

Fallin

by Kristyn Hardy

"See, Fallin. Can you find them?"

Her mother's whispered words flitted through her head. Her mother held her hand, guided her eyes with the other. In the shade of the tall trees, with sunlight dappling through the highest branches, she searched. Her mother caressed the braid that fell down Fallin's back. A breeze fluttered the leaves at her feet and the wisps of hair that had fallen from her braid.

"You're focused on too much, child. Take a breath, and look again."

She closed her eyes. She inhaled the salt from the river, the sap from the trees. Her mother stroked her head. Fallin took another breath. She opened her eyes.

Their wings glimmered in the morning's light; every shade of winter reflected throughout the forest. Some looked like fresh snow while others glittered the blues of an icy sea. Some were darker than night, some the hues of a pale sunrise at winter's first awakening. One had wings of polished silver and held the hand of a child with wings of solid granite, like the mountain at their back. Little ones chased each other through low branches, creating the breeze that rustled through the small clearing. Above her, in the higher branches sat others, creating the shade she had formerly assumed the trees themselves were responsible for. An older one, with wings of burnished brass, stood leaning against a tree, smiling faintly at her. Her shining hair, the color of polished silver, hung to her waist and her tan face was creased with laughter. She held her hand out, then turned away. Fallin, almost in a daze, followed. The others smiled as she passed. Warm smiles, as though they were welcoming her home. Fallin followed the older one to a small clearing. She sat on the ground beside her in the midst of tall grasses that swayed with their hair. Her mother lingered a small stretch away, her hand brushing the swollen bump of her belly.

"You are Fallin," the older one said.

She blinked. "I am."

"I am Saphina. This is my family, my clan." She gestured around her, to the dozens of wings that glittered between the trees. "You, my dear, are one of us."

Fallin looked over her shoulder to her mother, then back to Saphina. "But I don't have wings."

Saphina laughed, the sound so soft it was barely more than the rustle of the leaves around them. "Ah, my darling, it is not our wings that make us who we are. For some of us, it is the blood we share. But for all, it is our hearts. And you, sweet child, have both." Fallin cocked her head. "Our blood flows through your mother's veins. And, so, it flows through yours."

"And my heart?"

Saphina touched Fallin's cheek, her forehead. Her green eyes were so pale they were almost white, and they studied her, the eyes tender. "Where do you feel at peace, child? What calms your pulse, steadies your breathing?" Fallin thought for a moment. Her eyes traced the cliff's edge at the end of the forest. "It is here, is it not? Where the wind whispers your name and the stars tell you their stories; where the river's laughter reverberates and the mountains protect you?"

"I do feel...better out here," Fallin answered. Again, her eyes took in the world around her. The towering trees that climbed up the mountainsides and disappeared into the clouds. The river that rushed several hundred yards below them but echoed through the cliffs. A boom rushed through the woods as two figures rose towards the sky. The wind off their wings pulled more hair from her braid, and the grass around her danced.

"Of course, you do, love. This place, this hidden world of ours, it answers every question of our soul before we even know to ask. It holds us and frees us. It carries us home."

Fallin's brow creased. "I don't understand."

Saphina stroked Fallin's cheek. "I know you don't.

But in time, you will."

"And until I do?"

"Until you do, we will walk with you. Each of us. We will teach you to hear. We will train you to use your gifts. We will show you your home."

Fallin thought for a moment. She gazed down at her hands, the dirt beneath her nails. "My gifts?" she asked, her voice soft.

"Yes, your gifts. Many gifts. Each more remarkable than the last.

And it is my prayer that you embrace them. That you thrive."

"And you can help me?"

"I can show you all that I know. They," she looked to the ones that had begun to gather at the edge of the clearing, "will show you all that they know. We each possess a unique knowledge, a special way of understanding. And we wish to share it with you."

Fallin looked around, at the others. Some were warm, with wings glittering reds, golds, pinks. Some were cooler, their wings icy blues and whites and silvers. And then there were those in between. But they all looked on her with a sense of loyalty, as if she had belonged to them long before that moment. Fallin turned back to Saphina.

"Did you teach my mother?" she asked.

Saphina's bright eyes shadowed. She looked over Fallin's shoulder to where her mother stood. "Your mother was kept from us. We tried to reach her, to aid her as she grew. But her mother did not approve of our kind. She was under the impression that we were not of this world. In reality, she is quite wrong. We are the first. The first to step onto this plane, to lay claim to this world. But your mother's mother..." She sighed, years of regret clouding her face. "She could not be convinced of her daughter's need for us. But your mother understood. She sought us out after her mother passed. She brought us each of your brothers, but it was you in whom we saw our light shine brightest."

"So, my gifts. Do you know what they are?"

Saphina shook her head, strands of her silvery hair falling across her forehead. "That is for the gods to ordain. And for you to discover."

"But you said they are remarkable. How do you know that if you do not know my gifts?" Fallin asked.

"Ah. You're a curious one, aren't you?" Saphina chuckled. "That is good. That is very good indeed." She brushed aside the hair from her forehead. "I can sense your nature. The layers you carry within yourself. It is a gift we all carry, and you will one day understand it for yourself. So, that is why I know the greatness you carry inside you."

Fallin breathed in this new world. Her mother's world. She slipped her fingers between the stalks around her and let them twine between her fingertips. The light shifted above the trees, the sun setting. The sky faded to pink. "You said you would walk with me. Then what?"

Saphina smiled. "Then we soar."

"Haylin, find the Lord! Someone take Fallin away!" her mother's midwife—Marabale—called. Healers and servants rushed around, scrambling to prepare for the baby. Fallin's governess, Georgia, hurried her out of the room. She looked back to see her mother, two women supporting her, double over. Her moans of pain filled the air.

"Come on, now, Fallin. Let's give the stork her space," Georgia said. Her tone was soothing, but worry lined every inch of her face.

"But, Mama- "

"Your mother will be fine. Don't you worry about her," Georgia assured her.

Fallin looked back as the door was swinging shut. Her mother was leaning on her bed, her elbows propped on the mattress. A hand

held a damp rag to her face. Another rubbed her back. And then the door slammed.

Georgia held her hand as they walked through the manor. Most of the windows were propped open to allow the almost crisp breezes of autumn in. Her father hated when they did that. He said the stone walls kept the rooms cold enough without continuous drafts. Fallin liked it—she thought the fresh air brought much needed life to those gray halls.

At the end of one of those halls, her father sped around a corner, running towards them. His boots left footprints of clay behind him. He reached them, his eyes shifting and hands shaking. "Where is she? What's happening?" he asked.

"She's in the bedchamber, my lord. They're doing all that they can," Georgia answered. "It's so early, sir, but the midwife still seems optimistic."

Her father nodded, but Fallin didn't know if he had heard Georgia's words.

"Papa?"

He knelt and took her hands in his. "Yes, Fallin?"

"Papa, I'm scared for Mama." Fallin's lip trembled.

"Oh, my girl, your mother is going to be just fine. It just seems your brother wanted to meet you sooner than we had planned. But he and your mother are going to be perfectly fine." He tweaked her chin. "Stay with Georgia. She'll take care of you. You'll meet your brother very soon."

And with that, he was gone. Fallin followed Georgia as they climbed the staircases to her rooms. For hours, they stayed there. Fallin traced letters on a page and worked through spelling words as Georgia told her stories of when she was a young girl, playing with her sister and working their family's farm. Finally, her bedroom door creaked open. But it wasn't her father, with news of the birth, who poked his head in. It was Carsyn.

"Carsyn Chambers, what are you doing?" Georgia asked, an eyebrow raised.

Her brother grinned. Fallin giggled at the gap that showed every time he smiled. He had knocked that tooth out just a few days ago. "Georgia, can we please take Fallin outside?"

Fallin jumped up and hurried to the door. She looked back at Georgia with wide, pleading eyes. The woman wrestled her wide hips out of the old rocking chair in the corner of the room—that was her place in Fallin's room. It was where she had rocked her to sleep when she was a baby. Georgia stopped in front of Fallin, hands on her hips, and looked at Carsyn.

"We?" She nudged the door open. Waiting in the entryway behind Carsyn were Fallin's other brothers, Mickeal and Rhealan.

"Oh, please, Georgia. I'm so bored in here," Fallin whined. Georgia looked between the four of them. She pursed her lips and let out a grunt. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to get some fresh air." She rolled her eyes as Fallin hugged her thighs, but she patted her back nonetheless. "All right, then, let's go."

"Sir, lower your voice. Your wife has been through enough," the midwife said.

"You will not tell me how to speak to my own wife," her father growled. Fallin flinched in the shadows of the foyer. Georgia had put her to bed nearly an hour ago, but she hadn't been able to rest. She was searching the halls in hopes of finding something to get into when she had heard the yelling in her parents' chambers. Everyone was distracted and contained to the bedroom, so they hadn't noticed as she crept in.

"She is still losing blood. Your tone is making things even more difficult." Fallin hadn't been around the midwife much, but she recognized her tone. It was the same one Georgia got with her when she was being ornery and selfish.

"Wren knew how dangerous another pregnancy would be. This is her fault."

The midwife turned to her father, her hands in fists at her sides. "How dare you blame her for this. Perhaps if you truly cared about her wellbeing more than your own selfish desire to mount her every other night, she wouldn't be fighting for her life right now." Fallin had never seen her father speechless. The tips of his ears, his neck and face were splotched red.

"Get out," the midwife said, flicking her hand toward the door. "I have a patient to tend to."

Fallin held her breath as her father stormed from the room. She tried to disappear into the shadows, to sink into the stone. Her father didn't notice her as he tore the doors open, nearly tearing them from their hinges. She waited until she could no longer hear his footsteps. She crept to the threshold of the bedroom, clinging to the doorframe. The midwife had disappeared into the bathing chamber as soon as her father had left, so Fallin padded across the tile and thick rug to her mother's side. She grasped her hand. It was hot, sweaty. Her mother's chest rose unevenly. Her eyes fluttered between opened and closed.

"Mama," Fallin whimpered. "Mama, it's Fallin. Look at me, Mama, please."

Her mother didn't seem to hear her. Every few breaths she let out a weak groan. Fallin pressed her face against her mother's arm, the sleeve of nightgown soon soaked through with tears Fallin hadn't realized were falling. The door to the bathing chamber swung open, and the midwife emerged, carrying towels and linens. She draped them over the arm of a chair near the bed and dunked an already damp rag in a bucket of water on the floor. After ringing it out, she turned to Fallin's mother. Fallin had to dodge the woman's purposeful steps as she neared the bed. The midwife never noticed. In the corner, a different kind of sound chimed. Fallin inched towards the bassinette, shocked, for some reason, to find a baby resting within. It slept soundly, cooing every so often. It was smaller than she thought it should be. Its eyelashes fluttered. One of its hands wiggled free of its blankets. She reached her hand over the edge of the cradle, wanting to touch the tiny fingers, but across the room the midwife cursed softly.

Fallin jerked her hand back and whipped her head to the bed. The midwife held bloodied cloths in one hand. She held a damp towel in the other, wiping it along the inside of her mother's legs. It came away bloodier after each swab.

Fallin stumbled back, towards the door. She backed into the wall and yelped, but the midwife was too busy to notice. Fallin ran from the room, swiping at the streams from her eyes and nose as she turned down hallways and staircases. She reached the kitchens and found the door, stretching her arm until her fingertips grasped the handle. Pushing it open, she fell into one of the side gardens. She ran for the forest at the edge of the property, tripping over her nightgown as she went. The bottoms of her feet stung from the rocky paths through the garden. At the tree line, she paused long enough to gulp down breath. She wiped her nose with her sleeve. She tottered deeper into the forest until she could no longer see the lights of the manor. Burrs and briars snatched at her nightgown and tore at its hem. A root caught her foot and she fell, leaves and sticks crunching beneath her. Fallin pushed her hair from her face, more tears falling.

"Phina!" she cried. She huddled against the base of a tree. "Phina!" she tried again.

She called her name over and over, praying that one of the song birds or snakes or toads would hear and wake Saphina. After an eternity, the wind shifted. The leaves rustled above Fallin's head and a mighty boom sounded, getting closer. Then she landed. Her wings of brass looked milky in the moonlight. Her silver hair was braided back. Her pale green eyes searched the forest floor frantically. Fallin jumped to her feet and sprinted to her, clutching the woman's legs.

"Phina," she sobbed.

Saphina clutched at Fallin's back, her head, her arms. "Fallin? Fallin, what is happening?"

"My mama, 'Phina! You have to help her, please!" she pleaded.

"All right, all right, my child. Shh, shh. You must calm down." Saphina's hands found Fallin's face and she crouched on the

ground. "Fallin, listen. I can't see you."

Fallin sniffled. "Wh-what? I'm standing right here," she said.

"I know, dear. I can feel you, but I can't see you."

Fallin's breath quickened. She grabbed at her arms, at Saphina's wrists.

"Shh, shh. I believe it's just your powers trying to protect you. They sensed your fear, and you allowed them to take over," Saphina explained.

"What do I do?" She wiped her nose again.

"You have to relax. You have to calm down."

"But how?"

"I will carry you back to our mountain. Let the wind whisper to you. Give your worries to the treetops, your tears to the sunrise. Do you understand?" Fallin nodded and then remembered she was invisible.

"Yes," she peeped.

Saphina nodded once before gathering Fallin into her arms. Fallin wrapped her arms around her neck, her legs around her waist. Saphina pressed a kiss to Fallin's head and stretched out her wings. Within a few seconds they were airborne, Saphina carrying them high above the tops of the trees. Fallin nestled her head in Saphina's neck. The wind whipped her and sang past her ears. The horizon was just turning to a deep violet. The crisp smell of pine filled Fallin's lungs. By the time Saphina touched on the plateau, Fallin knew she was fully visible again.

"There, now. You just needed some fresh air, hmm?" Saphina asked, stroking her cheek once. "Let's get you warmed up and we'll talk about your mother."

Fallin hadn't realized it, but she was shivering. She nodded, and Saphina took her hand. They neared the mountainside, and Fallin almost smiled. With a smile over her shoulder, Saphina disappeared into the granite. Fallin ran after her.

Saphina sat on the bed, her mother asleep in her lap. Four others crowded the chamber. Their wings pressed to their backs, their size making the chamber look impossibly small. One of them, Tril, perched on the edge of the bed. Her cobalt wings shimmered in the candlelight. She touched her fingertips to seemingly random parts of the unconscious woman's body—her forehead, her wrists, her stomach, her knees. At every touch, a soft glow pulsed. Georgia held Fallin to her, a hand on her shoulder. The midwife stood to the side, wringing her hands and chewing on her bottom lip. Her father sat in a chair with an ankle resting on his knee. His brow was creased, but it wasn't worry Fallin saw in his eyes. It was discomfort and annoyance. That these creatures, as he called them, were in his house, inserting themselves in his business. At last, Tril cupped her mother's face in one hand, rested the other just above her heart. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath.

And then she began to sing.

Saphina's voice joined, as did the others'. It was an ancient song, sung in a forgotten language remembered only by the Fae and few others. Its words had the timbre of an army's march; strong and undeniable. They were words that were not so much heard, but felt in the chests and bones of those near them. When they sang, the world seemed to pause. As though the winds and the waters stilled to listen to their words, their voices. Even the flames of the candles stopped flickering.

Fallin had heard them sing it only one other time, several weeks ago, when a baby had fallen sick. Saphina had explained that it was a ritual prayer to the gods, to Rys and Belladonna specifically. It pleaded for healing for whomever it was sung over. And if healing could not be granted, then it asked for peace as the beloved faded. Fallin whispered her own prayer that the gods would be kind, that they would heal her mother.

The song ended, and Tril kissed her thumb and pressed it to the hollow in her mother's throat, sliding it down her sternum. That soft glow trailed in her finger's wake. She sat back and Fallin noticed the sweat gleaming on her forehead. She slid from the bed on shaking legs. Saphina stroked her mother's hair as she slept. Tril walked to the cradle, where the baby also slept, and gently picked it up. She swayed as she stood, humming and whispering soft

words. She repeated the process of touching her fingertips to its skin—its ears, the back of its head, its throat. She sang another song, quieter this time, in the old language. The others didn't join her this time. Fallin had never heard that one before. Tril laid the baby back in the cradle, fussing over its blankets, before straightening. She turned her attention back to the rest of the room.

"Well?" her father asked.

Tril placed a finger to her mouth and, after glancing back at the baby, motioned to the door. They all followed her to the small sitting area just off the foyer. Her father leaned against the mantle, arms crossed. Tril sat on the sofa, with Saphina standing protectively over her.

"Other than his small size and low weight, your son seems unaffected by the premature birth." Tril glanced to the other Fae.

"What?" her father snapped. "Is there something else?"

"It's his ears."

"What about them? He has two."

"It is not the quantity of the ears that is the problem. It is the quality." Fallin could almost see Tril's patience wearing thinner by the second.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that because of how difficult this birth was, your son suffered some damage to his skull. He has no hearing."

"You mean he's deaf?" her father clarified. Tril nodded. "Well, for how long?"

"Permanently. Forever."

"That is unacceptable," her father huffed. "Fix him."

The Fae tensed at the order before Tril snapped, "Accept it. And I cannot fix him. The mind is delicate. There is nothing we can or

will do. He will grow up just fine as he is."

"Fine," her father ground out. "And Wren?" he asked, almost impatiently.

"I was able to stop the bleeding," Tril breathed.
"So, she's going to be fine?"

Tril winced. "Your wife will recover physically, yes."
"What's that supposed to mean?"

Fallin thought she saw anger flash across Tril's face, but a blink and it was gone. "I was able to heal her body, but I have no powers over a being's soul. Her body is able to sustain life, yes, but if Wren does not have a desire to remain in this world...that is something beyond even our control."

"Why are you talking about this as though it's a possibility? Why would Wren want to die?" her father asked.

"Your wife is broken, Lord Chambers. I saw it as I healed her. Her heart is fragile, her mind is tired. She would not be returning to a life she loves," Tril explained.

"That's ridiculous. She's a mother," her father argued.

"And her children were the only light I could see inside her. But she is also the daughter of a woman who didn't understand her, who resented her. She is the wife of a man who fears her. Is that a life you would wish to return to?"

Her father trembled on the other side of the low table. "I do not fear anyone, let alone my wife." His voice was low, and Fallin wished she could hide under Georgia's skirts. Tril did not seem too bothered by his tone, though, as she went on.

"You do, Lord Chambers. You fear her power, her lineage, her heart. And I think you will prove me right very soon." Tril stood then. She cast one more wary look to the now closed bedroom door and then the five Fae made for the door.

Her father pushed off the mantle then. "That's it?" he demanded.

The Fae turned back. Saphina's eyebrows were raised, but it was Tril who answered. "We saved her life. Your healers can handle the rest."

As they left, Saphina turned back, her attention on Fallin. "You coming?" she asked.

Fallin grinned and wrenched free of Georgia's hand. Her father yelled after her, but she ignored him as she ran and was gathered into Saphina's arms. Down the hall, one of the larger windows had been pushed open. The other Fae stood around it. One by one, they leaped from the sill, their wings snapping open as they began to fall.

Saphina whispered in Fallin's ear, "Do you want to fly?"

Fallin's smile was wide as she nodded, and Saphina whistled. One of the Fae, a male named Ryhlin, turned back and hovered by the window.

"Catch her," Saphina said. And then she hurtled Fallin out the window.

Fallin shrieked and laughed as she fell, arms and legs flailing. Ryhlin's indigo wings shot past her and then she was sailing upwards, nestled comfortably in his arms. He grinned down at her as they shot across the countryside.

Below her, the manor sat nestled in one of the smaller mountainsides, its dark stones more foreboding than the mountain itself. Its tall iron gates and strictly hewn gardens were a stark contrast to the territory it ruled over. Even the town, which was growing smaller with every beat of Ryhlin's wings, was lively and beautiful. Every building was painted a different color, from pale yellows to bright pinks to royal blues. The old stories say the town painted itself so that even the most weary of travelers would be able to recognize it in the midst of the mountain range. Because unlike the manor, the town was a place of refuge, a sanctuary. The winds carried the scents of the town: fresh bread from the bakery, petals from the flower market, spices from the artisan district. Blessing bells clinked in a breeze and a somber song reverberated through the avenues and around the rooftops.

It was a song of hope; it was a song for her mother and her baby brother. But Fallin's attention was soon pulled away from the town beneath her to the world around her.

The massive trees reached for her toes, their needles stretching and dancing in the wind of the Fae's wings. It was nearly winter now, and only the heartiest would hold on to their green. To her right, the mountains stood their guard, protecting her small piece of perfection from the borders to their north and west. Their snow-covered peaks glistened in the afternoon sunlight and Fallin strained to hear the waterfalls their ice usually gave way to. There was only a gurgle to be heard—most were already frozen. Beyond the town, the forests gave way to fields of amber. The late crops were near ripe and then the people would begin their last harvest of the year. The light wove through the stalks like a stream through fingers, but Fallin knew from experience that it offered plenty of shadows as well, perfect for hiding in.

Everything Fallin had ever wanted was within her reach, within her family's borders. She had never understood why her father always seemed so unsatisfied.

"Remember, Fallin: your abilities are yours," Saphina said. She paced along the edge of Fallin's vision, her silver hair pulled into a single braid down her back. "You are not theirs. You control them, wield them. They are yours."

Along a row of hedges, Fallin's mother sat on a stone bench. Her hands clasped together and resting on her knees. Her face was bright. Eager. Fallin focused on that as she closed her eyes. Her mind quieted until it was only that animal inside her. She stood before it, hands braced on her hips, shoulders back. *Dominant*, Saphina had told her. *You must learn to be the dominant one.* The animal's head cocked. Its ears perked. It prowled to her, no longer curious, but familiar. Fallin recognized the playful glint in its eyes. It nuzzled up to her leg, twining between her ankles. It was no bigger than a pup, though Saphina claimed it would grow as her power did. She ran her hand down its back. She scratched its ears and kissed its head. *Come on*, she whispered to it.

Fallin opened her eyes. Around her, the frost melted from the grass. The closed buds on the shrubs opened, blooms bursting from their winter sleep. The small trees that dotted the garden regrew their leaves. On her bench, her mother looked around the garden in awe. This close to winter, a garden full of anything but ice was a stark contrast.

"Fallin..." her mother breathed. She rose and walked to her daughter, turning in slow circles to take it all in. "Fallin, this is incredible." She knelt in front of Fallin, in the fresh grass. She held her hands. "*You* are incredible. I cannot wait to see what all you grow to do."

Fallin beamed and looked to Saphina, who smiled and nodded in agreement. Fallin flung her arms around her mother. Since Aarum's birth, she had become painfully thankful for every day with her. And though Fallin wouldn't know of this for years, from one of the highest windows above the garden, her father stood in his study, overlooking this moment. And it was then that he decided to take his daughter's life into his own hands.

"Can you hear anything?" Mickeal whispered.

Rhealan's face scrunched in concentration as he pressed his ear to the window, his golden hair catching the afternoon's light. For ten minutes now, Fallin had crouched with her brothers outside the lowest window of her father's study. They had woken her up from her nap, saying that Saphina had flown to one of the inner gardens, landing so hard one of the fountains cracked. She had stormed into the study without a glance at anyone. A thrust of her wings had sent the doors slamming behind her.

"Shush. I can't focus," Rhealan muttered, shifting to watch the scene inside.

"I can hear them."

Fallin's brothers whipped their heads to her. "*You can what?*"

Rhealan hissed. She shrugged. "I can hear them," she repeated.

"Well, what are they saying?" Carsyn urged.

She scooted closer to the window, Rhealan moving aside. They could see what was happening: Saphina and her father on either side of the study, faces flushed and chests heaving. Through the pane, Fallin heard Saphina's voice rising, her father's along with it. Fallin had never heard Saphina yell.

"You are keeping her from us!" Saphina pleaded.

"She is too weak to travel anyway," her father countered. Even at its volume, her father's voice sounded bored. "Wren is not going anywhere."

Saphina's voice was suddenly low, like boots on gravel. "You know as well as I do that it is less than twenty minutes up the mountain by flight. Wren would have no problem making it, even in her weakened state." Her father didn't reply, but Fallin could almost feel the glare he leveled at Saphina.

"Why is it that Wren has taken such a downward turn, Johnson?" Saphina asked. Fallin sucked in a breath at her father's first name, used so casually and in such a spiteful tone.

"What is it?" Rhealan pried. Fallin waved his question away. Saphina prowled across the study. "She was healing wonderfully after Tril's work. Your healers have worked tirelessly these past three months to restore her health. So, what happened?"

Again, silence.

"This is what I think," Saphina continued, stopping just in front of the lord. "I think your wife's room holds the lingering scent of iron. I think her lips are coated with it, along with the empty vials of tonic on her bedside tables. After some inspection, however, I learned that the healers do not use iron when tending to your wife. But I also learned that you insist on personally coaxing that tonic down your wife's throat. So, here is my question: how is it that the tonic leaves the healers' quarters free of iron, but somehow, once it is handed over to you, Lord Chambers" — Saphina's emphasis on the title was mocking— "contains no less than a thimble full of crushed iron. Can you explain this *miraculous*

occurrence to me?"

"You've never been one to beat around the bush, Saphina," Fallin's father ground out. At his sides, his fingers twitched. "Why don't you just say whatever it is you're insinuating?"

"Tell me why you are poisoning Wren."

Her father bristled. "That's preposterous."

"Is it? Because iron is the only substance capable of truly harming our kind. And while Wren may not have Settled the way full-bloods do, she has retained her youth and will for much longer, if given the chance. But iron..." Saphina's words broke. "Iron kills us, Johnson. You know this. If it is capable of killing a full-blooded Fae, what do you think it will do to your wife? She has our blood. And you are killing her." Saphina's voice cracked on the last sentence. Her words were thick, like her throat was catching on every syllable.

"I do know the effects iron has on your kind. I also know that your kind holds to the belief of allowing nature to run its course. Perhaps my wife's state is simply that: a tragedy of nature." Fallin's eyes stung at the words. Her father only shrugged.

"There is nothing natural about poison," Saphina spat. "Just tell me why. What has Wren ever done other than be faithful to you? Nurture your children and be an excellent mother and wife? Why are you doing this to her? Is it because of Aarum's hearing? Are you holding that against her?"

"I do not know why my wife's health is declining. And no, I am not holding my son's deficiency"—Saphina's jaw feathered at the word—"against her. But I do know that she is nothing but dangerous when it comes to our children. Their resemblance to her is more than enough. So perhaps her passing would be...beneficial to the children. It would be best if they received nothing else from their mother."

Saphina stepped closer to Fallin's father. "Wren would never hurt her children."

"Oh, but she already has, hasn't she? Just look at Fallin. Barely five years old and performing magic tricks in the garden while her mother encourages her to push her power to uncontrollable depths. No child of mine will fall prey to the monster inside them." "Your children are not monsters," Saphina snapped.

"Perhaps not yet," her father stated, very matter-of-factly. "But they will be, should they be left unchecked."

"And this is your means of checking them? Murdering their mother? I suppose you are going to keep them from us too, then?"

"The boys can receive plenty of training here, at the manor," her father said.

"And Fallin?" Saphina asked. Her words were thick again.

"That is none of your concern."

"It absolutely is my concern! Fallin- "

"Fallin is my daughter. And as her father, I am afraid that it is up to no one but myself what her future should hold. Now, do see yourself out, Saphina. I am a busy man."

Fallin fell from her crouch onto the grass at her feet.

"Well?" Mickeal asked. "What happened?"

She knew her brothers were eager for information, but her mouth was like sandpaper. She tried to speak, only to fail. Her eyes darted around the courtyard, from the stone wall at her back to her brothers' faces to the flowering hedges surrounding them.

"Fallin?" Carsyn's voice was soft, his amber eyes tender. The curiosity had vanished from her brothers' mind. Worry now filled their faces instead.

She shook her head and stood. Her legs trembled, and she reached for the wall. Just then, the doors to the courtyard were flung open, Saphina appearing. All four children froze. Saphina's face usually held the glow and wildness of nature, but in that moment, it was

warped with frenzied anger. She stopped at the sight of them, and when her eyes met Fallin's, her face faltered in realization. "Fallin, wait," she tried.

But Fallin began shaking her head again. Her thoughts fell apart in her head, none of them making sense. Saphina took a step towards her, and that was all it took. Fallin turned and ran from the courtyard. From her brothers who knew nothing of what was happening to their own mother. From Saphina who knew the truth but not the solution. And from her father, who for all his worry about the monsters within his children, couldn't recognize the one in his own mirror.

The priestess' voice was a monotonous drone in Fallin's ears. She sat between Mickeal and Georgia, who rocked Aarum in her arms. Rhealan held Carsyn to his chest as tears rained down his cheeks. Mickeal gripped Fallin's hand fiercely. She barely felt it. At the other end of the row, beside Rhealan, their father sat. His stoic demeanor had yet to crack. In the row in front of them, the King and Queen sat with their young son, along with another man and woman and two small children with hair as black as the priestess' veil. Behind Fallin and her brothers, hundreds had gathered. Some noble, some villagers. All people with hearts that mourned her mother.

Because it was her mother who lay in the decadent box just behind the priestess. Not two weeks after Saphina's confrontation with her father, her mother had faded completely. Fallin had been there. Holding her hand. Telling her stories of the latest things Saphina had shown her. She had watched her mother's eyes close for the last time. Had watched her fingers slip from her hand. In the trees that lined the edge of the courtyard, if one of the visitors looked close enough, Fallin knew they would find birds that glimmered a bit unnaturally. And if they looked a little closer, they might realize that those were, in fact, not birds. They might notice the bare feet and wispy fabric that made up pieces of clothing. Because, perched in the highest branches, the Fae watched and wept as one of their own was unfairly and untimely grieved.

Around them, a light breeze whistled through the air. Sunlight glittered down through the outer branches. Birds sang to one another. Hellebores and jasmine swayed at the edge of the forest. The sky was a perfect blue, with sparse clouds of cotton ambling along. Somewhere beyond the trees, water trickled down stones and through a worn creek bed; the world was warm enough to melt the smallest of streams, it seems.

It was a beautiful day. Disgracefully so, Fallin thought. The sky was too unbothered to bury her mother. The breeze was too playful, the birds too lively to bury her mother.

Though perhaps the world was not disregarding her mother's death. Perhaps the rustling of the trees, the uncommon warmth of the sun in the midst of winter, was the world's way of singing goodbye. The world was fortunate that way. As was everyone else who had gathered that morning. Because their goodbyes would last only a day. Maybe less.

Fallin's would take a lifetime.

It was cool the morning Rhealan and Mickeal left. Shipped off, actually, if Fallin was being honest. They had been arguing about it for weeks now. Just last night, Carsyn had made a comment over dinner that flared into another argument. It wasn't the leaving that they had an issue with—it was common for children their age to head to the battle camps—but the five of them had grown into something more than siblings in the three years since their mother had died. It was them against their father. And losing the two oldest brothers felt like losing one's limbs.

"Carsyn," her father's voice echoed across the grounds. Fallin turned to see him crossing the pathway with Carsyn on his heels. "Your brothers are leaving in a matter of minutes. Now, you will not bring this up again or else I will send you off with them." Carsyn glared at their father a moment longer before storming off. With a satisfied look, their father turned to the wagons at the top of the drive. There were two, one for each of the boys. They were heading to separate camps, as if sending them away from their family, away from Fallin and each other was the only thing that would satisfy their father. Mickeal was rearranging and fidgeting

with the packs on his wagon. He hadn't been able to sit still since their father announced they would be leaving. Near the other wagon, Rhealan bounced Aarum on his hip. The youngest was already three and nearly too big to be on someone's hip, but his oldest brother was never far from him. Fallin knew that would be Rhealan's hardest goodbye.

Carsyn stomped up to her side. "He can't just send them away," he huffed.

"He is. You are all going to camp sooner or later." Fallin shrugged.

"Well, I'm not. I'm staying with you."

"That's what Mickeal and Rhealan said too."

Carsyn looked at her then. She saw in his eyes that as much as he wanted to mean it, as much as he wanted to be able to stay, in a couple of years he would pack his own wagon and ride off to wherever the King decided he should go.

She wedged herself under her brother's arm. He wrapped the other one around her and held her tight, resting his chin on her head. Fallin hoped that if she held on long enough, she wouldn't have to watch them all ride away. Without her.

Fallin barely registered the stinging of her cheek. Her breaths quickened more. Her mind grew dizzier. She reached for the wall with one hand, her cheek with the other. She jerked away at the stickiness. Her chest clenched. Her neck, her palms, her forehead grew damp.

She saw Carsyn move towards their father. His limbs looked as though they moved through water. Her brother's body shook as a guard wrenched him away.

Her father's ring shone red.

The light through the windows was too bright. She choked on her air. Her knees gave and the scene tilted.

Carsyn lunged again, this time for her. But he was too far away. Something popped in her wrist as she caught herself. Carsyn pulled her head into his lap, whispering words she couldn't hear. Georgia appeared, Aarum trotting behind her. Her eyes grew big and then she was holding Fallin, Carsyn shielding Aarum.

They had kept her attacks a secret for over a year now. But this one...Fallin hadn't known this one was coming. She usually does. She can usually hear when the ticking begins in her head, about two minutes before her lungs clench.

This one had no warning.

Rhealan and Mickeal weren't coming home this month. Sometime next year, probably, her father had said.

"How long have you kept this from me, Fallin?" Her father's words slurred. His voice was dim, as if he were yelling through a wall. "How long?" he repeated.

He lifted his hand again and Carsyn moved. This time, there was no guard to intercept him as he threw his weight at his father. The man was so top heavy that that was all it took to send him to the ground. Carsyn was already back on his feet by the time their father managed to roll over. Carsyn placed himself between the man and Fallin as the guards helped their father to his feet. His face resembled an unripe blackberry.

"This is not finished." He smoothed his sleeves and turned on his heel, pulling a kerchief from his jacket. As he walked away, he wiped his ring clean, the kerchief turning redder with every swipe of his daughter's blood it picked up.

"Fallin. Wake up, Fallin."

She peeled her eyes open at the voice. Her curtains had been pulled back—something that rarely happened before noon on any given day—and the morning sun's light was rather abrasive. She blinked several times and yawned before the voice registered. She jumped upright.

On the edge of her bed, Rhealan, Mickeal, and Carsyn sat with the largest grins she had ever seen. Aarum was clinging to Rhealan's side, beaming up at his brothers. Fallin squealed and managed to tackle all three of them at the same time, Aarum jumping onto the bed to ensure he was part of the commotion. Her brothers laughed as they held her to them and by the time they all let one another go, Fallin wasn't sure if she was laughing or crying.

"What are you doing here?" she squealed. The older brothers glanced at one another. "We convinced our commanders to give us leave for Moonrise," Carsyn answered.

"We haven't celebrated all together since Mickeal and I first left for our camps." Rhealan smiled before continuing. "And we wanted to surprise you."

"We couldn't miss our sister's fifteenth birthday," Mickeal said. Fallin tackled her brothers once more. This time, all of them were wiping at their eyes when they let go. After a few moments, Georgia brought in a cart piled high with sugar-dusted tarts, puffs filled with jellies and creams, and at least a dozen other breakfast pastries. Georgia kissed the boys and straightened their collars.

"These brothers of yours scared me near to death when they walked into those kitchens this morning," she lamented to Fallin. "It's so good to have you boys home." She kissed all of them again before leaving, dabbing at her cheeks with her pinafore.

Before the door had shut, Mickeal's hands were already full of pastries. Carsyn was next, though he filled a plate and handed it to Fallin. Aarum grabbed a tray of powder-dusted tarts and plopped onto the rug, not bothering to look to his siblings for approval. Each of them stared at him—Mickeal's mouth was half-open—before meeting each other's eyes. Their laughter reverberated around the room as they took up spots around the youngest, each one grabbing another tray and placing it in the middle of them.

"Fallin, let's go! We're going to be late!" Carsyn called from down the hall.

Fallin finished painting her lips. She cleaned the deep garnet stain from her fingertips, looked over herself once more, and turned on her heels.

Her brothers were waiting at the top of the staircase, all of them in some type of traditional costume. Loose pants that were tapered at the ankles, shirts that were cut into low Vs or not sewn together at all. Other pieces of fabric were tied around their waists or necks or heads, depending on the brother.

"For your information, Carsyn, you cannot be late to something when you're the guest of honor," she explained as she neared them.

"I see your charming sass has only grown since the last time we saw you," Mickeal noted.

"Well, you know what they say...nourish your gifts and whatnot." Fallin tossed her hair over her shoulder. She stopped as she noticed Rhealan's face had fallen into an almost sadness.

"Rhea?" she asked. "What is it?"

"You just...you look like Mother."

For the second time that day, Fallin's eyes stung. She folded herself into her brother's arms. Rhealan pulled away after a long moment and brushed his thumb under her eyes.

Mickeal clapped them both on the back. "This is a touching moment, really. And Fallin, you do look beautiful. But there is a celebration just outside."

"And where there's a celebration," Carsyn began, his grin wicked, "There's trouble."

Rhealan looked back at Fallin. "Well, then what are we doing in here?"

"Last one to steal a kiss, buys a round," she said, winking. Her brothers' grins matched her own as they answered her bet with loud hollering that rang through the manor's entryway. She slipped her hand into Aarum's.

Your brothers are ridiculous, she signed to him.

He smiled dryly back up at her. *I know*, he answered.

Fallin laughed and pulled her youngest brother to her, the other boys running ahead, Mickeal sliding down the wide banister beside them. The guards at the front doors heaved them open ahead of them, and the five of them were met with deafening cheers from the townspeople. Rhealan lifted Aarum onto his shoulders. Carsyn grabbed Fallin's hand and pulled her along down the cobblestones that led to the town as Mickeal seized the attention of the crowd to somersault down the street.

And for one small moment in her life, Fallin was not afraid of tomorrow.