

Prolog

The pains came more frequently now. Even with the help of Edwina, it was difficult to run. In the cramped darkness of the tunnel, she tried to maintain her footing, an all but impossible task with the burgeoning weight of her belly. Time was of the essence. They must not be caught. But the spasms were near to unbearable.

“I can’t go on,” she gasped, a sharp pang taking her breath away.

“Just a little bit further, Your Highness,” the enchantress coaxed.

Every step down the seemingly endless passageway was sheer torment. Queen Ivy willed herself to continue. She was the last hope for her people. She must not fail.

Edwina stopped so abruptly, the queen stumbled into her back. The enchantress pulled the debilitated monarch through a narrow gap in the wall. They crossed the threshold of a doorway into the depths underneath the forest. A tangle of tree roots filled the cavern, their sinuous forms dwarfing the fairies. A robust scent infused the air with bark, stone and earth. Queen Ivy, a Volant used to the skies, reeled at the unfamiliar smells and fell to her knees.

The enchantress, more experienced with Groundling habitats, remained unaffected and surveyed the area. She assisted the queen to a nook hidden between the sides of two large tree roots, which soared overhead out of sight to meet the trunk of the tree somewhere way above.

“Wait here,” she instructed, a moot directive to her incapacitated companion.

While Edwina disappeared the way they came, Ivy settled her awkward frame down. She wondered how it had come to this. The past few months had turned her world upside down. To be hunted by one’s own sister was horrifying enough, but to know her baby was targeted for death rocked her to her very core. Instinctively, her hand flew to her stomach, the muscles again tightening with the tremors of labor.

Her friend returned, hair disheveled, wings drooping. “As far as I can tell, we may have lost them in the maze of tunnels. I have used some cloaking measures along the way and put a spell on the door to keep others out. But your sister’s powers are strong. If she were to find us...”

“She will find us. It is only a matter of time,” the queen declared. Dahlia was learned enough in dark magic to track even a covered trail.

“Well, it is time for this baby, so here will have to do.”

Queen Ivy sighed heavily. When she found out she was with child so many months ago, she had not envisioned giving birth in a dark hole underground. The enchantress spread a blanket on the earth for the queen to lie on. She checked the progress of the baby and nodded.

“She is ready. You need to push.”

Above all, the baby must survive. Without her, the prophecy would remain unfulfilled and the kingdom would never be restored. The monarch braced herself against one of the roots, its surface surprisingly warm and smooth. Under the calm direction of her lifelong friend, she delivered the child.

Edwina laid the baby girl into her arms. Ivy admired the feathery blond hair and the round little nose. Tears welled in her eyes at the sheer perfection of the infant. The enchantress finished tending to the mother and turned her attention to the child. After a quick examination, she ripped a length of fabric off of Ivy’s skirt to wrap her. “You could not have asked for a healthier daughter. Now what shall her name be?”

“Her name?” the queen pondered. “I’d not thought of one. All I have thought of is her safety.”

Before Edwina responded, they heard it—the rattle of armor. Soldier’s footsteps approached, their faint clinking unmistakable. Both women froze in terror.

“She found us,” Ivy whispered in dread, her arms tightening around the baby.

“Perhaps not. Perhaps it is King Theros on his way to tell us he defeated Dahlia.”

The footsteps grew louder.

“No,” the queen affirmed. “It is my sister. I feel her presence. You must take the baby to the other world and keep her safe until the time is right. Dahlia cannot follow you there.”

The soldier’s armor rang loudly in their ears. They came to a halt right outside the doorway.

“Come then,” the enchantress conceded, holding out a hand to help her friend rise.

“No. I must stay and try to defeat her. Take her.” She thrust the infant into Edwina’s arms. “Go now.”

Loud hammering filled the air with the enemy’s attempt to break the door down.

“But my queen, she will show you no mercy. I will not leave you here to die.”

Queen Ivy leaned forward and placed her hands on her friend’s which cradle the child. She slipped the amulet inside the swaddling. “Yes, Edwina, you must. I command it. Take her now. Keep her safe.”

The enchantress desperately tried to think of another way. Axes and spears crashed upon the door, weakening her spell with every stroke. Sadly, she stepped back and conjured the words to transport her between the worlds, a power only she in the kingdom possessed.

The new mother watched the toss of the seeds and the whispered spell. A cloud of dust encircled her friend and her baby. Too weak to even stand, she blinked through her tears. Just before the two vanished, she said, “Lina. I want her name to be Lina.”

Edwina nodded, the final wish heard. With a poof, they were gone.

The door finally gave way, a multitude of soldiers pouring in, their armor dark as night. Queen Ivy turned to see her sister step through the broken threshold. Dahlia scrutinized the scene, the deflated belly of the queen, the cloud of dust on the ground. Her eyes narrowed in malice. The baby was beyond her reach...for now. She met Ivy’s eyes and despised the look of triumph in them.

“Kill her,” she ordered.

The queen had time to whisper one last anguished prayer for her daughter before an arrow pierced her heart.

Sixteen Years Later

Chapter One

Lina pushed her hair out of her face and wrote her list with great care. She did not make as many trips to the healer's cabin since her mother's health declined and she wanted to make sure nothing was forgotten. Her parents were in their older years when they had adopted her, at an age when they were more likely to be grandparents. When a sudden illness took her father at the end of last fall, her mother's strength suffered. The girl, only sixteen, took on the role of caretaker, determined to act with the same love and devotion they showed her.

"Don't forget to ask Winnie for more turmeric. My knee has been acting up," the

older woman called weakly from her bed.

"All right," the girl replied. She scribbled another line onto her list.

In the darkened bedroom, she refilled a glass of water on the nightstand. The room brightened when she pulled open the curtains. "You should let some light in. It's not good to keep them closed all day."

Her mother smiled at her, but said nothing. The winter stole much of the older woman's vitality arriving right on the heels of her husband's death. Lina hoped the coming spring may lift her spirits. With one last glance to make sure all was in order, she fetched her shawl and headed out the door. Her snug cottage nestled on the border of a rambling forest. The healer's cabin sat a good walk into the woods.

On the path through the trees to old Winnie's house, Lina pulled her wrap tighter around her shoulders. The steel grey sky guarded against the sun's warmth. Though signs of a lovely spring could be seen in the forest, winter was loath to release its relenting grip. A few squirrels stirred in the underbrush, but there was still no birdsong in the trees. With a sigh, the girl reminded herself they would return soon, especially her favorite swallow. Her springtime friend's arrival was always a source of comfort for her.

According to the townsfolk, Winnie was not a healer, but a witch. Lina's mother did not encourage the use of the word witch, her mouth pursed into a small circle when someone used it. Yet, the girl could think of no more appropriate word

to describe the strange woman. With long grey hair and a hunched back hidden under long, black robes, she certainly looked the part. Though Lina had to concede, Winnie did not act it. She was odd, but kind. Without her knowledge of herbs, Lina's mother would not have outlasted her illness this long. At this thought, Lina quickened her pace.

At length, the small cabin appeared, the brown structure blending seamlessly with the barren woods. The nearest town was a mile or so off. Lina's family did not get many visitors at the forest's edge. The cabin was all but ignored by the townspeople, but for the few who did take advantage of her healer's knowledge. In the warm months, a multitude of climbing flowers covered its walls and roof; today their empty limbs wrapped the house in a skeletal grip.

The infamous wind chimes rang all year round despite the weather, their tinkling heard long before the cabin came into view. Dozens of tiny bells clanked with every move of air, a tannic iron smell drifting from them. They overwhelmed the low lying branches outside the house like ripe fruit waiting to fall. Why Winnie had so many was anyone's guess. Absently, Lina twisted the amulet around her neck, a plain clear stone she wore since she was too small to remember. Sometimes she swore it vibrated around the chimes though she knew this was a childish notion.

Once on the porch, chimes cluttered every available space. Lina ducked around several to find the front door. It stood ajar, so she leaned inside a bit. "Winnie?"

"Come in," the familiar voice called.

She entered the large main room, its space aglow with the light of many candles. Small, thin and white, they littered all surfaces, counterparts to the chimes outside. Lina took a few steps around the muddle of mismatched furniture and overflowing bookshelves. Every surface was covered with bottles, papers and unrecognizable trinkets, most layered with a thick film of dust.

The witch shuffled into the room, her stooped posture slowing the process. In her hands was a tray of cookies. She motioned the girl to sit, the long black sleeve of her robe swaying softly. "How is Hazel feeling today?"

Lina perched on the edge of a ratty old chair, the fabric worn to nothing in the seat and the arms. She found it difficult to relax in the woman's presence, always feeling intensely scrutinized, but for what she did not know.

“She is still weak. Her appetite failed to increase despite the gentian you gave her last time.”

“Oh, I had hoped the herb would help, but the death of Felix hit her hard. They were together for so many years.” Winnie stated. She pushed the tray of cookies toward Lina, who took one.

“Yes,” the girl agreed between nibbles, “she hasn’t been herself since. Hopefully, the warmer weather will perk her up.”

The old woman nodded. She went to her workbench where she gathered some vials, her crooked body an awkward array of motions. The strong scent of herbs filled the air as she poured liquids and ground leaves to powder. After depositing the completed remedies into a burlap bag, she shuffled back and with a smile, dropped two cookies inside it before handing it to the girl.

Part of Lina wanted to stay and talk to the healer. After all, she must be lonely out her all by herself, but she did not know what to say. While the woman’s eyes studied her intently she rose to leave, grasping the parcel close as she navigated her way to the door. Winnie hobbled slowly to see her out.

“You are a good daughter,” the witch praised, watching her from the porch. “Remember, I am always here if you need me.”

A gust of wind blew and Lina’s thanks were drowned out by the cacophony of chimes. Once on the path home, she again pulled her shawl tight around her, though the air was fresh and crisp, Winnie’s stare gave her the chills. When the chimes faded into the background, she shook off the eerie feeling Winnie always evoked in her.

The medicine helped ease her mother’s pain, but did little to restore her health. Day by day, as spring roused the earth, drawing forth the plants and animals, Hazel faded, her strength not improved by the awakening of life around her. Despite all her efforts, Lina could do nothing to stem the tide.

One afternoon, she bundled her mother up, though there was little coldness in the air, and assisted her to a rocker on the front porch. Side by side they sat content in the silence of each other’s company. Flowers bloomed all around, their aroma carrying softly though the air. The girl threw some seeds down so they could watch the birds flutter and peck in front of them.

“Look,” Lina cried at the sight of a particular bird, “It’s Knox. Our swallow is back.”

Swallows were not common in the area, but this one had been coming to roost every year since the girl could remember. So distinct were his markings, he was recognized immediately and celebrated as the true herald of warm weather's return. As with most of his kind, his head and wings were blue and most of his body white, except for his red face. But, he had a unique spray of red feathers shaped like a heart on his chest. Never had Lina seen it on any other swallow. When she was quite little, Winnie suggested the name Knox and the name sounded as regal and handsome to Lina as he was.

He landed on the porch rail in front of them, a happy song trilling from his beak. Hazel smiled, a relieved look crossing her face. Perhaps this would be the event which would pull her back toward health. Knox hopped around a bit before soaring to the nearby tree hollow where he always nested.

After a long silence, Hazel said, "Go inside, go under the bed and bring me the small purple bag from the chest."

"The small bag?" Lina repeated disbelieving.

Her mother nodded a firm assent.

The girl went to the bedroom and crept to the bed. She pulled a rowan box out from under it. With a certain amount of awe, she lifted the lid. To others, it would merely look like a jumble of papers, a few keepsakes, and a small velvet bag, but to their family, they were precious relics—a marriage license, adoption papers, a tiny handprint stamped in clay, a drawing Felix made of his beloved wife, and the bag. These items told the story of their lives.

Lina picked up the bag, a slight shudder passing through her. What lay inside was a mystery to her. One time when she was younger, on a rare occasion when the box was actually opened, she picked it up, fascinated by the luxurious fabric and shiny golden cord. Both her parents called out in fright for her to put it down, which she did without question. It was the only time she remembered either of them raising a voice to her. And now, her mother asked for this very thing.

Back on the porch, she carefully handed it over. Hazel took it hesitantly. Again, they sat in silence, Lina too afraid to ask any questions. For a long while, the only sounds were the creaking of the old rockers and Knox's song while he happily built his nest.

"Lina, when I am gone, you must promise me something," Hazel finally said.

“Yes, mother, anything.”

“You must take this bag and give it Winnie. Do you understand?”

“Winnie?” she replied, confusion in her tone mixed with unease.

“Yes, promise me you will do this,” her mother said sternly.

“Of course. I promise.”

“Good, sweetheart. Now put it back where it is safe,” she requested in a softer tone.

Though bewildered, Lina did as she was told placing the bag inside the chest and pushing it back under the bed. When she exited the bedroom, her mother, who seemed invigorated by the conversation, came inside and sat at the table for dinner. For the first time in many months, she cleaned her plate. The unease Lina felt over their strange conversation disappeared, replaced by a hope for her mother’s recovery.

That night, Hazel embraced her daughter for an extra moment before she settled into her bed, a new sense of calm about her the girl could feel. She sat with her mother, softly singing songs until the woman drifted to sleep. Even then, she found it difficult to pull herself away to her own bed.

Lina rose the next morning to the sun streaming into her room. Birds sang sweetly outside, her Knox’s tune easy to pick out. With a stretch, she rose and dressed. After lighting the fire, she set the kettle over it for their morning tea.

She opened the bedroom door with a smile on her face, but quickly froze. With one look, she knew. Her mother lay still, flat on the bed, an expression of peace on her lifeless face and the velvet bag clutched to her heart.

Chapter Two

The last of the handful of mourners said their good-byes. Lina stood alone at her parents' grave, one side just budding with new grass, the other a dark pile of earth. A gloomy sky hung overhead, clouds ready to burst at any moment. Her swallow sang a mournful tune from the trees above. Thunder rumbled across the small cemetery.

For the first time in her sixteen years, Lina was alone. That her parents were together again was some source of consolation for the girl. They had always been two halves of a whole and Hazel was never the same after the passing of Felix. Their small cottage belonged to her now, its gardens providing ample food for the warm months. It would be up to her to perform all the harvesting and preserving which winter required.

A fat raindrop fell on her face, followed by several more. By the time she neared home, the skies opened up in earnest. She ran onto the front porch sopping wet. A neighbor had left a pie by the door which she collected and brought into the kitchen. When her clothes were changed, she prepared a small supper for herself. Alone at the table, she dined, the clink of the fork her only company.

Silence surrounded her in its suffocating grip.

For the next few days, she went through the ordinary motions, trying to regain some type of normalcy, but they were now all but hollow actions. She had no extended family and in the past only the occasional visitor ever stopped in, yet Lina had never felt lonely with only her mother and father as company. Now though, it seeped into every crack of her being. Such a new and unfamiliar feeling was this longing for someone...anyone.

Her future was unclear. She knew the day would come when her parents passed away, but she did not imagine it would be this soon. In her mind, she envisioned herself years from now married and with a family before this problem arose. Life, however, as it often does, had other plans. If she chose to stay here, she could make a living selling fresh and canned goods, but it would be a solitary existence. Yet, she would have much to learn if she chose to move to the nearest

village or even relocate to a larger town. Such a move would put her completely out of her depth. No clear decision formed in her mind or her heart.

One evening, she slumped into the one of the rockers on the porch, the sun low in the sky. Her eyes stared emptily across the yard. Knox flew down and perched on the rail. He cocked his head to regard her. When she didn't move, he bounced back and forth and cocked his head again.

“What do you want?” she asked, surprising herself. It was the first time she spoke aloud in days. “Some seed no doubt.”

He called out a few notes and leaned forward eagerly. Lina went inside to find a handful of breadcrumbs which she laid on the rail. He pecked it all up and ruffled his feathers in satisfaction when finished. The girl laughed—another foreign sound. The burden on her heart eased a bit, even after Knox flew home for the night.

The next day, she woke early and set about cleaning the house, a task she had been neglecting. Once all was set in order in the main room, she went to her parents' bedroom. She pulled open the curtains, dusted the furniture and brought the bedding outside to be aired. Her mother never would have wanted the room to be closed up like a dusty tomb. Later that afternoon, she brought the freshened quilt back inside. When she tossed it across the bed, her toe hit something hard underneath. The chest. On the morning of her mother's death, she hastily tossed the bag inside of it and meticulously avoided all thoughts of it since.

The promise she made to Hazel loomed over her. Slowly, she knelt to slide the chest out. Its lid opened with a tiny creak and she thrust in her hand to grab it. With the bag in hand, Lina returned to the main room. She sat at the kitchen table, laying the bag down in front of her. There it sat while she stared down at it. A noise from the bedroom startled her. Knox flew in from the open window. He landed on the table next to the bag, again cocking his head to watch her. When she remained still, he took the golden string in his beak and attempted to fly. The weight of the bag held it down, but he managed to move it slightly across the table in her direction. He stared at her.

“All right,” she heaved a sigh, “I will go to Winnie's tomorrow.”

Pleased, the bird flew to her shoulder where he leaned to rub his head against her cheek before flying back out the way he came in.

Lina picked up the pouch, her fingers running over the soft napped fabric, which she considered positively luxurious as a child. Though heavy for a swallow, it felt like next to nothing in her hand. Whatever was inside, it could not be much. She debated whether to open it now or wait. The sheer looks of fear on the faces of her parents when she first touched it flew to mind. When she later questioned her mother about it, Hazel said it was important and must not be lost. It was never mentioned again until the day before she died, but then, there was not fear, only deep respect.

Curiosity finally got the better of Lina. She tugged the strings open and turned the bag over. Into the palm of her hand fell three barley corns.

That was it?

Whatever her mind imagined the contents to be; these mundane seeds were certainly a letdown. Why her parents reacted so harshly when she first touched it was beyond her. Disappointed, she put them back in the pouch and went to bed.

As promised, the next morning she headed for Winnie's, bag in hand. A warm spring sun made the walk far more enjoyable than her last trip. Birds sang happy tunes, swooping from tree to tree. Squirrels frolicked in the underbrush, their bushy tails popping out every so often. Flowers burst into bloom around every footfall.

The lilt of wind chimes floated through the air long before Lina saw the cabin, her amulet vibrating at the sound. The structure appeared to melt right out of the forest in front of her. A few steps from the porch, she halted in surprise. There on the top step was Winnie with Knox on the railing next to her as though they waited expectantly for her arrival.

"There, there, child, do not be alarmed. Come," the witch gestured her forward. "It is time for you to learn the meaning of those barley corns."

Chapter Three

While Lina mounted the steps, the swallow chirped excitedly. Winnie put a guiding hand on her shoulder and led her inside. They settled down at a small dining table piled high with papers and books. The old woman cleared a large space and laid a plate of cookies down. Knox landed on the back of the girl's chair. Silently, Lina laid the bag on the wooden surface between them. Outside, chimes and birds tried to outdo each other's clamor.

"Did Hazel ever speak of this?" the witch inquired, a nod at the bag while she pushed the plate of cookies closer. Lina took one to be polite.

"No. Once when I was younger I picked it up. Both my parents yelled at me to put it down, it was almost as if they were frightened of it. They told me to leave it be."

"And did you?" Winnie pressed.

"Yes, until the day before my mother died. She asked for it and made me promise to bring it to you," the girl replied, uncomfortable under Winnie's inquisitive gaze.

"Did you look inside already?"

"Yes, last night." Lina felt as guilty as the first time she had touched it and incurred her parents' anger. She took a small bite of cookie out of nervousness.

"Not what you expected?" the witch surmised.

"No. To be honest, I thought it would be something of value."

"I see," was the enigmatic reply.

Silence again. Even the birds and the chimes quieted with anticipation of what would be said next. But, the witch seemed in no hurry to talk. She drummed her fingers on the table, her brow furrowed in thought.

"Are you even going to tell me what it all means?" Lina blurted out, exasperated by the wait.

"Yes," Winnie said. "I'm merely trying to decide where to start."

"How about at the beginning?"

“Yes, but whose beginning? Yours? Mine? Time’s? Which would be the most useful I wonder.” She deliberated a bit longer. “What did your parents tell you about your adoption?”

“That you helped a young woman deliver me but she passed in childbirth. You knew my parents always longed for a baby and asked if they would take me,” she exclaimed, annoyed that she was the one answering the questions. “Why? Is that not what happened?”

“In a way it was.”

Lina sighed in disgust. They were talking in circles, in riddles whose meaning she did not grasp. Sorry she came, the girl reached for the bag, but Winnie snatched it up.

“Patience, child. It is a long story and will take time for you to digest. Don’t rush me.” Something in Winnie’s tone intrigued the girl.

“Very well,” Lina agreed begrudgingly and took another bite of cookie before crossing her arms in irritation.

“I knew your mother well. She and I grew up together.” Winnie finally said.

Lina looked at her dubiously. The witch was clearly much older than her mother could have been. Knox flew over to Winnie’s shoulder as though he wished to add to the story himself.

“She didn’t die giving birth to you. She died shortly after. She sent me away with you. She died to protect you.”

“From what?” the girl exclaimed, surprised by the direction of the story.

“Evil, of course. What else could it be?” The witch shrugged as though the answer was self-evident.

“Why didn’t she just protect me herself?” It seemed a fair question to Lina, who held the witch’s gaze.

“Because I alone could get you out of reach and your survival was of the utmost importance. *Is* of the utmost importance.”

“To who?”

“The Fairy World.”

Lina thought perhaps she misunderstood. “The what?”

“The Fairy World, child,” Winnie repeated as though that cleared everything up.

Lina regarded her for a long moment. The old woman nodded solemnly. Now, she was doubly sorry she came. Whatever these barley corns signified, she was not going to learn here. She held out her hand in hopes of retrieving the pouch so she could leave.

“I know you doubt me,” the witch acknowledged.

“Doubt seems too inferior a word,” Lina declared.

“Please just hear me out. For Hazel’s sake. She would want that.”

The reference to her mother lessened her irritation. Hazel asked her to come here. She could at least hear what Winnie had to say. Knox now flew to Lina’s shoulder. He walked to her ear and nibbled on the lobe as though imploring her to listen. “Very well.”

“I could spend a whole day explaining this and still not be finished, but I will start with the basics. You are the daughter of Queen Ivy and King Theros, who were monarchs of the Volant Fairies. Their kind, the Hirundo, ruled over the entire Fairy World maintaining freedom and balance. But an evil queen named Dahlia toppled their reign and brought chaos and darkness to the land. A prophecy is linked to a child who will one day restore the kingdom and bring peace to the land. That child is you.”

Hazel always loved to tell Lina a good story at bedtime. She created quite a world full of fairies and other magical creatures as well as her beloved swallow. They had been a favorite part of the girl’s childhood, a comforting place of escape, but in the end, only a fantasy. In the real world, Lina’s parents were gone and she was alone. Alone and wanting real answers.

“I’m a bit old to believe in fairy tales, Winnie. If you don’t know what the barley corns mean, it’s fine. Please just tell me so I can seek answers elsewhere.”

“Clearly, words will not convince you. So I must show you. I will need a day to prepare for the journey. We will leave in the morning. Do you promise to come back?”

“Yes,” the girl replied reluctantly, unsure what else to say under the circumstances and anxious to leave. “How long will we be gone?”

“Quite long.” The witch escorted her to the door. “Go home and set any affairs in order. Return at dawn. I will keep these safe until then.” The pouch disappeared into the folds of her robe. Now, she had no choice but to return tomorrow. “And most importantly, make sure to wear your amulet.”

All the way home, Lina pondered the conversation analyzing it from all sides, but only found herself more confused. She fingered the amulet around her neck contemplating what could possibly make it so significant. Knox followed closely above, settling into his nest when they arrived at the cottage.

Back in her small abode, she prepared a light dinner. Her mind still debated what to do and what she believed. Even though Winnie's story was preposterous, she was not going to find out anything more by staying here. Wherever the witch was taking her, perhaps she could learn some answers from others. By the time the meal was finished, she resolved this was the best course of action.

There was not much for her to pack—a few sets of clothes, a comb, some bread. She looked around the house, but there was nothing else to bring except for the rowan chest. It was not cumbersome and its value sentimental enough she did not want to part with it. Once out from under the bed, Lina opened it to look over the remaining contents which no longer seemed relevant to anybody. A sealed envelope with the word *Lina* written in her mother's handwriting sat on top. Though she had not been in the box often, she was certain this had never been there before.

Lina wondered how her mother held the velvet bag the morning she found her. When she left her on that final night, it was still in the box under the bed yet somehow Hazel had retrieved it and left this in its place. She had not noticed it when she hastily threw in the bag nor when she blindly grabbed it out.

Carefully, she pulled out the paper and unfolded it into her lap. The words before her caused a gasp to escape her lips.

Lina –

Believe everything Winnie tells you. It is all true. You were a wonderful daughter to us.

Now reclaim your life as the fairy you were meant to be. I will always love you.

- *Mother*

