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# 1

## Where everything grows

The boy had said three times that he wasn't afraid of blood.
The fourth time, he fainted.
Althea caught him just before his head hit the edge of Myralda's stall.
"Oh, wonderful," she muttered, struggling to hold him upright.
"That's all I needed."
On the other side of the wooden counter, Myralda barely looked up from the bundle of herbs she was tying together.
"Don't put him on the mint."
"What mint?"
"My mint."
Althea looked at the boy hanging limp against her, then at the small green plant growing between two stones in front of the stall.
"Grandma, he's unconscious."
"And that mint only blooms once a season."
"Of course."
With her foot, Althea pushed a basket aside and carefully laid the boy down on a pile of linen sacks. His mother came hurrying over.
"Is he..."
"He's fine."
"He just fell..."
"Because he looked at his own hand four times after I told him not to."
"I wanted to see if it was still bleeding," the boy mumbled.
Althea looked down. "You're awake again."
"I never left."
"You were lying there with your mouth open."
"I was resting."
Behind her came Myralda's dry voice. "A born hero."
The boy gave the old woman an indignant look. Myralda smiled kindly back.

She was ninety-one and used her age as a free pass for almost everything. Bad manners. Too much honey in her tea. Afternoon naps on busy market days. And, according to Althea, deliberately frightening the children who came to their stall to be treated.

"Give me your hand," Althea said.

"Will it hurt?"

"No."

"Really?"

"No."

"Do you swear?"

"If you ask one more question, I will."

He held out his hand at once. The cut ran straight across his palm. Not deep, but ragged enough that an ordinary bandage wouldn't be pleasant.

Althea placed two fingers beside the wound. This was her favorite moment.

The silence just before she felt it. She closed her eyes.

The market didn't truly disappear, but the sounds grew softer. Voices faded. Footsteps, clinking bottles, the calls of merchants, everything slid into the background.

Beneath her fingertips, she felt something else. Warmth. A heartbeat. Blood flowing through tiny veins. And there, exactly where the skin had been cut open, a disturbance in the life force running through the body.

Althea breathed out slowly.

The warmth in her own chest moved to her shoulder, down her arm, and finally into her fingers. The boy gasped.

"It tickles."

"That means it's working."

"Can I do that too?"

"Can you heal?"

He nodded.

"Maybe when you're older."

"My father can make tomatoes bigger."

"Then I'd stick with tomatoes for now."

At the edge of the cut, a thin green glow appeared. Not bright. More as if sunlight had been caught beneath the skin for a moment. Slowly, the edges of the wound drew together. Althea knew exactly when to stop. Myralda had taught her that. Healing a wound didn't mean taking all the work away from the body. Life force had to be guided, not forced. When Althea pulled her fingers away, only a thin red line remained. The boy stared at it as if his hand had just turned to gold.

"Again."

Althea frowned.

"What?"

"Do it again."

"You want me to cut you open again?"

He pulled his hand to his chest. "No."

"I thought so."

His mother laughed and set a few copper coins on the counter. Althea tried to push them back. "That's not necessary."

Myralda's hand landed on top of the coins at once.

"No, it isn't necessary," she said. "But it's certainly allowed."

"Grandma."

"Herbs grow for free. Unfortunately, we don't."

The woman smiled and took her son by the shoulder.

"Thank you, Althea."

"Keep that hand still today."

"He will."

"I won't," said the boy.

His mother pulled him along before he could negotiate any further. Althea watched them until they disappeared into the crowd.

"He'll be back before sunset," said Myralda.

"With his other hand?"

"Probably."

Althea laughed. It was a warm morning in Vaeloria.

The market stretched along a wide street that was barely visible beneath everything growing on it.

Old trees stood between the stalls as if they had been there first and the city had politely been built around them later.

That was probably true.

Their branches reached toward each other high above the street, forming a green roof through which sunlight fell in golden patches. Ivy crept over the walls. Blue flowers spilled from windows. Roots formed natural benches along the road.

In Vaeloria, people rarely made nature step aside.

Usually, they asked it to move over a little.

A few stalls down, a flower seller held her hand above a closed bud. She slowly turned two fingers outward.

The flower opened.

A customer clapped her hands with delight.

Farther along, a man stood beside a cart full of melons. He laid his hand on one, closed his eyes, and made a face of deep concentration.

The melon turned yellow.

"Cheater!" someone shouted.

"Craftsmanship!" the merchant shouted back.

Across the street, a girl of about ten was trying to coax a thin root out of the soil. The thing rose barely two fingers high before it flopped over.

Her little brother laughed. The girl stamped her foot.

Suddenly the root shot upward and wrapped itself around his ankle.

He fell backward into a basket of apples.

Althea burst out laughing.

Myralda looked up. "What?"

Althea pointed. Myralda saw the little boy lying among the apples and nodded approvingly. "Quick learner."

Their own stall had stood in the same spot for almost fifty years.

Above the shelves hung a wooden sign that had once read MYRALDA in elegant golden letters.

Half the paint was gone.

By now, the Y looked more like a branch.

Myralda refused to have it repainted.

“People know who I am,” she always said.
And that was true. There had been a time when people traveled from every corner of Vaeloria to see her. For years, Myralda had been known as the greatest healer of the Green Realm.
These days, she preferred to stick to her herbs, her stall, and criticizing Althea’s work.
Althea had practically grown up there. At four, she had eaten an entire jar of chamomile because she thought dried flowers were the same as candy.
At eleven, she had closed her first wound.
“You used too much.”
Althea looked up. Myralda stood with her back to her, arranging glass bottles on a shelf.
“Of what?”
“Power.”
“On that boy?”
“Hm.”
“It was only a little.”
“Exactly. So why did you use enough for a cut three times that size?”
Althea leaned against the counter. “He was scared.”
“His fear wasn’t in his hand.”
“Grandma.”
Myralda turned to face her. Her eyes were dark green and sharp, even now that the skin around them had grown thin and wrinkled.
“You feel a lot,” she said. “That’s a gift. But a gift you don’t give limits will one day be the one using you.”
Althea made a face. “That sounds like something you’ve been thinking about for a very long time.”
“No. I just came up with it.”
Althea threw a cloth at her. Myralda caught it.
“Respect your elders.”
“You use that too often.”
“I’m ninety-one. I don’t have endless advantages left.”

“You only use your age when it suits you.”
“That’s exactly what old age is for.”
Althea smiled. She bent down to straighten a basket.

As she did, she saw something move between two wooden crates.

A small tendril. It was growing from a crack between the cobblestones toward the light. Althea reached out her hand.
Before her fingers even touched the plant, the tendril slowly turned toward her.
She smiled. “Hello there.”
Myralda glanced over her shoulder. “If you start talking to every plant, we’ll still be here come winter.”
“Maybe this one will at least listen.”
“That would make it smarter than most people at this market.”
Althea brushed one finger along a leaf. A second leaf unfolded. Then a third. She felt the plant’s life force like a tiny spark beneath her skin. Weak. But bright. She gave it just enough.
The tendril pulled itself upward and curled around the wooden leg of the stall.
“See?”
Myralda looked at it. “Beautiful.”
Althea looked up. That one word sounded different. Softer.

Myralda was no longer looking at the plant. She was looking at her.
“What?”
“Nothing.”
“You’re looking at me strangely.”
“I’m old. Everything about me looks strange.”
Althea wanted to answer, but her attention was caught by the sound of bells.
Not the little bells merchants hung on their carts. Deeper tones. Three slow strikes. The market changed at once. Heads turned toward the end of the street.
Children ran to the side. Even Myralda looked up.
A group of travelers emerged from beneath the trees. Four horses. A long wagon.
White and silver fabrics hung along its sides and barely stirred, even though there was enough wind to make the leaves above them rustle.

On the front was a symbol Althea knew only from drawings.
Three silver concentric circles, like echoes spreading out from a single center.
Her heart leapt.
"Aetheria."
Myralda said nothing.
Althea stepped out from behind the stall to get a better look.
The people on the wagon were almost all dressed in light fabrics. White, soft blue, and silver. One woman wore silver bands around her wrists that chimed softly against each other whenever she moved.
A little boy next to Althea pointed. "Can they really see dreams?"
His father pulled him closer. "Don't stare."
"But can they?"
"They hear things. Echoes. I said don't stare."
Althea watched, fascinated. She had never seen anyone from Aetheria.
Not in real life. In Vaeloria, everything grew. In Aetheria, everything was heard.
It had been that way for a thousand years: each realm its own magic, and every person only one kind.
Anyone who had two didn't exist. Or not for long.
The woman on the wagon turned her head.
For a moment, her eyes met Althea's.
Althea looked away without thinking.
When she looked again, the wagon was moving on.
"They're going to Avarys," she said.
Myralda was busy with her herbs again. "Probably."
"Do you think they came all the way from Aetheria?"
"The symbol on their wagon seems like a fairly big clue."
Althea walked back behind the stall. "How many days is it from here to Avarys, anyway?"
No answer.
"Grandma."
"Hm?"

“How many days?”
Myralda slowly began knotting a string around a bundle of herbs. “Four.”
Althea smiled. “Four?”
“With a good cart.”
“That’s not far at all.”
“I never said it was.”
“We could go.”
“No.”
“Why not?”
“Because my knees already argue with me when I walk from my bed to the kitchen.”
“We can stop along the way.”
“Then it takes eight days.”
“That doesn’t matter, does it?”
Myralda pulled the string tight. “Not to someone who’s nineteen.”
Althea let her arms drop onto the counter. “You always said we’d go someday.”
“And you always said you’d never eat chamomile again.”
“I was four.”
“And I was younger when I made that promise.”

Althea looked again at the spot where the wagon had disappeared.
Avarys.
She knew the city only from stories. The city without a realm. The place where roads from every direction met. Where people from Vaeloria, Aetheria, and even Necrath walked the same streets. Where, at a single market, you could buy a healing root from Vaeloria, a glass singing bowl from Aetheria, and, according to Myralda, something from Necrath you were better off never touching at all.
And somewhere beyond that city lay the old western roads. The roads to what had once been Kaelthar.
Althea knew little about Kaelthar. Everyone knew little about Kaelthar.
The realm had vanished in a war, long before she was born.
According to most people, there was nothing more she needed to know.

“Was Mama ever in Avarys?”

Myralda’s hands stopped. Not for long. One breath, maybe.

Then she went on tying. “Yes.”

Althea turned so fast that her hip bumped the table.

A jar of salve wobbled dangerously. “What?”

Myralda caught it. “For someone with good reflexes, you break a remarkable number of things.”

“You never told me Mama had been there.”

“You never asked.”

“I’ve been asking about Avarys my whole life.”

“You asked whether I had been there.”

Althea narrowed her eyes. “Have you been there?”

“Yes.”

“Grandma!”

A woman at the next stall looked up, startled. Myralda raised one eyebrow.

“Would you like to invite the entire market square to this conversation?”

Althea leaned toward her. “When?”

“A long time ago.”

“With Mama?”

“Sometimes.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes people go places without some great mystery behind it.”

“How old was she?”

Myralda finally looked at her. “About as old as you.”

Althea felt something unpleasant prickle behind her ribs.

“And you won’t let me go.”

Myralda’s face changed.

Not angry. Not stern. Tired, more like. “I never told you that you couldn’t go.”

Althea fell silent. She was right about that. There had just always been a reason. When Althea was ten, she was too young. When she was fifteen, someone had to help at the stall. When she was seventeen, Myralda began to struggle with walking.

After that, Althea had never really asked again.
“You’re allowed to see the world,” Myralda said. Her voice had grown softer. “More than this market square. More than this street. More than Vaeloria.”
Althea looked at her. “With you?”
Myralda smiled. But her smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Maybe I’ve grown a little too slow for that.”
Althea wanted to say something. Then Myralda suddenly drew a sharp breath. One hand shot to the edge of the stall. “Grandma?”
“Nothing.”
“Sit down.”
“Althea”
“Sit.”
“You have a particularly irritating way of giving orders.”
“I learned it from you.”
Myralda finally sat down in her chair. Althea knelt beside her. “Give me your hand.”
“No.”
“Grandma.”
“It’s just tiredness.”
“I can feel that for myself.”
“That’s exactly why I’m not giving you my hand.”
Althea looked up. “What do you mean?”
Myralda sighed. Then she held out her hand after all. Althea took it carefully. Cold fingers. Thin skin. She closed her eyes. And searched. Myralda’s life force was there. Of course it was. But where in others it felt like a river, her grandmother’s felt like a stream at the end of a long summer. Still moving. Still alive. But weaker than Althea wanted to feel.
On instinct, she tried to send warmth toward her.
Myralda pulled her hand away. “No.”
Althea opened her eyes. “I can help.”
“I know.”
“Then let me.”

Myralda laid her hand against Althea's cheek. "Not everything that grows old is broken."

"But..."

"And not everything that ends needs to be fixed."

Althea looked away. She hated it when her grandmother talked like that.

As if growing old were something simple. As if ninety-one years could be enough.

As if there were an age at which you no longer needed someone.

"I'm not planning to drop dead tomorrow," said Myralda.

Althea looked back at once. "That's not funny."

"A little."

"Not even a little."

Myralda smiled. "Fine."

She stroked her thumb across Althea's cheek. "Then I promise I won't die today."

"Grandma."

"Today."

Althea pushed her hand away, but Myralda saw her smile. "Come," she said.

"We're closing early."

"It's not even noon."

"A privilege of my age."

"Of course."

Together they began clearing the stall. Althea stacked the jars into wooden crates while Myralda gathered the bundles of herbs.

Normally she protested when her grandmother tried to lift anything heavy.

Today she didn't have to. Myralda didn't even try.

When everything was packed, Althea stood in front of the stall for a moment.

Above her, the leaves moved. A girl ran past laughing while small white flowers sprang up from the earth behind her footsteps.

The travelers from Aetheria were long gone.

Probably already on the main road toward Avarys. Four days.

Althea looked toward the end of the street.

She didn't know why yet, but for the first time, that distance didn't feel far.

Behind her, Myralda clicked the lock of the stall shut. "Althea?"

“Yes?”
“Are you coming?”
She looked at the road one more time. “Yes.”
She walked over to her grandmother and slipped her arm through hers. Together they slowly started for home. Neither of them saw the small stone beside the leg of the stall. It had been lying there for years. Gray. Smooth. Unremarkable. Until Althea walked past. For a moment, it trembled. Then it went still again.
Their house stood at the edge of the city, where the cobblestones gave way to narrow paths between the trees.
Althea had lived there her whole life.
It wasn’t large, but almost every corner held a memory. Dried herbs hung from the beams. The windowsills held pots of plants that refused to grow anywhere else in Vaeloria. Above the hearth stood old glass bottles whose contents Althea had long since forgotten.
And in Myralda’s bedroom stood a small wooden box.
Althea didn’t know what was inside.
She only knew she was never allowed to touch it. It was perhaps the only rule Myralda had ever spoken without a joke.
When they got home, Althea helped her grandmother to her chair by the window.
“Tea?” she asked.
“With honey.”
“How much?”
“Enough.”
“That’s not an amount.”
“Then after nineteen years you still don’t know me.”
Althea smiled and went to the kitchen. When she came back, Myralda was sitting in her chair with her eyes closed.
“Grandma?”
“I’m not deaf.”
“You didn’t answer.”
“I was thinking.”
“About what?”

Myralda opened her eyes. For a while she said nothing. Then she looked at the closed door of her bedroom. “About things I should have told you sooner.”
Althea stood still. “What kind of things?”
“Put that tea down first.” She did as she was told.
Myralda didn’t take the cup. “Sit down, Althea.”
There was something in her voice Althea didn’t recognize. No mockery. No dry remark. No attempt to laugh her worries away. Althea sat down across from her.
“Grandma, you’re scaring me.”
“I know.”
Myralda looked at her hands. “You asked about your mother today.”
“I do that a lot.”
“And usually I don’t give you a proper answer.”
“Why not?”
“Because I thought silence would keep you safe.”
Althea frowned. “Safe from what?”
Myralda didn’t answer. She looked at the empty chair beside the hearth. “You know your grandfather’s name.”
“Dorian.”
“He wasn’t from Vaeloria.”
Althea looked at her in surprise. “Then where was he from?”
Myralda was quiet for a moment. “Kaelthar.”
The name hung between them.
“The vanished realm?”
“The realm everyone believes vanished.”
Althea sat up straighter. “What do you mean by that?”
“Dorian was still young when the war broke out. His homeland was attacked. He lost everything he knew and fled here.”
“And then he met you?”
For the first time, something soft appeared on Myralda’s face. “Yes.”
“Were you in love with him?”
“Unfortunately.”
Althea blinked. “Unfortunately?”

“The most stubborn man I ever met.”
“That sounds familiar.”
“Careful.”
Althea smiled faintly.
“He told me stories about his homeland. About stones that could move. About buildings that grew out of the earth.” Myralda ran her thumb along the edge of her chair. “And his whole life, he insisted Kaelthar still existed.”
“Did you believe him?”
“Not at first.”
“And later?”
“Later, I searched for years.”
Althea stared at her. “You? For Kaelthar?”
“I studied old maps. Questioned travelers. Followed roads that no longer seemed to lead anywhere.”
“And?”
“Nothing.”
Myralda looked toward the window. “No city. No people. Not a single clue that truly brought me any closer.”
“Then why do you still believe it exists?”
“Because I knew Dorian. And because he didn’t lie about this.”
A long silence followed. Althea looked at her hands.
“And Mama?” she finally asked. “Did she know?”
Myralda’s face changed. “Yes.”
She was silent for so long that Althea thought nothing more would come.
“Thessa inherited something from her father.”
“What?”
“His magic.”
Althea went rigid. “But Mama could heal. You told me that yourself.”
“She could.”
“Then…” Althea didn’t finish her sentence.
Myralda finished it for her. “She carried two powers within her.”

The room went quiet. Outside, the leaves stirred in the evening wind.
"That's forbidden," Althea whispered.
"I know."
"Everyone says that doesn't exist anymore."
"Your mother was the proof that they were wrong."
Althea felt her heart beat faster. "Did Papa know?"
"Of course. Rowan loved your mother. Not in spite of what she was, but because of who she was." Myralda took a deep breath. "Your parents didn't simply die, Althea."
Althea felt her stomach tighten. "What do you mean?"
"They were on their way to Kaelthar. Your mother wanted to find her father's homeland. A place where she wouldn't have to hide what she was."
"And me?"
"You were with them."
Something cold moved through Althea's chest. "What happened?"
"On the way, they were discovered. Captured." Myralda's voice grew softer.
"Your mother used both her powers to protect you."
Althea's throat tightened. "And Papa?"
"Rowan stayed with her." Myralda swallowed. "Neither of them came back."
"But I did."
"Yes."
"How?"
Myralda slowly shook her head. "I don't know, child. I've wanted to know for nineteen years."
"Who captured them?"
"I don't know that either." She tried to stand. Althea jumped to her feet.
"Grandma, stay seated."
"Then help me."
"Where to?"
"My bedroom." Althea put her arm around Myralda and slowly helped her up. In the bedroom, Myralda pointed to the small wooden box on a shelf beside her bed.
Althea stopped. The box.

“That box?”
“Yes.”
“You always said I wasn’t allowed to touch it.”
“And for once in your life, you listened.”
Althea didn’t smile. Myralda drew a small key from a cord hidden beneath her clothes. She handed it to Althea.
“Open it.”
Althea looked at her. “Are you sure?”
“Please.”
Carefully, Althea took the box from the shelf. The wood was dark and worn smooth. Along the edges ran thin carved lines that met one another like tiny cracks in stone. She slid the key into the lock. A soft click. The lid opened. Inside lay a crystal. No bigger than a small plum.
Deep in color, with golden veins running straight through the stone.
Althea leaned closer. “What is that?”
“It belonged to Dorian.” Myralda carefully sat down on the edge of her bed.
“Then to your mother.”
“And now?”
“Now to you.”
Althea looked at the crystal again. “But Mama had it with her, didn’t she? On that road?”
“Yes.”
“Then how did it end up here?”
Myralda looked at the golden veins. “One morning it was simply here. In this box. A few days after you were brought back to me.”
Althea stared at her. “Just like that?”
“Dorian always said it finds its way back to the one it belongs to.”
Myralda smiled faintly. “I thought he was exaggerating. He exaggerated a lot.”
Althea wanted to reach out, but hesitated. “Why was I never allowed to touch it?”
“Because I first had to be sure you understood how dangerous it is.”
“Dangerous?”
“Anyone without Kaelthar blood who touches it with bare hands is burned.”

Althea pulled her hand back. “And you?”
“I have never touched it with my bare hands.”
“What am I supposed to do with it?”
“Touch it.”
“Grandma, you just said…”
“I know what I said.”
“And if I get burned?”
Myralda looked straight at her. “Then we both have a very big problem.”
Normally Althea would have laughed at that. Not now. She took a slow breath and reached out. Her fingers touched the crystal. No pain. No burn. Only warmth. A deep, strange warmth, nothing like the life force she used every day.
It was heavier. Quieter. As if something beneath her skin was waking that had been asleep for a very long time. Althea held her breath. For a moment, the golden veins lit up. Then they faded again.
“Grandma…”
Myralda looked at the crystal in Althea’s hand. There were tears in her eyes.
“Dorian was right.”
“About what?”
“That one day it would recognize someone again.”
Althea carefully turned the crystal between her fingers. “What is it?”
“Dorian called it his way home.”
“What does that mean?”
“I asked him a hundred times.”
“And?”
“He only laughed.”
Althea looked up. “Then I don’t even know where to begin.”
“You don’t have to know everything today.” Myralda gently took her free hand. “Begin in Avarys. Look for the old history. For what truly happened during the war.”
“Why are you only telling me this now?”
Myralda lowered her head slightly. “Because for too long I believed I could protect you by keeping you here.”

“And now?”
“Now you have to decide for yourself what to do with the truth.”
Althea looked at the crystal. “You want me to go?”
“I want you to live, Althea.” Myralda’s voice trembled. “And not spend your whole life afraid of something you don’t yet understand.” She squeezed Althea’s hand gently. “Kaelthar exists, Althea.” A silence. “Look for it.” One more breath. “Find it.”
Althea felt tears burning behind her eyes. “Then we’ll go together.”
Myralda smiled. “Sweetheart…”
“We’ll take a cart. We’ll travel slowly. Four days to Avarys, you said so yourself.”
“Althea.”
“And when you get tired, we’ll stop. That doesn’t matter, does it?”
Myralda laid her hand against Althea’s cheek. The same gesture as at the market.
“You have to promise me something.”
Althea shook her head. “Not if you’re going to talk like that.”
“Listen.”
“No.”
“Althea.”
The weight in her voice made Althea fall silent. “Never use your powers to become someone you’re not.” Althea looked at her, not understanding.
“What do you mean?”
“Power can protect. But it can also destroy. Even when you believe you’re doing the right thing.” Myralda tucked a loose strand of hair behind Althea’s ear.
“Promise me you’ll remember that.”
Althea nodded slowly. “I promise.”
“Good.” Myralda lowered her hand. “And now I want to sleep.”
Althea hastily wiped her cheeks dry. “You haven’t eaten yet.”
“I’m ninety-one, not five.”
“That doesn’t mean you don’t need food.”
“Tomorrow.”
Althea sighed. “You’re impossible.”
“I heard your grandfather say that often too.”

She helped her grandmother under the blankets. Then she set the box on the table beside the bed. She carefully laid the crystal back inside. For the first time, she closed the box without turning the key. Myralda looked at it. “It’s yours, Althea.”
“I know.”
“Don’t forget that.”
Althea sat down beside her. “I don’t forget anything.”
Myralda smiled. “I doubt that. Every morning you forget where you left your shoes.”
“Grandma.”
“And your tea.”
“Grandma.”
“And last week my…”
“Go to sleep.”
Myralda laughed softly. It was a tired laugh. But it was her laugh.
And despite everything she had just heard, Althea felt safe again for a moment.
That night, Althea stayed awake longer than usual.
The box stood beside her grandmother’s bed. Still, she kept seeing the crystal every time she closed her eyes.
Her grandfather came from Kaelthar. Her mother had possessed two powers. Her parents hadn’t simply died.
And somewhere there was a realm everyone believed had vanished.
Althea turned onto her side. How could Myralda have kept something like this from her for nineteen years? She wanted to be angry. But every time she thought of her grandmother’s pale hands, the anger faded. Tomorrow, she decided. Tomorrow she would ask her everything. About Dorian. About Thessa and Rowan. About the crystal. About Kaelthar.
She closed her eyes.
For the first time in years, she dreamed of a place she had never seen.
When Althea woke the next morning, the house was quiet. No clinking of cups. No grumbling about too little honey. No voice telling her she had slept too long again. “Grandma?” She waited. No answer.
Althea got up and walked to the bedroom.

Myralda lay exactly as Althea had left her the night before. On her side. One hand above the blankets. Her silver-gray hair spread across the pillow.
“Grandma?” Althea walked to the bed. “We still have to open the stall.” She smiled faintly. “Or are you taking advantage of your age again today?” Myralda didn’t answer. The smile faded. Althea sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand. Cold. Far too cold. “Grandma?” She closed her eyes and searched for the familiar stream of life force. Nothing. No. That couldn’t be. She tried again. Deeper this time. Her own magic gathered in her chest at once. Warmth flowed through her arms to her fingers. “Come on,” she whispered. The green glow appeared around her hands. “Please.” She searched for the life force she had still felt yesterday. That weak little stream. There had to be something. Something she could mend. But there was nothing left to guide. The glow around her fingers began to tremble. Althea felt her own power draining away. She knew she had to stop. She knew what Myralda had always taught her.
Death stayed death. And old age could not be healed. Still, she tried one more time. Until the warmth left her hands and she sank, exhausted, against the edge of the bed. “No…” She laid her head on Myralda’s chest.
No heartbeat. “You said today,” she whispered. The tears came before she could stop them. “You said you wouldn’t die today.” Althea stayed where she was.
She didn’t know for how long. Outside, the birds began to sing. Somewhere in the distance, the first market stalls were opening.
The world simply went on. As if nothing had changed.
But for Althea, everything was different. At last, she lifted her head.
On the table beside the bed stood yesterday’s empty cup.
There was still a little honey at the bottom. Althea began to cry again.
She took her grandmother’s hand and held it against her cheek. “I’ll find it,” she whispered. Her gaze fell on the wooden box. She didn’t know how yet. She didn’t know who would help her. She didn’t even know where to begin, except for the name of a city she knew only from stories. Avarys. Four days’ journey.
Althea looked at Myralda one last time. “I promise.”
Beneath the lid of the box, something glowed gold for a moment.
Only an instant. Then everything was still again.

# 2

## The stones

In Vaeloria, the dead were not buried among stone.
Myralda had always thought it a strange custom of other realms.
"You live among roots," she had once said. "Why would you suddenly want to lie under a cold slab afterward?"
So her grave lay beneath an old linden tree. Exactly as she had wanted.
The tree stood on a hill just outside the city, among fields where the grass grew high enough to brush against Althea's ankles. From there you could see the rooftops, the market in the distance, and, when the sky was clear enough, a narrow strip of the great road to Avarys.
Today, Althea looked at none of it.
She stood beside the grave with her hands folded together.
The crystal hung beneath her black cloak, in a small leather pouch on a cord around her neck. Cold. Still.
People had come from everywhere.
Customers from the stall. Neighbors. Market vendors. People whose names Althea didn't even know, but who told her that Myralda had once helped their child, treated their fever, or given them an herbal mixture when they couldn't pay for it. Althea knew her grandmother had been loved.
She just hadn't realized how many lives she had touched.
Serena stood before the grave.
Myralda's oldest friend. Her long silver-gray hair hung in a loose braid over her shoulder, and her dark green eyes were red from crying.
She knelt and laid both hands on the earth.
Slowly, a green glow appeared between her fingers.
The grass around the grave stirred.
Small stems pushed up through the dark soil. First one. Then dozens.
White flowers opened. Althea swallowed. Myralda had loved white flowers.
Someone beside her began to cry softly. Althea didn't.

She had cried so much over the past few days that it felt as if her body had simply stopped. Serena rose. “We give back what was given to us,” she said.
One by one, the people around Althea laid something on the earth.
A sprig of rosemary. A flower. An apple. A small pouch of herbs. An old man set down a jar of honey.
Despite everything, Althea had to smile. Of course. Myralda would probably have been offended that no one had thought to bring a spoon.
Then it was Althea’s turn. She hadn’t brought anything.

She only realized it when everyone was looking at her.

For a moment she panicked. Then she felt something in her coat pocket.

A small dried leaf. Silverleaf. From the stall. Althea looked at it. It was crumpled.
She knelt by the grave and placed it among the white flowers.
“Sorry,” she whispered. “You’d say I ruined it.”
A laugh escaped somewhere behind her. Not mean. Warm.
And suddenly that felt better than crying.

Althea brushed her fingers across the earth once.
“Goodbye, Grandma.”
That was all she could manage. She stood. Slowly, the people left.

First those who had come from farther away. Then the neighbors.
The market vendors stayed a little longer. They hugged Althea, offered food, offered help, all offering more or less the same thing without really knowing what to say. Althea thanked them. Later, she couldn’t remember who had said what.
In the end, only the older woman from the stall next to Myralda’s stayed with her.
“You don’t have to go to the market tomorrow,” she said.
Althea looked at her. “I wasn’t planning to.”
“Or the day after.”
“I know.”
“And you don’t have to decide what to do with the stall yet.”
Althea looked at the flowers on the grave. “I know.”
The woman gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “Your grandmother would be furious if you stayed behind that counter out of guilt.”

That sounded so exactly like Myralda that Althea almost expected to hear her voice somewhere behind her.
"She said that herself."
"Then I'd listen to her for once."
Althea smiled weakly. The woman started down the hill. After a few steps, she turned around. "Are you coming?"
"In a bit." She hesitated.
"Don't stay alone too long."
Althea nodded. Then she was gone. The hill went quiet.

Althea pulled her cloak tighter around herself. There was hardly any wind.

Beneath the linden, the white flowers swayed gently. She looked at the grave. Now that everyone was gone, it felt more real.
Myralda lay there. Not at home. Not by the fire. Not behind her stall. Here.
Althea sat down in the grass. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do now."
It felt stupid to talk to a grave. So she did it again.
"You left me behind awfully easily. With a crystal, a vanished realm, and far too few answers." No answer. "Typical." Althea looked into the distance.
From here she could see the great road. Very small. A thin pale line through the green. Four days to Avarys. Myralda had said it as if it were simple.
Look for it. Find it.
As if Althea could simply pack a bag and leave. She had never traveled alone farther than a few villages away. She didn't know how to find a room in a strange city. She didn't know how much four days of food cost. She didn't even know if she could rent a horse without being cheated. "Well prepared," she muttered.
She took the crystal out of the pouch. It caught the light. Just a stone. She turned it between her fingers. Dorian had called it his way home. She still didn't understand what that meant. This was her home. Vaeloria. The house. The market. Myralda. At least… Not that last one anymore. Althea let the crystal slide back into the pouch. Then she heard something. Tick. She looked up. Nothing. Tick. Althea turned her head. "Hello?" No answer. A bird, maybe. She was about to stand. Then something moved beside the grave. A small pebble. Althea stayed where she was. The pebble rolled a few inches through the grass. Stopped. She

frowned. There was almost no wind. Another stone moved. This one lay on the other side of the grave. Althea slowly got to her feet. “What…”
A third pebble trembled. The crystal against her chest grew warm. Althea grabbed it. The warmth grew. In front of her, the first pebble lifted off the ground.
Not high. Barely a hand’s width. But it hovered. Althea forgot to breathe.
Then a second one rose. And a third. One more. Within seconds, seven small stones hung around Myralda’s grave. Althea took a step back. The stones moved. Slowly. In a circle. She looked around. No one. “Who’s doing that?”
The circle kept turning. The crystal grew hotter. Althea pulled the pouch away from her skin. The stones rose a little higher. Her heart pounded. This wasn’t life force. Nothing was growing. Nothing was alive. Stone wasn’t supposed to move.
“Althea!”
She jumped. At the bottom of the hill, someone was waving at her.
“Are you coming?”
Althea looked away for a fraction of a second. Behind her came a series of dull taps. She turned back. The stones lay in the grass. Still. As if nothing had happened. Althea stood motionless. “Althea?”
“Yes!” Her voice sounded strange. She bent down and picked up one of the pebbles. Just stone. Gray. Cold. She turned it over. Nothing special. Then she closed her fingers around it. For a moment, very deep down, she felt something. Not warmth. Not life. Something else. A line. A shape. A tiny crack inside that she couldn’t possibly see. Althea dropped the stone. She recoiled. Her eyes went to the grave. Then to the crystal. Myralda’s words came back. And not spend your whole life afraid of something you don’t yet understand. Althea looked at the road in the distance. Avarys. For the first time, it no longer felt like a city she would like to visit someday. It felt like an answer. She tucked the pouch back beneath her cloak. “What did you give me, Grandma?” The white flowers swayed gently around the grave. This time, nothing answered. Althea turned and walked down the hill. Behind her, the grave remained beneath the old linden.
And among the white flowers lay a single gray pebble. A few moments after Althea had disappeared, it slowly slid closer to Myralda’s grave.

# 3

## Four days

Three days after the funeral, Althea opened the stall for the last time.
She had convinced herself it would be simple.
Awning up. Jars out. Herbs hung. Money box under the counter. Exactly as she had done it hundreds of times.
Only Myralda's chair stood empty. Althea hadn't counted on that.
She kept looking at it while the market woke up around her.
With a short gesture, a merchant ripened a row of tomatoes a little further. Two children were trying to splash each other with water from a fountain. Across the way, the flower seller was opening her first buds of the day.
Everything went on. Only at their stall was someone missing.
Althea picked up Myralda's chair and set it behind the cloth.
That helped a little. Above her still hung the old sign.
MYRALDA
The golden letters were almost completely worn away.
Althea ran her fingers along the wood. "One day," she murmured.
The news had apparently spread faster than she had expected.
Before noon, there was a line. Not because everyone suddenly needed wound salve. People came to say goodbye. A baker bought six packets of sleeping tea while clearly having no idea what to do with them.
"Six?"
"My wife sleeps badly."
"Since when?"
He thought about it. "Probably starting tomorrow." Althea looked at him.
He slid the coins toward her and took the packets. "Your grandmother gave me a discount for years."
"My grandmother gave everyone a discount."
"That's why she never had any money."
"That's what I always told her."

The baker smiled. “That sounds like her.”
He left without taking his change. The next customer did the same. And the one after that. By midday, Althea began to understand.
“You don’t have to do this.”
The woman in front of her set down three coins for a jar that cost one. “I know.”
“Then why…”
“Because you’re going to Avarys.”
Althea froze. “How do you know that?”
The woman shrugged. “Your grandmother had been telling everyone for months that you’d go to Avarys someday.”
“Of course.”
That sounded exactly like Myralda. Tell Althea nothing. But the whole market was apparently allowed to be prepared. The woman picked up her salve. “She was proud of you.”
Althea looked at the money box. “I know.”
For the first time, she could say it without her throat closing up.
By late afternoon, almost every shelf was empty.
Althea kept only what she would need herself.
Dried silverleaf. A small jar of wound salve. Two herbal mixtures for fever.
Bandages. A bottle of Myralda’s strongest tincture.
And the old herb book that lay on the kitchen shelf at home. The rest had been sold. She counted the coins three times. More than enough for the journey.
Probably enough to stay in Avarys for a while, too.
That idea felt stranger than it should have. A while. Not one day. Not just a quick look. She was really going. Althea looked out over the market. At the edge of the square, a cart stood ready to leave. Two horses in front. Wooden benches in the back. A sign on its side listed three villages and, beneath them, one name that caught her attention at once.
AVARYS
She walked over to the driver. “When do you leave?”
The man looked at the sky. “Tomorrow morning. At sunrise.”
“How long?”

“Four days if the roads are good.”
Four days. Myralda’s voice was in her head at once.
Four. With a good cart.
Althea swallowed. “Is there still room?”
“One seat.”
Of course. “Hold it for me.”
The driver held out his hand. “Two silver.”
Althea looked at him. “One.”
“One and a half.”
“One, and you get a jar of wound salve.”
He looked at her empty stall. “The good stuff?”
“Myralda’s.”
His whole manner changed at once. “Deal.”
Althea shook his hand. Maybe this traveling thing would work out after all. She waited until almost everyone had gone. Then she began taking down the stall. Not all of it. The wooden frame stayed. The market master would decide later who got the spot. Althea only took away what belonged to them.
The baskets. The cloths. The empty jars. Myralda’s chair. Last of all, she looked at the sign.
MYRALDA
She couldn’t leave it behind. Althea climbed onto the counter and unfastened it.
“You’re not taking that all the way to Avarys, are you?”
The flower seller from across the way stood with her hands on her hips.
Althea looked at the big wooden sign. “No.”
“Thank goodness.”
“That would be ridiculous.”
“Very.”
Althea jumped down from the counter. “I’m taking it home.”
The woman smiled. “Better.”
She hesitated for a moment.
“Come back whenever you like.”
Althea looked at the empty spot behind her. “Maybe.”