grasses around them rustled occasionally with the passage of small winged creatures that flew in and out of the tall grass, playing hide and seek. A beautiful creature with iridescent dragonfly wings flew up to Tabitha and hovered in front of her face, its hauntingly large eyes blinking slowly as they examined each other. Tabitha held out her hand, hoping that the fairy creature would stand on it but with the movement, it skittered at her angrily. It flew straight towards her face and ripped out a tiny handful of Tabitha’s hair at the roots as Tabitha tried, unsuccessfully, to swat at it and duck away. The fairy held its hair trophy above its arms as its companions let out tiny, enthusiastic cheers before zipping away.

Stupid little fairies, thought Tabitha, rubbing her sore scalp. I am beginning to hate this place. She ignored the chuckling of the large fox, with as much dignity as she could muster.

In the late afternoon, a large shape in the distance appeared, as they walked closer, like a tall, stone tower. They reached the spire as the light was beginning to fade. It was massive. Draugur and Taelon consulted with one another, leaving Tabitha to explore the outcropping by herself. The stone was rough and choppy, like it had been inexpertly carved and resembled a frozen giant covered in a soft green moss. It was the only colour they had seen since they arrived in the Dreamspace, and it made a fairly drab green into a loud pop of lushness in a dull, grey land. The dust that coated everything here did not settle on the stone beast but it seemed to avoid landing on it at all. Tabitha walked slowly around the stone tower, exploring its nooks and crevices, looking for a way inside.

She walked around the back of the tower, humming softly to herself, enjoying the peace and quiet of the evening. The scent of the grasses and the low drone of the insects reminded her of the farm. She was remembering the field at her grandmother's and wondering how she was doing. She was cut short from her reminiscing when someone bumped into her, startling her. Tabitha started apologize for running into them but her apology was cut short when the figure turned around to reveal her grandmother, Ellinor, standing in the middle of the Dreamspace, her back to a stone mountain, wearing her best nightgown.

Chapter Twenty Six - An Unexpected Surprise

“Grandma?” said Tabitha, incredulous. “What are you doing here?”

“Tabitha!” Ellinor beamed. “You have been missing for so long. I have been looking for you. Your hair is terrible. What would your mother say? Where is your mother? I had cheese puffs for breakfast and could use a glass of milk.” Ellinor embraced her granddaughter, wrapping her frail arms around her and holding tight. Tabitha closed her eyes and inhaled her grandma’s scent, a comforting blend of peach face cream and hard peppermint candies. When she was a girl, Tabitha used to sneak into the living room and steal the candies when she was not being watched. She would take the candies up to her room and chew the strong mints that would make her eyes water. She did not enjoy them exactly but when you are not spoiled for choices, any candies are better than no candies.

“Is mom here too?”

“Ellen? Oh goodness, no. What kind of a place is this for her? She has no imagination and would hardly know how to swing a sword.”

“And you do?”

“Oh my darling girl, I have danced with the faeries in the moonlight and feasted on impossible delights. I can almost remember...” Ellinor’s face went slack, her voice trailing off as she focused on something in the distance. “I can hear her calling now. Ellen. She gets so worried...goodbye dear.” Ellinor hands fell to her side and she began to walk away into the tower, her long nightgown making her look ghostly in the dim light. Ellinor waved her hands at the stone tower and a tunnel opened up and she walked through, the stone closing up behind her.

“Grandma...wait!” Tabitha hurried after her grandmother, but she remained out of reach. “Oh, hello dear,” a radiant smile broke out across Ellinor’s face. She turned away from Tabitha and winked out of existence, disappearing entirely.

“Grandma!” Tabitha called. “Grandma! Where are you?” Tabitha turned and glared at Taelon who came running around the tower. “What was that?”

He held his hands up as if fending off an attack. “I told you that the Dreamspace was accessible by only a few people? Your grandmother is one of them. The very old, the very young and, occasionally, the mentally ill can visit the Dreamspace. Mostly, it happens when they are sleeping.” He frowned, thinking. “She shouldn’t be able to do that.”

“Well, it looks like she just did. Now, what?” Tabitha kicked at the tower in frustration, making no effect on the stone besides disturbing a small patch of moss.

“Now, you die.” Carina, Queen of Hrafn stood behind them, a small smile on her perfect face holding a cross-bow in her dainty hands.

Tabitha glanced at Taelon both of them raising their arms to the queen in surrender. She thought at him in a stage-whisper. *I thought this was a hard place to get to, you liar.* He snorted, trying not to laugh.

Chapter Twenty Seven – Someone Wicked This Way Comes

Carina examined her fingernails, while sitting on a mossy-covered rock, her sharp features stony in concentration. The cross-bow, overly large for her size, was propped up beside her. Tabitha and Taelon sat with their backs against the stone tower, and Draugur, appeared to be catching a nap, un-phased by the angry, winged murderer, holding a weapon on them. She had confiscated the sword and was stroking the pommel like a cat.

“We are most pleased that we have recovered the sword. It was an embarrassment, having the sword gone, given that so many people have given themselves, freely, to its creation. The return of the sword will be lauded and poets will write ballads about their queen.” Carina laughed.

Tabitha debated the wisdom of a snarky reply versus being silent. “I am not sure that horror stories count as ballads but what do I know?” she laughed. “What’s your deal, lady? I am so sick of this place. Draugur’s people are starving, you live in a castle and you are obsessed with that stupid sword. All I want to do is go home and now I’m going to die before I’ve had a chance to punch Taelon in the face like he so richly deserves.”

“Hey!” cried Taelon, mock offended.

“Well, you do deserve it.”

Carina twirled the sword around, tip buried in the earth, sending up small plumes of chalky dust. “The sword is important. You wouldn’t understand...the sword is everything.” The queen seemed to forget that there were others watching. She stared at the tip of the sword, buried in the earth, with regret. “It is needed in order to cross through the boundaries – the ruler of Hrafn cannot rule just this land alone. She needs a symbol of her power. And this sword is the symbol that she needs to consolidate her rule.”

“It’s just a sword. It has a bloody and terrible history, but, really, it’s a weapon, not a gift from the gods.” Tabitha shook her head with disbelief. “All of this for hunk of metal?” She started to laugh.

Carina stood, her lips shrinking into a thin line and her body stiff with anger. “Insolent Deadlands witch! I will have your head for a centerpiece on my table. I will grind your bones to powder and bathe in your blood. I will – ” Carina raised the sword and was about to bring it down on Tabitha’s neck when she stopped with a groan, the sword dropping to her feet. Carina collapsed, hard and fell to the earth, her wings crumpling, coated with dust. A small blade stuck out of her slender back. Tabitha, confused, was surprised to see the elf Atli appear from behind the stone tower. He was panting and his hair was wild, he looked like he had had a hard few days. Carina made a small gurgle, her eyes wide and Atli hurried to her side. He clasped her hand and drew it to his mouth, giving it a soft kiss.

“Sister, I am sorry.”

Carina’s mouth opened and closed, trying to respond but unable to form the words and Tabitha was struck with an inappropriate urge to giggle at her resemblance to a goldfish in an aquarium.

It took a long time for the queen to die.

Atli sat beside his sister, holding her hand, as she gurgled and gasped her final breaths. Her skin became translucent and pale making her look like she had been carved out of marble – her wings, losing their vibrancy and hue as she faded.

Tabitha half-expected Carina to leap up and yell “Boo!” like some sort of deranged zombie-fairy and she kept casting furtive glances at Carina’s corpse. Atli sat silently beside his sister’s body with his eyes closed, looking pained. At last, he opened his eyes and met Tabitha’s glare.

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way,” he said. “No one was supposed to find out.”

Tabitha raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, what are you talking about?”

“Atli?” called a surprised voice came from behind them. “I have been looking for you forever! Where have you been?”

“Ellinor?” Atli rose to his feet and started walking towards Tabitha’s grandmother, looking like he has seen a ghost. “It has been so long.”

“Grandma?” said Tabitha. “What is going on?”

Ellinor only had eyes for Atli. “I’m sorry Atli, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to kill him. The troll... he tried to take the sword... I got scared. I’m not as strong as I was, but I was walking and Jotnar, he came at me....said, “She needed it” and that it was time,” she started to cry, covering her face in her hands. Atli wrapped his long arms around Ellinor’s shoulders tenderly and stroked the back of her hair. “You told me to keep it safe and I tried, Atli, I tried...but my grandbaby was missing and I tried to find her and could not find her. Or? Was it my baby that was sad and crying?” She looked up and stared off into the distance, remembering. “Oh, Ellen...she must be hungry. I should feed her. What is the price of dandelions in the rain?” Ellinor started to shake and whispered, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry” in a quiet voice, over and over again. Atli looked as shocked as Tabitha felt, holding her grandmother, trying to comfort her.

Chapter Twenty Eight – Questions Mostly Answered

“She was so beautiful,” said Atli, hugging Ellinor to him. “She is so beautiful.”

Tabitha squinted as she examined her grandmother: papery skin, lined face, frail arms, vacant stare and then she looked back at Atli. She guessed that her grandma looked good, for her age but Atli was tall and lean, with wiry muscles. Grandma, was not.

“So, my grandma is 72 and you look to be around 35. What gives?”

“Time runs differently in Faery, as you have seen,” Atli answered. “Ellinor went back to earth after I killed my brother,” Atli explained. “She...didn’t want to see me again. Said I had forgotten how to be kind. She was right. While I was trying to find Ellinor, my sister had our father killed and stole the throne. I had to stop her – I made a mistake. I betrayed my family, my friends,” he looked at Taelon, beseechingly. “I am sorry.”

Curious, thought Tabitha, wondering what their history was together.

Draugur chose this moment to stretch and shout-speak to Atli in his loud voice. “You king now, yes?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Will you be good king?” Draugur asked, staring Atli down.

“I hope so.”

Draugur pounded Atli on the back in an overly friendly way. “You had better. My people need food, and Draugur wants a large weapon...” Draugur was slowly drawing Atli away from Ellinor and Tabitha, informing him of his demands for himself, his people, his pet brownies, his many (many) women. Taelon, by an unseen arrangement, had been waiting for the distraction and crept towards Tabitha. The sword, which had been lying, forgotten, in the dust, he placed in her hands.

“Take this and your grandma and go. Now.” He whispered to her. He was so close to her that she could smell him. Even after all the running, death and dust, he still smelled yummy and Tabitha fought an urge to lean in to him.

“What do you mean go? Go where?”

“Ellinor knows how to do it and so do you. Bend the dream and go home, Tabbycat. There is nothing for you here. You promised.”

“I – a...” she did not know what to say. “I’ll miss you,” she said.

Taelon grinned. “Of course, you will.” Before she could lose her nerve, she leaned in and kissed him, intending it to be brief. Their lips touched, Taelon exhaled in surprise and deepened the kiss, exploring her mouth and lips gently. Tabitha pulled back and grinned at him. He smiled at her.

“You did not project your thoughts at all. Well done.” He pulled her and Ellinor to their feet. “Now go.” Tabitha pulled her unresisting grandmother towards the stone tower and turned away from Taelon, wondering what she could possibly say.

“Goodbye.” She held up her hand in a quiet farewell in what she hoped was a cool move but she had her doubts. Now Tabitha had to learn how to bend the stuff that dreams are made of so they could go home. Out of sight, she heard Draugur yell, and Taelon took off towards the sounds of fighting. Atli came into view, running as fast as he could, calling for Ellinor and the sword. Roused by his voice, Ellinor shook her head as if to clear away her cobwebs occupying her dying mind.

“Goodbye, my dear. I love you. I will miss you but my family needs me.” She waved at Atli who was rapidly getting closer. Her wave looked just as dumb as my wave, thought Tabitha, relieved that she had company in not being cool at all. Her grandmother raised an eyebrow at her.

“Now we are off,” she placed Tabitha’s hands on the tower, ignoring the fuming elf who had been tackled by Taelon and was now being thoroughly punched in the face. “The trick is to make it remember what it always was.” Ellinor held Tabitha’s hands and squeezed gently, bringing them to touch the tower. “Make a door home.”

“A door?”

“Well, a window is inconvenient at my age, so I would appreciate a door.”

Tabitha shrugged, trying not to pay attention to the sound of Draugur cheering on Taelon as he was beating the crap out of the future faery king. It was a little distracting. Taelon looked very...athletic. Tabitha took a deep breath and leaned into the tower thinking of a door back home.

The Door was a hallway, filled with light and colour. After days of bleakness and pale, featureless deserts, Tabitha was ready for the rich, greens of home. She even missed the wheat-covered hell that was the prairies. She opened her eyes to see the Door, beautiful and shining and her grandmother clapping at her side.

“Now, Tabby, now!” screamed Taelon.

Picking up the sword from the dust, Tabitha grabbed her grandma and ran through the Door, sticking her tongue out at Atli, who was barred from using her Door. She did not trust him. She made sure he could hear the echo of her laughter as she let the Door collapse in her wake.

Chapter Twenty Nine – Home

Tabitha and Ellinor ran through the Door that Tabitha opened, holding each other up as they passed through. *That was amazing*, thought Tabitha. The skin on her arms felt tingly and her head felt light. Unlike her previous trips through portals, she did not feel like throwing up her breakfast. This time, she felt exhilarated! It felt like there was too much of her – like the Dreamspace had filled her up inside and she was a pine cone about to burst in a fire. It was like she finally could feel her inner self, the real Tabitha, align with the earth and the cosmos and it pulsed along inside of her. It was thrilling – she had never felt more alive.

The feeling lasted for approximately as long as it took to take one breath in the dusty, dry prairie air. They were back in the wretched prairie grass and the lame little woods.

“Oh, look, it’s the house! It’s dinner time, Tibby. I am absolutely famished. Let’s go!” Ellinor announced, marching towards the farmhouse at a staunch pace.

Tabitha shook her head and started out after her only to trip on something in front of her. She stumbled, swearing under her breath. It was Tyrting, the stupid, magic sword.

“Well, then,” Tabitha said. “I guess this is mine now.” She picked up the sword, propped it over her shoulder and followed her grandma back to the farm.

Chapter Thirty - The Girl Who Got Away

There is a story about a girl who lived in a cave and was kidnapped by pirates, robbers, trolls or mountain men. In some stories, the girl got away without being harmed but, in most of them, the girl got away but not before she was punished in some fashion. In one, she was beaten, in another, she is made the mistress of seven robbers and the Robber King and bears a child a year until she is able to escape while they are bathing. The children are killed and the Robber King eats their hearts. The story does not say if the girl's heart remained intact. It so rarely does.

Excerpt from untitled memoir, author unknown.

The drive home to Prince George was long.

Ellinor had stopped Tabitha before they walked into the farmhouse to talk to her about their adventure. She grabbed Tabitha's arm, hard and said, "Don't say anything to your mother, dear. She wouldn't understand."

"Oh hello, dear! Look, who came home." She called out to her daughter inside the house before turning around and stage whispering to Tabitha with a wink. "Our secret. Hide the sword."

Tabitha ditched the sword in the lilac bush beside the house to be retrieved later. And with that, she threw open the door and her mother started yelling and crying and hugging them both.

Eventually, her mother calmed down and after a brief statement to the local police and a public shaming from the neighbours, Tabitha helped her mother pack up the remainder of Ellinor's things which they sent ahead of them in a U-Haul. Ellinor refused to talk to Tabitha about anything that happened and acted crazier any time Tabitha tried – so she

stopped trying. They drove across three provinces, barely speaking to one another, which was fine with Tabitha.

She spent the ride home staring out the window, thoughts closed down around her like a shield, not thinking about anything out of the ordinary. After all, she thought, she was never going to see faery lights illuminating corpse-white forests, or the dust of broken dreams settling on an impossible stone tower. She was never going to talk to a certain man with a ridiculous tail, ever again.

And that was fine with her, really. She shifted in her seat, touching the sword that lay on the floor of the car, wrapped in a pilfered, crocheted afghan. She has put this whole thing behind her and she was not going to think about any of it again. The sword chimed gently, as if in answer, but Tabitha ignored it.

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