

THE MUSES

by

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Abstract

This project is the first three chapters of a young adult novel, *The Muses*. Lily Bellows is singled out in infancy to become one of the Muses, humans given supernatural powers through enchanted golden masks. The six Muses (Faith, Wisdom, Pride, Obedience, Courage, and Desire) are telepathically linked to Illyria's king so that he is better able to manage his emotions and thus rule more efficiently. Lily is destined to be the Muse of Faith, but her parents fake her death and keep her abilities secret until she heals her village of a deadly plague and the Muses consequently return for her. As Lily struggles to master fighting arts, healing skills, and the ability to manipulate emotions, she must also befriend the moody Prince Connor who will one day share her consciousness, and she must untangle the complicated feelings she has for Connor's illegitimate brother, Ronan. While Lily's fellow Muse initiates have been training since infancy, Lily joins them as a teenager, and she finds it nearly impossible to give up her family, her dreams and her individuality so she can make Prince Connor into a better king. When she has the chance to break the oath she swore to serve her country as its Muse of Faith, she must choose between power and individuality and determine whether she must submit to her destiny or create her own.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Prologue: An Unusual Child	1
Chapter 1: A Killing Fever	25
Chapter 2: The Last Minutes	46

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Prologue: An Unusual Child

Jenny Bellows didn't know what to do with a baby who never cried. Jenny wouldn't have known exactly what to do when Lily did cry, either, but she imagined it would've been easier. As it was, Jenny moved the cradle closer to the fire to keep Lily warm, then moved the cradle farther away, then changed her diaper, then fed her, and all the while Lily looked up at Jenny with a bemused expression. Keeping Lily happy and healthy was near impossible, as Jenny never knew when Lily was *unhappy* or *unhealthy*.

Lily certainly had the right blood in her to make noise. Jenny's own sweet Thad was the loudest man in the village.

"You think there's something wrong with her?" Thad whispered. His whisper was as loud as a normal man's shout. Thad was Inavale's blacksmith, and he had been yelling over the noise of a forge since he was apprenticed at twelve. Jenny personally believed that Thad's roaring voice made his work extra-strong. Customers came from villages four valleys over so Thad could shout them the latest story and fix what they had broken, which was a fine thing for a man just nineteen years.

"Not wrong," Jenny said, brushing a gentle hand over Lily's thick black hair. Lily's blue eyes followed the movement of her hand with interest. "Just different." Different was bad. Her first baby, a boy, had cried, but he had cried differently than any other baby she'd heard. His cry was a high mew instead of a bawl, and he had died a few hours later.

"Maybe she's just thinking," Thad said, leaning in close to Lily's face and wrinkling his nose at her. Lily waved her fists in the air, almost catching her fingers in Thad's black beard. She didn't have much to grasp. Thad fussed over his beard like the village girls fussed over their

hair ribbons on festival days. He maintained his livelihood through sweat, dirt, and soot, but Thad had an uncanny ability to stay clean.

“There’s my clever girl,” Thad cooed. The sound made his tin mug rattle against the table, but Lily didn’t scrunch up her face like Jenny had seen other village babies (and, indeed, grown men) do when Thad spoke to them. Jenny took a deep breath.

“Thad...you don’t suppose she’s deaf?” she asked. Thad jerked his head up.

“Deaf!” he shouted, and Jenny winced. If Lily hadn’t been deaf a moment ago, she might be now. But to Jenny’s relief, Lily winced, too, though she still didn’t cry.

“She’s not deaf,” Thad said, beaming as Lily swatted at his long, slightly crooked nose, red from years of leaning over a hot anvil. “She likes her da’s voice, doesn’t she?”

Jenny remembered the careful way Thad had recounted the highlights of his day to her during her pregnancy, how he had saved certain stories about the village children and spoken them directly to the bulge in her middle. Thad told her about Samuel Stone’s new yellow puppy; he related how the girls beat the boys in a snowball fight for the first time in living memory, led by the dauntless Mary Lichen. Jenny smiled as she remembered how Thad had reenacted the fight using her uncarded wool as snowballs. Maybe their baby just had Thad’s sweet disposition.

“Look at her. She’s fearless,” Thad said as Lily swatted his nose again. He put his finger in her hand, and she held it so tightly Thad made a face, and Jenny had to smile.

“Fearless,” she agreed, but her own fears stayed curled at the bottom of her stomach.

When she went to the village women with her concerns, they laughed and told Jenny she could take one of their fussy babies in exchange. But Jenny was from Deepford, a village three valleys over, and she knew what could happen to unusual children like her own silent baby.

The Muses had never visited Inavale. And the Muses were very interested in silent children.

Though they worked with the king to keep peace in the land, Jenny thought the Muses no better than common child snatchers, as well as killers. Finn Shepherd of Deepford had been convicted of treason, and King Oberon and his Muses had brought him back to his hometown to be executed. Her mother insisted she was too young to watch the execution, but Jenny sneaked out to the village commons when her mother went down to the cellar for some eggs. She was small for ten years old, and she had no trouble squeezing through the crowd and up onto a wagon at the edge of the village square. Five of the six Muses had traveled to Deepford for the execution. Their golden masks glittered in the noonday sun, but their white robes did not ruffle in the breeze.

When the constable brought Finn out, the blunt-nosed Obedio, Muse of Obedience, stepped forward with a scarlet axe in his hand. Jenny knew Finn because his grandma lived two houses down from her. He was much hairier than the boy who had once given her an extra cookie when his grandmother wasn't looking. Finn, dressed in his navy blue soldier's uniform, knelt next to the chopping block and placed his head in the groove. He was silent, but one of his brass buttons scraped against the wooden block with a tiny jingle. From the look on his face, Jenny knew he wasn't sorry for his crime. She knew about that look. She was preparing to make it herself if her mother caught her watching the execution.

Some of the people around Jenny gasped as the Muse raised the scarlet axe. One woman put her hands over her face, but Jenny kept her eyes wide-open. The axe held in the air for one of Jenny's breaths. The silver sheen from its edge still did not gleam as bright as the five golden Masks. When the Muse swung it down, gasps shivered through the silence like puffs of hot air

before a thunderstorm. Finn's head separated from his body in three strokes with thick, wet sounds that made Jenny bite her lip. The blood pooled dark crimson around the Muse's feet, yet his robe stayed brilliantly white. A babble of exclamations and nervous whispers swept the silence away.

"Young lady, what are you doing?" Jenny turned to find her mother glaring at her, flour-covered hands on broad hips. She hopped down from the wagon and grabbed her mother's hand.

"Oh, Ma, can't we help him?" she asked. "I know he broke the law, but I-I just don't want him to hurt."

"He's dead, Jenny, and can't feel pain anymore," her mother replied, grabbing her shoulders and turning her away from the chopping block, where the Muse was holding Finn's head by its long, black hair. "But you're about to." Her mother whipped her when they got home, which Jenny expected, but the next day her mother surprised her with a march down to the village healer, Anna Sinks.

"If you want to help people, there's plenty here that aren't criminals," her mother said, and so Jenny was apprenticed. Jenny's chores soon taught her how hard it was to get bloodstains out of clothes, and she often thought of the Muse of Obedience and got goose bumps wondering what kind of power kept the blood from soiling the white robe. The Muses had been human children once, after all.

The stories said the Muses paid handsomely for the children they chose and that a village had royal favor if a future Muse was found there, but the scarlet axe was always first in her thoughts. A Muse had no family, no village, and no name. Jenny hadn't had time to name her first baby before he died. A name was important, sacred.

The touch of Thad's finger on her arm startled her out of her memories.

“Why are you so worried?” he asked. “Lily trusts her mama will take care of her and doesn’t see any sense in fussing. Hardly blame her, since you’re the best girl in the world.” Jenny smiled as Thad leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, but she still could not force the wrinkles out of her forehead.

“Thad, you know the stories about...about the Muses?” she said. Thad nodded.

“Everybody knows at least one story about the Muses,” he said. “Powerful, a bit spooky. But lucky for their home villages.” Jenny nodded, twisting Lily’s blanket so tight around her finger it stung.

“The stories say the babies that get chosen are the ones that never cry. And, Thad, I know it’s an honor and all, but I couldn’t bear it if...if...they took Lily away from us.” She pretended to be very concerned with a strawberry-shaped stain on her apron so he wouldn’t see her tears. Thad often joked that she hid her emotions with her apron like little girls hid behind their blankets.

“Hey, hey,” he said, squeezing her shoulders. His arm was much leaner than the meaty biceps of Don Keeper, the blacksmith Jenny had known in Deepford, but it was just as strong. Jenny was very grateful Thad was good at blacksmithing. His wiriness (though much of Don Keeper’s bulkiness had come from ale) made people suspicious. She’d even had to convince him to let new customers see him dirty, or else they wouldn’t trust him. A man who didn’t get dirty couldn’t possibly know how to work hard. Jenny’s own da had said those same words after he met Thad for the first time.

“Now what are you worrying for?” Thad continued. “Lily’s just two months old, and we don’t know if she’s got the stuff in her to make a Muse at all.”

“I don’t mean to worry,” Jenny said. “I just...think about things that could happen.”

“Now, look, nobody is taking Lily nowhere,” Thad said, his usual boom deepening even further. Even though his grip around her was firm, she felt a tremor, and she knew Thad was thinking about the baby they had lost.

“Promise?” Jenny asked, not caring how foolish she sounded.

“I swear it on my grandfather’s anvil,” Thad said. “I’ve got the two best girls in the world here in this house, and nobody’s taking them away from me.” Jenny smiled up at his crinkly blue eyes and sealed the promise by putting her hand in his.

They didn’t talk about the Muses again until Thad brought it up a few weeks later.

“What Muse would our Lily be if she was one, d’you think?” he asked as he rocked Lily to sleep after supper one night. “Erised?”

Jenny blinked as she tried to think of an answer. It was absurd that Lily would be the Muse of Ambition. She put aside a label for a bottle of liverwort so she could think better.

“But she never wants anything,” she said. Thad nodded and rubbed his palm on the right knee of his rough canvas pants, a habit of his when he was thinking hard. He had almost worn through his pants the night he asked Jenny to marry him. They had met when he was a journeyman in Deepford. A chain holding a piece of iron had snapped and slammed into Thad’s forearm, breaking it in three places. Though just fifteen, Jenny had managed to heal it.

Thad asked Jenny to marry him the day she turned sixteen. She agreed, and they returned to Thad’s home village so he could take over the forge. Thad joked that he never worried about Jenny leaving because he could always break his other arm.

“Then the one for courage, that Leo, maybe?” Thad continued.

“She’s too quiet,” Jenny said.

“Not all courage is the kind that shouts in your face,” Thad said.

“That’s not what I meant at all,” Jenny started, but she stopped when she saw Thad hiding a smile. Jenny laughed and came to sit on Thad’s knee. Before she sat, he gently grasped her waist-length braid and swung it over his shoulder out of the way. He was always careful with her hair, as he knew how much she hated catching it on his belt. Even after being married almost three years, being this close to him made Jenny smile. Sometimes, like now, she could waste a full minute just looking at his face. Thad’s long nose and high forehead were much more attractive than her narrow chin and snub nose, she was sure.

“If she’s Favian, she got all her wisdom from me,” she said, laughing again as Thad sputtered.

It became a game, guessing the Muse their daughter would be, and they played off and on all winter. Jenny’s favorite Muse was Primas, the Muse of Pride, but Thad favored Fida, the Muse of Faith. Soon, Jenny wasn’t afraid any longer. The whole thing had become a joke. One day in early March, she even caught herself wondering idly what Muse she herself would best make. She knew she was proud, but she also wanted a lot of things. She wanted Lily to make a noise. She wanted more time to seek out the rarest herbs and for all of her remedies to work. She also wanted to find an herb to end all sickness. If that wasn’t good enough for the Muse of Ambition, she didn’t know what was. She wondered if Thad had made this into a game on purpose to make her stop fretting. It had worked. She expected the Muses to arrive in Inavale as much as she expected Thad to quit using soap.

As she was in such a good mood, Jenny put together a turnover, Thad’s favorite, from some of the last of the apples in their root cellar. The big room, which included the kitchen table and the large fireplace with Thad and Jenny’s two chairs, was twice as big as the bedroom, the house’s only other room. When Lily was older, Thad planned on building another room on the

east side for her own bed. The yellow stone the villagers used to build houses grew out of the ground like daisies in the hill country, and every boy learned masonry along with hunting, fishing and farming. The girls learned how to fish and farm, too, but their specialties were baking and butter making. Sometimes, the fine butter from Inavale went all the way to the capital for the tables of the king and his court.

Jenny had just put the turnover in the oven and turned to skim the cream off the milk when Thad burst through the front door.

“They’re coming, Jenny,” he said, his eyes rolling. “They’re in Deepford, three of them, with their golden masks and tall red horses. Their hunt will bring them here tomorrow.” Before Jenny could think of a reply, Thad strode into the bedroom and returned with Lily pressed to his shoulder.

“We have to hide her,” he said. Jenny shook her head. They had joked about the Muses so much that Jenny had almost forgotten they were real.

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“The Muses, Jenny,” Thad said. He put the hand that wasn’t holding Lily on her shoulder. “They’re coming here. And they’ll find her!”

“Thad, wait!” she said, closing her eyes to steady her nerves. Golden masks and scarlet axes flashed before her eyelids. Golden masks with their black eye sockets fixed on...Lily. Jenny took a deep breath and opened her eyes. “Thad, I was worrying too much, just like you said. We don’t know that they want Lily!”

“The messenger from Deepford said one of them saw a red star in the north last October,” Thad said. “They’ve been waiting for the snow to clear before they set out. Said it was one of

the brightest stars they'd ever seen. They want to examine every child in the village tomorrow at noon."

Lily had been born on a blustery Friday in October.

A dull sound like an axe blade chopping through wood started in Jenny's ears, and she sank into a chair. The Muses wanted Lily. And in all the stories and all the rumors, the Muses never left a child they wanted.

"Where could we hide her?" Jenny asked. "Someone will notice she's missing. Henry Fisher will say something for sure."

Thad put a hand on the back of Lily's head and scrunched his black brows. Jenny looked frantically from the trap door of the cellar to the trunk by her bed to the wash kettle near the fireplace. The stories said Muses knew a gifted child just by touch. If they touched Lily, they would know she was different. But if Lily was not at the village gates, people would talk, especially Henry Fisher. He was the head of the village council because he liked hearing his own voice so much. Jenny knew what the Muses did to traitors. Did hiding a potential Muse count as treason?

"We've got no choice," Jenny said. She looked up at Thad and her sleeping baby and tried to keep her voice from breaking. "We've got to take her and just pray we're wrong. Maybe she's just a quiet baby. Maybe she's not special at all." Thad lowered himself into the chair next to hers. Now he held Lily with both hands.

"But maybe we could convince everyone to keep their mouths shut," Thad said. "Everybody loves Lily, and you've made yourself a great favorite with your herbs. They would help us."

Jenny shook her head.

“Thad, there’s good people here, but we can’t ask them to say no to a bag of gold and favors from the king just so we can keep our baby. That’s asking too much.” Thad sighed and gave his right knee a quick rub with Lily’s foot.

“What if we didn’t ask the whole village?” Thad asked. “What if we just asked a few to help us? Midwife Thacker knows how much Lily means to us. She helped us bury the...the first one. If she could say Lily was too young for the journey or pretend with us she was born this spring and not during the red star...”

Jenny took his right hand and pressed it between her own. Her tongue felt too large for her mouth.

“Think about this. Midwife Thacker is a kind woman, and one of the best midwives around. Sometimes she loves the babies she helped bring into this world more than their mamas do. But if she can say for the rest of her days that she helped birth a Muse, do you think she’ll do anything to ruin that chance?”

Thad didn’t reply, but he pulled his hand away and grasped Lily’s foot again. He slumped in the chair, his head hanging like it had when he carved the tiny coffin for their firstborn.

Jenny swallowed hard. She could only watch him for a few breaths before she wanted to throw the half-made turnover in the fire just to do something. She stood up so fast she knocked the chair over.

“I’m going to make some mint tea,” she said in a shaking voice. She righted the chair and went over to the counter where she kept her herbs. She took two deep breaths to steady herself and then reached up for the bottle of mint leaves. The labels all ran together in a blur of beige-colored parchment, and she tsked as she realized she’d grabbed the bottle of mortemwood

instead. She reached to put it back, but suddenly her fingers tightened around the bottle.

Mortemwood was a dangerous, highly addictive herb, only to be used in small doses to cure sleeplessness or knock out a very ill patient. It created a sleep so deep there were stories that some of the herb's abusers had been buried alive. They were discovered only if their graves were shallow enough that passersby could hear their screams. Hardly daring to breathe, Jenny let herself think her terrifying plan through to the end. The Muses would not be interested in a dead baby. Jenny walked back to the table so quickly she almost tipped her chair over again.

"How much are we willing to risk to keep Lily?" she asked, keeping the bottle clutched in her hand so he couldn't see the label.

"What do you mean?" Thad asked, his eyebrows drawn together. "I'd give anything to keep her, you know that."

Jenny opened her mouth, but no sound came out. She swallowed and tried again.

"Would it...would it be worth hurting her, if we could save her? If the hurt wasn't permanent, I mean?" Thad's eyes widened, and Jenny almost broke the bottle in her grip. She couldn't stand the distrust staring back at her. "Never mind," she said quickly, putting a hand on the table to help herself up. Thad's hand shot out and grabbed her wrist.

"She would be lost to us if they take her," he said, his voice hoarse. "If you're absolutely sure that your plan won't kill her, I don't see how it could be worse."

Jenny lifted her fingers from the bottle and let Thad read the label. It took a few seconds for him to process the word, short as it was.

When Thad looked at her again, the distrust in his eyes was gone, replaced with a new, chilling hope. Even his grip around Lily loosened. Jenny wished he hadn't relaxed. She was a

novice healer. She'd healed his arm, but how could he trust her with a task that was hundreds of times more complicated?

"You'd put her to sleep then?" he asked. "And then we'd pretend she's dead until they leave?"

"I'd make her look sick first," Jenny said. "I'll give her a fever and call in Midwife Thacker, so she can start spreading it around the village that Lily's sick. I'll make her look worse by tomorrow morning, and, then, right before the Muses get here, I'll give her some of the mortemwood. We'll bring her to the gates, so the Muses can get a good look at her. With any luck, they won't be interested in a...in a baby that's as good as dead. Then, when they've left, I'll give her the antidote." Thad stared for a moment down at Lily's face. Then he looked back up at Jenny.

"But?" he said softly. Jenny bit her lip.

"But...I've never dosed a baby as small as Lily. I've only been healing on my own for three years, Thad! What if I get it wrong?"

"You can't get it wrong," Thad said. "You're her mama and you know her better than anyone." Jenny let out a sigh of frustration. His trust made her wrap her hands in her apron even tighter than they had been before.

"What if we risk her life and the Muses don't want her at all?" she asked.

Thad didn't answer, but when he looked at her she knew he felt just as she did. The Muses were much too powerful to risk doing nothing.

Jenny fetched the herbs quickly, knowing that if she waited even one more hour she would lose her nerve. She dosed Lily with saffron, and Thad went to put a sign on the forge

saying he would be gone for the day. Jenny normally used saffron to treat gout, but it caused fever and vomiting in large doses.

When Thad returned, they tried to keep doing normal tasks. Jenny finished the turnover, and Thad busied himself sharpening some tools he had brought home from the forge. Jenny listened so hard for a sick-sounding noise from her silent baby that a headache began in her right temple. When Lily retched for the first time, Thad bounded out of his chair and headed toward the door.

“I won’t come back without the midwife,” he said. His right foot was on the threshold, but then he doubled back and kissed Jenny on the cheek. She didn’t say anything, but he hurried out of the door with even greater haste than the first time. Then Jenny set to work cleaning Lily, wiping guilty tears off her cheeks as Lily’s gray lips mouthed silent questions.

Thad returned with the midwife just as Jenny was finishing up.

“Are you causing trouble for your poor parents, Miss Lily?” Midwife Thacker asked as she blew into the room and made her way directly to the baby. She was a large woman, tall and broad instead of fat, but she had the doughiest-looking hands Jenny had ever seen.

The midwife picked the little girl up and rocked her gently, cooing all the while. “You know you shouldn’t do that. They’re nervous ones, all right. I bet your da gets gray hair when you start walking, mark my words. Can’t imagine what will happen when the boys show up in droves. And they will, too, just wait and see. You’ll be a pretty one, I warrant.” All during her talk she was gently touching Lily, her face, her tiny neck, then down to her stomach and even inside her cloth diaper.

“Fever first and now retching?” she asked.

Jenny nodded. “The spitting up just started,” she said, wondering if her voice sounded as wooden to the midwife as it did to her own ears.

Midwife Thacker nodded and smoothed Lily’s sweaty hair.

“She doesn’t have a rash or seem puffed up anywhere. It’s probably just a touch of something. Keep giving her liquids and keep her clean. I’ll come check on her again in the morning.”

Jenny nodded again, sure that her inability to think of another motion would betray them. “Of course. Thank you for coming,” she said. Thad escorted the good midwife home, and Lily retched again just as he walked back in the door. Jenny bit her lip to keep from crying and looked up at Thad.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” she said, looking from her baby, who was gray and shivering when she had been pink and smiling just a few hours before, to her husband, whose face was just as gray their daughter’s.

“By this time tomorrow it will all be over,” Thad said. “We just have to keep going until then.” He kissed Jenny gently on the crown of her head and then went over to Lily and began taking off her soiled clothes. Thad never helped dress or feed Lily, and Jenny resented that she had to find something else to occupy her hands. But she did not stop him. If this went wrong, he might never get another chance.

Neither of them slept that night. They sat up and watched Lily sleep fretfully, her tiny face wincing and smoothing as the drug ran its course. She was just starting to turn pink again when dawn arrived, so Jenny gave her another dose. She had to look even sicker when the Midwife came again, and then Jenny could give her the mortemwood.

“And how is Miss Lily today?” Midwife Thacker asked an hour after dawn, marching into the big room and putting the basket of fresh rolls she always baked for families with sick babies on the table. She picked Lily up with the same gusto of the day before, but there was no cheerful chatter now.

“Miss Lily, you are worse today,” she said. She gave Thad and Jenny a quick once-over with her sharp brown eyes. Jenny had to stop her hands from gripping the wooden cradle. “And you didn’t let your mama and da sleep all night. That’s very naughty of you. Especially today, with our special guests coming and all. You should be on your best behavior.” Midwife Thacker turned to Jenny.

“Have you given her anything?” she asked. Jenny froze, her blood rushing to her head. How had the Midwife guessed? Was her deceit painted on her face? Thad cleared his throat.

“She tried, Midwife, but Lily can’t keep anything down. We don’t know what to do.” Jenny forced herself to breathe. Midwife Thacker and Jenny often worked together, though Jenny specialized in fevers and injuries in all ages and the midwife only visited women with very young children. Midwife Thacker suspected nothing sinister.

“There’s not much you can do, except keep her quiet and try to keep something in her. For your sakes, I wish the Muses had chosen a different day. She shouldn’t be moved, but they must see all the children.” The Midwife paused a moment, and then she moved brusquely to her basket. “I’ll speak with Henry and make sure you can meet with them first. That’ll spare you waiting in line. I’ll come for you when they’re ready. Now, you eat these before they get cold, understand? And drink some tea. You’re no good to her if you’re dead on your feet.” Jenny and Thad thanked her, and when Thad signaled that the midwife had disappeared behind the Cartwrights’ house, Jenny brought the bottle of mortemwood from the shelf. She made a thin

paste of the leaves and took the tiniest drop on the tip of her finger. Lily was awake in her cradle, but her blue eyes were filmy, and they didn't catch on Jenny's face like they usually did. Jenny looked a long time at Lily's eyes. She'd never seen the color of her first baby's eyes. Her hand began to shake so hard the drop flew off and landed on the floor. Jenny ground her foot onto the spot with a cry.

"I can't do it, Thad! I can't poison my own baby!" She hugged herself and looked at Lily, who lifted and lowered her fist feebly. Then Thad's heavy footsteps sounded behind her. Jenny turned to him for comfort, but his face was grim. Then she noticed the drop of greenish gray liquid on his finger.

"Thad, no," she started, but he walked on without hesitating. His hand, steady from years of handling hot metal, did not waver. He poked his finger in Lily's mouth. The baby's face did not register the taste of the liquid, but Jenny saw her throat work as she swallowed.

"It's done," Thad said, his hands dropping to his sides. Jenny shivered and moved closer to him instinctively. He pulled her to him with both arms and held her there for a moment as they both watched their sleeping baby's face become paler and paler. They watched the life leak out of their baby once before, that day over a year ago. Jenny couldn't decide which time was worse.

Lily's breathing slowed until it was such a soft whisper that Jenny snatched her up to make sure the breaths came at all. Jenny sat down on the bench. Every short breath Lily made felt like a knife in her own ribcage. Thad joined her, and they sat stiffly. Jenny looked at Lily's face, then at the clock on the mantel, and then anywhere except both of the stiff, cold faces. Thad kept watching Lily. After a while, he got up and went to the washstand, bringing back Jenny's hand mirror. He held it up to Lily's mouth. An area only as big as Thad's thumbnail

fogged up. Jenny looked at the tiny mouth that had made such a small proof of life, and Thad settled back down next to her. He raised the mirror every few minutes, and every time the blurry spot was thinner.

Jenny's nerves were stretched so tight that the knock at the door twenty minutes before noon made her cry out. Thad squeezed her shoulder and strode to the door. Mistress Thacker was there, along with her straw-haired son, Alan, who was carrying his mother's basket so she could hold a shawl over her head to keep out the drizzle.

"They're ready for you, dears. Come along now," she said, smiling cheerfully. "And it's a bit wet, so make sure Miss Lily is wrapped warmly. She's feeling better, I hope?" Jenny grabbed blankets and began wrapping her too-still baby in them, but she left Lily's face uncovered until she reached the door so Mistress Thacker could see for herself. The midwife never bothered to make things seem better than they really were, but her sharp gasp sent the knife in Jenny's ribcage twisting again.

"Oh, Lily," she said, reaching out to touch the little gray face with the side of her finger. "This is not good. We'll let their excellencies take a quick peek at you and then back to bed it is. We'll see if your mama and I can get you pink and well again. Come now." Jenny pulled the blanket up over Lily's face, and she hurried after Mistress Thacker and her boy. Thad shut the door behind them, and Jenny started when she felt something drape across her head. She looked up and realized Thad was putting on her forgotten shawl.

"No sense in you getting all wet," he murmured.

The thin drizzle left a chilly sheen on the thatched roofs of the limestone houses. For the first time since she had moved to Inavale, Jenny wished that their house was not on its outskirts. The wall separating the village from the northern meadows had crumbled into bits of stone that

looked more like worn teeth than a wall. She turned her back on it and walked as carefully as she could, but with every footstep she felt as if more life was ebbing from the bundle in her arms.

Even in the wet, most people were outside their front doors. Though the houses were all made of the same yellow limestone, the wooden doors were painted a variety of bright hues. Today, the paint was dark. A sunset purple door reminded Jenny of a new bruise. What was yesterday a cherry red was today the color of blood. Some of the villagers were pretending to sweep or polish windows while shooting furtive glances toward the village gate, but others abandoned secrecy and talked loudly about their mysterious guests. Jenny wanted to sprint through the crowd, but curious villagers kept stopping Mistress Thacker, as she was known as a woman always in possession of the latest news. Jenny heard much more gossip about the Muses than she would have liked.

“I gave Danny a bath, though it’s only Tuesday,” Mistress Goldenrod told Mistress Thacker. “If he gets chose, I want him to be clean.” She brought the five-year-old Danny out from behind her skirts. “Do you think I should give him a haircut as well?” She anxiously stroked Danny’s jet-black hair.

“I’d shave Cynthia bald if I thought that would make the Muses take her,” Mistress Carpenter replied loud enough to be heard over the screaming little girl at her feet.

“Oh, Mildred, you don’t mean that,” Mistress Thacker said.

“I’d be proud of him,” Mistress Carpenter said. “And I’d be thankful for the gold, but I’d miss Danny something awful.” She smiled at her little boy, who smiled back with his finger in his mouth.

A few measures down the lane a group of teenagers near Jenny’s age were also discussing the visitors.

“Seven feet tall they are, with red eyes to match their horses,” Mary Lichen said as she wrapped up her golden curls in a blue handkerchief. Mary was an honest girl, but since Abner Cartwright, her sweetheart, was standing next to her Jenny didn’t take her too seriously.

“Their robes are so bright they built that tent so we aren’t all blinded!” Abner replied. Abner was one of the steadiest boys in the village, and Jenny had seen the bright robes herself. If she couldn’t look straight at them, how could she make sure they weren’t hurting Lily?

“One looked right at me, and I felt his voice picking around inside my head!” Stuart Roper added, waving his arms for emphasis.

“That’s enough of talk like that, Master Roper,” Mistress Thacker said. She stopped to put her hands on her hips and send Stuart a glare.

Jenny’s panic lessened some. Stuart Roper had always been an idiot. He should have been at home helping his wife prepare their baby, Max, for his interview with the Muses, but here he was telling tales in the street.

Though she looked like she wasn’t quite done telling Stuart to be quiet, Thad touched Mistress Thacker’s arm and asked if they could hurry. She shot forward with a loud apology, brushing clingy villagers away with impatient waves. Jenny held Lily tighter and quickened her pace. The sooner they met with these royal devils the sooner she could exchange the cold bundle in her arms for her baby again.

Jenny did not believe the Muses had developed red eyes and mind tricks, but a very normal brown canvas tent pitched just inside the village gate did comfort her, as did the mule picketed to its left. The three horses standing next to the mule were much finer-boned and taller than the workhorses of the village, but the drizzle had turned their red backs into a dark rust.

Still, the three horses pawed the ground and danced at the end of their tether ropes, mimicking the crowd of boys that had gathered pushing, shoving, daring each other to get closer.

As they approached, a hooded Henry Fisher pulled away from the tent and greeted them.

“Hello, hello, you just go right in. They know all about you and have agreed not to take too much time. They’re agreeable folk, once you get past the first shock. Here you are!” He pulled the tent flap back with a flourish and waved them in. Jenny went in first, though Thad was so close behind her he almost tangled in her skirt.

Three golden faces turned to them, and Jenny had to clench her teeth to keep from making a noise as a scarlet ax again swung before her eyes. But none of the masks were the blunt-nosed mask of her memory. She had not been so close to them before, but she did not remember the mesmerizing effect the masks had. She could see a rounded edge on the masks, as if they were separate entity from their wearers, but the gold had an elastic quality to it. She saw a muscle twitch in the leftmost Muse’s cheek. Had their very skin turned to gold?

Though the masks all glimmered the same, their features were different. The Muse sitting to the right side of the table had a long mask, with wide-set eyes and a narrow face like a horse. The center Muse and the Muse on the left had rounder faces, but the Muse on the left reminded Jenny of a mouse, with a sharp nose and curvy cheeks. The center Muse was the least animal-like of the three, but his features had such a crafty look to them that Jenny automatically associated him with a fox.

“Welcome, Thad and Jenny Bellows,” the foxy Muse said. His voice was soft, but it bounced off the walls of the tent with such force it almost had its own echo. His lips moved as he spoke, but, strangely, Jenny could not see any teeth. Little needles of fear began to move up and down her spine. Had these beings really been human children like the baby she held in her

arms? The thought of Lily becoming one of these creatures made Jenny stand up straighter and stare boldly into the center Muse's golden mask.

"We appreciate you coming even though your child is ill," the foxy Muse continued. "We promise to take as little of your time as possible, but allow us to introduce ourselves. We have never had the pleasure of visiting Inavale before, and legends and old wives' tales can be unflattering heralds." He stood up and bowed low to the ground, the sleeves of his white robe almost touching the rutted mud that made up the floor of the tent.

"I am Favian, Muse of Wisdom," he said.

The horse-faced Muse on the right bowed next.

"I am Primas, Muse of Pride." A woman's voice came from behind the mask, but even her treble tones echoed slightly.

The third muse, the one with the mousy mask, bowed last.

"And I am Leo, Muse of Courage," he said.

"We are here because we have seen a star, a portent that a child such as ourselves has been born in this province," Favian went on. Jenny tried to look into his eyes, but the curves of the mask prevented her from seeing anything but the black eye holes. "All we ask is to touch your child and determine if she is the gifted one we seek."

"If she is chosen, she will become one of the most excellent and honored Muses of Prince Connor, future King of Illyria, and you and your village will be handsomely rewarded," Primas said, and the bored note in her voice suggested they had repeated this speech. When Primas finished speaking, Jenny felt the weight of the three gazes focusing on the bundle in her arms.

"Without further delay, may we please examine the child?" Leo asked, gesturing to the table. Silently, Jenny stepped forward. She ignored Leo's gesture and kept Lily in her arms.

She didn't know if the Muses could read her mind if they touched Lily while she was holding her, but she refused to leave her baby alone and cold for even a moment. Averting her eyes from the masks, she drew back the blanket to reveal Lily's face. It was so still Jenny couldn't help making a small noise. Favian looked down at Lily and then up so that the black sockets in his mask were level with Jenny's eyes.

"Our apologies for intruding in such a time," he said. Jenny nodded and forced herself to speak.

"We understand how important this search is for the kingdom," she said, the lie coming so smoothly it shocked her. Could Muses detect lies?

But Favian did not indicate if he heard her. He placed a white-gloved hand on Lily's forehead and then studied her still face. The hand twitched once, and Primas's and Leo's hands were suddenly enveloping Lily's head as well. As they moved, Jenny noted that they smelled like normal things such as leather and horse and wood smoke. She had expected brimstone. Their hands moved with normal speed and agility, and they had five fingers. Some parts of their humanity were still intact. Still, the thought of those gloved hands touching her own skin made her shiver.

After a few moments, the hands stopped moving over Lily's face. The masks remained motionless, but Jenny could see the Muses' shoulders were tense.

"Her body is so weak, but her spirit is strong," Primas murmured.

"The other children's strength does not even compare, and she is but clinging to this world," Leo added.

Favian remained silent, his entire body stiff. Then Primas touched his hand with her free one. Favian shook himself and turned to Jenny and Thad.

“Your child is gifted like the children we seek,” he said. Then he gave a heavy sigh, and Jenny could not tell if it was in frustration or real sympathy. “But this child is not long for this world. We would be wise to keep searching.”

Primas made a low hiss. “Who knows when another child like this will be born?” she asked. She raised her face to Favian’s, and her mask was tilted at such an angle that it sent shafts of light spinning off it, like a prism. “It would be foolish to leave her behind. If we could get her to the capital, the king’s healers – ”

“It is not worth it,” Leo interrupted. He lowered his voice, and though Jenny was straining to catch his next words, she thought she heard a note of fear. “Primas, you best of all of us know that the king’s pride would not suffer a babe as sick as this one to serve his son.”

“Leo is right,” Favian said. “We must choose the healthiest and strongest for Prince Connor. The child stays here.” As one, the Muses brought their heads out of their huddle and dropped their hands from Lily’s head. Jenny brought Lily closer to her chest, fighting to keep her arms from trembling. As she cuddled Lily to her shoulder, Leo reached into a purple velvet bag and retrieved a silver coin.

“For your time,” he said, handing it to Thad and bowing.

“Wait,” Primas said as Jenny and Thad turned to leave. They stopped, and Jenny’s heart started beating in her ears.

“You must send a message to the capital if the child lives,” she said. “We would still be...interested in her.”

“Let them be, Primas,” Favian rumbled. “This child is none of our concern anymore.” Primas’s golden lips drew together in a hard circle, but she did not say anything else. Favian dismissed them with a wave of his hand.

Jenny did not remember walking home or convincing Mistress Thacker they didn't need her help, but suddenly Thad's voice was murmuring, "Hurry, love, hurry" in her ear and she was crushing iceweed thorns. She mixed the powder with some water and dipped her finger in it. Thad held Lily while she put her finger between her baby's cold lips. Jenny almost asked Thad to fetch the mirror just so they would know if it was too late, but instead she focused on waking Lily up.

"Come on, baby, swallow," she begged, stroking Lily's cheek to try to rouse her. Thad set Lily on the table, and they began rubbing her cold little limbs to warm them. A flicker of movement behind Lily's eyelids made Jenny's heart leap, but then the face was still again. Jenny tore off Lily's shift, put her mouth over Lily's lips and nose, and began pushing on her chest as she'd seen Mistress Thacker do to babies whose hearts were as still as Lily's was right now.

Thad kept rubbing, and Jenny kept pushing, but the gray body seemed to get colder and stiller. Finally, Jenny snatched her hands away and turned to press her face into the wall.

"Oh, Thad, what have we done!" she cried. Thad set Lily's tiny hand down and came to her, but she turned away from him. She deserved to feel like this. This had been her evil idea. She'd been given another baby to replace the one she'd lost, and she threw the gift away. If she had let the Muses take Lily at least she would have known her baby was alive and had every comfort ever –

A small noise like the mew of a kitten made both of them freeze. Jenny picked up her head from her hands and turned toward the bundle of blankets on the table.

Lily had made her first sound.

Fourteen and Half Years Later

Chapter 1: A Killing Fever

Lily squinted behind the bandage masking her eyes. Her head didn't hurt that much. She flexed her leg muscles and twitched her feet. Everything worked there. Then she wiggled her fingers and her toes. Moving her fingers on her left hand shot pain down her arm. Lily groaned. She'd broken it.

Again.

Suddenly, the mask disappeared, and Lily blinked up at her mother. The muscles around her mother's mouth formed a tight knot, and her honey-colored hair hung in tired strands around her face. Her mother was really worried if her hair looked like that.

"Hello, Mama!" Lily said. "Is it morning already? I must have overslept. I'll set the table for breakfast directly –" Lily sat up and started to swing her legs over the side of her narrow mattress, but her mother gave her such a look that she lay back down and pulled the covers up to her chin. Mama crossed her arms over the front of her pale blue work apron.

"That's my smart girl," she said. "But I don't understand how those smarts left you enough that you would climb Albert Thacker's rotten shed to get one particular apple when there's an entire orchard behind your very own house –"

"But Master Thacker's apples are better, and I wanted to make a turnover for Da because it's his favorite –" Mama's nostrils lost their flare a little, but Lily felt a flash of guilt instead of relief. That hadn't been the only reason she'd climbed the shed.

"And Max told me I couldn't," she finished, mumbling.

"What was that?" Mama asked, and Lily winced. Her mother forbade two things from her children: whining and mumbling.

“Max said there was no way in this kingdom or the next that I could reach that apple,” Lily said, louder. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a flash of red at the window. She put her hand up to her face to feel the knot on her forehead and used the cover to sneak a look. Max was stooped down at her bedroom window. His broad face was so large only one brown cheek fit in the pane, but he was grinning, the gap in his front teeth making the smile even wider. He was holding an apple and pointing at it with one thick finger. It was the one he’d dared her to get. Lily almost grinned in return. Suddenly, she didn’t feel like such a fool.

But then her mother started to speak.

“Fifteen years old,” Mama said softly, though her gaze was so hard Lily felt like she was suddenly shut up in a room of green glass, unable to breathe. If she could always remember how her mother’s eyes looked now, she’d be a lot less inclined to do stupid things. “Fifteen years old my girl will be next month, and she’s still tearing more clothes, climbing more trees, and breaking more bones than a six-year-old boy!”

Lily made a face.

“Wait, are you talking about me or about some other girl you have? Because if you’re talking to me, I haven’t torn my dress since Midwinter – ”

Mama reached into the mending basket next to her chair and brought up Lily’s brown everyday dress. Lily smoothed her smirk when she saw the finger-long tear in the sleeve.

“Ah,” she said. “I must have snagged that on a branch after I slipped.” Lily sighed and held her right hand open palm-up in defeat. The left one was tied up with two splints and a tight white bandage. “You win, Mama. As always.” Lily drew her shoulders together and met her mother’s gaze. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I never mean to worry you.”

Mama stared back, but Lily didn't look away. Lily's eyes were blue, like her da's, but every other part of her round face mirrored her mother's, especially her snub nose. Da, Abby, and Rob had dark complexions, but Lily and Mama were fair. Lily had learned to count to two hundred using the freckles on her arm.

Finally, Mama sighed and sat down in her chair.

"This better be the best apple turnover I've ever tasted," she said, a smile breaking through the hard lines of her mouth. Lily smiled back, but then her mother leaned over and reached for Lily's forehead.

"Does your head hurt?" she asked, her fingers brushing around the sore spot on Lily's temple and making her wince. "I hope it hurts. Maybe this fall knocked some sense into it. What is this, broken bone number four? At least you didn't crack your head this time. Maybe you'll never make fifty stitches after all." Her hands were much gentler than her tone, as they always were. Her mother's bursts of temper arrived and departed with the quickness of a summer storm and were about as frequent. Da said that you could chart the seasons by Mama's temper. One fit a week and a tantrum every three months.

Lily lay quietly as her mother fussed, but then she grabbed her mother's hand and kissed it.

"I am sorry, Mama," she said. "I promise I won't do it again."

Her mother sighed.

"What I don't understand is why you did it in the first place. If you *had* to have that apple, your da has a perfectly good ladder in the barn."

"I just had a good feeling about it," Lily said. Mama threw up her hands and Lily bit back a sigh, grabbed a fistful of bed sheet as an anchor, and waited for the rant.

“You had a good feeling? That’s what you said when you thought you could jump from the barn into the stream when you were eight. Two broken arms! Four years later, you convince yourself *and* four other girls that green apples cure spots – you all had the runs for a week. Then, just last year, Henry Fisher convinces you that witches steal your soul if you make too many left turns, and you walk the long way around everywhere for three months! This year, you take some good advice as a challenge instead of just plain common sense.” Mama paused, and the narrow nostrils of her snub nose flared out again. “I don’t understand how a child can be so gullible and so headstrong at the same time.” Lily hung her head, which made her skull hurt so much she wanted to groan. There were quite a few more her mother hadn’t mentioned. In an effort to cure a swollen hoof, she had knocked out Sunny the horse for twelve hours after overdosing him with a jar of numbbutter and a bucket of licorice tea. Gertie Carpenter’s eyebrows were sparsely haired because Lily had convinced her to use real fire to play dragons and damsels. Lily should have had burns on her hands from that escapade, but all of her injuries had been minor. She had actually thought she could *see* her skin crawling to cover the burns on her right palm, but she was sure she had imagined that, too. More recently, a peddler named Mugg Reiner had started asking for Lily’s hand every summer during his visit to Inavale because she had told him a love story in exchange for a green and gold headband. Sometimes Lily just *believed* things and never considered for a moment that maybe her convictions weren’t true or her schemes wouldn’t work. Her own stubbornness was bad enough, but even Lily got frightened by how strongly *other* people believed in her stories.

Her mother took a breath, maybe to bring up poor Gertie’s eyebrows, but a thin voice from the other room interrupted.

“Mama, I made the biscuits, but must I pluck the chicken? Also, Max is still hanging around, and if he doesn’t leave soon, the whole village will be waiting to milk.” Abby appeared in the doorway, her pink calico apron covered in flour. The way she held herself suggested that the flour was as distasteful as poison mushroom dust. In the spring, Abby was to be apprenticed to Mistress Tanner, the village baker, because she could make nearly anything out of some flour, a bit of sugar and a couple of eggs, but she hated getting dirty as much as Da did.

“You’ve now broken a bone more times than I’ve stubbed my big toes,” she said. Lily rolled her eyes, ignoring how the gesture made the room spin.

“I’m feeling fine, thanks for asking,” Lily said. Abby sniffed.

“I should be helping at the Fishers,” she said. “Three of the youngest have a terrible fever. It’s a shame I have to be here helping Mama take care of you instead.”

“At least I don’t choose which sick family I help based on how attractive their oldest boy is,” Lily said. Abby turned crimson. Mama was on her feet in an instant.

“Girls,” she said, and Lily swallowed her next retort. If she kept quarreling with Abby, she would be whitewashing the cellar with one arm.

“Abby, you should be glad your sister is better, but I’ll pretend it is concern for her that made you speak that way. I’ll come clean the chicken, but you keep working on the bread for tomorrow,” Mama said. “And, Lily, that comment was unnecessary. I’ll attribute it to the pain in your head.” She looked at Lily with another glare of reproach, but Lily answered with a bright smile. Mama lifted her eyes upwards. “It’s a good thing your da likes you so much. Another man would be annoyed his supper is going to be late because his daughter almost killed herself for a dare.”

Mama disappeared into the other room, but she was back a moment later with Max. Mama was so petite next to Max's bulk that Lily almost laughed. The scene reminded her of a kitten leading a bear.

"I appreciate you advising Lily when she's getting ready to act foolish, Max, but maybe next time you should sit on her just to be sure she listens," Mama said. "Don't see how you couldn't have just reached up and grabbed the apple yourself. I think you're the tallest man in the village, never mind you're but seventeen. Have you stood toe to toe with Abner Cartwright lately?"

Max shook his head, his shaggy brown hair twitching furiously.

"No, ma'am, but I'll be sure to do that if you're fretting about it," he said. "Also, I'd like to apologize for daring Lily to get that apple. I hope you aren't too upset with her, as she never would've done it if I hadn't been there." Mama's eyebrows shot up, and Lily tried not to smile. Many of the other village boys were shy or even surly when asked questions. Some of the taller ones, like Dob Cartwright and Laus Carpenter, had this habit of slouching as if they were sorry for being so tall because it brought attention. Max stood so upright he was on tiptoe, and he was never surly. Lily had heard her mother say she wouldn't be surprised if Max had stretched himself to such a great height through sheer force of will. Lily had also heard her say what a sorry excuse for a man Stuart Roper had been before he'd gotten lost in a blizzard after a night at the tavern and froze to death. Sometimes, Lily wondered if Max was naturally eager, or if he was just trying to make up for every time his father hadn't been.

"Apology accepted," Mama said. "You can talk for just a little bit, but Lily needs her rest, and you need to get back to your work." Lily had a feeling she accepted the apology just

because she wanted Max to stop talking. She often knew exactly what her mother or Max was feeling. She knew it was just her overactive imagination, but, still, she was rarely wrong.

“Of course, Mistress Bellows,” Max said, nodding eagerly again. “I want Lily to get well as soon as possible.”

“I bet you do,” Mama said. The sly part of her grin was lost on Max, but it made the fingers on Lily’s good hand curl in embarrassment. Fortunately, her mother left Max on the threshold, and the ripping sound of feathers separating from flesh started up outside the back door.

Lily took a deep breath. If Max realized she was annoyed, he would think he caused it, and she didn’t have the energy to reassure him right now. She gave him a big smile and gestured to the chair.

“So I did get the apple,” she said. “Next time you dare me to do something, I’ll make sure I get a reward from you when I get it done.” Max grinned and sank into the chair. The room, snug already with Abby and Lily’s beds, their bureau, and the chair, seemed to shrink two sizes with Max in it. His head brushed the top of every doorway in the village, and his arms were not wiry like her da’s.

Max quickly lost the hunted-rabbit look he had had with her mother and stretched out his legs as far as they would go. He never filled up silence with nervous talk when he was alone with her.

“So, was it a good fall, or did I look like a twit?” Lily asked.

Max twisted his mouth. Like the rest of him, Max’s features were large. Lily had once made a very believable bust of his head out of clay from the stream, as the softness of it suited Max’s nose and mouth, which almost seemed to blend in together.

“It started off pretty graceful,” he said. “But after you went through the roof, I lost sight of you.”

“I would hope you were running to my rescue by then,” Lily said primly.

Max tilted his head.

“Well, it was a rescue for sure. I had to move almost the entire roof off before I got to you. Then I saw your arm and it...it was all –” Max gulped, and Lily realized his face was turning green around the edges.

“Max, you’re not squeamish about a broken arm?” she demanded.

Max shrugged, not meeting her eyes. “Max Roper, I’ve seen you up to your shoulder inside a cow. Are you really telling me my rescue almost didn’t happen because of a little thing like a broken arm?”

“Well, you’re not a cow,” Max said. “You’re a girl.”

“Me a girl?” Lily said, putting her hand up to her face in mock surprise. “Gee, so glad you finally noticed.”

Max sat up straighter, and Lily almost felt like smiling when sweat broke out on his forehead. Instead, she pulled the sheet up closer to her chin. For some reason, she felt a flash of regret that her nightgown was plain linen. She had scoffed at Abby for sewing lace on her own nightgown, but right now, she couldn’t remember why.

“Lily, I didn’t mean it like that,” Max said. “I mean, of course I’ve noticed you’re a girl. A very nice girl. A...a pretty girl, even.”

“Ah-hem.”

Max jumped so high the chair seat creaked when he came back down.

“If Lily wants to come to the table to eat the meal this chicken and I are making, she needs to close her eyes and be quiet for a spell,” Mama said from the doorway.

Lily felt her cheeks warm. How much had her mother heard? From the upward turn on the left corner of her mouth, Lily was pretty sure she’d heard quite a bit. She drew back into the pillows, hoping she would hit her head on the wall and get knocked out again.

“Bye, Max,” she said, faking a smile.

Max, his own cheeks slightly pink, nodded stiffly. He took the apple from his pocket, set it gingerly next to her knee, and left the room, profusely thanking her mother for letting him stay so long.

Lily pulled the blanket over her head before she had to meet her mother’s eyes. When she heard her mother’s steps fade away, she uncovered herself just long enough to grab the apple and bring it inside her cocoon. Max had definitely polished it since her fall. Lily shook her head. He couldn’t ever leave anything alone. Da had apprenticed Max to the forge because of that relentless energy as well as his size, but Max had decided he was too tall for working indoors. When Max had been apprenticed to Ben Goldenrod instead and started being so successful training horses and dogs and taking care of the cattle, Lily had worried that they would not spend time together anymore. But Max always seemed to turn up. Often he would bring the herd back to the village near the stream where Lily fetched water in the evening, or he would finish his work early and have some extra time to help her deliver her healing lotions or pills, as had been the case the night before. She never had to ask for help or explain to him what she was doing. He just knew.

Just like her mother always knew exactly when to eavesdrop on a conversation.

With her insides still cringing, Lily didn't think she would fall asleep again, but as the apple warmed and made a smell like autumn in the orchards, her eyelids drooped. Then she was waking up and looking into Rob's wide blue eyes.

"Lily!" he said, smiling so she could see that both of his front teeth were now missing.

"Wow, Rob, I've slept so long you've got a new smile!" Lily said, reaching up to touch his cheek. She realized from the shadows that the sun was setting.

"It fell out last night before Max brought you home," Rob said, lifting up his top lip so she could get a better look. Then his bottom lip stuck out. "But the tooth muse didn't come, Lily. Does that mean I wasn't good enough?"

"Oh no!" Lily said, realizing that her accident had caused the tooth muse's memory lapse. Her mother was dutiful in putting copper coins under their pillows, but she had been busy last night. "Oh, that's my fault, Rob," Lily continued. "The tooth muse doesn't come when someone's been hurt. She's very afraid of blood and broken bones." Rob's eyes widened.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes," Lily said. "That's why she collects teeth. The King's Muses have masks made of gold, but gold is soft. The tooth muse builds a suit of armor out of teeth so she never gets hurt."

"Wow, I wish I could make teeth armor, too!" Rob said. He smiled wide and tapped his remaining teeth, nodding when his fingernail made a satisfying, hard *click* against the enamel.

Lily smiled. She prided herself on being a very believable storyteller. Sometimes she was too believable – as in the case of the green apples her mother would never let her forget. Lily could make almost anyone believe one of her stories. She'd enjoyed this until around the beginning of last fall. All the girls in the village were always bothering her to tell the story of

who'd they marry. She soon tired of such silly stories and was annoyed at the other girls for thinking that if she told them enough, they might come true. Then last April, the last time she'd gone to the tavern on a Friday night, even the boys started asking for stories. She'd matched Samuel Stone with Cynthia Carpenter and Danny Goldenrod with Ann Tanner. Samuel and Cynthia despised each other, and Danny and Ann couldn't count to forty using all the fingers and toes they had between them. She had made ridiculous matches, mostly to make everyone leave her alone, and she had even stretched the story out to how Samuel and Cynthia would have bad-tempered children, and Danny and Ann would be very happy but always get swindled.

But then both couples married at the Midsummer Festival. Lily was not exactly frightened, just unnerved, but she had not been back to the tavern since, and the other girls would not talk to her because she refused to match them. She missed them sometimes, but Max was more interesting than them anyway. He always had an animal that Lily could practice healing on or a puppy or a colt she could play with. Lily had never matched Max with any of the girls.

"Come here and tell me how it fell out," Lily said, patting the space next to her. Rob obeyed and snuggled into her arm. He was telling her how a fish tugged his line so hard he bit his tongue and his tooth fell into the mud when Lily noticed just how warm he was.

"I didn't get the fish, but I didn't want to lose my tooth. Da will understand, won't he? I'll catch two the next time, I promise," Rob said.

Lily put her hand on his forehead.

"Of course he will. Do you feel okay, Rob?" she asked.

Rob's chin jutted out bravely.

"I'm not sick. You're sick, and I have to help Mama take care of you," he said.

Lily frowned, and Rob shrunk back against her shoulder.

“Rob Bellows, are you lying?” she asked. “When in all of your seven years have you told me an untruth and I haven’t known it?”

Rob’s chin trembled, and he turned and put his cheek on her collarbone.

“I am sleepy,” he said in a small voice. Lily wasn’t surprised that Rob had caved so easily. He was as good-natured as their da but lacked their da’s fussiness. Rob was also much quieter. While Thad could be heard across the village, Lily could accidentally step on Rob and never hear his cry of pain.

“Then let’s lie down and sleep,” Lily said, helping him under the covers. He was asleep in minutes, and he felt so hot Lily that could hardly stand to touch him. Lily didn’t call out for their mother in fear she would wake him, but she soon stuck her head into the room.

“Is he bothering you?” she asked. “Da didn’t need his help at the forge anymore, and he wanted to see you so much I couldn’t stop him.” Lily shook her head and put a finger to her lips.

“He’s feverish, Mama. Feel him.” Her mother put her hand on Rob’s head and frowned.

“Whatever the Fishers have is catching,” she said, gathering up the sleeping boy into her arms. He had his own bed next to their parents’ larger one. When he was big enough to help build it, their da promised Rob would get his own little room like Lily and Abby’s. “It’s been three days now, and they’re no better. The Cartwrights, the Tanners, and the Carvers are all sick, too. This fever isn’t going to be an easy one.” Lily watched her mother’s hands, and, sure enough, she twisted one in her apron before using it to settle Rob more firmly on her hip.

“What should I do, Mama?” Lily asked as her mother slowly turned toward the door. Rob was really too big to be carried.

“Go to sleep,” Mama replied without looking at her.

“But I feel better, really I do. My head hardly hurts at all, and whatever you gave me for my arm is working. Did you use licorice root tea?” Mama frowned, but then she sighed and shifted Rob so his head was against the curve of her neck.

“Yes, it was licorice. Also, we’ve already eaten, but there’s a plate warming for you on the hearth – see if you can get into that and we’ll go from there.”

Lily got out of bed slowly. Her last broken arm had hurt more than this, but she was still careful not to bump it as she changed out of her nightgown and pulled on her loosest dress, made of red calico. She moved the apple out of her bed and put it in the top drawer of her bureau for safe-keeping until she felt well enough to make a turnover. Then she went into the kitchen and picked up the plate from the edge of the hearth with her right hand. She kept waiting for some kind of pain to shoot through her head like it had earlier that afternoon, but nothing happened.

Lily took small spoonfuls of the chicken and dumpling stew to minimize slurping and avoid another lecture about table manners. After another glance at Lily’s head, her mother went over to the counter, where she banged around the wash pan and a few pieces of crockery. Lily relaxed. If her mother was making noise, everything was fine.

“Do you think you could manage some cheese?” Mama asked. Lily’s mouth started salivating just at the thought, but she worked her jaw to see if chewing caused pain. She had mostly been gumming the dumplings.

“Yes,” she said. Mama was reaching for the round of goat’s cheese in the food cupboard when the dishes began to rattle so violently Lily dropped her spoon.

“What’s wrong?” Lily asked as her mother wrapped her arms around herself in a quick hug.

“Just a chill,” she said, though her green eyes were so wide and bright Lily knew she was upset. “The weather must be changing.” She reached for the knife to slice the cheese, but her hand shook so badly the knife dropped to the counter with another clatter.

“You’re sick, too,” Lily said. She stretched out with her good hand to feel Mama’s face. It was almost as hot as Rob’s.

“Mothers can’t get sick,” Mama said, gently swatting Lily’s hand away. She reached again for the knife, but now her shoulders were shaking, too, no matter how hard she hugged herself.

“I can take care of you and Rob, Mama,” Lily said. “You should go lie down.” Now Lily could redeem herself for causing everyone so much worry with her stupid fall. And could also get to practice making the herbal teas and ointments her mother guarded so jealously. Lily was her mother’s apprentice, but her mother still wouldn’t let her use any of the herbs without supervision. Lily could not understand why her mother was this way; her neat handwriting made the labels on all of the herbs in her cupboard very clear, and even Rob was smart enough to identify dangerous herbs like mortemwood by sight and smell.

“Nonsense,” Mama said. “Your head took a beating yesterday, and your arm’s broken. That’s more serious than a touch of fever.” Lily mimicked her mother’s favorite glare. If she could make Cynthia Carpenter believe she was in love with Samuel Stone, she could talk her way into being the boss of the house and redeeming herself for her stupid fall.

“But you’re sick, and I’m much better – look.” Lily wiggled her fingers and crossed her eyes. “It doesn’t hurt at all.” Mama shook her head, but she was smiling a little.

“Cross your eyes like that again, and whatever healing you’ve managed will get set back a couple days,” she said. But then another shiver shook her so hard her own eyes crossed.

“Maybe I will lie down,” she said.

“Of course you should. I owe you a few days of quality nursing,” Lily said. Her mother shook her head, but Lily smiled as she walked her mother to the bedroom and helped her get into her nightgown. Should she ask if she could make feverfew tea now or wait until her mother was sicker and couldn’t argue that Lily didn’t know enough? Lily had watched her mother brew the tea a hundred times, and, just a few times, she had treated herself or given low doses to Max’s sick animals. She had never lost an animal in her care. Max said she was a miracle worker, but Lily was sure it was just the herbs. For this fever, she might have to brew licorice tea, too, which was trickier. Lily had not been brave enough to mess with licorice tea again after almost killing their horse.

“I have a few sheets still on the clothes line,” Mama said as Lily tucked her in. “Your da went back to the forge because you weren’t awake when he came home for supper, but you should fetch him home. Abby is helping at the Fishers, and she can stay there if you don’t think you need her help, but otherwise she should come back.”

Thirteen-year-old Oxley Fisher was just a month older than Abby and had golden hair and square shoulders. Lily doubted even their mother’s own sickness would tear Abby away from sponging Oxley’s forehead to keep his fever down.

“I’ll get Da first and then see about the laundry,” Lily said. “You rest here.”

“I’m sure I’ll be up and about in the morning,” Mama said, even though her eyelids were drooping. Lily tucked in her covers tighter and went back into the big room. She put her plate in

the wash pan, downed a quick mug of water, and then went outside. She had just reached the Huntsmans' cottage when her da called her name.

“There’s my strong girl – out of bed already and looking fresh as a spring lily!” Da walked up to Lily and squeezed her shoulder. The muscles in her father’s arm bulged so tight his grip could have hurt her, but his hand was gentle. Lily breathed the three smells that followed Da everywhere – hot iron, sweat, and a bit of lavender, from the soap Mama made him so he wouldn’t always smell like a forge.

“I’m feeling fine, but Mama and Rob aren’t,” Lily said. “They’ve got a touch of whatever the Fishers have.”

“Just fever so far?” Da said. He asked casually, but he started walking quickly back toward the house. Lily nodded as she kept up with him, wondering if she should ask him about the other sick families. She looked at the creases in the corner of his eyes and decided to stay quiet. She felt queasy. This fever could turn into an epidemic. Talking about it made it too real.

“They’re both sleeping now,” she said.

“Well, we’ve always had the best nurse in the world when we were sick. I’m sure this one time we can be just as good as your mama.” He smiled at Lily, but then his brow furrowed and his hand moved from her shoulder to her temple. He touched it softly, shaking his head.

“Don’t think I’m not glad to see you up and around, but whew,” he whistled. “That purple bump on your head healed fast!”

“You always said if we wanted something badly enough we would get it, Da,” Lily said, pushing his hand away. “And I want the turnover that I’ll make from that apple we gathered to be the last reminder of how foolish I was.”

“Aw, Lily, we are all a bit foolish sometimes,” Da said. Mama would have added, “But you always find ways to be a bit more foolish than most.” She knew he was trying to be nice, but Lily still cringed.

“Ladies first,” Da said, ushering her into the house. Lily started. Da always said that to her mother but had never said it to her. And Max had called her pretty. Had falling through the shed’s roof actually helped her looks? Lily was a strange combination of her father’s sturdy build and her mother’s long curves, which meant that she envied Abby’s willowy slimness. She also shared Thad’s blue-black hair, but while his was a smooth, shiny cap, Mistress Thacker had started a joke that Lily’s hair was as good as a weather witch, as it tripled in size before a summer thunderstorm. Lily was pretty sure all three hundred and eleven of her fellow villagers (the ones that could talk, anyway) had made a comment about her hair some time in her life.

But before she could ask her father why she was suddenly a lady, she noticed Abby had beat them home and was sitting at the table, one hand propping up her head. Her hair, the same honey-brown as their mother’s, was flying away from her usually immaculate braid

“Abby, what’s wrong?” Lily asked.

Abby’s eyes were red from crying, and when they met Lily’s own eyes, her sobs started fresh.

“The Fisher baby it – ” The sobs shook her so hard she couldn’t talk. Lily took a step forward, but Abby lifted a hand to stop her. She took a deep gulp of air and continued. “I was holding her and rocking her asleep, and suddenly she went all stiff and...and...she was gone!” Abby buried her face in her arms and cried so hard even Thad’s boom for her to calm down was quiet in comparison.

“Oh, Abby, it wasn’t your fault,” Lily said. Her chest tightened with grief, and though she was glad that she could be strong for Abby, she wondered what crying felt like, just like she always did when she saw someone else’s tears. Through temper tantrums, broken bones, hurt feelings and even the death of their dog Flip, Lily had never cried. Once when she was eleven and he was thirteen, Max had promised to take her with him to pick up a horse in Icecade and then taken Danny Goldenrod instead because he thought Danny was better with horses. Motivated by both revenge and curiosity, Lily had repeated every nasty thing she had ever heard about his da to Max’s face. She had wanted Max to retaliate, to hurt her like she was hurting him, to make her cry so she could release what she was feeling like a normal person, but he had just stood there. Lily saw him hunch his shoulders for the first time in her life, and with that movement, she had started apologizing and explaining she hadn’t meant it. She had just wanted to cry. He let her hug him, but he was quiet, and he hunched his shoulders almost as a reflex whenever Lily started talking to him for several days afterwards. Lily wondered if Max thought about that day every time he saw someone cry. She did.

One of Abby’s hiccups squeaked, and Lily shook her head to make herself stop thinking about crying. That was weird. She had never obsessed about it before. How could she be thinking about herself when Abby was so upset? Lily took a step toward Abby but then stopped. Abby was like a wild kitten – she had to make the first move or Lily would end up with a bite mark for all her trouble.

“Maybe if I had fetched you or Mama, we could’ve saved her,” Abby sobbed. “Maybe if I had gone to gather feverfew with you last week we would’ve found a patch strong enough to break her fever.” Lily thought of baby Alice, how she had held her the week before, and Alice had pulled one of her curls, but it had been more cute than painful. She wished she could have

found stronger feverfew, too, and she had to swallow past the tightness in her chest before she answered.

“Abby, dear, you can’t carry on like this, or you’ll make yourself sick,” she said, taking a chance and slipping an arm around her sister’s shoulders. “Oh,” she said softly as the heat of Abby’s body burned through the sleeve of her dress. “You already are sick.”

Abby’s tears stopped at once, and her face went from blotchy red to white.

“I can’t be sick,” she said, her green eyes wide. “If I’m sick, I could d-die like...like baby Alice.” Her last words ended in a wail, and she pressed her face hard against Lily’s shoulder.

“Now, Abby, you stop this,” Da finally rumbled. He had been standing at the door, the muscles in his corded neck twitching, but now he came over to kneel in front of Abby and Lily. “Your mama and Rob are sick, too, but you and them are a lot stronger than the Fisher baby, so don’t you worry. Lily’s got them both tucked into bed, and once you get yourself there, we’ll take care of you, too. Now, no more crying. To bed with you.”

Lily exchanged a startled look with Abby, and then she smoothed her features so her da would not see her surprise. He usually let Mama do the ordering around. While Abby put on her nightgown, Lily moved Abby’s narrow bed into their parents’ big bedroom to make taking care of everyone easier, tucked Abby in to it, and then she and Da set the house to rights. Luckily, her arm hardly got in the way. There wasn’t so much as a twinge even when she caught it on the clothesline. Lily wondered if she had really broken it after all.

The tight muscles in her father’s neck and the way his hand twitched toward the worn spot on his knee reminded Lily about baby Alice, and she knew she had more to worry about than her broken arm. Lily wanted to ask when the last time a killing fever had visited the village,

but she didn't want to be the first one to call it that. And she didn't know how to talk to her father when he started giving commands.

Lily knew there had been a plague when she was five that had killed several elderly villagers, but Inavale had been spared from more devastating types of sickness. Fevers occasionally visited Inavale, but farm accidents, quarry injuries, and frostbite were the most common ailments. Stuart Roper's demise nearly ten years ago was the most dramatic death Lily could remember. She hoped Alice would be the village's only death this time. She had held or hugged all of the babies in Inavale at one time or another.

Lily said goodnight to her da a good four hours after the sun had set. Her straw tick felt wonderful to her weary muscles, but she was impatient. Rob's breathing sounded wet, and she wanted to mix up a silverstem ointment to see if she could cure it. Lily had never tried to make that one before.

Lily didn't know what woke her up, if it was a dream or noise, but after she blinked a couple of times to clear the sand out of her eyes, she knew, somehow, that her father had come down with the fever. She tiptoed out to the big room where Da had made a bed of blankets in front of the hearth so his snoring wouldn't wake the sick ones.

Da was so solid that Lily felt the heat from his body when she was two measures away. She touched his forehead softly, and his eyebrows twitched, but he did not wake. For some reason, his thunderous voice had made his hearing sharper, and he was usually a light sleeper, but he did not wake up even when Lily's clumsy splint made her bang the water bucket against the table leg. She was already running behind in making more feverfew tea, so Lily quickened her pace as she went out to the spring behind their house.

The pre-dawn air was cool, and the birds were still in their beds. The stars were so close Lily felt that if she reached up, they would come off on her hand, like fresh paint. As she hurried to the spring and back, she noticed a red star in the north. It out-twinkled all of its fellows, but Lily didn't think it very pretty, just obnoxious. Her mother had told her about a red star that had appeared right after she was born and brought the King's Muses to their village the following spring. Lily made herself shiver thinking about the golden masks with the black eyeholes her mother had described. She was glad she had parents with warm flesh to raise her.

Lily looked up at the star one more time and shook her head sadly. If all the households in the village were as sick as hers, there wouldn't be a village if the Muses ever decided to return.

Chapter 2: The Last Minutes

By the time Lily had roused her da and tucked him next to her mother, the sun was rising. Lily hurried out to milk the cow and throw some food to the pig and the chickens, and when she got back in the house, Rob and Abby were calling for water. Lily gave Abby a cup and she was able to sit up and drink it herself, but Rob was so weak Lily had to hold him up.

“Isn’t that better?” Lily asked when he stopped after just one sip.

“My throat really hurts,” Rob said, reaching up to touch his neck with a finger. His blue eyes were wide in his white face, and his skin was clammy to the touch. But even in his sickness, he didn’t whine.

“Let me see,” Lily said. He opened his mouth wide, and Lily winced in sympathy. His throat was the red of a new horseshoe. Small yellow dots covered the sides.

“I bet that does hurt,” Lily said, trying to keep her voice sweet and calm even though her insides were shaking. She had heard stories about the hundreds who’d died in the capital last spring from yellow spot fever, though it had never visited Inavale before. Mugg the Peddler had reported that over a third of Ariel’s inhabitants were dead.

“You’re a brave boy, Rob, not crying a bit,” Lily said, smoothing back his hair. “Do you think some tea would hurt your throat less? Then, since you are being so brave, I think Tabby’s kittens could come visit.”

Rob smiled and nodded.

“Am I being brave enough for a kitten?” Abby asked. Since Abby’s eyes were closed and she was still curled up on her side, Lily couldn’t tell if she was mocking her or not. But Abby’s sweaty, tangled hair and her dry, yellow skin told her that Abby, who once re-braided her hair six times in one day, was probably more miserable than Rob.

“You can each have two kittens,” Lily said. “And then I’ll help you brush your hair, Abby.”

Abby opened her eyes. She didn’t smile like Rob, but Lily knew she had said the right thing. Lily tucked Rob’s covers tighter and then went into the kitchen to get the mugs of tea. She had been dosing them all frequently, but the herb did almost nothing to cool their fevers.

She had just got the kettle boiling when a knock came at the door. Lily wiped her hands on the dishtowel. Finally, someone had seen the cold forge and sent his wife or daughter to help her.

Mary Cartwright, whose sunny personality matched her yellow hair, smiled at Lily.

“Hello there, sweet pea. Is your mama around? I’m looking to borrow you and your sister. All six of my boys and Abner have had the nerve to fall sick with this fever. It’s been a right big shock for Abner. He hasn’t been sick a day in his life since he ate a bad pike when he was twelve.”

“Everyone’s sick here except me, Mistress Cartwright,” Lily said. “But maybe I could –”

“No, no, forget I even asked,” Mistress Cartwright said, reaching over to pat Lily’s shoulder. It was the first reassuring thing that had happened to Lily all day, and a little of the tension left her shoulders.

“We’ll make do on our own,” Mistress Cartwright continued. “It’s almost a vacation for me. This is the slowest moving my boys have been since they wore diapers, and Abner’s been so quiet and agreeable, bless his heart. You should’ve seen the look on his face when I told him he had a fever.” Mistress Cartwright paused to chuckle. “Most surprised I’ve seen him since my da gave him permission to marry me.” She gave Lily another smile and departed to her house one lane over. Lily closed the door and returned to her tea-making. Maybe one third of the capital’s

population had died from this fever, but people in the hill country were tougher stock.

Everything would be okay.

Lily had just returned the kittens to the barn and tied a piece of string around Abby's new braid when eight-year-old Becky Flint came to the door. Both her parents and baby Moe were sick. Her small freckled face was so pinched that Lily gave her a little packet of feverfew. Next, shortly after Rob started coughing up blood, Ben Pine, who had been in Lily's class at primary school, came to the door. His thatch of red hair was black with sweat, and Lily almost put him to bed next to the hearth. But he said he was the least sick in his family of eight, and he began the slow trek back to their cottage after Lily gave him a mug of tea.

Lily returned to Rob's side as soon as Ben was gone, but she just had time to wipe away the worst of the blood before someone knocked on the door again. Sighing, Lily opened it.

Henry Fisher was on the doorstep, his cap pulled down low over his ears as if a cruel gale was blowing.

"Ah, Miss Lily," he said, his voice hoarse. "I was wondering if Miss Abby was coming today. I'm afraid the missus and I have a touch of this fever, too, and we'd appreciate the help."

Lily swallowed to make sure the painful yellow spots were not budding on her own throat.

"Abby's sick, too, Master Fisher. Everyone's sick here but me. I wish I could help you, but –"

"Don't worry, Miss Lily," Master Fisher interrupted. He gave a weak smile, but Lily thought his skin looked even grayer than it had a moment ago. "You take care of your own. We'll manage somehow."

“If I get a moment, I’ll make sure to come look in on you,” Lily said. Henry was the head of the village council, and Abby was in love with his son. Surely she could find time to help out his family. They would need him to put everything to rights again, once this was over.

Henry gave a weak wave of his hand.

“Don’t trouble yourself. We’ll make out alright.” He bobbed his head and turned away, his usual jaunty walk a slow shuffle. Lily watched him go with one hand half-raised to grab a packet of feverfew and call him back. She should give him some feverfew. But she dared not. She had a feeling she would need all of it before this was over. When she went to make more tea, she had to ball up her fists and take a deep breath before she stopped shaking enough to pour the boiling water.

Lifting the heavy kettle seemed to take more energy than usual, and her splint made gripping the handle difficult. Lily flexed her fingers and then quickly unwound the bandage and put the splints back among her mother’s supplies. She didn’t have time for clumsiness, and her arm didn’t hurt at all. She must have just sprained it.

Lily set mugs to cool and returned to the bedroom. Her mother’s sunken eyes watched Lily carefully as she wiped the rest of the blood from the corners of Rob’s mouth, but she said nothing. Rob didn’t stir even when Lily changed his nightgown for a new one. Lily sat back and pushed a strand of hair off her forehead with the back of her hand. September had no right to be this wretched hot.

“I need something stronger than feverfew, Mama,” she said. “He’s only been sick for a day, but his fever has him so burned out he can barely breathe.”

“Feverfew’s the only thing we have,” her mother rasped. “We have to make do.” A crack in her lip split and began to bleed. She yanked her arm out from underneath the sheets and blotted it with the back of her hand.

“There’s something else,” Lily said. She watched the tight muscles in her mother’s face and tried to decide if her mother’s sickness would make her more or less inclined to listen to new ideas. Her mother hated experimenting with tricky herbs. “I was reading about it. Have you ever heard of using mortemwood to put a sick person to sleep so they can heal?”

Her mother grabbed Lily’s hand.

“Feverfew,” she said. “That’s all. Do you understand me?” Her fingers pinched Lily’s wrist so hard that Lily wanted to yank it away. Her mother had never hurt her before.

“Okay, Mama,” Lily said, struggling to keep her voice low and soothing. “I’ll keep using the feverfew. And my silverstem ointment should be ready in a few hours.” Mama nodded, and then she sank back into her pillow, her eyelids fluttering. Her grip on Lily’s wrist loosened, and Lily drew her hand back quickly. Mama had used the same hand to blot her lip, and her blood had rubbed off on Lily’s wrist. Lily scrubbed it on the corner of her dress just as Abby began to cough.

By an hour after midnight, Lily had cleaned blood off of her entire family, though Abby and Rob were much worse than Mama and Da. Her silverstem ointment was not the clear green of her mother’s best batches, but after she rubbed it on her da’s chest his breathing came easier. He didn’t speak, but he squeezed her hand. Lily didn’t realize she had chiseled a smile on her face until her lips hurt when she smiled for real. She snatched a few hours of sleep then. When the red and black rooster in the henhouse crowed, she felt as if she’d just closed her eyes for a couple of breaths. She threw some corn to the chickens and the pig, and then she went into the

cowshed. Lily hadn't had time to milk the night before, and Rose bawled lustily at her. Lily noticed for the first time that Rose's stall was much dirtier than it usually was.

Max had not taken the cows out yesterday.

Lily stopped moving so quickly the milk pail banged against her shins. Max had pulled her from a collapsing shed and told her she was pretty, and she hadn't given a single thought as to whether he was sick. Quickly, Lily stripped Rose's swollen udder and turned her out into the small paddock behind the barn. She stopped in the house just long enough to take off her apron, and then she hurried out into the lane.

She had gone about fifty measures before she stopped in mid-stride. The village wasn't generally loud, at least not like the Glen Elder festival down in the river lands Da had taken her to last summer. But the hour after dawn was the noisiest part of the day. The stock moved about as their masters fed them, Homer Pine started yelling at his boys and arguing with his neighbors, and Mistress Cartwright greeted everyone she saw as she went to the woodpile before starting that day's baking. Da's hammer was usually warming up in the forge, or children were shouting on the green, or Moll Baker was whistling through the gap where her left front tooth was missing as she baked the tavern's famous cinnamon rolls. Today, the only sound was the wind moving over the thatched roofs.

Lily gave her shoulders a shake and hurried down the lane to the small cottage Max shared with his mother and his little sisters, Tess and Mipsy. Their house was smaller than many in the village, but Mistress Roper kept it so neat even Mama would get jealous. Between Max's work with his animals and Mistress Roper's skill with a needle, they made enough money to keep a horse and wagon.

Lily had to wipe her hands on her dress before she knocked on the weathered green door. She wasn't sure if she was wiping off sweat, ointment or blood. No one answered, so she knocked again, louder.

"Max!" she yelled. "It's Lily. Are you all right?" Silence still. Lily put her hand on the doorknob. She and Max were good enough friends that Mistress Roper always encouraged her to just open the door. "Max, I'm coming in!"

"Don't, Lily, please." The voice was so close Lily knew Max was just on the other side of the door. She let out her held breath. At least he could get out of bed. Even Da was too sick to do that now.

"I want to help you," Lily said. "Are you sick? Are your mother and the girls ok?"

"We're all sick, and Mipsy...Mipsy stopped coughing a few hours ago. We'll be fine. You worry about yourself." Lily did not like how Max had paused as he said Mipsy's name.

"Max, let me in," Lily insisted. "You rescued me two days ago. Let me rescue you now. I won't even turn green like you did."

"No," Max said. His voice was right next to her ear. Lily wished he would pull himself up to his full height like he normally did so she would know he wasn't too sick. "The place is a mess. My mother'll die of shame. Besides, you don't need to see me like this." Lily rapped on the door in frustration. She'd seen Max covered head to toe in birthing goo during calving season. Max covered in yellow spots couldn't be that much worse.

"You saw me in my nightgown the day before yesterday," Lily said. "I can take a look at you now."

"So your family's all well then?" he asked. "They sent you here?"

"No, they're sick, but I thought I'd check on –"

“Lily, you go look after your family. I’ll be fine.”

“But –”

“Go home, Lily.” Lily turned on her heel. She walked two paces before she thought of a parting shot.

“My head’s all better, thanks for asking!” she said at the closed door.

“I knew it would. It’s a thick one.”

Lily suddenly leaned hard against the door. Her thick head was so heavy she had to rest it against the green wood.

“I’ve got our apple stashed away in the cellar for when you get better,” she said. “I won’t eat that turnover without you.”

“I’ll look forward to that,” Max said. Lily didn’t know what else to say.

Max gave a wet cough.

“You coming to check on us is help enough. Go home. I’ll see you soon,” he said.

“Bye, Max,” Lily whispered. She put her palm on the doorway, wishing he could feel it, and then turned back toward her house.

Lily’s feet drug as she walked through the village. The silence pressed on her, like the closeness before a thunderstorm. Walking through the weariness she felt might have been easier if the brassy sun was less orange, if the violets in Mistress Copper’s window box were less purple. The colors hurt her eyes. She knew she should hurry, that even now her da or Abby could be coughing up bright blood.

A sudden wail scared Lily so much she ran several steps forward before she realized it was coming from the row of houses the next street over. Her heartbeat in her ears, she thought of Rob and of Abby, and how she had not rubbed ointment on their chests in hours. Then she

looked toward the direction where the wail had come from. But none of her family was making noises like that. They could wait five minutes. She ran into the next lane, and the wail came again, this time next to her left ear. She stepped up to the door, painted yellow to match the centers of the daisies in the window box, and rapped on it.

“Mistress Cartwright, it’s Lily Bellows. Are you all right?” She had to shout to be heard over the wail, but it cut short after she said her name. The sobs that replaced it made the hair on the back of Lily’s neck go up. Then the door rattled in its frame. The wail sounded like a woman’s, but Mistress Cartwright was a petite woman, dwarfed by even the youngest of her hulking sons. Surely she couldn’t make such a loud noise or make the door shake. Lily shrank back. Then she gave herself a little shake for being foolish and stepped back up to the door.

“Mistress Cartwright? May I – ”

“Oh, Lily, the fever’s taken Abner. He’s gone!” For a moment, Lily didn’t believe any of it. The voice was so much rougher than Mistress Cartwright’s usual smooth treble. Abner used to throw Lily up in the air when she was little. Once, he whittled her a wooden dog and painted it black and white to match her dog Flip. She still kept it in her top dresser drawer. Master Cartwright couldn’t be dead. He couldn’t.

“I’m...I’m so sorry,” Lily finally said. Her voice sounded so hollow compared to Mistress Cartwright’s sobs. Before, Lily had wished she could cry so she could release her own emotions. Now, she wondered if crying would help Mistress Cartwright. Lily swallowed hard and stepped closer to the door.

“I’m not sick, Mistress. Let me in, and I’ll help – ” Again, the thick croak interrupted her.

“Go home, child. Ben Pine, Sarah Joiner and who knows how many others are dead now, too. Go home and take care of your own family. It may be the last minutes you spend with them.”

“But – ”

“I said go, Lily Bellows!” The door clattered against its frame again, as if the fever was fighting to get out. Lily turned and fled.

The village stood hot and silent. The yellow of the limestone houses was the same yellow as the spots in her family’s throats. The last minutes... Mistress Cartwright’s words sent a sudden chill through Lily, and when she burst through the front door she didn’t remember running the last few hundred measures. The house was quiet, but Lily continued her flight into the bedroom. The room smelled like crushed mint and sweat. Rob and Abby were stretched out on their cots, clutching their blankets as if the warmth from the morning sun streaming in the window could not touch them. Her mother was curled into a ball, and her breath whistled in her chest. Her da was the stillest of them all. Everything Da did was loud – speaking, breathing, moving.

“Da,” Lily whispered, kneeling at the side of the bed so that she was eye level with him. She put a hand on his shoulder. It was still hot, but it seemed stiffer than usual, as if the supple muscle underneath had burned to hard cinders. “Da,” she said, shaking his shoulder. He had always responded to her the past two days, even if it was just to blink and twitch his lips in a semblance of a smile. “Da, open your eyes,” she commanded, her voice louder. He didn’t respond. Lily put her hand in front of his mouth.

She couldn’t feel his breath.

She ran into the other room, snatched the hand mirror from the washstand, and returned to Da's side to put the mirror in front of his lips. She waited, her own breath lodged in her throat. The warmth in the room made her dizzy.

The glass remained clear.

"No," Lily said. She dropped the mirror under the bed and put her hands on either side of Da's long face. It was cooler than it had been in almost three days. "Da!" she shouted, squeezing his face between her palms, rubbing it, even slapping it. With a mighty shove, Lily rolled her father from his side onto his back, but he still didn't move. She climbed onto the bed herself, her knees pressed between his sweat-soaked side and the board that made up the edge of the bed. She rubbed his hands, then his face, then ripped open his shirt and started beating on his chest.

"Da, wake up!" she shouted. "Wake up, you can't sleep anymore!" Maybe if she were loud enough she could bring him back from the silent place he had gone. He was always talking, singing, or whistling. Whenever he had to leave to work on a piece of equipment at a distant farm, Lily invited friends over because the house seemed so quiet and strange.

Then Lily broke off mid-yell. How could she have forgotten the others?

"Mama," she said, reaching over Da to shake her mother's shoulder gently. "Mama, I'm sorry, I was just trying to wake Da up."

Her mother's head lolled like a two-day-old kitten's.

"Oh, no, no, no," Lily said, scrambling over her da's prone form. She touched her mother's face and called her name, but her mother didn't answer. Lily grabbed both of her shoulders and lifted her off the pillow and then set her back down, but her mother still didn't move. Her forehead was so clammy Lily wanted to wipe her hands in her apron.

“Water, you must need water,” Lily said. She crawled over her mother and ran to fetch the pitcher in the corner. She stopped between Rob and Abby’s beds, waiting for the blankets to move up and down.

But nothing in that warm, sunny room moved except her own chest.

Lily put her hands in her hair and opened her mouth to cry, but no sound came out. She could no more cry than bring her family back to life.

“Who says you’re dead?” she asked the silence. “Who says? I say you aren’t!” Lily flew to them, first to Rob, then to Abby, then Mama, and finally to Da. She kissed their foreheads. She rubbed their hands. She pleaded in their ears. Her frantic movements made her so hot sweat dripped off of her face. She ran back around the bed and started over again with Rob.

“Rob, baby, you’ve got to grow your teeth back,” she begged, running her thumb against his lips. She turned, frantically, and wrapped her arms around Abby’s shoulders. “Abby, Abby, we have to dance at the Glen Elder festival together. I didn’t last year even though I told you that I did. I didn’t dance because you weren’t old enough to go, and I wanted to wait for you.” She crawled back into the big bed, lying down next to her mother.

“Mama, Mama, wake up. If you wake up, I know Da will.” Lily rose to her knees. She gave her da’s neck a quick hug.

“Please, Da,” she said. Her voice cracked. She’d spent it up. There was nothing else she could do. Lily stretched her hands to reach both of her parents’ chests and sat back, her head bowed. She should cry now. A normal girl would cry now. She must not have loved her family enough, or else she would be crying.

“You will get better,” Lily said aloud. She pressed her hands down onto her parents’ chests. “You *will*.”

Breathing hard, Lily listened. Outside, she could hear the chickens clucking in the yard. The wind whistled through the crack between the window and the sill. Inside, the only sound was her breathing. After five breaths, Lily let go of the fabric of her mother’s nightgown. She removed the other hand from Da’s chest. Then she folded her hands in her lap and held her breath. Breathing was suddenly just too loud.

When she first heard the click she thought it was the wind. But when it came again, she turned her head, wondering if she had forgotten to latch the front door.

“Yee-argh!”

Her mother sat up so fast and so violently that Lily fell over into her da. Lily yelled and put her hands to her face to keep them from trembling. Then her da sat up, and she yelled again, louder. His momentum was so great it threw her against the footboard.

“What? What?” Lily said. She finally managed to untangle her legs from her arms and jumped over the footboard. She stood at the other side, trembling, hardly believing that her mother and father were sitting up and looking at her.

“Mama? Da?” she whispered, swinging her head right and then left. “I-I thought you were dead.”

“Dead? No,” her mother said, and her voice was barely hoarse at all. “But the dreams I’ve had!” She shook her head.

Da smiled and shook his head, too.

“Aye, mine were strange as well,” he said.

“But what’s wrong, Lily?” her mother asked. “You’re much too white. Come over here and let me look at you.”

Lily ignored her and went over to the two cots. Rob and Abby were still motionless, their faces turned toward each other. Lily pressed her left hand to Rob’s heart and her right hand to Abby’s.

“You *will* get better,” she said slowly, as if the words were a magic spell that wouldn’t work unless she said them exactly right. She almost wondered if they were. Only magic could’ve brought her parents back to her.

Rob and Abby sat up almost immediately. Somehow, Lily had known they would. Lily hugged each of them and then pulled away.

“Don’t go, Lily,” Rob said, clinging weakly to her. The warm feeling in her neck was almost unbearable. She didn’t understand how she could do it, but she understood what she needed to do.

“I have to go for now, Rob, but I’ll be back,” she said. She looked at her shaking hands. “I’ll be back!” she said and ran out of the room.

She started with the Huntsmens’ cottage. The room smelled like sweat and blood, but Lily left the door open and by the time she had placed her hands on the chests of Master and Mistress Huntsmen and their four little girls, the odors were gone. She did not stay long enough for the family to start sitting up, but she knew from the sounds of breathing that her healing had worked. She went to the Cartwrights’ house next. She didn’t look at the still shape of Master Cartwright covered with a white sheet, and she did not answer Mistress Cartwright’s questions about what she thought she was doing. She touched each of their chests, and then she left. She went to the Fishers’ cottage, and the Bakers’, and the Tanners’; she placed her hands on so many

chests that she lost track. Almost every house had a still form she could not heal, and she felt her strength begin to fail after the tenth or twelfth house, which meant she had only been to a third of all of the cottages in the village. At the Goldenrods' cottage, she stopped before turning the doorknob. The warm feeling in her neck was suddenly cold. She knew the seven Goldenrods were beyond her healing.

Lily picked up her skirts and sprinted toward the cottage she had been avoiding, though she didn't know why. Maybe she was afraid she would be stuck on the other side of the door again, and this time it wouldn't open no matter how hard she pushed or begged.

"Max, I'm coming in!" she shouted, twisting the knob as she spoke. The smell made her gag more than it had in the Huntsmens' house. The room was dark, but worse, the cold feeling on Lily's neck remained.

Lily ran into the bedroom. Mistress Roper and the two little girls were in the bed, but Max was curled up on the bare floor, his shirt hanging around his shoulders. Lily went to him first.

"Max, you will get better," she said, putting her hands on his damp chest. Her mouth was so dry that the words were just a croak. Lily swallowed, demanding her body to produce more saliva. Then her mouth was so wet she had to swallow twice, but she still couldn't speak. Lily didn't question herself. She spit on her fingers and placed them on Max's eyelids.

"You will get better," she said, and, suddenly, the missing warmth from her neck was in her fingertips. She stood up and repeated the gesture for Mistress Roper, Mipsy, and Tess. They stirred at once, and Lily returned to Max's side. He had not moved at all, and his chest was no longer shining pink, but gray.

Lily's mouth was dry once again. The spit trick must have been the very last of her reserves. Her vision was blurring, but she had to try one more time. She fell to her knees, swayed a moment as she almost collapsed, and then crawled to Max's side.

"Max, you will get better," she whispered. "For me, Max...get...better." She meant to kiss him, but her knees gave out, and her shoulder hit the floor. His face was too far away. She kissed her hand instead, and then she pressed her fingers to his chest. Her hand fell to her side, and the legs of the bed, Max, her fingers, all grew large and then so small she worried they would disappear and leave her all alone.

But Max was saying her name.