

A
STONEHEARTH
Fan Fiction
By CrazyCandy

The Invisible Princess
Complete Edition

from the series of *Tales of Lesfaia*

version 2

A fragment of the map of Lesfaia. The full map can be found at:
<http://discourse.stonehearth.net/t/fan-fiction-fan-map-the-kingdom-of-lesfaia/23121?u=crazycandy>

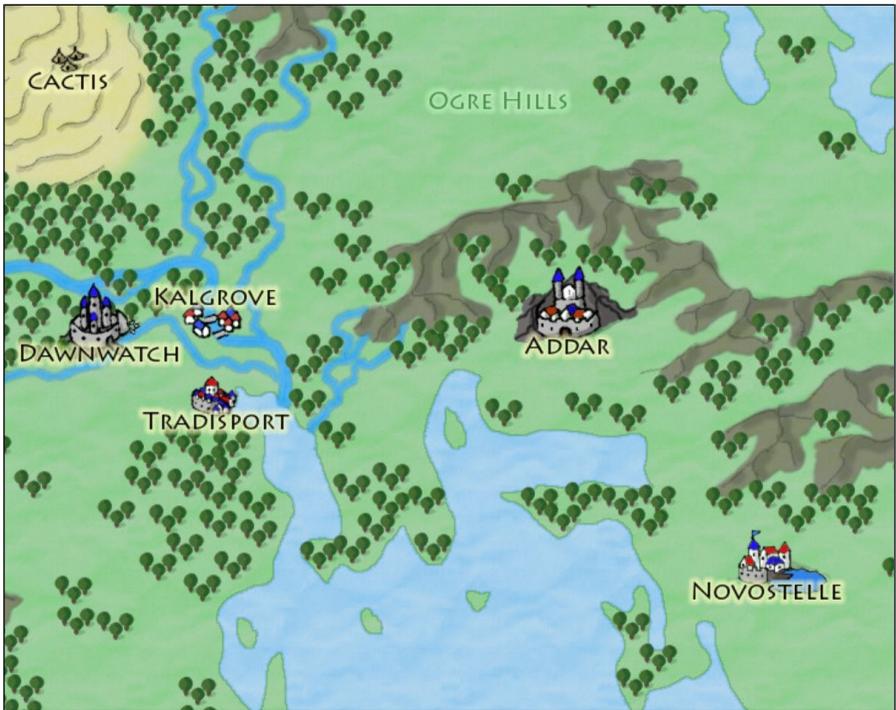


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Part I

GAVIN

Year 241, Kalgrove – Spring

“Hey, guys!” Brett Addion suddenly cried out from behind his giant jug of booze; his voice distorted by the dozen drinks he had that evening. “Are y’all up for an adventure?” he said.

“What kind of adventure?” said Treston Bendell, a short and skinny young man, the son of the town’s weaver.

“Last week I’ve been to Tradisport where I...” said Brett, taking a short break to take a breath, as he tried to speak too quick and too much, then he took a sip of his ale, “... So, there I met this guy, and he wore some blue velvet robe.”

“Are you sure it was velvet?” Treston interrupted.

“Are you sure it was blue?” Gavin added with a grin upon his face.

Brett looked at them with funny eyes and he suddenly seemed unsure. “I think... I think it might have been pink.” he said.

“Pink robe?” said Treston, “What kind of man wears a pink robe?”

“No I mean...” he said. “The pink was not robe... It was the gemstone thingy he had in his ring. That thing was pink... I mean blue... or...” he took another short pause. “It was pink. I think.”

Treston chuckled, “But what color was his robe?”

Brett took a while to think about some words he lacked to say something very important to him, but likely a lot less important to Gavin and Treston. “I think his robe might have been not velvet,” he said, then he took a long deep breath, “If I recall right, it was actually silk.”

Gavin and Treston took a short glance upon one-another, then looked back at their drunkard friend.

“The color, Brett,” said Treston in a slightly demanding, yet mocking tone, looking at him with a dead serious expression upon his face, “What color was the robe, Brett? It’s important!”

At this point, Gavin could barely resist the urge to unleash the loudest laughter he had in weeks.

“The color?” he said, “Well, um... I think it was blue.”

“But a moment ago you said yellow,” said Treston.

“No, that was most def-... defi-... um... defi-ianitely, or whatever...” said Brett with a slightly frustrated tone in his voice, “Pink was his thingy, not the robe.”

“Thingy?” said Gavin and raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, the thingy.” Brett replied. “So ya come with me?”

“To where?” said Treston.

“To an adventure to places where no man of our town had ever been!” said Brett, finishing the sentence with a burp.

“So it’s like an expedition?” said Treston with half a smile upon his face.

“No, no! Defi-thingy whatever that word is... No expedition!” Brett exclaimed. “Need not I have to remind you of what happened to the infamous Isola Expeditions? Right?”

“I never heard of those. What happened?” said Gavin.

“I have no idea!” Brett replied. “But I tell you what... Horrible, horrible things! You don’t want to know. All I say is: No expedition!”

Gavin closed his eyes, and took a long and loud breath of the damp and warm air that filled the tavern. As he opened his eyes again, he saw Brett sitting by the opposite side of the table, and saw that his mouth was opening to speak, filling the air with nonsense.

“Come on!” he said. “It’s an easy job, and the wizard told me we get lots of coin when we’re done.”

“Wizard?” said Gavin startled. “What wizard?”

“The guy in the robe,” Brett replied.

“You never said he was a wizard,” said Treston.

“Well,” said Brett with a bit unsure tone, “The guy never said it either, but...” he paused.

“But what?” Treston asked, demanding the rest of Brett’s sentence impatiently.

“He had this blue robe and that thingy, and he also talked in some mysterious way,” he said. “If that doesn’t make someone a wizard then nothing does!”

“Wearing a robe and carrying that, um... that *thingy*, doesn’t make someone a wizard, Brett,” said Treston.

“What’s that *thingy* anyway?” said Gavin.

“The pink thingy,” Brett replied. “I already told you what it was.”

“Ah, so it’s the ring?”

“Yes, the thingy!” said Brett.

Gavin sighed, then took a short glance towards the ancient clock that stood tall and proud by the wall. He followed the pendulum with his eyes for a couple of moments, then slowly raised his blue eyes to see the time it displayed, and it said it was *time to go*.

He turned his back to the table, gazing down he saw his empty plate and beside it his cup with one or two sips of ale; he drank it all, and then he raised up from the chair. “Well,” he said.

“Going away so soon?” said Treston, then he glanced too at the clock. “Oh! Time flies as always,” he smiled, then he raised from the chair as well.

“Well then,” said Gavin. “See you two tomorrow.”

“Good night!” said Treston.

“Think about the adventure ‘till tomorrow!” Brett cried after them,

completely neglecting to say *good bye*. Gavin and Treston both looked back at him, and saw as his head dropped down, and his face slammed into the table.

They looked at one-another, then without saying a word, they both headed back to the table where their friend was lying. They lifted the drunken fool and carried him all the way to his home while occasionally making remarks of his weight...

Gavin said good bye once again to Treston, then he headed home for his long deserved rest after the tedious day at his father's workshop.

Being the blacksmith's son, Gavin worked at his father's workshop, doing what he thought was the hardest job there was in the world. Standing by the hot furnaces and hammering metal all day wore him down completely by the end of the day, and many times he had wished there was something else he could do – even the opportunity for a wild and dangerous adventure sounded tempting.

Unfortunately for him, it was the only thing he was good at – hammering metal. Apart of brawling with the others during hazy nights at the taverns in town. However, there was no need for good brawlers in town, as just to the North of Kalgrove, there was a huge outpost of the Royal Army where nearly a thousand elite soldiers were stationed, and so the town was safe from all harm. Gavin even tried to join their ranks, but they just mocked him and said they were not recruiting at the time.

That night he could not sleep, as his mind was filled with thoughts of Brett's so called adventure. He was wondering if it was a real thing, and not just one of the drunkard's fake tales, like the one where he said he had beaten an orc to save a fairy.

The next day was his day off from work, and before hearing Brett's tale, he planned to spend it alone in his room in his father's house. He walked downstairs

into the kitchen, but he was late to join his father for breakfast, as he already was in the workshop. Working restless, never taking a break ever since the death of Gavin's mother.

After having finished his breakfast, he rushed out the doorway that led to the front yard, which was protected by the ancient wooden fence that was made by his late grandfather a long, long time ago.

The fence, however, was badly in need of repairs, as a couple weeks earlier, a wild boar found his way into the town. As the guards chased it out, it tore down the ancient wood and crossed the yard, causing quite a mess before breaking the fence at another point at the eastern side of the yard. After which the beast fled into the woods and was not seen ever since. Neither Gavin, nor his father found the time to repair the fence since then. Maybe if Gavin had no other plans for the day, that sunny day could have been the day to fix the fence, but it was not. Although even Gavin knew his day would be wasted for a cause of nonsense...

Gavin crossed the river upon the South-Bridge that the townsfolk used to call "Fat King's Bridge", because many centuries ago lived a king who was so fat they had to build a second bridge in Kalgrove when he visited the town, as they were worried that the other bridge would collapse under his weight.

Not far from the river was standing the house of Brett. His house was quite easy to find even for the most distant of his *friends*, as the dwelling of his was surrounded by countless empty bottles that he had left lying around, piling up over the years. The house itself was in ruins, especially since half the building was burnt down a year before when after a dispute Brett had with a someone, that someone set his home ablaze. He never had the coins to fix things around the house, as his wealth usually slips away from him and is replaced by booze and hazy nights and rude awakenings in some ditch or in the middle of a forest or... or in the Royal Prison in Addar, the *City of the Crown*.

Brett had so many adventures in his life, yet he could barely recall even a quarter of them, as on each adventure he had, he enjoyed the companion of at least a dozen bottles that either disappeared or ended up lying empty in the yard around his house.

Gavin knocked the door, but there was no answer. After trying again two more times, he simply opened the door, which was always easy to open, as it had no lock. Not like he had anything of great value inside his dwelling – it was mostly old, dust-covered furniture from two centuries ago and many more empty bottles all over the floor; it makes one wonder where he gets all the coins from; the coins that get him so drunk all the time, they all seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Gavin looked everywhere he could think of, even inside Brett's old leather-bound wooden chest, which was empty. Though, Brett was not there, Gavin knew it well where he could be that early in the morning when even the sun was barely up in the sky...

The Golden Poyo was the oldest of the thirteen taverns in Kalgrove, and as it stands, it was Brett's favorite. It was an old large cottage standing proud at the northern end of the town; its blue roof and two chimneys could be seen from afar.

Gavin stepped through the door into the spacious hall and the sight of the remarkable and ornate stone hearth from across the room greeted him. The place was silent and peaceful – only a single table was occupied: the table where Brett was sitting alone, drinking ale from a giant clay jug, before him lied an empty bottle, lying on its side, and another standing, it was half full (or half empty). “How can someone drink so much?” Gavin muttered to himself.

As he made a few steps in, Gavin laid his eyes upon the fair bartender, Talia, who greeted him with a wide smile, “Good morning, Gavin!” she said. “Came to pick up your friend?”

“Ugh... aye, something like that.” he replied. Gavin was not even surprised

she knew he came for Brett. Countless times had she helped Gavin and Treston save Brett from trouble, which Brett never said thanks for, as he forgot what happened each time; that day though was not another day they needed her help, fortunately.

“Gavin!” the lonely drunkard from the distant table cried for his friend. “I haven't seen you in a long time! Where have you been?”

“Brett!” said Gavin. “We met just last night.”

“Impossible! I've been to Tradisport yesterday,” he said.

“We know!” said Gavin.

Brett looked at him startled, “We?!”

“Yes,” Gavin replied. “Treston and I drank with you in the Goblin yesterday,” he said, referring to the *Green Goblin*, which was Brett's second favorite tavern in town. “We even took you home.”

“Hah!” Brett exclaimed, “You're trying to fool me again!”

“No,” said Gavin. “You even told us about some guy you met in Tradisport.”

“Oh,” Brett sighed, “I totally forgot that. Sorry.”

Gavin sat down by the table and looked into his friend's eyes. “You also told us about some adventure.”

He could read on his face how surprised he was, as normally neither him, nor Treston bothered him about his *adventures* as he called them.

“Adventure?” Brett said. “Oh, yes, indeed! I was about to tell you about that! The *adventure!*”

“So what is it about?” said Gavin, his tone becoming less and less calm, and more and more excited.

“There is some old haunted castle east of here. I'm sure you know that well,” he said.

“Yes, Dawnwatch Fort,” said Gavin. “They say the place is cursed, and

there's nothing there.”

“Well, that's a lie to keep folks away from there. Like, you know... those adventurous treasure hunters,” he said.

“Like you?” Gavin suggested.

“Why, yes, my friend!” Brett exclaimed. “I want you to come with me and together we'll get rich!”

“What's in there anyway?” Gavin asked, his voice filled with doubts, yet his heart longed to try something new.

“Treasure!” the drunkard replied with a mighty smile upon his face, revealing the place of his two missing front-teeth.

Gavin looked to the table, giving room for his thoughts inside his mind. He wanted to break free for once from the daily struggle of his job, but his mind was also filled with worries and doubts. He thought to himself: *what if he lies?*

It was not the long journey he was afraid of, as Dawnwatch Fort was just a few miles away from Kalgrove; it was what could be waiting for them *inside* that worried him. An old castle of a lord who passed away many centuries ago, shrouded by the cloud of many mysteries, advised by the old and wise to be avoided by as far as possible. It is said that even the wild animals dare not enter.

“And what about the guy?” Gavin asked.

“Guy?” Brett raised his eyebrows.

“Yesterday you told us about some guy who had a gemstone.”

“Um,” Brett appeared to be lost in his thoughts, “I think I remember that... I mean the guy.”

“You think?!” said Gavin. “Tell me the truth, Brett; there was no guy.”

“There was!” Brett exclaimed. “He wore blue robe, and he had this thingy.”

“Thingy?”

“Yes, the thingy,” said Brett. “He told me he needs something from the castle to make the thingy work.”

“What?” said Gavin, wondering if there was any truth behind the words of his friend.

“He had this ring with a shiny pink gemstone. He told me it opens some chest.” said Brett.

“Let me guess,” said Gavin, “the chest is inside the castle.”

“Yes! You're a genius, Gavin!”

“I know,” he said, then took the bottle away from Brett, just before he could reach it to take another sip. “No more drinks for today. We need to find Treston.”

“Why?” he asked startled.

“We're going on an adventure!” said Gavin...

“Are you insane?!” cried out Treston Bendell, the weaver's son, leaning against the ancient loom that served his family for many generations. “You can't possibly believe all that nonsense, Gavin!”

“I'm not lying, Tres,” Brett insisted, “The man I've met in Tradisport gave a detailed description of what's inside the place, and it's perfectly safe to go in. All we must do is to go in, grab the chest and bring it here, and he'll open it with his key.”

“If it's that easy, why doesn't your man go in himself, instead of dealing with drunkards?” said Treston with a demanding tone in his deep voice.

“There's some magic that keeps him out the place, but we can enter, and that's why he needs us!” Brett replied.

Treston rolled his eyes, “Oh, yes?” he said, “Tell me the truth, Brett, there's no man, no chest, no key... you just got bored of your life, and want to find a good place to get yourself killed!”

“Hey, you need to calm down, Tres!” said Gavin, bursting into the argument, hoping to calm the tides, but instead, all he achieved was pouring even more oil into the fiery flames of Treston's temper.

“You!” cried aloud the son of the weaver, pointing his finger towards the son of the blacksmith, “You are an idiot, just like this other idiot! Why can't you understand this with your nut-brains?! Dawnwatch is a forbidden place for a reason, and if you go there you both are going to die!”

“There's nothing there, just treasure,” said Brett.

“You'd rather believe a man whom you met in some tavern, and was probably just as drunk as you were, than your own friend who got you out of countless troubles?” said Treston, his face full of disappointment.

“You don't know what is in there,” said Gavin.

“How can you support this foolish idea?” asked Treston of him, “I thought at least you had some brains, but I'm starting to have doubts.”

“There's nothing to be afraid of,” said Brett, “If we go right now, we'll be back by midnight with a chest full of treasure!”

Treston turned towards Gavin, “Seriously, Gavin, you know it better than this. This is a suicide!” he said. “What am I supposed to tell your father when you don't come back?”

“I already made up my mind, Tres,” he replied, “I'm tired of hammering metal all day long; I need to take a break.”

“A break?” muttered Treston, “Well, good for you, as this is going to be one permanent break,” and just as he finished, he stormed out the room with heavy steps, behind him the door closed with a thundering crash, disturbing the peace of poyos outside, as their chatter suddenly grew clearly audible even from inside the house.

Gavin glanced at Brett, who looked back at him. A brief moment later, Brett stood up from the stool he was sitting on, and rushed after Treston, “Treston, wait!” he cried after him.

Gavin stayed in the room for some time, admiring the tapestries crafted by the Addions throughout the years. All of them were made by Treston's father or

grandfather, except one.

Gavin looked at that one, admiring it and remembering back the day when Treston urged him to take a look at it – his very first work of art, portraying a proud falcon, standing upon a tower.

Gavin's first ever work was much less artistic, as it was a simple head for a hoe that one of the farmers ordered from his father, and he was given the task to craft it. At first he was excited and proud of his work, but months later he had come to realize that it was just one of the many hoes he was yet to craft, as the farmers had the habit of breaking them as if they were planting their crops in granite.

The sun was high in the sky, and the bell of the town hall was heard from the distance. From upon the branches of trees standing tall on the roadside, the orchestra of countless birds joined, filling the air with the symphony of late spring.

The air was warm and dry, filled with the scent of flowers and fresh bread. Ahead of him was the bakery – clean white smoke was slowly puffing out its chimney, carried away by quiet winds – behind it lied a field of countless colors, a sea of blossoms and wild herbs, populated by bees and butterflies, free and blissful, ignoring the young blacksmith boy's presence, flying from flower to flower.

Gavin leaned against the fence on the side of the field, watching the scene, listening to the tranquility of nature. Above him a lone cloud slowly traveling South-East, to the distant desert lands far far away, below it a proud bird of prey wheeling above its lunch, or the lunch of its children perhaps.

Suddenly, the peace was shattered to pieces by a familiar voice. “Hey,” said Brett, placing his left hand upon Gavin's shoulder. “Tres won't come.”

“I know,” he said. “It was pretty obvious from the way he reacted.”

“We should go right now if we are to return by midnight,” said Brett.

“Are you sure this is safe?” Gavin asked doubtfully.

“The place's been abandoned for two-hundred years,” Brett replied, “there's nothing to be worried of.”

“I don't think this is a good idea anymore,” said Gavin.

“Whoa,” said Brett, “Don't you start acting like a poyo, too! Well... if you are afraid, it's fine! I'll do it alone, but you'll get nothing from the treasure!”

“But what if the rumors are true?”

“They are not!” Brett exclaimed. “It's nonsense! There are no dragons in there; no demons; no ghosts; no wild ogres; no man-eating rabbits; NOTHING!”

Gavin sighed, looking back at the field of flowers for a brief moment. “Okay,” he said. “Let's go.”

They headed towards the town center, not far from there was Gavin's home. Before they left for their *adventure*, Gavin wanted to say good bye to his father...

Gavin's father was in the workshop since early dawn, the clanking voice was to be heard from afar. The shining hot piece of metal which he was hammering restlessly had not yet any shape. “I thought you had the day off,” he said as he noticed his son.

“I do,” told Gavin to his father, “I just wanted to say that I'll be home late today.”

“How late?” he asked.

“Like midnight or later.”

“Can I expect you to be useful tomorrow?” his father asked him, briefly pausing his work.

“You don't even ask where I go?” said Gavin, his voice a tad bit low.

“I don't care, as long as you can work tomorrow,” he replied.

Gavin turned his head down, then glanced back at his father, his gaze commanding as always. “I'll work,” he told him.

“Good,” said the father.

Gavin without a word left the workshop and met up with Brett. They headed out the town...

Halfway towards the edge of Kalgrove they saw two strange men approaching them, accompanied by an even stranger beast that had an outlandishly long neck and a rather odd face; upon its back was a hump and it carried a large package of tools and other things. The beast had no hooves whatsoever; its four feet made no noise as the creature walked forward, but the rattling of the many things it carried was rather loud. Neither Brett nor Gavin had ever heard or saw of anything like that. "What the heck is that thing?" said Brett. There was no answer from Gavin.

The strange duo headed towards the town center. As they arrived closer, Gavin saw they both wore white robes that covered them for the most part except their feet, their hands, and their head. They wore sandals as footwear.

They seemed very much alike, they were probably siblings, and the tone of their skin was a bit darker than those of the folk who lived in Kalgrove, or anywhere else in the Kingdom for that matter. Their hair and beard was black, and their eyes below their thick long eyebrows seemed to be black, too.

As they were about to pass by them, one of the strangers halted. "Ho!" he said.

"Hello?" said Gavin, looking startled at the traveler from distant lands.

"We are searching for a little boy," said the man in white robe, "did you happen to see him?"

"We see a lot of little boys around here," said Brett, "Why do you ask? You'd like to buy one?"

Gavin tried to force himself not to chuckle.

"No," replied the stranger. "He was stolen from before us by a man. The boy was with him. The boy had green eyes, like that of an emerald."

“I don't know how an emerald looks like,” said Brett. Gavin looked at him, and said: “Me neither.”

The man looked away from them, and without a word, they continued to head towards the town center.

After they were at least twenty yards away, Brett looked at Gavin, “Who the heck these are?” he said.

Gavin shrugged. “What the heck is an emerald?”

“No idea,” said Brett.

The two of them continued their journey. As they left the town, they followed the road that crossed the thick woods which was known as the Kalgrove Forest...

From behind the horizon, Gavin could see the highest turret of the ruined castle. Tall limestone walls slowly crawled upwards from behind the hilltop as they approached. As they reached closer, they could see the moss between the individual stones and the ivy that covered most of the lower part of the walls.

Nobody was watching them from atop the ramparts and nobody was in the gatehouse to close the mighty iron door before them. It was revealed before them that the turret at the south-western side of the outer wall had collapsed some time ago – heavy blocks of limestone were scattered all over the hillside and some made their way into the tiny spring that ran from the west towards the east, heading into the river that crossed Kalgrove, but first it ran under the wide stone bridge that led from the main road to the main gate of Dawnwatch Fort.

Standing atop said bridge, Brett and Gavin gazed at the rusty gates that greeted them wide open. Between the wings of the gate a lone crow browsed the ground, searching for food inside the cracks between the bricks of the road.

Gavin stepped to head into the castle, but Brett hesitated. He looked back at him, “Did you change your mind?” he said.

Brett was gazing upon the top of the ramparts in awe.

“Brett?” said Gavin.

Brett looked at him, “Oh, sorry!” he said. “Let's go!”

Together they entered through the gate, and the crow fled before them. They entered the courtyard where a field of tall grass greeted them, and some even made it through the cracks of the road. There was nobody to tend the castle, nobody to cut the grass down.

Ahead of them was another gate, a smaller one that led to a building that was much taller than the walls around it. Looking up, Gavin saw a central tower with three lesser towers surrounding it in a symmetric fashion, ramparts leading to each one of them, and below those were archways. The two towers that were fully visible from that part of the castle were connected to the outer wall by drawbridges, both of which were down.

As they approached, suddenly Gavin saw movement in the grass to the left of him. A small creature hidden below the sea of grass moved towards the road, and once there it was revealed to be a cat. The cat halted in the middle of the road and gazed at the two visitors who stood and looked back at it. After a while, the animal disappeared in the sea of grass to the right of the road.

High above the entrance of the main building there was a balcony for defenders to be used in the event when those who besieged the castle got through the outer layer. This time, however, there were no defenders, instead, about thirty crows sat upon the battlements, gazing down upon the visitors.

Gavin pushed the left wing of the fortified door inwards, and it opened with a squeaking noise. A long hall greeted them inside with an open door on its opposing end. Brett and Gavin crossed the room to enter the great hall behind the door, and found themselves standing upon a balcony.

Below them was a vast and dim hall with only a tiny bit of sunlight crawling in through some openings high above. From the ceiling hung a dozen

chandeliers crafted of silver, each one holding twenty candles, but none of them lit.

Two rows of tables crossed the room with a carpeted aisle crossing between them towards a high chair that stood tall like a throne of a king or a high lord. In that high chair was seated a majestic full plate armor covered in dust and webs woven by spiders. A mighty claymore was placed leaning against the seat, and the armor's grip seemed to hold it by its hilt.

Brett tapped Gavin's shoulder to show him a stairway that led down. They walked on the dust-covered royal blue carpet towards the armor in the seat and admired it for some time. "Why would they leave such an art in a place like this?" said Gavin.

"Look at that sword," said Brett. "I bet that sells for quite a fortune!"

And indeed the sword was beautiful; by the looks of it, the blade was at least five feet long, and despite being at least two-hundred years old, it still shone bright as if it was completely new. The gilded cross-guard curved towards the blade and in the middle there was a socket with a blue gemstone inside that seemed to shine in the dim darkness of the room.

"We should take it!" Brett exclaimed, and rushed ahead to claim it from the hands of the armor, but after he made a few long strides, suddenly the armor moved.

Its head which was leaning down before raised and looked upon Brett and Gavin, and a pair of brightly glowing crimson eyes gazed at them.

Gavin could feel as his soul froze and he was suddenly overwhelmed by fear...

Part II

NOELIE

Year 241, Dawnwatch Fort – Spring

Noelie gazed into the dusty mirror, and sighed, as she could – as always – see nothing, save for the ancient stone wall behind her and the same old picture hanging from a rusty nail, being held up by only the mercy of gods, as the weight of the heavy wooden frame and the touch of time slowly bent the weak nail towards the floor; Noelie believed it would only take another fifteen years for it to finally fall down.

She did not bother to fix it, as she had no love for the old painting that displayed a field of flowers with a tree in the middle.

A spider was in front of the picture, hanging from the ceiling on a thread of spider silk. Gently rocking back and forth, carried by the quiet wind that crept in through the broken window.

The corners of the room below the ceiling was decorated by countless webs made by spiders. While Noelie tried to find her missing image in the mirror, a lone spider above her was silently weaving a new web, hoping to catch a fly or two or three.

She glanced at the floor where her feet were supposed to be seen, but she failed to find them. She could only find her footsteps in the thick layer of dust all over the stone floor, covering even the blue carpet in the center of her room.

Her bed by the wall, a giant mess, upon it her sheets in a pile. The sheets were once white, but turned gray by the dust and was torn by the touch of time as the textile grew weary and old. The mattress broken and uneven, but she rarely slept in her bed. More often than not, she went to dream under the stars or upon the bare stone floor in the library.

The tapestry that was once above the bed was dragged into the corner of the

room. The image it once displayed hidden, as it faced down, rumpled and compressed, so the bed could still be accessed.

The wardrobe, opposing the dresser was missing a door. The missing door was leaning against the wall, outside the room in the hallway, gathering dust and slowly rotting to oblivion. The hinges of the other door rusty and squeaky, soon to fall down, too. Of the two shelves inside, one was rotten and broken in half. Both halves of it lying in the tall grass below Noelie's window.

Noelie looked back into the mirror.

She had no other mirrors, save for the one which she held in her hand, the one which had a gilded frame, beautifully crafted by an artist who since perished, but his works of art could all over be seen inside and outside the castle. She had gathered every other mirror to be hidden away in one of the many empty rooms in the castle.

Like every other mirror, this one also refused to show Noelie her face, but she still allowed it to stay with her, hoping that one day it would change its mind, and reveal the face she had long forgotten how it looked like.

She embraced it, and referred to it as *her*, as if it was a person.

Its backside was otherwise plain, save for a short message engraved into the metal:

*“From the Heir of the Crown, Prince Leonard Laglass,
to the fairest lady of Dawnwatch, Lady Noelie Inverse”*

A bitter memory for her it was, a piece of the forgotten past she could not remember; a past that was ought to be different, much sweeter and blissful.

The memory of the witch's gaze haunted her ever since, and she could never forget the day she had let loose her curse upon Dawnwatch, destroying

Noelie's hopes and dreams, and not only for her, but for everyone else who dwelt within the walls of the castle of Lord Dawnwatch.

She would never forget the evening she found herself disoriented in the dining hall with her mirror in her hands, and with many memories of her past erased from her mind. Panicking and screaming, surrounded by cats and crows and knights being slaughtered by an enraged lord whose name was Dawnwatch.

She could see them all, but they could not see her. Many times she was tripped over by a knight, and was even wounded by an arcing blade that clanked hard against the breastplate of Lord Dawnwatch.

The wound was not too deep, and had since healed, but it probably left a scar upon her invisible shoulder.

Noelie looked away from the mirror, glancing out the window above her dresser.

Her room was in the south-eastern tower, her window facing towards the main gate of the outer walls.

As she gazed into the distance, she spotted two figures beyond the walls. After a few minutes, Noelie realized that they were heading to the bridge. "Fools! Don't come here," she murmured.

As they reached closer, it was revealed before her that they were the shapes of two young men. They stopped at the middle of the bridge. They seemed to hesitate.

After a while they started walking again, and they crossed the gate. They were in the courtyard.

I should shout to warn them, she thought to herself. No! That's a bad idea. Lord Dawnwatch could hear, and he'd be angry.

She decided to go down and warn them, storming out her room, heading into the stairway across the hallway beyond her door, which she'd left wide open in

her hurry.

She descended three floors, and reached the level of the walls where the drawbridge was, leading to the battlements.

She stepped upon the ancient wood of the bridge, fearing the rotten wood might break under her weight, and looked towards the courtyard, but she saw nobody. The entrance door was open. *Too late*, she thought, *I ought to have shouted. I'm so stupid.*

She ran to the battlements with light steps, and climbed down the rusty iron ladder that led down, skipping the last four steps, landing silently upon her bare feet, then she followed them inside. Her steps silent in the tall grass that reached above her knees.

She crossed the hallway and glanced down from the balcony above the hall. The young men were down there, walking between the dining tables of the Great Hall.

The Great Hall in which the curse of the witch was set loose centuries ago. Memories of the bloodshed that occurred in that very hall began to torment her mind.

She forced those memories away, then ran down quietly. She could hear the visitors talking. She was about fifteen steps behind them.

One of them had broad shoulders and his sleeveless shirt revealed his muscles. The other was lean, and he was at least a foot taller. "Stop," she whispered, but at the same time she said the warning, the lean man shouted, suggesting to steal Lord Dawnwatch's blade. *Idiot!*

It was too late to stop them. The Wraith Lord was awake and aware of the visitors.

Noelie stepped beside the man with the muscles, she looked at him, and saw that he was barely a man – more like a boy. His facial hair was yet to begin growing. His hair was dark, his eyes blue.

The other man looked back at him with a frightened expression. He looked a little older. The whiskers upon his cheeks messy and uneven.

Behind the lean man, the Lord slowly arose from his high seat. Raising his mighty sword high in the air. “Run! Run you idiots!” Noelie shouted at them, and they finally realized they were in danger.

The two of them began to run to two different directions. The lean and tall man towards the kitchens to the east, the other towards the southern corridors, crossing the doorway under the balcony with long and fast strides. Stomps of his heavy boots echoing in the hollow halls.

Noelie ran after the latter. “No, not that way!” she shouted after him, but he did not hear the words, or maybe he did, but they scared him. There was no other option than to follow and try to stop him, but he ran so fast she could barely keep up.

She was so focused on him that she did not even notice that the Wraith Lord decided to go towards the kitchens to pursue the other man.

Noelie followed the boy through the corridor which slightly curved to the right.

At the end of the corridor there were two options: a door to the right which led to a room with no other entrance, and another door which led to another corridor that ended in a dead end. The boy turned right. As Noelie reached there, she saw the door closing in front of her. She arrived just in time to slip in unnoticed before the door was shut.

The room which they entered was illuminated through windows just below the ceiling, rusty iron bars lined up behind the dirt-covered glass.

The room itself was below the level of the ground, and the tall grass outside obscured the path of the light, but the amount of light that entered the room was enough, and enabled them to see.

Noelie looked around, and saw that the room was packed with mirrors of all

shapes and sizes. *The Hall of Mirrors* was the name which she had given to this room. All the mirrors that she had banished from the castle could be found here.

She looked at the boy who looked startled into the mirrors, then suddenly, he looked towards Noelie, upon his face a shocked expression and confusion.

A moment later, he turned back to the mirror, then back at Noelie. He looked very confused and lost, he frowned his eyes. "What sort of sorcery is this?" he demanded.

Noelie looked into the mirror, but she only saw the reflection of the boy, and that of the other mirrors.

"Who are you?" said the boy again, gazing into one of the mirrors.

Not understanding what was happening, Noelie stood there without a word. Confused.

"Why can I only see you only in the mirrors?" he said, "Are you a ghost?"

"You can see me?" said Noelie startled after many moments of hesitation, her eyes were wide open.

The boy looked to the spot where she was standing still. Confusion still upon his face. "I see you, but only in the mirrors."

Noelie's heart began to beat rapidly. "How is this possible?" she said excitedly. "How can you see me in the mirrors? I can't see myself."

The boy reached towards her, almost hitting her face with his sturdy hand. Noelie leaned back just in time to avoid getting hit. He started waving his hand, reaching closer and closer, and she backed away. "Stop that!" she cried.

The boy stopped. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Noelie," she replied. "Who are you?"

"I... uh," he halted as if he had forgotten his name, "I'm Gavin."

"Tell me," reluctantly she said, "how can you see me in the mirrors? Are you a wizard?"

"I... I'm just a blacksmith. I don't know what's happening," he replied.

“Why can I see you only in there? Are you stuck in there?” he said, and laid his hand on the mirror screen, gazing at Noelie’s image.

“No, I’m right behind you.”

He turned back, leaving the mark of his hand on the mirror screen, “How?”

Noelie turned to one of the mirrors, looking into it, her image missing before her eyes. “I was cursed by a witch many years ago. She made me invisible.”

“What? A witch?” he said.

Noelie nodded, not realizing he was not looking at the mirror at the time, “Yes,” she replied, fighting with tears in her eyes, her voice weak and low. “I’m bound to this place. The magic binds me here along with the others.”

“Others?” he said startled. “There are more invisible folks in here?”

“The others are not invisible.” she replied. “The witch turned the other ladies of the castle into cats. The servants into crows... and the... and the—,” her voice faltered, and her tears slowly trickled down her cheek.

Gavin placed his hand upon her shoulder, or at least that is what he had thought. The weight of his hand dragged her down, and she had to pivot away. “Please,” she said, her voice low and weak, “just don’t touch me!”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just... I saw you in the mirror, but I couldn’t feel you. I couldn’t... I...”

“No, it’s fine,” she said. She looked at him through the mirror. “So, Gavin,” she said calmly, “just what the heck did you think when you came to this place?”

“It was my friend’s idea,” he said, “Oh, my! Brett! He’s out there with that thing! I must go!” and just right that, he stormed out of the room. “Brett!” he cried.

“Brett?” she muttered, “So, that’s his name.”

Noelie followed the boy, shouting after him, trying to stop him before he got himself killed.

They returned to the Great Hall where two-hundred years earlier her friends and family perished. “Stop, you idiot!” she cried, but he did not stop, hopelessly

pursuing his friend. “Your friend is probably dead by now!”

“No! I must save him!”

She glanced towards the spot where Lord Dawnwatch had struck down her knight father before her eyes that evening, so long ago. “You can’t save him!” she cried while struggling with tears, “You’ll get yourself killed!”

They crossed a couple hallways. The boy was frantically trying to find which way his friend went.

There was a loud clanking noise coming from the armory a floor below. Gavin found a stairway leading down. He descended and Noelie followed, stepping carefully on the loose stones.

As they reached to the bottom, there was another loud noise. A loud cry of agony filled the corridors, and Noelie could feel a chill running up her spine. She shivered.

“Brett!” the blacksmith boy shouted.

The cry was growing louder, slowly turning into a cold screech, echoing across the empty hallways. After some moments, there was silence again, save for the heavy footsteps under Gavin’s boots that overwhelmed the sound of Noelie’s silent and light steps.

The door to the armory was right before them. Gavin reluctantly reached out to the door, and carefully opened it, the hinges made a squeaking noise.

Behind the door was a ballista and a lean man whose name was Brett, leaning against the device which was unloaded.

“Brett!” Gavin cried, and Brett gave him a smug smile in return. “What happened?”

Brett made a motion with his head, suggesting to look to the other end of the room, which was hidden by the door which opened towards the inside.

Gavin and Noelie both looked past the door. The armory was a very long room. There was another entrance at the opposing end of the room, and it was wide

open.

“There’s nothing there?” Gavin said.

“Come over here, you’ll see!” said Brett.

Noelie looked across the doorway at the end of the armory, and saw Lord Dawnwatch, pinned to the hallway wall by two large arrows shot by the ballista. She glanced at the arrow rack behind Brett, and saw that two arrows were missing out of the six.

“Wow!” Gavin exclaimed, “Brett, you are amazing!”

“I know, man! He was like ‘rawgh I gon’ get you now!’ and there was this thing loaded with that giant arrow, facing just perfect, and then there he is!”

“I thought he’d slice you up like bread, but! Wow! I still can’t believe it!” said Gavin, excited like some of the ladies Noelie had met back in the time when they received letters from the knights of the court.

Noelie let the two of them share their thoughts of excitement while she walked to the Lord of Dawnwatch to inspect him closely.

From the holes, where his breastplate was pierced, blood was leaking, but it was already clotted and dark, yet it still trickled down the shining steel plate as if it was fresh and bright red.

She touched the plate near where it was penetrated. Something seemed wrong about it. The same armor, which deflected the blades and maces of the knights, whom he had defeated so easily was now pierced by wood and poor quality metal.

She glanced back to look at Brett. There was something strange about him, but she could not tell what.

Looking back at Lord Dawnwatch, she saw his face, pale and motionless. The crimson light of his eyes faded, and the brown of his eyes returned. She reached up to close his eyelids, “Sleep well, Lord Dawnwatch!” she whispered, “May your dreams be calm and blissful, to help you forget the torments you had

suffered in this world.”

“All right,” said Brett, “Now let’s get back to the business!”

Business? Noelie looked at him with suspicion.

“I look for it in the lower floors, and you go up,” he said, “How about that?”

“I’m fine with that, but,” said Gavin, “what if there are more of these things?”

“If there were more, they’d be here already,” said Brett.

“I hope you’re right. What are we looking for anyway?”

“I suppose it’s a tiny chest with a round keyhole.” Brett replied, then he headed towards the doorway where Noelie watched them.

“Brett! What if there are more of these?” Gavin demanded.

Brett turned back to him, “Trust me, I’ve been to places far worse than this,” he said, “Besides, what’s fun in adventures if there’s no danger?”

“I don’t know, I just... I think Tres was right.” said Gavin.

“Tres is a coward! But you are brave! I think we should do more adventures together after this,” said Brett.

Gavin slowly shook his head, “I... I don’t think so. I think adventuring isn’t fitting for me.”

“Hammering metal does, huh? But anyhow, time is running, and we ought to be back by midnight. Go! Go!” Brett urged, then passed by Noelie and the body of the Wraith Lord.

For a short time, Brett paused by the body. Noelie watched him as he gazed at the breastplate for a few moments, then slowly turned back and looked around with wary face.

After a while, he turned back to the hallway, and left. *He saw me*, Noelie realized, looking at the breastplate, which had the hazy reflection of the

surroundings cast on it.

She looked behind to where the two were previously talking, but Gavin was not there anymore.

She went to find him.

Across many empty hallways on the higher floors, Noelie could not find Gavin, and she started wondering if it was a good idea to try and call him, but ultimately decided not to.

After all, they came to the castle with the intent to steal something. Something that sounded familiar, but she could not recall what it was. A chest of great value was the only thing she could remember, but for where it was, she had not the slightest clue.

She checked the countless empty rooms, all which once belonged to the ladies and lords of the castle. None were in their room, save for a girl named Thalia, who was now a cat with snow-white fur and mesmerizing blue eyes.

The witch's curse turned all the ladies of the court to cats, except Noelie. She never understood why she was given a different fate.

She did not get to know all the ladies of Dawnwatch before the witch appeared. She and her father had only been in the castle for a few weeks.

Thalia was one of the few ladies she had the chance to talk to during her stay. They became friends, well, at least that is what Noelie believed she remembered.

Thalia could not see Noelie, but every time Noelie tried to speak to her, Thalia fled. Maybe she was just startled, or maybe it's part of the curse. The other cats, however, completely ignored her when she had spoken to them.

Noelie took a short sad glance upon her former friend before she carried on to check the other rooms.

Eventually, she arrived to her own room, and found the door open. Took her a few moments to remember that it was her who had left it open when she rushed out to warn the visitors.

She stepped to the door with the intent to close it, and heard noises sneaking out from inside.

She looked in, and found Gavin digging in her belongings, arousing the dust that covered most of her room. “Hey!” she called him out, “Those are my things!”

Gavin was startled. “Oh, I... I’m sorry!” he said, looking around the room, puzzled, “Where are you?”

Noelie walked to her dresser, and looked at the mirror she received from the Prince. It was lying with the screen down. “What are you looking for in here, Gavin?”

“I... uh,” said Gavin, “I suppose I’m looking for a chest.”

“There are so many chests in Dawnwatch, you might spend a few weeks before you find it.”

“No, it’s not like any other chest. Brett said it’s small and... um, it’s small,” he said.

Noelie rolled her eyes. “Your friend,” said Noelie, “Who’s he?”

“Well, he’s Brett.”

“Not like that,” she snapped, “Where did he come from?”

“Um, uh... I don’t really think I know where he came from,” said Gavin, “He’s kind of a traveler. He’s been to many places before he came to Kalgrove. Why do you ask?”

“Kalgrove?” said Noelie, ignoring the question she had received, “You’re from Kalgrove?”

“Yes,” he replied, still gazing around the room to find where the voice is coming from.

“I’ve been to Kalgrove once on my way here with my father,” said Noelie.

“What? Really?” said Gavin.

“Yup,” she said, “We’ve stayed the night in a tavern. I can’t remember the name. I actually remember very little of the town.”

Gavin smiled. “Kalgrove’s a nice place. Should have stayed there instead of coming here. Why’d you and your father come to this horrible castle in the first place?” he said.

“Well, back then it was a nice castle full of life,” she replied.

“That must’ve been very long ago,” said Gavin, “but you don’t look any older than sixteen.”

“It was long ago. If I’m not wrong, a little more than two-hundred years.”

Gavin looked amazed. “Wha–, two-hundred?!”

“Yes.”

“But... how? You look so young!” Gavin said.

Noelie grew excited for a moment, “I still look pretty?”

“Asking the important questions, huh?”

“It *is* important!” Noelie demanded, “Tell me!”

“You look beautiful, my lady!”

If Gavin had seen Noelie, he would have seen that she had blushed. Noelie felt a bit relieved, but then remembered, there’s no point in beauty if nobody can see it.

She picked up her mirror from the dresser, and handed it to Gavin, “Here, take this!”

“Oh, a flying mirror!” said Gavin with a smile upon his face.

“Take it!” she commanded.

Gavin took the mirror and turned it towards himself, “Look, I’m pretty, too!”

Noelie placed her palm upon the top of her forehead, “Use it to see me,

dummy!”

“Oh!” Gavin exclaimed. He tried positioning the mirror in a way so he could see the invisible girl, but with little success. “Uh,” he said, “I think this isn’t gonna work.”

“Sit on my bed!” Noelie told him, and without a question, he sat upon her bed beside the piled up bedsheets. Reluctantly, Noelie sat down beside him, keeping a notable distance between them.

“To the left,” said she, suggesting him to turn the mirror towards her.

“Oh, I can see you now,” he said, “You sure know how to handle mirrors.”

Noelie smiled, and Gavin saw her smile. He smiled, too.

“What happened to this place?” he asked.

Noelie’s smile faded. “As I said earlier... the witch cursed the castle and everyone in it.”

“Yes, but what happened then? What happened to the others? You talked about others before.”

“Have you seen the crows as you entered the courtyard?”

Gavin nodded.

“They were once the servants of the castle. Cooks, stable boys, maids, smiths, and many others. The witch’s curse turned them into crows, and the ladies,” she sighed, “They’re the cats of the castle now.”

“But you’re not a cat,” said Gavin.

Noelie shook her head, “I’m not. For whatever reason, the witch decided I should be invisible instead.

“The curse also made me forget a lot of things from my past. Like my home, Novostelle, or the rest of my family. I don’t even know how the buildings looked like back home.

“The only thing I remember from Novostelle is this building from which they forgot to remove the scaffolding, and they left it like that for years. Nothing

else.”

“Oh, my, that’s terrible,” said Gavin, his tone low and sad.

There was a teardrop on Noelie’s cheek, she had cast it away with her hand. “The memories of my childhood also disappeared. All that I know of myself is my name, and that I was supposed to marry this Prince Leonard whose message is engraved into the backside of this mirror. A person of whom I also have no memory of.”

“Prince Leonard?” said Gavin, “You mean King Leonard?”

“He’s a king now?” she asked.

“Was,” Gavin replied as he turned the mirror round to read the engraving.

“Oh,” Noelie sighed sadly, followed by a short pause, “I sometimes don’t realize how much time passed by while I was here.”

Gavin looked at her again through the mirror, pity in his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“In a way, it is not that bad,” she said, “I can’t remember how he looked like. I’m not even sure if I’d ever met him.”

“Well, I’m sure you’d met him at least once,” said Gavin, “the message on this implies that he’d seen you at least once.”

“I’m sure that’s a message that every prince ever would send to a girl he was to marry,” said Noelie, “It’s just common courtesy, or something like that.” She teared up once again. Gavin reached out to her carefully to wipe the tears, but she backed away and frowned, making a low sound of disapproval. Gavin’s hand backed away from her slowly.

Noelie wiped away her tears, “I think you should leave,” she said, her voice brittle and low.

“Why?” he asked.

“I just...” she said, “I don’t know. I feel bad. I want to be alone.”

“Can I help you feel better in some way?” he asked.

“I don't think so,” she replied.

Gavin looked at her, not saying a word for some time, then he turned the mirror to stare at his own image, “Come with us!” he suggested.

“No!” she cried, “I can't.”

“Why not? We could help you find a magician to break your curse!”

“The magic of this place binds me here! I can't go past the outer gate.”

Noelie rose from the bed.

When Gavin turned back the mirror to where she was, he could not see her image. He looked around the room puzzled. “Then we will find a magician and bring him here,” he said.

“No!” said Noelie in a tight tone, “Just go away! Leave me be!”

“I just want to...” Gavin said, but Noelie interrupted him.

“No! Shut up!” she said, her tone frustrated and furious, “Just, leave,” she said, this time her tone a little calmer, “please.”

Gavin reluctantly rose from the bed, while trying to find Noelie with the mirror, and he eventually found her. Noelie gazed at him through the mirror, a stream of tears upon her cheeks.

“You need help,” he said.

“Just... go,” she said, “Find your chest and go. Leave me alone.”

Gavin hesitated for some time before he walked through the door.

“Wait!” Noelie cried after him, “My mirror!”

Gavin turned back to give her back the mirror, but after two steps, he was stumbled by the threshold, and he almost tripped over.

The silvery mirror fell from his hand, hitting the stone floor with a clank. The shards of its screen scattered all over the floor.

It was broken. The only thing Noelie had from her past was now gone. Broken.

“Ah!” she cried out in anguish, as if her heart was pierced by a dagger and

twisted to further the pain.

Then she remembered. Remembered all that was before the dark evening when the curse was laid upon her.

“Noelie?” Gavin said with a certain surprised tone in his voice. She looked up at him, and saw his face with his mouth and eyes wide open as if he had seen a ghost. He was looking down upon her.

It was not a ghost he had seen. Noelie looked back to the shards of the mirror, and in those shards, a familiar blue-eyed face stared back at her.

She gazed deeply into the mirror shards, inspecting her image, her face pale white from the lack of sunlight, her cheeks reddened by emotions. Her hair the same deep brown color it was the evening she disappeared from the world. In the past two-hundred years, she had not aged a single day.

“I’m a monster,” her voice drowned by tears as she began to weep.

Gavin's mouth moved to open, but no voice had come out of it.

“All these years I've wondered what fate the witch had. If she had been punished, or lived her life to the fullest, laughing when she'd thought of what she'd done here...” she said, “but now I realize. The witch disappeared together with me, as I am the witch who cursed this place.”

“What?!” Gavin exclaimed.

“Blinding rage and jealousy led my actions that evening. The day I found my beloved one was to be wed to another woman, whose name was Dawnwatch.”

The witch's gaze which haunted her for so many years... it was her own gaze, and she had seen it in the mirror which now lied before her, its pieces scattered everywhere. It was her friend, Thalia, who turned its screen towards her while she shielded herself from Noelie's wrath with it.

The spell backfired on Noelie with unexpected results. She forgot things, and she herself was forgotten by the world.

“No, that cannot be true!” Gavin said in dismay.

“But it is!” she replied, “How could I not realize?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Over the years I’d spent here, I frequented the library where I’d found many books about magic. I read them and tried to make magic myself. I learned a couple tricks with so little effort. Nothing big, as there aren’t a lot of books here about magic, but it helped me entertain myself.

“The reason I’ve learned the art of magic so easily, because I already had learned it once. I just couldn’t remember. How could I be so stupid not to see it!”

Noelie had sunken back into her weep. Teardrops poured down her cheeks to her chin, then to the stone below between her hands.

The stone was cold; she could feel her hands losing heat, the texture of her skin changed as goose bumps appeared all over her arms. Only then she grew aware of another thing she had lost: her senses.

“Noelie?” Gavin called her name, but she paid no attention.

She felt a tremendous hunger in her abdomen, her throat turned dry, and her head began to ache. Every part of her body seemed to turn against her in the most violent way. She suddenly grew weary, and saw the world spinning around her, until everything darkened before her...

Part III

GAVIN

Year 241, Kalgrove – Spring

It was late in the night when they arrived to the outskirts of Kalgrove. Gavin carried the unconscious girl, while Brett held out a torch against the darkness to light the path before them. Below his shoulder was an ornate chest, made of hardwood, but not heavy.

They made the road home in less than half the time it took them to reach Dawnwatch. They didn't stop to take a rest. They didn't stop by berry bushes. They marched relentlessly forward, daring the night, not caring for the menacing darkness.

Above them the stars were bright. But the moon was missing; far too shy to show her face to the folk who lived in the towns and plains and forests below. There were no clouds for her to hide behind. The moon was simply not there.

The constant song of crickets filled the night air as they approached the tiny town of Kalgrove. The sound of leaves played by the gentle winds joined the melody. In the distance, the howl of a lone wolf echoed, and behind them the laughter of goblins.

“Hurry!” Brett urged. Noelie wasn't very heavy, she was quite the opposite of heavy. But having carried her for so many miles while marching forth at a quick pace, Gavin was growing weary. His muscles began to ache. But no... it was not the time to give up. It was the time to be strong and to endure pain. Like the hero of many storybooks – the young champion that saves the princess.

Her long brown hair was waving in the wind as they hurried forward and her pale face glittered in the torchlight. She lay between Gavin's arms motionless, barely a sign of life, save for the barely observable movements of her breathing.

Gavin gathered the remnants of his strength, and stepped up the pace. The lights of the town ahead were clearly visible from behind a hill that Gavin and Brett would have to thread. The wavy white smoke of chimneys danced in the wind, slowly carried away to the far where it dissolved and became one with the night.

The footsteps of goblins were getting closer with every moment, and the laughter grew louder.

“Curse them!” said Brett, “There are so many of them!”

Gavin glanced over his shoulder, and saw at least twelve goblins behind them. One of them riding a huge wolf – their leader, he assumed – he wore black leather, strapped together with rivets. Behind him like a flag waved a cape made of blood-red rags. His hideous golden eyes shone in the dark, the white of his teeth, revealed by his impish grin glittered in the starlight.

The wolf rider unsheathed a rusty blade from a scabbard made of patches of animal skin loosely sewn together. A hundred yard was left between them and the young adventurers.

He commanded the wolf that he rode to charge forth, leaving the others behind, and within a few moments, he was before Gavin and Brett. His mount growling fiercely. “You give us your shining treasures, or you will be wolf food!” he said.

“Please,” Gavin begged, “we have nothing valuable. We need to take her to our herbalist, or she will die! We must go!”

The goblin looked at the pale girl in white garments, “She’s a ghost,” he said with a grin, “ghosts are dead already!”

“No, she is not!”

“She is,” he said. His vassals surrounded them as they talked. They bore maces and shields made of wood and barks of trees. “What is in that chest, you ugly little manling?” he said, looking at Brett.

“It’s empty,” Brett replied, pivoting to hide the chest from the goblin leader’s eyes.

Another goblin crept up behind him and grabbed the wooden chest, trying to pull it out of his hands, but Brett resisted, and kicked the goblin away, then with an arcing swing of his arms, he struck down another goblin, hitting them hard with the chest.

The goblins all around them crept forward. One of them hitting Gavin with a blunt mace below his hip. The powerful blow made him cry out in pain, and he fell to the ground. Noelie whimpered as she rolled away from him upon the cold hard ground. He looked at her, and saw her eyes opening slowly, reflecting the flickering torchlight.

Another strong blow had struck Gavin. This time hitting his head, and he started seeing stars dancing before his eyes in a frantic pattern with colors of red, green, and yellow.

Brett retaliated, using the chest as a weapon, but soon he was down, too. He fell to the ground, and the chest was now in the hand of a goblin whose face was hit by it a few moments back.

The goblin swung the chest, hitting Brett in the face, he cried out in pain. “Sweet revenge!” the hideous thing murmured.

The leader was watching with a grin upon his dark-green face as his vassals surrounded and beaten the two adventurers with many kicks and punches, not noticing the pale girl a few yards away from the scene, who struggled to rise to her feet.

Noelie finally got back to her feet, but still struggled to hold balance for a few moments. Her legs trembled under her weight. She looked at the group of goblins around Brett and Gavin.

With a wave of her hand, the air turned cold like early winter. A powerful gust of wind charged to the scene from behind her, waving her white silken dress.

She shivered as the sudden chill of the air touched her soft skin. The goblins flew many yards, and landed among the trees with heavy thumps and the sound of cracking branches and twigs and... *and bones*.

The goblin leader cried out, "The ghost!", and his mount charged towards Noelie, making a fierce growl.

Gavin saw him heading to the girl, "Watch out!" he cried.

She turned to face the wolf rider. She held her right hand out before her. There was about half a yard before the goblin could strike down the fragile girl, but then there was a flash of fiery light that shattered the darkness of the night...

The wolf fled with a whining screech that was carried far by the winds. The goblin who had lost his mount was running frantically in circles, engulfed in flames, screaming and howling.

Shortly as the fire disappeared, in pain and with scorched skin and rags, the leader of the goblins ran away towards the trees to the north, not looking back, not even once.

His companions that stumbled out from among the trees followed him, one of them bearing an ornate chest that wasn't his.

Noelie fell to the earth. Gavin ignored the pain of countless punches and kicks, and ran to her.

She was lying face down in the dirt. The young blacksmith boy turned her to her back, and gently cleaned the dust off her cold pale face with his hand.

The torch was lying on the ground a few feet away, but it bore no fire to fight the darkness. Brett struggled to stand to his feet. He picked up the dead torch, and roared in anger as he tossed it back into the dirt of the road. "They took the chest!" he cried furiously, "We must go after them!"

"No!" Gavin said firmly while carefully lifting Noelie from the ground, "We must take her to Mikael."

Mikael Boltoose was the herbalist of Kalgrove. Gavin's only hope to save

the girl.

“We don't even know her!” Brett demanded, “She's a witch! We should have left her at Dawnwatch! Would've saved us a lot of trouble.”

“If you want to take your chest back, you must go alone,” said Gavin firmly, then turned his back to his friend, and continued to march towards his hometown.

Brett followed him reluctantly, but he said not a word on the way to Kalgrove.

The town was silent and asleep for the most part, save for a few windows with lights sneaking out, daring the night as if to challenge the darkness.

Gavin and Brett approached Boltoose's shop, and saw Mikael and his family huddled together by a fire in their fenced garden by the house. Sitting on pillows laid upon the freshly mowed lawn they chatted and laughed.

“Mikael!” Gavin cried.

The old herbalist, startled by the late night visitor jumped to his feet the moment he saw the unconscious girl in the arms of the young blacksmith boy.

They took her into the shop promptly. Mikael lighted a couple of lanterns and some candles, and the room was illuminated, as if it was broad daylight. The light was exceptionally bright due to the special oil he had made from the fluid of a rare plant that he called *Cid's Blessing*.

The room itself was plain and simple with minimal decoration. Upon countless shelves lined several pots with various herbs growing out of the soil inside them. The only window was hidden by blue curtains. By the wall, facing the entrance was the herbalist's workbench, upon which lay many books upon one-another, by them standing two glass bottles, one empty, and another holding an orange-colored liquid.

“Put her on that bed,” he said while pointing to a bed between two cabinets.

There were no sheets, just the mattress covered with silken fabric.

Gavin carefully laid Noelie down to the mattress. He gazed at her who lay there motionless. Behind him a silver spoon made clanking sounds against the side of a deep clay bowl.

Mikael stepped to Noelie, lifted her head and shoulders and put two large pillows underneath her. She was now in a sitting position, her arms laying beside her.

The sound made by the spoon continued. Gavin looked behind, and saw Mikael's son, Sven. He was stirring herbs and some liquid in a clay bowl, mixing leaves and petals of several different plants together.

A glass full of water appeared in Mikael's hand. Gavin never saw where it came from. Slowly he put the glass to the girl's mouth, and carefully poured the water down her throat.

As he turned away from her, he almost bumped into Gavin. He looked at him. He was a head taller. "You should go out," he urged.

Gavin did what old Boltoose said.

Outside in the garden, Brett was by the fire, sitting on a pillow, telling the story of what happened to them in Dawnwatch to the rest of the Boltooses.

"It was foolish of you to go there," said Remi Boltoose, the mother of Mikael, "and even more foolish to bring her here!" she declared, her voice old and rough.

"I couldn't leave her there!" said Gavin, "She was cursed and alone for many years!"

"And now she'd brought us her curse!" she said, "Every sane person in Lesfaia knows that Dawnwatch is cursed and dangerous! What if the curse is contagious? Poor Mikael would spend months to cure all the sick fools who catch the curse!"

"Grandmother, please!" the youngest daughter of the herbalist cut in.

“Silence, Lia! Let the grown folks speak,” her grandmother snapped.

“You don't even know what you speak of, Grandmother. Curses are not contagious.”

“How would you know that? You're just a child!” said the old Boltoose woman.

“Father taught me the difference between illnesses caused by magic and illnesses caused by nature. Magic can only spread if it's intended to spread, and is also not older than five years. The girl was in Dawnwatch for far longer, if what Brett said is true.” the young girl said.

The old lady made a sound of a swallow in frustration. She was furiously looking for words to speak, Gavin could easily read that upon her face illuminated by the fire.

Meanwhile, the other Boltooses, two of Mikael's younger sons who remained by the fire looked at the visitors and their grandmother confused, not understanding what was going on. Their mother, Janna Boltoose was inside the shop, helping Mikael.

“Once she gets better, I'll take her home to us. She won't cause any trouble to you,” he tried to reassure the old woman.

“If she gets better,” said Remi.

Remi Boltoose, a grumpy old lady... She was the one person everyone in Kalgrove hated with fierce passion, except those who had never met her. But even those would begin to hate her once they had met her. The obnoxious woman had cut into every argument she had ever come across, and tried to force her opinions onto the others. No matter what was happening, she knew it better. She knew everything of gardening, of carpentry, of magic, of dragons... She was the expert of every field... well, that is what she'd believed of herself.

When Gavin needed something from Mikael, he usually waited not far from the herbalist's shop, until the old woman went out into the town to argue with

random people.

“I’m sure she will be fine,” said Lia, “Father is the best herbalist as far as eyes can see.”

As far as eyes can see, the words repeated in Gavin’s mind, *but what if that is not enough?*

“Why did you go to Dawnwatch anyway?” Old Remi asked them with her fierce voice.

Gavin was going to reply, but Brett cut in, “That’s none of your business, with all due respect.”

“Respect?” Remi snapped, looking at the lean man with fury and fire in both her eyes, as if she was ready to break every bone of Brett. “You know nothing of respect. If you did, you would have respected the fact that Dawnwatch should be avoided.”

Gavin rolled his eyes, but as if Remi felt it somehow, she turned to him. “You and this *outsider!*” she said, referring to Brett, who was still seen as an outsider by her, despite living in Kalgrove for five years, “The mayor will sure hear about this! What will your father think of you now?”

“My father doesn’t care,” Gavin replied matter-of-factly with a surprisingly calm voice.

“He cares. I’m sure of that,” she said, “I’d love to see when he tells you to take this *woman* of yours elsewhere. Far from his house.”

“Grandmother!” Lia cried.

Remi turned to her granddaughter, looking at her fiercely. “I told you to let grown people speak!”

“You are the one not letting them speak!” the young girl said. She was brave enough to defy against her crazy grandmother, and Gavin respected her for that. *She would defeat dragons one day*, he used to think.

“Go to your room!” the old woman shouted at her granddaughter.

There was a brief and tense silence in the air until Lia disappeared behind a door. The poyos in the neighboring pasture began to discuss in their own language, dismayed and awakened by the sound of the argument.

“See what you did?” Remi demanded, looking deep into Gavin's eyes. “Wretched fools you are... look what you did to poor girls mind!”

Gavin and Brett said nothing to that.

Remi slowly rose to her feet, her bones cracking in the process. She pointed at Gavin with a finger and looked at him sharply. “If I see the cursed woman here in the morning, I'll have the mayor banish you from town.”

“Of course,” Gavin said with a tiny hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“You think I'm joking, do you?” Remi said, “I'm good friends with the old fool. He'll listen to me,” she turned towards the little boys. “Sleep time!” she commanded.

Before the sentence was finished, the boys jumped to their feet, and headed to their rooms. Remi left Gavin and Brett by the fire. After she disappeared behind the door, Brett looked at Gavin, “Crazy old demon,” he said.

Gavin nodded slowly. “I wish she'd die already.”

“Hush!” Brett warned. “She might hear ya!”

“I don't care!” he said firmly, “The world will be a happier place once she's in the grave.”

Brett puffed. “Bet she'll come back from there just to haunt the town.”

Gavin looked into the fire. “I hope she'll get better. Noelie, I mean. She *must* get better.”

“I hope so, too,” Brett said. Gavin looked at him. “Then she can help us get the box back from the goblins.”

“What?” Gavin frowned.

“I mean... did you see what she did back there? She destroyed those green beasts with a wave of her hand! Imagine what she could do to them when she

recovers!”

“I’ll hear none of that!” Gavin said firmly.

“Why? What?” Brett demanded, rising his tone slightly, “We didn’t go there to get *her*. We’ve gone there for the chest.”

“Just a few hours ago you’d have left her to die in the castle,” Gavin said, “Now you want her to get your chest back. What’s in that chest, Brett?”

“I told you already. I don’t know.”

“Then why do you want it so much?”

“The wizard would pay dearly,” he replied. “He has the key of it.”

“How did that wizard look like?” Gavin asked him.

“Why would you ask?” Brett raised an eyebrow.

“I’m just curious.”

“He was very short and he had a long gray beard. He wore a hood over his head that cast a shadow over his face. His mantle was simple and dark. He had a strange staff carved with runes,” Brett described him, “He was definitely a wizard.”

“So you don’t even know how he looks like? Do you even know his name?”

Brett reluctantly shook his head. “I know it was a bad idea,” he said, “But I can’t just go back to him and tell him I lost the chest to some forest goblins.”

“You met him in Tradisport, right?” Gavin asked him.

“Yes.”

“Does he know you live here?”

Brett shook his head. “I think he doesn’t.”

“You think?”

“I can’t remember properly,” he said. Then the door of the workshop opened with a squeak. “That door needs to be oiled,” Brett remarked.

Janna was standing in the door, gesturing for them to go in. So they rose to their feet and walked into the shop.

“Is she all right?” Gavin asked quickly. She looked at the girl who lay upon

the simple mattress. This time she had only one pillow under her head and she was no longer sitting.

“She will be fine,” Mikael said, his voice tired and weary. “All she needed was some water and a little medicine. She I gave her some herbs to help her sleep. She probably won't wake for a while,” he made a wry smile that faded just a moment later, “I heard what my mother told to you. The window was open.”

“I will take her to my home,” Gavin said submissively.

“I could take her to me,” Brett offered.

Gavin looked at him and shook his head, “No,” he said simply.

The young blacksmith lifted the lightweight girl from the mattress, and carried her home after thanking Mikael, Janna and Sven for saving her...

NOELIE

Noelie woke in an unfamiliar place, laying in a bed she did not recognize. The tiny room that surrounded her, lit by the dim light of the morning sun did not belong to her.

She leaned to sit in the bed, and the first thing that she had noticed was the window... a window with decorative bars, like the ones they have in deserts. Except that this one was a mixed with a classic wooden frame around the glass – as fitting to a town like Kalgrove – and the bars were behind that in the outside.

The first thing she'd thought of the bars was that it was a mess, and not because the style belonged to the desert. No... It was a mess, because it was absolutely not symmetric; the entire pattern of it was offset by one inch! *Outrageous!*

The next thing she'd noticed in the room was the young man huddled in white bedsheets, lying upon the hardwood floor, his pillow by the base of a cabinet. She recognized the boy as Gavin.

She was hesitant as to whether she should wake him or let him sleep. In the end, she decided to wake him. “Hey! Wake up!” she shouted.

Startled, the boy jumped into a sitting position. He quickly looked around, searching the room. *His* room. “Oh! Good morning!” he said.

Noelie smiled. “Good morning!”

“How do you feel?” he asked her.

“I feel fine,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I'm a little hungry.”

Gavin tossed his blanked against the wall and rose to his feet. “I will bring you some breakfast,” he said quickly.

“That would be lovely!” she said, suddenly aware of how her stomach growled fiercely, like a lion. “I feel like I could eat a banquet's worth of food right

now. I haven't felt this hungry since..." her smile faded as she paused, "since so many years."

"Just stay here," Gavin said as he headed to the door, "I'll bring you something... though, it won't come any close to a banquet."

While Gavin was absent, Noelle's eyes wandered the room, exploring the details.

The room was barely furnished, as there was only a single cabinet on the right side of the bed, and a simple night stand.

From the walls hung several horseshoes, which she'd thought was strange at first, then she realized that he was a blacksmith, and they were probably made by him.

The cabinet, unlike the one in her own room still had both doors, and though it was quite simple, it looked just fine. Perfectly fitting the simplicity of the room.

The top of the night stand on the left side of the bed was totally empty, made of smooth polished wood. There was a drawer to it, and curiosity led her to open it, despite her manners warning her that she shouldn't. Inside were some coins, silver and copper. Nothing else. She closed the drawer.

Her eyes wandered back to the asymmetric window bars that bothered her more than it should have. She felt a terrible urge to draw the curtain to hide it, but through sheer willpower, she did not. *Stop looking at it, Noelle*, a voice in her mind told her, *you lived countless years with a cabinet missing a door. This shouldn't bother you at all.*

She looked away from the window, and her attention turned underneath her blanket. She found that she wore a simple light-green nightgown. Her eyes searched for the dress she was used to wearing, and found it draped over the footboard of the bed.

Someone changed her clothes while her mind was away in the world of

dreams. She blushed at the thought of it.

Gavin returned shortly with a platter of cheese and bread, as well as a cup of fresh and warm milk.

Noelie sat in the bed and ate the food delightfully. Though, it was simple cheese and bread, to her it felt as if she was chewing upon food that was dropped directly from heavens, blessed by Cid himself.

Meanwhile, the boy leaned against the wall by the window. “I hope it tastes good enough,” he said apologetically, “I know a castle girl like you would deserve much better.”

“No!” said Noelie, “It’s lovely!” What Gavin didn’t know was that this crude hard cheese and half-dry bread was in fact the first meal she’d had in the past two-hundred years. Even the milk was perhaps a little too sour, but even that tasted to her like the sweet kiss of a fairy.

Gavin looked at her troubled, as if he was to say something, but struggled to find the right words. “What’s wrong?” she asked him while chewing on a piece of cheese. *Very unladylike.*

“I must leave you here,” he said. “My father needs my help in the shop.”

Noelie smiled a reassuring smile. “Then go help him! I can eat without you staring.”

Gavin gave an embarrassed smile, his face turned slightly red. “I’ll be downstairs in the workshop if you need something,” he said then turned to head out of the room.

“Wait!” said Noelie, then glanced down to the light-green fabric that she wore, “Whose nightgown is this?”

Gavin made a sigh and glanced down to the floor. “It was my mother’s,” he said, “Don’t... don’t worry, I didn’t look.” He blushed.

Noelie rolled her eyes while smiling. “Is she around?” she asked him.

Gavin's expression turned grave, and Noelie knew well what it meant. He shook his head. "Oh... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"No! Don't worry about it," he said quickly, "Just enjoy your meal and rest as long as you wish," he gestured around the room with his hand, "The room is yours!" He smiled and left.

Noelie ate the food, then placed the empty platter and cup upon the night stand. Then she leaned back to the pillow, and returned to the land of dreams...

Many hours later, she woke to the thunderous sound of a heavy wagon passing by under the window.

The sound of clattering hooves on cobbles, followed by the thundering rumble made by a pair of heavy iron wheels broke her out of her peaceful slumber, and she felt as if the floor below her suddenly disappeared and she fell into darkness... But rather than falling to hard ground, she landed on something soft... The mattress of Gavin's bed softened her fall, even though she wasn't truly falling.

As she jumped up to a sitting position, her heart raced and she breathed heavily, until she realized she was not in danger. It was just a wagon, nothing of danger. Nothing to be afraid of.

She pushed the blanket off herself and tugged the fabric upon her back-and-forth. Goosebumps shaped all over her skin as the gust of cool air found its way under the fabric, caressing her soft skin covered in sweat.

Then she got out of bed, her bare feet touching the unfamiliar wooden floor for the first time. She hopped out of the nightgown and lifted her old dress off the footboard. That was when she had found another dress hidden below it. A light-green cotton dress, slightly darker than the nightgown, fitting to the fashion of these lands. "Oh, hello," she muttered to the dress as if it was a person.

Since she could find no logical reason for Gavin to keep a woman's dress in his room, she concluded he left it for her.

She took on the simple cotton dress and it fit her almost perfectly. Almost. The shoulders were perhaps a little too loose, but other than that, it was all good. Although, cotton didn't feel as soft and embracing as silk, it was still a refreshing change after so many years.

She walked to the asymmetric window that bothered her for no reason other than being... asymmetric. She glanced through the glass that could definitely use some cleaning, and saw the street – though, the decorative bars slightly obscured the view. It was late-afternoon, and the distant horizon seen over the rooftops had the hint of red tinting on the bottom. She slept through the entire day.

The house was built on a corner where two large roads had met, so it seemed from the window. Across the street stood a very long building, it took a while for her to realize what purpose such long building would serve with such narrow windows high above the foundation, but then it struck her like a thunderclap when she heard the neighing of a horse... *Stables!*

Indeed, it turned out the window was not very soundproof, as almost literally everything that happened outside could be heard very well in the inside. That would explain how the wagon could be heard so loud.

Noelie looked over the wide street from left to right. People were tending to their usual daily routines. One person led a wheelbarrow down the street, packed like a mountain with heavy looking burlap sacks, labeled as *flour*. Soon that would become bread, and very soon after that, the bread would be eaten. That's was just how things worked.

A florist with a bucket-worth of colorful flowers passed by the person with the flour, heading towards the crossing of two roads, where he entered a building that stood diagonally across the crossing from Gavin's home. Another corner house.

The corner of it that faced to the crossroad was chopped off, forming a new side to the otherwise rectangle-shaped building. That was where the entrance was –

a wide double-winged door made of oak. Above it was a tiny balcony with a pair of long terracotta planters attached to the railing, both were empty, waiting for something colorful and lively to be planted inside them. Like a bucket of flowers, perhaps?

The next moment, another wagon thundered across the street, pulled by two strong stallions, moving so quickly that it almost ran over a couple pedestrians. As it passed by, it aroused a thick cloud of dust from the cobblestones.

Noelie concluded it was enough sightseeing for the day, and it was time to go out of the room. *Time to explore Gavin's home!*

She opened the door to a gap and peeked out to the outside. A short passageway was unveiled before her eyes that led to a slightly wider common room with a table and a pair of chairs. Upon the table she saw a board game of some sort that she did not recognize from afar.

She walked through the passageway and examined the game. There was a pair of dice sitting between six-six red and blue identical figures.

Beside them was a thin wooden board, with a map of some island painted on it. There were countless tiny circles all over the map, probably resembling where the figures can go, and there were numbers inside them. In the center of the map was a huge "X".

Treasure hunting! She finally recognized the game. She used to play it, too... so many years ago, back home in the distant city of Novostelle. Her set was a little bit different, though. The map was different and the shape of the figures were much shorter. *I wonder if he would play a match with me.*

Further down the passageway, there was an oval-shaped mirror hanging from the wall that served as the end of the passageway. Excitement rushed through her when she saw it, and after a couple of delighted skips she stood in front of it, staring at the brown-haired pale girl, whose name was Noelie Inverse.

The girl in the mirror looked rather worn-out, but at that time to Noelie, it

was the most gorgeous thing she ever saw.

It was the face of a girl unseen for two centuries, and now it was there before her eyes, all for her to see. Free to explore the details of it. All the tiny wrinkles, all of the insignificant imperfections. She could count every single hair upon her head if she wanted to. Speaking of which...

After staring at herself, exploring the details that were mostly unchanged since the last time she saw herself in a mirror, she finally spotted something unusual. She glanced over to her thick brown hair, and spotted several white hairs among the brown.

With her tiny hand, she reached to one of them, and plucked it out. She brought it before her eyes, and examined it deeply. Then she plucked all the white hairs she could see. She counted them... *twenty-four*.

"Could it mean that..." she whispered to her image in the mirror, but she dared not finish the sentence.

A moment later, she heard sounds coming from downstairs. Just then, she noticed the stairway was next to her.

She crept down the stairs with silent steps, and was unnoticed until she reached the bottom. Then a man with gray hair and side-beard appeared from behind a corner. He spotted her in the corner of his vision and turned to her. Her eyes opened wider, and she wanted to flee for some reason. But she didn't.

"Hullo," said the man. "You must be Gavin's girl."

Still startled slightly, Noelie contemplated on what to say for a few short moments. "Uh. Hello. My name is Noelie."

"Huh. You look like you're not used to being seen. Covering yourself just like that."

Noelie looked at her figure, and saw that she tried to hide herself with her arms.

"The dress looks nice on you," he said, "No need to hide that. I'm Gavin's

father, by the way. You can call me Andor.”

“Thank you for having me as a guest, Mr. Andor,” she said and made a bow of gratitude.

“I’m not the one to thank for that... Boy stormed into the house in the middle of night with you. Scared me a little, if you ask me.”

“I can imagine,” she said, slightly embarrassed. “Did he tell where he found me?”

“Yeah. Sounded like a really... really strange fairy tale with drunk pixies and prince charming saving the princess.”

“Drunk pixies?” she asked.

“It’s just something my wife used to say when she heard something unbelievable,” he replied. “Not that I don’t believe him. Dawnwatch is a dangerous and strange place. He was stupid enough to go there, so he’s probably too stupid to make up a story like that on his own.”

“Please, don’t be hard on him. He saved me,” Noelie said.

“I mean no offense,” said Andor, “But it was the opposite of smart to go there. I’m glad you’re liberated, but at the same time, I’m angry at the boy for letting that fool Brett persuade him to risk his life.”

Noelie looked to her feet, then back up at the man who caressed his side-beard with his left hand, stroking it over and over. “Where can I find him?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Gavin.”

“Oh! Silly me... He’s out in the workshop, cleaning up. We’re done for today.”

Noelie reluctantly stepped closer to the man and looked around the room. A dining room.

In the center was a simple dining table, four simple seats around it. From

above it hung an old oil lamp, waiting patiently to be lit and to shine as is the purpose of lamps.

“I’ll put some dinner together. Sit down. The boy’s coming in soon,” he said.

Noelie took a seat by the table, facing a wall, upon which hung an old painting between two tiny windows. “That picture... I’ve seen it before.”

“That?” Andor raised an eyebrow, “I bought it many years ago from some man in the Tradisport market. He told me it’s a copy of a famous picture. Crazy fellow said there’s a poyo hidden somewhere in there. I’ve been searching for it all those years, but damn... I swear he lied to me, it’s not there.”

The picture displayed many stairs, going in unusual directions, some even upside down. There were various people in the picture. A knight chasing a goblin who stole his helmet, an engineer whose goggles were stolen by another goblin. A third goblin is clinging onto the ledge behind the engineer, he is about to steal her wrench that is lying on the stone floor. There are some sheep and a goblin who managed to acquire a shepherd’s crook – he’s quite happy about it while standing on the stair upside down. In the background... there is the eye of a terrifying creature, looking at the scene, being menacing and scary, like a monster should be. There were many more details to the picture, but Noelie’s attention focused on finding the poyo with no luck. Of course, from a distance of nine feet, what did she expect? She’d need the eyes of a hawk for that.

“Anyway,” said Andor, “I love that picture, even if it’s just a copy.”

“It’s really nice,” Noelie agreed, “I saw another copy that looked a bit sloppier. This one is really well done.”

“Did you also see the original?” Andor asked her.

She shook her head. “The man who showed me the picture said the original was lost centuries ago. Presumed to be stolen by some goblins.”

“That would be ironic, really,” he chuckled, “The picture displaying goblins

stealing stuff, stolen by goblins.”

Noelie chuckled. “Yes, that's right!”

Andor left the room through a doorway that led to a kitchen. He returned shortly with bread, bacon, and cheese on a platter. He placed the platter on the table, and headed back to the kitchen, only to return in a few moments with a knife and some clean handkerchiefs.

He handed her one of the handkerchiefs, and proceeded to cut the cheese and the bread.

There was a sound of a door opening and closing. In a few moments, Gavin appeared from behind a wall. “Hey!” he said excitedly as he saw Noelie, “Did you rest well?” he asked her.

Noelie nodded with a smile. Gavin was about to take a seat by the table. “Boy,” his father said, “I forgot the plates.” Gavin gave him a single nod and headed to fetch the wooden plates.

Andor laid a thick slice of bread upon each plate, and placed a slice of cheese and a stripe of bacon upon each. A poor dinner for a king, but luckily, there were no kings in the room.

Gavin's father headed back to the kitchen once more and returned with three clay cups and a jug of water. Then he took a seat.

The three of them ate in silence at first, then Andor began to speak of wild gossips from all over the town.

“... some even say that the king would withdraw the entire camp,” Andor said.

“That would be insane! That camp is the only thing that keeps the taverns alive,” Gavin said.

“I suppose the king has bigger issues than a couple of tavern owners losing the coin,” his father said, “The mayor told me the other day that he'd heard that some scouts sent out from Katten didn't return from beyond the Misty Grasslands.

If there is something going on in the south-west, King Laglass would most probably send the army there.”

“Then who would defend Kalgrove from goblins?” Gavin argued.

Andor took a glance towards Noelie. “I don't know... maybe someone who can wave them away with magic?”

Noelie who didn't pay too much attention to the discussion looked up to the man, puzzled. She raised her eyebrows. “I... I don't think...” she muttered.

Andor chuckled. “Don't worry. I'm joking.” Noelie felt a little relief crawl across her body. “But I'm actually curious... did you really destroy a gang of goblins all yourself?”

Her expression turned a little embarrassed. “I don't know... I can't really remember what happened.”

“Believe me, Father! She did. She waved with her hand, and a strong gust of wind sent the little pests flying. Then she set the leader on fire!” Gavin said irritated. Noelie looked at him, a little skeptical at first, then a couple fragments of a hazy memory returned to her mind, back from the depths of oblivion.

She began to remember the dark, the laughter of goblins... the grin of the wolf rider... the stars, the wind, the fire... The chest... *The chest! Oh my! The chest!*

Her heart started racing at the thought of it, but she minded her expression to hide the fear that surfaced inside her. Even so, her eyes wandered the room anxiously while father and son argued of unimportant things above dinner.

Eventually, Andor steered the discussion to quieter waters, and they talked of weather, of food, of girls... Little things.

Meanwhile, Noelie contemplated on how she should break the ice. How she would tell them she had to leave. But as the discussion of father and son carried on, eventually a question appeared out of the blue, saving her the trouble.

“Where will she sleep tonight?” Andor asked. “We only have your room,

and I won't give up my room," he said.

Gavin's face seemed troubled at the question. "I can sleep on the floor as lo—"

"There's no need to," Noelie cut in quickly, "I'll find a room in a tavern."

Andor looked at her. "But you don't have any money."

"Oh," she looked down to the table embarrassed.

"Actually... the owner of the Golden Poyo still owes me a favor," Gavin said, "I could call that in for you."

Noelie looked at her, "No, I wouldn't want to waste your favor."

"It wouldn't be a *waste*," he smiled at her, "Besides, I would probably never call it otherwise."

She looked into the boy's eyes with gratitude. "Thank you!"

The evening passed on with more chatter and generally in good mood. Andor told tales and gossips while his son recited several jokes he'd heard in taverns. Some were funny. Some were not.

As they finished, Andor gathered the empty dishes and cups and headed with them to the kitchen to wash them. Then he returned and wished a good night to the girl before heading to his bedroom.

Gavin then escorted the girl to the northern end of the town where the Golden Poyo was, one of the thirteen taverns, the favorite of countless soldiers who lived further north in the military camp.

Up high in the sky the stars were smiling down upon them. Darkness took over Kalgrove, and Noelie could see the lights escaping through the several windows of the large blue-roofed cottage with two chimneys.

Gavin explained the situation to the short thick-bearded man who owned the place. He gave him a hearty laugh and agreed to let the girl stay for a couple nights. The young blacksmith boy thanked him.

He turned to Noelie and wished her a good night. Before he could leave, she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back gently. Then she gave him a kiss upon his cheek. He blushed. "Good night!" she said. Then he felt with a bright smile upon his mouth, brighter than any star or torch in the night. Noelie sighed as she watched him go.

The tavern owner showed her to her room in the distant back of the long building, leading her across a long hallway that had many windows on the left, looking out to a garden shrouded by the night.

The man took a lantern from the hallway, and brought it in to the room, then he hung it upon a hook set in the wall. After that, he returned to his duties in the taproom.

The room was a little larger than Gavin's room. It was also better furnished. There was a night stand by the bed with two drawers, a dresser with mirror, a desk and a chair, and a wardrobe. On the floor there was a warm woolen carpet that caressed her bare feet gently.

Noelie closed the door of the room and enjoyed a moment of loneliness. Through countless years she had grown so used to being alone, it felt so strange to be around people... to be talking to people. It felt to her strangely good to be alone again.

As she headed to fall in the bed to take a brief rest, she passed by the mirror, which drew her attention to the image of the brown-haired girl inside it. Her precious little image looked back at her. She smiled at her, and the image smiled back.

But hey... what is this? She reached out her hand to her head, and plucked a hair white like snow. She examined it, then she searched for more... and she found more. She sighed a deep concerned sigh and bit her lower lip. She frowned.

There was no time to waste... The chest! She had to reclaim the chest!

She quickly seated herself in the chair by the desk. She pulled both drawers

of the desk, searched for ink and paper and pen. She found paper, but no ink and pen. Luckily, there was a pencil in the upper drawer of the night stand.

Dear Gavin,

You have my eternal gratitude for breaking the curse that I've unwillingly laid upon myself, and I would truly love to find a way to repay you for the favor.

However, as much as I regret having to say this; I can not stay in Kalgrove for I have an urgent issue that I must tend to before I can look into repaying favors.

Sadly, I can't tell you the nature of my callings, but I assure you that I will return as soon as I can.

Yours faithfully,

Noelie Inverse

She folded the letter in half and laid it out upon the desk for all to see. Lacking a proper envelope or a seal and wax, that was the best she could do.

She eyed the letter for a long moment in silence. “as soon as I can,” she muttered the words of her lie silently.

After some time, she opened the window and took the lantern from the hook. Then a moment later she hung it back up... *Sneaking out with a lantern? How stupid can I be?* She frowned and rolled her eyes in frustration.

So she climbed through the window and disappeared in the dark shroud of the night, guided by nothing but the light of stars.

She followed the line of roads until she reached a main road that crossed the town from east to west. West was where she was heading to...

Luckily, the streets were empty. Light filtered through curtains and blinds from the windows all over the town. Like vigilant eyes, the bright windows

watched over the dark streets. Of course, there were also many dark windows. Those belonged to people already far beyond the sea of dreams, using their beds as ships and their imaginations as sails.

Music was carried by the wind, coming from a cozy tavern overlooking a tiny square where a well stood still, proudly as if it owned the whole place. Above it a lamp post loomed, bringing light to the square, but for whom, Noelie couldn't tell, as there was not a single soul to enjoy the steady light of the oil lamp hanging high beyond reach of poor ladderless folks.

Noelie crossed a bridge and followed the road further west until she found herself standing in a familiar place. The same place where she woke up in darkness, surrounded by the laughter of goblins.

She looked around the roadside grass that was hazily lit by starlight, trying to find clues as for where she should go. *Not going to work.*

She decided to try something else. She searched the cracks between the cobbles of the road for some tiny rock... and she found one.

She took the tiny stone and closed both her hands around it. She lowered her eyelids and focused... and she felt the stone, she felt its breathe, she heard it sing a song of unfamiliar tune...

She opened her eyes and saw a strange greenish light filtering through her fingers. The tiny stone was glowing bright. Brighter than any lantern could ever dream to glow. If the moon was in the sky that night and saw what Noelie had done, she would be proud.

The light emitted by the tiny rock unveiled a narrow field of grass between the forest and the road. There she saw a trail created by countless steps that led into the woods to the north. Noelie followed the trail.

She passed by ageless trees and followed the clues that led her further north – a flower crushed by a foot, broken off twigs from bushes, a trail of footsteps in the mud... All those things led her to a tiny encampment. The light of a campfire

filtered through the boughs and she heard the sound of laughter and chatter and... a fight?

She quickly dug up a tiny hole. She kissed the glowing rock, and carefully laid it there, and tugged the soil over it to hide it from curious eyes. "Sleep well, little stone," she murmured.

Noelie crept close to the camp and peeked from behind the thick trunk of a tall oak tree. She saw firelight flicker upon the figure of a lean man who wielded a hatchet; swung it once, twice, thrice... Missing the goblin he aimed to strike, cutting the air, the hissing sound of it carried away by the wind. She recognized the man. *Brett?*

There was no time to try and figure what he might do there. He was surrounded, and the menacing figure of a wolf prepared to tackle him.

Noelie called the power of mighty fire, and the campfire in the center of the camp exploded. *BOOM!*

The sound of panic followed the explosion. Embers started raining onto the camp from high in the sky, and a couple tents caught on fire.

Noelie stepped out from the shadows, her pale face illuminated by the raging flames that consumed the nearby tent, feeding on it as if to satisfy an ancient hunger.

As she walked forward, a goblin saw her. "The ghost!" he cried out and proceeded to charge. Noelie waved her hand towards him, focusing upon an ancient spell she'd learned long ago, and the dirt slipped out under his feet, and so he fell face first, his blunt mace flew far from him.

In the edge of her vision, she saw a pair of goblins fleeing to the woods, and ahead of her she saw the wolf and the goblin leader upon the ferocious beast's back, holding onto leather reins. "You will regret this!" he cried. Then the wolf charged.

But rather than setting them on fire like the last time, Noelie chose to try

something new. She called the might of the earth, and then...

The fierce goblin and his ferocious wolf halted in place, their skin and fur and hair and everything... They turned to solid stone. A statue left for eternity, for all to see. Noelie made a satisfied grin.

She walked around the statue, examined it for a few short moments.

A pair of goblins headed towards her, with maces and clubs high above their heads. She looked at them, and they faltered to a halt as they saw the statue.

One of them decided he was brave enough... or stupid enough – same thing. He charged forth. He made a couple steps, then he disappeared deep under the ground. It wasn't one of Noelie's doings... there simply was a hole in the ground and he stepped in it. Noelie raised her eyebrows and made a wide smile.

The other goblin fled. The brown-haired girl looked around the scene. Tents were burning tents and crates everywhere and all the goblins were hidden by trees and boughs and the night itself. She could feel their terror in the air. Her eyes searched, but not for goblins. He searched for a lean young man whose name was Brett.

Her eyes wandered up to a hillside that flickered in the firelight that was cast upon it. She saw the shadow of a tall figure climbing up, holding something below his shoulder.

She followed him up to the hill, then into the forest. He took nervous glances towards her as he ran forward. Then he stumbled and fell.

As he lay on the cold hard ground, he quickly reached for the chest he'd dropped, and tried to stumble to his feet, but he couldn't...

His arm was tangled by something... a thick root emerged from the ground below and held him back. Then another root grabbed his leg.

He reached into a pocket of his, and took a sheathed knife to his hand. He swayed it a couple of times to remove the loose leather sheath, and the iron blade shone in the starlight. He used it to cut the roots, and he jolted forward.

“Brett!” Noeie shouted after him, but he didn't stop. Didn't look back.

“Leave me alone!” he cried. “You monster!”

Noeie let out a deep sigh. *Monster*. “You know you can't run. Give me the chest!”

“No!”

She sighed another time, then she called a gust of wind that pushed him back towards her.

Brett lay there in the dirt, and Noeie was above him. He pointed the knife towards his face. “Stay away from me!” he demanded.

“Put that away,” she said irritated.

He tried to back away, pushing himself with his legs. Her eyes narrowed as she slowly walked after him, keeping her eyes strictly on him. “Give up the chest,” she said. “There's nothing inside it for you.”

“No, I won't give it to you! I need it!” he said, still pushing himself back while pointing the knife at her, “Why do you even want it?” he asked. He took a short glance to the chest, then looked back at her. “What's inside it?”

Noeie didn't answer to that, she just followed the lean man who crawled back away from her desperately. “I don't want to hurt you,” she said.

Finally, Brett's flight was halted by the trunk of a tree, against which he bumped the back of his head. “Ouch.”

There was no escape. He was cornered and he knew it. His arm that held the knife began to tremble. Noeie just stared down at him with sharp eyes.

After some long and tense moments, he finally decided to lay down the knife. “Fine,” he said submissively. He slowly reached the chest out for her to take.

Noeie reached for it, but then... Brett grabbed her arm, and dragged her down, and she stumbled over. The next moment she was in the dirt. Brett jumped to his feet, and ran as fast as he could.

She looked after him, her eyes in fiery flames, fueled by rage. She stretched

her arm out ahead of her, and clasped her hand into a fist. She roared like an enraged lioness, her furious growl was carried far by the winds.

Then there was a loud crack in the air, then just ahead in Brett's path, a giant pine tree began to fall... So many years lived, so many things seen, only to be brought down by an ancient spell, merely to stop a tiny man from running away. Such is fate.

Brett tried to climb over the fallen tree. *Oh, no you don't!* Noelie called all the leaves from nearby trees, stripping their boughs naked, and she commanded the wind to create a fierce storm of leaves around him.

He panicked, swung his arms frantically, stumbled and fell, then rose back to his feet, only to stumble again and fall. Soon he gave up, and tossed the chest away from him, towards the brown-haired girl.

"Thank you," she said irritated, then she released the wind and the leaves. Brett fled with the speed of lightning. She reclaimed the chest and took it under her shoulder.

After the incident was over, Noelie returned to the road and spent the rest of the night walking further west. On the way back she found a peaceful spring with crystal clear water that crisscrossed among trees and rocks. She drank from the water, then carried on.

The rising sun to the east was slowly crawling up to the sky. The birds began to sing, and things slowly became alive again.

Far ahead stood tall the castle of Dawnwatch. That was where she was heading.

She crossed the stone bridge before the great gate, then stopped before crossing the threshold. She held a hand out, trying to feel something in the air ahead of her. Nothing. She smiled. The magic wall that held her in for so long was gone. She was truly free.

She walked the familiar steps back to her room, where she'd immediately dropped to her bed, still clinging onto the tiny wooden chest. She fell asleep and slept until the sun was high in the sky and was already heading towards the horizon in the far west.

After she woke, she felt surprisingly refreshed. She rose to her feet and looked into her wardrobe. She felt a little disappointment after she found nothing fitting for the road, then she headed to other rooms that belonged to other ladies long time ago.

She dug up a pair of traveling trousers, a couple of shirts, a belt to keep her newly found trousers from falling, and finally, a pair of boots along with so many socks. Surprisingly, the fabric of these clothes still held strong, even after so many years, almost as if they were new.

As she prepared to push the drawer back in, she saw something glitter among the fabric. *A mirror?* Yes. A mirror – one that escaped the great banishment of mirrors from the castle by hiding among clothes. *Clever mirror. Very clever.*

Noelie smiled at the mirror and took a peek into it. She looked at herself, examined her face, and looked carefully over her hair. No white hairs this time. She made a relieved sigh and placed the tiny mirror onto the pile of clothes that she'd gathered for herself.

She looked into other rooms to try and find a backpack. Half an hour later, she found a cozy leather bag that was fitting perfectly for the purpose.

Then she headed back to her room. On the way back, she saw the tail of a snow-white cat. “Thalia!” She placed the pile of things she carried onto a nearby table.

The cat startled, began to flee. Noelie ran after the tiny creature who was long time ago a noble lady, just like her. The cat ran further past hallways and corridors, and they eventually arrived to a dead end where the cat was cornered.

The snow-white cat turned back to look at Noelie. She hissed at her

fiercely.

“It’s just me, Noemie!” she said, “Come here,” she stooped closer to the cat. “I can break the curse. Come! You can be yourself again,” she said gently as she reached closer and closer with her hand. “You can be free.”

The cat backed away until the wall wouldn’t let her further. She hissed again, and made a clawing motion with her paw. Then there was the sound of a... *sneeze?*

Noemie turned towards the source of the sound and she saw it right away... A litter of four fluffy snowballs hidden beneath a crack in the wall. “Oh!” she exclaimed. She turned back to Thalia, “I didn’t know,” she said. Now she understood her resistance. Thalia the cat had a family now. She was more a cat now than the lady she once was.

Noemie gazed at the tiny kittens for a while, mesmerized by their fluffiness. She finally turned back to Thalia and smiled at her. “I must go now, Thalia. The magic wall is gone. We are all free now.”

The white cat seemed to have calmed. She walked to where the crack was and checked on her litter. Noemie made a nod of farewell and left, smiling delightfully.

She reclaimed the pile of things from the table where she’d left them at, and headed to her room. She dressed into the trousers and one of the shirts – cotton, dyed red that turned pale over the years, so it was more pink now than red. She fastened her belt and hopped into the pair of boots. Perfect.

She packed everything else into the backpack she’d found, including the tiny mirror and the light-green cotton dress Gavin gave her. She sighed regretfully at that. Finally, she’d carefully put the tiny ornate chest into the backpack.

Once everything was in her backpack, she headed to the treasury. She opened a chest full of glittering coins and filled a sack with gold and silver.

She lifted the sack. *Too heavy.* She poured half its content back into the

chest and decided it would be enough. She'd put the sack into the backpack, then added a couple more silver coins to her pockets from the chest. Just in case.

She'd lit a torch, then headed down to the armory floor where Lord Dawnwatch's body was pinned to the wall.

His lordship was still there, motionless and cold. His breastplate glittering in the flickering torchlight. Upon the cold hard floor lay his mighty sword, proud and glorious.

She stared at the pale face of Lord Dawnwatch and sighed. "I'm so sorry for what I've done," she spoke to him. "I acted like a child and let my actions be led by rage. I ruined everything... I hope that one day you might forgive me."

Noelie placed her tiny hand upon the smooth steel breastplate, and a moment later, the curse she laid upon him was broken... The sound of metal clattering on the floor followed as pieces of his armor fell to the ground.

The ashes of Lord Dawnwatch quickly filtered through cracks of his armor, and a gentle breeze carried them through hallways, out of the castle into the open air. He was truly free now.

Noelie took her backpack and walked across the mighty gate of Dawnwatch Fort and crossed the bridge one final time.

She headed south-east to Tradisport where she would find a ship to somewhere. She didn't yet know where she was going, but she was certain that in the right time, her goal would be unveiled before her.

Until then, she enjoyed the freedom that was withheld from her for so many years.