



A Wicked Investigation

WIIRA Publishing

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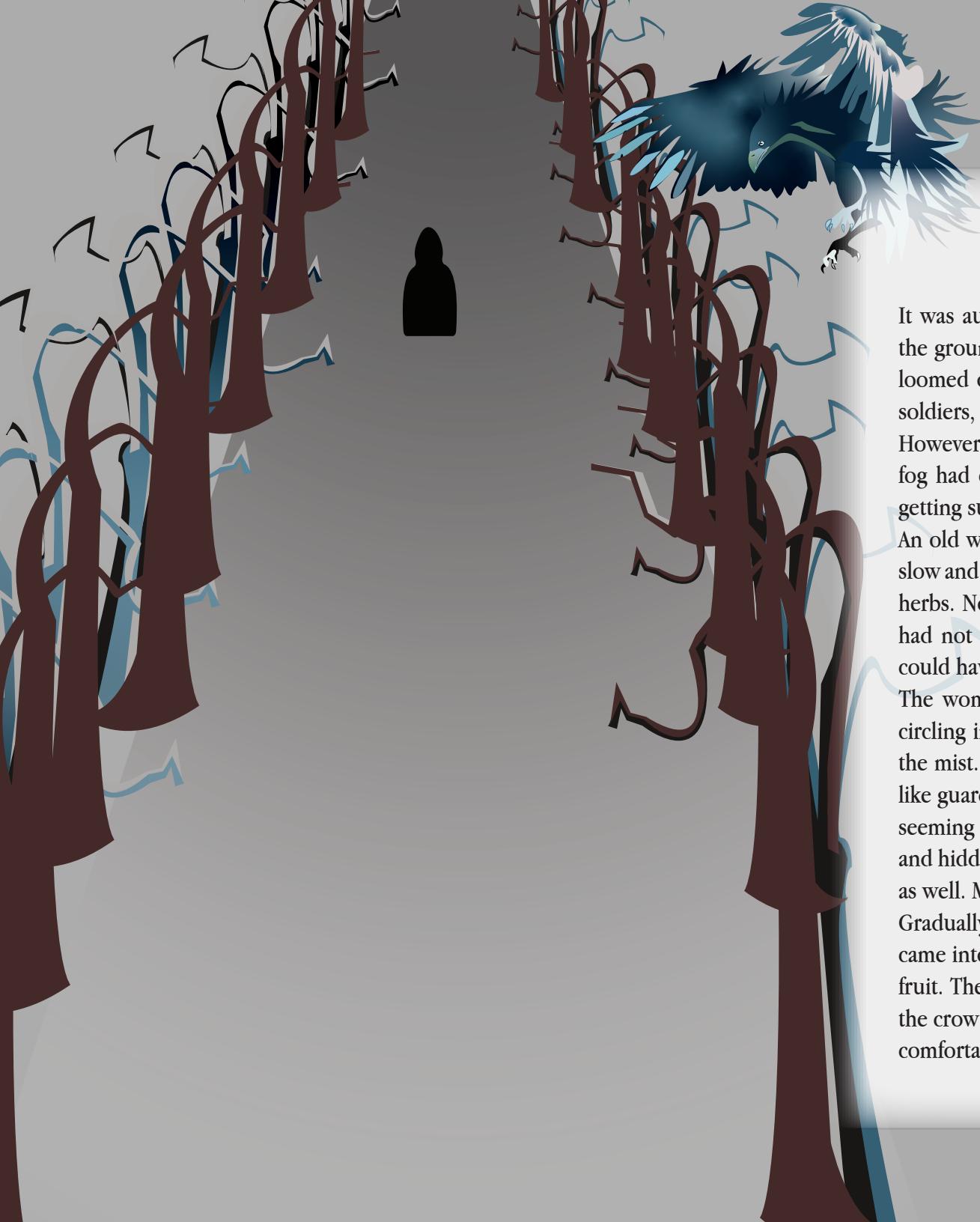


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CHAPTER 1

It was autumn. The wind guided dead leaves to a new home on the ground, industrious squirrels looked for provisions, chimneys loomed over the grey sky. In the forest, trees stood like nature's soldiers, protecting the secrets that lay beyond.

However, there was a path. A path that never seemed to end. The fog had claimed it for its own, allowing no one to pass without getting surrounded, shrouded in white.

An old woman carrying a basket was wandering all alone, moving slow and almost unseen as if she was part of the fog. She was picking herbs. No one else was out; the morning was young and the sun had not yet had the chance to pierce the mist. If only someone could have been there to follow her.

The woman caught the attention of a crow. It flew around her, circling in greeting as an old friend would, and followed her into the mist. The path wound ever on, the trees thickening, lining up like guards protecting a precious item. The woman walked slowly, seeming unconcerned and unbothered by the looming darkness and hidden secrets of the woods. Maybe, the trees were her friends as well. Maybe she was the precious item they guarded.

Gradually, the fog started to clear. A small cottage with a garden came into view, framed by wildflowers and gentle trees heavy with fruit. The woman approached the door and entered quietly, while the crow flew up to the roof of the house, cawed once, and settled comfortable on the chimney, keeping watch with beady eyes.

The sun was almost up. The old woman lit a fire in the hearth and hung the kettle over it while the rays of dawn were sluggishly filling the room, eventually lighting up a blanket and a pillow, and shining into a pair of half-open hazel eyes. Slowly waking, a young girl blinked against the sunlight. She stretched her muscles, then looked around, still disoriented. As on most mornings, it was a struggle to find the will to get out of her warm bed when she knew it would be cold out. Eventually, she managed to put away the blanket, and she endured the fresh cold air until she reached the fireplace, where her dress was warming. She put it on quickly and warmed her hands.

"Alene, you are up! Here, I made you some warm milk. I even put some honey in it for you; it's from the last harvest before the bees start to hibernate for the winter. We need to be careful around this time of the year, it is very easy to catch a cold."

"Good morning, Granny!" said Alene, trying not to yawn. "Thank you."

"My pleasure, dear. I went into the forest this morning to pick up some fresh herbs," Granny added, while she set about preparing breakfast.

"Oh, you know what Ebbe said? You know, the butcher's son?" Alene burned her mouth on the milk when she tried to take a sip and winced, but continued, "According to him, there are ghosts in the woods! He said he saw one, but his sister thinks it was just a large deer."

"Would this be the same Ebbe you and Reymar got into a fight with yesterday?"

Alene pouted into her cup at her grandmother's sharp tone of voice, feeling like a little girl. She was impulsive sometimes.



"I was defending you, Granny! He was saying you're a witch and a heathen." She tugged on one of her brown braids. "What was I supposed to do?"

"You know those people just say that because they don't understand what I do, love." Alene's grandmother put a plate with fresh buttered rye bread and a boiled egg down in front of her. "I appreciate the thought, but young Reymar gets you into enough trouble on his own."

"Do you think he's up yet?" she asked, a little offended on her best friend's behalf. She and Reymar got each other into equal amounts of trouble, and yesterday had definitely been her fault. It was hard to listen to people slander the only family she had left.

"If he isn't awake and on his way over here yet, he will be when the smell of bread and eggs gets to him. That boy can eat like a horse. You know he would never miss breakfast with you." Grandma stopped talking for a second, then exclaimed, "Ah, there he comes, down the path!"

Alene brightened, jumping to her feet and only just preventing her milk from spilling as she hurried to the door with an excited grin on her face. Once she opened the door, the corners of her mouth tugged down. Reymar had come to visit as expected, but as long as she had known him, which was practically her whole life, Alene had never seen this expression on his face. Her friend looked anxious, with his dark eyebrows pulled together and a downcast look in his usually so vibrant eyes.

"Reymar, what's going on?"

"Good morning, Alene. It's nothing, don't worry," the boy said, looking at his feet. He was shuffling his leather-clad toes in the dirt.

"I don't think that's true," Alene said, crossing her arms. "Come on, Rey, did something happen? Did you get in trouble with your father for that thing with Ebbe?"

"No, it's just... It's my uncle. He's been gone for a few days, and no one knows where he is."

"But he often leaves the village, everyone knows that. He's the mayor, he has a lot of important things he needs to visit and do, I guess," Alene responded to that, not sure if this was really something to be worried about. Then again, if Reymar, the human ray of sunshine, was, maybe something was wrong.

"Yes, you're right," he was saying. "It's just that he's never been gone for more than a week and he hasn't sent word. But it's no use talking about it right now, I'm sure he's just fine. We're pretty resilient, my family."

Reymar took a deep breath, hugged Alene as he did every morning, and walked in.

"It smells good in here! Good morning, Granny! How was your walk this morning?"

"Ah, hello Reymar! It was just as always, although the fog was a bit thicker than usual, like there's something in the air." Grandma gestured him further into the small house. "Please, dear boy, have a seat. I will leave you two to enjoy your breakfast, there's more milk in the kettle. I'll go work in the garden. Those trees won't pick themselves!"

After Alene and Reymar thanked her, she started scuttling to the door, wiping her wrinkled hands on her dress, but turned before going outside.

"You two," she said, and her tone was stern again, so they both looked up at her. Pointing a finger at them, she warned, "Remember not to go into the forest. I know you'll most likely get yourself into trouble with someone in town, but if you go into the forest, you'll get in trouble with me. Both of you."

It wasn't an unusual thing for her to say; even though Alene's grandmother went into the woods every day to pick herbs, she was adamant that danger was always lurking and cautioned them at least once a week not to follow her there.

Alene waved at her vaguely, and, after watching her walk outside, she turned to Reymar, who would have usually been talking her ear off already by now. Seeing that her friend was not as talkative as usual, she tried to get his attention.

"Hey, Reymar, do you remember last year when we were playing hide and seek, and you looked for me for hours while I was just in my bed?"

"Yeah! It was winter and I was so cold and angry... I was wandering around the village looking for you, and you were enjoying the warmth." He shivered as if remembering it, tugging his coat tighter around his shoulders. Despite the fire, the cottage still got chilly whenever the temperature dropped slightly. "I still regret that we didn't set some ground rules for that game. Anyway, what about it?"

"Do you remember why we began to play in the first place?"

"Wasn't it because we were bored?"

"Well, no, not in particular." Alene leaned forward, putting her elbows on the table and resting her face in her hands. "Your family's livestock wasn't doing well, remember? Your siblings were all trying to help them, but they wouldn't let you lend a hand because you were upsetting the cow. You were so worried about everything. The cold didn't help."

"Where are you going with this?" Reymar asked curiously.

"After we played that game, even after you roamed the village for hours, you felt better! You took your mind off the problem. Sometimes, you just need to pretend you're a little kid for a while, you know? Let's try to do that now. Let's go on an adventure!"

"Alene, I don't know. I don't think that's always the solution. Do you remember the time we tried to spy on Sheriff Anwar? We just wanted to see if it's true that he spends his time at home dancing around while he does work and singing songs about himself, like Ebbe and his friends said." He frowned, pursing his lips. "We spent an entire week doing his chores as punishment!"

"Come on, that was worth it for hearing how bad he is at singing!"

"You know what," Reymar started, starting to grin, "you're right."

"So, are you in?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"Well, you know how we aren't allowed to go in the forest? Have you never wondered why that is? Maybe there's something they want to hide!" Alene gestured enthusiastically with her bread, spilling crumbs on her dress. "I heard once that there's a secret path that leads to a treasure of some sort. I really want to know what that could be. So what do you think? Should we find out what secrets are behind the barriers the adults of Westmoor have put up?"

"I don't know, Alene. It sounds like taking a lot of risks. Are you sure you want to do that? People say it's dangerous in the forest."

"Come on, it's just trees and some animals. Animals love you, Rey! Just trust me, it will be all right. And if it doesn't end up well, we can always just play checkers for a week. I know how much you love checkers. If we survive, we can play all the checkers you want."

There was a moment of silence. Reymar put his cup down and looked at her, expression tight and frightened. Then Alene realized her enthusiasm went a bit too far.

"I was just joking. Everything will be fine, you'll see!"

"So what happens if I feel better afterwards, do I owe you anything?"

"Well..." Alene quirked her eyebrows, grinning at him. "I wouldn't mind if you did my chores for a day. You were quite good at taking care of the sheriff's, I'm sure you'd be very helpful."

"You're hilarious, Alene," Reymar replied drily, but he was smiling as well. "But, you know what, it's a deal. Let's do it!"

The two friends shook hands as they looked into each other's eyes, knowing that it was going to be an adventure they were not soon going to forget. After Alene found her shoes somewhere among her bedclothes and put them on, and they packed the leftovers from their breakfast into a small sack to take into the woods with them, the two of them walked outside, where Granny was hunched over in her vegetable garden, obviously still trying to figure out how to save her plants as she had been ever since the cold set in. Alene knew their vegetables were all right, but the herbs were losing the fight with the cold this year. It presented a problem. Not only for them, but also for the villagers who were counting on Granny as a healer. Alene was on her way to say goodbye to her grandmother, when two children peered around the corner of the cottage, the side of it that faced the road that led into Westmoor.

"Mother, look! The weird old lady is outside again," one of them shouted, looking wide-eyed between Granny and his own mother.

"The witch is making spells!" exclaimed another, quickly hiding behind her mother's skirts when Alene glared over at her. Granny didn't react. Alene knew she was used to the comments, but she still hated them.

The children's father approached and put his hands on their shoulders to tug them back.

"Enough, children. Run along home. At least this year, the heathen's ingredients for pagan incantations are of no use anymore," he said, turning to his wife but speaking loud enough that both Alene and her grandmother could hear him. Alene wanted to shout, but Reymar tugged on her arm and shook his head no.

"I hate this!" she fumed. "Granny, are you all right?"

"I am always all right, my dear." The woman leaned on her spade. "What are you two up to today?"

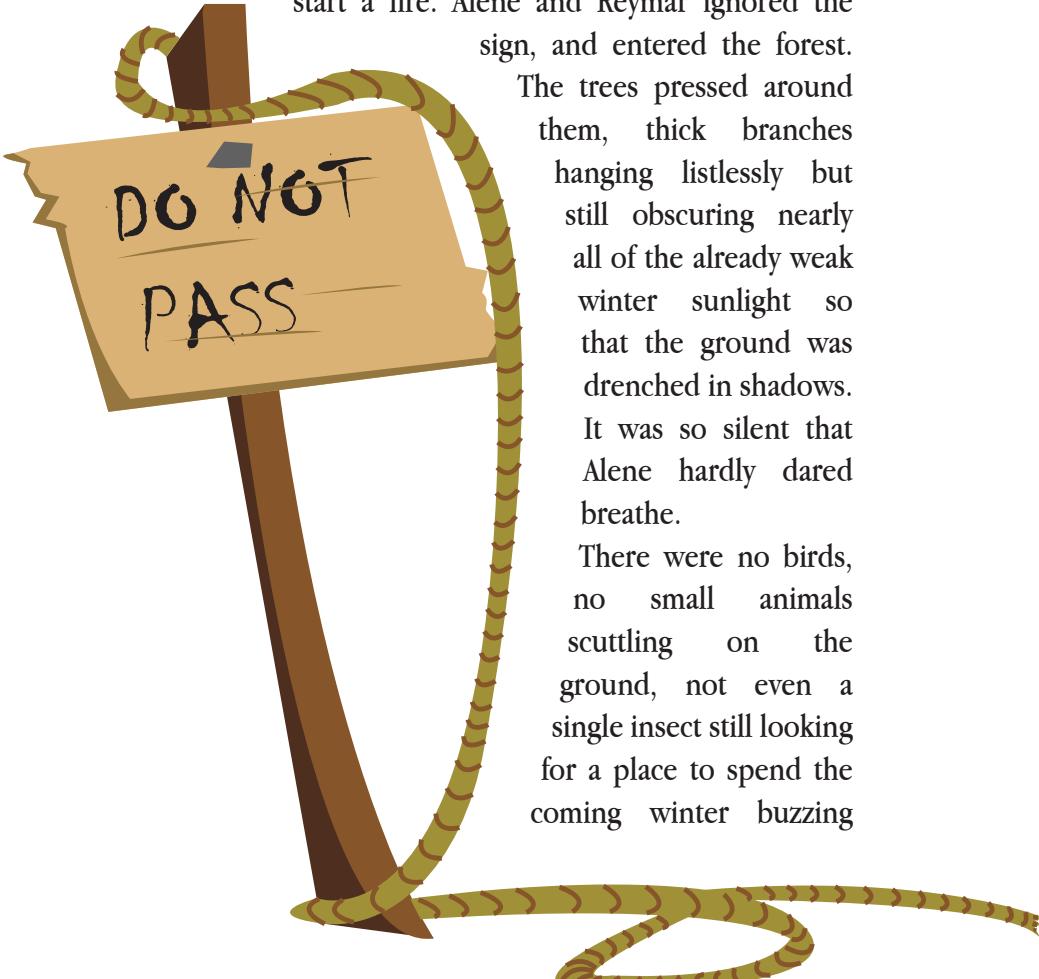
"We're just going into the village," Alene replied, glancing at Reymar, who nodded enthusiastically so that his hair flopped back and forth.

"The livestock sale is today, and I want to look at the cows."

"That sounds exciting." Granny smiled. "Have fun, children. Be careful."

"Of course!" Alene waved, and then she and Reymar started heading down the road to the village. There was an old path that split off from that road that had been in heavy use before the people of Westmoor had stopped going into the forest. Its worn stones were now covered in lichen, and the underbrush had started to make its way onto the path. Years ago, someone had put up a warning sign and tried to erect a wooden barrier, but the sign was barely legible now, and the wood had long since disappeared, probably stolen by someone who wanted to start a fire. Alene and Reymar ignored the

sign, and entered the forest.



The trees pressed around them, thick branches hanging listlessly but still obscuring nearly all of the already weak winter sunlight so that the ground was drenched in shadows. It was so silent that Alene hardly dared breathe.

There were no birds, no small animals scuttling on the ground, not even a single insect still looking for a place to spend the coming winter buzzing

around.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed when Reymar stopped and turned to her.

The village was not visible through the thicket, and hadn't been for a long while now.

"Do you think... Maybe we should head back?" Reymar asked cautiously, taking a small step backwards. Alene looked at him, and was opening her mouth to reply when something behind him caught her eye. A flash of blue among the grey, like an ink stain on the forest floor.

"Rey..." she whispered, hearing her voice shaking. He blinked down at her, already wide eyes somehow widening even more at whatever her terrified expression her face was making.

"What?" he asked.

She pointed a finger slowly, and he turned. They were silent for a stretch of time that felt like hours while Reymar visibly started shaking, and his voice was unsteady when he breathed a single word.

"No."



CHAPTER 2

The sheriff of the village was a large, imposing man called Anwar, and it was him that Alene and Reymar were looking for as they ran into the village. Stumbling through the streets and dashing around vendors and townspeople, they reached the station house. One of the sheriff's watchmen, a scrawny man with the hawk nose, stopped them at the door.

"Where do you two think you're going? No one's allowed in here unless they have an appointment with the sheriff."

Alene's face scrunches up in frustration and she huffed.

"We have to talk to sheriff Anwar right now, there's—"

"We found my uncle's body in the woods!" Reymar cut Alene off, his voice breaking halfway through.

The watchman raised an eyebrow, looking at them in disbelief.

"Do you really think I'd fall for one of your little fantasy stories?" he scoffed. "You know, you would do best to stay away from this girl here, it seems she and her grandmother have filled your head with nonsensical ideas."

"I'm not—" Alene started, at the same time that Reymar burst out at him.

"She's not—"

"What is going on out here?" A booming voice interrupted both of them.

Sheriff Anwar was standing in the doorway of the station house, presumably having come out after hearing the ruckus outside. Alene knew the sheriff would help them and launched into her explanation.

"Sheriff Anwar, we found Reymar's uncle in the forest! He's dead! You have to find out what happened to him."

The sheriff's eyes widened and he quickly ushered the children inside.

"What were you two doing in the forest? You know it is forbidden to enter. Who knows what could've happened to you?" His anger and worry were clear as day and Alene felt embarrassed for sneaking into the forest at all, let alone taking Reymar with her.

"We were just playing around, we didn't mean to get in any trouble!" Alene tried to put on a charming smile, something that used to get her out of trouble when she was younger, but was gradually losing its effect as she grew older. Sheriff Anwar sighed, raking a hand through his hair.

"I'll look into it. You two ought to go home and get some rest, you've had quite a day." He let out another sigh, casting a sympathetic look at Alene and Reymar. "I'll come with to make sure you get home safe. Come now, no more detours and adventures for today."

After saying goodbye to Reymar, Alene returned home with Sheriff Anwar in tow. She slowly opened the door and laid eyes on her grandmother. A smile appeared on her face when she saw Alene, but it quickly turned into a frown when she noticed the sheriff standing next to her.

"What's the meaning of this, Alene?"

Alene opened her mouth to explain, but was interrupted by Sheriff Anwar scraping his throat.

"Let me explain, ma'am. Your granddaughter," he said, putting a hand on Alene's shoulder, "went into the forbidden forest. Not only that; she managed to become witness to a terrible scene when she and her young friend found a dead man."

Anticipating a scolding, Alene closed her eyes and braced herself for the worst, but the harsh words never came. Confused, she opened her eyes again. Alene's heart dropped when her grandmother didn't acknowledge her and turned away from her, looking out of the window. Somehow, this was even worse than getting scolded.

"Granny, I— I'm sorry. I won't go into the woods again, I promise. I just thought it'd cheer Reymar up a bit, since he seemed so down because of his uncle. Although, I suppose in the end it didn't really work out, but I didn't mean for this to happen! I only wanted to—"

"Enough."

Alene couldn't remember ever having heard such disappointment in her grandmother's voice before. The old woman looked tired. Her eyes pinned Alene to the spot but seemed so exhausted compared to the freshness that was usually there. Alene didn't know what to reply, and it seemed that Granny had heard enough, stepping out the door to tend to her garden. Sheriff Anwar briefly put a hand on her shoulder, but left her alone soon afterwards. Alene shut the door and sat down on her bed, silent.

The next morning, Alene and her grandmother went to the market. Granny still seemed reserved, but there was no longer a storm swirling in her eyes. As they approached the town square, Alene noticed a huge crowd gathered around someone. She and her grandmother exchanged a glance and unanimously stepped closer to the action. Alene spotted Reymar next to his siblings and raised her hand to wave at him, but stopped herself when she saw his mother notice the exchange. The woman, the mayor's sister, had never liked that her son was friends with a poor girl like Alene and had no qualms about showing her dislike.

Luckily, she'd never forbidden Reymar from meeting up with Alene, but Alene wasn't so sure about that anymore after yesterday's events. She was snapped out of her thoughts upon hearing the tolling of the town bell. Turning back to the crowd, she saw Sheriff Anwar on the steps in front of the town hall, his hand on the rope attached to the bell.

"People of Westmoor," he bellowed, "yesterday, Mayor Savio was found dead in the forest."

A pregnant silence followed the Sheriff's words, and then, a wave of screams and calls for revenge ignited.

Without a mayor, a small village like Westmoor would surely not be able to function anymore. Alene understood the townspeople's words, but her thoughts were occupied with Reymar. He'd been there when they had found his uncle's body, cold and lifeless. Although her friend had, miraculously enough, not broken down, she knew him well enough to know he'd been upset about his death. The guilt of bringing Reymar along with her to the forest weighed on her. On the steps, Anwar was trying to draw the focus of the crowd back to himself.

"Order!" He rung the bell again. "This is what I know now: the mayor was not stabbed, nor otherwise visibly harmed. The cause of death is unknown. If you have information about this incident, or if any suspicions exist, please report them to me immediately!" The calls from the crowd started up again.

"What are we to do?"

"How did the mayor die?"

"There's a murderer among us?"

The calls increased and got more aggressive. Alene tugged at Granny's dress, motioning for them to get away from the crowd before something happened, but Granny put her hand over Alene's and didn't leave. One of the townspeople turned and caught sight of Alene and her grandmother, and pointed an accusing finger at them.

"It's the witch! I bet she killed our mayor!"

Alene looked at the man in horror and was terrified to hear more of the villagers accuse her grandmother.

"It must have been her, who else can commit a murder without leaving a trace on the body?"

"Quickly, arrest her before she escapes!"

Once again, Alene tugged at Granny's sleeve, but she refused to move. What was she thinking? Why wasn't she trying to leave?

"Calm down, love, there's no reason to run. Remember, the truth works in mysterious ways. Do not worry about me."

Alene didn't understand what Granny was saying, she could barely hear her words in the first place. Frozen, she could only watch as Granny finally started moving, but it was in the wrong direction. She slowly made her way through the crowd, the townspeople stepping away from her in a mix of disgust and fear. She stopped in front of Sheriff Anwar and turned to face the crowd.

"Why do you accuse me of killing the mayor? I have no reason to kill a man. I only seek to heal, never to hurt."

Alene looked on in desperation. What her grandmother was saying made sense, but she knew the villagers would not listen to logic and smart words. They only wanted to see someone burn, only wanted a show of fire. Emotions warred for attention inside of Alene. It was all too much for her. She couldn't understand Granny's actions, was scared to lose the only family she had left, and was frustrated at the townspeople who always tore her grandmother down. Tears blurred her vision and her breathing was high in her throat. She felt the crowd push her from all sides and her view of Granny was obscured by angry villagers. In a last desperate attempt, she tried to get through the crowd but there was no strength left in her body. She felt a hand on her arm pull her away before everything turned black.

Alene woke to the sound of a crow cawing in the far distance. With effort, she forced her eyes open.

Looking around, she saw that she was in the hall for the sick in the town's convent. The high walls and small beds were familiar to her, because of the many stories Granny had told her about healing the sick here. Alene shook her head to get rid of the last remnants of dizziness and climbed out of the bed she was in. The cold floor of the hall sent shivers down her spine the moment her feet touched the flagstones, but she barely noticed, already heading to the doors. She needed to get to Granny, to stop whatever the townspeople were planning to do with her.

"You're not leaving that soon, sweetheart." A voice interrupted her hasty escape. Caught redhanded, Alene turned around, coming face to face with one of the nuns of the convent. Sending a sympathetic look her way from underneath the shadow of her wimple, the nun shook her head, clucking.

"That boy was so concerned for you, and for good reason. I'm not letting you leave so you can run off and do something thoughtless again."

Slightly offended by the words but seeing her point, Alene begrudgingly let herself be led back to the bed.

"Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I'm fine. But what about my grandmother? Do you know what happened to her?" Anxiety seeped into her voice and the nun's reply only confirmed what Alene feared.

"They plan to test her tomorrow, dear."

Testing was just a nicer word for torturing. In Westmoor, burning the accused was the most common method. If the flames were

black, it was evidence Satan was inhabiting the accused, which would prove them a witch. No one had ever survived a test before, and surely there was no way Granny would come out of this ordeal alive.



The thought of losing her only family member brought tears to Alene's eyes, but she wiped them away before they could spill. She couldn't be weak now, not anymore. She had to rescue Granny, no matter the cost. Making up her mind, she sprang up again, dashed past the nun, and ran out of the convent. She didn't stop until she felt a hand grab her arm and halt her steps.

"Alene!" Reymar dragged her into a tight hug and spoke into the collar of her dress. "I was on my way to you! I didn't think they'd let you go already."

"I ran away, I guess." She pulled back to look at her friend. "Did you bring me here?"

"Yes, of course. My mother wouldn't let me stay with you any longer, but I got my sister to distract her at home so I could come back." He took a deep breath and didn't give Alene a moment to thank him or even process his words before continuing, "They want to kill your grandmother, Alene!"

She knew that, but hearing him put it so bluntly into words made Alene bite down on a sob. She hated to cry, hated seeming weak, after everything. Her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands so hard blood welled up under them.

"We should do something! I know she's innocent." Reymar shook her shoulders. "We have to convince Sheriff Anwar that she couldn't have done it."

It was insanity, of course, to even accuse a frail old woman like Alene's grandmother of killing someone, let alone someone as big as the mayor, whom she would have had to drag all the way into the woods on her own for the body to end up where it did. It would be difficult to convince the sheriff of this, she thought. He and his men would just say she used witchcraft, and they certainly wouldn't listen to Alene, just a small, poor girl who wanted to save her Granny. She didn't have any other ideas herself, though, and maybe Reymar would have some pull because he was related to the mayor, so she agreed to find the sheriff again.

At the station house once more, Alene and Reymar ran into the same watchman as yesterday, but he let them through with just an eye roll and a clinking of armor this time. In the hall, the sheriff's men were buzzing with excitement over the capture of 'the witch'. Some of them straightened respectfully when they saw Reymar. None of them spared Alene a second glance. The sheriff himself was leaning against a wall and talking to someone, but he waved the man away when he spotted the two of them. He bowed his head towards Reymar.

"Young Reymar, I'm very sorry for what your family is going through." And, putting a heavy hand on Alene's shoulder, "My dear, I hope you feel better."

"I don't!" she burst. "You arrested my grandmother! How could you do that?"

"Now, girl—"

"Sheriff Anwar!" Reymar interrupted. "You know Alene's grandmother can't have killed my... The mayor. She isn't capable of that, she's ancient."

The sheriff shook his head, crossing his arms across his broad chest.

"This isn't in my hands, children. The town elders have decided she must be put to trial and tested."

Through angry tears, Alene looked up at him. She wanted nothing more than to shake the man, to make him see how stupid he was being.

"No one has ever survived a test!" she shouted. The sheriff's men were most likely watching her now, but she didn't care. "Not even young, healthy people. My grandmother is over 60 years old, and we know she isn't a witch. There has to be way to prove her innocence and catch the real murderer, Sheriff. Whoever it is, he could flee, or even kill someone else."

"Again, this is not up to me. I want to put the real murderer to trial as much as you do, but your grandmother is the only suspect, and unless you can convince the council to cancel the test or find the real killer yourself, there is nothing I can do."

"Then, please," Alene whispered, closing her eyes so that a tear rolled down her cheek, "can I at least see her?"

"I'm sure you know that's again the rules." He paused. "But I can make that happen, even if not for long. I'll give you five minutes."

There was a building out back of the station house that had functioned as a prison for the past few years. In theory, they could hold all kinds of prisoners there, but most of the people in the cells had been those accused of witchcraft. Ever since they had moved the cells from the station house itself to this newer building, with more guards and thicker walls, no one had escaped. Even though it had been good for the village's morale, having to imagine going in there herself, let alone finding Granny in there, made Alene's blood run as cold as the prison walls.

"Well, here we are." Anwar had led Alene, and by extension Reymar, who refused to leave her side, to a closed door with a guard stationed next to it. The guard saluted when Anwar told him to open the door, and stepped aside when they went in, Anwar waiting in the drafty corridor. The door remained open.

Inside, there was a large cage against the back wall, still separating Alene from her grandmother. The old woman was sitting on the cold, dirty stones, eyes closed. She was praying, something that always calmed her. Alene walked up to the bars and put her hands around them. Granny opened her eyes.

"Alene, my dear girl!" She didn't move. When Reymar tugged on her sleeve and Alene followed his gaze, she saw that Granny was chained to the wall by her ankle with a chain not long enough to come closer to the bars.

"Granny, I'm so sorry. I'll get you out of here, I promise. No matter what. I just don't understand why they would do this to you!"

"Oh, Alene, please don't worry about me. I regret that you have to go through all of this alone." Turning to Reymar, she continued, "Please take care of her when I'm gone, child."

"No!" Alene said, anger and sadness welling up and threatening to spill over. "You can't give up, Granny! I'm not. I'm going to prove your innocence."

With a sad smile, Granny reached her hand out and told Alene to stay strong.

"You've always been a fighter, just like your mother. She would be proud of you for standing up, but please, dear, just stay safe. Be stronger than your anger and your fear, and I promise you, you will see the truth in the end."

"Children," Sheriff Anwar interrupted, stepping into the room, "it's been long enough. Say goodbye to your grandmother." As Alene tried to do that, through tears, Reymar turned to the sheriff.

"You told Alene, just now, that the only way you could let her grandmother go is if the council was convinced of her innocence, isn't it?"

The sheriff gestured the two of them impatiently out of the cell and back through the corridor before turning around and replying suddenly as if coming to a conclusion.

"I did say that, but you understand they won't listen to two children, no matter if one of them is the mayor's nephew."

Reymar, who had one arm around Alene's shoulders, gestured at him.

"But what if we have evidence?" His dark eyes were wide and hopeful. Sheriff Anwar scoffed.

"I'll tell you what, son, if you can find evidence before the trial at dawn tomorrow and bring it to the judge, I'll let Granny go." With that, he turned and stalked off, back to the station house.

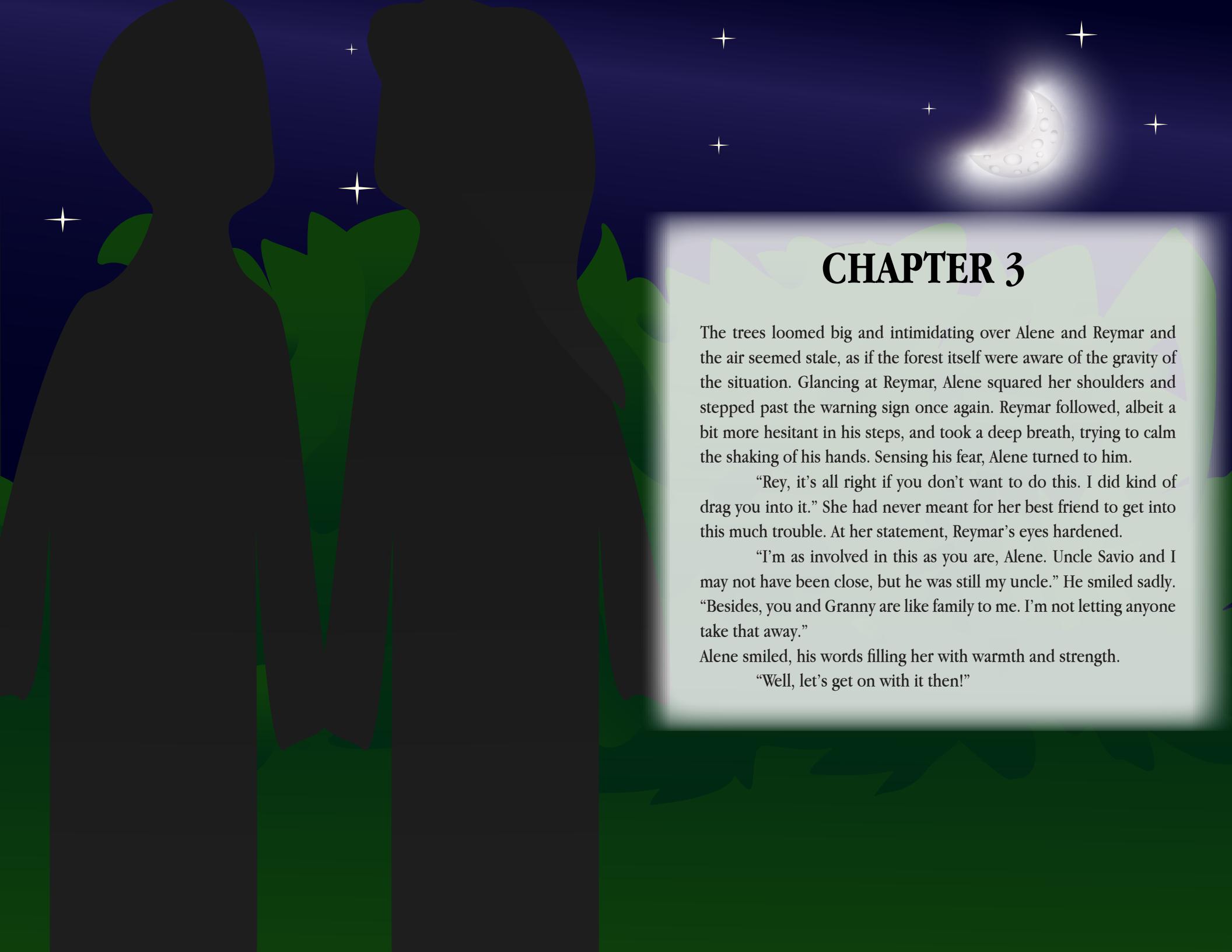
Alene stared up at Reymar, who was pressing his lips together in a flat line and shaking his head sadly. Everything seemed bleak at the moment. Her grandmother had given up. She was just accepting her death as inevitable when she, of all people, knew she had no part in Mayor Savio's death.

It was so clear to Alene, and if she had to stay up all night and find evidence to save Granny, she would without hesitation.

"Rey, we have to help her," she said, straightening and shrugging his arm off.

"I know," he replied, "but I wouldn't even know how to begin to start looking for evidence."

"I wish I did." Alene felt a frisson of anticipation in her fingertips, and squinted into the weak sunlight to the west, where the forest bordered the village. "Actually, I think I do. We have to go back into the woods."



CHAPTER 3

The trees loomed big and intimidating over Alene and Reymar and the air seemed stale, as if the forest itself were aware of the gravity of the situation. Glancing at Reymar, Alene squared her shoulders and stepped past the warning sign once again. Reymar followed, albeit a bit more hesitant in his steps, and took a deep breath, trying to calm the shaking of his hands. Sensing his fear, Alene turned to him.

"Rey, it's all right if you don't want to do this. I did kind of drag you into it." She had never meant for her best friend to get into this much trouble. At her statement, Reymar's eyes hardened.

"I'm as involved in this as you are, Alene. Uncle Savio and I may not have been close, but he was still my uncle." He smiled sadly. "Besides, you and Granny are like family to me. I'm not letting anyone take that away."

Alene smiled, his words filling her with warmth and strength.

"Well, let's get on with it then!"

Perhaps she'd been too optimistic about this, but Alene really thought they'd have found something to help Granny by now. Instead, the duo had been walking around for what seemed like forever, unable to find any clues whatsoever.

"Whoever did this, they cleaned up after themselves thoroughly," Reymar mused. "Do you think we're going to find anything at this point?"

Looking up at the darkening sky, Alene felt frustration rise at their inability to find anything and kicked at one of the trees in anger. Pain shot up her foot, and she cursed her impulsive nature for always getting her in trouble. She cursed the villagers for getting Granny arrested, cursed the watchmen for taking pride in capturing the 'witch', and cursed herself for going against her grandmother's wishes. If only she had listened when Granny told her to not go into the woods, maybe things would have been different.

The events of the day catching up with her, Alene sat down against a big oak tree, heaving a sigh. Reymar settled next to her, placing one of his hands over hers.

"What can we do, Rey? I thought we could help Granny, but now I'm not even sure we'll ever get out of here."

"Of course we will. I wish we'd thought to bring torches, though. It's so dark here already, I can't imagine what it's like at night."

"Well, I wish something would just show us where to look!" She clenched her hands into fists, scrunching them into the fabric of her dress. "I wish—"

A crow cawed, and the trees were illuminated in a bright, sudden glow. Alene's breath stuck in her throat and she looked on in bewilderment as a trail of light unfurled like a ribbon, stretching into the woods.

"What in the world... Reymar, are you seeing this?"

"Am I seeing what?"

"This light!" Alene jumped up and whirled around, her dress billowing around her. "Right there!"

Reymar raised an eyebrow at her, confusion clear on his face.

"Alene, I have no clue what you're talking about. Are you sure you didn't hit your head instead of your foot?"

He was joking around, but Alene could hear the genuine worry in his voice. She smiled at him, offering her hand to help him stand up.

"I promise I'm fine. In fact, I'm actually doing much better than before. I don't know what happened exactly, but this light... I think we should follow it."

Reymar looked at her skeptically, but breathed out a sigh eventually after seeing that Alene wasn't giving up.

"All right, so we just follow the light then? Where does it lead? Alene squinted at the illuminated path, but couldn't see further than a few trees ahead. She told Reymar so. He shrugged.

"Fine, I believe you. Lead the way."

They started down the path only she could see, but had barely made it out of the clearing when a sound startled them. Reymar squinted around in the dark—the moon had only just come up—and then suddenly leaped backwards, gangly limbs flailing.

"It's a boar! We must have come too close!" He yanked her away. "Run!"

They ran off the path of light, which glimmered between the trees, obscured by the shadow of the large wild boar barrelling towards them. Its large canines glinted dangerously.

"They can't climb!" Alene yelled. "Get into a tree!"

Reymar, who was tall, jumped up and grabbed the lower branch of a pine tree in his way to pull himself up, then extended a hand towards Alene. She grabbed it. As he pulled her up, she felt the boar's snout touch her foot, but she made it before it could hurt her.

Sitting on the tree branch, both of them caught their breath for a moment. The boar kept circling the tree, snorting and scraping its hooves in the dirt.

"It's not leaving," Reymar hissed. "Alene, what you just did with that magic path of yours, can you do that with this pig?"

"What, make him light up?"

"No! You know that's not what I mean."

He let go of their branch with one hand to gesture down.

"Make him leave, or something. Make him friendly!"

"I don't even know what I did!"

"Well, figure it out. We'll be stuck here either way." His eyes were wide in the gloom. "I know you can do it."

Alene bit her lip. When the path appeared, she had wished for something to show her the way, very fiercely. She shivered and pulled her cloak around herself with one hand. Did that make her a witch, or was someone guiding her?

"I wish..." she started. "I wish that the boar was friendly?"

More stomping and snorting.

"Maybe wish harder?" Reymar suggested. Alene closed her eyes and thought about it. She envisioned very clearly how the boar would stop stomping around, how it would stop being angry and instead lie down calmly and be nice to them while they went back to the path. She even pictured Reymar petting it, just for good measure. A bout of dizziness made her lose her grip on the tree trunk. She pitched forward. Reymar grabbed the back of her dress and yanked her back, shouting in surprise.

"Careful! What did you do?"

"I think..." She squinted down. The wild boar was silent, and she couldn't see it anymore. "I think it worked?"

"Really?" Reymar looked down too. "So it's gone now?"

"Well, it should be friendly. There's only one way to find out if he really is, though."

Looking between the boar and Reymar, Alene righted her back and slowly got down from the tree.

"Alene!" Reymar hissed. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"We can't just stay in this tree the entire night, can we?" she shot back.

Begrudgingly, Reymar got down from the tree as well, looking around with anxiety clear on his face. Alene caught sight of the boar, its beady eyes landing on her. Letting out a soft snort, the boar walked over to Alene.

To her surprise, it lay down on its back, exposing his belly to her. She reached out her hand to touch the boar, feeling its coarse hair catching on her calloused fingertips.

"I can't believe it," Reymar whispered next to her. Alene gestured for him to pet the boar too. After casting a wary glance in her direction, Reymar slowly put a shaky hand on the animal. He let out an almost hysterical laugh, looking between Alene and the boar in amazement.

"This is insane! Have you always been able to do this?" Alene chuckled nervously, raising an eyebrow at her best friend.

"If I'd always been capable of doing this, don't you think I would have told you?" She caught the light of the illuminated path in the corner of an eye. "Right, we should keep moving. It's going to be morning soon and we don't have much time left until..." She trailed off, not wanting to think about what would happen if they were unable to find the real murderer.

"That's right. Where's the path? Must be there!" Reymar turned around and walked in the opposite direction of the one they had come from, with purpose. Despite herself, Alene had to smile at the obvious attempt to distract her.

"Yes, right there," she replied, walking the other way. Reymar followed quickly, and she smiled gratefully up at him. He nodded, the light from the path sparkling in his eyes. They followed the ribbon of light further into the woods, where the underbrush got thicker and thicker, catching on Alene's dress and cloak. She paid it no heed and continued walking determinedly, until the path was blocked. A tangle of thorny vines rose up in front of her, long-withered roses still hanging on despite the cold. Reymar shot a confused glance her way.

"Why did we stop?"

"The path leads us here, but it stops at this bush. I think we have to go through it." She intoned the last part like a question, hoping against hope that Reymar would come up with a solution that wouldn't involve making their way through the vines.



"We can't just go around it?" His voice was hopeful, gaze darting between her and the imposing rose bush. The bush was bigger than both of them and the thorns stuck out on all sides. Reymar was shivering as he looked up at it. Alene gave him a sympathetic glance, but shook her head.

"We will have to go through it... Call it intuition if you want, but if we step away from the path, I'm afraid we won't ever be able to find it again."

"But there's no way to get through it in the first place!" Reymar flailed his hands around in frustration, his tone desperate. An idea sprang to Alene's mind, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she turned to Reymar.

"I could wish for the bush to widen, just like I wished for the boar to calm down earlier. Then we can just walk through it easily!" She let the smile widen, enthusiastic about exploring her new abilities. Reymar raised an eyebrow, but they both knew there was no use in arguing with her. Once Alene had set her mind to something, there was no way she would let it go.

"All right, you do your little magic thing and see if it works. I'm... I'll just watch from over here."

He took a step backwards and gave a little wave. Alene nodded to him, twirling around to face the bush.

Wishing for the thorns and roses to move aside, she felt her fingers grow cold, her limbs tingling as if warning her that something wasn't right. All over her body, cold sweat broke out, and her hands shook, but she felt removed from herself, like she was watching from afar.

This wasn't supposed to happen, was it? What was actually supposed to happen? Thinking back, she couldn't remember what she was trying to do in the first place, until a frantic voice interrupted her thoughts.

"—lene! Alene! Are you in there? What's going on? Talk to me, Alene!"

Gasping in air, Alene opened her eyes—when had she closed them?—and grasped onto the first thing she could find, which happened to be Reymar.

"Alene! What was that? What in the world just happened? I tried talking to you, but you didn't respond to me at all. I didn't know what to do, you were just gone—" he took a breath before resuming his rambling—"and I tried to shake you out of it, but it didn't help at all!"

"Rey." Alene coughed, her throat dry for some reason. "Rey, I'm all right. I don't know what happened exactly, but I'm fine now." Hesitating, Reymar let her go, holding out his arms cautiously as if ready to catch her again. Alene looked at the bush. A hole had appeared in the middle, thorns moved aside. Something was off about it, though.

"Why is it so small?"

Frowning, Reymar whipped around to look at the opening. He gestured at it.

"Oh, that! Yeah, so when you did your little magic thing—" Alene shot him a flat look, in response to which Reymar shrugged helplessly—"the hole was really big, but it shrunk right afterwards. That's when I figured out something was wrong, so I tried to wake you up."

His voice got softer at the end. He seemed shaken by whatever had happened to her while she was so out of it. Alene glanced up at him, sensing his worry, and sent him a smile in an effort to cheer him up. Reymar had always been the joker and he usually cheered Alene up when she was down, but he recognized her efforts whenever it was the other way around. Clearing his throat, he turned to the opening in the bush.

"Do you think we should try and get through it?"

He bit his lip, but he was smiling.

"It's worth a try. We just have to watch any thorns that might be in the way." Alene huffed.

"This is going to be the end of my dress, that's for sure."

They stepped closer to the hole, getting down on their knees to crawl through it.

"Ladies first," Reymar drawled. Alene snorted in response, but started making her way through the vines. While he followed, she replied to him.

"When did you get manners?"

"Excuse me, when did I get manners?" He scoffed jokingly.

"I'll have you know I come from a reputable family who have taught me good manners since I came out of the womb."

"Never noticed them before, that's all."

Reymar gasped dramatically behind her, and she had to laugh.

"Why, I never! Young lady, I have always—" A hiss followed by a curse interrupted his words. Alene stopped crawling to look over her shoulder.

"Rey? What happened?"

"Nothing, I just cut myself on a thorn. It, ah, it's bleeding a little, but I'm fine. Let's keep moving."

Concerned, Alene turned around fully, careful not to hurt herself with any of the thorns. Her eyes widened upon seeing Reymar's wound, a straight cut on his arm.

"Bleeding a little? This is not a little," she scolded him, worry seeping into her voice.

"Look, we can't do anything about it right now. Let's keep moving, I'll cover it with part of my sleeve to stop the bleeding. I'll be fine."

Alene's gaze shot between the wound and his face. She narrowed her eyes, then widened them, tugging one corner of her mouth up.

"Oh, no," Reymar said, "I don't like that face,"

"Why? I'm not even doing anything." Alene replied.

"That's your idea face. You always get it when you're about to do something stupid and I really don't think you should do something stupid while we're in this forest."

Grinning, Alene tucked an escaped strand of hair behind her ear and reached for Reymar's hands, taking them into her own.

"Just trust me on this one, all right?"

Before Reymar could respond, she closed her eyes and started wishing for her friend's wound to heal. The tingling returned in her limbs, her hands and feet losing feeling slowly. She frowned, her newly found powers coursing like a storm through her body. She imagined them flowing into Reymar's wound and healing it with everything she had. The familiar feeling of floating above her body returned, and everything turned black.

"Come on, come on! Wake up, you idiot. What were you thinking? You stupid, selfless moron. Wake up!"

Was that Reymar? Why did he sound so anxious? As consciousness slowly returned to her, Alene opened her eyes to see Reymar sitting above her, tears in his eyes. He choked out a sob when he saw her eyes open, helping her sit up.

"You might be the stupidest person I've ever known," he sniffed. Alene stared at her friend, somewhat confused by his behavior.

"I... Fainted?"

"Yes, you fainted! You decided it would be a neat idea to heal my wound without thinking of what it would do to you. You were out for a good ten minutes! I had no idea..." He inhaled sharply, his voice softer when he spoke next. "I had no idea how I could help you. I was scared, Alene. Don't ever do that again."

He let his head hang down in anger and worry. Blinking sudden tears of her own away, Alene wrapped her arms around him briefly.

"I'm sorry. I really thought I had it under control this time. But, hey, it looks like I did heal your wound," she said, trying for a lighter tone. Reymar shook his head, the hint of a smile teasing at his lips.

"Let's just get out of here."



CHAPTER 4

When they finally emerged from the rose bush, the moon was high in the sky. In the quiet of the forest, Alene heard Reymar sigh behind her even over the rustling of autumn leaves. It was as if using her newly discovered abilities had made her senses sharper. A crow cawed in the distance.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Reymar asked softly.

Alene scrunched her nose, perturbed by his doubt.

“The path leads this way and I don’t see a reason not to follow it,” she replied sharply, turning around to face him. Taken aback by her harsh tone, Reymar held up his hands. She drew her eyebrows together, feeling sorry for scaring him, but she didn’t apologize before she turned away again.

“Let’s just go. I’m sure this path will lead us somewhere.” Alene kept an eye on the trail of light leading through the woods, trusting that Reymar would follow her as she clambered over a log and landed soft in fallen leaves.

"Look!" Reymar hissed, grabbing her arm to stop her. Finally, she looked up from the light to follow his gaze into the distance. To where the trail ended. A small, run-down house stood in a clearing, no lights behind the windows. The crow she heard earlier was sitting idly on the thatched roof, staring at them. She frowned up at it, wondering why the trail led here. What was special about this house? When she tried to take a step towards it, Reymar tugged her back again.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "We can't just go up to random houses!"

"The path... The path ends there. It must be important, right?"

"You tell me, I can't see the path," Reymar reminded her.

"It must be important," she decided, and yanked her arm out of his grip to start marching toward the house. Reymar made a plaintive noise, but followed her quickly.

The trail of light that had led the way slowly disappeared as she closed in on the house. The walls were covered in moss, and the smell of rotting fruit was very distracting. Taking a deep breath through her mouth, Alene reached out and put her fingertips against the wall. Frustratingly, she couldn't feel anything special.

"It doesn't look like anyone lives here," Reymar said, voice low. "Look at this hole."

The hole was in the wall, and looked just about big enough to fit through. Alene looked between it and Reymar, raising her eyebrows.

"What?" Reymar looked at the hole. "No! I won't fit through that! Besides, someone could be in there!"

"You just said no one probably lives here." She crouched to inspect the hole. Peering through it, she could see the whole house. There was only one room, and it was dark and deserted, the only thing moving the dust in the moonbeams.

"It's empty, Rey! We should go inside. Whatever this place is, I know we'll find something."

Even without the guiding light, she could still see quite clearly, so she ran to the front door, trying the rickety doorknob. The door swung open easily.

"This is wrong, Alene!"

"If you're so concerned, stay out here and keep watch," she told him. "If someone comes, we'll be gone in a second."

Without giving him a chance to respond, she shot into the darkness of the house. Inside, it didn't look any better. What furniture was still recognizable was incredibly dirty, and there were scraps of food among fallen leaves on the wooden floor. Alene had to slow down her pace to take it all in, realizing that this was definitely a bad idea. There was no turning back now, though, so she took a deep breath and started searching through the dark house, flipping trash over

with her foot and opening cupboards that looked like they were a gust of wind away from falling apart.

"Alene," Reymar hissed from outside, obviously trying not to make too much noise in the forest, "what are you doing?"

"Just looking." She rifled through some dusty books, fishing equipment and pottery before spotting a pristine glass bottle sitting on a high shelf. "This might be something."

Using the edge of her cloak as protection, she picked it up. There was a strange green liquid inside, and a note attached to the neck proclaimed that it was "for someone special". Alene felt uncomfortable. She was sure that something was wrong with this. If only she could find out what. A sudden ring in her ears, like the buzz of a thousand angry bees, made her almost drop the small bottle as she stumbled backwards from the intensity. The ringing got louder until she fell to her knees, her hands shooting up to her ears to try and block out the noise.



"Alene? What's going on?" Reymar, who must have heard her stumbling, ran into the house, kneeling at her side. "What happened? Are you—are you alright? Alene, talk to—"

A loud thud interrupted Reymar's panicked rambling. Both his and Alene's gaze shot up towards where the sound came from. A wooden table tucked away in the corner of the house quickly caught the attention of both of them. A weathered book lay on top of it, seemingly having appeared out of nowhere. Had it always been there? Did Alene's new powers summon it somehow? Alene gripped Reymar's arm, and he snapped back to her, wide-eyed.

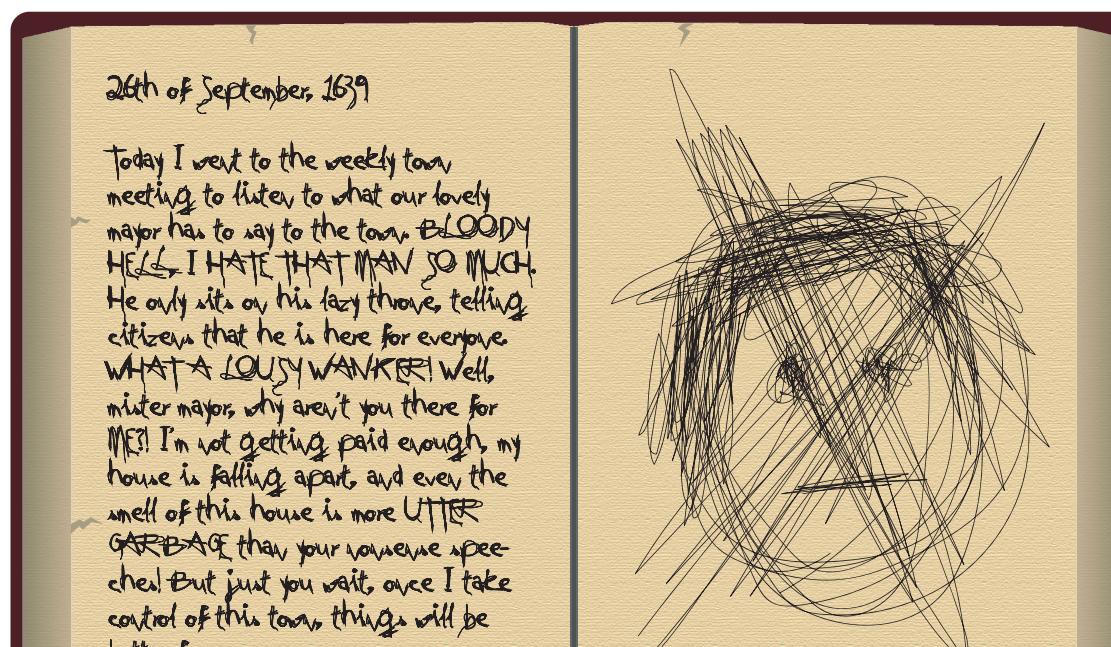
"What just happened? Did you do that?"

"I don't know..." Alene paused, the ringing in her ears finally subsiding. "Do you reckon we should take a look at that book?"

"Probably."

Slowly, the two walked towards the book, Reymar holding Alene's arm to keep her steady. However, the ringing in Alene's ears started again the closer they came, making her cling to him. He kept glancing at her, obviously trying to hide panic. Alene looked up at him, preparing to tell him she was fine, when she saw that he was now focused on where the book was. They stopped walking. There was a noise like paper rustling.

"Rey, what's going on?" Alene followed his line of sight to the book, and clung even harder to his arm. The pages were turning on their own as if guided by an invisible hand.



Both of them looked on in shock as the pages slowed down, until they eventually stopped turning. Reymar shot her a look, raising his eyebrows in a silent question. Alene nodded, squaring her jaw, and they stepped closer to the book.

The page it had landed on was filled with rough handwriting and disturbing drawings of faces. The faces were heavily crossed out and difficult to identify.

"Wait, is that... Is that my uncle?" Reymar whispered, pointing to one of the drawings, his hand shaking. Alene shook her head, the ringing having gone down again, and looked at the drawing.

"All this writing... I think this is a diary."

"What does it say?" Reymar asked, anxiety seeping into his voice.

"You should read it."

'26th of September, 1639'

Today I went to the weekly town meeting to listen to what our lovely mayor has to say to the town. BLOODY HELL, I HATE THAT MAN SO MUCH. He only sits on his lazy throne, telling citizens that he is here for everyone. WHAT A LOUSY WANKER! Well, mister mayor, why aren't you there for ME? I'm not getting paid enough, my house is falling apart, and even the smell of this house is more UTER GARBAGE than your nonsense speeches! But just you wait, once I take control of this town, things will be better for me.'

Alene turned to Reymar, seeing him shaking from head to toe.

"I can stop if you want me to, Rey. This is a lot."

"Whoever this belongs to, they really disliked my uncle. I'm not stopping until I find out who killed him." Reymar's voice stopped shaking and his eyes shone with determination. Alene nodded and turned back to the diary, turning the pages until she stopped at a recent entry.

'29th of September, 1639

I've finally gotten my hands on something to get rid of that arsworm of a mayor. Tonight, he'll be coming over to have a meeting. Little does he know... I prepared a special ingredient for his tea... I can't wait.'

After that, the diary was empty save for more drawings of crossed out faces. Alene skipped through more of the pages and was about to close it when Reymar spoke up.

"Wait, go back. I think I saw something."

Alene flipped back through the diary until Reymar stopped her.

"There, up in the left corner! What does that say?"

"Anwar, Sheriff of Westmoor. Did—Is this the sheriff's diary?"

Alene felt the blood drain from her face as she traced the ink with her fingers. She heard Reymar turn around and walk out the house.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

Reymar turned to Alene, a grim expression on his face.

"What do you think? I'm going back to the village to expose Anwar for killing my uncle."

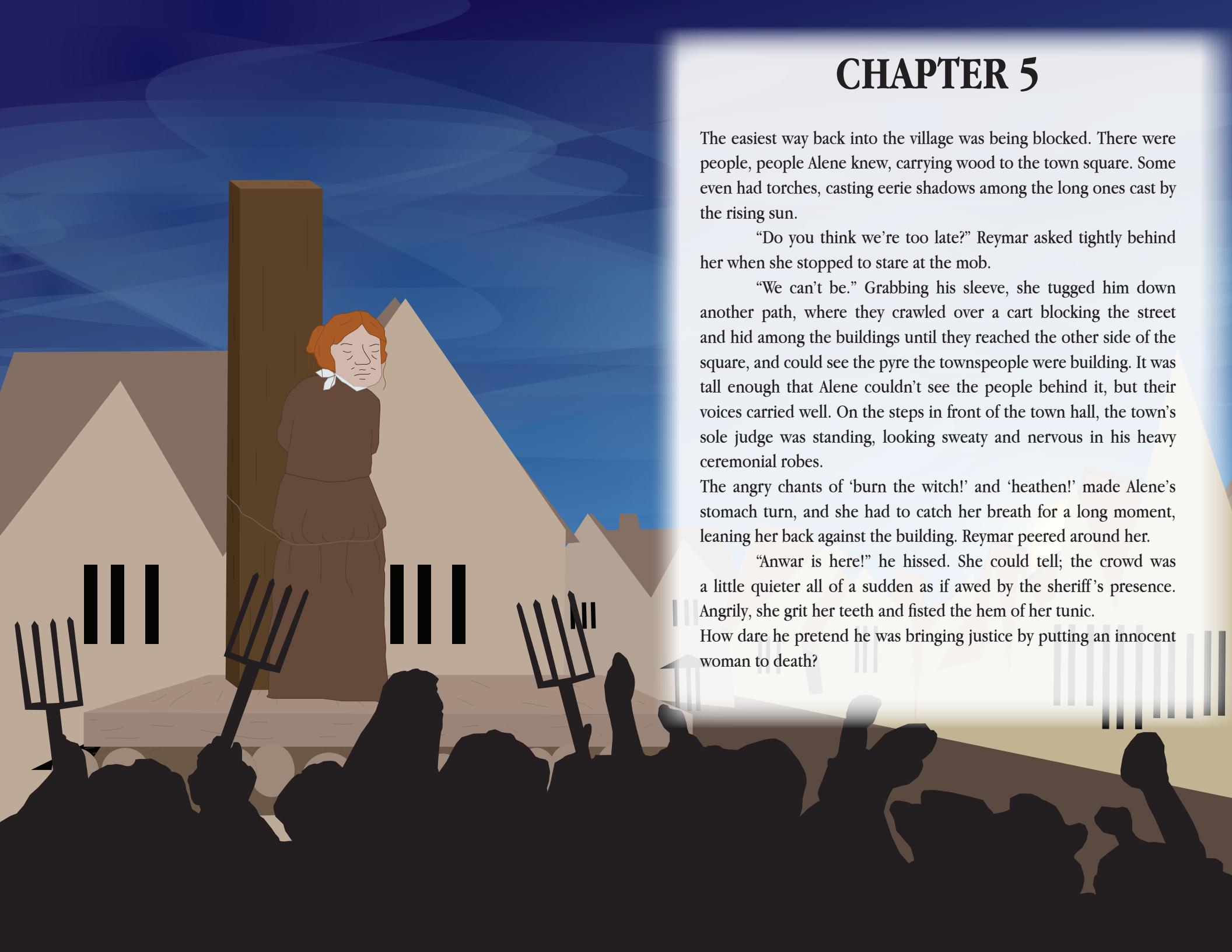
"But I don't understand... Why did he frame granny? Why her?"

"Don't you see? He needed a way out, a quick cover. Your grandma was the easiest target." Reymar's face clouded over, the words leaving a bad taste in his mouth.

Realization dawned on Alene as she understood Anwar's plan. All this time, the sheriff had been lying to them. And now, his lies were going to put her innocent grandmother on the stake to be burned.

"Come on, we only have until noon tomorrow to prove granny's innocence!" Reymar shouted at Alene, already halfway through the hole in the wall, diary in hand. Snapping out of her thoughts, Alene followed him back into the woods. The crow cawed and flew ahead.

CHAPTER 5



The easiest way back into the village was being blocked. There were people, people Alene knew, carrying wood to the town square. Some even had torches, casting eerie shadows among the long ones cast by the rising sun.

"Do you think we're too late?" Reymar asked tightly behind her when she stopped to stare at the mob.

"We can't be." Grabbing his sleeve, she tugged him down another path, where they crawled over a cart blocking the street and hid among the buildings until they reached the other side of the square, and could see the pyre the townspeople were building. It was tall enough that Alene couldn't see the people behind it, but their voices carried well. On the steps in front of the town hall, the town's sole judge was standing, looking sweaty and nervous in his heavy ceremonial robes.

The angry chants of 'burn the witch!' and 'heathen!' made Alene's stomach turn, and she had to catch her breath for a long moment, leaning her back against the building. Reymar peered around her.

"Anwar is here!" he hissed. She could tell; the crowd was a little quieter all of a sudden as if awed by the sheriff's presence. Angrily, she grit her teeth and fisted the hem of her tunic.

How dare he pretend he was bringing justice by putting an innocent woman to death?

As she was thinking that, Anwar climbed up to the steps of the town hall and was stretching his arms out, motioning for the crowd to be silent. He waited until even the children who climbed on their parents' shoulders to see him were quiet, then started to speak in a booming voice.

"Today, we are here for the trial of Matilde of the White Mountain, who has been accused of using witchcraft to murder the mayor of our town!" He gazed out over the people. Reymar ducked away next to Alene as if the sheriff might spot him. She yanked him back up. If they wanted to save her grandmother, they had to time it right, and they needed to stay focused on what was going on.

The sheriff started to deliver a monologue about the mayor's life, about his great achievements and how much everyone loved him, while the judge stood next to him, hands clasped in front of him. Alene was almost impressed by how sincere he managed to sound. If they hadn't found his diary, she wouldn't have doubted that he was honestly upset about the mayor's death. Now, it was just upsetting to listen to what she knew were lies.

"Your grandma!" Reymar gasped, unnecessarily, because Alene could see the guards march her out of the town hall and into the square. She still looked ready to stand her ground, even if she was obviously tired, her wrists were bound in front of her, and her grey hair, always so neat, was loose and wild around her face.

"We'll fix it, Granny," Alene whispered, trying to smile at Reymar when he touched her shoulder. "We can't let him get away with this, Rey."

"And we won't. We have everything we need to take Anwar down."

They couldn't wait much longer now. The guards had positioned her grandma in front of the pyre, and Anwar was reading her charges while the judge stood silently next to him, looking mostly terrified.

"Is this..." Reymar trailed off, frowning between the sheriff and the judge. "I think this is supposed to be a trial."

"It's not a trial, it's a hunt," Alene said.

Her own voice surprised her; it was almost a growl. The power that she had just discovered was in her blood, was brimming at her fingertips as if it wanted to do something. She tried to breathe calmly, but it was no use.

"What are we— Alene!"

She stood up straight, held her chin up high, and marched into the square, confident that Reymar would follow. She wasn't sure whether the people parted for her of their own accord or if she was forcing them to subconsciously, but the two of them reached the foot of the steps without being stopped.

"Guard!" Anwar yelled, and it was as if the spell was broken. A guard jumped in front of Alene and Reymar, blocking their way up to the sheriff, who was gripping the balustrade and leaning so far over it, it was a wonder he didn't fall.

"My grandmother is innocent!" Alene shrieked at him. Reymar had to keep her back by grabbing at her cloak when she wanted to pass the guard. She could have flung him aside with a thought, and would have, so it was probably for the better. Around them, the crowd was starting to chatter again, and she knew it wouldn't be long until they turned on her and Reymar, so she turned around.

"Everyone, listen! My grandmother, Matilde, didn't kill the mayor!"

Anwar, coming down the steps, shouted, "She has no idea what she is talking about. Would you let a peasant girl—"

"Sheriff Anwar is the murderer!" she yelled over him.

"Quiet!"

As the guard stepped aside, Anwar made a grab for Alene, but Reymar yanked her out of the way just in time. She stumbled, but stayed on her feet. They shared a look, and shot off in different directions. Alene ducked into the crowd, evading hands trying to stop her left and right. Some people made no moves toward her, and she hoped with everything she had that it meant they were on their side, not just that they hadn't caught on yet.

"Guards!" Anwar's voice echoed around the square.

And then, "Get down from there, boy!"

Reymar, up on the town hall steps, was holding up the diary.

"This is evidence that the sheriff—" He interrupted himself, and Alene couldn't see what happened, but she could hear the guards, in their armor, clatter up the steps, and hoped Reymar was getting away. When she could see him again, he was vaulting over the balustrade, crashing into the pyre, and apologizing frantically to no one in particular when they met up again, right in front of Alene's grandmother.

"Judge Masud!" Reymar turned to the terrified judge on the steps, whose name Alene didn't know. "We have found evidence condemning Sheriff Anwar for the mayor's death!"

"He speaks of matters he knows nothing about!" Anwar interrupted, and Reymar and Alene had to jump away again before he reached them. "Come back here, you little jerks!"

"Show me this evidence," the judge was saying. Since Reymar seemed ready to throw Anwar's diary up at the man, Alene quickly yanked it out of his hands, throwing him an incredulous look at which he shrugged even as they ran up the steps.

"Stop it!" Anwar waved at the guards wildly. "Light the pyre! The witch must be put to trial!"

The diary looked very small in the judge's large, ringed hands. Someone in the crowd tried to throw their torch on the pyre and nearly scorched the sheriff's hair off. The guards seemed to be confused and were standing still. Grandma stood silently but smiling despite everything.

"What is this?" Judge Masud whispered, turning the pages in Anwar's disturbing diary. He leaned over the balustrade, staring down. "Sheriff Anwar, what is your explanation for this?"

"Those wretched children must have put that together!" he yelled. "Guards! Do something!"

In response to that, the judge reached into his robes and pulled out a long parchment filled with very familiar, cramped handwriting.

"You think me a fool, Sheriff. I recognize your hand."

"The witch must have done that!"

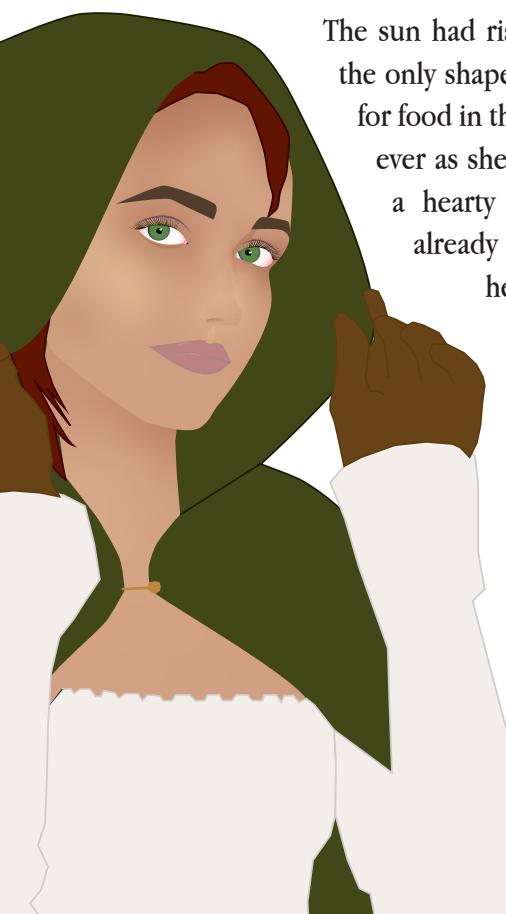
"Enough!" the judge bellowed. Reymar winced, and the man put a hand on his shoulder. "Guards, apprehend the sheriff!" The guards looked between the judge, Reymar and Alene and Anwar for a moment. A moment too long, because the sheriff turned tail and ran. Reymar jumped off the steps again, rolling over the pyre, almost into Alene's grandmother, who jumped away with surprising agility, and started to run after Anwar, whom the crowd was closing around. Alene ran after him. The sheriff wasn't concerned about pushing the townspeople who tried to stop him, and no one wanted to get near him at all when he yanked a torch out of someone's hands and started waving it around threateningly. He was still too close to the pyre to Alene's liking, and with how much Reymar's jumping around had dislodged the wood, setting fire to it now would surely spell disaster for the town, the wooden houses and the straw in the streets.

"These children are insane!" Anwar was yelling, fire swinging in large arcs around him. "Don't listen to them!"

The crowd was shouting, at him, at themselves, but they seemed to have been swayed. Still, no one could stop Anwar, who looked wild and unhinged and was setting fire to the straw on the ground around him with no regard to anyone's safety. He looked diabolical in the dusk. Alene could feel her power threatening to spill over, the energy eager to get out. She clenched her hands into fists and looked at her grandma, desperate for some guidance. The old woman winked. Alene took a very deep breath, ducked into the crowd, and hid behind Reymar, who was shouting for someone to get water.

"Alene, what are you doing?" he asked.

"Something very dumb, probably." Quickly glancing around, she reached out to Anwar. She could feel her senses stretching out, new and thrilling while her friend shielded her from the townspeople who'd turn on her in a moment. They reached until they found the sheriff, and froze his legs in place.



He looked at her while he fell over, flat on his back, and someone was immediately pouring water all over him—much more water than could have fit into the bucket it came from. No one seemed to notice.

“Alene!” Reymar sounded both terrified and excited while he pulled her up, holding her upper arm.

“I know, I know,” she replied, rolling her eyes. Dizzy from using her powers, albeit a small amount, she held onto Reymar and grinned. The guards had finally made up their minds and were pulling Anwar away, while he shouted about witchcraft all the while, thrashing wildly in their iron grips. Reymar grinned at her, dark eyes glittering with something like mischief.

“No, that was very neat.” He pulled her into a one-armed hug, and she breathed out. “I think your grandma is proud of you.”

Alene really hoped so. She would do it all again for her.

The sun had risen to a sky unmarred by clouds, the only shape in the sky a distant crow looking for food in the forest, and Alene felt better than ever as she helped her grandmother prepare a hearty breakfast. The old woman was already waving away concerns about her health, which was good, because it was normal. Reymar, jumpy as always, ran into the room with a pamphlet, only stopping to let grandma fuss over his incorrectly laced tunic for a moment.

“Look at this! They’re having a trial for Anwar tomorrow at noon.”

He read from the parchment, “The accused stands trial for the murder of Mayor Savio, as well as falsely accusing Matilde of the White Mountain of witchcraft and the aforementioned murder.”

Alene took the pamphlet from him to read it, but there was no other information.

“What do you think they’ll sentence him to?” she asked. She knew there was only one price for murder, but she didn’t really want the sheriff to die.

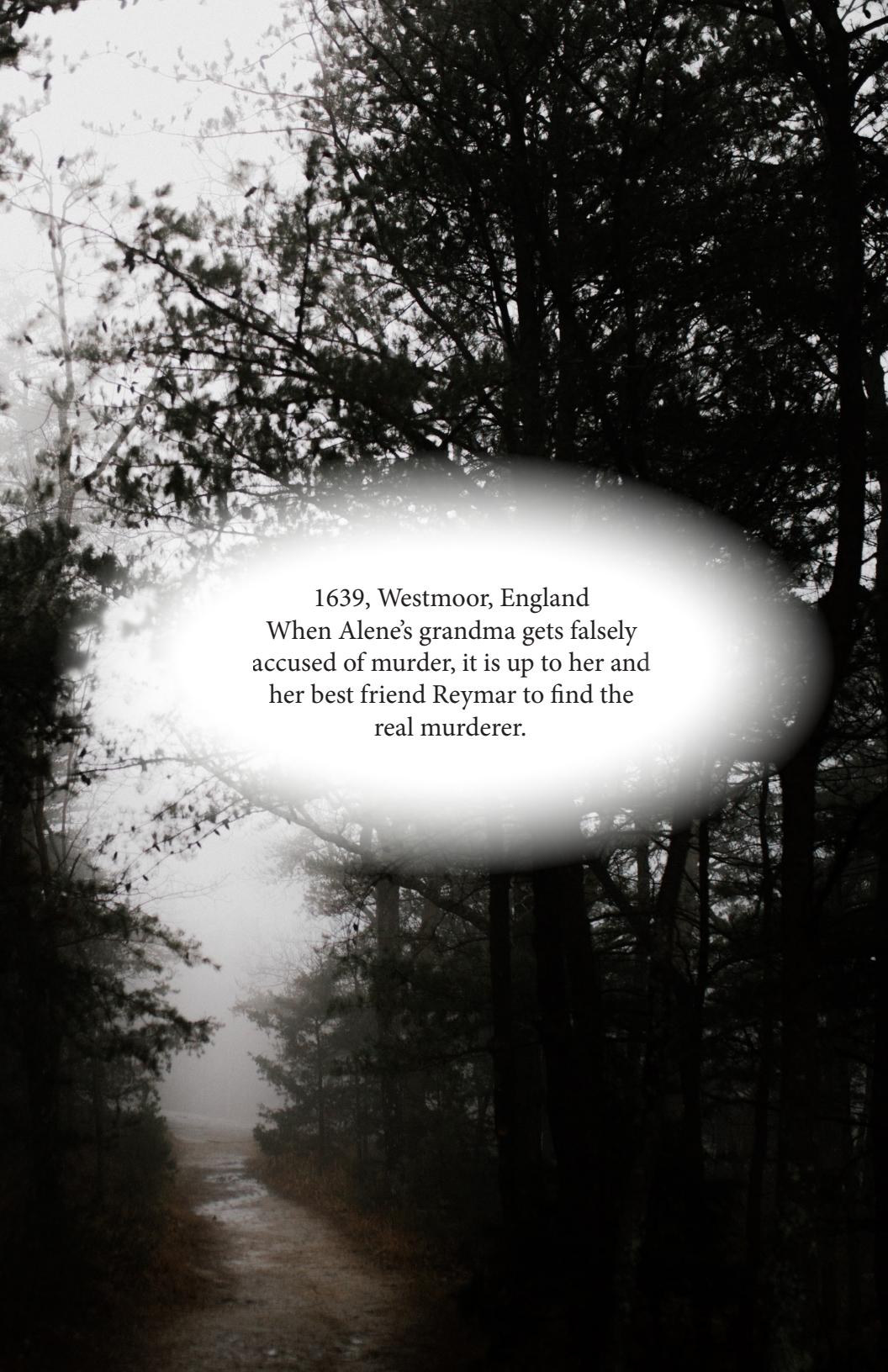
“Death would be too merciful for him,” her grandma said, from her place at the breakfast table. And, when Alene and Reymar looked at her in shock, “What lesson would he learn?”

“Maybe you’re right, because the town crier said the expected punishment is banishment.” Reymar sat down and started to gather bread and cheese from the table. Alene and her grandmother let it happen, amused. He was here more often than not, after all.

“They know who he is in the villages around here as well,” Alene mused. “He would have to go far away.”

“And we will have a new sheriff. A good one.” Reymar was talking through the bread in his mouth, but waited to continue when grandma shot him a warning look. “Sorry. There are elections next week! Town crier said that too.”

“Good.” Alene smiled, looked around, and pulled the bread towards herself without touching it. “Very good.”



1639, Westmoor, England
When Alene's grandma gets falsely accused of murder, it is up to her and her best friend Reymar to find the real murderer.